

## Episode 2.19

### Bittersweet

Crowds of angry people pushing homemade banners and signs as high as they could swarmed an already busy town square. The star had barely peeked over the horizon, the air extremely chilly. Street lamps were starting to dim, leaving only the flashing signs and screen sprawled across every side of every building as the only decent source of light. At least until every since screen changed to a man holding a microphone, with the crowd behind him.

"This is Hourly News live at the entertainment district. What you're seeing here is only a fraction of the scenes playing out across the planet after last week's..." the man stopped to emote shock, he also shuddered from the cold, "dramatics. We've never seen a reaction quite like this." As if on cue a fight broke out in the middle of the crowd, it quickly spread.

The reporter quickly moved out of the way so the camera could get a better shot. "How can a harmless, peaceful competition turn into such a violent, disgraceful show of events? A lot of people are calling for disqualification, while others are torn over whether to cancel or postpone the festivities." So much shouting from the brawl behind him almost drowned him out. The camera focused on a group tearing up another's banner.

"Breaking news!" the man bellowed into his mic, bringing the camera back on him with his finger by his ear. "The tour are arriving. We go now live to our orbital cameras. Now remember, be civil folks."

All of the screens changed once again to darkness, most of the crowd fell eerily silent. A few ships appeared abruptly from warp, prompting all sorts of mixed cheers and jeers from the crowd. One of the vessels the cameras focused on most of all; Voyager.

The crowd were deafening by the time it circled out of the camera's view. The man raised his microphone volume so he could be heard while other ships arrived, "amazing, the atmosphere here is tense and electric. No one knows what will happen over the next few days. One thing is for sure, we're in for one hell of a show."

On board Voyager, a few were watching the same thing at the Conference Room table. Unlike the town square, they did so in a tense silence. Even Neelix looked like he was ready to give up.

*"If you've been living in your cellar the last few weeks, you'll be wondering 'just how did this happen?'. Well, lets take a look, shall we...?"*

Kathryn touched a little panel beside her to turn it off.

"That's a no," Tom glumly said.

For once no one scolded or glared at him for breaking the silence.

Kathryn shook her head, "yes... lets talk about it." Nearly everyone looked on, shocked. "But I want to hear it from you." Her eyes pointed towards one corner of the table, the occupants there grew increasingly uncomfortable.

### **Three Weeks Earlier**

The usual people were at their usual places. Everyone's eyes were on Tom as he worked at his station.

"Bring us into orbit, Mr Paris," Kathryn ordered.

"Yes ma'am," Tom said without taking his eyes off the console.

"As soon as we're in orbit set us to auto pilot," Chakotay ordered.

"Aye sir," Tom said.

"Harry, lets see the planet," Kathryn said.

Harry nodded in response, and he worked on his console.

The viewscreen changed its view to show a beautiful green and blue planet. The light from a nearby star was reflecting off the northern atmosphere.

"What a beautiful planet. Maybe I should extend shoreleave so we can spend Christmas here. Nothing could possibly go wrong this year," Kathryn said.

Everyone glanced at each other nervously. Almost, Chakotay eyed her half empty mug of coffee with a frown.

"I'm getting the heebie jeebies here," Harry stuttered.

Jessie nodded, "yeah me too."

"Kathryn," Chakotay whispered to get Kathryn's attention. She swayed across towards him, pressing her elbow on the arm rest and leaned on her hand, a smile spread across her face. "Did you put more than one spoonful in again?"

"No," Kathryn answered, pouting on purpose, "what's everyone's problem? If we stay put, what could happen?"

Chakotay noticed the serving spoon sitting halfway down a jar of coffee by her feet.

"Oh I don't know, remember last year?" Tom chuckled.

A lot of the bridge had to stop and think about what he meant since it was the least eventful.

"We barely got out alive," Harry laughed awkwardly.

Tom swivelled his chair around, "I know right, but in my defence, the nebula was shaped like a tree." The two of them laughed at the memory.

Kathryn scowled, "what are you little boys talking about? What nebula?"

Tom and Harry stopped laughing abruptly with a squeak as if they lost the ability to breathe. For Harry it certainly felt that way too.

Jessie smiled and looked over her shoulder, "oh you mean the time when you drunk drove into an alien's fireworks festival and started wailing Christmas songs over a lightyear radius?" The two stared at her accusingly, Tom used a zipping motion across his lips. "That was a good year, but weren't we supposed to keep it a secret?" she giggled instead.

Kathryn growled intensely. Chakotay meanwhile fished the coffee jar up to refill her mug, his hand shaking fiercely.

Tom grit his teeth, "I hate you so much."

"Then my work here is done," Jessie smiled.

"Phew saved by the comm," Harry muttered under his breath. "Captain, the Z5 is hailing us."

"Is that the Goth one or the one built by a colourblind ninny?" Kathryn asked in a hush tone.

Chakotay smirked, "Goth, one of." He sat up straight and tried to look serious, "on screen."

The viewscreen's image changed once again to show the bridge of the Z5. They were greeted by Lilly hogging the Captain's chair while her brother sulked behind her.

"Oh, there's two of them," Kathryn realised, then slouched in her chair to finish her mug.

Chakotay laughed nervously, "what's the matter? Please don't tell us that these people have rules someone like Tom will break, or customs that Tom will offend."

Tom frowned, "double the hey!"

"No, apparently big bro's dealt with this sector a few times. It used to be war central here yonks ago, so we've been buying all their leftovers, so to speak," Lilly replied.

Dave cleared his throat, cueing an annoyed glance up. "Tell them about the Tour."

"I was getting to that!" Lilly hissed with wide eyes. He matched her stare when she turned to face Voyager. "It looks like we've arrived just in time for the annual peace tour."

"Oh I can't wait to miss it," Tom said.

Jessie rolled her eyes, "that's why you're insulted twice."

Lilly sniggered behind her hand. "No apparently it's quite fun."

Dave saw his moment and stepped forward. "Yeah we joined in last year while we were in between letters." He noticed a few confused stares on Voyager's bridge. Kathryn got it and laughed, at least he thought she did but she did have a coffee by her lips. "The Y range weren't our proudest moment."

"Why?" Duncan piped up. Everyone but Jessie were shocked as they hadn't seen him, or knew he was around. Jessie laughed and picked him up from under her console.

"Oh, between the Dellia X-One Million and Z1. Okay go on," Tom said.

Lilly didn't look amused, "great stuff, you should take part in the tour."

"Oh god, no. I plan to go this year," Dave stammered fearfully. The exchange got everyone curious. "It's a competition instead of a war. The races here decided to settle their differences peacefully by doing something they all enjoyed."

Kathryn perked up, "oh please be coffee."

Lilly decided to ignore her and direct her answer to Chakotay. "A music contest." Kathryn groaned in disappointment.

"Ohno, nobody tell the Doctor," Chakotay stuttered. "The last thing we need is his ego boosted."

Harry looked very interested, "oh like instrument playing?" Jessie shuddered, only Duncan and the Liger crew saw. They quickly shook their heads. "Aaaw."

"No it's a teamwork event. Each planet submit at least one musical act to take part. *Unfortunately* we've missed the auditions," Lilly said.

Dave looked confused for a moment but she elbowed him. He nodded sympathetically. "But we've been invited to follow the tour and watch, take part. It's a hoot. Now if you'll excuse me for no reason." He ran off. Everyone could hear him shouting, "Kim, no I don't trust you with the drums!"

Lilly rolled her eyes up, "he's aged more than I have but he's still the teen moron who fancied himself as a rock star. *Lame.*"

Kathryn glanced briefly at Chakotay with a tiny smirk on her face. "So Tom and Harry can still audition after all? I could do with a good laugh," Kathryn said.

"Hey," both Tom and Harry complained. However Harry wasn't done, "he only knows how to play one song on the recorder, and it's terrible." Tom glared at his friend.

Chakotay shook his head, "when does the tour leave this planet? Do we have time to have a look around like we planned?"

Lilly nodded, "oh sure. Apparently this planet won last year and they have this all day festival before they go. That's why it's so busy in orbit. We start here and *circle* around for the final."

"I suggest we let the crew decide if they want to stay here, or follow the tour," Chakotay said.

Kathryn thought about it, sipped her coffee, then nodded. "Within reason of course," she said with a straight face. It slipped into a giggle, "maybe Doctor and Neelix can join Harry's band and do their own YMCA dance. Then we can call them the Annoying People."

Chakotay took the mug off her since it looked empty, then he noticed it wasn't and what was left looked a bit milky and lumpy. One sniff took his breath away, the fumes were already giving him a hangover. "Tom?" he groaned threateningly. As soon as he looked up Tom had vanished, but his chair was swinging around on the spot. He heard the turbolift door close.

Lena and Kiara were heading towards a small cafe in the middle of a town. It was summer at this part of the planet, so the sun was shining brightly and people were walking around with light clothes on.

"I still don't see why I have to put up with you," Lena muttered.

Kiara smiled, "cos mum's busy getting her stomach pumped and dad's pestering his animal guide."

Lena sighed a little impatiently when they reached the cafe. Kiara was about to go inside when Lena noticed a poster, so stopped to look at it. Kiara waited in the doorway.

"It's probably that tour thing Naomi was going on about," Kiara said in a dreary voice.

Lena tried to read the poster but she couldn't. Her gaze travelled back to the picture that caught her eye in the first place; a massive stage surrounded by speakers with five people with blurred faces holding microphones. "I thought it was some boring old snooze trip. It's a music competition?"

Kiara groaned and stepped out from the door, allowing it to close. "I hope you're not thinking of entering."

"Why not?" Lena huffed in offense.

"Come on Lena, this is a legit thing with stages and crowds bigger than the Mess Hall," Kiara chuckled. Lena's eyes narrowing didn't put her off, it encouraged her. "You can't show up and sing cheesy covers, you'll be laughed off."

Lena laughed mockingly, "how would some aliens know they're covers? How do you know if there is or isn't a penalty about it?"

"Alright," Kiara pretended to sound annoyed with a sparkle in her eye, "if you insist on embarrassing yourself, I will too..." Lena snorted slightly and bit her lip, Kiara blushed. "Take part, not embarrass myself."

"I know what you meant," Lena giggled. This time Kiara was offended. "You do a couple songs when everyone's pissed, and you think you're a band."

"Better than doing one song when you and everyone are pissed, and thinking you're a band," Kiara said mischievously.

Somebody inside the cafe made the mistake of leaving it. They stepped out just in time to witness a second hand Janeway stare.

"I'm serious. We've done a lot more since, you haven't. You'll not last," Lena said.

"What makes you think you will? Craig's flat and tone deaf, your routines are all over the place so you all sound wobbly, and you sound like Tom pretending to do an impression of a woman," Kiara grumbled.

Lena gasped angrily, "you... I was just putting it on, I don't do that any... we don't speak of that anymore!"

Kiara laughed at her again, "okay squeaky. Now you don't have anything remotely interesting about you. Good luck." Lena's darkening scowl killed off any amusement she had left.

The man who had left the cafe carefully stepped closer, sweating a little. "Excuse me." He was immediately stared at, "um perhaps you'd like an automatic translator menu? We have a..."

Lena snatched one from him, Kiara hoped the thought of food would calm her down a bit. "Listen, that interesting comment was a little too..." Kiara said.

"I know, you're not really sorry but you gotta innocent little brat rep to keep," Lena muttered. She snapped the menu closed while Kiara's jaw dropped. "I'll have the round, pizza looking thing." With little care she pushed the menu towards Kiara's hands, expecting her to take it.

"You know why I really came with you? I was trying, but you can forget it," Kiara huffed and stormed off.

Lena rolled her eyes, "yep, there it is. Everything's my fault, nothing's yours!"

"I'm telling!" Kiara shouted back at her.

"Wow, I never saw that coming," Lena said clearly sarcastically. She noticed the waiter staring at her nervously. "Do I get my own table or...?" He panicked and showed her in.

Many of the vessels in orbit of the planet began to break away in packs. A group of four shot into warp, all going in the same direction. Voyager joined the second bunch, along with their Liger allies.

Little did either crew know their launch was watched by the excited millions of people on numerous worlds.

The atmosphere was more than a little awkward as Lena lead her bandmates into the Holodeck, ranting all the way.

Once inside there was finally a very brief breather. Jessie took full advantage of it, "so we're auditioning for a music contest so you can humiliate Kiara? Where do I sign?" she said the last part overdramatically.

"Oh please, that's not it," Lena grumbled. "I would've done it anyway, and I've already sent in the audition."

Craig did a double take, "oh god, I'm sorry. I didn't think I drank *that* much last night."

Lena stared, befuddled at him. "What? No, I have old footage of our performances. I sent them. Apparently that's allowed if we're late to the auditions."

James shook his head and sighed, looking indifferent to everything. "So, why are we here then?"

"Duh," Lena scoffed, "we're in. We've got to practice our first song."

"Right," James sighed, averting his eyes to the side.

Jessie frantically glanced between them, "no, it's not alright. Maybe you should have asked us first before entering us all into this competition. I'm okay with performing in front of no more than a hundred, after a drink or two, but this? How many people are going to be watching?"

Lena shrugged absentmindedly, "I dunno, thousands." Jessie's face drained of all colour. "Oh come on, you can't see how a hundred people are reacting, so what difference does it make?"

"A few dozen more drinks, it seems," Craig tried to lighten the mood. Jessie glared him into a puddle of goo for the trouble.

The doors opened again to the group's confusion. Lena scowled at the three new arrivals. "Ohno," she stomped over to get in their way, "we were here first."

Kiara clicked her tongue then sighed. "It wasn't reserved and there was no program running. We can't all be telepathic superheroes, you know."

Naomi meekly turned to the side to face only Kiara, "maybe we should practise somewhere else."

"No, there's nowhere else," Kiara protested.

"Don't tell me the pre-schoolers got in," Lena sniggered. The rest of her group all tensed and looked away.

Kiara's brow lowered, "apparently they liked our maturer style."

"Whiny songs are mature, who knew?" Lena muttered.

Craig hurriedly stepped forward, clearing his throat. "It's okay, the Holodeck can be anything we want. We can both use it." The two girls stared at him blankly, making him laugh nervously. "We can take turns?"

Kiara shrivelled up her face in disgust, "so I have to watch my tart of a mother prance around and screech, while you three sway in the back? No thanks."

"Oh," Lena growled, stepping right up to her, "who are you calling a tart?"

"I thought you would like that since it's another word for food," Kiara said indifferently.

Craig cringed and made a little whiny sound, "or the other group can wait outside?"

James shook his head, he intentionally did a loud sigh to get their attention. "Or like what I thought Craig was going to suggest, divide the Holodeck into two different rooms. One each."

"That figures," Craig scoffed. For the third time in five minutes he was stared at, once again by Jessie and this time James as well.

"Meaning?" Jessie asked with a dangerous glint in her eye.

Craig's eyes widened, he started to shake. "No meaning, just blabbing."

"Fine, but can our room be soundproof?" Kiara said flippantly.

Lena's eye twitched, "yeah, we don't want to hear you lot."

Everyone else groaned.

"So how many words are you carefully handing out to your bandmates?" Kiara asked sweetly.

"Why do you always bring your only fan onto the stage, it looks really awkward," Lena asked back while glancing toward Bryan.

The rest of Lena's group walked off to the side. Jessie massaged the bridge of her nose, "forget different rooms, we need different quadrants."

James briefly smiled, "I'll start with different buildings. Go from there." He walked off to the arch computer.

"This isn't going to be easy," Craig sighed sadly.

Jessie nodded, "I know, thousands of people watching, judging me. I dunno how I'm going to manage."

Craig suddenly grew very nervous. "I was going to suggest what my school teacher told me, but..." he shuddered violently, "knowing my luck, Neelix would be front row."

"Er..." Jessie didn't get what he meant at first. When she did she twisted her face.

Fortunately for the both of them the grid faded away, and in its place a small stage inside a long hall appeared. James walked back over to the rest of the group. "I just duplicated the one we use." He looked across at the two temporarily not arguing teens nearby gazing around. "They're exactly the same. There's nothing to fight about."

"Don't look at me, I never start the fights, she does," Kiara said.

Lena stopped and glared at her, "I start the fights, do I?"

"Erm, can I just butt in? If we don't start practising, neither band has a chance at winning this competition," Craig said.

Lena and Kiara glanced at one another. They both nodded eventually.

"Ok, we're getting this stage," Kiara said.

"No, we were here first. It's not far to the other stage!" Lena yelled.

Everyone groaned yet again.

The *air* space around the first destination seemed to be even busier than the last planet. A musty red looking planet covered in lights. Ships were flying haphazardly all over.

Voyager attempted to get into their assigned parking spot at one of the orbital stations, but had to give way for a couple of identical ships with flashing lights on the top whizzing by.

They were told that the arena was at the quiet part of *town*, right in the outskirts. The visitor's land shuttle had been driving for a good hour through bustling city streets with blinking lights everywhere, the buildings so high they could barely see the sky. When they could, lots of different shuttles would fly over, all in the same direction they were going.

"I don't see why we couldn't just beam to our *dressing room*," Jessie said. The streets they were driving through were getting busier with people, the knot in her throat was tightening.

Sitting across from her, Dave shrugged nonchalantly. "It's all part of the tour experience. I'm not too keen on it either..." A man serving drinks stopped to serve the opposite of the bus, completely distracting him. Of course he took two glasses.

Lena tried to do as well. James beside her though took one of them to drink immediately. She stared in shock and anger at him. "Thanks," he said while she was still frozen, and took the other one too.

Opposite them, Craig slumped down into his seat fearfully. "Oh god, swap with you?" he asked in Jessie's direction. She was too busy downing her own glass to notice.

Lena waited until James had finished the second glass before slapping him in the shoulder. "What's the matter with you, you greedy sod?"

"Oh god that's horrible," James grimaced, angering her further.

Craig didn't wait, he dashed over to squeeze next to Jessie and the unknown Liger guy she was stuck next to.

"You want to win this, don't you?" James asked, daring to look the dangerous Lena glare in the eye. "We won't if you're passed out after two sips."

Jessie meanwhile peered across, but not at them but at Craig inadvertently pushing her neighbour's thigh into hers. "You know, if you'd sat with your bandmates, we wouldn't be putting up with this."

The man smiled warmly at her despite being constantly nudged. "Oh I don't mind, I wanted the closest seat to your group. I love you guys," he said.

Jessie shuddered and looked away, instantly creeped out. "Remind me not to be last on the bus again."

The shuttle came to a stop. A few were confused since the noise outside didn't sound like it was in the quiet outskirts. Jessie decided against peering outside again, what with all the screaming and chanting.

"Oh," Dave laughed at the same time the doors opened, "this is it." He tapped Kim sitting behind him, "come on guys, first out, first remembered." The man in between Jessie and Craig got up.

Lena got up as well, staring expectantly at her bandmates. "Guys, come on." She hurried after the previous four, only for the two sitting opposite her to get in the way.

"Sorry mumsie, comic relief is last," Kiara giggled. She and Bryan followed the Liger group to the doors.

"Then why is the Z5 crew going first?" Lena protested. She heard a small excuse me behind her. She peered over her shoulder and saw Naomi meekly pointing ahead. "Oh fine, best till last."

Outside the three groups were quickly mobbed by what looked like hundreds of people. Only a low fence stood between them; they couldn't get over it but they could still reach out and grab anyone if they wanted. A few friendly looking aliens on their side lead them to the steps leading up to a lit up arena.

Jessie looked around anxiously, her body shook and her heart raced. She still followed everyone, but not before discreetly sliding her hand into one of James's. He gave her a smile and her hand a gentle squeeze back as they made their way up the many steps.

Inside the massive arena, the stage seemed to be the literal centre of attention, surrounded by thousands of seats in a staircase/cinema style. What looked like the occasional balcony had the camera crews all finalising their setup. The first to finish pulled a little lever to detach it from the wall and fly around slowly until they found their preferred spot.

The lights dimmed until they were off completely, leaving the crowd buzzing with excitement. During the chants and screams, the stage lit up with sparklers encircling the perimeter.

*"Ladies and gentlemen. It's that time of year again!"* a man's voice announced over the speakers. The crowd roared their approval. *"We have ten amazing acts and their ten debut songs, but only eight spots are available for the next gig. Let the battle begin!"*

While a lot of the Voyager and Dellia crew had mixed in with the crowds, one crewmember wasn't particular chuffed to be watching it from the tiny screen next to the Flyer's helm controls, especially when another signal made the picture speckle.

"Try narrowing the bandwidth," Neelix suggested helpfully.

Tom grumbled over the top of the announcer welcome the first act to the stage. Neelix hurried over and hurtled onto the back of Tom's chair just as he fixed the picture. However the view of the stage was slightly obscured by a tiny second window in the corner, where two aliens were yammering away excitedly. On the small screen, it made a massive difference.

"Why is there nowhere to park on this..." Tom grumbled while eyeing the metropolis, "floating city."

"We could've beamed down," Neelix reminded him.

Tom huffed, "hardly." He reached for the volume control.

*"First up looks to be our host's group; 54X!"* one of the announcers said as music started picking up. Tom could just make out two people emerging from the stage floor. He felt his chair wobble, making him glare backwards.

"It's not them," he said.

"So?" Neelix grinned, he reached over to turn the volume up to Tom's dismay. The lead singer had a scratchy, screaming singing style, it left his ears ringing. Neelix bopped his head along to the guitar-like playing.

In the arena itself the loud duo was even louder and agonising for the ones who didn't like it, which were the majority of the Voyager crew. Once they were done the duo were overwhelmed by applause.

To mostly everyone's relief, the follow up act named LG calmed everything down with a rousing ballad that had people swaying their arms.

Directly under the stage, a few hundred feet down, Kiara and Bryan stood waiting next to a lift, anxiously looking around.

Naomi hurried in, neither of her bandmates were surprised she'd changed her outfit and put up her hair. She though was waving a PADD around. "Why do I only get the whiny bit at the end?"

Kiara sighed impatiently, "we had all day to practise this, and now you bring it up?"

A group of workers hurried over to them. The one with their own PADD tapped on it and stepped forward, "you're up next. Are you ready?"

"But even Bryan gets more than me," Naomi complained. Bryan pouted and glanced away.

The workers glanced in between each other.

"It's my song, and it makes more sense for me to sing certain parts. I can do it better," Kiara said.

Naomi gasped, "no you can't!"

Bryan's shoulders sank, he meekly shook his head at the group.

"It's alright," the lead person said in a tone that didn't sound alright. They hurried off, talking about winging it.

Neelix perked up as the stage seemed to grow into a circular staircase. "Oh, this one's got to be good."

Tom wasn't listening, he spotted a tiny gap in between two large vessels. Poppy music started playing which he would've recognised had he been listening. Neelix started to clap along.

*"Oh, I think this is one of our guests. I can't wait to see what kind of music they have."*

*"Tell me about it Jepp, apparently they have a vast array of styles. But with only three bands, we might only hear some."*

*"Better than none, I say..."*

With the four tier staircase fully revealed, various colours intermittently flashed around it, lighting up the dark arena in flickering rainbows.

Two entrances appeared on different sides of the first tier vertically, but all the crowd could see were silhouettes standing, posed. Microphone stands emerged from the floor in front of them. A few eagle eyes noticed another appear in between the two doors.

The music picked up when another person was brought up to top of the fourth tier. The crowd cheered and screamed as the lights shone on the three people instead, revealing them.

Lena and Craig stepped out from their doors, Lena waved as she went to take her microphone. The one at the top raised her head and handheld one, her body shaking as she prepared to sing the first verse.

"Here I fly, in a lost and lonely part of space." Many applauded her, but still Jessie's whole body was tense. She thought she'd feel better once James joined her from the rising platform behind her. "Once again, Tani's creeping, I'll slap her face," she shakily sang, then gestured the microphone to the side.

James, previously with his back to her, took the microphone and swung around to sing his part. He offered his other hand to her at the same time, which she gratefully squeezed for as long as she could as she strode down the stairs.

"Going home, I just can't hold it back no more. I really should be..." Craig and Lena started pushing their arms out one at a time. "Judging you." Jessie reached the bottom where the spare microphone stand was just in time to join in with the hand motions. "Avoiding you, hating you, blaming you!" James' voice raised each time. It felt a bit overwhelming for him to hear it across an entire stadium.

The rest of the group pumped their arms up gradually to encourage the crowd. It did the trick, the crowd loved it.

"Tragedy!" The whole group sang while dropping their hands, or in James' case his not microphone hand, over beside their mouths as if they were overdramatically gasping. They quickly began an energetic routine on the spot. "When the coke is gone and life's pissing you off it's tragedy." Their hands did the same ohno gesture at tragedy.

"When Seven cries and you don't care why." Lena rubbed her fist under her eye and pouted. "It's hard to hear," the group brought an open stretched hand up to their ears.

"With so much annoying you, we're going nowhere." They all opened their arms and shrugged, while glancing from the left to right.

At the end of the first chorus, the three members at the bottom rhythmically walked away from their microphones in a circle. James meanwhile jumped down a few times to join them at Jessie's previous spot, discreetly handing his microphone to Lena as she passed by him. She turned inward to go up the same path he came down, while he took her place in the circuit, only until he reached the next stand. Jessie and Craig stopped as well, leaving Craig in the centre this time.

He gulped nervously, hoping his few drinks would kick in any second. "Sight of you, there's a yearning down inside of me." Jessie and James slowly clapped over their heads, the audience followed suit. Meanwhile Lena got to the top and stood, posed. Craig finished his verse, secretly thankful his wasn't changed much from the last time like the others.

"Down they go, I just can't take your crap no more," Lena sang loudly with a kick to her voice. "I really should be hating you, ignoring you." The group once again egged the crowd on with arm pumping.

By the second half of the chorus, a lot of the audience were on their feet, dancing along. The ones who weren't sure if they liked this *new style* still subconsciously nodded their heads to the beat.

"When you jump in time and everyone lies, it's hard to fare. With no end in sight, we're going nowhere."

Typically that was the part where Tom finally tuned in, and abruptly too, his head turned so fast he felt his neck twitch. "Wait they changed the song again, did they say anything about me this time? After everything, they better..."

"No, shh!" Neelix snapped in response.

Tom's eyes widened, mouthing ok. Then he returned to flipping his fingers at the guy on the other side of the window giving him a ticket.

Back in the arena, the changing lights flew around the room, temporarily clouding the crowd's view of the group changing positions and the microphone stands lowering into the ground. The music built up once more alongside the band's clapping.

The final chorus, their routine picked up as well and they sang through the handheld mics.

"Tragedy! When aliens invade and a mummy's chasing you, it's tragedy! When Damien's back and you can't help sigh, it's hard, don't glare. With so much deception, we're going nowhere."

The song ended with a bang and pose, the audience erupted into further cheers.

*"Wow, give our newcomers Virus a warm welcome everybody! Thank you!"* The voice waited for the audience to cool off a bit. *"Next up it's who you've all been hearing about this week, fresh from their tour of Nutropa. It's Party Crashers!"*

Even though that was followed by mountains of cheers, just as loud as Virus's, a lot of people appeared to be choosing that time to go to the bathroom or get more drinks.

Once they started their performance, Kathryn wished she had done the same thing. The two female youngsters strode around the stage, rapping in an alien language while pulling faces. After ten seconds, she couldn't take it anymore and left anyway.

Most of the ones that left returned when they heard the finishing cheers, but they weren't much better off with the next act.

"How are you doing, Rova!" a man squealed as if his voice hadn't broke yet.

The woman beside him laughed nasally. "Since this week's theme is First's, we have our amazing number one smash, Rock Your Umbrella."

"Um, this looks um..." Harry said very nervously. He noticed the crowd didn't look that impressed either. Only a few awkward claps and a *woooo* from a random audience member.

In the quiet empty foyer, Kathryn walked away from a stand with her tray of coffees. Even she could hear the screechy wails and the nasally shouts from the duo. Still she snickered and remained where she was, slurping one of her drinks through a straw.

A frazzled looking Tom stomped past her, ignoring Neelix's plea's to get souvenirs, grumbling about fascist ticket people and parallel parking. Neelix overheard the noise coming from the arena and decided to ditch him for the souvenir stand.

It didn't take long for Tom to rush back into the foyer with bleeding ears, swaying from side to side as if he had been knocked out.

Finally the song was over and so Kathryn shoved him out of the way to return to her seat. Neelix ran after her carrying programme booklets, a t-shirt and some flashy strobe lights.

For some *unknown reason*, the next act had to be delayed to allow the poor audience to recover from their torture. Fortunately for the alien majority, the next act was a teenaged pretty boyband singing love songs as if to the audience individually.

Next up were Dave and his entourage; Carly, Kim and the weird guy from the shuttle bus. Kim had been relegated to keyboard with a tiny microphone so she was pouting all the time. Carly had something that looked like a saxophone, but closer to recorder size. Finally the strange guy manned the drums, earning him a few occasional scowls from Kim. Dave had a guitar hanging from his shoulders.

"How are you all? We're Alright! Are you having a Special Night?" Dave shouted the last bit too closely into his microphone, it squealed for half a second afterwards. "Hit it."

When Dave sprung the guitar once, Kim started awkwardly tapping the keyboard, while the nameless guy drummed. Occasionally Dave repeated the same beginning notes in time. Carly awkwardly bopped around on the spot with her instrument to the music, which was a little upbeat and pretty repetitive.

"How are you, on this special night," Dave sang while firstly rising his voice up a note, then down again. The keyboard and his guitar playing followed the same tune. He repeated the same line again. "I met you on this warm special night," he sang similarly.

Carly looked alarmed and quickly went to play her instrument as if she forgot. The rest of the band didn't react if she did.

"Now we're alone, soon I can't deny," Dave and Kim sang together, she stopped playing the keyboard. "My love for you, is so true," Kim pulled a face while she sang that part. "Now can we meet, on the dancefloor. So we can show everyone how tonight." He sprung the guitar a few times. Carly and Kim once again swapped playing for the chorus.

Once it was done, the Voyager and mortified Dellia crew were surprised they got any claps. Some did sound polite though.

Unaware of the latter, Dave lead his band back under the stage with a wide grin. That was until he saw his snickering sister. "What? The theme is first songs."

Lilly bit her bottom lip to stop from laughing in his face. "Yeah, it must've been hard to learn those five notes."

The next group had no trouble following Alright's act. Their energetic, musical play-esque performance got many standing ovations and screams.

