

Episode 3.16

Fourboding

A young Human looking man, lean with dark hair and pale skin, was lead down a pitch black hallway flanked by two guards front and back.

They stopped him with a press of the button which triggered his cuffs to spark. Something ahead of them shone brightly into his eyes. Once he recovered he could see three judges sitting at a podium in front of him.

"Kevin Clarke. You have been accused of stealing a ship without an ID or permission to fly. You've been found guilty..." one said.

"Not guilty," the man blurted out, put off by the judge's last few words. "Huh? I didn't get a trial!"

The judge continued despite his objection, "the penalty is execution, tomorrow at star rise."

"What? The last guy who did that is still in the cell next to me. It's been days!" Kevin objected desperately.

"Silence scum! Your fate has been sealed," the second judge barked at him.

Kevin eyed them suspiciously, "oh I see. I see what's happening. You won't get any satisfaction from me. I'll..."

The guards pressed the button again, but for longer. The sparks that came from his cuffs were brighter and far more painful, bringing him to his knees and unable to stand back up. They then dragged him back the way they came.

"Have a nice death," judge three sneered.

Kevin tried to lift his head, everything around him span around in a wonky circle. "Yeah, same to you," he slurred.

"Attention: A thousand miran reward for confirmed sightings of the Slayers, wanted dead or alive. Do not engage unless in vast numbers. Fugitives are armed and extremely dangerous. Attention..."

Sandi looked up to see where the voice was coming from. It appeared to be a billboard floating in the sky currently showing grainy images of Lena, quickly followed by James. She herself was last before the message replayed a final time.

"Yeah, that makes things so much easier," she muttered.

"Sandi," another voice quietly said from behind her.

Startled she swung around and pointed her gun, only to find it was James. Still she didn't lower it. Lena and Jessie emerging from a nearby alley put her even further on guard.

"So, are fire fights your only way of making friends or can we skip it?" James asked. Sandi still kept her gun trained on him, eyes narrowed. "I need more than that to pass the Softmicron test, don't I?"

"No, but your lady friends could be anyone," Sandi replied.

Lena pulled a face, not keen on the lady label. "Wouldn't it be much easier for two Soft's to take him down first before confronting you?" she asked.

"Probably," Sandi said uneasily, so she finally lowered her weapon. "Alright fine. What do you want? I already told you I'm not leaving yet."

"This place is a death trap for people like us. Why would you want to stay here?" Jessie asked.

"You didn't come here alone," James thought aloud. "You said we when you mentioned trying to get into Games."

Sandi's shoulders slouched, brought down by guilt and concern. "My little brother. He tried to acquire a ship after one too many escape attempts. They caught him. I can't leave until I get him out of that prison."

Lena smiled slyly, "we have a way." James and Jessie glanced at her with similar *we do* stares. "What you have now is the deadliest, most stubborn and twisted weapons in the entire quadrant."

"You're really selling yourself short there Lena," James said.

Lena pouted and folded her arms tightly, "I was talking about all of us!"

Jessie laughed meekly, "oh, I didn't get that at all. Which description was me?"

"Forget it," Lena sighed. "I have a plan."

Up on the top of the hill for all in the town to see stood a stone castle. Surrounding walls far too tall to climb. Even if someone managed it they'd be blocked by a red forcefield at the top. The only way in and out looked to be a narrow path, mostly steps, with six foot walls on either side. Guards stood watch at the path opening leading into the town, while the other side was closed by a metal gate. That in turn lead to the castle yard and the building itself.

The two guards were easily despatched and moved to one side, the gate ripped open. Lena strolled all the way up to the castle's entrance without anyone noticing. She walked inside looking a little bored. "I am in the right place, aren't I? It isn't some old coot's house or something," she mumbled to herself. The first room she got to computer sounds and men talking emanated from it.

Inside a bunch of guards were mulling around the many consoles either watching camera footage of jail cells, or in one guy's case sipping a cup of tea.

Lena cleared her throat, "excuse me." All of them gasped and turned around fearfully. "I think it's time for your piss your pants break."

Most of the room scattered, screaming hysterically as they did. Lena shrugged and let any run by her. Only a few stubborn ones remained. "You meddling brat, how did you get in here?" the one now standing in a puddle of his tea and shards of its cup.

"A little too easily for a supposed hard to escape from scary jail," Lena replied. "This is it, right?"

The man gestured to the remaining guards, "what are you waiting for?"

"Oh," one said, not very discreetly aiming for a red button nearby.

"What's that, the summon competent guards button?" Lena asked.

They pressed it with a smug grin on their face. An alarm sounded throughout the entire building.

"Ohno," Lena barely pretended to sound concerned. "What will I do about the tiny scared of me things throwing themselves away from me. How will I cope?"

"Arrest her, she'll be perfect for our collection," the tea guy chuckled maliciously.

Lena snorted a little as she tried to restrain laughing at him. "Did you drop your cup of tea, or are you just scared to see me?" She waved at them before running straight back outside. All of the remaining guards chased after her.

Meanwhile outside James and Sandi waited by the wall, far enough away from the entrance so they wouldn't be spotted. The siren they could hear faintly.

"Well that's the signal. Now what, jump over the wall?" Sandi smiled.

"Close," James replied, pulling the gun from the sheath on his leg. Sandi had little time to object, a large gaping hole soon appeared in the wall. He waited until the dust settled enough for them to see ahead to walk through it.

"Okay, so you must be the twisted one. Check," Sandi mumbled. She followed him.

Lena ran back along the narrow road leading back to town, only to be confronted by guards literally gunning for her. She reached for her pole weapon on her back, hidden by her jacket. It extended into the trident while she was still revealing it. She dug the blade side of it into the ground to help launch her into the air and over the wall.

A few corridors lead to the cells. No guards got in their way, only an electrified door with a pass-code.

"Let me guess," Sandi said about it.

Her fist raised to do the deed herself. Inches away James called out, "no! That'll redirect the alarms and the guards to us. I'll do it."

Sandi stepped aside, a little confused since his strategy so far had been shooting holes in walls and breaking things with his fist. She half expected he only wanted to do what she was going to do himself. Only instead of smashing the panel to bits he pressed it a few times with his finger, all while using another tricorder. The door opened with no complaint.

"And two holes in the building wouldn't?" Sandi questioned with a smirk on her face.

"Not straight away," James shrugged.

As soon as they entered the cell area every prisoner conscious hurried forward to beg for release.

"What else do the Softmicron arrest people for? I doubt everyone here stole ships," James questioned.

"Interfere with the Games, tell visitors about them, not be shapeshifters. It's a still growing list," Sandi replied. Her face drained at the sight of one prisoner; an elderly alien man. "Tenko, you too?" She rushed over to him.

He seemed pleased to see her despite his predicament. "Miss Sandi, you're alive."

"Tell me they didn't lock you up for giving us a place to crash," Sandi said. He said nothing, it was answer enough. "I can't leave you in here." Her hands reached for the bars, Tenko clasped her hands.

"No dear. I'll slow you down. I'll be fine," he said.

"The guards are distracted. They will be for a while," James said.

Tenko didn't budge, "really, it's okay."

"No it's not. Aiding a Slayer is grounds for the death penalty," Sandi grumbled. She gently brushed his hands away to pull the bars so they'd come free. The rest of the prisoners were riled up at the sight of it.

James glanced all around him at the rambunctious prisoners. "Oh, this isn't good, how..."

"Never mind them. Where's Kevin?" Sandi asked.

"He was dragged down here," Tenko said, slowly leading them further down the cell area. Sandi took his arm to get him to stop.

"You need to go. He's this way?" she said.

Tenko's face fell, "yes but..."

"I'll get him out. You find your brother," James said.

Sandi smiled gratefully, "thanks. Be careful."

The prisoners jeered as James lead Tenko back the way they came. James turned to say something to one of them, only to find the cell he picked at random held a starved frail teenaged girl in it. The something he ended up saying ended up being two simple words, "stand back." Every cell he walked past slowly he slammed his fist against the lock. Some prisoners chose to flee immediately, others ran off to break out other prisoners who weren't in his path.

Sandi looked over her shoulder at the racket he was making because of it. It brought a smirk to her face. "We did need a backup distraction, that'll do it." At the far end of the jail area she found Kevin slumped, front down on his measly bed. Once inside she shook him, "Kev, wake up. It's me."

Kevin seemed to stir, his head turned to one side. "Nah nah, girls don't pay. I'll have the lasagna," he mumbled, his eyes still closed. Sandi shook him a few more times until he finally woke up with a start. "Prawn curry! Sis?"

"What the hell goes through that head of yours?" Sandi said, shaking her head. Kevin was about to answer, but Sandi quickly regretted asking. "Never mind, let's go."

"You're travelling alone?" an alien woman asked in a suspicious tone.

Jessie's angered frown didn't break. "Is that really a problem that affects you?"

"No, uh..." the woman stammered.

"Look here," Jessie said, folding her arms on the counter between them. "I've spent my only day off getting barrelled over by your overzealous police, panicking over some bar fight. The weather here is utter crap, purple rain the size of houses, what the hell...?"

"Well..." the woman tried to cut in.

Jessie was far from done though. "Then my taxi driver is arrested for parking violations, because apparently clothes shopping at the worst market I've ever seen is aiding the enemy. All I want to do is get off this pigsty of a planet and go home. Is that sodding clear or do I need to talk to your manager?"

"No miss. I'll sort out your permit immediately. All I need is your bio scan, it takes two seconds," the woman stuttered as she pointed to a machine behind Jessie that looked like a phone booth. "We already know your reason for travel, but we'll need an off world time range estimate."

"Oh believe me, I'm never coming back. Why the bio scan anyway?" Jessie asked.

"So when your vessel passes through the security barrier, it'll know it's you piloting and not someone else," the woman answered nervously. "If it's a one way service you need to set the auto pilot once you're at your destination. It's easy, one button. If you forget it'll do it itself after idle time or when it's out of range."

Jessie made a mental note to mention the last part to James so he could break that little feature, one way or another. "Wow, it's a wonder you don't jump at your own shadow. Fine," she muttered, walking over to the scanner.

The woman though looked like she was in fear of her life. "One more thing."

Jessie slowly turned back around, arming her best death glare. "What?"

"We have to ask everyone today," the woman said, sliding a holo image under the glass thankfully separating them. Jessie walked back to look at it even if she did know what it would be. As expected it was the same security camera captures of James, Lena and Sandi the billboard showed. "Have you seen or had any interactions with these *people*? And if you do, you must avoid them at all costs. Assisting criminals..."

