

## **Episode 5.18**

### **Parental Advisory**

#### **One Month Ago**

Three alien ships shot out of a brief flash of light. One by one they glided through the empty region of space. The ship leading the pack shone brightly, then vanished. Its followers stopped abruptly, the one at the rear maneuvered around to the other's side to avoid a collision.

The two ships stayed there for a while, not even moving an inch from where they stopped.

Finally one of the ships moved forward steadily. It vanished seconds later leaving only one ship left.

Instead of following the others, the final ship eventually turned tail and shot off to where it came.

#### **Present Day**

"It's there."

The tall man couldn't turn his eyes away from what he was seeing. Until now there were stars, nebulas, planets. Now there was just an abyss of black in front of their ship. Something about it made the hairs on his arms and neck stand on end.

"The probe came back in one piece?"

"No. It managed to find the vessel before it lost power."

It didn't even look like just a huge empty area of space. It seemed warped to him, unnatural. He couldn't help but smile for a moment. Nothing about this place was natural.

"How are we going to get in there and retrieve them?"

"By any means necessary," the man answered. The rest of his crew looked right at him. They each looked worried, they all knew that he meant it, he would do absolutely anything. He turned to face his crew, the stern look on his face confirmed their fears. "Set a pursuit course, full warp."

Harry pointed at the panel he stood next to, it showed a star chart with a wonky line, almost zig zagging on route to the other side. The point he was gesturing towards seemed to be almost in the middle.

"If there are no more disasters we should get back to the Krralef homeworld in a week," he said with a weak smile.

"Really, all of this to avoid the Enterprise's victims? Seems a bit excessive," Chakotay commented.

B'Elanna glanced down with a grim look on her face, "it's also to avoid the instability the Leda's core breach created. We'd have to drop out of warp to get through it." Harry closed his eyes, dipping his head.

Tom turned his chair so he could fold his arms across the table. "Okay. I hope we can come up with a plan before we get there."

A hand shot up into the air, everyone in the room groaned. "Oooh, oooh... Mr Paris, over here!" the owner of the arm squealed.

"I also hope for respect, but I don't expect it. Moving along," Tom stuttered nervously.

Annika pouted as her arm lowered back to her side. B'Elanna meanwhile gave Annika a dirty look as the ex drone had decided to sit next to her. "Why are you here? You tried to destroy our warp core, again!"

Annika's good mood vanished for the moment, she pouted. "The first time was the Enterprise."

"Oh! In that case..." B'Elanna mockingly said with a fake smile. Annika fell for it anyway and perked up. "Get out."

Annika climbed out of her seat and stomped off in a huff, in an over dramatic way might I add. James made sure to get his foot in her path to make her exit even more silly. Naturally she tripped over it and slammed into the wall. "Owie!" she cried.

Tom tried not to snigger too loudly. "Wow, you don't just have to be strong, you have to be a master ninja to fight vamps."

"Yeah it's a hard job, but someone's gotta do it," James shrugged.

Annika scowled at him while holding her sore head. Her sore head now glittered. The few that didn't know she did that now looked a little weirded out by it. "You're a... you're a..." she stuttered. James stared at her with a smirk on his face. "Bad man!" She stomped off with a smug look on her face.

Tom laughed nervously. "Please tell me now that she's actually supposed to be immortal, that we can kill her off permanently cos you know... irony."

"Why? She's probably the only *funny* material we have left in this series," Harry said.

Chakotay shook his head, his eyes rolled up. "Okay to sum up; we're hoping the Krralef will give us a ship but we don't yet know what to do with it, after barely a week to think about it?"

"Still better than anything you've come up with in recent years," Jessie muttered to herself. Chakotay overheard anyway, he only stared at her.

"It's not that bad. We know that Chosens are immune to the anomaly thingy, so worst case scenario we chuck James on the new ship..." Tom said. James cast a bemused glance his way. "Ship finds Enterprise, tows it back and viola!"

"Who goes back in to rescue him when that ship runs out of power?" B'Elanna asked. "Our other Chosen isn't exactly up to anything at the moment."

Tom smiled meekly, "there's just one of him, surely he doesn't need that much power. Just give him a few sandwiches, one room with air etcetera, and he'll come back with power to spare."

"Wow sounds great, I can't wait. If only we weren't a week or so away," James said sarcastically.

Jessie giggled behind her hand while Tom sulked. Harry sat down beside him. "It's not meant to be your summer vacation you know," Tom said.

"Good thing too, you didn't mention water," James said.