Under the stage Kiara watched the entire thing, sweating bullets. Bryan was too busy being fussed over by his mum and still delirious dad to have time to be nervous. Naomi didn't seem bothered, but she was nose deep in her PADD, reading aloud quietly. Her mother kept trying to fix her hair and occasionally scrub her cheek with a hanky, but she kept batting her away.

Kiara looked around at her bandmates helplessly, then around for anyone to fuss over her.

"Mum, why did you tell him?" Bryan moaned, temporarily distracting her.

B'Elanna glanced at Tom, then back at her son. "I didn't. Dunno how he got in here actually." She gave her husband a little nudge, waking him up slightly, just in time to see the duo he witnessed torturing everyone pass by. He screamed and ran off.

Kiara sighed and shook her head. No one was there but it could be worse, she thought. They were soon called to the lift and handed their microphones.

The moment the lift brought her to the stage, she was blinded by the lights which made the audience look like a moving blur to her. It helped until she heard her band announced and the roar of the crowd.

A couple of unknown crewmembers with guitars started to play a downtempo tune, almost depressing. Bryan nervously stepped up for the first verse, which he did very shakily and flat. People still cheered for him anyway.

The music picked up and the two girls joined in for the chorus. Near the end of it, Kiara's vision cleared up a bit and the audience started to look like people. Nerves tried to push her back under the stage, but then she saw Kathryn and Chakotay ten rows from the front, smiling and waving.

"I'm wasting my time," Kiara near whispered into the mic, "cos there's no justice here in this trial." She tried to raise the volume of her voice, "you're way out of line, when you ignore my innocence and deny it."

The chorus roared into life again, the three band members felt a bit more at ease the second and third time around.

"So don't expect me to let you in," Naomi sang next and softly, which clashed with the guitar riffs. The crowd loved it though. "This is just a game, with no players. No one will win."

Kiara repeated her previous line and the chorus kicked off again. "Gotta be kidding, what do you want? What's going on inside your head? You gotta be kidding, look what you've done. If I'm alive or dead..."

The music trailed to a near stop, only a string kept getting plucked occasionally. "That's all you need to know," Kiara sang quietly over the top of it.

They were more than relieved they weren't booed from the stage and got an applause, nothing like the one for the act before them. It was enough for Kiara and she left the stage with a smile.

The final band took the stage, everyone underneath could hear the crowd clapping and hooting along to the catchy, summery beat.

On the way back to the dressing rooms she spotted Lena talking with Jessie in the corridors. Lena eventually spotted her and turned to look, but Kiara turned on her heel and stomped off.

"Fine," Lena grunted, rolling her eyes.

Jessie looked on awkwardly as a voice rang over the intercom. *"And that's it, our polls are now open. Every citizen gets one vote. Use it wisely. The results will be compiled and announced in eighty minutes."*

Lena smiled mostly out of relief. Jessie noticed and frowned, which made Lena slip into a grin. "We were the best there, easily. No problem," she said.

*"Will all contestants make sure to be in the announcement room within the final forty minutes,"* a different voice announced, just for the understage.

Jessie didn't notice she had a lump in her throat until she tried to swallow. "If you say so."

James approached them, trying to smile. "Well, we were at least better than the Earplugs Wanted over there," he said while gesturing towards a few of the groups walking toward them. The rappers passed by, practising some of their rhymes. The universal translator had a hell of a time and gave up after a sentence.

Lena watched them until they turned the corner out of sight. "Wait, they're actually called that? Appropriate."

"I meant." James waited for the other duo to pass by before answering, "I-Great."

Lena snorted a little. Jessie groaned, knowing what was coming. "Aaaw, yes we were," Lena mocked him like a child.

Craig rushed out of their dressing room looking panicked. "Do you guys know how long minutes are here?" He got blank stares as his answer. "Yeah, we'd better get to this announcement room before we're disqualified." He ran off after the other bands.

The rest of Virus followed him with unsure looks on their faces.

Turned out that they were waiting with all the other groups in a room full of tables and chairs for over an hour before a camera crew showed up. The only screen which lined the wall was turned on by one of them, which showed the host at the circle stage. A little window appeared beside him, showing everyone the announcement room live.

"Oh crap," Jessie said through gritted teeth as she adjusted her hair, then slouched down in her seat.

"Our polls are closed and the results are in!" the announcer shouted, with approval from the audience. "In no particular order, the bands that are going to Darjhan next week are...?" He of course dragged it out for a good minute. "LG!"

Kathryn meanwhile rolled her eyes toward Chakotay. "Oh for god's sake, this is almost as bad as Neelix's Who's Pie Is It Anyway segment. We all know it was Tuvok's cos the tasters are still alive." Chakotay laughed quietly.

A few more bands were named, followed by their reaction shots. Six remained when the announcer shouted, "Virus!"

Lena shot out of her chair, giving poor Craig nearly heart failure. "Yes I did it, I knew it!" She turned around and did a fist pump, "I beat ya Kiara, neener neener."

Kiara pouted and looked away, while the rest of Virus were mortified that her reaction was on camera. Fortunately the sound of the audience drowned out her gloating.

"Lena, do I have to remind you of your age?" Craig asked.

"Nah," Lena laughed.

James shook his head and sighed, "he said it was no particular order."

"Even if it was, we don't know which way he's going. It could be worst to best," Jessie added on.

"Spoil sports," Lena huffed and sat down.

"And the final band definitely going to Darjhan are..." the announcer said with a cheeky glint in his eye. "Alright!"

Most of the room turned towards the equally baffled Liger band. Kiara covered her face as it turned bright red, hoping no one could see her.

"Okay, so we all know the rules but our guests do not," the announcer said. "The four bands with the least votes remain, two must go. How do we choose? Well, a battle to the death of course." He paused dramatically and the audience laughed it off. He smiled again, "no seriously, it's still in no particular order. The next band going to Darjhan is..."

B'Elanna meanwhile looked ready to blow as she rolled up her sleeves. "I'm going to wring his neck, that piece of sh..."

Beside her Tom looked startled and glanced around. "What... when did I leave the Flyer?"

"Pulse!" the announcer shouted.

Tom instantly started clapping erratically. "Yeah that's my boy." He watched the stage expectantly. B'Elanna stared at him blankly until he noticed the reaction shot. "Um, this is a weird performance."

Only the two duos and the boyband remained. The atmosphere in the stadium was tense. All but Kathryn who was already walking out the door for a refill.

"Number One are through," the announcer finally said. The cheers for the boyband were deafening. "That means we have to say goodbye to the wonderful Party Crashers and er..." even his professionalism was slipping at the thought of saying the other band's name, "the I-Great."

"Oh good, less torture," Lena sighed in relief, briefly glancing back at the two rappers.

They all jumped at the sound of an ear-piercing shrill shriek. The source, apparently the woman from the screechy duo's sobs. A few people did start to feel sorry for them until she started batting a few sympathisers away. "Get your plebeian hands off me. I am the great Anna-Rei. These people don't know good music and talent."

"I know, we are too good for this place," the man very squeakily replied. Everyone near them shuddered and walked away from them.

Very early the following morning Voyager and the rest of the tour started their departure from the planet, travelling only at impulse.

Inside the Conference Room, the three visitor bands sat or stood around the table with a couple of officials. Most of them were struggling to keep awake.

"It gets harder from round two. It's no walk in the streets," one of the officials said. "You can't re-use songs, and you have to comply with the themes. The final is band's choice, so I'd save your best couple until then."

The other official laughed to himself, "but they could be the only suitable ones for a previous week's theme. I suggest saving more than two."

"Yes but you have to get to the final, so you need some good ones to get the votes," the first official said. She looked around the table at very tired faces. "The themes are also random. The citizens suggest, we run a poll."

"What if we don't have anything that suits the theme?" James asked.

The first official shook her head, "then you'll have to find a new one that does."

"No problem. We got some variety," Dave stuttered while glancing at his teammates. He was a little put out to find Kim napping across the table.

"So, the first theme is your first song everytime to not put people off?" Jessie questioned.

The two officials thought she was joking and laughed accordingly. Jessie's face told them otherwise. "Everyone wants to win the peace tour," the guy said, smirking.

"Okay, so what's the theme this time?" Lena asked.

Kiara walked into the Holodeck, still with the same grin she had since the meeting. Bryan and Naomi were less than enthused about it.

"Please, it gets harder? We're more than ready for this," Kiara said.

Naomi groaned, "I still don't get it."

Kiara turned on the spot, looking a little concerned. "Well, we have a loads of songs that fit the theme."

"Yeah," Naomi said slowly, eyes darting away, "I didn't hear it, I was too busy wondering what I did to that girl."

Bryan and Kiara exchanged confused glances. They were used to Naomi's misunderstandings but this one they couldn't figure out. "What do you mean?" Kiara asked.

"She said it's personal. I mean, why? I'm a nice girl," Naomi said, pouting. She got two groans for that answer.

### **The Mess Hall:**

"I don't think our anti-Seven ones count here," Jessie commented.

Lena looked as if she'd had her dinner taken away from her and replaced with a salad. "What, it can't get more personal than that."

Jessie glanced across the table at James for backup, but he'd plugged headphones into the computer he'd brought, lost in thought. Jessie sighed while shaking her head, "we want people to like us."

"Exactly," Lena forced a smile, though it was obvious she was about to snap.

"The last changes you made ending up renaming the song to Die oh Die," Jessie muttered.

Lena slammed her hand on the table, lighter than usual but enough to rattle it. Craig glanced between the two and quickly piped up, "our killing Annika songs are good for the Voyager crew but..." Lena stared at him instead, threatening any resolve he had, he shook. "Um, but this sector doesn't know her. We'll seem like psychopaths singing about killing some woman they don't know."

Jessie smiled and nodded. Not smug but glad someone else saw it her way, Lena saw it as smug though. Jessie chose to ignore it, "we got away with Tragedy since it wasn't just her and it wasn't OTT."

"I dunno if we did, to be fair," Craig said.

James meanwhile lowered his headphones and frowned. "Are you quite done? I've got an idea."

Craig thought that was directed at him, he grumbled under his breath huffily.

Lena narrowed her eyes in James' direction since he said it in her direction. "Oh by all means, you're the smart one," she said sarcastically.

"So no then," James said matter of factly, slowly putting his headphones back on.

"James, no, she's done," Jessie quickly said.

"Pfft, I wasn't going to suggest Die oh Die anyway. I know it's too political," Lena mumbled.

James looked around at the tense table with a rising eyebrow. "Ookay?" he said slowly, "personal doesn't have to be *woe is me* crap."

"Too bad for you," Craig muttered. Jessie elbowed him in the arm, he squeaked in response.

James cleared his throat intentionally in order not to comment on that. "It could be anything to do with us, in theory, and we might make more of an impression if we avoid the bloodbath songs. I've got a couple songs here that might follow the theme if we adjust a few lines."

"We don't have time to learn a new song. Apparently a week is only a couple of our days, and we've wasted all morning talking about it," Lena said.

"It can't hurt to hear his suggestions, it's at most ten minutes," Craig said toward her with a smile.

"Fine, but I don't see what's wrong with Chain Reaction," Lena said, taking the headphones from James.

Jessie closed her eyes to avoid anyone seeing her roll them. "Oh sure, we don't want to be original and cover other bands or singers, do we?"

To both of the men's relief, Lena took it well and laughed it off. "You can't be too inconsistent, or we'll not keep the fans we have." She put the headphones on, cueing James to press play.

"It's a cover anyway," Craig said. Jessie looked at him, mouthing *what*. "Chain Reaction, Tragedy. We're cover-coverers."

James snickered to himself while Jessie secretly thought about defecting to Pulse or Dave's band for a moment. "Oh is that why we don't do the Barbie song anymore, and the spooky one, and the Indiana Jones song, and the *dummy de dada nah* ode to Tom..."

Craig's eyes widened sharply and shook his head while squeaking a bit. "Ex-nay on the A word nay."

James struggled to fight off his smirk when he looked at the both of them, mainly Craig. "What?"

Lena laughed, getting the rest of the band's attention. "Oh I get it." She threw the headphones into James' lap and got up. Craig grimaced for more reasons than one. "Yep that's fine, Jessie's just reminded me I need to grab that blonde dye."

The others watched her walk away and leave, unsure what she meant or what to say.

Jessie said it first, "who was the dye for?" she eyed Craig before she'd even finished.

"Okay then, I think she likes the first song, so er..." James said, waving the headphones in Jessie's, then Craig's direction. Craig shrugged indifferently.

"This should be good," Jessie chuckled as she took them to put on.

Little under two days later, Voyager and the rest of the tour approached a very Earth like planet. This planet though had many small moons circling it and a very faint ring at its northern equator. The entire tour were instructed to fly single file into a specific orbital path to avoid collisions. Voyager slipped in behind the Z5.

Despite the planet looking a lot like home from orbit, it was a different story on the surface. With the haze of the rings the sky had a golden tint to it. The many moons looked massive, one took up a near quarter of the horizon, and thanks to the star and the rings, it shone brightly through the daytime clouds.

Like the last planet, the bands were chauffeured to the arena, this time separately from the others. This one made almost entirely of glass, they could see the stage inside and the crowds already flowing into it.

The coaches turned in before they reached the heavy traffic of people, towards the back where it was quieter.

Virus's coach stopped furthest from the door, the two officials escorting them immediately got up to approach them.

"Okay, now that we're here, we must go through today's program," the woman said to their confusion. "In one of the weeks each band must film an intermission clip. That will be scored by judges first and then public, which could help you if your main song's votes are in trouble."

"Um, why are we hearing about this now?" James asked.

The newly blonde Lena jumped up out of her seat, practically giddy. "Oh you mean like a music video, we've got a few already."

The two officials exchanged bemused glances briefly. "Possibly, if your videos are set to your music," the woman answered.

The man quickly thought to answer James' question before the band responded, "it's meant to be last minute, that's the point. Your people have already chosen the song, it doesn't take long to do."

Jessie grimaced, "they have?"

"Out of what?" Lena asked.

"Oh it's okay, they pick out of a selection of ones you've done," the woman said brightly. "Now, shall we go in." She headed for the door anyway.

By the time the arena was at full capacity night had fallen. The walls surrounding them were no longer see through and instead were four massive screens, showing a video of one of the groups with their music blasting.

Since the arena didn't have seating, everyone had to find a good spot and stand there. The film crew flew around in their open-top buggies.

Not long after the video clip was over, Tom squeezed through a lot of screaming aliens to get back to his spot with B'Elanna and Harry, trying his best not to spill the drinks. There was barely half left in each cup by the time he got there.

"You didn't miss much, just the Ligers declaring war on a beloved movie soundtrack," Harry said whilst taking his drink.

Tom's eyes flew open, "ohno, I hope it wasn't My Heart Will Go On."

B'Elanna didn't even try to not laugh at him, she then eyed Harry playfully. "Let me tell him," she said.

Harry chuckled, making Tom panic a little. Meanwhile all of the walls but the one behind the stage had turned to almost black, silhouettes of people wandered the stage while an electric guitar started playing. Anyone at the far back or stuck behind a tall person could still see the stage perfectly via one of the four screens.

Spotlights dotted the stage as if they were trying to find someone. In time with the guitar chords they each stopped on one of the three members of the band.

"Hey, hang your microphone up cos there's, nothing left to prove now," Bryan sang with attitude. Tom and B'Elanna looked on proudly while Harry swapped his empty glass with Tom's half full one.

Kiara smiled and took over, "hey, hang your microphone up. No one cares but you."

The pair stomped off in opposite directions, Naomi strode down in between them to sing her bridge. "What planet are you from? Accusing me of things that I've never done." She span around on the spot, "listening to you wailing on." She looked towards Kiara sharply, they sang together, "killing another love song."

Tom's earlier pride had quickly been swapped with quite a lot of anxiety. When B'Elanna noticed she stopped clapping along and gave him a firm stare. "What?" she asked as the three started their chorus.

"Ohno, this is a little too personal," Tom started to sweat.

B'Elanna was ready to give him a slap until she overheard the last line of the chorus; "bye bye my sister ex." Realisation made her face turn very white.

Kiara took the centre stage. "You say that I stole the scene but the lights are back on you now." She pointed ahead, cueing the spotlights to flicker around the audience.

Meanwhile in the backstage preparation rooms, one contestant in particular was watching the show with a hardening glare on her face. Anyone sane knew to keep their distance.

"Does it help you sleep at night?" Kiara sang until Naomi walked over, pointing at her.

"Pointing the finger, picking a fight," she finished for her.

Kiara walked by her smiling. "I'll not waste another tear."

"Your poison's not welcome in my ear," Naomi laughed.

Backstage James carefully approached Lena, briefly eyeing the screen. "It's probably just a song they found and liked, a coinci..." he said not sounding entirely sure himself.

Bryan walked up to join them in the middle. "You moaned and changed your hair," he said.

"Still the same," the girls whispered.

James flinched and looked down at the ground, in the corner of his eyes he saw Lena's fists beginning to clench.

"Do you think I'll be fair?" Bryan sneered.

The girls laughed, "L, O, L."

"Bye bye my ex sister," Kiara followed that with and waved towards one of the cameras. Of course that was the one that Lena had been watching. She huffed and stomped off.

By the time the first half of the chorus ended, the audience were shouting their approval as if they were finished entirely.

"If I were in your shoes, I'd worry about your effects. You've had your say, but now it's my turn," the whole group sang despite the overwhelming noise. "Bye bye my sister ex."

Almost everyone in the arena were clapping for them. Only a few of the Voyager crew stood still and awkwardly quiet.

"I'll get us more drinks," B'Elanna said as she pushed her way through the people on her right.

A dreary ballad started to play from the screens next, with video clips of the ten year old looking boyband posing moodily to go along with it. Anyone put to sleep were soon startled awake again by the next group acting out a tragic love story with opera like singing.

On their return to the backstage, Pulse ran almost into Dave's group. Naomi and Bryan were pretty thankful for that since they spotted Lena pass by a few feet further ahead, and fortunately Kiara was too distracted to notice.

"God guys, it's only round two. Take it easy on the little guys," Dave chuckled.

Kiara giggled, "little guys? What are you talking about?"

Kim rolled her eyes and groaned at the other male member of the band, "no it's not!"

"Uh yes it is," the strange guy said mockingly, "*it just takes two to make it through, please!*"

Carly jumped to Kim's defence a little too eagerly, "it rhymes, that's why it's right."

Dave tried not to look embarrassed by them all. "So does true," he muttered under his breath, they all looked at him accusingly. "It doesn't matter, the video's done, it's over!"

"Uhoh," Bryan whimpered when he spotted James walking down the corridor towards their general direction. Bryan shuffled to stand behind Naomi and ducked a little. Naomi gave him a funny look as he swapped her for the taller Kiara.

"Ah ha!" the weird guy shouted triumphantly before hurrying over to block James' path. He had to stop abruptly to avoid collision. "Oh you're just in time."

James grimaced and stepped back once. "That's subjective."

The strange guy chuckled, "you're funny. It's almost our turn. Can you..."

"Good for you," James said, raising his eyebrow in judgement. He was about to walk around him but the strange guy hurried to get in his way again.

"Steve, come on..." Dave tried to call him over whilst picturing his drummer being faceplanted into his own drums if he didn't.

The man turned around on his heel, furious with a cold look in his eye. "It's Steve-ay!"

James tried not to laugh and was about to walk off when he noticed Kiara's group lurking nearby. Bryan squeaked and ducked further down.

"Okay," James looked confused at that. He focused on Kiara. "I'm assuming you haven't seen Lena on your way back."

"No," Kiara replied quickly while Naomi nodded and pointed.

James was about to respond when he heard the familiar opening chords of Virus' intermission video. He sighed and walked off in the direction Naomi pointed.

"Okay, so are we ready? Two minutes," Dave said to his group.

"Shh!" Stevé snapped at him, "I'm trying to listen to the music."

Carly and Kim sniggered at each other knowingly as Dave stared blankly.

Back in the arena B'Elanna was regretting her last drink run, or at least her bringing it back with her to Tom and Harry to share. She tried to pay attention to the video playing on the screens, but their loud conversation could've been heard by the many rows of people around them.

"Hey did you see that bit in the second verse?" Tom asked to the annoyance of the people around him.

Harry swigged his tenth bottle and hiccuped. "Yeah, I liked it."

"You know I'm starting to think that I was right!" Tom yelled.

"About what?" Harry ask-shouted back.

Tom poked his friend drunkenly in the shoulder, "this bit," he said while pretending to lean his head against Harry's shoulder. He pushed him away, accidentally knocking the next person's drink. "Yeah exactly bud. James is all *if you feel you can love me*, and Jessie's on his shoulder with that line... what was it again?"

"Oh for god's sake," B'Elanna muttered.

"Oh, right about your theory of them being a couple," Harry said without a care. He was more interested in the middle eight of the song, which Jessie seemed to be leading surrounded by glittering stars. James would occasionally adlib the last few words she sang standing back to back with her.

"Yep," Tom didn't notice his tone of voice and grinned. He looked up at the screen and started to snigger. This time Harry groaned along with B'Elanna. "Look at them, who are they fooling?"

B'Elanna rolled her eyes, "I dunno, you."

"I'm with her. If they were together and keeping it quiet, why flirt in front of the camera?" Harry said.

"Once again Harry, you've got me. But have you ever thought that they did it on purpose to get people to think what you think," Tom asked. The chorus blasted back on, drowning them out.

"I suppose, it could be either way," Harry raised his voice to reply.

"Well I still stand by my theory!" Tom yelled back

"Well I don't think it's our business whether they are going out or not," Harry loudly groaned. B'Elanna nodded.

Tom blew a raspberry, "please. They should've thought about that before they became celebrities. It's a good thing I'm not a petty man, or they'd never win this competition if the people here knew."

"Knew that some weirdo had an unhealthy fixation with them? I'm sure they'll manage," B'Elanna said, finally shutting up her gossiping husband.

With Virus's video over, Dave's band took the stage next. Violin strings blasted through the speakers, and yet no one was playing anything like one. Only Stevé drummed along with the fast paced tune. Most of the audience didn't care, they loved it instantly.

Carly started to play her small sax once the strings stopped. Dave sang along a little flatly, but in time with the fast tune, "feel my heart beat. It chimes faster than a beating drum. No one here knows me like you..." he tried to sing high but it went a bit wobbly. His voice quickly lowered for the rest of the sentence, "and that's the way I like it. Feel my beat and turn the other way, towards me."

While the crowd seemed to love the backing music, quite a lot of people were struggling with following the subtitled and translated lyrics on the screens. Dave's fast talking *singing* style wasn't helping either.

Thankfully Kim swooped in for the next part, though she couldn't sing anywhere near fast enough to keep up with the song. "So he says, *you cannot do better than me* and I know that you'd keep me awake and feel the beat until we fly away." She cringed and so did the others whilst hurriedly moving onto the next line, with very little time to breathe, "I cannot move on until you'll miss me and you hear mine in time with yours."

"Feel my heart beat, it flies faster than the speed of light," Kim and Dave sang together but no one could really hear Dave over Kim. "Come with me and I'll show you what I'm simply made of. Feel your beat and turn once more towards me, I need you."

Dave took the lead once more to a lot of people's disappointment. "One more chance to, I know you feel it, keep up with my beat."

The song got a better a reception than the last one despite the problems, still the band didn't look happy with themselves. They bowed out as gracefully as possible and left the stage.

Their quick singing and seemingly wrong lyrics, the audience hoped, were quickly forgotten after two more intermission videos and another sappy performance from the pre-teen boyband.

Backstage Jessie, Craig and James waited anxiously during the second video, each with small mics that sat over the top of their head and looked more like little headphones. James tapped his commbadge a few times, each time he was ignored.

They were soon summoned to the stage by the backstage crew.

"We can't, not without Lena," Craig stammered.

Jessie sighed a little impatiently, "I dunno where she went after Kiara's dig at her. I dunno if I'd want to go up after that either."

The crew hinted for them to go, tapping their ear pieces urgently.

James groaned, "it's okay, she'll not miss this. Let's go." He walked through to the stage corridor, leaving Jessie and Craig looking more than a little baffled. They hurried after him as their music started playing around the arena.

The audience saw James hurry up onto the stage just as the opening chords finished. Him being alone seemed a bit off to them, most assumed it was part of the act. He stopped abruptly and started to sing like nothing was the matter, "really, can't you see..." Jessie and Craig joined him on either side and began to dance. The crowd roared and clapped. "I'm calling a one like you, should wear a warning. It's dangerous. I'm falling."

Tani meanwhile swooned so much she passed out to the bemusement of the people around her.

James continued, thankfully unaware of this. Lena with her normal hair colour jumped out from behind the curtain once he was finished the verse, cueing loud cheers from the audience. "Too hot to handle, losing my head and the world around," she coyly sang high. "I need you now."

The group got into formation as if this was all part of their routine, with Lena and James at the front.

"From the taste on my lips, I'm on a ride," they all sang together while dancing on the spot. "You're toxic, I'm slipping under. The taste of a poison paradise."

They all sang the next line, but James accidentally did it louder than the others, "I'm addicted to you..." Lena briefly glanced at him, "but you know that you're toxic."

The band spread out into a circle as a white spherical object slowly lowered from the ceiling. No one really had a clue what it was even when it landed in the middle of them. They stretched their arms out and bowed before it, before speedwalking to the front of the stage, once more in a line, only Craig and Jessie fronted them this time.

"It's getting late, to give it up," Craig smiled as he sang. "I took a sip," his hand raised, pretending to hold something to his face. It looked like he was downing a drink, "to my devil's cup. So thirsty, it's taking over me."

"Oh I get it!" Kathryn laughed loudly during an extremely brief lull in the music, so people heard her. She didn't care, she chugged her coffee.

The group circled the object again, only this time they didn't follow each other, Jessie and Lena went around clockwise, Craig and James did the opposite.

Jessie repeated Lena's earlier lines while stroking it with her finger. She pretended it was hot and brought the finger to her lips, just in time to pretend to collide with James. She turned her hand around to bring the same finger over to his lips instead while singing, "I have you now."

Tom's eyes widened, he started pointing sharply at the stage. "I knew it, see, see!" he drunkenly shouted. B'Elanna shoved him into the people in front. They let him fall to the ground.

After the next chorus, they repeated the last line while once again caressing the object. Unknown to the crowd Lena and James were push-turning it discreetly with their fingers so it would turn and slowly. The object was revealed to not be entirely spherical, it had a giant handle that had been hidden behind it the whole time.

Kathryn wiped a tear from her eye. "Oh I'm so proud." Chakotay hid his embarrassed face with his hand.

When the song ended on Lena's repeated "intoxicate me now," line, the whole stadium erupted in applause, excited cheers and hoots.

The next video started to play while they were still exiting the stage. They had to pass by the last two groups, who didn't look pleased with their good performance, before they could find a quieter place to stop.

"Lena, what the hell..." Jessie started to snap.

Lena dabbed her head, revealing her hair was only a wig, the blonde she had dyed it to was underneath. "What? If Kiara wants to embarrass me, she's going to have to do better."

James rolled his eyes, "you could've told us that."

Lena giggled as if it were no big deal, "and ruin the surprise, no way. It was cool, wasn't it?"

"As I was saying, if I knew you were going to turn this into a you versus your own kid insult match, you can count me out," James said before walking off.

Lena's jaw dropped, her eyes sharpened as she placed her hands on her hips. "What's his problem?" she asked in Jessie's direction.

She and Craig glanced at one another tiredly.

Like the last time, all of the groups were directed into one room to wait for the results. This one was much better with a bar and table service. Most were watching the highlights of the show playing on the large holographic screen in the middle of the room, which played on both sides.

"Wow, what a night folks," one of the two people hosting the event pretended to wheeze. He turned to his female partner, "I honestly don't know who to vote for. Do you?"

"Honestly, me neither Jepp," the woman laughed. "To help us out this time, our judges were given the intermission videos before the show and were asked to rank them based on only that. We're about to look at those now, and hopefully that'll inspire some to vote for their favourites."

The male announcer, Jepp nodded furiously. "Yup Eylene, eight acts so there's a maximum of eight points to earn, with one being the lowest you can get. This is always fun, we usually don't get to see our bands ranked until much later in the competition."

"I've been told this is also to determine the order for the next show and that's why it's early," Eylene smiled. Jepp pretended to look shocked. "Whoever gets the lowest score goes first, and you know that's a terrible disadvantage going first. You have to be really memorable to get those votes at the end of the show."

Jessie flinched as she peered down into her drink. Lena spotted her and gave her a tiny elbow to the arm, "don't worry, we're more than good."

"I dunno, did you see some of them?" Jessie said. Craig nodded with his eyes widening. "The boyband could probably go on stage and put their fingers up the whole time, and they'd still have people Tani-ing the place down."

James peered across at her with a slight frown. That made Jessie chuckle a bit, but she was still worried. "That one band puts on one hell of a show everytime, and the singer in that Rhythm band..."

"Yeah so what, she's loud. James is louder," Lena said.

"I've already said it was an accident," James groaned, shaking his head.

A lot of people shushed them as a scoreboard appeared beside the hosts. "In eighth place with one point is... wow, our next week's hosts LG. I'm sorry guys," Jepp said, putting on a clearly fake pout.

Eylene kept her trained smile on while she spoke, "in seventh with two is..." She read the card and couldn't believe her eyes, her smile almost fell off. "Jailbreakers? Wow, didn't see that one coming." Neither did a lot of the room, angry murmurs took over a few of the tables while Alright and 54x were announced next.

"Rhythm came in at fourth, and I'm starting to wonder what the judges are drinking," Jepp chuckled sincerely.

"Third is the second of our guest bands," Eylene said, smiling once again politely. Kiara and Lena both had similar expectant looks on their faces, trying to avoid seeing the other and yet their eyes still drifted in each other's directions. "It's Pulse." Kiara covered her face while Lena celebrated with a little hand clap. "That's a shame, I liked their little cutesy video."

"Third's nothing to be scoffed at, at this point in the competition," Jepp reminded her. Eylene nodded in agreement. "Second will probably be..." he looked down at the results, his eyes flickered in confusion, "second is Number 1."

Lena gasped and jumped out of her seat, "yes, we won!" Craig was shocked not only at that but the sudden hug he got from Lena which nearly choked the life out of him.

"So that leaves our guests Virus with top marks, meaning they'll be last to perform in round three," Jepp stammered in shock. Kiara snuck a glance over at Lena who had left a poor wheezing Craig behind in his chair, giggling and saying something to a still shocked Jessie.