"No and no," Jessie snarled, trying in vain to not show her distaste at the way she had said people. "What did they do, try to leave this planet?"

"Okay," the woman squeaked. "Step into the scanner and I'll print your permit. Your allocated ship is called the Maucy Sair in section twelve."

Jessie struggled not to laugh. "That's a typo, surely?"

"I wish it was, there's even a vessel here called Ship," the woman answered.

"That's a lot less stupid, I'll take that one," Jessie said.

The woman really didn't want to get on her bad side again so she quickly changed the ship name and section on the permit. "Please don't take the warnings lightly. These animals are very dangerous. They'll kill you without blinking an eye, unfeeling monsters."

Jessie tried once more to contain her temper, which so far hadn't been as easy as she thought despite having to act it. The tricky part was not reacting to the things that would tip her off. Her face managed to remain the same, only just at the animals remark. "Yeah, you don't get many tourists do you?" She gestured to the gap under the glass, the woman slipped her the permit and once more reminded her to step into the bio scanner.

Sandi and Kevin ran alongside the prison yard wall to get to the gate, prisoners ahead of them were doing the same. Some stopped, put off by the sound of phaser blasts up ahead. The closer Sandi and Kevin got to the town, the louder it got. They reached the narrow path opening up into the street when crossfire forced them to a sudden stop.

Kevin waited for a few blasts to settle down to edge forward. Sandi grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Wait. I had help, he'll..." she said. A blast of energy slammed into the pillar next to her, small pieces of stone and dust crumbled down over her head until she moved further backwards.

"Shoot you?" Kevin smirked. "You certainly can pick 'em."

Sandi half rolled her eyes, "did you see which side that shot came from?" Her brother briefly nodded. "Okay good. I'll distract while you run in the other direction. Look for another Human guy with a gun..."

"But sis," Kevin protested.

"Don't but sis me. We're only in this situation because you didn't listen to me last time. When it's clear, go," Sandi said forcefully. During a brief lull in the shooting she ran out, triggering more from the right, she fired back in kind. Kevin waited impatiently for his opening.

Further down the street on his left James had taken cover behind a market stall. As soon as Sandi had rushed out, he could look for the source of the weapons fire without having to dodge incoming hits. He had a general direction but it wasn't enough to take them out at the distance and angle he was at. The first one he had narrowed down to a huge watchtower close to the gate. His thumb slipped a latch on the gun prompting it to bleep rapidly as he hovered it in that direction. A continuous bleep and he fired. Unlike the prison wall, this shot had a far more lowkey ending; a painful yelp, a figure almost tumbling out of the window and the fire from that direction stopping.

He looked for the second gunner. He was too engrossed in that he missed Kevin run right past him and leap onto a fire exit style ladder to climb up a nearby building.

With the second shooter down James hurried over to join Sandi at her new hiding spot. She watched him in horror. "What?"

"My brother, you didn't see him?" she stuttered.

"I was a little busy," James replied.

Sandi groaned, "ugh, I told him to look for you. I didn't really expect you to watch out for him and fire a gun... by the way, how do you use that thing with only one eye?"

"It has a tracker, locks onto... wait, I didn't shoot him if that's what you're thinking," James said with some offense.

"No," Sandi sighed. "Boys will be boys."

James looked on, a little more confused than usual. "What did I do? I don't use it everytime."

Kevin thought twice about it, then leapt anyway to the next rooftop. It was a little lower than he thought and so did a tumble on landing. He rubbed his arm as he stood, and looked around for the next building. Only there weren't any, they were all taller. Begrudgingly he wandered to the edge and looked down for the safest spot. There he saw a young woman run straight into an alley, three men chasing her.

"What's this? A damsel in distress," Kevin smiled. He got ready to jump.

Meanwhile Lena turned around to face her pursuers and eyed them confidently.

"Stand down Slayer and we shall be merciful," one of the men threatened.

"Yeah I heard that one before," Lena said, rolling her eyes. "Do your worst."

One fired, she ducked by rolling forward and kicking another. The remaining two had only enough time to panic at her proximity before they were forced to headbutt each other.

A man yelped as he fell to the floor behind her. She swung around and aimed her fist. Kevin scrambled up, fists ready to fight, temporarily ignoring his bruised ego and everything. "Hey? What the...?" he stuttered before he was punched in the face. "Ow, what did you do that for?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Lena asked with a raised eyebrow.

Kevin checked to see if he was bleeding. Satisfied he wasn't he massaged his aching jaw so he could smile at her. "Aaah I see. You're a Slayer." Lena knew better now than to answer to that. Still his smile grew, "that's hot."

"What?" Lena groaned in disgust.

"You and me, we could make some magic. Maybe later in the future, Slayer babies huh, well?" Kevin said, winking at her. Next thing he knew he was lying on the floor, the sky spinning fast straight ahead of him, and a massive ache throbbing through his entire skull.

Jessie waited by the ship supplied to her that looked more like a Delta Flyer reject, when Tom's pleas for go faster stripes and two extra wings fell on deaf ears. She pretended to inspect it, look at the permit, anything to look nonchalant and not like she was waiting for anyone. With prying eyes on her from the building where she got the permit from she opened the doors to walk inside.

Fortunately after a short while of casually looking at the controls, she saw one of the two signals; some litter rolled up into the fence, annoying one of the guards there. Jessie started up the vessel, got what felt like air conditioning and then the reverse command before finding a take off lever. Steering was at least easy, two parallel vertical sticks for each hand. Turning it right turned the ship to the right too. She flew it high enough to skim over the rooftops, through an energy barrier and stop it there. The directional levers didn't allow her to go down safely. She hit the radio button by mistake.

"...Fugitives at large. One adult alien female, slim and lean, light pink skin, brown hair. Long and close range armament, do not confront. Report to authorities only.

One teenaged minor alien female, slim and petite, pink skin, dark blue hair. Close range armament, confront with extreme caution.

One adult alien male, easily identified by a scar and bloodshot eye. Long range arm..."

Jessie pressed the same button, "yeah yeah. One of these days we'll find a competent doc." Then she chose the other button next to it. Finally the ship lowered a little to land on a high rooftop. She sighed a little in relief that it didn't cross the barrier again. "Okay now, hurry hurry." A quick glance through the window and she saw people filing out of the building where she came from, all of them looking her way. "Really hurry."

A light tapping on the hull from the outside got her full attention. Jessie glanced down at a little screen to find James and Sandi waiting outside by the door. It took her two seconds too long to find the button she wanted. "What's the password?"

"Um, long flowing black cardy that gets shorter at the front?" James said hesitantly.

Sandi blinked rapidly while thinking about it. "Black leather boots with a two inch heel?"

"Hmm. I'm not that short and black's a safe colour," Jessie mused to herself. "But okay, close enough." She opened the door allowing the pair to hurry inside.

"I knew I should've gone with the light blue," James said as he joined her at the front.

Jessie looked at him like he was crazy, "on a long cardy? You really do like living on the edge."

"Yeah but I get props for choosing clothes as the password, right?" James asked with a smile.

Jessie nodded, smirking back. "We don't have long anyway. They're already suspicious."

"Your bad flying wasn't enough to convince them this landing here was a mistake?" Sandi questioned. Jessie looked shocked, miming the word what. Sandi ignored it for now, "damn my stupid brother for running off again. And it looks like your sister is the same, at least I'm assuming she's your sister."

"Lena?" James questioned in Jessie's direction, she grimly shook her head. He looked around in worry. "She should've been here long before us."

Jessie winced, "maybe we need some more *bad* driving to bind our time. It's not like we can really defend ourselves if they come for us."

Kevin hurried after Lena, his eyes wide and his tone frantic, "you're kidding? You want to go into the Games Matrix willingly? With a ship and not via a Game."

"Yeah, so what?" Lena answered impatiently.

Kevin thought to grab her arm to stop her, flashbacks of her punches stopped him. "It's hella dangerous in there, especially for us if you don't know what you're doing. Bringing a ship in will only put a bigger target on your back."

"Oh, it's dangerous is it? I didn't notice from all the fleeing into the nearest Games we were doing. I kinda sleptwalked through most of it," Lena said sarcastically. "Come on, they're waiting for us."

After clearing yet another alleyway she looked up to watch the skyline. Something caught her eye. "There!" They hurried to the left towards a building that looked like a hotel.

"Uh, not a good idea," Kevin warned.

Lena shushed him and ran in anyway. The reception area had a big screen showing the wanted adverts again. Most of the people there were typically distracted by it to notice her slip straight into a stairwell, sprinting up them as soon as she was out of sight. Kevin followed her exactly. A few tourists pointed but didn't dare say anything or stop them.

It didn't take long for them to reach the top floor, forcing them to stop and look for roof access. "No, no, damn it," Lena grunted when she didn't see it. "We can't get out this way."

Kevin smiled on spotting a window, but it was more than that to him. It was an escape and a chance to impress. "We can. Watch and learn gorgeous."

Lena watched in disgust as he made his way over to it. "Oh, you're gonna hurl yourself out of the window? Damn, if you need a hand let me know."

"No, thanks?" Kevin's smile struggled to keep its structural integrity. He opened the window to climb out and stand on the ledge. Winking at her all the while. Lena groaned and looked away, that was when she spotted the fire escape down the corridor. She left him to it.

Lena climbed into Ship as Kevin arrived on the roof, he ran over huffing and panting before the door shut. Once he got in he was greeted by his sister, and a slap across the back of the head.

"The day you listen to me, I'll throw you a stripper party," she said.

"You don't mean that," Kevin pouted.

"Try me," Sandi smiled sneakily.

Lena cringed. "That's not creepy at all."

"Who's flying this bucket? I'm taking over," Kevin said, overtaking her to get to the front of the ship.

"What? No," Lena complained.

Sandi hurried after him, "let him have this one. It's his only talent."

"That burns sis," Kevin sighed. He stepped into the cockpit, raring to go. James looked around so he spotted him first. "Woah," he recoiled at first glance. "How did I miss *you*, a bit drastic of a look man."

James stared at him blankly, then over his shoulder at Sandi. "My translator's broken. Can you translate dipshit for me?"

Sandi looked on apologetically. "I've never been fluent. He's a pilot though so I'd recommend he takes over. It'll keep him busy."