Tom groaned into his hand, "and here I thought he lived off sarcasm and my tears."

Harry smirked at his friend. "We all do, Tom." He got a narrowed eye glare for his trouble. "He does have a point though, the ship won't need much power if there's a small crew. The only issue we have is getting the Enterprise out as well."

"Hmm, I suppose that is a minor flaw in the plan. Why did we ever doubt you?" Jessie said.

"Not you too," Tom complained.

"The Enterprise wasn't too far in. Depending on what ship we get and how much power it needs to sustain at least one person..." Harry said, his eyes began to sparkle. "Although, if we only have one person perhaps we can turn off life support and use the environmental suits instead."

Jessie was giggling again, "how will James eat Tom's infamous sandwiches then?"

"That's it, I give up. You're on your own," Tom grumbled. He climbed out of his chair and walked out in a huff.

Harry laughed nervously, "as I said, it's not that far. The ship should have enough power to tow it back. Simple. All the ship will need is engines and the tractor beam."

"That's great but all you're doing by reducing the ship's systems is giving the anomaly little choice to take from," Chakotay said.

B'Elanna shook her head. "With most systems offline there will be a lot of reserve power. It could either drain that or if it drains the engines, the reserve power can compensate."

"Ok great. Once we're in communications range I'll ask Tira what ship she can lend us," Harry said. "We'll still have nearly two weeks once we have it to figure out the little details. I'd feel better if we could send others on board, but we'd only be making things worse if we did."

"Harry," B'Elanna warned, her head gestured towards the side of the table Chakotay and James were on.

Harry swallowed, or at least tried to, the big lump that appeared in his throat. "I wasn't expecting Ylara to make a miraculous recovery. We'll make do."

"It's all right. She didn't die, that's the important thing," Chakotay said.

James and Jessie shared a worried glance, she gave him a brief nod. His eyes briefly looked towards Chakotay and she winced slightly.

"Okeydoke, let's get back to our posts then. Unless there's anything else," Harry said. He waited but no one said anything else. He did notice James and Jessie's silent conversation but thought better of it. "Dismissed."

Everyone but those two quickly shuffled out of the Conference Room. Once they were gone Jessie sighed in relief. "Thank god, I didn't know how to gesture my next sentence."

"Why, what was it?" James asked.

"He should know before Lena sees him," Jessie answered. She shrugged, "all I could think of was stealthily pointing at him and a mixture of holy crap signals."

James laughed at the image, but he thought about what she said first and his smile went away. "Yeah, you're right. He needs to be told delicately."

Jessie's eyes narrowed mockingly, "you're going to get Damien to tell him, aren't you?"

James' smile was already back, "damn, I'm getting predictable."

### **Meanwhile:**

Kiara watched with a sad look on her face as the plate opposite her was just stared at. Her own was half empty by now and had gone cold minutes ago. She put down her fork beside her plate, her face raised up so she could look straight ahead of her.

"Do you not like it?" she said, hoping that was the only reason for the full plate.

As she expected she didn't get an answer or any kind of visual response. Kiara's attention went straight to her companion's eyes, as usual they looked lightyears away from her.

"It's okay, it won't bite. I got it from the replicator," Kiara said with a small smile.

Right on cue Neelix cried out in pain, "ow!" Kiara's eyes widened, but she didn't dare move her head or anything to see what on earth Neelix hurt himself over. To answer the question he muttered to himself, "damn those pancakes are sharp."

She shook her head, once she was done she noticed that there was movement in front of her. She appeared startled to her. "What's the matter? Another vision?"

"No, I heard..." Lena mumbled with her head towards the kitchen. She just caught Neelix sucking a cut on his finger. Her head turned before he started scooping a pancake stack with his bare hands.

Kiara however saw it all, she pulled a disgusted face. "Yeah, the Leola hardens everything up."

Lena looked down at her plate, her hand moved to pick up the fork. "Sorry."

"No it's okay. It took me a while to get used to everything again," Kiara smiled. Lena's eyes drifted up to stare straight ahead of her. Kiara wasn't sure if she was looking at her or just staring ahead again. "Voyager I mean, not eating in general. Though being in the Q cont..." Her head shook angrily, "shut up Kiara."

She was too busy doing that to notice a slight frown on Lena's face. "Why are you here?"

The question felt like a slap in the face, Kiara tried to hide it with another smile. "I dunno, the smell in here always puts me off. Maybe I thought..."