Eylene smiled and it looked genuine, "history in the making folks. Three guests still in, and two are in the Judge's top three. Lets hope we can keep all of them one more week. You've got ten minutes to vote to save your favourites."

### **The Mess Hall:**

Everyone made a point to avoid the buffet table, as per usual. For once though it wasn't only the smell that was putting people off, it was the noise as well.

Lilly made the mistake of walking by and was immediately pulled in for an uncomfortable hug with a sobbing Stevé. "It's not fair. We were sixth place. How? What did I do wrong?"

"Well, this for starters," Lilly grumbled as she pried herself away. When she realised who it was she scowled in disgust, "who the hell are you again?"

Stevé wiped the tears from one side of his face. "Captain Lilly? I'm so sorry..." he whimpered. Lilly sighed and nodded, inching to get away. Still he continued, "I let you, I let our people down."

"Oh," Lilly said in realisation, yet her eyes darted from side to side, "don't worry about it, erm... Steve."

The man howled and sobbed more, fortunately for Lilly everyone in the room were trying to avert their attention away from him. "It's Steve-ay!"

A few tables away Lena poured a bottle of pop into her glass, giggling before it spilled over the top. James took the bottle from her to fill his own.

"Wow, we're killing this competition," Lena laughed, "I told you."

Jessie eyed the bottle curiously, then at Lena and back again. Then she noticed a group of aliens carrying a few cameras hurriedly approaching them. She shook her head, "I'll pass." James shrugged and handed it over to Craig.

"Virus, how do you feel about being the first guest band to be ranked first by the judges?" one reporter asked.

Another spoke over the top of him, "what are you going to do for Slow Song week?"

Lena smiled up at them eagerly. "Well it was a huge shock, it still hasn't sunk in."

James stared at her with a bemused smirk, "really, this is your meh response?"

"Does slow mean ballad?" Craig asked a little fearfully.

One of the reporters inadvertently came to his rescue to ask their question, "what do you think of your fellow shipmates' band, Pulse?"

Jessie noticed Lena's smile falter a bit. She was about to respond a little less cheery, so Jessie cut in first. "They started quite recently, they're really young. I think it's brave of them to be taking part."

"Yeah brave," Lena chimed in with a flat tone.

Craig laughed very nervously, "yeah they're doing really well. It's cool that both of our groups have been getting your votes. Thank you."

"Your Liger counterparts haven't took their defeat so well," one reporter said, gesturing to Stevé trying to break his bottle of booze over the table and failing miserably. "It's gonna be tough for your remaining two bands to go up against well known, beloved groups here in the later rounds. Do you think you can handle it?"

James peered over just in time to see Stevé somehow managing to slam the bottle over his thumb. He struggled to maintain a straight face. "Oh him, no he's not being a sore loser. He's been like that since that weird song, you know..."

"You mean... I hope it wasn't us," Jessie said.

Lena scoffed, "he said weird song but I think he meant annoying. You know those two ra..."

"The ones nobody liked, yeah," James cut in intentionally, lightly shaking his head. Lena wondered why but let it go.

The reporter sighed knowingly, one cringed as if in pain. "I know the feeling, I still have nightmares," they said.

"Poor man," another chimed in. They tried to smile at the group, "thank you for your time, and good luck in the next round." They all wandered off to interview Dave and his other two bandmembers.

As if she'd been storing it up during the entire interview, Lena burst into a fit of giggles again. "Guys, I know a good slow song we can use. Mum will love it."

Jessie groaned, "you mean the one that Tom insisted was his song at karaoke, and you changed like one word?"

Lena wasn't put off, but her giggles calmed down a tad. "I've changed more. Besides his was the made up version, I'm only changing it back. Girl does not flow as well as coffee, what a moron."

James was confused until she said that part, then he widened his eyes and looked a little embarrassed. "Oh god." Craig looked at him similarly. "His Bad Girl song, yeah that was terrible. I'd never sing that."

"Nope, so entitled and needy," Craig agreed a little too much.

Lena and Jessie stared at them both suspiciously.

"Anyway, I'm sure there's a ballad we can use without butchering its lyrics for once," Jessie said. Lena made a little aaaw sound. "Or a slagging people off song. We're meant to be the grownups, so..."

James and Craig agreed and nodded. Lena pouted further. "But Toxic was a dedication. Mum loved it," she complained, "I'm not singing a sappy love ballad. No way." Her eyes and face soon lit up again, "oh, there's a one about time travel. No one will know it's about anything true."

Craig winced through his teeth a little too long, it hurt his gums. "Kiara already did that one, remember?"

"Oh," Lena's face fell. "I thought I'd called it, but okay, fine," she grumpily muttered.

A few tables away Kiara thought she heard her name mentioned, so she looked around. Only the reporters caught her eye. A few more entered the Mess Hall to veer directly towards Virus.

"Of course," Kiara sighed then pouted. "We can't do that one, they'll be expecting it."

Naomi shrugged as she put her PADD to one side. "I thought this was a music thingie, not a grudge match." She ignored her friend's blank stare to munch on the rest of her dinner.

"I think Lena got it this time, we don't wanna be petty-er," Bryan said with a mouthful of food.

Kiara cringed, "I'm only doing this for fun." Naomi and Bryan stopped and looked at her in ridicule disbelief. She blushed and looked down, "the altered lyrics I mean. It's fun. The competition I wanna win, which is supposed to be hard enough for visiting aliens without Lena being in it too."

"You know why I said it. You're only in this to beat your mother, but I'm in this to have some fun and that's it," Bryan said. Naomi nodded furiously, then got back to her dinner.

"If you wanna have fun singing, do it in the shower or singing into a brush at home like everyone else. This is a serious competition," Kiara snapped.

Naomi burst into giggles. "So serious you're more interested in embarrassing your mom. You've always been a good laugh."

Kiara stammered and blushed again. "No, no, I'm done with that. I don't care."

"Okay," both Bryan and Naomi said in a reassuring, we know you're lying tone. Kiara sulked, looked down and got back to poking her stone cold dinner.

## **Two days later**

### **Holodeck Two:**

A piano played in the background slowly as Craig tried to sing softly into the standing microphone. James and Jessie were on either side of him, looking worried. Their two officials sat a little ways in front of them, their faces blank it wasn't clear if they were enjoying it or bored.

When the music faded, one of them clapped unenthusiastically and politely. The other shook their head.

"I knew I'd screw it up, sorry," Craig said, turning his head away from the microphone.

"No, no," the previously quiet official said and smiled, "you were fine. The song's beautiful, a lot of people would identify with a love un-reciprocated song."

Jessie stepped away from her mic to sit down on the slight step at the edge of the stage. "We're fast running out of ballads we all agree on. It's not our style, is that the problem?"

The official that clapped sighed sympathetically. "That's part of the problem, yes. From the audience reactions, to the comments on the message boards and social chatters; your group are a breath of fresh air not only because you're new, you're interesting and quirky. A lot of people call Craig the shy, cute one. Mysterious."

Craig instantly perked up, he peered over to them. "I'm sorry, you said Craig right?"

James and Jessie both sniggered quietly to themselves, while the officials nodded.

"They can't get enough of James, his attitude, his look, his voice has turned quite a few heads," the other official said, dashing Craig's spirit immediately.

"Of course. I'm just the cute one," he mumbled huffily.

Jessie raised her eyebrow as she looked at him. "It's a start?" she tried to sound helpful but it sounded patronising. Craig took it as the latter, he plopped himself down on the spot he stood and looked away.

"And Jessie, you're a hit amongst the women and girls vote. Your confidence and sassiness is mentioned a lot," the first official said. Jessie looked a little confused at that, she looked up at James still fidgeting awkwardly from his feedback. "And Lena, they love her spirit and enthusiasm."

"Yes, she's so enthusiastic she doesn't show up for two hours. We like that too," James said.

Craig huffed as he stood back up, arming a scowl in advance to aim at James. "You've got to cut that out." James looked at him a little bemused. "Lena's doing her best, she's been through a lot."

"Yeah that's why I'm worried," James countered back, eyes sharpening. "I sorta hoped she wanted to do this because it was simply something only she liked to do, help her with her lost sense of self, you know..."

"Kinda ruined with Kiara entering her band too," Jessie mumbled.

James trailed off, his head slumped down. "Kiara can't be blamed for that. She's still a kid, we forget. I doubt she realised what she was doing." Craig stared down sullenly as well.

One of the officials forced a smile on their way over to them. "Now see, this I can get behind." The remaining group members focused on her, each with their own confused

frown. "A ballad doesn't have to be a tragic love song. On my world the self analysing and enlightening power ballads are almost always hits. While it may be a risk, it could be a one that pays off."

The male official made a little unsure groan. "No matter what, they have to learn a new song and we only have one of their days left."

"I'm sure Lena would prefer that over a song Craig probably sang to himself everytime he updated his old PADD," James said, smirking slightly.

Craig saw it and narrowed his eyes, "yeah, hilarious. Give up your day job, no all your jobs, funny guy."

James tried not to laugh, he caught it in his throat. "Oh god, you really shouldn't."

The Holodeck doors opened to Jessie and the official's relief. Lena ran up to them with a giddy grin on her face. Once she stopped in front of the stage she had trouble keeping still. "Guys, guess what."

"Your mum's increased your allowance?" Jessie guessed.

Lena's eyes glazed over, then she sighed sadly, "yeah I wish." It didn't last, she grinned again, "nope, it's band related."

"They're changing the theme to spoken word songs?" Craig suggested, earning strange glares from his other bandmates. "I could just sing the chorus," he said very meekly.

Lena shook her head. "No no. Apparently during the tour, the bands promote themselves at these little concerts before the show. They almost always invite other competitors, especially the guests."

"We're hosting one and/or been invited?" James said in surprise.

"Bingo," Lena's grin managed to spread further. "The invited one, I mean. Apparently mum hasn't had enough coffee to authorise a few hundred visitors to go to our own in the Holodeck. At least not yet. I'll bother her about it later."

"Assuming we get there," Jessie said.

The male official beamed proudly at the group. The female one looked a bit worried, "that's great news, but we haven't chosen a song for this round, let alone practised it. There's no time to rehearse a five song set."

"Ohno, it's semi final promotion," Lena giggled, she held her hand out for a high five. Craig scrambled forward to do it before the other two, who didn't move an inch.

"Let's get you to it then, shall we?" the male official said. "Which band invited you?"

"Oh it's..." Lena answered quickly but trailed off with a draining face, "they do these plays instead of dancing, the breaking something?"

"Jailbreakers," the female official gasped, "that's an honour."

"Really?" James said.

The male official chuckled as if he'd said something stupid. "They're only the hottest thing in the Nutropa system. They're certainly unique and very talented. They must think highly of you to invite your band to their semi final gig."

Jessie climbed back to her feet, wincing a bit. "Or they think we're terrible and want to show us up."

Lena groaned in disgust. "Oh for god's sake Jessie, lighten up a bit." She shook her head and smiled once more, "speaking of which, I've got a not so dull ballad in mind. It's gonna blow the stadium's roof away. Let me play it for you, not that I need to, it's *that* good." The arch was her next destination, she typed on it quickly.

Everyone were deathly silent as the song played, and even a minute after it faded out.

"It's a bit long," Jessie said, fully expecting another scolding from Lena so she quickly continued, "but I like it."

"Me too, but isn't it too sappy for you?" James asked.

Lena scrunched up her face and shrugged meekly, "it's not lovey dovey crap, it's empowering I think, so nope."

Craig looked around at the group with hope building in his eyes. "Does that mean we're all on board for this one?" He got a few approving nods and mumbles in response. "I hate to ruin the mood, but how do we assign who sings what? I mean there's a lot there."

"Simple isn't it?" Lena chuckled. "All on the chorus, you or Jess on the opening." Craig squeaked in response, making her groan. "It's the easiest part! Ugh forget it. Since James likes to shout a lot and these people like it, he can get the longer verse. Whoever doesn't do the intro gets the shorter verse. I'll take the last bit."

The female official didn't look so sure. She meant her hmm to be quiet but they all heard it. "Sorry, I have a suggestion. We're your advisors because you're new to this sector, so I'd be remiss if I didn't do what I could to help you advance to the semi's."

"What's the suggestion?" James asked, cueing Lena to stare at him accusingly.

"As I was telling you earlier, we've been looking through the feedback and discussions about you to get a better idea on how to advise," the female official said. "I know you like to equally share out the vocals, but at this stage we've got to play to win." Craig not so silently sighed in relief. "I think with a song like this, a few modifications to your idea with a lead would *blow the roof off* as you said."

Jessie glanced at her bandmates curiously, then back at her. "You mean a lead singer?" The woman smiled at her, she took it as a yes and not as a nomination. "I dunno if that's a good idea."

"It might be," Lena said, though her voice didn't sound confident. "None of our songs so far have been belters. We haven't shown off that we can sing, not really."

"Speak for yourself," Craig muttered.

Lena turned her head to smile at him for a moment. "So what do you suggest, I do a few lines of a verse, some of the opening?"

The female official glanced at her teammate, he shook his head. "Why don't we practise the whole song together first," she stuttered. Lena frowned, unsure why. James and Craig weren't either but kept that to themselves. Jessie though had a good idea, she dreaded what was to come.

*"We're live in Lo'Ihna, already in our third week of the peace tour,"* Jepp directed towards anyone who was watching on their screens. *"The public have decided this round should be chill, relaxing. What better theme for the tranquil city of Satorissia?"*

James scoffed, reluctantly turning his head and slowly to look out the window next to him. While there were buildings and pedestrian walkways only a few metres away, their vehicle was floating along water. He groaned and faced forward twice the speed, shaking his head. "Tranquil, right."

Craig couldn't help himself, he sniggered a little obnoxiously. "I know right, what if we break down?" James raised his eyebrow as he looked at him. "What if we sink?" Craig faked a gasp.

"What if you're unconscious for the evening?" James said in a flat tone, Craig wasn't sure if he was serious.

Jessie peered out the parallel window. The streets seemed a lot further away on that side. Still they were close enough to make out faces of the people there, that was until their transport floated by an ice blue tree, its branches filled with sparkling blue leaves.

Lena noticed as well and rushed for the window, eyes wide in wonder. She stuck her head out the window after they passed by. She was more than astonished to see not just one, but they'd passed many more like that, all of them growing from under the water. Mist was beginning to settle over the stream they had travelled through, making the trees glow as well. "Wow."

"Looks like we found Atlantis," Craig chuckled very nervously, even though James had stopped staring at him.

"Is that it?" Lena wondered aloud. Her attention had changed to straight ahead of them, so Craig tried to peer in that direction too without hanging outside the window like Lena. He didn't have to. Their boat floated into an ancient stone building, its higher floors propped up by massive pillars.

Inside, the boat slowed to a stop beside a platform already full of paparazzi and screaming citizens. As they stepped onto the pier and lead into a fenced off path, they were immediately swarmed by the crowd shouting questions at them. *"What's your gimmick this week gonna be?" "Who are your songs about?" "Is it true you mime sometimes?" "Are the rumours true about you and Kiara, Lena?" "Are you two dating?"*

Craig turned his head to answer, Lena assumed one of the last few and gave him a discreet nudge in the gut. He whimpered and continued forward. Jessie took the opportunity to squeeze in front of them and walk faster to their destination, with her head down. The last question she heard before she disappeared through the door were, *"are you really pregnant, Jess..."*

Lena had to quickly grab the door to stop it closing in her face. She and Craig then followed, with James right behind them giving the man who asked a stare that was colder with every step. Once gone the guy shuddered.

The arena's staging area took up the entire northern wall of the circular hall. The stage itself looked like a stone staircase, walled by fountains on either side which kept glowing everytime the workers tested the ceiling lights.

While it was still empty, the quietest of conversations could still be heard, echoing all around, barely drowned out by the sound of running water.

In less than an hour the entire stadium was packed to the brim, each seat taken. The regular ceiling lights had dimmed, leaving only the support pillars generating each a different coloured water effect on during intermissions.

A few acts had been on already so the crowd were buzzing, and for the most part completely wasted. Of course a lot of them were the Voyager visitors getting into the Christmas spirit a little early.

Backstage Kiara, Naomi and Bryan waited for their turn, each dressed in co-ordinated white and silver outfits. To Kiara's annoyance her bandmates were being fussed over again by their mothers. Once again, she looked around for her own. In that brief moment she'd forgotten, and sighed sadly to herself. When turning back to her group she spotted Lena standing a little ways down the corridor, looking half dressed with a fluttery watery blue ankle length skirt, which clashed with her casual red t-shirt.

Lena noticed she'd been spotted, she hurriedly turned around and grabbed a passer by's arm to stop him and talk. His band carried on without him.

Kiara recoiled a little from that until she saw a brief head turn toward her again. "How long have we got?" she asked, interrupting Bryan's face cleaning.

He couldn't answer with his mother's vice grip around his chin, squeezing his lips together. Naomi promptly pointed at the same group that passed Lena just as they were going through some tall curtains. "After them."

"Won't be long," Kiara mumbled as she hurried over to Lena before she was spotted.

Halfway there she noticed the man Lena had stopped getting worked up. "No no, I don't want to go to your concert, you stuck up brat." Lena's face twitched exactly like her mum's would. "Aliens think they can waltz in with their so called new sound and win the biggest competition of the year. It doesn't work like that."

Kiara arrived in time to quickly get in the way of the guy getting a very likely punch. "Lena, what are you..."

"So what you're saying is," Lena inadvertently interrupted her, "I need to do something drastic that'll get more votes. Okay, hold still." She gently coaxed Kiara a little to one side with a tiny push of her left hand. Her right fist had clenched.

"Lena!" Kiara shouted and reached for that wrist. She laughed nervously and turned to face the man. "I'm sorry but um, she gets a little stressed before a show. She doesn't mean anything by it."

"Hey," Lena protested.

The man smirked, "all right. Tell your friend that just because Jailbreakers are giving you Humans a pity slot, the rest of us won't waste our time with any of you. The rest of us prefer a class act, a decent show. *Good luck.*" He hurried away to the curtain.

Lena growled, "ugh, why did you do that?"

Kiara turned back to face her while shaking her head. "You know why. Or you should. He's the lead instrumenter from Rhythm."

"So?" Lena said and shrugged. "He's also overdue a black eye."

"So you injure him and the public will hate you," Kiara said.

Lena laughed insincerely, "why do you care?"

Kiara grimaced, shoulders tensed. "I was coming over to ask you the same thing. You only talked to him to make it look like you weren't keeping an eye on me."

"Nuh uh," Lena grunted. "Mum said we could host a concert if I find another group. I thought..."

She got a scoff in response. Kiara smiled sweetly, "you're always around in some way. Don't deny it. You were there at the end of my first performance, you watched my second..."

"You mean the one where you pretty much stuck your middle finger up at me and told me good riddance, of course I saw it," Lena said like she had a frog in her throat. Her face looked angry though, jaw was clenched and cheeks were reddening. Kiara noticed her tone and winced. "Forget it. Having two Human groups at the Voyager concert beats the point in having one. Aren't you going to..." Lena rapidly spoke and pointed.

"Yeah but um, what is the point?" Kiara shyly asked.

Lena frowned, more than confused. "I dunno, to win."

"I thought the point was to compete against me," Kiara said.

"Well..." Lena said hesitantly, her cheeks drained, "fine. Fine, assume that's what I really meant. I'm the bad guy remember."

Kiara felt her eyes stinging, she tried to blink it away but that only made it worse. "I didn't," she said through a throbbing throat. "It's opposite, I'm glad you..."

"Go on, the song won't hurt me as much without you there," Lena hissed, stomping away. "I hear that enough anyway, why would I want to hear it at my own concert?" Kiara heard her mumble to herself.

Naomi approached carefully. "You okay?"

"Mmhm," Kiara squeaked as she dabbed under her eyes. "Yeah, let's do this."

Gentle piano music echoed around the already buzzing stadium. The spotlights danced around the higher level of the stage, leaving the floor in darkness.

"Half the heart to fight you," voices sang in unison repeatedly.

The spotlights pointed down on three band members in front of standing microphones, as more instruments joined the piano.

In the centre Kiara quickly took a deep breath to calm herself. It didn't work, her shoulders still tensed. "Yesterday you said you were alright, now you're tearing me apart tonight," she sounded raspy still with a lump in her throat. Anyone watching the other two band members caught them looking across at her in concern.

"First you didn't want to talk to me, now you won't stop talking at me," she continued, blinking away a tear forming. "Acting like you're right, and everything's okay."

Bryan and Naomi sang together for a few lines, building up to the chorus.

*"Half the heart to fight you, half the mind to leave. Torn between what I want, and what I do. I'm completely divided, now it's me that's undecided. That's the way it is, you throw back what I give. Only half a heart."*

Backstage those lines could be heard clearly in the quiet corridors. James had spotted Lena sitting in a corner on the floor, near one of the dressing rooms. Her head bowed as if it were too heavy to keep up. He sat down beside her and waited patiently.

She looked him over, half heartedly frowning at him. "You're not dressed yet."

He gave her a smile in return, "and I assume you are?" Lena's eyes briefly diverted from the ground to her t-shirt, she sighed in response. "Craig always wants to get changed first."

Lena rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Jessie waits until I go to the bathroom or get a drink. I thought it'd be easier to give her the hour she needs."

"Is that all?" James asked her.

He was glad to see Lena laugh a little but had no idea why. "I'm telling her you said that."

"What?" James said until it hit him, his eyes widened, "ohno," he stammered. "I meant is that your only reason you're sitting here, down in the dumps?"

"I'm fine," Lena brushed him off sharply.

"Uh huh." James smiled weakly. "The end bit's a little hard for me to sing. I think it'd have more meaning if you sang it instead of me."

"No," Lena mumbled and shook her head. "Not it wouldn't mean anything. I don't even get the lyrics."

James turned his head to look straight ahead, grimacing slightly. He turned back with a worried frown on his face. "You picked the song."

"Yeah cos the chorus is like all in your face, and a flip off to all the doubters," Lena replied rapidly. "The aliens will only get the botched subtitles of what you're singing anyway, so who cares?"

"Right," James laughed, "so you wouldn't care if I make up any old crap, or just hum along to that part?" Lena sharply glared at him, but that only made him laugh even more. "I'd better go. I hope Craig's got his pants on this time."

He got up and walked off, leaving Lena twisting her face so much it ached a little. "Eeew, I didn't need that image."

Virus made their way to the curtains behind the staging area, each of them wearing a similar watery shade of blue. The boys wore the same thing, light blue trousers with splashes of glitter down the side of the legs which sparkled under direct light, and a similar shaded t-shirt. The girls, a simple darker blue tank top to go with the skirt. Jessie made sure to have leggings matching her top underneath that though.

They passed the previous act, the cutesy boyband, talking to another group. One of them Lena recognised as the guy she argued with, staring while shaking his head, she stared icily back.

The other members of Virus didn't notice this until felt someone behind looking at her. She peered over her shoulder, catching the lead singer of the same group turning her attention back to her own band.

"What's that about?" Craig asked.

"Nothing. He's just a diva," Lena replied bitterly.

"Right, he," Jessie mumbled, more than a little unnerved by it. She chose to hide it and smile at James walking beside her. He looked worried, staring straight ahead he hadn't noticed her. Still he hooked his arm around hers all the way to the stage.

The intermission music faded out, leaving the arena quiet and in the dark. It was like that for a few minutes. A lot of the crowd were confused, they knew there was still one act to go.

Music started abruptly at the same time the gushing fountains were lit up. It immediately faded into a gentle, beautiful serene instrumental playing along with the sound of the fountains.

A soft blue spotlight hovered over the staircase, eventually landing on Jessie sitting halfway up, trying her best not to look nervous, holding a mic by her chin.

"Through wind and rain we got here, now we're flying with no fear," she sang softly.

Not many of the audience noticed someone step down behind her, due to what little lighting there was. Jessie did. Their presence soothed her, she smiled in the pause between her lines. "Through wind and rain we burn bright, learn to fly through flames and hold tight."

The crowd started to sway their arms slowly, quite a few held white candle shaped flashing lights, which looked to anyone on the stage like a dense starfield.

"With so many ways to go wrong, but when I look in your eyes they're all gone," Jessie continued, then rested her mic on her chest, sighing in relief.

Drums built up the so far soothing, calm music into a louder, yet haunting and still somewhat slow piece of music. The light shining on Jessie moved up and over to shine on James standing behind her, as he began to sing what sounded like a chorus but on his own. Jessie took the opportunity to discreetly curl the small of her arm around his leg, only then noticing how much she was shaking.

The supposed chorus over, three more spotlights danced across the stage, losing everyone's sight on what band members they could see before. The instrumental played over the sound of the crowd's approving cheers.

At the top of the stage, all of the lights combined to shine over Lena and follow her down the stairs. "It's only real, when you're not around. I'm walking in the rain, the sun goes down, oh."

She reached the bottom while singing her final line, the lights spread out slightly to show Craig approaching. They turned around so they were back to back while he sang his part. It didn't last, Lena joined in with him, both of them swaying their spare arm up then down in time with each other.

James and Jessie meanwhile took each opposite edge of the stage as the drums raised the intensity of the song once more.

With the spotlights on each member of the band, they sang the same bit James did earlier together this time. "And in my dreams it feels like we are forty stories tall. When you're around, we're untouchable."

Chorus over, Craig immediately dove into his next verse the best he could over the deafening cheers they got for it. "It's only real when you're not around. The candle in my hand, is burning out, oh!"

"I know that love shouldn't be so hard," Jessie sang as she walked across the stage to where he was. He did the same, they crossed paths at her next line, "and sometimes we're standing in the dark." On cue the lights died down completely for only a few seconds. When they came back on, she'd turned so her left side was facing the audience, with James facing her. "But you light up everywhere I go."

They sang together to the delight of certain people in the audience, one of them obviously Tom having a good laugh while elbowing Harry beside him. He rolled his eyes.

They soon parted, stepping backwards to allow Lena to walk up between them and take centre stage. This time she sang the chorus alone, while Jessie and Craig strode up the stairs with the lights occasionally losing them. They lost James as he went behind Lena.

"And in my dreams it feels like we aren't ever gonna fall. We're safe and sound, we're untouchable," Lena sang, holding the final word and note for as long as she could. The crowd loved it and applauded her.

Each of the spotlights turned off one by one, starting with Lena, then Jessie and Craig's. The final one that had settled in the middle of the stairs before it went off.

"Whenever you're gone, gone..." everyone heard James's voice echo around. The blue tinted lights faintly came on, too dark to see anyone on the stage or on the stairs. All anyone could make out was a shadow at the top.

"They wait at the door..." One spotlight tried to pierce the blue light onto the shadow, allowing everyone to see him finally mid sentence, "and everything's hurting like before."

"Without any meaning, we're just skin and bone," he put his all into it, holding notes and empathising a couple of the words. Loud, but not a shouting, screaming way, but powerfully. He had a few seconds to take in a deep breath in and out, "like beautiful robots dancing alone."

The roaring crowd had settled down, almost silent by this point. The rest of the band hidden in the shadows took their final positions. Jessie glanced up to check on him, while Lena and Craig silently worried about the reaction so far.

"Whenever you're gone, they wait at the door," James continued either oblivious or pretending he was. "And *everything's*," his voice caught in his throat very briefly, "hurting like before."

A brief flicker from a few camera flashes caught Lena's stoney face as she was glancing upward. Only a very few noticed it, the majority's attention was elsewhere.

"Without any meaning, we're just skin and bone. Like beautiful robots dancing alone," the last word echoed over almost complete silence, the quiet instrumental and the trickling of the fountains. The spotlights changed to look like rain gently falling from the ceiling, the blue started to fade away.

A lot of the Voyager crew looked around, baffled by the aliens' reaction.

Harry leaned in closer to whisper to Tom in case he was heard, "what's the matter, it's not like he was bad."

"Dunno, maybe the subtitles for him were wrong," Tom whispered back with a frown.

On Voyager, everyone watching in the Mess Hall were equally confused. They could see the same thing, only with the two television hosts quietly discussing between themselves while alien text scrawled across the screen.

"I've never seen this before, not this far in the competition," Eylene commented aloud first while facing the camera.

Jepp nodded as the song's instrumental started building up in volume. "Not in all my years either Eylene. I don't know if they hated it or liked it. What a finish though..." The

steadily increasing sound of people clapping along interrupted him, he and his partner looked even more confused than before. He forced a laugh, "oh it's not over."

Spotlights returned to shine on the entire band as they sang the chorus together. After that it was definitely over, the music faded out and the lights dimmed. The applause and cheers were deafening.

"Amazing," Eylene chuckled sincerely. "I think Virus have secured their place in the semi-final, no question."

"Hmm, it was a bit touch and go there for a moment. Perhaps they should've saved this number for the final," Jepp said.

On the ship and in the stadium, the Voyager crewmembers were a little relieved but confused at the reaction.

Jessie and Craig returned backstage first. Jessie waited around by the curtain, while Craig hurried over to the nearby drinks being offered by the staff.

It had been a good half a minute, so Jessie peered through the curtains. She immediately had to back off to avoid getting it swung into her face by Lena marching through in the middle of an angry grumble, "...what you did." She stared at Jessie briefly before stomping off in between Craig and her.

James followed only to stay by the curtain, straining his face like he was biting his tongue, and literally too.

Lena scanned her surroundings, quickly noticing the same two bands they passed earlier were still around. She turned back towards Jessie and James, face like thunder. "I knew it, they're laughing behind our backs."

"About what?" Craig asked at the same he repressed a hiccup from his fast drinking. Lena stared back in disbelief, he felt his insides shrivel up.

Jessie shook her head in obvious disapproval. It was long gone by the time she turned around towards James, she gave him a smile. "I told you, that was brilliant."

James laughed at himself, "so brilliant it killed everyone in the room, like the Rihanna and Justin tribute band on the first week."

"Oh!" Craig gasped in horror, "is that who I-Great were supposed to be?" Lena snatched the rest of his glass to down it.

"Well I thought it was gorgeous," Jessie said dismissively, wrapping her arms around James' shoulders. Despite the audience, she gave him a peck on the lips.

Lena eyed the bands. The boyband had already wandered off, but the one she'd argued with stood around. "You would," she muttered.

Jessie sharply turned her head her way, "what's your problem?" she asked while pulling back a touch.