Jessie swivelled her chair around to get out of it. Seeing her, Kevin was suddenly a lot more eager to takeover than before and was by her side before she lifted her body up. "Hey sweetheart, if you want we can both sit there."

"Seriously? Is there a second test all pilots must take, like an Insufferable Overcompensation Prat final where you must get an A+ to get your pilot's licence?" Jessie snapped. She turned the chair the other way to escape from him, taking her new place at the furthest station.

"Ouch. You have all the fun ladies," Kevin snickered, passing a glance back towards James. Even the darker look on his face didn't wipe the smile off his own, he took the pilot's seat with little care. "So why so grumpy, mate?"

"Kevin, don't make them regret saving you," Sandi said.

"Too late," all three said.

Jessie checked out the window again to see a few people rushing to other ships in the shipyard. "Uh, time to get out of here."

James walked over to take the last remaining station near the back of the cockpit. "Take us up, I'll scan for any subspace signatures."

A few of the ships started to take off. "Do we have any weapons on this thing?" Lena asked, keeping a close eye on them. Their ship started to lift as well.

"Nothing, only shields," Jessie answered.

"Um I hate to be a buzzkill but there's no Game Cubes around, maybe we should've waited for one before doing this," Sandi said.

James typed away to the left of the console, occasionally stopping to look at the sensors on his right. Lena noticed his frustration before the annoyed grunt, she quickly hurried over to his side. "I'll scan, you do your thing," she said. James glanced up at her gratefully, then turned his full attention to his work on the left.

"We won't need one. If this place is a game hotspot..." James started to explain. Weapons fire interrupted him, Ship trembled a few times. His station bleeped much to his relief. "We'll be able to open a door."

"There," Lena said, pointing at the sensor monitor. James briefly glanced at it then worked quickly on the left. "Sending you the co-ordinates, one track mind."

Kevin swung his chair slightly to the right, arming his so called charming smile. "It's Kevin bab..." Sandi grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to turn his chair back to the front. "Okay, later. Got them, setting a course. I'll try to shake 'em."

Their vessel lurched to the right, its nose pointed up, it headed into the sky. Many different types of ships followed it, firing varying weapons at them. As it flew upwards, Ship evaded them with on the spot corkscrews and ridiculously sharp twists to one side. Inside the ship Lena had to resort to sharing

the seat with her brother and cling onto the station to avoid another near spill to the floor. Sandi had in her own tumble pulled the back of Kevin's chair clean off, and decided to stay on the floor until he was done. Jessie meanwhile was very thankful she hadn't ate in a while, what with her stomach doing the same motions as the ship.

"Hold us still for one damn second," James snapped.

Kevin huffed about it, "you're lucky I'm such an easy going fella." He changed his current maneuver to flying straight up.

James had to laugh, "he's funny, I'll give him that." He tapped one final command as Kevin turned his head to object.

Ship's deflector brightly shone for a moment, then it fired a beam into the sky. It seemed to hit nothing yet the clouds churned. They turned from an already deep blue into a mixture of blues and reds.

"It's working, a portal's opening," Lena said.

"Okay I gotta admit, that's a neat trick," Kevin grinned.

"Courtesy of the Softmicron themselves. Let's do this," Lena smiled.

Ship flew in an almost vertical line into the portal when it turned mostly red. A few of its pursuers decided they didn't want to chance it and tried to get away, only they couldn't. The pull of the portal brought them to a stop first.

As soon as they entered Ship trembled viciously, it felt like it was occasionally driving over speedbumps as well. Kevin held one of the steering columns still, hoping that would do the trick as his other hand reached over to the speed lever and slow them down. The rumbling did calm down slightly, allowing him and the others to breathe a sigh of relief. Then he looked up to see the extremely tight red and blue corridor straight ahead of them.

"Turn us around. We need to close it before we get company," Jessie said.

"Easier said than done, but sure," Kevin said, trying badly to keep up his bravado. It failed and sounded more like a whimper. He turned the ship around sharply, firmly gritting his teeth as he hoped for the best.

Once the ship was turned around James fired the deflector once more. One pursuing ship was barely peeking through a red rimmed black hole in the tunnel. The beam zipped it shut, returning it to the same state as the rest of the corridor. What little of the ship they could see before disappeared in a barrage of flames.

"We need to get out of this section. They'll have definitely noticed this," Lena said.

Sandi nodded as she stood back up. Her legs were a still wobbly after the evasive maneuvers. "Before you do, kill as much power as you can. Bare minimum. We'll need to find somewhere lowkey to stop and change the shields."

"No argument here. We're probably lit up like a Christmas pudding," James said. Kevin and Sandi looked at him with confused frowns, then Kevin sniggered thinking he was nuts.

Jessie meanwhile shuddered, "oh god, we never did find out what Neelix put in that damn thing. No food should smell like feet."

Kevin and Sandi shared a wide eyed expression as the lights in the ship turned off, most of the panels on the stations as well. Kevin grew even more worried as his navigating monitor was taken off too, all he had was the window in front of him. Reluctantly he turned the ship around to fly through the corridor, carefully and slowly.

It didn't take him long to slouch back in his seat, one hand on the steering, the other arm lay coolly on the armrest. Ship flew along occasionally drifting side to side. He noticed Jessie looking at him, her contempt for him invisible to his eyes, and promptly waved his free arm and nodded. She pretended to chuckle, pressed a hand across her chest and look away.

James watched from afar, a blank look on his face. He turned around to step into the back room, missing the pretend swoon turn into a tricorder throwing into Kevin's smug face.

"Ow, what a tease," Kevin groaned.

"We must be nearly there. The path's getting narrower, the energy here looks calmer," Sandi said, eyeing the gentle mostly blue light shining through the window.

Kevin looked over his shoulder at his sister, bumping his fist against his chest. "Trust me, I got this. The perfect spot is up ahead." He turned back in time to stop the ship's brief veer to the left.

"Good, we can figure out a search plan while our defences are sorted," Lena said, her attention drifted up to the window. "Hopefully."

Ship hovered in a dead end, narrow corridor. All of its lights, including warp and impulse drives' were out. Not that it hid them any better. Anything in the bright clashing colours of the corridor stood out.

At least the crew didn't have to worry about not seeing anything with all but few of the lights off. The window allowed for all of the bizarre lights from outside to get in.

Sandi stood by James' station, pointing at certain parts of it. He sometimes keyed things in after she did. "I'm not sure how many of our tricks will work in a ship. Hiding lifesign readings and using the protect signal at the last second can only go so far," she murmured.

"The protect signal, is that what you use to survive lost games?" James asked.

Sandi frowned down at him, "you've never heard that term? It was one of the first things our watcher taught us, right after duck sometimes."

"Sorry, the only watcher I knew was too busy trying to kill me so..." James said. Sandi stared with her eyes so wide they stung a little. He laughed but not at that, "oh yeah, I forgot about that other one I met in here, Lena's. You could give him a ruler and he'd still be unable to give you a straight answer."

In the back room of the ship Jessie and Lena were having a look around to see what they could use, but mainly to get away from Kevin.

"What are the odds of two pairs of Human Slayers running into each other, huh? Must be a sign," Kevin said with a wink.

It didn't work.

Jessie and Lena shared a disgusted glance. "I think I need to hit him harder, what do you think?" Lena asked.

"Nah, it never worked on Tom. Maybe we should hit him at the same time," Jessie replied.

Kevin though found that amusing. "Maybe lighten up sometime. You've been around Mr Doom and One Eye for too long. You'll find me much more fun."

"Eew, you're implying that you're a replacement for my own brother so you're hitting on me? What's wrong with you?" Lena snapped. She pushed him out of her way to return to the other room, not apologetic at all about leaving Jessie alone with him. She on the other hand looked more annoyed than betrayed.

"To be fair, not all Slayers are related to each other, and they don't look anything alike. How was I supposed to know?" Kevin said, shaking her outburst off. "You though, what's your story? How did you end up with the grump twins?"

Jessie smiled, seeing her chance, "James is my fiancé."

Kevin only looked disappointed for a fraction of a second. Shock took over and not for the reason she hoped, "I don't believe it. How the hell is he allowed to marry when I had a watcher chaperone my last date?"

Jessie struggled not to laugh in his face. She didn't know why she was even trying. "So many jokes, so little time."

"You're messing with me, right?" Kevin smiled slyly. "No way a guy like that gets a hottie like you. Is it the scar?"

"If you're not allowed to date, what the hell are you trying to do here?" Jessie asked whilst pulling another face at him.

"Do you see any old farts here?" Kevin replied with a grin.

Jessie rolled her eyes, "no, but I do see a desperate little boy about to get a punch in the eye."

James stepped down into the back room to join them only he stopped to look around. "Have you seen anything that looks like a wrench or spanner back here?"

"Actually yes," Jessie said while staring dangerously at Kevin. She turned away to go over to a bench, on it a little toolbox.

Kevin made sure to get there first so he could pick it up and hand it over to her. "There you go, pretty lady. At least I don't expect my women to slave for me."

"Oh thank you kind sir," Jessie said through gritted teeth, before promptly walloping him with the whole box. It was enough to get him to back off for a few minutes so he could rub and cradle his sore chin.

James couldn't help but laugh as she walked over to hand it to him. "Here I was worried when Lena walked in calling him a pervert."

"Oh so this was a ruse?" Jessie asked, pointing to the box. "Please, him being a run of the mill Natural Slayer just means I'm able to use more force if he tries anything." Kevin looked over in dismay.

"Uh huh maybe I should be worried but for different reasons," James smirked.

Kevin hurried back over, "hey, hey. That hurt."

"Well I sure didn't do it to tickle you," Jessie said flatly.

"Nuh uh, calling me a mere Natural Slayer. I'm thee king baby," Kevin boasted.

James looked at him with his eyebrow slowly raising. "King of the Braindead Morons?" He tutted but more towards himself, he walked away shaking his head, "damn it, that was lame. I can do so much better than that but it's just so not worth it."

Jessie's lips threatened to curl as she watched him. Kevin's offended expression didn't help either. "Maybe you should try that *I'm the Chosen* chat up line with girls who aren't already engaged to one. Okay?" she said in a patronising kiddy tone.

"Ha, him? Good one," Kevin laughed. He walked off to go back to the cockpit leaving the pair judging him behind his back. "Any idiot knows there's only two at a time."

"Two what at a time?" Sandi murmured, deeply engrossed in her work.

Kevin pointed his thumb back at the door he walked through. "The older woman is playing hard to get so much, it's no longer funny..."