"No," Lena shook her head. Kiara's smile faded away. "Your..." her face turned vacant again for a moment. She grimaced and tried to shake it off. "Q training. I thought... um, it would be a while."

"Oh," Kiara sighed. "I learned enough to come home. Nobody told me though what happened with you and... well, it was a bit of a shock."

"Me and mum you mean," Lena mumbled.

Kiara bit her lip and nodded. "Right of course, I didn't know when it all... Sorry, why don't we talk about something else." Lena just blinked in response. "I haven't told anyone you're back, I assumed you wouldn't want people crowding you, asking questions."

"Craig," Lena said quietly.

"Oh right, well he... he was making things awkward and..." Kiara stuttered.

"James as well," Lena said.

Kiara felt a little relieved, "he already knew, I didn't tell him."

"What about da... Chakotay?" Lena asked.

"Wacko!" a voice laughed from the side of the table.

Kiara glared at the person responsible. "Damien, go away!"

Damien faked a scowl her way as he folded his arms. He decided to sit down in the chair in front of him so she could get a better view of it. Kiara rolled her eyes and turned her head to try and ignore him.

"No he doesn't know," she replied.

"Of course he does, he's been whining about repentance and other crap for months," Damien said, finally letting up his fake scowl.

Kiara stared at him again with her eyes narrowed. He did the same back. "What do you want?"

"Well my own ship would be nice, with a little rabbit farm and not annoying minions," Damien replied.

"That's not..." Kiara said.

Damien hadn't finished though, "some new yoghurt flavours, Mississippi's gotten old fast."

"I meant with us!" Kiara snapped.

Damien chuckled, "I knew that, you're so easy." He turned his attention to Lena. "So, let me know when you're ready for some violent revenge cos I got a juicy of a plan for that crybaby Craig."

"What?" Lena said half hearted.

"No one told you. He was half responsible for your little brain mishap," Damien answered. "I never liked that little weasel. As for the other guy, I can't even remember his name but that's never stopped me before."

"Damien!" Kiara snarled.

Damien jumped, he turned his head back towards her so he could imitate her glare again. "Mini Q, what?"

"My name's Kiara. You should know that considering you tried to kidnap me more than once," Kiara said.

"I don't follow your logic, brat," Damien said, his eyes rolled. He turned back to Lena. "Why is she sitting with you anyway? I thought she hated you."

Lena's eyes fell down to the table. Kiara saw it and felt terrible, her anger grew so she directed it at the right person. "That's not true. Shut your mouth or I'll do it for you again!"

"Yes it is," Damien's mouth curled into a smirk. "Oh she's selfish, can't she see what harm she's doing to everyone around her. She doesn't belong here. Something like that?"

"No, that's what..." Kiara muttered. She stopped when Lena stood up and started to walk away. "No wait!" She hurried to her feet, but Lena had already gone through the door. "Why did you do that!?"

Damien cackled as he reached over to steal some of Lena's food. "I was bored."

Kiara stared at him blankly as he munched on a chip. "Well stop it. She's not your *friend* anymore, Ylara's dead."

To her surprise he didn't seem shocked by that. He just laughed to himself again. "I know." His smug face looked up at hers. "I always know."

"What?" Kiara stuttered, her face turned a little pale. "You knew that was Lena but said all those things to hurt her. That's low even for you."

Damien looked a little offended for a moment. "Hey, I made the effort to remember you were a whiny selfish brat, you should remember what I'm like."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't make you appear outside," Kiara grumbled, pointing towards the window.

Damien smiled as he climbed back to his feet. "Very well." He stepped closer to her, she pulled a face. "I lied." He laughed to himself as he walked away.

"About what?" Kiara yelled after him.

Damien stopped at the door, he turned all the way around. "The girl was forced out of her shell and tossed aside to the wolves." Kiara thought it was her imagination when his smile turned bitter. His voice seemed to crack slightly, proving that it wasn't. "Ironic isn't it?"

"What?" she said as she watched him walk out.

A flash of light behind her made her turn around towards the window. All she could see were the stars streaming by when the ship trembled.

The ship shook again as Tom stumbled out of the turbolift. He grabbed the railing in front of him, just in case.

"Report!"

Harry glanced behind him, he tried to pull himself out of the Captain's chair so he could get back to the neighbouring seat. Another shudder pushed him back.

"An alien ship must have been chasing us at warp nine, they're on our tail and firing on us. They're not responding to any hails," he answered.

"Shields fifty two percent," Jessie added on.

Tom's head swung to one side, with a look of shock on his face. "Already?"