"Nothing," Lena said while faking a smile. "It's what everyone else's problem is." She stomped off in the opposite direction to the staring band.

Jessie peered around James curiously, he looked over his shoulder. They both noticed the group moving away, so they quickly broke apart as if nothing happened.

Craig frowned, "where did I put my glass?"

### **The Mess Hall:**

Tables had been shuffled around to create a sitting area in front of the large screen that had been brought in a few nights earlier. Instead of showing the competition, a programme about the tour was playing. The two hosts excitedly talked about the semi-finales, while repeats of the performances played in the background.

Jessie, James and Duncan sat at a nearby table. Duncan kept glancing over at the screen, then at them. He seemed to remember he had breakfast left and tucked into that.

James sighed. "How the hell did we get through to the semi's?" he asked in between a forkful of food and a sip of his drink.

"Gee," Jessie chuckled, glancing at the screen he had his back to. Typically a repeat of their performance was on, spliced up to show the best bits, she assumed. "Apparently, I don't need to be biased."

James frowned, "huh?" Jessie smiled and shook her head. Still his face didn't change, "Lena was right. I shouted that last part, ruined it. If it weren't for the last chorus, we'd be out."

Duncan peered up at him with his brow lowering, he pointed his puzzled face towards Jessie. "Why is he lying? You said lying bad."

Jessie giggled to herself while James froze, more than confused. "Yes James," she said, making his confusion worse. "Stop lying to him. You need to set a good example for your son."

James almost spat out his drink and laughed genuinely, "that is a good one." His attention went back to his breakfast, mumbling while scooping some food, "me, good example."

"Uh huh," Jessie sighed, looking a little deflated. "I am a little serious here. Duncan shouldn't have either of our poor self esteem issues. You can't keep calling yourself crap around him, or he'll do it too."

"Crap?" Duncan sounded like he scoffed. He shook his head, "Silly daddy."

The mirth faded from James' face in an instant. Jessie though quietly sniggered at Duncan's comment.

"It's not... with the band I don't usually care if I do well or not. The silence spoke for itself, that's all," James said, trailing off when he noticed Lena and Kiara walk in together, followed by Craig and the rest of Kiara's band. "Uh... something's really wrong with this picture."

Jessie peered around to see what he was talking about as the group reached the table. She recoiled from the rare sight of Lena and Kiara together, not arguing.

"Oh, they haven't announced it yet?" Lena said, eyeing the screen.

"They've already told us *next week's* theme. What else is there?" Jessie said.

Lena didn't answer, instead her eyes lit up and she pointed at the screen. "Ah this must be it."

James and Jessie reluctantly turned around to watch the screen. The announcers had a screen behind them showing a still promotional image of their group.

"Now this is quite the surprise," Jepp said. "We've been told that Virus will not be attending Jailbreakers' summer bash at the weekend..."

"What?" Jessie snapped.

James stared up at the smiling Lena. He didn't have time to ask, the announcer continued. "... citing unforeseen circumstances. Taking their place will be Ausfalt tribute band Faultsa. Of course this has..."

Lena walked over while he was talking to mute the TV, much to everyone in the room's annoyance. "It's okay. I got..."

"They've replaced us with a tribute band?" Jessie stammered over the top of her, offended and a little angry.

Lena shrugged casually. "That's Jailbreakers' problem. Now, our news."

"Wait, what do you mean *our news*? What's happened here?" James asked, gesturing to the screen.

"Well," Lena said, glancing at the uncomfortable looking Kiara beside her. "I asked mum about hosting our own promotional concert. She thought with both bands getting to the semi's that it'd be a good idea."

"Then she dunked her head in her coffee mug, might I add," Craig meekly said from behind her.

Jessie stared blankly between the pair, "so, to all?"

Lena tried not to laugh, "well duh, it's obvious. We can't be in two places at once."

James glanced back over his shoulder at the TV showing English subtitles over the top of alien text occasionally appearing at the bottom of the screen. The hosts were reading some from cards, grimacing. Judging from that and some of the translated text, he wasn't the only one who had a problem with the news.

"You did this?" he asked, standing up with a hardening face. "You cancelled on one of the favourites to win, as well as the semi final's hosts, inviting us to their event, so you can do what you always do; perform Die Barbie slash songs on the Holodeck here?"

Lena's face fell in a matter of seconds. She looked at Jessie, she was grimacing from what James had said but anger was in her eyes as well. Kiara hinted at her group to leave them all to it, but they were already side stepping away.

"Hey look, I'm still mad that Kiara bitched about me in all of her songs, but if we're both at the same concert, they'll think..." Lena said, sounding very surprised at their reaction.

"That we're blowing off aliens who'll never see us again, for people we can perform for at anytime, at the last bloody second," James snapped back.

Lena's jaw dropped, eyes sharpened and pointed only at him. "yeah exactly, what does it matter! It's for a good cause. We pretend to get along and both Pulse and Virus will be flying to the finals. Why are you being so arsey about this?"

"Oh I don't know, because the Voyager crew can't vote, we can't invite many people up here to watch so what's the point? *And* you've just pissed off an entire planet with this," James answered, voice rising. "Probably more, this is a popular band with fans everywhere."

Lena scoffed, once more turning her attention to Jessie. "Tell him to calm his ass down before I humiliate him in front of his kid."

Duncan laughed, angering her more. "Good one."

Jessie started to tremble as she ground her jaw in an attempt to calm herself. "He's right, so no. But you'll accuse me of taking his side, so why bother talking to me at all?"

"This is a much better idea than being upstaged by the musical pantomime!" Lena shouted at them both. Craig nodded timidly.

Jessie coughed, pointing at him. Lena looked around, huffed and shot her attention back at Jessie. "Oh I see, that's how it is?"

"Ohno, not even close," Jessie faked a laugh. "Any group that snubs a mass of fans for another, especially ones that see them all the time, I want nothing to do with. Too bad, I don't have a choice in the matter."

"Come off it, Jailbreakers' planet won't give a crap about us cancelling on them. You're having a hissy over nothing," Lena snarled.

Several days later the four hovering buses each carrying a band inside arrived at an arena standing almost on top of a beach. It appeared to have no roof over it, only a sparkling forcefield. Built on a slightly raised hill, parts of it including the staff entrance to the arena hovered over the sands. People who wanted shade tucked underneath it.

The two suns were still high in the sky. Although the human bands were warned about it, they still reeled when they stepped out of their air conditioned transport into the scorching suns.

Each band were told to wait until one was called into the arena. The host band, the infamous Jailbreakers went first along the bridged path going over the edge of the sand. Everyone on the beaches had already rushed over when the buses arrived, so they

clambered up the hills to get a good look at the band. They got a roaring applause and cheers, they waved back at their fans on their way into the building.

The second band called over got a similar response as they made their way across. Before entering, the lead singer and the man who Lena got into an argument with looked across at the human bands still waiting, he with a sneer on his face.

Pulse were next, they were relieved to get a warm welcome, even if it was quieter than the two alien groups.

James and Jessie tensed, knowing their turn was next. Lena was completely opposite, excited and raring to go. Craig kept to himself, hoping his other bandmembers were overreacting.

When they were called the cheers and clapping stopped. Like during their previous performance, it went eerily quiet as they crossed the bridge. They tried to cross the bridge at a normal pace but the quiet was making each of them uncomfortable. Jessie and then Craig quickened their pace to get in sooner.

James glanced over his shoulder at Lena as he stood at the door, waiting for her. She expected something from him after that response, but he only waited for her to go through first, then he followed.

"We're screwed," Craig moaned as he sat, peering up at the darkening sky. It was still hot and sticky, but nowhere near as much as it had been earlier. He still picked at his tight red trousers that felt like they were stuck to him.

James stood nearby, leaned against the wall, peeling off the dark red jacket with a few grimaces. Craig heard him inhale through his teeth with one and looked up curiously. "How the hell did I burn through this?"

Craig groaned, "you didn't, it's just the heat." James sighed and tossed the jacket to one side. Craig cringed at the resulting clatter that made. "Don't tell Lena this but..."

"I was right," James finished for him, not sounding proud at all.

"Ye...yeah," Craig reluctantly said, staring at his knees. "How are we going to get through two songs if everyone hates us."

"Simple, we do our few lines, let Lena do all the adlibbing again and pretend we're only in rehearsals," James answered.

"No," Craig shook his head, he noticed he was starting to tremble. "You may be used to people hating you, but nobody really cares or notices me. I dunno if I can handle this."

James frowned down at him, fortunately with a small smile tugging the corner of his lips. "I'm not even going to touch that one."

A knock on the door interrupted an annoyed Craig before he could open his mouth. They didn't answer but still the male of their two guides walked in without a care in the world.

"Okay gentlemen, we've got a lot of work to do before we go on," he said giddily. "The first theme of the night is the Summer's Eve festival, and unfortunately that's the one you're having trouble getting right."

Craig blinked rapidly, eyes widening a little. "Wait, it's not even summer here yet?" The guide laughed and shook his head. "Fine, I suppose that's why we have to be out of our comfort zone with our song choice. I'm already there."

The guide glanced toward James expectantly, brow furrowed. "No. Summer's Eve celebrates the dawn of the second sun. In ancient times, the people here used to believe it was the devil summoning its beasts to attack the heavens."

Craig had a blank look on his face. James though rolled his eyes. "We're doing their *Halloween* one first," he said in a plain voice. Craig pretended he got it and nodded. "What are we doing wrong then?"

"Well, Miresha and I agree that it's missing a certain something. We can sneak it in without much practise. We think it should repair the damage of the last week," the guide replied.

Craig flinched, his shoulders sank. "Is it really that bad?"

The guide smiled in his direction, "well I've seen worse."

Craig's face turned pale at that answer. "But, we had a good reason to cancel."

"Which was?" the guide asked but pleasantly, it threw Craig off. "If I were you, I'd come up with a new reason just in case you're asked. Rumours are circulating."

"Story of my life," James said, forcing a smile. "So what's the extra thing we're missing?"

The guide lowered his voice to a near whisper to explain. Neither James or Craig liked the sound of it.

"But why?" James asked in a strained voice.

The guide's eyes drifted over to him while straightening his lips. "You gotta give what fans you have left what they want."

Bryan dressed in a vampire cape hurried off the stage with flushing cheeks. He had long since scampered off before Naomi and Kiara got down the stairs.

"I told you, Bump in the Night wasn't a good enough replacement for..." Naomi sighed.

"No, don't say it!" Kiara blurted out, then made a shushing sound. "It was better."

Naomi giggled at her friend, "than a Lena cast off. Admit it, you turkeyed out." Kiara mouthed *what?* "You know, bwerk bwerk, scaredy turkey."

"Right?" Kiara mumbled to herself. "I just don't like that song anymore, it's silly."

"And we go bump, and bump, bump," Naomi said in a robotic voice, "isn't?"

Kiara groaned as if disgusted, "Bryan's just mad he only got to sing in the choruses."

"Like he did the last time, and in the next one too," Naomi said, clicking her tongue after. She walked off, leaving Kiara alone with her thoughts.

She snapped out of it when she spotted Lena and the rest of her group approach in awkward silence, so she hurried away to avoid getting involved in another spat.

The red-dressed group headed up to the stage wordlessly once they were given their cue. They could hear the audience but couldn't see them with the thick curtain in between them. Several workers finished fixing a circular platform with mic's attached around the edge onto the stage, avoiding any eye contact with the band.

Once they were gone, Lena nudged the edge of it a little, making it spin on the spot. She laughed weakly, "well at least it's not Seven-trapped."

"Good stuff," Jessie commented plainly with a straight face.

Lena chose to ignore her and step onto the platform and take one of the mic's. The others did the same, each one dreading what was coming.

They heard their band name announced, shocked that they still got some claps and cheers. There were boos mixed into it too. Electric guitars signalled the start of their performance, the curtain rose as the band but on their game faces.

As the song played, they took the mic from the stand and started waving the stand itself side to side, in time with the music. Since their stage was a circle, only Lena and Craig were directly facing the majority of the audience. Something Jessie was relieved about considering the mixed reactions.

"Distant shrieks, I've gotta keep my head down low," Lena sang lightly and cutely.

"Heart is thumping, I'm here all alone," Craig kept his voice low, trying to smile at the same time. He dared himself to look ahead, quickly relieved as he could see a number of people cheering and dancing along, the boos were nowhere in his sight. "Something's banging on the nearby wall."

Lena swung around the stand to prop herself against it, then slid down it, "they're stalking my grave, I gotta let them go."

She knew it without seeing it, Kathryn spat multiple feathers and chugged her giant flask of coffee.

Once Lena slid back up to a standing position, all four of them put the mic's back on the stand, then leaned to the right bringing the stand and mic with them. The platform began to slowly turn.

"Blood is running in the wrong direction," James sang when he could face the audience. He brought his fingers to his face, pointing to the left with two fingers.

The group leaned forward, slowing the platform to a near stop. "Gotta feeling that's a mixed up sign," Jessie sang so softly, it was close to a whisper.

They all maneuvered to the left this time, sending them spinning very slowly again. "I can see it in my own reflection," Lena sang toward the people at the side of the stage.

Finally they all pulled back, it kept spinning though. "Something funny's going on inside my mind," Craig sang while pointing fingers at his temple.

For now the cheers were overwhelming the booing, still they could hear them.

"Dunno what..." James sang while pushing his spare hand out, turning his hand so it looked like he was offering something. "Is pushing me further."

"Like the gusts from the trees above," Craig tried to put some extra oomph in his voice, it came out a little shaky.

"Then it drops, and catches on fire," Jessie sang her line trying not to cringe at that.

Lena tried to stir up the crowd by raising her hand rapidly, "it's the sound I, it's the sound I..." The rest of the group joined in for the chorus.

*"It's the sound of the underground. The beats of my heart go round and around. Into the overflow, where the ghouls jump down to the sound of the reaper. Out of my eccentric mind, the beasts jump out in the back street's light. The creeps come around and around. It's the sound of the under, sound of the underground."*

With the platform still turning, they took the mic's off the stands again to walk around in the opposite direction. Doing so brought the platform seemingly to a stop, this time with James and Jessie at the front.

"Chain reaction running through my veins," Jessie sang, starting the others off with the stand swinging again. "Pumps the fear right up into my brain."

James kept a hold of his stand as he walked forward a couple steps. "Screws with my mind until I lose control." He leaned forward while the others crouched down beside their stands smoothly. "And when the building rocks I know it's got my soul."

The others got up quickly to retake their standing positions, while James walked around back to his stand. He repeated his earlier line; "blood is running in the wrong direction." They all did the same routine up until and including the chorus.

Once that was over the lights fell to show only their shadows, a guitar instrumental started playing as they danced and walked around the stage.

Just before the lights came back on, they returned to the circular platform. All except James who stood right in front of it. As the music faded into a quieter moment, Lena and Jessie returned to their mic's. Lena pulled a face and looked around, confused. Craig pretended to do the same.

Only James started to sing over the quieter music. Lena looked across, trying her best not to look mad. "I dunno what is pushing me further. Like the gusts from the trees above."

Lena glanced toward Jessie, she shrugged, none of the wiser. Craig averted his eyes.

"Then it drops, and catches on fire. It's the sound I, it's the sound I..." James continued, intentionally oblivious to this, his voice rising with each repeat. He stepped partly onto the platform at the same time. He slid that foot backwards and forward, but it didn't move, the platform did. He got on for the final, "the sound I..." pushing it into its usual slow spin.

The rest of the group improvised, knowing that was the start of the chorus again. James dragged out the last word he sang until halfway through it. The audience loved it much to Lena's annoyance, which she kept behind a smiley mask.

As the song started to fade out, she sang over the others. "The beasts jump out in the back street's light." She repeated it one more time to close off the song.

The resulting applause and cheers overwhelmed any boos they might have gotten. Lena's smile at hearing that wasn't faked to the rest of the band's relief. But as soon as the curtains fell, she stormed off quickly with fire in her eyes.

"Um, what the hell was that?" Jessie asked, a little annoyed herself.

Craig looked at her, panicked and ran off after Lena. Jessie wasn't sure what to make of that, shook her head and looked at James.

He let out a sigh, "apparently our fans prefer it when I take the lead. We needed something after everything."

Jessie was momentarily speechless. She stammered a bit as she walked forward. "And you knew Lena wouldn't agree, so I didn't hear about it either."

James shook his head, "I figured you'd been told at least."

"Oh," Jessie groaned. The staff entering the stage gestured at them to leave, and urgently. The pair quickly left, leaving them to clean up after them. Once they were alone again, Jessie hinted for him to stop. "If I were Lena..."

James stared at the floor, grimacing. "I know, I wouldn't blame her. I wasn't too keen on it either, but she wants to win this. If it helps her to do that then..."

"It won't if you two are at each other's throats," Jessie pointed out. He nodded like he expected that. "Come on, I'll watch your back."

Inside the stadium's version of the results room, Lena stood at the buffet table merely staring at it. Craig had tried to find anywhere safe to hide, but couldn't so opted to hanging out with Pulse at the sofa and TV area.

"Okay," Lena said, even smiling.

James and Jessie exchanged worried and very confused glances. Jessie dared to look forward first, "you're fine with this?"

"Someone could've told me," Lena said, looking away towards Craig and Pulse. He noticed and shrunk down in his seat. "But it went down better than the Untouchable fiasco so... who am I to complain?"

Jessie's eyebrow twitched slightly. James noticed and quickly chimed in before she could, "maybe we should get some last minute practise for the second song."

"Yeah, as long as it's still the same," Lena sighed and shrugged. She walked over to the sofa area. Craig turned into a nervous wreck much to everyone else's amusement.

"So Lena, was that song inspired by real life events?" Kiara asked while smiling sweetly.

Lena turned around while narrowing her eyes. For once it looked a little in jest, "damn you, that was gonna be my insult."

Kiara giggled, "well I was first."

"Girls," Craig stammered as a warning, pointing to the door. "Maybe not now."

Lena looked across expecting one of their competition, instead it looked like a group of six reporters with a few cameras. "Oh great," she groaned.

James and Jessie walked across the room to join her and Craig. Lena looked at them alarmed, and hurriedly climbed on the chair so she was kneeling on it and facing them. "Hey, you guys go on a makeout break or something."

Jessie turned bright red, either furious or embarrassed. Lena assumed both. "Excuse me!"

"I've seen these guys, they're tabloid twats," Lena whispered to them, eyes rapidly pointing between the approaching reporters and the pair. "You two are like twenty Christmases at once for these people."

"What?" James said, still confused.

They were almost on them. Lena looked to Craig, hoping he'd help her. He coughed to clear his nervous throat, "they're the Tom's of the journalist world."

"Oh," James and Jessie both said at once, suddenly very worried. It was also too late for them to leave without being rude.

"Just keep quiet, Craig and I will do all the talking," Lena said. Craig took that as a cue to get up and join them.

"And we...?" James wondered.

"Just stand around and erm, look pretty or whatever," Lena replied.

"Pretty?" James tried not to laugh.

"That's a hard job for him, Lena," Craig whispered. Lena shrugged.

The reporters reached them, all pointing nosey smiles at them. They all took turns asking questions, to which mostly Lena answered with Craig chiming in now and then. James and Jessie nodded along.

One of the reporters looked at them, "you two are being really quiet. Is everything okay?"

Lena tried not to panic, "oh, no. They're very shy actually. I'm the talkative one."

Another reporter frowned, disappointed. "Well I have a question for them."

"Oh boy, goodie," Lena said through a gritted teeth fake grin.

"There's a lot of people who'd love to know for sure. From your performances, the videos and some behind the scenes gossip, if it's true you two are a couple?" the same reporter asked.

"No," Lena replied before they could even finish blushing.

All of the reporters looked intrigued, the one who had asked even more so. "I didn't mean you, dear." He looked at the so far quiet pair.

"It's as she says, no," Jessie said.

"Hmm, but you two seem awfully close in your performances," the reporter said, while the others made notes.

Lena noticed them, she tried quickly to think of something to stop them.

"We are, not in the way you think though," James said, instantly stopping them and getting their very confused attention. "I think our people have different customs to you, that's probably why, we gave you the wrong idea. Our people are private and wouldn't, erm show it off in the open."

"Right, that," Lena said. Jessie meanwhile sighed quietly in relief and smiled.

"I see," one of the reporters sounded disappointed. They all seemed to buy it though.

Another slid to the front with their own separate camerawoman to the others, pointing a microphone at them. "What's your opinion on your competition? Who'd you like to win if you don't?"

"Honestly, I like them all. Rhythm's singer is amazing, Pulse are fun and since they're our shipmates..." Jessie said.

Craig nodded rapidly, "yeah I quite like Jailbreaker." James and Jessie looked at him as if he had outed them to the reporters. "I um, wish we... I hadn't gotten food poisoning and cancelled. Performing with them would've been awesome."

Lena internally facepalmed, "so much for avoiding it," she muttered quietly.

"Um yeah, thanks Neelix," Craig tried to laugh and put up a thumbs up at the camera.

Some of the reporters laughed with him and jotted a few things down. The one who'd asked the question wasn't done though, "who do you think will win?"

"That's tricky, they all have strong points," James said. "We meanwhile are very lucky to get this far."

"So the rumours about your feuds with every band left in the competition are fake?" another reporter asked.

Craig flushed with worry. "What, no? We're close with Pulse. Jailbreaker were pretty understanding. I haven't had the chance to meet anyone in Rhythm yet, I'd like to. Dunno where that's coming from."

"I'm not surprised, they're not that welcoming to visitors," Lena said a little bitterly. She regretted it immediately before all the microphones and cameras turned to her. "It's okay, it's not a feud. It was barely an anything."

James cringed while the camera was off him. "Definitely fake. We're here to have fun. Apart from Craig's idea to eat Neelix's clearly mouldy crumpets the other day, it has been."

Craig scowled at him. "It wasn't clearly."

One of the reporters thankfully came to their rescue, "they say none of your songs are original. They're songs from long ago."

"No," Lena answered sharply.

Jessie had answered yes half a second later, she winced afterwards.

"Which is it?" the same reporter asked.

"They are, mostly. The lyrics have been changed in some of them," James replied.

"We do this for fun in between our jobs," Jessie added on. "We call them parodies on our world."

"I see," the reporter was happy with that answer.

Lena frowned, "are you going to ask the other bands the same questions?" Everyone looked at her, her bandmates in growing horror. "I mean Jailbreaker apparently cover songs all the time, they're a performance act after all, not songwriters."

"Our questions are ones our watchers asked," one reported piped up.

"I was just asking," Lena said, sounding a little offended.

The reporters finished making notes. Two of them decided to go and pester Kiara's group instead. The ones left smiled politely and thanked them before doing the same.

"Wow, way to go everyone," Lena grumbled.

"What?" James scoffed, "we tried to curb the gossip, unlike someone."

"Oh please, they already know the stuff I said," Lena said.

Jessie laughed insincerely, "oh right, so we gotta shut up just in case the reporters spread the usual couple gossip, which doesn't affect whether people like us. But you're allowed to slag off other bands..."

"I didn't..." Lena tried to butt in angrily.

"Let me finish!" Jessie snapped back, cueing everyone to stare at her. Craig squeaked and backed away. "Craig covered for you, James convinced them of the not a couple thing, I complimented our competition. You got all defensive and snotty, so chuck that *way to go everyone that isn't me* crap into the bin before you ruin this again for us."

"Again!?" Lena stammered furiously. "I cancelled our concert because of you and James..."

"No you didn't, you and Craig still went," James said.

Lena gasped in offense. "To watch, we didn't..." James and Jessie's look towards her told her they weren't going to buy it, or they already knew. "Of course, you're just taking her side to protect her. You know I'd win without breaking a sweat."

Jessie rolled her eyes, "oh god Lena, get a new tune."

"Please," Lena faked a laugh, "that's what he does. Sarcasm and treating you like a damsel. Too bad he's not very good at it."

Craig once more squeaked and side stepped further away until he was out of harm's way, which turned out to be in the corridor outside.

James' face meanwhile hardened in Lena's direction, she smiled smugly at him. "What does *that* mean?"

"You know what I mean, you schmuck. It'd be funny if it wasn't so deadly for Jessie," Lena said.

"Okay, that's enough..." Jessie tried to cut in, her eyes throwing daggers at the girl.

Lena shrugged them off with ease, "yeah Jess, I can say the same about you. He may be a terrible protector, Slayer, anything, but if I were him I'd be offended everytime you tried to help me out. Ask Craig."

They all noticed Craig had gone when she said that. They all mentally shrugged that off, not surprised in the slightest.

"Oh so sorry, your perfectness. I get it, we'll get out of your perfect way," Jessie said in a fake polite voice. Then she started to walk away, but stopped when she thought of something else. "You know, maybe Kiara has a point. It's always you." Jessie stormed off, leaving Lena a little shellshocked and definitely offended.

"James," Lena tried to scold him to stop him from walking off too, but she sounded vulnerable. "I'm trying, okay? It's hard."

James looked at her with his face blank, she had no idea what he was feeling about her. "I know," he said in a tone that was almost understanding, before he left as well.

All four bands had performed once, the crowd were very eager for the second round. To keep them occupied until then, the usual two hosts were displayed on a projected image over the curtain, discussing the event so far. The occasional clip of a performance or an interview was played in between topics.

The image faded away, the lights dimmed, setting the crowd off into an excited frenzy.

Pretty soon Kiara, Naomi and Bryan were back on the stage, which had been made to look like a beach. The background a live shot of the sea. Summery music played as they danced around the stage.

"Put your coffee away, it's gross and kinda dull. We're tomorrow's generation, don't be bashful," Kiara put on her cute kiddy voice to sing her bit while clapping along. "So bring the glasses, pronto, step this way. The modern kid's delighted to be risk-ey."

Bryan looked pleased to get a part of the verse next, once done he had a massive grin on his face as he got a massive cheer.

Naomi tried to do her bit in a sultry tone, it came off as more cute than anything. The three then threw themselves into a very lively chorus compared to the light verses.

After that Bryan was up again, very eager to go. "Sugar just gimme your notes, I'll play it all the time. You know please is the word, but hey, the word is mine." Of course his parents beamed proudly at his much bigger part. "I don't do work, but I do keep my own pace. So I suggest you wipe that nag from off your face."

Naomi walked up, repeating his earlier lines from the beginning. She finished by giving the crowd a wink, then put her hand out for Kiara to tag in.

"So 1, 2, 3 now baby, here we go," Kiara sang with a giggle.

The chorus kicked off again. Since the audience were expecting it, they mostly stood up in anticipation so they could dance along.

"Here we go, here we go. I'm on sugar coated high, you're my number one. Here we go, here we go."

Kathryn meanwhile sighed contently, "aaaw, isn't she so cute?" Chakotay smiled warmly at her. "Another of my babies dedicating a song to me." Chakotay mentally kicked himself for not seeing that coming. He laughed and shook his head.

The band got a standing ovation and a rip roaring cheer once they were finished. They each did a little bow, thanking them before they left.

The intermission between them and the next act seemed a lot longer than the last time. A lot of the Voyager crew were worried, since they knew who were next.

Kathryn chugged her fourth flask. "Oh dear, maybe I should go check on them." She was about to get up, Chakotay quickly grabbed her arm to stop her. "Oooh," she giggled, "you pick your moments Chucky."

"No," Chakotay groaned. "They'll be on soon. Be patient."

As soon as he said that the curtains drew, revealing a misty stage. Only a piano played. Two microphone stands in the middle, which confused the crowd into thinking Rhythm were next instead.

Jessie stepped out of the mist though, bringing a mic to her lips while walking up to one of the two stands. She sang a few lines before a rock track started playing instead of the piano, she raised her voice to be heard over it.

Craig ran out to take the other mic, occasionally shouting, "wake me up," and "save me," into it. James and Lena rallied around at opposite sides of the stage with hand mic's, singing along with Jessie.

Lena approached Jessie near the end of the chorus, she moved off without even looking at her. Acting as if that didn't bother her, Lena started doing the second verse.

After another chorus, Lena harmonised with the instrumental while Craig whispered his lines. She moved off long before James walked over to take the stand instead of her.

"Only... you are my life, among the dead!" While he sang the last line, Craig started to sweat about something, his eyes darting around.

It didn't take long for everyone to find out why. Immediately after James finished singing the last word, it was his turn. This time he didn't try to shout, he used his gentle singing voice. "All of this time, I can't believe I couldn't see. Trapped in the dark, but you were there to follow me."

James took the mic from the stand, turning to face him when he took over. "I've been sleeping a thousand years it seems." His vastly different singing power to Craig's didn't clash like expected, they went together nicely. The crowd were revved up by it, clapping their hands above their heads. "Got to open my eyes to everything!"

Craig seemed a little bit more relaxed. "Without thought, without a voice, without a soul."

James lowered his voice to a whisper with the mic very close to his lips, "don't let me die here."

Craig took in a deep breathe and tried his hand at singing loudly like him after all, "there must be something more!" It sounded more like a yell but it fit the music style.

"Bring me, to life!" James finished off the middle eight, overpowering him effortlessly.

The girls joined in to sing the chorus with him, with Craig back on shouty adlibbing duties. The mist started to settle down, revealing what looked like a platform high above their heads. People swore they saw someone there, walking steadily across the beam.

On the last, "bring me to life," drawn out for quite a while, the figure jumped over the edge. They didn't fall far. Everyone gasped in horror and disgust as she hung there by her throat, a tightly wound noose was clear for even people at the back to see.

The band noticed from the movement above them and abruptly stopped, as shocked as the crowd. Lena had her eyes closed while she sang, so she'd missed it. The sound of the audience's horrified reaction got her attention. She noticed people pointing, everyone talking. She peered up to find the corpse hanging directly above her head.

Her chilling screams echoed around the entire, mostly silent stadium long after she'd ran off.

Jessie looked around, noticing James no longer where he was. She had a feeling why and so looked over to the platform's supporting pillar behind them. There he was as she expected, trying to climb up. He didn't get far when it and the body fizzled out of existence like the holograms they truly were, so he didn't fall too far. At the same time the lights around the arena went out as well.

"Oh my god..." Jessie stuttered and ran over to him. The boos and shouting that were getting thrown at them, as well as literal things being thrown, were the last thing on her mind. Craig though was so unnerved he ran off as well.

James got up just as Jessie got to him. He nodded, "I'm fine," he said quietly. They didn't dare eye the audience, they left as well.