"Oh snap, did he call me the older woman?" they both heard Jessie grumble.

"Yes he did, and he also said your hair was stupid!" Lena shouted back.

Kevin panicked and pressed the button next to the door to shut it. Sandi sniggered quietly. "It's not an insult. This one's a teen, older doesn't always mean old."

"He called you a cradle snatcher!" Lena yelled.

"Please stop," Kevin stuttered. Lena shook her head and smiled. "She's making up some rubbish about Scar back there being a Chosen."

"That's playing hard to get? Sounds more like *stay the hell away, I have a mace and not afraid to use it to me,*" Sandi said.

Kevin hand waved it off. "It's ridiculous, I bet he's bigged himself up to impress her. So sad."

"Yeah you are," Lena sighed.

"You don't have to try to get rid of the competition sweetie. You already made a lasting first impression," Kevin smirked at her.

Lena shuddered visibly, it could even be heard from Sandi's position. "Wink and I'll toss you outside," Lena hissed.

"Seconded," Sandi muttered. Kevin stared at her slack-jawed. "We've been over this Kev. So much time's passed, the odds are win the lottery and get struck by lightning twice narrow, but it isn't impossible. Now, can I concentrate on the shield mods without you mentally humping everything?"

"Um, what's not impossible?" Lena asked.

Sandi swivelled the chair around so they were facing one another. "Four Slayers from Earth in one place at the same time. Unless things have drastically gone down the pan, that's not a thing that happens. Sometimes generations can go by without any Alpha Quadrant Slayers at all."

Kevin laughed genuinely for a few seconds, thoughts running through his head turned it into nervous laughter. "Hang on," he stammered. Sandi glanced over her shoulder to look at him. "Are you actually suggesting that him." He pointed at Lena who wasn't impressed by it, "her. Us too? I didn't know that was possible."

"Why not?" Sandi shrugged. "Usually we don't last long enough to co-exist with the next lot. Why would Jessie lie about it? She's perfectly capable of rejecting you on her own."

Kevin stared blankly. Finally after a few seconds he smirked and shook his head. "Nah!" He stomped off back to the helm.

"What are you guys talking about? I followed two pairs of Human Slayers being rare, but after that..." Lena questioned.

Sandi looked downcast toward the console again. "We need to get the shields modified so they can run at low power at a moment's notice. Though if we're gonna be here a while we should probably keep them on fulltime. Here the Game radiation's pretty benign but if we go in deeper it'll get pretty rough."

"Game radiation?" Lena said, sounding a little startled. She looked at the console she was sitting at. "All I'm picking up is the power surges occasionally in the walls."

"Yeah you have to know what it is to look for it. It's not something the watchers teach you. You know the charged atmosphere around a loss site?" Sandi answered. Lena shook her head, she'd seen what happens but never was close enough. The closest she'd been was the one Damien and his minions chased her from. Too far away to notice anything. "Things can get a little foggy if you're exposed too long. Kevin and I have gotten into the routine of dodging the worst of it, changing our route tends to keep us away from most trouble. It's never a good idea to stay here too long anyway, but you know that."

"I vote for keeping the shields up all the time. I'm itching to get going," Kevin said.

Lena nodded, "me too. The longer we stay in one spot, the odds of us getting caught go up."

"That's good enough for me," Kevin smiled whilst starting up the engines.

Sandi shook her head, keeping her objections to herself.

Lena turned her attention to the sensors, hoping for anything, even a smidgen of metal that would hint to Voyager or Enterprise's presence. At the top corner of the panel the numbers 2513 were displayed which made her think it was the time on the ship, until the fourth number went up three times in the seconds she kept her eye on it. The rest of the panel were a few levers and buttons, and the large monitor showing their position inside a narrow corridor, which itself was surrounded by nothing but noise. The only thing that changed while she watched it was the ship's icon moving along the tunnel.

"So your brother said it's two ships we're looking for, right?" Sandi asked.

"Mmmhmm," Lena barely answered, nodding her head slightly.

"Let's hope they're still here," Kevin said.

The remark slapped Lena in the face, bringing her attention back to inside the ship. "What, why wouldn't they be?"

"*Time has no meaning in the Games Matrix,*" Sandi said as if she were quoting someone else's words. Lena looked across at her. "If there's anything the watchers love doing more than anything else, it's being vague."

"Hear hear," Kevin said, the second word over the top of Lena's station complaining about something. He glanced around curiously.

Lena focused on the monitor, which showed the corridor ahead veering left a little. Then the perspective rotated around from top down to side view, showing the path splitting downward. Unlike the corridor they were in and what lay ahead, this downhill path looked to be massively wide. A brief finger slide in that direction on the screen showed it expanding further into a pit too big to fit on the monitor. That wasn't what was setting her console off. The narrow corridor ahead contained many dots, flashing at her.

"All stop," she ordered.

Kevin shrugged and did as he was told, stopping the ship a little too suddenly for everyone else's liking.

"Was that really necessary?" Sandi moaned, having been an inch away from headbutting her own console.

"Actually yes," Lena wasn't too keen on admitting. Kevin smiling was exactly what she wanted to avoid. James and Jessie hurried through the door to join them. "I'm not sure exactly what but the sensors are picking up energy signatures. Lots of them. Various sizes. Could be people, could be ships."

"As usual that didn't take long," James commented.

Lena shook her head, "there's another way, but I don't like the look of that either. It's massive, probably a Game loading area..." It got Sandi's attention enough for her to go over and look as well. Lena tried to get the computer to look into the wider path, but all she got was a bit more of an idea of the scope of the place. "Sensors are struggling to get through, I think. Or it could be empty. Difficult to say."

"Kevin, turn us slightly so we're facing this wider path," Sandi said.

"Sure," Kevin said reluctantly. He carefully dipped the steering controls with one hand, while lightly tapping a button nearby it. The view ahead barely changed, yet they could feel the ship moving. Eventually they noticed the amount of red seemed to be increasing slowly until he finished the maneuver, then all they could see was red. He swallowed a large lump in his throat, while Sandi felt blood drain from her cheeks.

"Let me guess," Lena muttered.

Sandi nodded grimly, "we're not going that way. How many energy signatures are there?" She tried to look for herself but the sight ahead was difficult to tear her eyes away from, the fear of what could be lurking in there made her want to keep a close eye on it.

"Why not? Our ships disappeared into a mostly red portal, we went through one. Considering the amount of Game and Softmicron activity, large open red places are exactly where we need to look," James said.

"There's a good reason for that," Kevin remarked. He span his chair around to smirk in his direction, "it's okay. Leave it to the experts, mate."

"I wasn't asking for your best creep women out chat up lines," James said plainly.

Kevin pretended that didn't annoy him by keeping his smug smirk planted on. "Only a hard headed psychopath would be stupid enough to fly in there. Suits you to a tee."

Lena rolled her eyes, Sandi shook her head to hint she should stay out of it. "Fourteen signatures, now. Some converged," Lena said.

"They're manning their ships. They've spotted us. We need to make a decision quick," Sandi said.

"Yeah um, I vote for the no people path personally," Jessie said.

Lena and Sandi shared a worried look. As they did so they missed Kevin hurtling by them, still fixed to his chair until it hit something and toppled over. He ended up face first on the floor. They heard that though and looked towards the source, missing James take over the controls for the ship.

"Kevin, stop playing around!" Sandi scolded her brother before she had even finished turning her head. She looked a little apologetic when she saw him buried under his own chair. "What?"

Jessie sighed knowing full well what happened, as their vessel once more started up.

"Wait," Sandi objected and lurched forward.

"He doesn't know," Lena said whilst putting her arm out. She hurried forward to the helm in her place. The ship trembled slightly, putting her off momentarily.

Sandi glanced down at the sensor readings, their signal having already entered the mouth of the much wider path. Jessie meanwhile noticed the fourteen energy signals moving out in their direction from where they were.

"James, Sandi says the mostly red areas are dangerous. We'll have to take our chance with the possible Softmicron in the other corridor," Lena said.

James hesitated briefly, then continued what he was doing. "They'll have already called for re-enforcements. We need to get ahead of them."

"Dangerous how?" Jessie asked.

Kevin pushed the chair off him and got up in a hurry, huffing and puffing with an angry scowl on his face. It didn't suit him at all so Jessie and Sandi were only amused by it. He marched over to the pair at the helm with his fists clenched. "Hey, you think you're funny pulling my chair like that? How old are you, ten?" He was even more annoyed when James ignored him completely. "Face me properly, *tough guy*. Oh, you can't."

James' eyes drifted toward his sister, she struggled not to laugh, instead she hid it behind her hand. "I'll keep us to the *shallows*, it's calmer here. We can get away with flying in a straight line for a while," he said, letting go of the steering controls.

"We really can't risk sticking around here too long. The next exit, we go," Lena said.

"I knew it, all talk and glares," Kevin gloated, aggressively putting a hand on James' shoulder.

Both Jessie and Lena winced in advance. James' shoulders tensed, swung around to swiftly deliver a punch to the face. Kevin ended up back on the floor, once more nursing his face.

"For god's sake," Lena groaned.

Sandi crouched down by her brother to help him up, her face frozen in shock. Once he was back on his feet she pulled him backward a few steps.

"I'm all right, he got me by surprise," Kevin said, waving his hand. His face looked determined as he stomped forward to put himself back in the thick of it. "Look. I've travelled the Games Matrix most of my adult life. This is my *town*. If you want to survive it, you have to listen to me." Sandi coughed as a hint. "Us."

"Isn't that cute? He's pretending to be useful. I thought you were only here to waste space and humiliate yourself," James said.

Kevin's jaw quivered, "me? I'm wasting space? What have you done but overcompensate with your gun and swinging fists. We get it, you're a man. Congrats on that really, but you're not the only one now. Time for us to share, no need to show off."

"Oh god, really?" Jessie sniggered.

James stared at Kevin blankly for a short time before laughing in his face. "The hypocrisy is so off the charts, the machine's on fire."

Kevin though wasn't put off, he smirked and folded his arms. "Oooh, he's clever with words too. What a catch."

"Oh enough!" Lena spat at them. "You're both overgrown kids. You pushed his chair over," she directed toward James, then turned her head towards Kevin. "You flipped out as if he took your *man card*. Also *psychopathic hard head*?" It was James' turn again, "way to prove his point."

"To be fair, you hit me too," Kevin protested.