"Their weapons are very similar to the quantum torpedoes we ran out of," Jessie said. Another shudder interrupted her.

"Another reason to get the Enterprise back," Tom commented.

Harry looked over her way as well with worry. "What do you mean they're similar? Similar in power or actually similar?"

Jessie held onto her station as the next hit made the ship shake more violently than before. "Thirty. I mean similar. If I didn't know any better, I'd say we were getting hit by Starfleet weapons."

"Open a channel," Tom quickly said, sweat was starting to build on his forehead.

Harry shook his head, "we still should be able to last longer than this, even with them." He meanwhile got up to rush over to Opps. The occupant there didn't argue, she continued eating her disgusting looking sandwich. He pressed a few of the panels. "Channel open."

Tom breathed in and out deeply to calm himself down a little. "Alien vessel, this is the USS Voyager. We mean you no harm. Stand down or we'll be forced to defend ourselves."

Jessie pulled an awkward face, so did Harry. "How many times did you fire at them?" he asked quietly.

She shrugged, "five, maybe six."

Tom covered his face with both hands. Harry knew to quickly cut them off on their side. "It's okay," he mumbled behind them. When he moved them he continued, "threatening to defend ourselves after a few hits, they'll think we've got better attacks up our sleeves. We do right?"

"Yeah sure, I didn't use our last five photon torpedoes," Jessie said.

Tom gestured to Harry that he wanted the comm back on. He did so. "We are not trespassing in anyone's space, so I assume there's something you want. We're no good to you dead. Stop your attack."

"Never heard that one before," Nathan quietly said to himself.

Harry shook his head. "They're responding. Audio only." Tom gave him a nod.

A cold voice spoke over the comm. *"USS Voyager was it?"*

Tom made his way around the barriers to get to the centre of the bridge. "It is, who are you and why did you attack us?"

*"What happened to your other ship?"* Tom felt like the man was laughing but quietly as he said that.

"Which one?" Jodie asked.

Tom quickly shushed her. "Answer mine first."

This time he definitely heard a laugh. *"You're hardly in any position to be making demands. Your weapon arsenal is pitiful, I expected a lot more."* Tom looked around at everyone on the bridge, they all looked just as worried as he did. *"I didn't mean your flagship anyway, hardly. I meant the one you could barely call a shuttlecraft."*

Harry gripped the side of the opps tightly, his knuckles turned white. He wanted to say something back, but he kept his jaw tightly clenched.

"You've heard of us," Tom said as he began to pace.

*"Of course. I know more than you think."*

"Then why waste time asking us stupid questions?" Jessie asked bitterly. Tom knew better not to try and shush her, doing that to Jodie was risky enough.

*"I could go back to destroying your vessel if you'd prefer."*

Tom couldn't help but sigh in annoyance. "We are more than capable of fighting back. We just hoped you'd listen to reason."

*"Ah yes, the Starfleet way," the man chuckled.* It gave Tom a very cold shudder. He spotted Harry trying to get his attention in the corner of his eye. He gestured to put them on one way again.

"You're not going to believe this," he said. Tom gave him a look that told him to hurry it up. "This is the same ship that left us the warning message while we were pursuing the Enterprise."

Tom's eyes widened, in fact most of the bridge did. He gestured to put the comm back. "What is it you're after?"

*"After? If I was after something, I wouldn't have tried to kill you. Speaking of which..."*

"You wouldn't have stopped either," Tom quickly said. "You thought that beating us in a fight would intimidate us."

*"Hmm, interesting idea. I simply wanted to see if you were more formidable than the other vessel."*

"A test?" Harry said.

Tom stepped forward so he could reach the forward barrier. He leaned on it, gripping it tightly. "Are you talking about the Enterprise? What do you know about it and how do you have some of its weapons?" The man just laughed in response. "Stop playing these games and tell us what you really want from us."

*"The USS Voyager, the sworn enemy of the Softmicron."* Most of the Bridge tensed up. *"I have to admit, I'm a little disappointed. I expected a species that survived an attack on their homeworld to be..."*

"Formidable?" Harry muttered.

*"Smarter. It's almost insulting."*

Jessie rolled her eyes, her finger was instinctively heading for the fire button. As if he sensed it, Tom turned to look at her and shake his head. She was about to ignore him anyway when he mouthed *not yet*.

"You are just wasting both of our time with meaningless insults. If you want to destroy us, go ahead," he said.

There was silence for a minute or two. He expected the rest of the bridge to object or at least stare at him. Everyone were waiting patiently as well as him, Tom assumed they were all on the same page.