"What the hell was that, what were you thinking?" Kathryn roared at the three remaining members. Behind her, Chakotay kept attempting to get a word in. "Even if you pulled that stunt during the scary theme, it was extremely..."

James shook his head, "we didn't do it!" he shouted back at her, cutting her off momentarily.

"That much is obvious," Chakotay tried to chime in also.

Kathryn stared at each of them while blinking more than usual. She rolled her eyes, keeping them to one side. "Well I'm sorry if it reminded me of your last edgy Halloweeny performance."

Jessie looked up from her lap with hardening eyes directed at the Captain. "The only thing it had in common was your teenage daughter screaming, and this one sounded pretty genuine to me."

"I didn't expect this to be one of her ideas," Kathryn said dismissively, "just like all the other recent ones."

Chakotay stepped forward hurriedly. "I think we're getting off track here," he said with a strained smile. All eyes but Jessie's turned to him. "Each stadium has a security system built to stop outside interference. The signal for the holograms must've come from within." He gestured the hand holding a tricorder, it squealed briefly. "They've got a dampening field in effect now, so I imagine they'll find out where it came from soon enough."

"Within?" Craig said with a new frog in his throat, "that could be anyone. The staff, any of the bands, the bands' visitors backstage, our officials."

"The whole audience," James added on in a flat tone.

Chakotay sighed and nodded. "Unfortunately we're on our own. No one's allowed to leave. Even if we were, the dampening field, as well as the stadium's normal security measures, is stopping us from getting through to Voyager."

"Then perhaps we should do a head count, then keep us all together," Kathryn said. Chakotay looked back over his shoulder toward her. "Take one of these three, and get on it. Bring Kiara and Lena here first."

"Actually..." Chakotay objected not to anyone's surprise, though it still made Kathryn's eyebrow twitch, "I'd recommend against taking any familiar faces. You and I may be able to mix in with the alien crowd, but everyone knows them."

Kathryn firmly shook her head, "in the dark, I don't think so." She turned to where she remembered the band members were. "James, you go with him. I hope I don't have to tell you this, but if any trouble flares up..."

"And yet you're still gonna tell me. I know," James said, already on his way out.

Chakotay heard the door click open, so hurried over while turning on the tricorder's little flashlight. He almost collided with a figure going the opposite way.

"Excuse me, Commander," they heard a familiar voice come from them. A brief flicker of the strobe light Kathryn bought so she could see her coffee during the concert, and they all recognised her as both of the band's guide, Miresha. "I apologise for taking so long. Security at first refused to tell me anything."

"At first, so what do you know?" Chakotay asked, double backing through the door.

Kathryn cleared her throat and pointed, not that he could see. "Stay with James!" she hissed.

"Really, I'm probably more in danger with him than without," Chakotay groaned, turning to leave once again.

Kathryn scoffed, hiding her smirk in the dark. "How cute, he thinks he's the one I'm worried about." Jessie side eyed her with a steadily raising eyebrow. As if she sensed it, Kathryn laughed meekly. "So, what have you learned?"

Miresha shut the door behind her. She waited for the very little noise outside the room to simmer down before she answered, "they can't find the source of the holographic signal. They're thinking of resuming the competition as a ruse, to lower the guard of the perpetrator."

"So maybe you shouldn't be telling us this," Kathryn said.

Miresha was about to respond, but Jessie exhaled sharply. "For god's sake. Why would we sabotage our own performance, especially when we already have a sketchy reputation?" she snapped.

"Don't keep getting your pants in a bunch Jessie or you won't be able to take them off at the end of the night. You might need to stand out less, you know," Kathryn sniped back. Craig's eyes widened, he started to shake fearfully.

"Yes well..." Miresha said quickly with a customer service smile painted on. Her voice soon caught up as Jessie stood, looking ready to retort. "I'd suggest preparing your crewmembers for a quick exit once we're all cleared to leave. Unfortunately we need to be a mile from the stadium to get any kind of signal to and from your ship."

Craig made a little gasp, "oh, is that why we always have to be taken to these things via buses and stuff?"

Kathryn ignored him, shaking her head. "Perhaps you can ask for more time than everyone else. An earlier exit time during the results portion of the show, to avoid any trouble."

"That is what Reve is attempting to organise," Miresha said. "Pulse and Lena have already been escorted into a secured room. How many of your people were backstage or in the audience?"

"I'd say roughly a dozen, Chakotay should..." Kathryn said over the sound of the door, it put her off. Craig and Miresha looked around, she pointed a tiny finger sized torch at it. She couldn't see anyone, it looked shut. By the time she pointed it towards the others, Kathryn already knew what had happened. "Jessie. Idiot," she grunted.

Craig nervously glanced between the two women left. "It's okay, she's probably just going to cool off. Most of the people mad at us will be nowhere near backstage, right?"

"I'm still trying to understand who'd hate us, or just your group enough to do something like this," Kathryn said.

"I don't think it's about hate," Miresha chimed in, getting both of their attention back. "It's only about winning, bringing pride to your planet. The war's still going on in a way. An outsider winning would make the contest meaningless to most. It could be anyone."

"Comforting," Craig commented after a worried gulp.

Miresha nodded grimly. "Nutropa and Yuma, Jailbreaker and Rhythm, it'll make no difference to some. It always comes down to these two, every year." Kathryn made a little curious hmph sound, she thought of as cue to go on or explain. "It's curious, why this happened now and not at the final. Unless one of them were worried they wouldn't make it, but with Virus's reputation of late, they're almost guaranteed a place, so why?"

"Were they really? Until the hangwoman, the people who didn't like them were in the minority," Kathryn pointed out.

"Hmm perhaps," Miresha said, not sounding certain. "But who they chose, and the placement. Neither would have gone so low, but yours wouldn't have known about the incident to pull this off. Though you could've found out..."

"Hold on. What are you talking about?" Kathryn asked.

Miresha tried to swallow a lump in her throat, she timidly nodded. "Asyla Reqim of Nutropa. A century ago she was a rising starlet, beloved by both her home planet and even Yuma. The media as they always do broke her down, sharing everything she did, following her. She reached the final, only to hang herself in front of everyone at the end of her song, exactly like the hologram did." Craig and Kathryn looked on in horror, Craig shuddered from it. "Yuma had two representatives in that final. The bands were sympathetic but the planet's people were furious that Nutropa were given the win as a mark of respect. It caused much unrest. Both planets almost went to war again."

Kathryn impatiently sighed, scowling away to herself. "What have we gotten ourselves into here?"

"No," Miresha sounded alarmed, "this was a long time ago. Both sides will know better than to disrespect Asyla's memory in this fashion. So why?"

"Neither of them want to risk missing their yearly *battle*. We kept hearing all this fuss over guest bands and how far they're getting. The novelty of two guests competing against only one of them must be appealing to the majority. I mean, the same thing every year must get pretty old, fast," Kathryn mused aloud.

Craig nodded, "so maybe one of them would do anything to avoid that. But who? Jailbreaker for cancelling on them?"

"I doubt it, they're the Nutropans, same as the suicide victim, correct?" Kathryn questioned in Miresha's direction. She got no answer, it made her hesitate a moment. "Though this is their home planet and stadium, they'd know their own security systems."

"Rhythm don't like us either. Lena said the guy who does the instruments was rude to her, and the lead singer keeps staring daggers at Jessie, I think," Craig muttered uneasily.

Kathryn groaned, "we're getting nowhere. They're both possible culprits, either them or their fans, staff. We're wasting time... we need to keep our people together. Miresha?" She got a little acknowledgment from the official. "Please can you bring Jessie back here, or to Lena and Kiara's room?"

"Of course," Miresha said, sounding a little worried. The pair remaining heard the door open and close within a few seconds of each other.

Not far away, a group of Voyager crewmembers were being lead by Tom and B'Elanna, most of them using the flashing strobe lights to find their way down the dark corridors. They stumbled unknowingly into the open area behind the stage. Tom had been holding the wall to help guide him, so when his hand brushed against the curtain he nearly toppled into them. B'Elanna heard him yelp and grabbed his arm when he was almost halfway down.

His distress got the attention of the people lurking around in the room. One of them approached without a light of their own. None of them noticed, they were too focused on Tom's scramble to get back on his feet.

"Is that everyone?" James' voice asked, startling the majority of them. Tom more so, he ended up on the floor anyway despite his efforts.

B'Elanna chuckled, being the only one not really surprised. "Chakotay's trying to convince Neelix to come, with or without his horde of souvenirs. Samantha was with them. Apart from that..."

"Good lord, you really have to stop doing that," Tom wheezed as soon as he was back on his feet, pointing accusingly at no one since he couldn't see.

Someone made a little shuddering sound, footsteps a short distance behind James faded further away. "Yeah," he said while looking around to pinpoint them.

"What, no argument? Are you all murdered out?" Tom pretended to sound confused, at the same time a door opened. B'Elanna nudged Tom in the ribs, making him whimper. That covered the sound of the door shutting.

"Yeah," James murmured as he turned to walk off in the earlier sound's direction.

Tom chuckled but nervously, "is he messing with me? I was joking, that was clearly suicide."

B'Elanna frowned in the direction James previously was. "He's clearly gone. Come on, Bryan's room's down here." The group wandered off in the same direction they were originally going.

Meanwhile James walked down a corridor that seemed to lead to a dead end. A little touch around in front of him he quickly realised it was a metal door, different to the wooden ones throughout the building. A warm breeze hit him as soon as it was open, as well as the sound of the sea crashing into the nearby beach. There wasn't much in front of him, barely a raised platform leading left. He followed it until a corner took him along another wall, and into the parking lot for the coaches they came in from. A few metres in front of him was Jessie leaning against the wall, taking deep breaths and shaking.

"Jess?" he said on approach.

She looked at him while taking in one last deep breath, then out. "I know, I know. But I couldn't breathe in there. Dark, stuffy, annoying."

James looked around the entire lot before leaning against the wall directly beside her. "I heard they'll be putting the power back on very soon. We should go back then."

"I guess," Jessie sighed, grimacing. "I dunno. Everyone's inside. Maybe we can get in communications and transport range before..." she cut herself off as a thought came to her, instead she groaned.

"What?" James asked, concerned.

"Everyone watches this, don't they? Someone in that town will spot us," Jessie replied as she stared straight ahead of her. "Tell me I'm being paranoid."

James heard the slightest of taps, he looked across at where he thought it came from. One of the buses to his right had its door ajar. He shook his head, "I wish I could."

"At least we won't make it to the final. Once we're back on the ship it's over," Jessie said. Despite her words she didn't sound relieved, only more worried. "Kiara, Naomi, Bryan. They don't deserve any of this crap, I hope they don't have to."

A few more taps elsewhere had James tense, he thought he could hear someone whispering. "We should get back inside."

Jessie glanced between him and in the direction he was staring. She couldn't see anything. Still she nodded, "sure."

They began to make their way back the way they came. The bus James had been watching earlier rolled forward, right into and blocking their path. His attention darted between the ajar door and where he heard the tapping. Jessie started to hear them as well and looked over her shoulder. The previously empty parking lot was starting to get crowded with people filtering in from behind the other vehicles.

"James," she said as a warning.

The ajar door opened, a couple of men jumped down from it. All of the other few dozen of people began to surround them, most of them with angry, disgusted scowls pointed at the pair.

James inched a few little steps to the left so he was between the majority of the crowd and Jessie. She frowned into the back of his head, shaking her own.

"What are you viruses still doing here?" one of the men from the bus snarled. Several of the crowd shouted similar things and agreements. Someone else in the crowd spat in their direction, it didn't hit them.

"Look, we were about to leave. There doesn't need to be any trouble here," James said while keeping an eye on everyone at the front. He felt Jessie's hand grasp around his arm as if to try and pull him back.

"Oh there's no trouble here. Two of you, all of us," a woman said with a slight sneer.

"You spat on not just her grave, but insulted us all!" another screamed. That riled up the crowd even more, more of them started to shout. Bottles were thrown. Only one got close, it smashed into the wall right next to them.

Jessie shook her head, "don't. Please, it wasn't us."

A good majority of the crowd shouted back at her, some pointing. "You dare accuse us?" was the only one either of them made out.

"Listen. We're going to leave. There's no need for this," James said with a raised voice. It didn't matter, not many could hear him over their own voices. "Move aside!"

"James, there's far too many of them," Jessie said close to his ear.

James very lightly nodded. "I know. When you get an opening, run..."

The grip on his arm tightened. "Don't you dare do anything stupid," she whispered urgently.

"I'm not going to, I'll be right behind you," James whispered back. He noticed a lot of the crowd were closing in on them further, but his attention was further ahead behind them. Looking closer to the right, in the rough direction the bus which had been moved had stood, he eyed the people there.

"You're not..." Jessie said quickly under her breath, put off by a couple of the crowd lunging forward.

James only pushed at the ones directly ahead of them, including one of the lungers. They toppled over into the people behind, they struggled to keep upright too. James hurried forward into the brand new opening, making short similar work with the ones at the back. Jessie kept close behind him until they were almost clear.

Five men threw themselves at him from multiple sides. Jessie instinctively went to help. "Go!" he shouted as two were floored with little more than a throw of his arm.

Jessie hesitated, the remaining crowd still standing coming toward her, pushed her into at least stepping backwards. With only two men left with a hold of James, the original

five on the ground, she knew he'd be free to run soon, so she took off into the parking lot, straight through a wide gap between two buses. James got one away from him, then ran as well after her. The last guy deposited on the ground seconds later. The remainder of the crowd and some of the ones getting up gave chase.

The lights of the arena flickered back on, the wall turned into a screen showing the two announcers apologising and attempting to explain the situation.

Straight ahead of Jessie lay the town, which for the time being looked quiet. The people she could see were rushing in all manner of directions, most of which towards a big building that looked like an old tavern. She looked behind her to check, at the same time James yelled to keep running. So she did, down a street no one was going for.

James got to the same spot, him and the chasing crowd had garnered interest from the people there. Some were filing out of the tavern to find out what was happening. James sighed, eyeing the street Jessie had gone down. The people almost on him, and new people shouting to join them, he turned to sprint down a completely different street, still shouting for Jessie to run as if she were going the same way.

As planned, the majority chased him and only him down that street. Stragglers were pointed down Jessie's chosen street, they followed her.

"Despite the horrific display from Virus, Jailbreaker have come through with an absolutely beautiful performance," Jepp announced to the mostly empty break room backstage. Kathryn scowled at the screen. He stopped talking and looked nervous as if she were there.

Eylene struggled to smile, she pretended to wipe away a tear, "their best yet I think Jepp."

Chakotay approached Kathryn as she sipped on what barely remained of her flask, a grim look on his face. "Kathryn."

She looked up over her shoulder, "is that it, are we all ready to evacuate?"

"No," Chakotay said, his face had gotten very pale. Kathryn's curious and worried stare pointed at him didn't help. "James and Jessie are missing."

Kathryn found herself staring at the screen again, clenching her jaw and hands.

"The polls for the second round are open, but make it quick, we're running on extra time already," Eylene said.

Jepp nodded, "five minutes folks, and this year's finalists will be revealed."

"Kathryn," Chakotay said warily.

Kathryn shook her head, "you go, I'll stay. Don't crash the bus."

Chakotay tried to laugh but his heart wasn't in it. "I wouldn't recommend just one of us staying behind to look for them. Maybe..."

"We haven't got time," Kathryn said in a hoarse voice. She eyed him with her stubborn eyes while standing. "Get our people into transporter range, get them out of here. Our daughter and granddaughter should be your first priority. Get to it."

Chakotay felt his throat throb. He knew she was right. "I'll get right on it, then I'll send a Security team down in a shuttle." Kathryn widened her eyes briefly as she gestured her head to one side, he took that as another order to leave. He did with some regret and worry.

When he was gone Kathryn's face softened, she once again eyed the screen, head shaking.

The sound of the audience's cheers and claps had long since died down, people had filtered through the backstage area until only a few, including Kathryn remained. She ended her fourth circuit of the place where she started, only then noticing how quiet the place had gotten. What looked to her like two security guards watched her from the main entrance, she approached them with a rapidly growing death glare.

"You, is the concert over?" she barked. The two glanced in surprise at each other, then back at the woman half their height and weight. One barely had time to nod, she pointed at the other harshly. "You're with me. Bobblehead, check your security system. They have cameras don't they?"

"Bobblehead?" the one who nodded stammered before he was melted into a puddle by her gaze. "Yes we do. What are you looking for, ma'am?"

Kathryn scoffed in disgust, "fine, we'll all look at the camera footage, shall we?" They were about to object, her stare darkened even more as she leaned in close to one of them, leering up at him. "If something happened during the blackout, I'm just going to take it out on you, understood?"

"No," they both replied but fearfully.

"Captain," a familiar voice ahead got her attention and saved the two security guards. They turned to confront a group coming down the stairs.

"This facility is off limits to civilians," one said, still unnerved by the woman behind him.

Kathryn rolled her eyes. "Tuvok," she said accusingly, the two guards glanced at her briefly. "Shove off you overcompensators, they're with me because you pissants can't do your job," she hissed, waving her hand in between their faces. They stood aside, one whimpered. "What are you doing here?"

Tuvok stepped down, the three officers he had with him were struggling to keep a straight face. "Commander Chakotay informed me of the situation. I suggested we make use of the Ligers cloaking system to avoid further trouble."

"You managed to fit one of their clunkers in the parking lot?" Kathryn sounded very surprised.

Tuvok's eyebrow shot up, his lip almost curled. "Not exactly Captain."

Outside one of the alien bands were discussing something between them and their officials, occasionally glancing over at one of their men arguing with Stevé and other Ligers standing around in the middle of the empty lot.

"You can't park that thing here, that's why," the man grumbled, his face turning very red.

Stevé folded his arms firmly, "we're not parked anywhere. You're imagining things."

The man knocked on nothing, a metallic ringing followed. Stevé looked nonplussed about it as if nothing happened. "You knocked our bus, look at it!" the man shouted while pointing at the lone remaining vehicle, the bus with its face against the wall of the corner of the building, sporting a second dent at its back tire. The marks on it were scuffed with red paint.

"It was like that when I got here," Stevé said sincerely, intentionally though not looking at the new dent.

They all stopped arguing at the sound of two more vehicles arriving, a similar one to the bus but smaller driving in, and a shuttle sized ship on its way to landing. Stevé looked up, gritting his teeth since it was not far above them. "Oh this isn't..." he said just as it collided with a shield, "good."

"Hmm, not parked anywhere, really," the angry man grumbled. He stomped over to his band and teammates, "get on the new bus, come on." They followed the grumpy man to the other land vehicle. "Don't get too close, some moron called Steve has parked his invisible ship..."

Steve turned his head tensely, making his neck crack, "it's Steve-ay," he grumbled still with gritted teeth. The sound of the shield getting hit again put him off. He looked up again to see the ship maneuver around to park beside him, this time landing safely.

"I don't care if it's the smallest one, it's the oldest. I'm surprised you're not dead," Kathryn grumbled.

Neither she or Tuvok noticed more people walk down the steps into the break room, as well as the guards being dismissed outside. The security team cleared their throats to get one of their attention.

"Captain Janeway?" one of the newcomers said.

Kathryn and Tuvok turned their heads, finally noticing them. Her brow furrowed, she marched over to them. "That's me. Who are you?"

"Forgive me, I am Dieder, I'm what you'd call a prime minister for this continent," the same man said.

The worried look on his face did nothing to deflate Kathryn's sour mood. "I don't have time to be playing politics right now. I have missing..."

"Yes I'm aware," Diederer abruptly said.

"What does that mean, have you found them?" Kathryn asked, eyes sharpening.

Diederer sighed as he glanced back at the two escorting him. They nodded and returned to the stairs to leave them alone. "Our security forces were called to the town nearby on reports of a disturbance. We've found one of your Virus band members. He's been taken to our infirmary."

Kathryn's face hardened. "He? Infirmary?" she sounded calm despite that. It didn't last, her voice raised to a harsh scolding, "I have two missing, and why the hell did he need to be taken to an infirmary?"

"Captain," Tuvok said, hoping to calm her down. "Might we ask what happened?" he directed at Diederer.

He seemed very hesitant. "I'm sorry. We are investigating, I'm taking this matter very seriously."

"Tuvok, tell our friends to help look for Jessie. Turn the town upside down if you have to," Kathryn ordered without breaking eye contact with Diederer. He looked alarmed, so did Tuvok. "You can hand my crewmember over to me. If he actually needs medical treatment, I'd prefer it if we took care of him."

"I can't allow that, I'm sorry," Diederer stammered quickly. "He was harmed on our soil, by my people, it's my responsibility to fix this. If someone else is missing, I'll get officers on it."

Kathryn scoffed, staring at him as if he were a teabag in her cup. "No *thank you*. We've already been let down your useless security personnel..."

"Might I interject," Tuvok said, instantly feeling the chill. "It would take further time to bring more of our people down, and dangerous too. Ligers are Human, so by extension they will not be safe from any retaliation either. I suggest we accept their help."

"Can't you lower your arena shield that blocks our scanners?" Kathryn snapped, "she must be within a mile radius if we haven't found her. That would shorten our search time significantly."

"I'm afraid not. It runs independently, even the power cut didn't affect it," Diederer answered, bracing himself. "It would take our technicians several hours to shut it down. Please, I only wish to help. Otherwise I can only apologise on behalf of what my people did, and that is not enough in these circumstances."

Kathryn glanced over her shoulder back at Tuvok somewhat calmly. He knew better than to lower his guard. She eyed the prime minister again somewhat curious, but still furious. "What happened exactly?"

Diederer thought about how to answer. He shook his head eventually. "Come with me. I'll take you to him."

"So, Mr Stuart can explain it instead of you?" Tuvok questioned, curiously as well.

"No," Diederer said, shoulders slumped. Kathryn's eyes turned very suspicious then. "It might be easier to show you."

The awayteam cautiously followed the alien entourage back to their shuttle. Kathryn gestured a nod at the Liger personnel still standing next to visibly nothing. Stevé nodded and turned around, bumping into nothing with a nasty thud. His teammates sniggered to themselves. "Who moved the ship?" he squeaked.

Once the team were inside the shuttle, the outline of the F9 appeared first before the rest of it decloaked, with Stevé's face still implanted in its hull right beside one of its open airlocks.

It took only a few minutes for the shuttle to reach its destination; a tall shielded building on the cusp of a hill overlooking the nearby town. A portion of the shield vanished to allow it to fly inside.

Diedera lead his visitors down a few halls, into a circular room walled with monitors each showing different parts of the town. Tuvok ordered his team to guard outside, so he and Kathryn were alone with the minister.

"I thought you were taking us to our crewmember," Kathryn said.

"I got word that isn't currently possible. They're operating," Diedera said reluctantly.

Kathryn's eyes flashed, "operating? What the hell happened?" Tuvok again tried to calm her down, she waved him off, "no, James shouldn't be getting so hurt that he needs an operation. Tell us!"

"Of course," Diedera sighed guiltily. He turned to face one of the monitors to use the keyboard like console underneath it. The screen changed from a live shot of a street, to a woman facing the camera with a microphone, the area with the tavern behind her.

"Oh what the hell, don't you people do anything normally?" Kathryn hissed.

Diedera said nothing, he merely unmuted the screen so they could hear the woman talk.

*"...live at the scene, in the aftermath of this unprecedented escalation of events. We arrived while a swarm of police officers struggled to contain the unruly crowd. We at Channel Two are asking anyone who caught the incident on video to send them in to us and the police. For now, this is all we have."*

The clip changed to show roughly a hundred people in the not so distance. Diedera had to lower the volume a little since the shouting was so loud. People scattered at the sight of law enforcement converging on them. Quite a few argued, even picked a fight with the officers. Many were dragged off screen while the persons behind the camera tried to follow them.

*"Sir, sir. Tell us what happened, what's going on..."* the same reporter's voice was heard.

The security officer's hand reached for the camera to push it away, *"not now, keep back!"*

They watched as more people were arrested or ran away into the streets. An alarm sounded over head. Within seconds a vehicle landed in the square. People charged out of it, carrying equipment. The police tried to clear the way through what was left of the crowd for them. A couple stragglers shouted at the new arrivals, calling them traitors.

The camera crew seemed to edge forward, catching a few other reporters and cameras running forward to capture the action. Thanks to them, they couldn't see anymore. All they could make out were the police shouting at everyone to make room.

*"As you can see,"* the reporter's voice said before the image cut back to her talking directly at the camera. *"There were many involved in this brawl, some of which have escaped the law. If you recognise them or..."* She touched her ear, frowning. *"Oh we're getting some of your clips. I'm being told to warn all viewers that what will be shown may be distressing to younger viewers."*

Kathryn steeled herself for what was to come, her shoulders were so tense they ached.

The first clip seemed to be filming a street from a window two floors above. About twenty people were charging down the street, shouting different things nobody could make them out.

*"What's going on?"* a woman's voice asked.

The camera followed them by going into the next room. *"Oh, is that...?"* a man's shocked voice stuttered. The shot quickly tried to zoom in to the far right. At first it was blurry. When it cleared up Tuvok and Kathryn recognised James scaling the parallel building's roof, hunched down to not be seen.

"What is he doing?" Kathryn wondered.

*"That's it, it's her!"* one of the crowd shouted, followed by similar shouting. James walked out of the view of the camera in a hurry. They couldn't see anything, but from the noise they could hear, the shouting was starting to mix with bangs and clatters.

The image cut off, interrupted by a different video. This one looked to be amongst the crowd themselves. For a short while all they could see were the backs of other people until the shouting volume raised, then the crowd parted slightly to allow the camera to see what appeared to be an empty street. Something there was setting them off further, something that Kathryn couldn't see.

Tuvok stepped forward, "may I?" he asked the minister. He gave him a nod. Tuvok assessed the console and pressed one of the buttons, the screen slowed. A few more taps and the image zoomed in on the empty street, it looked blurry so Kathryn nearly missed it; barely three pixels moved slightly, then disappeared. "Crewman Rex," Tuvok said definitely.

"She's hiding," Kathryn said while the minister looked on in shock. She shook her head, "no wonder..."

Tuvok returned the video back to normal. Barely a second later something fell from above to land in front of the crowd. It took them all a moment to recover from that to realise it wasn't a thing. The someone straightened up from their crouched landing, not making any effort to escape.

Kathryn groaned into her hand, "of course." Tuvok raised an eyebrow, not that he was surprised either.

Whoever was carrying the camera lunged forward, along with many others. It shook, something slammed into them. The camera and possibly the owner slammed onto the floor sideways. The screen badly cracked, fizzled and went off.

Just when both thought it was all over, another video started to play in the middle of a voice shakily speaking over darkness, *"believe it, I can't believe it."* The camera seemed to move making a scraping noise, then was pointed out of another window. This one seemed to be on a lower floor, pointing to the same street. The crowd had swarmed around one spot, shouting, screaming, grunting. However there were other shouts approaching them, that spooked a lot of them into running off.

The police started to arrive on the video, attempting to drag people away. It still took a good minute to clear the crowd enough to see what they had swarmed around. James lying near a wall, unmoving, with one of his legs looking twisted to an unnatural angle, bleeding. More stammers from the cameraperson occurred as they tried to film the people still around, occasionally throwing a punch or a kick at him. The image cut out finally, leaving Kathryn sick in the stomach.

*"We are urging anyone with information to come forward,"* the reporter said sullenly. *"Despite the incident at the concert, we condone violence of this kind. We as a people have to be better than this and..."*

Kathryn reached across to try and turn it off. Eventually she got the right button. "Tuvok," she said in a hoarse voice.

"Yes Captain," Tuvok said in her direction, then turned to the minister. "May I suggest we start our search in this location."

"Yes of course. I didn't see her," Diederer stuttered as he led the Commander back to the door. Kathryn waited as patiently as she could for him to order his people, while Tuvok argued his case about going with them. It seemed to work as he left with the rest of his team, leaving only Diederer. He returned to Kathryn, unsure what else to say to her.

"The operation?" Kathryn asked icily.

Diederer nervously nodded, "I assume so, so it'll..."

"No," Kathryn barked, startling him, "where is this happening?"

"I can't take you there. It serves no purpose even if he was conscious," Diederer said.

Kathryn growled and turned her head away. "I told you. We'll treat him. Who knows how many people in there are biased against him."

"No, we have moral codes in our medical service," Diederer objected defensively. Kathryn once more eyed him dangerously. "I mean, nothing he did deserved that. Noth..."

"We never proved that James or his group did anything wrong at all," Kathryn snapped. "Now, I won't ask you again."

"On one condition," Diederer said, sighing in defeat, "you let us finish his treatment. It wouldn't be good for him to interrupt it just for a transfer."

Kathryn rolled her eyes only to make a point, inside she knew she couldn't argue against that. "Fine."

**Voyager:**

Danny exited her bedroom and looked over at the main door to her quarters, heart sinking at the sight of little Duncan curled up on the floor, fast asleep. She walked over to gather him up. She heard a yawn behind her.

"Is that..." Ian said, rushing over. "I swore I put him into the crib with our Kyle." Danny sighed and carried the baby over to the sofa, sitting down with him. "They're still not back yet?"

"No," Danny answered, looking over her shoulder at the planet. "Poor thing, I dunno what to tell him. *The concert ran late*, but at this time that's ridiculous."

"Yeah," Ian said and frowned. He walked over to sit next to her. "It can't be as bad as I think, right?" Danny looked at him curiously. "Maybe they're helping with the investigation, you know, into the weird suicide sabotage."

Danny shook her head, "no, they'd have called to tell us. Something's wrong."

Diederer lead Kathryn down a bright hallway with its outside wall made completely out of glass. Everyone they passed seemed to be in a hurry, running in the opposite direction, frantic about something she didn't care to ask about. Diederer was growing increasingly worried and quickened his pace.

They arrived at a section of the building fronted by a wide desk manned by five people. Diederer headed for them, while one of the five rushed over to meet him halfway.

"Minister Diederer sir, we didn't want to disturb you."

"It's alright, that's my job, what is happening?" he asked him.

"One of our patients has woken up," the man replied to the confusion of both of the new arrivals. Kathryn shrugged it off, only one thing was on her mind.

Diederer frowned, "what's the problem, isn't that the point?"

"Yes but in the middle of his treatment. Room eighteen," the man said, eyeing Kathryn. That got her attention, then she was suddenly interested in what was happening. As they walked through the doors to the left of the desk, they heard him tell them to be careful.