"I'm not done!" Lena snapped in a higher pitch than usual, pointing a glare his way. "Jessie and I are never going to make out with you. Don't touch people you don't know when they're already tense." The next sentence she directed seemingly to the whole room, "both ways were risky. Lastly," she said, glancing toward James for the big finish. "You don't decide for all of us. Don't ever do that again."

"Fine," James said with indifference.

Kevin huffed about it though, "I'm sure I got more than him. How's that fair?"

"Aaaw, your first and last win," Jessie said in a faked cutesy voice.

Kevin didn't seem to notice the fake part though, he smiled at her. "That attitude, I love it. If you ever wanna swap him for a real Slayer then I'm..." He got an elbow in his side, to his surprise it was his sister who did it.

"Keep it in your pants while it's still attached," she said.

"Oookay? Nice to have options you know," Kevin pouted.

Jessie turned up her nose and shook her head.

"He's going to get us all killed," Kevin said in a hushed voice to his sister.

Sandi didn't understand why he was doing it. She stood directly behind him, leaning against the wall. Their new teammates had gone into the back to catalogue what they could use as weapons or even tools, as well as food, while things were mostly quiet outside. Sandi didn't like it, she had spent far too long avoiding areas in the Games Matrix like the one they were in. A Game could arrive at any moment as well, they had to keep their wits about them.

"Don't fret about that. There's two of us if it comes down to it," Sandi said softly. "Try not to provoke him in the meantime."

"I didn't," Kevin whined.

"Weren't you listening before? If a dog is baring its teeth and growling at you, would you poke it in the face or pet it on the head?" Sandi said.

Kevin smiled cheekily at her, "what kind of dog is it?"

Sandi rolled her eyes whilst caressing her forehead, "it doesn't matter, neither are a good idea."

"Oh," Kevin chuckled, glancing over his shoulder to check if they were still alone. "A Yorkshire Terrier, got you."

"Kevin," Sandi scolded him, temporarily killing his buzz. "He's, no both of them are not like us. He's unstable, she's young and reckless. Like you were, just less... um," she trailed off, thinking of a nicer way to say it.

"Friendly?" Kevin suggested.

Sandi's scowl made him think he was close, "on heat."

Kevin chuckled, "are we done with the Slayers are dogs metaphor?"

"Now I am yes," Sandi smirked.

"Pfft," Kevin scoffed. "Slayer training's sure gone down the toilet since our day. Our watchers would've locked us up if we did what he's doing. Shacking up, pretending to be a badass anti hero."

Sandi's smirk faded away into a serious frown, "he didn't have a watcher apparently." Kevin stared at her in horror, with a touch of jealousy she noticed. "That would explain it."

Jessie re-entered the cockpit holding a flat piece of metal, with a few cups and what looked like muffin sized purple marshmallows settled on it. Sensing the tone of their conversation she remained quiet, opting to sit down at the sensors station and keep the makeshift tray in her lap.

"No, it only raises further questions," Kevin whispered back.

Jessie's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but kept her head down and watched the sensors. On it a tiny dot ahead of the ship's symbol caught her eye.

"One question. It doesn't matter, we only really have to worry if the eyes go red. It doesn't matter who's right, we're gonna have a bad time if that happens," Sandi said.

Kevin winced, "oh come on sis. We didn't spend *that* much time in here. And Humans being picked, again? That's crazy talk. He's probably half way there, that's why he got the drop on me." Jessie frowned, her eyes drifted upward toward them again.

"And Lena?" Sandi questioned teasingly.

"I fell from a building, a tap would've done it," Kevin stammered nervously. Sandi judged him with a head shake. "Hey, I'm not arguing that they're not at all. I like that she's a tough cookie, it's..."

"Creepy," Sandi pulled a face.

"Nuh uh, what's creepy is the Chosen wannabe Natural Slayer marrying himself to a normal woman. The wedding night's gonna be hella awkward," Kevin chuckled.

Jessie tried her best to remain quiet, opting to biting her lip firmly. Nothing worked, "what exactly are you doing with the women you manage to brainwash?" Kevin leaped out of his chair, squeaking a little. Sandi laughed quietly to herself. "Oh right, nothing but drool over them. I can't believe I'm missing out on that."

"Hey," Kevin objected once he recovered, for the most part. "I'm not... I mean, I'm not a brute. That's the difference. I can be with women, all kinds of women. Which I have."

"It's okay," Jessie said a little too sweetly. Kevin already learned not to let his guard down to that. "You just proved to me that you don't know what you're talking about, which is embarrassing for you cos talk's all you got."

Kevin's face turned bright red, "I... this is only making you hotter to me, stop."

Jessie groaned in disgust, she raised the tray to roughly place it on the console. "What why? Because I'm apparently Slayer approved and tested? You sick freak."

"Knowing him, probably," Sandi said apologetically. Jessie stared at her with her jaw dropping. "But he meant the comebacks and attitude."

"Don't you ever wonder if he was swapped at birth?" Jessie asked.

Sandi walked over to her so she could pick up a glass and one of the odd muffin things. "All the time. I'm sorry, he's lonely... but that's no excuse."

Jessie looked away, once more noticing the white dot on the scanners now closer than before. It made her feel a little panicky, "crap, all of this I forgot." Sandi looked down, silently asking what with her curious expression. "Sensors are picking up something, dead ahead."

Sandi and Kevin looked to the front window, not that there was anything different about the view ahead. It was still red and stormy looking.

"Low energy reading, metallic," Jessie said as she read her station. "I don't know, we'll see it soon enough."

"Slow us down, Kev," Sandi ordered.

Kevin nodded, "yeah, we don't want to bump into it." He did as was told.

All three kept a close eye straight ahead, Jessie occasionally glanced down to check the sensors. While they did James and Lena returned, Lena munching on the purple things with a grimace.

Kevin saw it first, a faint sliver of light flash once amongst the clouds. Jessie looked down once more, it looked like they were almost on top of it. "There, stop," she said. As Kevin did so the others saw the second flash, this one slightly brighter than the last. The ship slowed to a stop, the light source grew more into focus. Three out of five of them recognised the shape of it.

"What is that?" Sandi asked.

Lena smiled and hurried forward to take the only spare station. "It's a probe," she mumbled with her mouth full. Once it was swallowed she began tapping on the station, "one of ours."

"Its power reserves are almost dry," Jessie said, reading the data she was now getting. James hovered behind her, then leaned on the back of her chair so he could see it too.

"So that means they were here? Great," Kevin mumbled a little fearfully.

"Is it still moving?" Sandi asked, squinting her eyes at the object.

James briefly glanced up and back again, "hope so, then we can figure out what direction it was going, and maybe where it came from."

"You mean which ship? What does it matter?" Kevin asked.

James ignored that to watch the sensors carefully, focusing on the white dot. Jessie worked meanwhile, occasionally looking at it.

"We'd better take it with us. When you're done," Lena said.

"Yeah, it'll have some useful info on it," James mumbled while tracing his finger away from the dot, diagonally in a straight line upwards and left.

Sandi bit her lip, "if we can find it and figure out where its been and its course, then others will be able to too."

James flinched, Jessie looked up at him in concern. He straightened back up to head over to Lena's station. "Should be good to go."

"I'll relay our new course to you," Jessie muttered in Kevin's direction.

Lena hesitated, "problem. I can't find a tractor beam on this thing. No transporters either. We can't destroy it. How are we going to get it onboard to turn it off?"

Kevin swivelled his chair around a little too eagerly, something his sister scolded him for with just a stare. He ignored it for now. "I found what looked like a spacesuit in one of the cupboards."

"Ohno," Sandi chuckled nervously. "I have no idea if we're even safe in the ship while flying around in this junk. Going out there, you know what'll happen."

"Yeah," Kevin said as if she said something stupid. "That's why I suggested a spacesuit, duh." He smirked and laughed while looking around at everyone.

"We could have a look at it. I wouldn't rule it out," Lena said. Sandi looked on in dismay. "Yeah it could be a simple spacesuit for space walks, but it could be like ours; designed to protect its user from certain types of radiation."

"Yes exactly, spacesuit, space walks. This isn't space," Sandi stuttered impatiently.

Kevin patted her arm, getting her full attention. "Sis, you said it yourself. If we leave this thing here we'd be leaving a breadcrumb trail for any nasties that won't be happy we're here. What choice do we have?"

Sandi's shoulders and resolve fell, he was right. It was even more frustrating since he rarely ever was. "All right. The question is, who goes?"

"Well, our strongest and brightest of course. That thing is quite big and looks complicated," Kevin replied with a chirpy smile.

"So that's Kevin excluded right away," Jessie said.

Kevin smirked at her, "and you sweetcheeks." His smile fell away, not because his comment cued two glares his way from the usual suspects, but he mostly figured out what Jessie's insult likely meant. "Hey, I thought of the spacesuit. I'm clever."

"You didn't recognise it as one of our probes. It's down to me or James," Lena said. She looked at her brother, her eyes slightly narrowed as if daring him to immediately volunteer.

He smiled at her briefly while putting his right hand behind his back. "Rock, Paper, Scissors?" he suggested.

Lena's eyes narrowed further, but this time in jest. "You're on." She also put one arm behind her back. When one hand came out flat and the other with two fingers pointed out, Lena quickly stuttered, "best two out of three?"

Covered head to toe in a black spacesuit that looked half an inch thick, making it difficult to maneuver in, James collected the gun he always used and an alien looking rifle. Fortunately the gloves weren't as bad as the rest of the suit so he was able to grasp both of them normally.

Kevin stepped into the back room, a smile broke onto his face. He couldn't help it, a laugh escaped him which he tried to stop. It sounded a bit strange as well as brief. It obviously didn't go unnoticed as James turned his head towards him, while Jessie briefly scowled at him before returning her attention to the not yet put on helmet.

"What was that supposed to be?" she asked.

"I was cheering," Kevin replied. He bumped his fist upward, "go team."

James absentmindedly reached for a thicker part of the suit on his arm that was digging in. Jessie noticed it in her peripheral and batted the hand away, earning a bemused look from him and a quiet snort from Kevin. "Maybe I should get it in a bigger size," James said lightly.

Jessie smiled and tried not to laugh as well, "any bigger and you won't fit through the door."

"Oh god you're killing me," Kevin snickered.

"That is tempting, I must admit," James said in the same joking tone as before. Kevin though had a feeling he meant it too.