Finally the man on the comm spoke again, *"your vessel survived a trip through the cloud. I want to know how."*

Harry frowned, "cloud, what cloud?"

Tom shrugged, "which cloud?"

*"Your flagship hides within it."*

Tom quickly made eye contact with his senior staff briefly before turning back to the viewscreen. The alien vessel looked like it sat right behind Voyager's tail, staring the Bridge crew down. "Why do you keep calling it that?"

*"Why do you avoid so many questions?"*

"I could ask you the same thing. You attacked us, I think you owe us," Tom said.

Again the man laughed. *"You Humans do have a sense of humour after all. I want to know how your ship avoided being drained by the cloud when your flagship didn't."*

"We didn't," Tom replied. "We just escaped before it drained everything. Now answer my questions. How do you know us and the Enterprise? Why do you want to get into the anomaly so badly? Is it why you tried to warn us away?"

Jessie's station beeped, at the same time the alien ship on the screen rose upward and quickly disappeared from view. "They're firing weapons." Everyone clung on as the ship shook a few more times. "We can't keep taking anymore direct hits, we should either go to max warp or slow down so we can evade."

Nathan nodded, "they've overtook and reduced speed. They're staying with us dead ahead." The viewscreen was quickly adjusted to show the back of the alien ship.

"What are you doing? Destroying us will get you nowhere," Tom stuttered.

"They've proved they can keep up with us," Harry whispered. He quickly tapped in something on the station. Nathan frowned when a message started flashing on his own screen.

*"You answered your own question. You have nothing to offer us so the question is, why not?"*

"Because if you want to be inside that thing so badly, you'll need us," Tom quickly improvised. This time everyone did look at him accusingly. He tried to ignore them. The viewscreen meanwhile showed the alien ship getting smaller and quickly, the streaming stars slowed so they were just dots. At the same time he heard an impatient sigh over the comm.

*"You've made a mistake."*

"They've dropped out of warp, they're coming back for us," Nathan said with a head shake. "I know, evasive maneuvers."

"No. You want in, so do we. I have a feeling it's for the same reason. Why don't we instead of fighting pointlessly, share what we both know. I have a feeling we should be on the same side, not against each other."

*"Preposterous!" the man growled. "Your Enterprise clearly knows more than you do. I just assumed the mighty Voyager the Softmicron are afraid of would know many secrets."*

"They're afraid of us for a good reason. Do you really want to find out why?" Tom threatened. He felt Jessie glare into his back. "We have more than that one *thing* going for us," he said to her, but figured the alien would understand too. Jessie calmed down a little and glanced down at her station to work on it.

*"If that is the case, tell me, why are you going back into the cloud you were so eager to escape? Why did you even want to leave it in the first place?"*

"You can't go inside it without hallucinating and losing power. You're certainly not going to steal the Enterprise without getting trapped too," Tom smiled.

*"Why would I want it? I got everything I needed from it already,"* he chuckled.

Tom's smile was immediately wiped off. "So... why?"

*"As I expected, you do not know anything. A shame."*

On the viewscreen a few torpedoes and phaser strikes shot out towards the approaching aliens. They all slammed into the exact same spot on the enemy ship. The shield around the attacked spot fluctuated and wore off.

*"What!?"*

"She took out their warp core," Nathan stuttered in disbelief.

Tom swung around to look at Jessie, he had a smirk on his face. "How did you do that, nice job!"

"Just a hunch. I figured they didn't just take the Enterprise's weapons," Jessie smirked back.

Harry shook his head, resisting a smile for now. "Once we're out of range, take us to warp nine." Nathan only nodded his acknowledgment.

Tom frowned, "but the Enterprise should have had good shields, how did you..." It then occurred to him, "you targeted the ship's warp core." Jessie shrugged and then smiled sweetly. Tom couldn't help but laugh, "what kind of fool would take a warp core shield that never works?"

Nathan quickly keyed in the commands for warp nine. The ship started shaking occasionally again, everyone clutched onto the nearest thing.

"They're still following, shields twelve percent," Jessie reported.

"Almost..." Nathan muttered as he worked. Another shake and everyone on the bridge were jolted forward. "Damn it, they've locked a tractor beam on us."

Jessie shook her head, "shields are gone."

Tom couldn't help but sigh, "proves my point. They never wanted to kill us." The intruder alert signal made his shoulders slump. "Great. Where?"