"It's him, isn't it?" Kathryn said.

Diederer seemed surprised, "how did you know?"

Kathryn tried to force a smile, but the frown she had was very heavy. "Only James would cause this kinda commotion."

The pair reached a room with a window beside its door, several medical personnel waited outside.

"What's the emergency?" Diedera asked them while Kathryn walked around them to peer through the window. All she saw were a couple of what looked like guards holding rifles, she noticed one of them sporting a fresh swollen eye. She didn't have to try that time, her lips curled upwards.

"He demanded to know where his friend was," one of the medics answered. "When we couldn't answer him he tried to get up. His leg's still under repair, so we were able to block him from leaving... at first."

"And the security?" Kathryn asked, gesturing to the guards with her thumb.

The same medic looked guilty, "they were already outside. High security case. They came in while we tried to hold him back, managed to put him off for a moment. I..." they stammered a little nervously. Kathryn then realised the rest of the staff looked unnerved as well. Her brief and small smile already faded away.

"Even with his leg, he still overpowered us. If it weren't for them, he'd have left," another medic finished for her.

"He can't. The leg's not set," the first medic said.

Kathryn nodded apologetically, despite still feeling the anger from earlier. "Yes, that's one of the reasons why I asked to take him off your hands. May I?" she pointed again, this time at the door.

Diedera nodded, beckoning the medics to clear the way to the door. He still walked forward first to knock on it. The guard with the sore eye walked over. "This is Diedera, you're cleared to open the door." The handle pushed down, door creaked barely an inch open. Kathryn pushed forward to get inside before him. Instead of the guard the first person she saw was James with his back to her, eyeing up the window beside a bed surrounded by equipment.

"James," Kathryn said to get his attention. He swung around, eyes wide. She sighed, annoyed and deflated as he was covered in bruises and cuts still. "You..."

He attempted to limp over to her. The guards raised their rifles in an instant. He stopped not because of them, his weaker leg buckled slightly, so he had to lean against the bed to keep upright. "Have you found her?" he asked. Kathryn's sullen face answered him. "Oh. Then lets go." He tried to walk again, she rushed forward to block his path and be there just in case he lost his balance again.

"No, no. You're too injured to help. I'll take you back to Voyager, since they clearly aren't doing anything here," Kathryn said without any attempt to hide her contempt.

Diedera flinched behind her, "that wasn't the agreement." Kathryn's eyes narrowed, he didn't have to see it to know it. "My medics are trained to treat the severe wounds first. He hasn't been here that long."

"Please," James said quietly, if a bit vulnerably, "I have to find her. She was right there. I wake up, they tell me she's not around."

"James," Kathryn said softly in a whisper, clasping his arm, "we're on it, I promise. Sit down and calm yourself. Tell me what happened."

"I can't do both," James said. He shook his head, ignoring the pain that gave him. "She was hurt when I found her. We were getting away when... I dunno, I fell, something hit me."

"Was that when you jumped down from the roof?" Kathryn asked.

James looked around, first at the guards, then the door before looking back at her. "How do you..." Kathryn stared firmly, he got the hint, "no, after. Jess was with me then. She's not now. There were so many of them. I can't just sit here."

"It looked like things died off relatively after that. She's probably ok, in hiding. Don't..." Kathryn tried to sound reassuring.

"No. I can't let her down, not again," James stuttered, "if something happened, I know where it was, where she is."

He tried to move her aside despite her standing her ground, he barely got to the door when Diederer shouted in the guards direction, "stop! He's a patient, not a prisoner."

Kathryn looked around at the guards lowering their weapons, then at Diederer. "Then how will you stop him?" she asked.

James looked at her accusingly. "What?" he sounded more confused though.

"Clearly I can't," Diederer sighed. "If a patient insists on being discharged earlier, we legally can't stop them."

"Then why did they try?" James asked, gesturing towards the door.

Diederer's face tightened. "Leaving here voluntarily means you forfeit our protection. I can't guarantee your safety out there, here I can. You understand?"

James nodded, "yeah... later." He continued to limp towards the exit, Kathryn went to follow.

"What's later?" Diederer wondered aloud.

Outside Kathryn didn't need to put in much effort to catch up with James and walk slowly alongside him. "We find her, then you're going to Sickbay," she whispered.

"That was the plan," James whispered back.

"Wait," Diederer called after them, nodding at the cautious medical staff. They walked off in different directions while he approached the pair. "If you are serious on returning to the crime scene, you'll need an escort."

James groaned, "so you're following us?"

Kathryn held out an arm, signalling him to stop. "Do you remember being brought to this place?" she asked. The answer she got was a blank stare for a moment, then a side eye roll. "It's okay, I have a better idea. An escort won't be necessary."

"Your F9 vessel won't fit in the town square. The closest it can park is where it is already," Diederer said.

"You mean in orbit?" Kathryn said with a pretend frown. Diederer looked a little offended by that, making her sigh. "Surely in these circumstances, you can waive the parking ticket?"

"It took up 90% of the spaces, so tickets," Diederer muttered. Kathryn's resulting glare actually made him laugh and not nervously. "I'll arrange for transport, shall I?" He walked around them casually despite her best efforts.

When they arrived back at the town, they found police cordons all over to keep the reporters out, with little success. Teams of officers combed the streets, and they weren't the only ones. The two Voyager crewmembers looked a little surprised to see the residents offering their help as well.

James tensed at the sight of a group of civilians forming their own search team. "We should hurry." He left for the same street he chose the previous night, leaving an unaware Kathryn looking confused.

"I don't think they'll do anything with..." Kathryn said, then noticing he was gone. "I really got to put a bell on that boy," she groaned, running off after him.

He'd only managed to get a few yards ahead, trying to walk fast on his bad leg. As she caught up, he stopped to look up a building. Its doorway was protruding outward on the ground floor only. His focus turned to the upper left floor, then he walked that way.

"Maybe this would've been easier if you stuck to the ground level," Kathryn said. James kept going despite that, though she could hear him mumbling to himself. "I saw some of the footage. I can help from what I saw. Stop me if I get a detail wrong or missed something. I assume you climbed up there first, then..." she pointed up to trace the roof of the terraced building, "the jump was next..."

James stopped, then abruptly turned down a narrower path, mumbling something about an *other side*.

Kathryn followed, growing increasingly worried. He seemed to be getting more and more agitated with every painful step he made. "You know, no one could've defended themselves from an angry mob. Even if you could see every attack coming, it'd be impossible..."

She heard a tired, almost growling sort of groan right before he stopped. "Why do you think I ran and climbed..." James snapped, trailing off before walking back the way they came. Kathryn didn't follow this time. She waited until he reached the original path and turned off to the right, in the direction they had been going before the detour.

Once they turned yet another corner, James stopped abruptly, his eyes darting around the road ahead. Kathryn walked ahead of him, eyeing the left side, recognising the street from two of the videos. On further inspection she noticed the road looked rundown, covered in rubbish and bins. There didn't seem to be any doors leading into the two terraced buildings on either side of the road, only windows and balconies. The road seemed to only lead to a gate at the opposite end, almost the same height as the

second floor balconies. It had been half opened to allow a few people to mull around the other side.

Many were scattered all over already; taking pictures, filming and or searching for clues. James walked in the general direction of one crouched on the ground. He passed by them, staring with a frown at the puddle of blood they were collecting samples from. His attention drifted up to the building on the right, paying close attention to every level. "Four stories tall," Kathryn heard him mumble.

She approached, glancing curiously between him and where she assumed he was looking. "Well, three if you call where we are the ground floor. Why does it matter?"

"Someone said that before..." James answered, trailing off when his eyes landed on one particular balcony on the second floor. Kathryn once more tried to follow his gaze, spotting the same balcony, its metal fence badly broken and sporting a larger gap than the others. The bars around it bent outward. On closer inspection, the concrete under the gap seemed to be chipped.

James walked away towards the nearby gate while she tried to think of another reason for it besides the one in her head. The people there, moved aside while closely watching him. He meanwhile looked around the square courtyard, walled by the two terraced streets merging into one a short distance ahead of him.

"James?" Kathryn said on approaching the gate.

It barely registered. James heard little more than a quiet and muffled voice when he spotted the cracked commbadge lying on the pavement by his feet. Shards of it were pointing him in a certain direction. In that general direction lay an archway to the left of the building. He hurried in that direction.

Kathryn rushed into the courtyard, just missing him walk through it. Apart from the main entrance, which was too far ahead for him to get to and through with his injured leg, the archway was the only other direction he could've gone in the little time so she followed.

The arch had been so deep, James hadn't been able to see what was on the other side until he was halfway through. Crates and litter lined the walls, the air stunk of booze and meat rotting. What lay ahead that he could see was more of the same.

He reached the end, only to find barrels as well, stacked up and lying abandoned on the ground. The small area was surrounded by a six foot tall wall with a couple of steps leading to a door bolted shut.

Some of the barrels that were lying were blocking a lopsided crate by the far left wall. James hobbled towards it as Kathryn entered the archway, unaware she was being followed.

The barrels moved to one side, James found what he was looking for, lying half under the crate with dry blood around a nasty open head wound.

Kathryn arrived in time to see him lift the crate up, then toss it clear out of the way to the right. The gasps behind Kathryn alerted her to the extra company. "Oh for..." she growled. For the moment, she focused on James kneeling down besides the still Jessie. Just in case she tapped her commbadge, only getting crackling in response. "Still out of range. Damn."

James stood back up shakily with Jessie slumped in his arms. Kathryn hurried forward to help.

"I remember. She said the perimeter was close. She had a signal, then the gate..." James said, only then noticing the crowd. With a stoney face he coldly said, "move."

They knew he wasn't asking, and quickly parted to let him back through the arch, most of them nervously so. Kathryn followed closely while still trying to get her commbadge to properly respond. It wasn't until they were a few metres clear of the archway that they got a very weak, muffled response.

"Voyager? Can you hear us?" Kathryn asked, cueing James to stop.

*"Just about... where..."*

"No matter, just get a lock on myself and the two humans near me. Careful not to get our voyeurs in the beam." She eyeballed the people following, they froze fearfully. "Straight to Sickbay."

*"Gladly."*

The Doctor couldn't hide his concern as he worked, hovering a tricorder over Jessie's swollen, bruised face and broken nose. He switched on the scanner, then went to carefully place two circular devices on her forehead.

Tom approached but kept a wide berth from James, eyeing what the Doctor was doing in distaste. "That's just a precaution, yeah?"

"Start on the fractures," the Doctor sighed.

James glanced between them as Tom got to work too, unsure what to do. Kathryn gently grasped his tense shoulder and lowered her voice, "sit down. You've done all you can, and more."

"No, I can't. I've got to... wait, how long has it been?" James stuttered.

"A few hours, at most..." Kathryn reluctantly answered as he stumbled towards the equipment tray. "What are you doing?"

"Duncan's still at Danny's," James said, Kathryn wasn't sure if that was an answer.

"Hang on. Settle down. I can tell her, you wait here," she said.

James continued undeterred, picking up, squinting and putting them back. "A few hours. He'll think I've abandoned him."

"No, no he won't, silly," Kathryn gently scolded, placing a hand on the one he was using, it flinched back. Tom glanced across with his eyes downcast. "Danny or Ian will have gave him a place to sleep, or taken him home. He probably doesn't know enough to worry." She noticed his hand hesitating near the tray. "He definitely will if his daddy limps in, in the middle of the night."

"Is it?" James asked, looking around.

Tom cringed and turned back, "no."

"Tom," Kathryn warned him through gritted teeth. "I'll take care of it. If he asks, what do you want Danny or Ian to tell him?"

"I don't want to lie to him, it's not..." James said, shaking his head. He reached for the tray again, grabbing whatever he landed on. Kathryn went to stop him, but he was already waving it over one of the cuts across his cheek. "Not... fair, right," he mumbled.

Kathryn shook her head as well, "he's eight months old. He's not going to remember a little white lie. You will though frighten him in your current state."

James froze and turned a little pale, he shakily lowered the device he'd been using down to his side. His eyes closed tightly as he grimaced.

"Sometimes you have to lie," Kathryn whispered, placing a comforting hand on his arm, "to protect them."

James hesitantly looked across at the occupied biobed, then at the Doctor dividing seconds of his time between the body scanner and the devices on her head. Tom was next, as he walked around to heal her shoulder.

"Let me tell people that you're back, you stay here," Kathryn said, backing off, then turning towards the door.

Tom finished what he had been told to do, so looked across at the Doctor. He shook his head and returned to treating what little was left of Jessie's facial wounds. Tom moved away towards James, still eyeing the device he had picked up. Tom noticed then his hand shaking a little.

"Maybe I should handle that," he said, reaching out. He took it from James, not realising how easy it was until it he put back into the tray. Hiding the shock behind a professional mask, Tom reached for a tricorder, sensing he should start his scan from the top. The first readings he got, he chewed the inside of his mouth but couldn't bite his tongue. "So, these aliens. What kind of injuries do they consider the most urgent?"

"I don't know, leg's not that bad," James mumbled while staring towards nothing in particular.

Tom's eyes drifted up from the tricorder, noticing then James' eyes were narrower like he was squinting. "Doc!" he called before looking over his own shoulder, "he has a concussion as well."

James looked in his direction, only slightly widening his eyes for a moment. "As well?" The Doctor looked up in alarm. "No, no... I'm fine, she...."

The Doctor clicked his tongue, "I was informed the worst was a broken leg. You'll have to handle it, I'm afraid. Jessie's is far more severe, since he's still awake."

"Yeah but," Tom protested at first, then sighed. "Okay, sit down but don't get too comfy. First, I need to find something that'll keep you awake without giving you an energy boost either..."

"Don't bother, I'll come back later," James said, turning to leave.

Tom hurried after him, easily catching up and stepping in front to block his escape. "Hey look, Janeway's right. You go to Duncan looking like I would if I insulted your mother, and you'll freak him out. He'll know something's wrong then, and that's before he notices his mum's not with you. Then what?"

"I'm not..." James quickly said. "I've got to do something, anything to keep me busy. I can't sit here."

He looked about to walk around him, but Tom stood his ground and inched a step to one side. "Like what? No one else is in danger. People have been arrested. I doubt they'll find them all. It's not like you're going to hunt the rest of them down and off them as revenge."

James' eyes flickered from glazed to sullen staring down at the ground. "Wouldn't I?"

Tom hesitantly didn't answer right away, his first answer would not go down well. While he was thinking, James limped over to the nearest biobed. Tom followed while he took a seat. "Look, I don't like you, we both know that. But today, I understand you. If the situations were reversed..."

"Hold on," James mumbled. "Who is the injured party in your version; Harry or B'Elanna?"

Tom let slip the smallest of smirks as he began to use a regenerator on one of the bruises across his forehead. "Even now you can't be nice, huh?" He shook his head and chuckled, "now that you mention it, either of them, both? If Harry, B'Elanna, anyone I cared about were on that bed because of some mob, then I'd want to do something too. You're not that different, you know."

James raised an eyebrow lightly. "I never said I was."

"No but you're thinking it," Tom said. "You're the Slayer, you should've been able to protect her, fight the hundreds of people off. But no, shock horror, you're human like the rest of us, not Superman."

"Why does..." James snapped, turning his head away for a split second. Only then he noticed the regenerator hovering near his head. It gave him the second to re-think. "I tried to get us away, both of us. Divert them, distract them. Nothing. Everything I did made things worse. That's what I do."

Tom stalled, his patient's sullen mood seemed to be infectious. "You don't know that for sure. Even so, you tried. You weren't the aggressor. Who should be feeling like rubbish are those fanboys."

"Were they though?" James said, frowning slightly. "An image of someone hung themselves over our performance. This isn't about cancellations or saying one band was rude in an interview."

"Why can't it be all of the above?" Tom said, moving onto a gash on the left temple.

"Cos it didn't work," James mumbled, absent mindedly turning his head forward. Tom adjusted his aim with a silent grumble. "I only wanted to do well for Lena's sake, to help her, you know. Now."

Tom finished with the gash and took a step back. "You still can. That's what you can do."

James forced a brief laugh, "what? Go out onto their breakfast show and murder My Heart Will Go On?"

"How does everyone know that..." Tom stammered and furiously flushed. James had no idea why and so frowned. Tom coughed, trailing off. "I mean, no to more murder."

"Hmm." James looked bemused. "I don't care about that anymore. All I care about is Jessie getting better. I'm not going back, not that I could anyway."

Tom tried to smile but he looked too nervous, once again leaving James very confused.

Craig's jaw dropped. He had to stop mid step to collect himself, but not for long. Lena kept on going down the corridor without him.

"Wait a minute, how?" he stammered as he ran after her.

Lena shrugged when she reached one of the doors. "Beats me, I'm only telling you what I saw."

"Can't be," Craig stuttered over the top of the door chime. "Is it just me, or does this all feel like the next step of some master plan to screw us over?"

"I don't follow," Lena said. The doors opened, revealing Danny on the other side with a blanket around her shoulders. The pair stared, baffled at her. "Uh, hi? Are they in?"

"No," Danny whispered, glancing back over her shoulders. She noticed their faces and frowned. "You don't know?"

Lena and Craig exchanged similar worried expressions. "No?" Lena said.

Danny checked over her shoulder again, then beckoned them into the dimly lit quarters. They followed her inside. Lena noted the only light came from the computer sitting on the coffee table. Danny tiptoed over towards it to pick it up slightly so she could turn it around, allowing them to see the screen. Whatever she was watching seemed to be paused until she leaned over to press on one of the panels.

An alien man continued talking directly at the camera, *"...top story this morning; chaos at Nutropa. A mass of locals, angered by the events at last night's semi finale, take to the streets in a very violent protest."*

"Oh boy, I don't like the sound of that," Craig mumbled at the same time the screen switched away from the reporter.

In his place, an aerial view of a town square. Crowds of people charged through it, all seemingly going in the same direction. People that were already in the square, some ran to join them. *"At least fifty people have been arrested so far. Appeals for some of the activists captured on video have gone out."*

The reporter returned to the screen, along with a grey box in the bottom right corner of the screen displaying the headline. *"As we announced an hour ago, one member of*

*Voyager band Virus...*" the grey box changed to show a promotional image of the group, *"was taken to hospital with severe injuries, under secure guard in case of further attacks. Another member is still assumed missing, and..."*

"What?" Lena stuttered, her whole body shook.

Meanwhile the image of the band had been zoomed in to only focus on Jessie. *"Nutropan civilians are being asked to report any sightings of her to the authorities. This..."* The whole screen changed once more to a different video, overhead but on an angle so for the beginning, they could only see the large gates partially open. A figure ran from off screen towards them, looking over her shoulder, shouting something as she sped through. *"Was the last sighting of Jessie Rex, captured by a resident at Kui Homes..."*

James entered the video from a similar direction, only to get the gate close in front of him. He instead headed for his right and down in the camera's point of view until he was out of its sight. Swarms of angry, shouting people spread out, filling the majority of the screen until it was paused. The image zoomed into the gates to show Jessie grabbing the railings and peering up. The image lingered for a moment until the reporter appeared again.

*"Investigators are studying the security cameras for any clues to what happened to her after this video was taken. We..."* the reporter paused and glanced away. Looking back, his eyes were a little wider. *"Breaking news on this developing sto..."* The whole video froze as soon as Lena pressed one of the panels.

"Uh, maybe you should watch it till the end, or at least that bit," Danny said.

Lena tapped away, rewinding the video back to the previous shot focused on Jessie. It zoomed in further, right into her face. Craig and Danny had no idea why until they spotted the faint shot of a hand reaching out behind her. "Son of a bitch. I gotta..." Lena turned around to stomp out.

"Wait!" Danny yelled to stop her. Lena did right at the door, staring back at her furiously. "You stopped it too early. He announces her being found."

"So they're in Sickbay then, fine," Lena huffed, once again turning to leave. Craig looked on, unsure what to do.

Danny though marched over to the girl. "Fine what? I just told you. They're back, but they're injured. Be patient, wait."

"Why?" Lena grumbled, swinging back around to face her. "I need to find the cowards that did this. You heard him, only fifty were arrested. I saw more than that on the clip before I spotted the creep who grabbed her."

"Somehow I doubt Jess or James will be able to give you a detailed description of everyone involved. Bothering them now seems pointless," Danny said.

"So these prats get away with it, go free after beating Jessie and even James to a pulp, and I'm supposed to forget it?" Lena hissed.

"Dad?" a small voice said from a bedroom door. Danny and Craig winced. "What about dad?" Duncan asked while rubbing his tired eye.

"Duncan... I..." Lena stammered. "He's fine. Daddy's stubborn as hell, he's fine. On an unrelated note." She turned on her heel to escape before she was stopped again.

Since he was closest, Craig walked over to the sniffing Duncan still in his pyjamas, and knelt down beside him. Danny hurriedly closed the computer before approaching him as well. "Hey, hey, it's okay. Lena didn't mean anything," Craig whispered softly.

Duncan looked at him with wobbly eyes. "You mean he's not fine?"

"He... will be," Craig stuttered. "I mean she was making stuff up, being all dramatic."

"Why?" Duncan sniffed, his face scrunched up like he was annoyed despite the tears building. "That's really crappy of her."

"Er well," Craig mumbled.

Danny struggled to repress a giggle, "yes it is, but Lena can be crappy." Craig glanced in dismay at her. "Why don't I get you some breakfast, hmm?"

"No," Duncan huffed, "where's my mum and dad?"

Craig glanced in Danny's direction nervously. "Um?" Duncan ran around him towards the door. Craig got up in a panic, "they're busy, no..."

Danny got to him first and picked the boy up before he could slip through the doors. He cried out and struggled, forcing her to bring him down closer to the ground so she didn't have to carry him as well as hold him still. "Shh, take it easy. They'll be back soon."

"I don't believe you," Duncan grunted with tears streaming down his cheeks. "Mum said she'd be here today to open presents."

"Presents?" Craig said but the realisation struck him right then. "Ohno, it isn't?"

Danny nodded as a lump grew in her throat. "Christmas Day, yeah." Duncan pulled away from her and bolted outside. Danny quickly got back up to run after him.

### **The Ready Room:**

Kathryn pinched the bridge of her nose as she groaned. "Lena, I'm just as angry about this as you are."

"No you're not!" Lena shouted. Kathryn at first looked surprised, then her face hardened. Lena barely blinked in response. "You're sitting there playing diplomatic nice Captain, when these people have attacked us..."

"I have not done nothing," Kathryn barked back, standing up to face her daughter. "Don't take that tone especially with me. I stayed behind to look for them, I was there with him in that butcher's hospital, and again at the crime scene."

Lena rolled her eyes, "alright mum, well done and everything, but you walk around here and nobody cares. Nobody on Voyager noticed the hanging, the power cut and attempted to get us out. Did any of them bother finding out who sabotaged us, or how these people, including James and Jess got out of the locked up arena. Which..."

Kathryn slammed her hands onto the desk, the loud bang startled Lena enough to shut her up. "That's enough Lena!" Kathryn snapped back. "You're scared, I know. Don't take it out on me, or anyone else for that matter."

"I'm not," Lena stuttered, shaking her head, "I'm pissed off. Aren't you?"

Kathryn scowled, then covered her face with one hand. "What do you think? My people get hunted through the streets, then beaten by the people who invited us here. Of course I'm angry, I'm furious. But all we can do is investigate the suicidal hologram. Unfortunately the rest of the tour are leaving Nutropa to head back to that first planet, so we'll have to tag along. Though share time is over now, no visitors, no contact, no anything. Not until we figure out who's behind it."

"Isn't it obvious?" Lena said with disgust in her voice. "That pillock who said we were not welcome, the Rhythm lot. Doesn't matter though, those Nutropans were the ones who attacked them, so both should be held accountable."

"We assume," Kathryn said, confusing Lena. "Think about it. There were so many visitors to the planet at the time, it could've been anybody."

Lena's shoulders slouched, "you're right. Then how do we do this?"

"We keep up our guard while we play along. Hopefully the saboteurs will try again and we'll catch them in the act. The problem is, who will represent us. I'm not keen on either in these circumstances," Kathryn said.

"Mum?" Lena sounded confused. "They've already announced it. I saw a repeat of the results when we got back to the ship. I dunno how we made it. All I understood was the first round had its votes collected before everything kicked off."

Kathryn's eyebrow flickered, lips curling. "Suspicious no?" Lena flinched, slightly nodding. "I asked them for a recount, and if it's still correct, another vote. They've basically left it up to us, and delayed the final by a few of their days."

"No, Kiara shouldn't be there," Lena said before firmly biting her lip.

"I'm not exactly jumping for joy about it either. But this doesn't seem to be an anti-Voyager or Humans thing, it's all focused on Virus," Kathryn said.

Lena rapidly shook her head, "no. We'll do it, that's what they want, right?"

Kathryn lowered back into her seat, watching her carefully. "Not so fast, aren't you forgetting something?"

"Hardly," Lena scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I know them, they're tough and they'll want to show these creeps up."

"Lena," Kathryn sighed, sounding a little dejected to Lena's surprise. "I'll tell the officials we're not making any decisions until James and Jessie have recovered. I'd suggest in the meantime you think about this carefully."

Lena turned to leave, "yeah whatever, mum."

**Sickbay:**

Tuvok and the rest of Security Team One joined James in the Doctor's office. While Tuvok and Foster were discussing the situation with him, Thompson kept rotating a PADD and squinting. After five attempts he sat at the desk to use the computer.

"It seems that in a situation like this one, they only allow neutral parties to investigate to eliminate bias," Tuvok was saying while Foster looked on nervously. "We can only work with what scans we have, as well as the video evidence."

James leaned back against the chair opposite Thompson. "Okay," he said with disinterest.

Foster made a little squeak before speaking up, "I figured you'd be a little more... *upset* than this. We'll probably never find out which of the bands, if any, tried to sabotage you."

James shrugged and folded his arms, "call me crazy but I'm more upset about being attacked."

"Then perhaps you can assist us in describing some of the assailants, preferably the ones who caused any of the damage," Tuvok said. "I can pass that information on to the neutral delegate."

Thompson caught a laugh in his throat, the snort got everyone's attention. He looked up, wincing. "The dominoes bit was funny." He made a little bang sound then gestured with his hands a falling motion. Everyone stared blankly at him. "You know, when you pushed them out of the way," he said awkwardly.

"Anyway," James said while facing Tuvok once more. "The cameras saw to that. The only one or few I want to but can't describe are the ones behind the gate."

Tuvok nodded, "indeed. I have a theory about that, which I was trying to get Mr Thompson to help with." Thompson's head darted back up, alarmed. He hurriedly tapped something. "In his own time."

James glanced over his shoulder at Thompson once more. "Oh?"

"Perhaps you'd be better to assist?" Tuvok suggested, walking across to the desk. Thompson grabbed the computer, but Tuvok took the PADD instead and walked back. "It concerns the moment the two of you split up, the first time." He waited for a response but James didn't move an inch. "It seems your diversion of the crowd did not fully succeed." The PADD brought in front of his face, playing the aerial shot of the town centre video in slow motion. Tuvok pointed at a few stragglers going the same direction Jessie did. Finally James did react, he took it from him to replay.

"Oooph, no wonder you're hobbling around like Chakotay does when the coffee pod machine is broken," Thompson snickered. Only Foster this time stared blankly toward him, prompting him to smirk back. "Or whoever's closest when Janeway finds out."

"You think it was these guys who followed her?" James questioned.

Tuvok briefly nodded, "I cannot assume. I ran a facial recognition scan on the later videos, and they don't reappear during the attacks. It's possible, but there's no proof unless I can convince the delegate to find them and bring them in for examination."

Thompson laughed, "oh, you mean a mutilation right?" James stared back with a raised eyebrow, "what, too easy?"

Foster meanwhile walked around to the same side of the desk as Thompson with curious, wider eyes. "You got the moment he fell? Apart from Jessie, that's the only part we don't have."

"Nah, just the aftermath. Brutal," Thompson snickered.

James was about to respond other than rolling his eyes, when the Doctor's voice shouted from Sickbay. "Mr Stuart, can you get back in here... now please?" That was quickly followed by an angry mutter, "that is not necessary." James tried to hurry out as he normally would, but was forced into a limp once more.

"Curious," Tuvok said before following.

As soon as James returned into Sickbay itself he instantly saw why he was called back. The Doctor struggled to stand up from a crouch with a squirming, tiny boy in his arms trying to wiggle free. "Duncan?"

The boy looked in his direction with angry tear trails on his red cheeks. "Daddy?" He pushed against the Doctor's chest, "put me down, now!"

James hurried over as the Doctor once more crouched down to let him go. Duncan scowled up at him and gave him a kick in the leg. "Bad Doctor."

"That's nice," the Doctor muttered, shaking his head. He returned to treating his patient.

"How, what... how did you..." James stammered as he picked up the little boy. Duncan immediately threw his arm around him, once again crying softly. "It's okay," James sighed, stroking his son's back to try and soothe him, "why don't we get out of here."

Duncan pulled back a little to stare at his dad with his jaw dropping, "why? I want to stay with mum. He won't say why she's sleeping."

"Because he's trying to help her. Let him," James replied. He got a huff, pet lip and Duncan turning his head away for that. "Duncan, how did you know to come here?"

"Saw a picture of mum, Lena talking about you," Duncan huffily answered. He slowly turned his head to look in the general direction of his dad, seemingly avoiding eye contact. His hand hovered over James' arm where there was still a cut and bruise. "You're hurt too. Why?"

James sighed while he took him back to the office. Duncan looked down while watching, tightening his grip on a different arm. "It's a long story, okay. We'll be okay, so let's just wait here."

"But..." Duncan squeaked.

Thompson meanwhile was too engrossed in watching something on the computer he didn't notice James limp over to him, clear his throat, then gesture with his eyes to move. Not until he heard a harsh, "move!"

"Okay cranky," Thompson stammered as he got up, quickly too.

Duncan was then gently placed in the seat. A nervous Foster panicked and reached over to slam the computer closed. Thompson smirked, taking that as a cue to snatch it away.

"Look, I need to finish talking to Tuvok. After I'll be right back. So..." James said while Duncan inched forward on the chair. James gently took his arm, "stay put. Can you do that for me?"

"Oh," Duncan pouted, huffing out through his nose, "fine."

"Good," James gave him a smile, then a forehead kiss. Duncan's pout went away, he looked a little better.