Jessie finished adjusting the settings on the tiny panel at the front of the helmet, then handed it over to him. James quickly juggled the alien rifle into the fold of his arm so he could take it. Jessie shook her head and snatched the rifle, then the gun off him, tutting all the while.

"Before he puts it on, he's got a little smudge there," Kevin smirked, gesturing his thumb at his own cheek. Of course the comment earned blank stares almost in unison, which he found equally funny. "What, if I walked in ten minutes earlier I'd have seen you helping him put his pants on right?"

"Oh Kevin, you'd actually be a little funny if you ignored the need to explain your own jokes," Jessie said while turning head back towards James.

"I don't know, I think he's funnier when he does," he commented before putting on the helmet. It clicked in many places which told him it was on properly. Jessie still fussed over him to make sure it was. "Jess it's fine, I'm not going into space. We've walked in this place many times."

Jessie's good mood fizzled away to nothing. Once done she gave the helmet a little slap. "So it's ok when you do it, huh?" she said whilst handing the alien rifle to him first.

"Do what? Explain my jokes?" James frowned, reaching out for the gun as well.

Jessie kept a firm hold of it and made no effort to pass it. "No. If this was me, you'd be double checking every inch of this thing too."

"You kidding? He'd take your place. Probably rigged his game with Lena too. Any excuse to show off," Kevin scoffed.

"Yeah, I bet I'll look like a right badass clinging onto this ship in my Lego spacesuit, tugging a probe in by some rope," James said.

Jessie smiled as she put the gun down to one side. She got in the way before James could grab it. "That's a point, you'll only have one hand spare."

"Really? If something comes, am I supposed to throw the probe at them?" James asked with a slight smile.

Kevin folded his arms, "the thought occurs this entire mission counts on some one eyed short fuse. Maybe Lena had the right idea."

"We can't hang around here any longer. I'll have to do," James sighed.

"Don't let her hear you say it like that," Jessie smirked. "Good luck. And don't you dare do anything James like."

James shrugged but because of the suit no one could tell. "I'll try not to kill the probe, promise."

"But throwing it at people or a ship is still on the cards, right? I'd pay to see that," Kevin said seriously. "How heavy are these things?"

"I guess I'll find out," James said on route to the door leading outside.

Jessie looked on with worry, she moved away to join Kevin at the door to the cockpit. "I don't have to tell you," she said.

"I'll be careful," James nodded while attaching the rifle to a mechanised clip on the back of the suit.

"You better," Jessie said, turning to leave.

Kevin walked out before her. He kept going until he was at the helm, while Jessie stopped at the panel beside the door. It took only a couple of taps to seal it. Sandi waited for her nod of confirmation before she unsealed the exterior door. Lights flashed on the panel beside it, so James knew it was safe to open it. He couldn't shake off the feeling that he'd need a weapon with him, so he snatched it from the table at the last second.

Ship had been lowered as far as it could safely go, at least in Kevin's opinion. It was still almost three metres from the ground, so he knew he couldn't fall or go down there voluntarily or he'd endanger the others, if they tried to rescue him anyway.

He reached down to make sure the boots were magnetised before taking a first step. They were, but he only took the one so he could shut the door behind him. He turned around completely to get a decent grip on the hull with only the one hand. Then he began the climb up.

Jessie walked over to Sandi's station, her shoulders so tense they were beginning to ache. Sandi passed her a look of sympathy, then pointed at the station opposite her. Jessie glanced over to find Lena sitting there, her arms folded in a sulk. They couldn't help but laugh quietly.

"Come on. You didn't want to do this. The suit would have ate you alive," Jessie giggled.

"So? It would've been fun," Lena said.

Jessie shook her head in disbelief, "you two have a funny definition of fun."

"And you think I'd care about looking scruffy during a probe retrieval. I wasn't gonna judge," Lena grumbled.

"I wouldn't call it scruffy. It's..." Jessie said, trailing off to think of a better word. "Cumbersome. James was having difficulty moving in it."

Kevin snorted again and sniggered, "he did look like a black Hulk. Only the temper was reversed."

Sandi rolled her eyes, "don't say stuff like that Kev."

"What? I think he should always wear it. At least I'll hear him coming, and then..." Kevin chuckled. He stuck one finger out in front of him and pretended to push something. "Aaah, thud!"

"I take it back. He's still not funny," Jessie said. The station below beeped a few times. She and Sandi glanced down at it. They immediately saw what it was complaining about. Multiple flashes of light approaching their ship's symbol. "Ohno."

Sandi shared her concerns, even if it paled in comparison to hers. "Fourteen signatures coming straight for us."

Lena's attention darted to her abruptly, "fourteen?"

"You mean those ships in the other corridor? They've already caught up?" Kevin stammered. He looked back, "how long does it take for that idiot to put on a spacesuit?"

Jessie scowled at him viciously, he whimpered and turned forward again to avoid it. "It was your idea!"

"With this red crap clogging the sensors we weren't going to see them coming until it was too late," Lena muttered. "How long have we got?"

"They'll be on top of us in ten minutes at their current speed," Sandi replied.

Jessie leaned over the console to get a better look, "where is he?"

Sandi swivelled the chair to the left to work on a different part. It took her a few seconds to get an answer, "lifesign reading is on top of us. He should have it any second. It's the pulling it in that'll vary. It's not like we all weight lift with probes in training. No way to know if it's in his strength range or not."

"The suit didn't have a comm device in it," Jessie said impatiently. Her fists clenched against the console, "we can't leave him out there when they arrive, but we can't tell him to come back either. What the hell do we do?"

Lena's eyes drifted to the door behind her, her mind raced to think of something.

"There is a one on the exterior door. We used it to persuade you to let us in," Sandi reminded everyone.

Jessie hurried over to the front where Kevin sat and immediately started to look around for the familiar button or lever. A little screen nearby which displayed nothing but red jogged her memory, a few buttons were below it. "It's one of these," she said, her finger already reaching out to try them all.

Now standing on top of the ship, James looked over his shoulder, lingering there for a minute. Since nothing looked out of the ordinary, in the strange Games Matrix anyway, he reached for the rifle's clip on his back, unlocked it and brought it around to his front. A little switch was all it took to light up green and hum. He looked up and ahead of him towards the probe floating, listing to one side a small ship length away, its only light weakly flickering now and then.

The rifle lifted up and pointed directly at it, it beeped slowly. Its pace quickened as he drifted it to one side. He had mostly gotten used to adjusting his aim so it would look slightly off target to him, but this wasn't his weapon, or a weapon at all. At least if he missed with that he could normally still deal with whatever he was aiming for; a second attempt or the old fashioned way of knocking something out. This, if he missed he'd have to try again, and they very likely didn't have time for that.

He should've let Lena go instead of him, he thought again. Pushing his silent berating of his stubbornness aside for now he once more tried to lock on. It shouldn't be that hard, the probe was large and close enough. As long as he hit some part of it, there was a decent chance of success. The rifle did finally beep continuously, so he pressed the trigger. A three pronged hook shot out of its tip, still attached to the rifle with a thick metallic wire. The hook slammed into the deeper section of the probe at its stern, he felt the rifle tug forward as it embedded in its hull.

That was the easy part. First he gently tugged on the wire to check if it was sturdy enough for the task ahead. Then a gentle pull as a test. There was a lot more resistance than he hoped, the probe didn't look like it budged an inch, although he heard metal groaning. As it did voices rang out from below, he only just managed to hear it, it distracted him for a moment. Holding very still he looked around to figure out where it was coming from. When he didn't see anything he quickly checked the rifle's tiny screen. The green light told him it was okay to keep going.

As he crouched down carefully the red clouds behind him and the ship fluctuated in multiple places silently. Then he heard the voices again. Without the probe's groaning, it was a lot clearer. At least he could distinguish who's voice it was, not what they were saying. "Jess?" He tried but he couldn't make out what she was saying. The door was too far away, and the Matrix's so called white noise drowned out a lot of her voice. The helmet didn't help either.

James decided to at least get the line secure first. The tricky part was finding something on Ship itself that would work.

"He can't hear us," Kevin said. He noticed Jessie nervously bite her lip behind her fist, now white from the nerves. "The probe's hooked, he has the boots. We can move, slowly of course. It might help with the towing."

Jessie's slow glance down at him was the first clue that his suggestion wasn't what she wanted to hear. The back of the head slap was the second.

"Moving slowly isn't going to help us here. We'd have to leave now and at full speed to get ahead," Sandi said, staring down at the sensors. "I'm not even sure if these things are ships. The signatures are tiny. Probably why it was harder to pick them up on the sensors."

Jessie tried again to get James' attention, she shouted as loud as she could. Kevin looked on apologetic as her voice grew more desperate. They still got no answer. She seemed to give up, that was until she turned on her heel to go the door. Since he was watching her Kevin noticed it first, and quickly tried to grab her arm to pull her back. "You crazy? You can't go out there."

"Of course I can. I've done it enough times," Jessie snapped as she tried to pull her arm away from him.

"Not at these levels, I'm sure. Otherwise..." Kevin said, pulling a look of disgust for no reason she could see.

Sandi blurted out an, "ohno," that cut him off. The two looked across at her. "Lena."

Jessie and Kevin focused their attention on where Lena was sitting earlier, and now she wasn't. Kevin found himself laughing very nervously, "she wouldn't. Would she? Jessie yes, but Lena knows the dangers."

Sandi's face fell, "if that was you out there, I would," she whispered.

The rifle lay discarded beside James. The thick wire originally attached to it had been deeply embedded into a protruding piece of the ship's hull via a hook similar to the one in the probe, forced in brutally. He kept a hold of it despite checking to see if it was secure many times.

He had turned around slightly and crouched down to get a better look and access to what he was working on, the probe sat on his right side, leaving his left completely blind for the few seconds it took.

James heard it first. Tiny ships emerged from the depths, only just big enough to fit one person, fast and disorganised. Several whizzed past in all manner of directions, some ahead, some to the left and above. Most opened fire on the ship as well as the probe, while a few were content to dive at the stricken ship. James narrowly avoided getting one of the latter in his face already by being crouched, but he ducked further down anyway instinctively.

He was a little relieved he was stubborn enough to bring his weapon, which though he had left on the hull further back where he had stopped to seize the probe. Another one was coming for him, he had just enough time to turn off the magnetisation on the boots with a light tap so he could roll away. Then he scrambled for the gun while keeping ducked down. Once he grabbed it the latest barrage of weapons shook the ship enough to disorient him for a moment.

It annoyed him greatly, so he followed the ship that did it until it slowed to turn around and fire again. He beat it to it though, one shot from a higher setting on the gun sent it spiralling to the ground. Then he swung around to target other slower moving ships, the faster ones too quick and small to get a lock. The one about to dive at the ship was an easier target, so he took that one out similarly to the first.

Unknown to him a couple more were closing in from behind him. A blast of energy from beside him sent it crashing down. James heard that and turned around to see where it came from. His shoulders fell as he saw his sister finish climbing to the top, Sandi's energy weapon darting in another direction beside him. Where she was pointing he noticed the second ship slowing down enough to look like it was landing on their hull. He glanced between them both, divided on what to focus on first.

"Heads u... down rather!" Lena shouted at him, momentarily distracted by a couple of ships above them aiming to fire. Despite her warning him, they both had to back off as one hit struck the roof of the ship, a few feet from them. Sparks flew, fortunately the blast was contained to a narrow radius. The damage to the hull was a smoking hole the size of their feet. It reminded the pair of a handheld phaser, not a phaser array on a ship.

A few more shots back and forth seemed to put off the attacking ships from firing, instead some circled around whilst closing in. The rest pulled back to get out of Lena and James' firing range.

The one which landed on the hull slid open, its pilot leapt out in what looked like a bodysuit and helmet, only to be greeted by Lena swinging a kick into his or her face. They ended up rolling down the sloped section of the ship until they grabbed another protruding section. James meanwhile fired on a few of the ships attempting to land.

Lena hurried over to his side, "leave it. We need to get out of here. If they don't cut us off, we'll still be able to tow it."

James looked along the wire up until the probe. A few strikes had left similar holes all over it, but it still looked as active as it was before the attack. He turned back to her, noting the beads of sweat on her forehead. "We'll only lead them to us again if we do. You should get back ins..."

Lena smirked at him in between phaser shots, "no way." A couple ships still managed to land unscathed. "It's much more fun out here."

Inside the remaining crew could only watch part of the battle, unsure what to do. Kevin more so as he was so used to flying around, sitting there and taking it felt so alien to him. They occasionally felt the thuds of the little ships landing on top of them, not that they knew what it was.

Sandi occasionally watched the battle on the sensors. There the dots were indistinguishable to each other, darting around across the field like a mosquito swarm. She did notice a couple finally stood still, right above them. She imagined exactly why they were, but shook it off as stupid. It did allow her to scan them more thoroughly. "I don't think they're Softmicron."

Jessie was about to reply but was interrupted by another blast ringing around the ship. "Oh, good!"

"The lifesign readings differ. They're aliens, of different kinds," Sandi said, ignoring the sarcasm for now.

Kevin looked around over his shoulder, "that's looking on the bright side. They could be demons."

"Demons don't normally use ships," Sandi muttered.

"Hey, have you met all demons? No," Kevin said huffily. Sandi only rolled her eyes in response.

"It doesn't matter who they are. We can't do anything in here. Maybe I should've took that Saucy Tear ship after all," Jessie said.

Kevin burst into dirty sniggers, "saucy what? That sounds like my kinda ship."

"Yeah," Jessie said indifferently. "It looked like a sailing ship; ugly, run down and old fashioned. Suits you."

"Ouch," Kevin said and meant it. He soon recovered though and was back to his normal cheeky self, "I bet it had big honking cannons too. Armed to the teeth. A badass."

"No, it had digital sails to complete the look, which did nothing, and looked to have a top speed of ten miles an hour. So fake, useless and slow, still you," Jessie said.

"Jessie that's enough," Sandi scolded her.

Jessie wasn't put off, "what, I need a distraction what with my fiancé being shot at or probably already down outside." They all heard the telltale sounds of multiple transport beams, several figures appeared dotted around the cockpit. Like the one outside, they were dressed in protective suits. They didn't

seem to be armed though, opting for element of surprise. Jessie though was more annoyed than that, "not that kind of distraction!"

Sandi and Kevin bolted up to confront them, while the intruders lunged for the closest to them. Sandi swiftly took care of two of them, throwing one backwards into the door leaving them embedded in it, and the other knocked flat on his or her back with an uppercut punch to the helmet covered chin. Kevin kicked his chair into his only attacker. During their stumble to regain their footing, Jessie shoved her made up tray into one's stomach hard enough they stumbled into them. They both ended up in a pile on the floor along with the chair. The final intruder took advantage of Jessie's attack to grab her by the throat and push her down onto the console.

"Damn it, hang on," Kevin stuttered, hurrying forward and yet carefully trying to get by the two fallen and blocking his way. One though did grab him by the leg. Sandi was closest and was able to grab them by the suit and harshly pull them back, away from her. Jessie though wasn't about to wait, even though she had little room at first she aimed her knee towards her attacker's crotch. It struck in time before they were out of her knee range, so by the time Sandi had him in directly in front of her he was trying to curl up in a foetal position despite being upright.

"Nice," Kevin still managed to comment while grappling with the intruder on the ground.

Sandi shrugged and dropped the guy to the floor to let him cry it off. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," Jessie croaked as she massaged her now sore throat. "Maybe. Thanks."

"No prob..." Sandi smiled, cut off by the sound of the exterior door in the next room slamming. The two women looked, instantly realising it wasn't the one thrown into the door's fault. They were still there, sliding out involuntarily, clearly unconscious. Sandi pushed them out of their way to get to the door, which even after a few taps at the panel refused to open thanks to the damage. They heard further commotion on the other side, Sandi quickly elbowed the dent halfway through the door, finishing it off into a clean hole. With that she was able to get a decent grip to pry them open.

The first detail they noticed was the exterior door left wide open. Many more of the intruders were caught red handed looting various things from equipment to the purple rations, only a couple noticed they had been spotted. Instead of fighting like Sandi and Jessie expected, they fled back toward the door with their loot. Jessie thought to pursue, while Sandi dealt with what was left. She had barely took a step forward. A loud thud by the door stopped her, but most importantly it stopped the runaways in their tracks.

"I really hope you're not nicking those purple muffins. I liked them," Lena said from the outside step, with a playful glint in her eyes. That disappeared the moment she reached out to force them to side headbutt each other. They collapsed into a combined pile, forcing her to step over them to get in.

All of the noise she made got the rest of the intruders attention. They quickly realised they were blocked in, surrounded by their victims. A few didn't seem to be too keen on trying to fix that, they crept backwards while the rest stubbornly moved forward, determined to fight and flee with their treasure.

Lena acted first, aiming her boot toward the largest of the items the previous pair dropped. The item which looked like a spare part of the ship, wing in shape but much smaller, flew towards the group. They ducked, moved out of the way, some froze. They were distracted enough to allow Jessie and Sandi to get in closer and deal with them.

Meanwhile Kevin straightened up after knocking out the last of his two intruders. He was about to go forward and help the girls, only he heard a loud tapping behind him. It reminded him of someone knocking on a window. He smirked, thinking that was dumb. Still he turned around and got the shock of his life. There was James on the other side of the viewport glass about to knock again, instead he pointed at the helm controls. Kevin stared at him with his jaw locked in a dropped position, blinking much more than usual.

James looked like he was going to go back up to the roof, somebody jumped down on his right to join him. He didn't need to see his face behind the helmet, Kevin knew he rolled his eyes before casually shoving them off the nose of the ship and onto the corridor floor. James once more pointed at the helmet like nothing happened. Kevin nodded slowly. James then climbed back up out of his sight quickly.

"That... that guy is insane," Kevin spluttered as he hurried to his seat. He looked over his shoulder to check if anyone were conscious. Confident they weren't he smirked, "starting to like the nutcase. God damn it." He flipped the switch to reactivate the thrusters.

The fight in the back room wasn't going too well. Too many of the intruders were more interested in escaping, and since their number was far greater than the three of them, some were slipping through the cracks in between fights and making it. A few were already down, yet the number hadn't. Sandi glanced towards both doors briefly whilst pinning one against the wall, suspicious they were still trying to break in.

Lena meanwhile was jumped as she punched yet another down, she only looked mildly annoyed as the alien looked more like they were hugging her from behind. She stamped on their foot and swung them over her shoulder. The loud slapping sound made anyone who saw why it happened wince.

One who snatched a red box saw an opening between Lena after that, and Jessie who was busy pushing another runaway into the counter. They ran, but the latter saw them easily. Jessie sighed, "this always used to work on me at school, let's see," she then kicked her foot forward to one of theirs, catching it. They lost their balance and fell face first onto the floor.

They felt the ship rock a little, putting everyone off. Lena scowled after her initial shock, "what are you doing?" She charged for the cockpit.

Taking advantage of the brief lull in the fight, one of the aliens lunged for a dropped weapon; Lena's retractable spear. Jessie tried to stop them by stepping on it. Another approached behind her, the ship chose then to lurch harshly upwards, throwing all three of them to the ground.

Both Jessie and the one behind her tried to crawl for the spear rolling away, the initial person who tried had already been tossed into the wall. Jessie managed to grab it a mere second before her attacker, she promptly pulled it towards her knowing how close the other wannabe owner was. As she hoped it slammed straight into their bulky helmet. She heard them gasp as it cracked, air shot out of it like a balloon that had been popped. They scrambled back to get back to their feet.

Sandi got a good look at the damage before they covered their face. She looked on in shock and a little pity at what she did manage to see. The face behind the helmet looked scarred, disfigured, a sickly grey. Their eyes white, though she wasn't sure if that was the glare from the broken glass in the visor. The rest of the aliens reacted to her seeing with anger, they lunged for her at the same time. Sandi had time to elbow one behind her in the ribs before she was pounced from her left.

Jessie managed to get up, she heard heavy footsteps approach her from behind. Her thumb pressed the button which unlocked the whole weapon. The blade shot out as she turned around to point it at them, only to get a gun pointed toward her right back by another person in a bulky spacesuit. She barely had the time to react, they fired but not at her. The gun had moved slightly to one side first before it was shot over her shoulder at another attacker.

"Don't!" Sandi had tried to tell them, mid knocking someone else out. Only it was far too late.

Instead of the attacker, the gun's energy blast slammed into a nearby computer which burst into a waterfall of sparks. The blast knocked the attacker to the ground.

Jessie looked around to see for herself, she felt a little relief at that. "So you brought the gun anyway?" she said, lightly scolding.

James removed the helmet and tossed it to one side, intentionally knocking someone else out from the impact. "Yeah I feel terrible," he said.