Thompson laughed in the direction of the computer he had re-opened on top of his left arm. James and Foster gave him a funny look as the former passed by to leave. "Poor kid's scared enough," Thompson snickered, "he doesn't deserve that."

James stopped to give him a dark, hard glare which even melted Thompson into a puddle of goo. He closed the computer and shuffled backwards pathetically.

### **The Mess Hall:**

Neelix didn't look impressed. The entire room was heaving, but not one of his spread had been touched. Even Sid had joined in on the TV watching, only he kept attempting to elbow people not to get them out of the way, but so they'd do so back. He had only been there two minutes and already had a swollen eye and bleeding lip.

"Look, there," Triah said, pointing at the screen currently showing Jessie lying on the ground, buried under the container. The crowd rumbled with muttering and gasps. Triah noticed Tani beside her, the only one not watching and instead staring off to the side. "Aren't you watching this?"

Tani grunted in offense, "I've seen it already. I'm not so sick as to find my rival getting beaten entertaining."

Somebody behind her snorted and laughed, "rival, good one."

Tani narrowed her eyes but didn't look back at whoever it was. Triah chuckled, "then maybe you could move aside then..."

"Why, so these other sickos can watch a member of their own crew being injured, almost dead," Tani said. A few crewmembers overheard, they awkwardly started to move out of the crowd. A little bitter smile appeared on her face. "I bet he's earned a few hundred fans from that stunt."

Triah frowned, confused, until she looked at the screen and saw James carrying Jessie around and then out of view. "How... what? That's a bit cynical isn't it?"

"Yup," Tani sighed, shrugging. "But it's true. Everyone loves the hero of the story."

Someone shushed her when a reporter took over the screen instead. They were all dead silent for a while, listening to her recap everything so far.

Tani shook her head, got up and squeezed through what was left to go to a quieter part of the hall. Neelix of course made a b-line to her, shoving a tray in her face.

"Maybe later. Christmas Day has barely started yet," Tani said glumly.

Neelix didn't notice her tone, so grinned. "I know things are a little tense at the moment, but there's no reason why a young lady like you should be on her own today."

"What would you know?" Tani snapped back. That he noticed, his face fell. "Today's all about friends, family, people who love you. Sharing and crap, food," Tani said.

"Exactly," Neelix gestured the tray again.

"I'm sure there was a comma between crap and food," Tani muttered, confusing the Talaxian again. She managed to escape while he was thinking about it.

Tom stuck his head through the Sickbay doors to peer inside. Most of the lights were off, leaving only the Doctor's office that could be clearly seen. The rest of the room, dimly lit by the consoles only. Tom gestured to someone outside and stepped in lightly.

"I'm not going in there. You're mad," Harry's voice said from the still open door.

Tom tweaked with a thin device wrapped across his forehead, a little blue light switched on above his right eyebrow. "Suit yourself. Keep the channel open, but I'll be on radio silence," he whispered.

"That'd be a first," Harry's voice said. Tom waited until a little PADD could be seen dangling from behind the door, before tip toeing further into the room.

A small groan and light shuffle froze Tom mid step. While his whole body felt like ice, his forehead poured with sweat. He forced himself to look for the source, only to find it came from the far corner behind the biobed, where he quickly spotted James sitting, leaning back against the wall with his eyes closed.

"I'm going to be filming a murder scene," Harry whispered, also sweating despite his safer position.

Tom carried on a few more steps so he could get a better view of the biobed itself. His throat throbbed while his torso continued to prick at him continuously with tiny icicles. Still, he remained, turning around briefly to make sure he wasn't blocking Harry's PADD view. Turning back, he focused and zoomed the device in on Jessie, still with the circular pads and wires across her forehead, pale and unresponsive. Despite the thin blanket covering her up to the shoulders, she had been given a jacket as well to keep warm. Tom noticed the small lump underneath it on her left, so stepped closer, only then noticing Duncan's head poking out from under the coat, snuggled into her shoulder.

"Damn, this is worse than I..." Tom whispered to himself. He heard a throat clear behind him, reminding him he was meant to be quiet.

He was almost done, he figured. There was one last shot he needed, just in case the first time didn't come out right. He turned his head in the direction of the corner James was in, catching him in the act of getting to his feet. Tom's heart jumped up into his throat, choking out his panicked swearing.

"What the hell, what are you doing?" James grumbled on approach. His eyes drifted up to the device on Tom's head. "Are you bloody kidding me, Paris?"

Tom attempted to back away, far too late to avoid being grabbed by the scruff of his neck. James snatched the device with his other hand, giving it a brief squeeze, breaking it in two.

"No no, look, calm down. I'm doing you a fav..." Tom stammered as he was pushed, forcefully walked backwards.

"Get out. What's the matter with you?" James said, surprisingly calmly despite the killer look in his eyes.

"I'm trying to help," Tom only had time to splutter before he was pushed into the corridor wall, winding him into silence.

Harry had quickly stepped back in time, out of their way, discreetly bringing the PADD partially behind his back, enough exposed to capture the event.

"No, you're doing what you always do. Filming people, us for your sick, twisted hobby," James no longer sounded calm, his voice had raised to a sharp growl. Tom could feel him shaking, he knew he was only just getting started. "I stupidly thought you had a line, and that line was you caring about Duncan enough not to spy on him." Tom tried to reply but he was shook and re-slammed into the wall. "He's just a baby, a baby who's mother could be dying, and you're filming him!" his voice rapidly rose to a shout, scaring Harry into hiding the padd completely. "I kill monsters like you, talk me out of it."

"I do care, that's why," Tom stuttered, wincing even before the expression opposite him hardened further. His eyes inadvertently drifted over to see if his friend was still there. He regretted that immediately as James followed his glance. It gave him a moment to try again, "these people see this, they'll see what you are. The victims." James' stare directed back at him. Meanwhile Harry took the opportunity to step further back. "Anyone who knows someone involved, who has a heart, will not stand for it and turn them in. I would..."

"Of course you would," James hissed, but he let go of him. Tom wasn't expecting it and tumbled partway to the ground. "You can't live without your cameras, spying on everyone, manipulating them. It's because of people like you she's lying there."

"Now hold on," Harry blurted out. He regretted it when he was glared at. He trembled, but still soldiered on, "the alien media portrayed you as this hateful group who not only didn't get along with anyone, but thought you were better than them. The only reason the public are still on your side at all is because of cameras capturing what really happened. The attack, the aftermath. You can't argue with the truth being shoved in your face."

"You've always been a naive prat Harry, but I didn't think you were that bad," James muttered, causing Harry to frown.

Harry grumbled under his breath while Tom collected himself, desperately trying to straighten his torn uniform collars.

"He doesn't know, Har," Tom managed to say, slightly breathless.

James glanced between them. "Know what? That people everywhere in any species will still side with the angry mob because we asked for it, or I fought back too much, or I made the mistake of splitting up. Any excuse they can think of to justify it so they're not the bad guys. Look at you two, filming an injured woman and her baby to get sympathy. Spare me."

"More footage has come out. You noticed the people lurking about when you rescued Jessie, right? You must've known it'd come out," Tom said. He hurriedly side stepped a few times just in case he was grabbed again, James' glare merely followed him. Harry brought the PADD slightly back into his view to tap on it.

"Rescued? Yeah right, so what?" James grumbled.

"So, because of that we all know that you put yourself in front of a violent mob to protect her. When you were trapped and she wasn't, you scaled the walls via the balconies to get away, divert them. Only you know for sure. Something went wrong though," Tom said.

He was about to side step again, James slammed his palm into the wall to cut off what he assumed was his escape attempt. "You really can't handle not knowing something, do you? It's none of your business."

"Something hit you, you fell," Tom said, ignoring James' very brief wince. "One of the balcony's was ripped apart, almost as if somebody super strong tried to cling on. It doesn't take a genius to put the pieces together."

"How does this convince me that I shouldn't at least make you and your twerp over there headbutt each other?" James said while trying not to clench his jaw.

Tom laughed nervously. "Well it's an upgrade from murder, it's a start."

"That depends on how much effort I put into it," James muttered.

Harry attempted to swallow the lump in his throat, it failed and his attempt made a loud gurgle that got both Tom and James' attention. Tom tried to slink down and slip away while he was distracted, the hand blocking him only moved further down.

"What's that?" James meanwhile asked, still focused on Harry.

Harry squeezed the PADD behind his back. "What's what?"

James rolled his eyes before walking over to him instead. Harry backed off fearfully until he bumped into the wall himself. "You two... ugh, you're not even worth it," he growled in disgust. To both Harry and Tom's relief he headed back into Sickbay, leaving them to stew in their own nervous sweat.

"I told you, suicidal," Harry muttered.

Tom sighed as if in relief, but he was faking it clearly. "He'll understand later. You did get it all, right?"

Harry brought the PADD out in front of him to have a good look. "Yeah, but you didn't tell me Duncan was there. You deserved more than what you got for that."

"I..." Tom stammered, his face fell, "I know, bud. I'm doing this for him, remember? People need to be punished for what they did to his mum. There is no other way."

"Really, cos no one's seen the face of the person or people who got to Jessie after James was out of the picture," Harry said. "Only a hand. We'll only know who chased her there."

Tom nodded as he stared at the carpet. "I know. If one person is turned in, or turns themselves in after seeing this, then it was worth it. Opinions sway when innocent children are involved."

Back inside Sickbay, James made his way back to his previous position, checking on the biobed before he sat back down.

He'd barely reached the ground when he heard a quiet muffled voice. His haste to stand again made his leg twinge, he had to press against the wall to steady.

"Put that down before I... what?" Jessie's groggy voice groaned, stirring Duncan awake. Her eyes narrowly opened, wincing from the very little light in the room. Duncan was the first she really saw, peering over her. "Duncan?"

"Mummy," he said with a smile, snuggling back up to her.

James limped across to join them. Jessie sighed in relief when she noticed him as well. "James, you're okay."

"Me, it's you we're all worried about," he said.

Jessie glanced down at the boy hugging her a little too tightly. It didn't bother her, she held him back. "So I see... but," she winced from a pain in her head, "you, I saw you... the balcony."

"Don't worry about that. I'll get the Doc," James said, noticing her reaction. He turned to leave, but Jessie grasped his hand, stopping him. "Jess?"

Jessie stared up as firmly as she could, "I'll worry a lot less if you didn't keep running off." The flinch she got in return softened her face, she smiled instead. "I thought they..." she glanced down at Duncan, then up again, "k word-ed you. That was quite a..." she nodded once deeply. James got the message, weakly smiling back. "Glad you're okay... ish."

"You too," James sighed. He lifted the hand she held slightly to give hers a kiss, which she smiled at, unaware the Doctor had exited his office in a hurry and was approaching.

"Come on you two, give her some space," he tried to say lightly, grabbing a tricorder on route. He was relieved James listened to him, but Duncan only looked up at him with his eyes wide and his bottom lip out. He tried not to let that get to him. "The sooner you do, the sooner she can go home with you." That worked, Duncan went to climb down. The Doctor carried him instead.

Voyager and their Liger allies dropped out of warp, joining the rest of the alien fleet waiting around a spacestation for them.

Kathryn stared at every single one of them accusingly, before finally settling on the station.

"Our neutral party?" Chakotay wondered aloud.

"Looks like," Kathryn sighed.

Harry glanced up from his station, "we're being hailed by the station." Kathryn gave him a mere hand wave.

The viewscreen switched to show inside a Conference Room where three people sat facing them, one of which was Diederer. The middle woman greeted them with a friendly smile and nod. "Captain Janeway, I'm glad you decided to meet us here considering the circumstances. I'm Tark of the Bruellans, the designated judge for this matter."

"I hope you asked us to stop because you have some answers for us," Kathryn said icily. Chakotay side eyed her and winced.

The woman didn't look like she took that personally, her expression remained. "I'm afraid not, Captain. I've been discussing the situation at length with the Nutropan and Yuma prime ministers about whether or not the competition should go on, and if we do how we go about it."

"Mmmhmm," Kathryn said with disinterest, turning back to take her chair.

Chakotay purposely cleared his throat behind his hand. "I'm afraid it doesn't look good, either way." Diederer looked dismayed, glancing between the two others. "I think you can understand our reluctance here."

The only one they didn't know stammered before replying, "our people have come a long way since the Asyla tragedy. We thought we'd put the pettiness behind us when we reinvented the peace tour."

"Hmmpf, ironic," Kathryn mumbled in between coffee sips.

"Um." Chakotay started to sweat. "No one's accusing anyone here. We simply wish to keep our people safe. It's still too soon to make a decision."

"This situation has already caused massive unrest on many of our worlds," Diederer said. "Both sides are blaming each other, while the other factions blame the furthest neighbour. If we don't resolve this, we may be looking at another conflict."

Kathryn sighed impatiently to hide her concern. "I'm sorry. None of this was because of us. You can't beg, guilt trip us, we're the victims here."

"Captain, if I may..." Tuvok piped up.

"Nope," Kathryn rudely said over her shoulder.

Tark gestured both her hands towards the pair at her side. "We discussed what we'd do if both of your groups turned us down, and that would be to cancel until next year."

Tensions are too high to start again. However, the opinion of the masses around the sector would indicate that would make things worse."

"What about bringing in the groups who were kicked out in the previous round," Harry suggested.

"Then suspicion would fall on one or both of those worlds," Diederer said sadly.

Tark nodded, "that's unfortunately true. We all agree that our best chance of quelling the unrest is for a human band to be in the final."

"Contact the Z5, I'm sure Davey and his lackeys will love the chance to lose again," Kathryn said.

"They were kicked out too early to consider," Tark said. "We've delayed the final, there's still time. I won't demand or force you, but please, ask your bands to think about what we've discussed. I assure you, the security will be extremely heightened, most of which will be soldiers from my faction."

Kathryn repressed a scowl for the moment, "if there's still time, why are you in such a rush?"

Diederer reluctantly brought out a small laptop computer from under his seat. He placed it on the table so the bridge crew could see it play a video showing angry protesters in their hundreds outside the building he took Kathryn to.

"What?" Harry stuttered.

"Without any answers, the media have presented their own ideas on what happened. People on a mass are easily convinced of what they want to. History is repeating itself," Tark said.

"Is this really necessary?" Craig anxiously asked, gesturing his head to one side.

Lena looked around to see what he was talking about. When she couldn't see anything but a few empty bowls on the coffee table, she frowned. "That's a little rude, isn't it? Jessie's on bed rest."

"Yeah, emphasis on bed," Craig said.

"Uh huh," Lena said, glancing briefly at Jessie slouching on the sofa with a few cushions propping her up. Then it hit her, "oh, well yeah. Jessie should have a say too, so yes it is necessary."

James walked across the room from the replicator to put down a glass in Jessie's reach, then stood back a touch. "A say in what?"

Lena sighed impatiently. "Well, apparently which band takes part in the final is up to us." James rolled his eyes and walked off again, making Lena twitch in anger. She tried to calm herself and carry on, "we got through and Kiara didn't, but mum thinks that it's some conspiracy or something."

"She's probably right," Craig commented.

"So what?" James asked while his back was still on everyone. They looked in his direction, then he turned to face them again. "You're not seriously asking us, are you?"

"We're in this together, so duh," Lena scoffed.

James smiled bitterly. "Yeah, I can see how much you care about your bandmates. No *how are you*, no sympathy, no nothing, you just waltz in and ask us to join you in the chorus. Who cares what happened to us, huh?"

Lena's eyes narrowed. "Don't get pissy with me. I didn't do anything."

"No but maybe if you stopped acting like a selfish bitch, none of this would've happened," James snapped.

Jessie and Craig looked a little shocked, Craig slunk back to get away.

They weren't the only ones, Lena's stare had hardened and she jumped to her feet. "What did you call me?"

"I'm sure I can think of worse," James said, angering her further. "You signed us up to this thing without asking us, and then have the cheek to complain when any of us have an opinion, disagree with you, or if god forbid, somebody sings instead of you."

"Oh, is that what this is all about?" Lena snarled, then faked a laugh while glancing back at Craig. He shook his head timidly. She faced James once again, practically seething. "You're still whinging about your screamfest in the last round? Get over it, I did. I was even nice enough to get over the you going behind my back and adding extra lines for you to wail, because the deaf sods liked it. You..."

"See," James butted in a little smugly. She was unsure why so didn't stop him. "You've done nothing wrong, not once, not ever. Everyone else is at fault for ruining your little competition." He approached her as he spoke, "did it ever occur to you that we didn't tell you I was doing that because you'd have reacted exactly like this? Or that I normally wouldn't have done it at all because..."

"Because you're a coward, too scared to face me," Lena snapped back.

James rolled his eyes once more, continuing his gap closing. "I did that so we'd get through to the next round, so you could continue being happy. I was doing this for you, otherwise I would've told the official where to stick it." Lena's anger floundered, she went into a daze. "I didn't say anything because I knew it would offend you, and doing that before it may have screwed that up."

"Oh enough," Lena groaned, "you accuse me of being all Miss Perfect, then you portray yourself as this thoughtful guy doing the little girl a favour. You can go to hell."

"Guys," Craig tried to intervene but his voice barely broke through.

Fortunately for him, Jessie had the same idea, "oh, cut it out, both of you or I'll make you." The pair briefly stared in her direction, only briefly as Lena had more scowling to do. "We all know you've been through a lot lately, Lena. That's why we all tip toe around you sometimes."

"I didn't ask you to!" Lena turned to snap at her.

Jessie's eyes sharpened, "well you don't make it easy to not to, do you? We're your friends, you don't take that crap out on us. You keep this up and even Craig will be put off."

"Hey, what do you mean by *even Craig*?" Craig mumbled.

Lena's body and voice shook, "but, I'm not..."

"You are, or James wouldn't have been doing it too. You know how straight forward he can be," Jessie said.

James pulled a bemused face, "that's a rather, diplomatic way of saying I piss people off on purpose."

Jessie smiled and shrugged, "call it what you like."

"But, I just wanted to take part, do something besides... anything," Lena stuttered.

James sighed, he looked a little apologetic. "I know, we all do. That's why we all worked so hard. I'm afraid that only goes so far."

"What do you mean?" Lena asked.

"You came here to ask us if we should go to the final. Well I vote no. Even if yes wins, I'm not going," James replied.

Jessie stared at him with a slight frown, while Lena and Craig stood around with blank faces, he awkwardly shuffling his feet.

"You can't, this wasn't a vote. We all go or we don't," Lena said.

James shook his head. "You don't need me, you said it yourself. You never know, showing up without a member or three might get the people talking and voting. Also, more lines for yourself."

"Don't be such a prick, she's trying," Craig said bitterly.

Jessie had enough and tried to get up, but still was far too sore to do anything more than turn on her side.

James chuckled derisively, "oh there's Craig to the rescue, he's a little late."

"Oh for..." Craig grumbled, "just leave the vicious little backstabber behind. We'd probably be safer."

James' mood shifted in an instant, his face like thunder he marched around Lena to go over to him. Craig's nerve ran off before he could and he started backing off. Lena hurried to get in between them, firing a warning glare towards James. "Way to prove his point, jackass," she sniped.

"It would be if that was what he meant," James said, glaring over her shoulder in Craig's direction.

A cushion flew over from the sofa towards the three, bopping Craig in the cheek. It got all of their attention, they turned to look and for two of them, quiver at Jessie's staring at them.

"When I get better, I'm gonna smack all of your heads together. Don't think I won't," she growled. All three believed her so they didn't say anything. She fortunately softened her features. "If we back out, that means Pulse, the band that consists of three kids, will have to take our place. Personally, I'd rather go back than subject them to what we've been through."

"I'm not saying we should. Neither band should show up, let them sort it out," James said.

Jessie cleared her throat and eyed him, he knew that meant to shut up. "They hoped we were out because of the cancellation snub..."

"You won't let me live that down, will you?" Lena complained, knowing she'd cue a similar glare in return.

"But we weren't, we came back fighting," Jessie continued with a louder tone. "So they decide to sabotage us in the most disgusting way possible. That's not enough, they chase us through the streets like Neelix did when last month's crop got loose."

Craig's eyes shot wide open, "what? I didn't hear about that."

"Anyway!" Jessie barked back at him, making him duck as if another cushion was flying toward him. "They think they've gotten rid of us, they're bloody wrong. If I didn't show up at that final, the people who attacked me and got away with it will smile and think, job done. But if I do and in one piece, they'll not be so smug, will they?"

James took a few steps toward her, looking very worried. "Jess... are you sure about this? After everything they did to you, you're gonna go risk another incident just for the sake of singing a couple of songs in a competition we won't win. I'd understand if there was more at stake here..."

"James," Jessie said sadly, "sorry, but yes. I've come too far to start running away from the bullies again."

Lena nodded with a smile. "So that's two against one, Craig?"

Craig looked around the room, deliberately avoiding James just in case he was deathglaring him. "I'm in."

"But," James stuttered when all eyes fell on him. He shook his head and walked off to the other side of the room again. "I'll go, but only to make sure no one gets hurt."

Craig snorted into laughter, "can you even do that?" He regretted that immediately, his head shrunk into his shoulders before not just James stared at him, but Jessie and Lena too.

Jessie tore her melting Craig gaze away, shook it off and returned to looking towards James. "We have plenty of time, I mean look..." she gestured at herself, lying on the sofa with a blanket over her, "promise me you'll think about it first."

"Do we? We don't have a song, let alone two," Lena said with some worry.

"As long as I don't have to jump around or anything, we should," Jessie said, forcing a smile.

Craig perked up, "oh, what about a sitting routine. I heard it was pretty popular two hundred years ago."

James scanned the room, eyes wider in disbelief. He shook his head on his way out into one of the bedrooms. Only Jessie noticed, she gazed after him with a forlorn expression.

Tani wandered into what she thought was an empty Mess Hall, only to find James had beaten her to it, sitting alone at a table and staring at the stars streaming by. She approached with mixed feelings about it.

"This is the last place I expected you to be," she said. James looked over his shoulder at her, then back again. Tani then noticed the couple of empty glasses beside him, and the half full one in his hand. "Or doing."

"I'm not in the mood to be harassed right now," James mumbled, then took a swig. "Or ever."

Tani flinched, but decided to sit down at the table anyway. "I figured you'd be with Jessie after all that."

"She's..." James said before sighing and putting down the glass, "with the others, so she's fine. Figuring out song choices, probably."

"Oh?" Tani frowned. "But you're not?"

James bitterly laughed. "Is it only me that thinks worrying about winning some ego driven singing contest is a *tad* less important than... everything?"

"No," Tani answered nonchalantly, "isn't that the point though? A distraction."

"Sure, it was," James said with little enthusiasm. "Now it's just another day on the job."

"Oh I dunno. I think you guys could easily snag the win now," Tani snickered. "That'll piss off whoever hated you."

James slowly looked at her without moving his head. "I can't stress how little I care about that."

"Bet Lena does, so Craig will as well. Obviously Jessie," Tani said, her lips curling slightly as she turned towards the window. Still, her eyes drifted back in James' direction, instantly disappointed he'd lost the little interest he had and was getting another drink from the replicator. She sighed irritably. "Seems a little odd that you'd stay behind when there's a good chance they'll get attacked again."

James was in the middle of sitting back down when she finished, he paused for a moment. With a tired groan, he sat back down and made a point to turn his chair slightly so it was pointed further away from her. "I'll still be going."

"Oh?" Tani teased, then smiled. "Then why not join them on the stage? It makes no sense. They need you for more than your *muscle* you know."

"Right," James pretended to laugh. "Lena will be there, she can do both, and better."

"You have no idea, do you?" Tani said mid-grimace, then she got up in a hurry.

James hoped she was leaving him alone, but she only walked over to the large TV in the corner to switch it on. He left her to her channel flicking, at least until she ended up on a one recapping the competition, which was typically one of Virus's performances. The little oooh sound she made inspired him to get up and escape, nearly bumping into Lena on route.

"There you are. Jess is asking after y..." she said, trailing off when she noticed Tani and the TV.

"Oh, I love this bit," Tani almost drooled.

James shuddered on his way out, leaving Lena behind pulling a disgusted face. "Oh gross Tani..."

"What?" Tani stuttered, turning around wide eyed.

"At least wait until he's not around, or better yet, when you're at home," Lena muttered.

Tani shook her head and blushed. "No, I was showing him..." She looked around the whole room, "where did he go?"

Lena meekly shrugged. "Probably gone somewhere to continue his sulking."

All of the embarrassment fell off Tani's face, leaving only fury behind. "You've got to cut that out."

"Cut what out?" Lena chuckled.

"What else?" Tani scoffed, rolling her eyes. "The jealousy act, it's getting tired."

Lena looked confused for a second, then laughed again. "I'm not acting jealous."

"Oh, so it's the legit kind then?" Tani said, developing a smirk.

It got the response she was after, Lena gave her a deathly scowl. "What? How many times do I have to tell you? I don't like James like you do. Even if I did, you're not the one I'd be jealous of. Not even close."

"Wrong," Tani teased, annoying her further. "You've been special since the day you were born. Now there's someone else who is super strong, can hold a note and has stage presence, only he's not smug about it, has charisma, and didn't alienate everyone."

"Oh god stop," Lena spat out, "you'll make me choke on my non existent drink."

Tani giggled, "he's also wittier, people love that."

Lena groaned in disgust, "you're having a laugh, right? If anyone's jealous here, it's him or he wouldn't be trying to best me at everything. I mean, he was on this ship first..."

"And yet, you're more than happy to let him go when you know full well that his rising popularity will help you win," Tani said. "That sounds a bit jealousy to me."

"Is that what you're doing?" Lena asked, pointing at the screen. She started giggling derisively. "You can't pet James's ego like that. He's only happy when he's got something to whinge about. If the aliens hated him, he'd be the first to volunteer. He's a weird one, a little twisted if you ask me."

"Yeaaaah," Tani said slowly, glancing away briefly. "That makes no sense."

"Tsk," Lena spat while walking off, "it's scary that it does."

Tani hurried after her, "so what was it then? His contributions gave your band a little oomph, and it pissed you off because it wasn't you that did it. It's your band right? He doesn't care."

Lena stopped, her shoulders tensing. She swung around, cheeks reddening and eyes sharpening. "He went behind my back and added extra lines for him to sing, cos apparently people liked him. Yeah right! I'd sooner believe that in my previous life I was best mates with Annika, than James even believing something positive about himself, let alone using it."

"You know, I'd die happy if I had a friend who'd do something so out of their comfort zone, to help me out during a rough patch," Tani said wistfully. Lena's face fell. "Not that I have a friend to speak of."

Lena hesitated, she found herself watching the screen. Tani waited for her to respond, but her continued silence left her feeling guilty. "Look, I'm not defending him. He shouldn't have done that without telling you. I've noticed that he's one of the few who can brave the wrath of Lena lately, so if even he chickened out back there, that's very telling."

"Why does everyone blame me? I'm tired of it," Lena sighed.

Tani started to stutter, "I'm not, I... If he couldn't tell you his plan, he shouldn't have done it at all. Problem is, you four got as far as you did because you were a team of friends and it showed. Then the big ballad happened." She gestured her thumb, turning slightly towards the screen to check if it was still showing the same performance. The pair recognised it as near the end, as Lena was in the middle of singing a chorus on her own. "Then you weren't anymore. You were full of yourself turning down that concert invite, and for what? To fool people into thinking you and Kiara had patched up, it wasn't even sincere."

"You're wrong," Lena blurted out angrily. The chorus was over, the part of the performance she refused to re-watch was seconds away. "It was fine until his bit. The reaction to it." She cringed when the camera eventually found James on the dark stage and focused on him.

They stood around in silence, with Lena wincing and looking away occasionally. She saw herself briefly flash on the screen with an annoyed scowl pointing upward, it was merely a second but it hit her hard.

Tani waited for the quiet, uncomfortable part to speak up again, "you're both good at what you do. You do even better when you work together. You treated him as the enemy and it all fell apart."

"But he..." Lena stammered, then huffed defensively, "he started it, getting on my case about Kiara." Tani didn't say anything, and yet it still poked at her already sensitive nerves. "Why do you care? You're the one who turned on me because we were hanging out more, you spread those rumours."

"Yeah," Tani said with a nod. "But I've grown and matured since then, I see the truth now." Lena looked at her in bemused disbelief, making Tani laugh. "I didn't realise back then that awkward, no backbone boys were more your type. If I did..."

Lena turned up her nose. "Admit it, you're only saying all this crap cos you want James back on the stage, so you can drool over him some more."

Tani stuck out her bottom lip, widening her eyes innocently. "Maybe. I am pretty selfish."

Lena laughed lightly, "at least you admit it."

"I told you," Tani said, laughing too. "Grown and matured."

They both laughed until they noticed the streaming stars slowing down. Lena felt a sudden knot in her stomach.

*"Chakotay to all senior officers, and Lena, please report to the Conference Room."*

"Lena?" Tani sounded worried as she stared at her old friend.

Lena shook her head almost timidly. "You're right," she said in a hushed voice. Tani frowned, unsure what she meant. "I should return the favour," Lena said before walking outside.

Tani blinked rapidly, "huh?"

### **The Conference Room:**

Everyone sat in silence, engrossed in the footage of protesters screaming at one another, brandishing signs, chanting outside a building that looked like an arena. Judging from the little light and the white sparkling ground, they had chosen to do this during a chilly winter night. Many of the table occupants felt uncomfortable about it, and yet still couldn't tear their eyes away.

*"We've never seen a reaction quite like this," a reporter said as the camera moved to the right to capture a fight breaking out. "How can a harmless, peaceful competition turn into such a violent, disgraceful show of events? A lot of people are calling for disqualification, while others are torn over whether to cancel or postpone the festivities."*

The shouting was getting so loud, Chakotay felt he had to turn the volume down a little.

*"Breaking news!" the reporter shouted. "The tour are arriving. We go now live to our orbital cameras. Now remember, be civil folks."*

Most of the room held their breath, a few divided their attention between the wall panel screen and the window as they dropped out of warp. The mixture of cheers and jeers that erupted seconds later did nothing for the sour mood already in the room.

*"Amazing, the atmosphere here is tense and electric. No one knows what will happen over the next few days. One thing's for sure, we're in for one hell of a show. If you've been living in your cellar the last few weeks, you'll be wondering 'just how did this happen?' Well, lets take a look, shall we...?"*

Kathryn touched a little panel beside her to turn the wall screen off.

"That's a no," Tom glumly said.

For once no one scolded or glared at him for breaking the silence.

Kathryn shook her head, "yes... lets talk about it." Nearly everyone looked on, shocked. "But I want to hear it from you." Her eyes pointed towards one corner of the table, the occupants there grew increasingly uncomfortable.

"I just want to state on the record, that Tom told me it was an arranged interview, and I didn't know," Harry stuttered.

Tom glared at his friend, "gee thanks!"

Craig was unfortunate enough to be sitting in between them, he shuffled on the spot awkwardly while clearing his throat. "Ok, now I know why no one wanted this seat."

Kathryn drummed her fingers across the table and loudly too. Most of the room tensed in anticipation.

"It worked, didn't it?" Tom blurted out, "they're angry, and so they should be. My video did that."

"What, you mean that mixed angry crowd waving obviously alien banners we can't read, fighting between each other," Chakotay said. "Yeah, good job Paris. Everything will be fine."

Tom winced as he stared down at the table. "At least it's indecisive now, whereas before they all hated us."

"I'm sure we can all agree that our little competitive holiday is over now," Kathryn said, prompting dismayed and worried stares her way. "You don't honestly expect me to allow one of the bands to go down there for some silly music contest. Either way, I'm sending one of my precious girls into that bloodbath and that's not happening."

"Is it really a question, which I mean?" Neelix asked. "Last I heard, Jessie's still recovering and James..."

"He's fine, I asked Jessie to call me when he went to sleep. I dunno why he was so stubborn about his leg being fixed," the Doctor grumbled.

A lot of the table glanced around anxiously. Kathryn cleared her throat aggressively.

"I've been informed that the security has been ramped up and we're allowed to bring our own, regardless of who we pick," Chakotay said.

"I'm not so convinced, there is no discussion here," Kathryn cut in, staring daggers into him.

"So why are we here?" Neelix asked.

B'Elanna growled in his direction, "that's a good question. I thought for a moment we were seriously discussing whether or not to send my son to a planet where he could be hunted down for sport just for getting a lyric wrong."

Kiara folded her arms and shrunk down in her seat, glancing off to the quieter side of the table.

"Captain, it is not often that I agree..." Tuvok chimed in.

"Oy," Kathryn barked before he could finish.

Of course his eyebrow shot up, "however I agree that the risks outweigh the gain in this matter. We should depart during the concert so to avoid further incident."

Chakotay seemed puzzled, "but what happened to your investigation into the holographic sabotage? Surely that would tell us just who is gunning for us, then we can prepare accordingly."

"Inconclusive Commander. The technology involved is shared amongst the factions. My investigation only excluded us and the Ligers," Tuvok answered.

"Please," B'Elanna scoffed, "it's very clear to me and anyone with a working braincell at least, that the ones behind it were not the hosts. However a vast majority of them were involved in the attack. We can't trust either of them."

Kathryn glanced between her and Tuvok, until she finally noticed her daughter almost nose level with the table. "Lena?" She noticed her eyes twitch but not in her direction, "sweetheart? I understand my decision will have upset you, but..."

Lena's eyes pointed toward her gradually. "I'm not."

Neelix smiled cheerfully at her, "oh, is that so? Perhaps tuck in that lip, it gives you away."

"What?" Lena tiredly said. She sat up only a little bit so she still looked slouched and disinterested. "I agree with mum. Going down there after everything, it'd be selfish."

B'Elanna's eyes and face hardened, "but sending your daughter in your place isn't? I've heard it all now." Kiara flinched and looked up.

"Torres," Kathryn warned.

Lena shook her head, "I never said that."

Chakotay sighed, hinting at B'Elanna to leave it. "Is that what your bandmates want?"

"Sorta, one anyway," Lena mumbled. "Me too now."

"What?" Craig was taken aback. Lena only turned her head part the way in his direction. He meanwhile looked around, deliberately avoiding Kathryn just in case. "When did this happen?"

"It's like I said earlier; we're either all in or we're all not," Lena replied. She lazily gestured to the wall panel, "we've done this. I don't want to make it worse."

Kathryn's features softened as she stared at her sullen daughter. "No, you didn't. It's clear these people were already on tenterhooks if a street fight could set them off."

"But it wasn't," Chakotay chimed in. "We're caught in the middle, sure, but the fact is the two stronger factions treat this peaceful competition as a battle one of them must win. One clearly tried to cheat at it, and we don't know if this has happened before. The factions that never win would be annoyed too. This was going to happen someday even if we didn't show up."

"Yes," Kathryn nodded, "and we shouldn't provoke things further."

Craig nervously drummed on the table as his mind raced. Kathryn looked like she was about to dismiss everyone. "Wait!" He got many bemused stares in return, as well as Kathryn's hardened stare. "Question. If this whole thing is a huge pissing match between Yuma and Nutropa, what would happen if their only competition dropped out?"

"They said they usually cancel when that happens, but it'd escalate tensions this time," Tom glumly replied. His eyes lit up further, "so doing nothing is going to make things worse."

Kathryn growled while rolling her eyes, "oh don't start making sense, it gives me the creeps." Craig and Tom both weren't sure who she meant by that, so assumed it was the other.

"Not really. It sounds like we're risking provocation no matter what we do," the Doctor said.

"Lena?" Craig said curiously in Lena's direction. She responded by staring at the table. "I don't know what James has said to you to change your mind, but..."

"He didn't," Lena mumbled.

Craig was put off for a second, "well, either way we can do this without him."

Tom laughed nervously, then stared at him with pity. "Can you?"

"Oh for god's..." Craig grumbled very irritably. "I'm tired of the kiss ass crap that's going on here. You may be afraid of him, but I'm not." A few people laughed to themselves, he ignored it. "That's not what this is," he stammered defensively. "I've watched the aliens' TV shows too, and all he brought to the band was tension and a lot of violence. I don't know why you thought filming him threatening you two would endear him to them, anymore than him flattening the crowd and intimidating other camera crews. We're trying to calm things, not make it worse."

Harry sheepishly nodded in agreement, "yeah, I did wonder if that was such a good idea." Tom shrugged his concerns off.

"I was the one who they hated, I just wasn't there," Lena blurted out angrily. "I threatened the Rhythm guy, I cancelled on the Jailbreakers. All because I wanted to win instead of Kiara." Kiara watched her with a neutral expression. "Jessie and James were attacked cos of me, these people are fighting cos of me. Whatever it takes to fix it, I'll do it, just tell me what..." Lena stuttered, trembling while getting some tears in her eyes.

Kathryn got up to walk over to her daughter and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "I wouldn't do anything unless all four of you are onboard, it's your decision. We'll support you whichever."

Lena peered up at her, squinting her burning eyes. "But, James would never agree, so what's the point?"

"Oh I dunno about that," Tom smiled sneakily. Most of the table stared at him, some curiously. "I've known him longer than you, and one thing about him has always been consistent. Apart from cruelty to Tom anyway." Harry snickered a little too loudly, Tom narrowed his eyes at him briefly. "Anyway, if you want to get him to do something, all you have to do is pretend it'll be dangerous for people if he didn't. He'll be all *oh no, I suck too much*, but he won't be able to help himself."

Kathryn stared blankly at the helmsman for a while, he struggled to maintain his resolve. "You come up with the stupidest crap sometimes, you know that?" Tom withered and shrunk down in his chair. Yet she smiled warmly, "and yet sometimes, you have a point." Tom brightened up, though thought about pinching himself just in case he was dreaming. "Just try to tone the convoluted, I'm so funny, rhetoric from now on."

"I only learned from the best," Tom bitterly mumbled very quietly.

"What?" Kathryn snapped anyway.

Tom panicked, "I said I'll learn from the best." Kathryn bought it thankfully and smiled again.

Kiara shook her head. "So what if that doesn't work, what then? I'm not taking Lena's place, no way. I'm still getting grief from the last time I was accused of it."

The majority of the table froze in horror.

Jessie waited twice as long as she expected to, it gave her a chance to finish her hot chocolate. Once that was done all that was left was silence, so she looked around to check on what James was doing, only to find him still staring at the PADD she gave him. Only then she realised he was only staring in its general direction. "Well?" she asked and waited.

James was a few seconds away from getting a cushion to the head when he handed the PADD back to her. "That's putting it mildly."

"Oh?" Jessie raised an eyebrow quizzically. "So you were reading the lyrics, and not pretending to?"

"Well," James sounded hesitant. He turned to her looking a slight sheepish, "I read the first line."

Jessie faintly laughed, taking the PADD back to put on the table next to her. "We can't go back with a defiant, FU song but we can't not do a related one either." She got a disinterested mmhmm in response, prodding her slightly. "The second one I suggested, it's subtle I think, but it's missing something."

James sighed as he leaned forward, covering his eyes with his hand. "Jess, I can't. I'm not doing it. For me, it's not worth it."

"It is for me. I don't want to play the victim any longer," Jessie said. She gave him a smile that was sweet and yet sad at the same time. "I know you, you'll change your mind for my sake."

"Ohno, no, that's cheating," James complained as his hand slid down his face, then dropped onto his lap. "Please don't ask me like that."

Jessie's smile dropped, a frown quickly replaced it. "I'm not. I'd be lying if I said I didn't need you up there with me. I couldn't have done all that if you weren't by my side, holding my hand. But still, I don't want you to go because you think I need protecting, or to make me feel better." James glanced across at her. "Well anything other than because you want to, no one else."

"Then why?" James questioned, with a confused eyebrow raise.

"I know you said you did all this just for Lena, so she could be distracted from and forget about all her problems for a few weeks," Jessie said in a hurry. She grimaced and shook her head. "It feels like that's what you wanted too, but then you had to be you again for all eyes to see." She laughed from the distorted face he was pulling, and what she was thinking. "You'd do whatever on stage, even flirt and not bat an eye. But now that people have seen the real you, you're too embarrassed to show your face again. It's funny."

James still looked confused. "What do you mean by the real me, or having to be me. I wasn't acting."

"I mean the first, no only person who bothered to try and help save the hanging girl before we knew she was a fake. *Little* things like jumping in front of an angry mob, searching an unfamiliar town with a broken leg and concussion to find someone. The man who defended his baby son and girlfriend from creeps filming them," Jessie said. James' eyes widened in her direction, she smiled in response. "Yeah, it's been on a few of their shows."

James groaned, "great."

"I know, I looked all pasty, my hair flat and all over the place, that awful Sickbay gown, ugh. You tried to stop people from seeing that, so I appreciate the heroics," Jessie said with a little smirk.

James couldn't help but laugh. "Anytime."

"I know you don't. That's okay. You'll be remembered by these people no matter what you do," Jessie said, faking a sad sigh. James watched her as she turned her head towards the planet. "I just hope that's not all they remember you for."

"You know, it's not really *doing this cos I want to* if you put the idea in my head," James said.

Jessie pretended to look surprised back at him, "what idea?" James leaned over to give her a soft, brief kiss. "Hmm, I like it but it could do with more details. Essay length."

"A compromise," James said, reaching across to pick up the PADD again, "two songs length."

Jessie laughed while shuffling a little closer. "Two songs? You certainly know how to spoil a girl," she teased while bumping her arm into his. He turned his head in time to see her nuzzle into his shoulder with a warm smile. "At least we'll definitely win."

James looked confused for a moment. When he got it he had to laugh with her. "You're still sorta talking about the kiss, right?" Jessie attempted to nod without moving, smirking all the while.

Lena paced the length of the mostly empty Conference Room, while the only other occupant sat staring at the table. "So let me get this straight. No matter what I do, I'm wrong huh? I decide to go on with Jess and Craig and I'm labelled selfish. I back off, take the blame and I'm..."

"No that's not..." Kiara tried to interrupt her. "This band stuff, you know why I did it. I didn't expect for it to last this long, and I got caught up in it all. I should've been out long before the semi's."

Lena stopped at the head of the table by the window, staring at her blankly. "What are you talking about? You earned it, and I can't say anything about changing lyrics to take the mick out of someone. I'm not a *hypo*."

Kiara smiled cutely, resisting a laugh. "Thanks but, we're not the same anymore. I'm not you, you're not me. You can quit if you'd like, but I'm not taking your place."

"But..." Lena protested with a lost look in her eye.

"Besides, the Lena I used to know would have loved the idea that Virus got to the final, even when lots of people hated them. She'd go into that final guns blazing. For me, the thought of it is terrifying. The whole thing was scary, I don't want to do it again. As I said, I'm not you so I'm going to stop trying to be and be me. It's better for both of us."

Lena laughed, then mockingly frowned, "stop sounding so grown up. You're making me look bad."

"Of course, that's my job now isn't it?" Kiara said teasingly.

"Oh don't think you're getting off that easy now, you little headache," Lena said in jest, or at least Kiara hoped.

She pretended to look offended anyway, "little what?"

"Hey, it's a massive up or downgrade from migraine," Lena smirked.

Kiara giggled as she shook her head, "well, why not. It runs in the family." Lena pretended to scowl back. "Okay, so why am I not getting it easy?"

"I need a favour," Lena answered.

*"Tonight's the one we've all been waiting for, all year long, and yet the mood tonight is sombre. Bitter. Our 98th tour comes to end here on Yuma, and it's certainly one for the history books. Three bands, three different representatives. For the first time since the changes, we have a visitor from not just outside the system, but outside our quadrant in the final, up against Nutropa and the host planet. We all hope that everyone can put the last few weeks behind us and focus only on the music."*

The shouting amongst the cheers echoed around from the front of the building to the heavily guarded back entrance. Each Voyager or Liger audience member stood in a line going to the door, waiting for the next person to be escorted to their supposedly secure seating area. No matter where they looked, there was a screen broadcasting the same opening show on the side of a building. The volume from it blaring all around the city, there was no escape for anyone not interested.

*"We know Jailbreakers and Rhythm are our home groups this year, vying for the much sought after trophy, but our third act has still not yet been announced to the public. Will it be the original choice Virus, or their wild card Pulse, both of them representing our Federation visitors."*

*"That's right. It's a closely guarded secret due to the hostilities over the last week,"* this time the female host Eylene spoke. The shot focused on the both of her and Jepp.

Kathryn rolled her eyes in disgust. "We hope we can forget about all the crappy things we've done, oh by the way, here's a reminder we did those things. Idiots."

Chakotay couldn't resist sniggering since his back was to her. She heard him though and scowled.

*"Even if Virus are chosen as representatives, it's not known if they'll be the usual four piece. There have been no announcements about half of the band's recovery, only rumours. The most popular one is one member quit, while another claims the injured party have been replaced. Again that's if Virus are showing up at all. I guess we'll find out soon."*

Only five were left in the queue to get inside. Once B'Elanna had gone in, Tom was next. Kathryn pushed in to gently pull on his arm, still giving him quite the fright. "You did remember that you were supposed to park in the VIP bay, right? Just in case."

"Duh, like I'd forget," Tom said confidently. As soon as he was ushered inside his eyes widened.

*"Now as most of us know but our guests don't, each group must choose two songs. This time with no theme restrictions. However..."* Jepp paused for dramatic effect. Meanwhile Chakotay was next to go inside. *"Both are sang back to back, conjoined into one performance."*

Tom accosted Chakotay as soon as he was through the doors, much to the two guards annoyance. "What does she mean by the VIP bay? I parked the Flyer alongside the tour buses, like Tuvok instructed. She was there," he stuttered.

*"The trick is to get them to fade in, merge without being identical."*

Chakotay quickly glanced behind him. "It stands for Vicorum Inta Pakrat, victors parking. I think she expected VIP, ie coffee waitressing service. Just go with it." The two hurried away with one of the guards before Kathryn was brought inside.

*"Yes, easier said. The idea is our winning band must be able to adapt to all possible problems, while still entertaining their fans."*

They arrived in a raised podium at the side of the stage. The nearest seats were a couple floors below them, or even in the opposite podium. There didn't seem to be a spare seat in sight, the stadium looked completely packed and for the moment, civil.

Tom went to take the seat his wife reserved for him beside her. "Oh sure. They're making it all up as they go, aren't they?" B'Elanna commented as he sat down.

"What's that?" Tom wondered. B'Elanna pointed at the giant screen behind the stage, showing the same two hosts chatting. He though noticed the little one on his right attached to the wall of the podium.

*"This year our groups have had to have a hit for a first song, filmed a video at the last second, usage of props and different staging, comfort zones taken away..."*

"Beaten to a pulp," Danny remarked.

Ian cleared his throat and gestured to Duncan in front of them, trying to peer over the balcony edge twice his height, only to get a forcefield buzz as a warning everytime. Danny sheepishly leaned forward to pick him up and put him on the next seat. "I told you this wasn't a good idea," Ian whispered. Danny brushed him off with a hand wave in front of her face.

Tuvok and Kathryn walked into the podium next, Kathryn busy downing a cardboard looking cup with a twisty straw. They sat down in the last two seats while Tuvok shook his head. Chakotay stared at her bemused, "where did you get that?"

She slurped before answering, "I asked one of the guards to go to the concessions stand, obviously. It wasn't warp drive science."

Tuvok's eyebrows were both up to the people around him's amusement. "You neglected the part where you ordered me first."

A few who heard laughed quietly. Kathryn though glowered at him, "you're not human, I thought you'd get away with mixing in with the crowd."

*"All three bands have proven themselves. Now it's up to our judges and the public in each faction to choose who is their winner." The lights started to dim, the hosts looked eager. "We'll explain more about the voting system later, as our first act is about to take the stage."*

The hosts were demoted to a small window in the corner of some of the screens, except the biggest one behind the stage. Videos of the first group began to play there instead

along to some introductory music. While the usual cheers and claps rang out, it was nowhere near the volume they were used to. The Voyager crew could hear some booing and chanting mixed in. Any of them watching the smaller screen noticed the hosts whispering between themselves, looking shocked.

*"I see the tampering rumours have reached their world too,"* Eylene said in a hushed voice. Some of the Voyager crew frowned, wondering what rumours. Instinctively some eyes fell on Tom as he bopped his head subconsciously to the music. He noticed the ones beside him, including his own wife but since he didn't hear the comments he had no idea why and thought it was his head movements, so he stopped.

*"This group have been consistently getting top marks all throughout the competition. Their talent and drive are barely matched. We can't assume because of ancient history that they'd do something so cruel, just to simply cheat. I hope their performance will distract much of the gossipers."*

Kathryn grunted as she stirred her drink with the straw. Chakotay looked at her expectantly. Only she tossed the drink over her shoulder, thankfully there was no one behind her. "I told that idiot, no ice."

The stage erupted in showery fireworks for a few seconds, leaving behind a cloud of smoke. Three figures emerged during heavy marching style drumming. The boos were getting harder to hear, the trio acted as if there were never any. While the smug, rude man took to his podium, the lead singer grabbed the microphone aggressively and started to project her powerful voice around the stadium.

"Pfft, she's not that great, miss shouty," Danny scoffed. She smirked as she spotted Duncan covered his ears, pulling a disgusted face.

The majority of the podium though were enthralled with her.

Ten minutes later they were done, the crowd made a lot of noise, a mixture of cheering and shouting. Duncan joined in with a raspberry blow.

*"Wow, that was the ever lovely Rhythm everyone. Simply beautiful."*

*"Yes, representing their home planet with style. What an honour it must've been for them to open the finale right here in their backyard."*

The crowds were still chanting long after the performance was over. It sounded increasingly volatile the longer it went on. The Voyager and Liger crew watched, mostly worried as the stage remained empty for an uncomfortable amount of time. Some eagle eyes noticed microphone stands rising up from the stage cloaked in the darkness, they assumed or hoped their group wasn't next, especially with the reception of the crowd.

Finally after fifteen long minutes, similar introduction music built up, increasing the already tense atmosphere. A video started playing across the screens, but no one knew which group it was since all anyone could make out were silhouettes of what looked like different people. The background started out completely black, then started to lighten into a red gradually, the details of the changing shadows started to clear as well.

The cheers and applause the Craig reveal got was a nice relief for the crew. If there were any boos they were drowned out. Lena next got a similar response. James followed and the volume doubled, not that many of the Voyager lot were surprised. Jessie's though, and it seemed like the entire stadium were cheering her on. All four members stood

together for the final shot before a fast recap of their performances were shown to the building music.

Most were focused on the back screen when the whole stage was changed into a street of houses. The overhead lights turned off one by one, leaving the right corner shining brightly on the sky blue backdrop as the music faded out completely.

*Bittersweet memories, that's all I'll take with me. No matter what I know that I'll get by.*

A gentle, yet midtempo track started playing. One of the doors to the houses opened revealing Lena, who immediately started singing her part. Doing so, she stepped forward in time to the music toward one of the front mic stands. "Images falling through my mind, floating outside time."

The next one through the holographic door had the crowd shouting and cheering so loudly, James had to use his louder voice to be heard over it. "And the light fades away into dark. Like my heart."

Both of them alone sang the chorus, leaving the other two stands suspiciously empty. As soon as it was over another door opened on the right of the previous one. The reaction that one got was the same as the last, but when she finished her part she got a roaring applause as well. Jessie's cheeks were already flushed bright red from that when James put an arm around her and kissed her forehead. She slipped her arm around him as well, and gave him a brief squeeze.

Poor Craig came through the door and sang most of his verse while the audience were still reacting with glee to that. He stuck it out though, smiling when he was done. Jessie remembered her cue and finished of the verse. This time all four sang along to the chorus.

The music slowed, James stepped up next, "now and then we all can lose our way."

"Tomorrow's gotta bring a better day," Craig chimed in straight after.

"And I can see that finally I'm free," Jessie sang. She glanced toward the others, catching Lena grinning at her and nodding. She continued to sing over the rising music, raising her voice as well. The others joined in with the chorus.

*Bittersweet, when we meet, that's how it's come to be. Cos I'm stronger now and I won't run and hide.*

By the time the song was over, the majority of the crowd were on their feet, clapping and cheering. Only it wasn't over and they all knew it. As sudden as it ended, the next song began on a flourish of violins. The crew were a little concerned that it sounded like another midtempo "ballad", but considering the circumstances they weren't surprised.

Meanwhile the holographic background's blue sky faded to mimic a night sky. The microphone stands had a little light each, turning on dimly. For the moment all the audience could see were just the group.

Lena opened the second song as well, "what you can't see can't hurt you, they say. But I've been blind too many times before. Never see it coming your way. Shadows and secret hide."

James followed with a softer tone, almost drowned out by the crowd. It only got louder when Jessie joined in mid sentence, "just say you're mine and stay by my side." Jessie reached for his hand, he clasped it as firmly. "Don't say you're leaving." They glanced at one another, smiling. Of course meanwhile Tom was having a smug told you so moment, only to get a little slap to the back of his head. "Don't turn out the lights."

"I scream, I scream," he did on his own, dragging out the last word. Then the music picked up quite a bit, the audience were expecting a routine but they stayed by their stands. Still, the song was upbeat and catchy enough for the majority, they clapped and danced along themselves.

Jessie looked like she scratched behind her ear, at least until an overhead mic was pulled from the top of her head, down in front of her. "I'm the kind who is always falling," she sang into it. As she parted from the stand and strolled to the centre of the group, the crowd went nuts. Craig walked over to join her, taking Lena's place while Jessie took James'. They meanwhile crossed paths to go to the back, Lena gave Jessie a friendly shoulder tap as they passed one another. "Into trouble and into paradise. I don't love by half, I'm all in."

The microphone stands meanwhile grew a few metres taller so they were like street lights, allowing everyone to see the stage better.

The group in their new positions started a simple, on the spot arm routine while she and then Craig sang the rest of the verse. James then repeated his earlier *scream* lines to start the chorus off again, to the delight of a lot of the audience. This time they did more than stand around, there was a full on dance routine to go with it.

Lights petered out one by one. The band changed positions under the darkness cover, while Craig sang one line low, over and over. James joined in with it, both of them steadily getting louder until the whole stage lit up brightly. James at the same time bellowed, "I'll never be scared of the dark," to thunderous applause.

The crowd also noticed four more hooded figures had snuck onto the stage during the blackout, and were following an individual band member's every movement, harmonising with the group after every other line.

When it was over, the reaction was deafening and it took a while for them to settle down.

Back on Voyager, many of the crew had gathered in the Mess Hall to watch the results. Naomi did so while chewing at one of her nails, "I dunno why I'm so nervous, it's not us."

Kiara eyed her briefly, then back at the screen. She tried to ignore the camera crews that were still around, filming their reactions. On the next table, she spotted Kathryn actually letting her mug get cold.

On the TV, Jepp stood to one side, talking to a woman on a monitor beside him. "A huge welcome to our representative from Bruella. We've missed your wonderful dance routines this year."

Kathryn groaned a little too loudly, "oh for god's sake, I thought the Earthvision Contest was tedious. Get on with it."

Lena blushed and hid her face, hoping the camera crew didn't broadcast that part. James though found it funny, and helped himself to Kathryn's drink. As if sensing it, she gave his hand a slap without even looking.

The woman clearly started to read off a cue card in her hand. "Virus, one point." A scoreboard took the place of the talkative host. "Jailbreaker, three points." Many members of the room tried to discreetly hide their disappointment.

"That's Rhythm with another five points, bringing them back in the lead," Jepp's voice said excitedly. "And finally..." The woman disappeared, replaced with a man, "Darjhan! You must put us out of our misery."

The man laughed, "of course, but I must thank you for hosting a splendid, violence free final. Bravo Yuma."

Kathryn went to take a swig of her drink, noticed it was empty and so stomped off for a refill, grumbling under her breath.

"The results for Darjhan. Jailbreaker, one point. Virus, three..." the man continued, cut off by far too many groans in the Voyager audience. The scoreboard updated to show their band third place, and the host's group Rhythm at the top. Then it cut to a backstage shot of the band celebrating between themselves, it churned a few of the crew's stomachs, especially Lena's. The man she dealt with so many rounds ago felt like he was smiling smugly directly at her.

"Now we find out how the public voted," Eylene said once the camera cut to her. "Will Rhythm keep on top due to all the controversy around Voyager and Nutropa, or will one of them steal the crown?"

Jessie sat back uncomfortably folding her arms tightly. Kathryn returned to the table with two cups, standing behind her and James. "We have to go through all that crap again? I need more preparation." She walked away, leaving behind her cups, one of which James helped himself to. Craig winced as he noticed that whole bit was shown on the TV.

"In no particular order..." Eylene said with flourish. She looked down to read the device in her hands more than once. "With the lowest percentage we've seen in decades in one system, and a surprising nine percent of the total votes is..." Lena bit her lip, expecting their name to be read out. "Rhythm, I don't believe it," Eylene stuttered.

The Mess Hall didn't either, the whole room went silent apart from a few whispers.

"Oh I love karma in my coffee," Kathryn sighed dreamily, cradling her freshest cup in her hands.

Rhythm were shown reacting to the news, and they were as shocked as everyone else. The lead singer tried hard not to show how furious she was as she talked over her shoulder to the rude man.

"I don't get it. I haven't seen any Yuma or Rhythm backlash at all," Neelix stammered. "It was Jailbreaker's planet where this happened, right?" He got a few nods.

"Suspicious, no?" Kathryn smirked. Lena stared up at her mother quizzically.

"Next up, with a total public vote of forty eight percent is..." Eylene continued undeterred. "Jailbreaker."

The scoreboard updated again, bringing Jailbreaker to first place. Tom massaged his aching head, "I can't make heads or tails of these scores. Can we still win?"

"Last up, our record breaking guest band, the first ever to reach a peace tour final," Eylene said with a smile. "With a total public vote of forty three percent." The scoreboard changed once more, bringing Virus up passed Rhythm and into second place. Even so, almost everyone were ecstatic. "Amazing! Our first guest band have landed in second with a mere six points between them, that makes Nutropa and Jailbreaker the winners."

Lena smiled and looked around at her bandmates. Craig went in for a hug before she could see James and Jessie, the only ones in the room that weren't celebrating. Jessie tried to smile, in case the cameras caught her. Fortunately the shots on TV were more focused on Jailbreaker's backstage reaction.

"Oh well, still one for the history books. You can't scoff at that," Neelix said proudly.

Kathryn nodded while patting a still straight faced James on the shoulder. He handed over the cup he stole to her without looking, she wasn't sure what to make of it. When she noticed his lack of expression, she hinted at him to lower it and continued to pat him on the shoulder. "I know, but it's alright, you've all done us proud." She walked around to re-take her seat.

Lena noticed then her other bandmates, only to be blocked again by Kiara, Naomi and Bryan crowding around. "Hey, good job kicking those creepy saboteurs in the nuts. That'll teach them," Naomi giggled.

"Huh?" Lena sounded confused, glancing again at her two sullen bandmates. "Rhythm? Yeah, they were cheating arseholes but..."

As the screens showed the reactions from Nutropa, Jessie got up and walked out with her smile still painted on. James and Lena got up quickly to go after her.

"Jess?" James said softly, but it still stopped Jessie partway down the corridor.

"So that's how it is, huh?" Jessie mumbled, her shoulders tightened. "One stupid little hologram cheat is worse than a street attack in their hundreds. Wish we'd thought of that."

Lena stepped ahead of James to approach her. "I know, I think it's rubbish too."

"Yeah yeah, we assumed it wasn't the Nutropans who put the hanging girl there because she was one of their own, but we don't know," Jessie said, turning to face them both. "What I do know is that I was chased through the streets, forced to hide, run and defend myself as if I was some criminal. The people who did that were angry that their idol's image had been sullied. Yeah sure, there could've been other planet's citizens mixed in but it would've mostly been Nutropans."

James closed in to give her a warm hug, which did help calm a touch but she was still trembling. "They left me in that alley along with the rest of the rubbish once they were finished with me, and they're loved for it. I could've handled the cheaters winning, but not this." She buried her face in his shoulder. Lena looked on, getting more and more concerned. "I'm sorry, it's not just me."

Lena swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. "No, don't be." The pair looked at her, a little confused. "*They're the first guests in the final. Oh Yuma scored rubbish.* These Yumas, Nutropans are still fighting their stupid war, using a singing contest to score literal points on the other. They've got a long way to go before they have actual peace. In the meantime I say leave them to it. It's not our fault. All we did was fall for their peace tour line, like all the other planets in this farce."

Jessie smiled at her weakly, "you're right. And at least we made a positive impact. Beating one of them, it's a start."

James nodded, "yeah."

They stood in silence, unsure what else to say.

"Hey, who stole my karmatic coffee!" Kathryn's voice screamed from the Mess Hall, cueing an embarrassed sigh from Lena.

**THE END**