"He's still out there, what are you doing?" Lena shouted at poor Kevin over his shoulder.

Kevin's shoulders slumped in temporary defeat. He turned to her with a look of disbelief on his face. "He told me to."

Lena sighed impatiently. She wasn't surprised in the slightest. "Can you get around these idiots?"

"Please," Kevin smirked at her proudly. "In my sleep."

"Fine. We'll tow the probe and shut it off somewhe..." Lena trailed off as a shadow rapidly cast over the entire cockpit. Whatever it was began to gently shake the ship.

"Woah, what's that?" Kevin stuttered.

Two ships flew by the screen quickly, one was struck by an orange beam sending it hurtling down in flames.

Lena was momentarily transfixed by it all. She shook it off to hurry to the station with the sensors. Even just doing that took the energy she had left in her away.

Sandi double checked on all of their now unconscious intruders to get to James and Jessie, a quizzical look on her face. "I don't get it. What the hell happened out there?"

James shook his head as he shut the exterior door, "that answer remains to be seen."

Jessie rotated the spear so it was standing vertically in front of her. "Isn't it obvious? We've just been mugged."

"That's the only part I do get," Sandi said. She gestured upwards while the ship continued to shake, they could hear the weapon blasts outside. Her hand moved toward the downed intruder with the broken helmet, then finally back at the cockpit. "Seriously. Those people had teleporters, these guys seemingly don't. I can hear weapons fire outside. How many groups are mugging us exactly?"

Transporter beams rang out once more. Sandi could only groan in frustration. James jumped at it, aiming his fist as he turned. The central figure now standing behind him in a white spacesuit instantly raised their hands in a panicked surrender pose. "Woah, watch where you're aiming that thing." The voice was more than familiar, it caught James completely off guard and he froze on the spot.

Jessie laughed in disbelief, "Tom?"

Sure enough Tom's voice chuckled in return, "you guys want to tell me why you were half inching my probe?"

James shook off his earlier shock, "fixing your mess, as usual. What else?"

Sandi stepped forward with a tense frown, "you know these guys? I'm guessing this is Voyager?"

"Close," Jessie replied.

"Looks like I'm the one saving *your* ass for once, wise guy," Tom said in a friendly tone. He briefly turned to address the pair behind him whilst opening his visor. "Clean up here. Check if they need medical attention first." They nodded and split up, their targets were the downed aliens. Tom turned back to face the people he did know, for some reason he recoiled a bit. "Jesus, what happened to your face?"

Jessie cringed as she glanced up at James, he meanwhile didn't look too bothered. "That's a long story," she said.

"Good thing I like stories," Tom forced a grin, though he was still freaked out. "It'll have to wait though. Paris to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here. The Matrix Raiders are retreating."

"But..." Tom stuttered, eyeing the aliens. He couldn't help but loudly sigh, "they really are no better than pirates, leaving their people behind. All right, change of plans. The brig for now." The two he came with acknowledged uneasily.

Sandi looked more confused than she was before, especially when the aliens and Tom's teammates were on a mass transported away. "I've spent too much of my life in this place and I've never seen aliens other than the Softmicron picking fights."

Tom was also looking a little puzzled. "That's nice, um..."

"Sandi," she interrupted with.

"Tom, charmed," Tom said hurriedly. "I don't fully know what their deal is. What I do know is they picked a fight with us too, talked big and ran away with their tails between legs in the space of five minutes."

"That sounds familiar," James commented. Tom didn't know what he meant. Jessie had a good idea though, she tried not to laugh. "I guess explaining jokes is sometimes necessary."

Jessie shrugged and smiled at him, then turned her attention back to Tom. "A favour? Is our daughter still in Sickbay?"

"Sure, Danny's been watching her now and then," Tom replied.

"I'm surprised Janeway hasn't tried," James said.

Tom's face fell and lost a little colour. To make him feel worse he spotted Lena slowly step through the broken doors to the cockpit. Judging by her face he figured she already knew, there was little to no expression on her face and she looked exhausted in the eyes, at least to him. Still he tried to choose his words carefully for once. "I think she's a little busy, um... elsewhere."

"What happened?" Lena asked in a hoarse voice.

Tom felt a lump grow in his throat, "you know if I were you, I'd be more worried about us right now. Why don't you come back home and we'll catch up."

None of them liked the sound of that.

As soon as the transport ended, the trio couldn't help but feel the bleakness of the Enterprise. Lights were either on bare minimum, flickering or off completely. They couldn't turn a corner without running into repair crewman buried in wall panels, or rushing around with tool kits. Sandi and Kevin though were shocked for different reasons. Tom recognised the awe in their faces, he used to see it all the time in the ship's better days.

Eventually they reached the Conference Room via the almost pitch black turbolift. A few more familiar faces were already there, sitting waiting for them. Tom took a seat at the head of the table. He knew to avoid looking in Lena's direction as he did, he knew she was scowling in someway. She was the first of the group to take a seat, the closest one.

James and Jessie bee-lined straight for one of the occupied chairs. The occupant smiled brightly at them. "Hey guys, welcome back," Danny said. She gasped once she clasped eyes on James, "oh, someone's come back with a sexy scar. Don't make this harder on me."

James hesitated and took a step back, for more reasons than one. "Yeah erm, maybe I shouldn't."

"James," Jessie said sadly while Danny handed her the bundle in her arms. She was greeted warmly with a gurgle and half smile, hazel eyes stared back at her. Jessie felt guilty when she thought he had the right idea at this moment. "We can go to Sickbay next, then you can."

"I think both Docs will be a tad busy with the raiders for a while. One looked like they were melting," Triah said.

Tom looked on awkwardly, then he noticed Sandi and Kevin were still standing around staring at everything. Kevin was ogling the ship models, his eyes sparkling. "Why don't we sit down, it's been a long day," Tom said.

"No I'm good," Kevin said.

Sandi though managed to snap out of it, she took the nearest empty seat. "I should've expected something like this. I guess. It's a fine ship."

"Yeah, but unfortunately she's had a rough time in here," Tom said sadly. In the corner of his eye Lena folded her arms and looked at him. "Within seconds of our arrival Voyager joined us too. There was barely enough time to move out of the way to avoid a collision. We thought to turn around, fly straight back out, but..."

"You couldn't," Sandi said knowingly.

Tom reluctantly nodded. "It didn't look the same on the other side. That red portal in the sky turned into *miles* of blue/red corridors. The popular assumption was Damien had already locked us in."

"I don't know about that, but once Kev and I stepped into a Game from here in a large open area like this. Since the locals in it were definitely not Human, or any species we knew, we decided against staying behind and go back into the Games Matrix when it ended. Same thing, we ended up in a run of a mill corridor," Sandi explained.

"Makes sense. I doubt they'd want people they want to die during a game loss to hang about and wait for another one to show up," Lena said.

Sandi didn't look all that convinced. "It wasn't always like that. The protect signal was relatively new to us when we were given it. Our watcher said it hadn't been tested."

"So? If they hadn't made a defence for it yet, how come you got lost in the first place?" Jessie asked.

"How often do Games land on Earth or anywhere in Federation Space nowadays?" Sandi asked back. The question left everyone dumbfounded. "Yeah. We would've been waiting a very long time, if we were given that chance."

Kevin flinched even with his back still on the others and eyes on the models. "They were everywhere," he mumbled.

James looked a little put off, still he had to ask, "what happened, to you and Voyager I mean."

"All we could do really. Look for a Game or a new portal, figure out a way to open our own," Tom replied. "B'Elanna said she was getting somewhere when we found a similar portal. Captain Janeway wanted to scout, go first."

Lena didn't like where this was going, or where she thought it was anyway. She shuffled on her seat uncomfortably.

"We followed them and then, zip, bang!" Tom clapped his hands once.

Kevin finally looked around toward the table then with a bemused expression.

"What was that?" Lena groaned with very little enthusiasm at the former helmsman. He looked at her, expecting a Janeway style expression of judgement on her face, she looked almost bored with her chin nestled in her palm.

"No portal. Gone, zipped closed in our faces," Triah answered for him.

"Our only way out now is Games and we have no way of knowing what'll happen if we fly into one with a ship..." Tom said.

Kevin chuckled to himself, "boom," he whispered.

"In here," Tom finished with a frown pointed in his direction.

Sandi looked a little apologetic, "outside yeah, not recommended. Ships generally as a rule don't come in here. The rules though are different once you're inside, there's no way of knowing."

"It's not like we can land underneath them. It's a little tight and I've only ever see them come upwards anyway," Tom said. "We can't stay here. The ship's too big to navigate most corridors, otherwise we wouldn't be in this red mist place. As you can see we're running on grey mode, emergency systems only. Shields are hogging the majority of our power and we can't keep it up. This area is pretty rough without muggers, the ship isn't happy about being in here."

"What do you mean?" James asked.

"That's the thing, I'm not sure. Our engineering team compares the redder parts to a sponge. Our power slowly whittles away. At first we didn't notice it, then a couple minor systems went down. It's doing the same to the shields," Tom answered.

"We were lucky though," Danny cut in. "While we lost a couple replicators and Ian's hairdryer, Voyager was losing stuff like gravity and deflector control. Most of it was on lower decks. Apparently the bio neural gel packs were taking a real beating."

"That'll explain why those dudes didn't do anymore teleporting after looting us," Kevin said with a smile. Lena glanced at him with what he thought was disdain, but she was merely confused.

"Ian's hairdryer?" Jessie smirked at Danny. She winked at her, suddenly Jessie regretted bringing it up again and didn't want to know how that was considered rude. "It also explains why they were stealing from us at all."

Tom nodded firmly, "and here I was thinking they only did it to be dramatic, or to allow us to swoop in and ironically rescue you instead of you, us." He coughed nervously as everyone looked at him oddly. "That's not what happened. So yeah like I said, it's not Voyager we should be worried about. B'Elanna was the only one other than Harry that had any idea how Damien's weapon worked."

"Actually that's not true," James said. "We only got in here by opening a portal of our own."

Tom couldn't help but smile broadly, "in that case, what are we waiting for? Triah tell the bridge to grab their ship and the probe, then set a course back to the portal's co-ords. I dunno about everyone else but I'm in an awful rush to get out of this hellish place before lunchtime. I don't know how much ration salad or sandwiches I can take. It took a whole day to sleep off that last one."

Sandi and Kevin shared a worried look with one another.

TO BE CONTINUED