Harry frowned, he quickly checked the back of his station. "Strange. Two groups, decks eight and nine."

"Why there, there's nothing they'd want on those two decks," Tom pondered. "Nevertheless, inform Security."

"I don't know about that, the weapons storage is on deck nine," Harry said.

Jessie looked a little pale as she glanced across at him. "Where about on deck eight?"

The doors to the Security Office swiftly opened, both James and Craig stepped out to join a large group of officers. They followed the pair down the corridor.

"I don't know, maybe Foster or..." Craig was saying as they left the office. Foster made a squeak. "Stewart could take the lead. Maybe we could call Zare, she keeps complaining that she never gets the *good stuff*."

"I've already called her, she's on her way down," James said.

Craig's shoulders were already slumped, they managed to fall even lower somehow. "You don't want someone like me leading a team, I'll just screw it up."

The group reached a T junction, James pointed one finger down the corridor. A quarter of them split up and went down the way he gestured. Everyone continued on towards the turbolift. They passed a Jeffries tube junction, this time he pointed four fingers towards it. Another quarter split up and went that way.

"Yes I do, and no you won't," he muttered once they reached it. Craig was about to argue again but his arm was grabbed a little too roughly. "Craig, I don't have time for your pity party. Just go, you'll be fine." He raised three fingers at the group and stepped into the turbolift. The remaining group split off to join him. "Besides, I need someone on the team who knows how to duck."

The door closed before Craig could comment on that. He let out a deep sigh. "Fine, second team, you're screwed and with me." He turned completely around to walk down the corridor.

### **Deck Eight:**

Despite his complaints earlier, Foster had found himself leading the group he was with. They each crawled out of the Jeffries tube after one deck of climbing up. They carefully used the corner wall as cover. Foster tried to peep around the corner but he couldn't see anything. A little hand gesture told them it was good to go.

Half way down the corridor he heard footsteps approaching. He quickly raised his rifle, everyone else did. Some of the team backed away to the corner to take cover around it. The footsteps stopped for a moment. Foster and the others still with him gradually moved closer to the walls so they weren't standing in the middle of the corridor. Just in time as they saw a tip of a weapon peep around the corner, only for a second as they were soon attacked by a barrage of brief but plentiful blue phaser blasts. The team at the front started to fire back.

Meanwhile on Deck Nine the team of unknowns were stuck behind a wall, being showered by phaser shots. The one apparently taking the lead looked a little panicked, he tapped his commbadge.

"Chuteme to Stuart. We're pinned, but we can't go further back or the intruders will take the weapon storage," he stuttered.

*"Seriously, your name is shoot me?" James' voice tried not to laugh.*

He wasn't the only one, the people around him were struggling not to laugh too.

The crewmember didn't understand why though, "yes sir."

*"And you haven't been shot yet? All right fine. I was hoping we wouldn't have to, but unleash the secret weapon."*

The entire team looked even more nervous than they did before. The ones still trying to peep around the corner to shoot back were trembling as they did so.

"Oh god. This is how we die," Chuteme stuttered. He tapped his commbadge twice. "Team One here. We're ready." He gestured to the others, "fall back."

As the Security team started to withdraw, the aliens saw their chance to move forward and continue shooting. What they didn't realise was someone was behind them.

"Well hello boys," a familiar voice said in a seductive tone.

They didn't have to turn around to find out who it belonged to. As soon as she spoke, Annika strolled through the group like they weren't even there. Her hair was down and she was wearing a brand new even more revealing catsuit, basically it didn't cover her chest very well. For extra effect she swung her hips and her hair, as well as winking at the men she passed.

The retreating Security team cringed at the horrific screams they heard. Chuteme couldn't help but shudder, he raised his hand. "Now, lets put them out of their misery." The team charged back the way they came, phasers firing. They found most of the aliens didn't just stand there and allow themselves to get shot, a few actually jumped in the way.

Back on Deck Eight, the second team that James lead were exchanging fire. Both sides were holding their ground for the moment.

James turned his head to the only named person on his team, which was Stewart. "Take the lead. Try to keep them here for now, I've got an idea."

"But... we've already deployed Annika," Stewart stuttered. "What more can we do?"

James looked towards a nearby door, then back at him. "There's more than one way to cheat. Cover me." Stewart and two others nodded, they spread out a bit to block the aliens view of them, while continuing to shoot ahead of them. He meanwhile backed through the door slowly.

Once he was through it a few members of the team didn't look too happy about it.

"Is he leaving us here, I thought those guys are supposed to be brave," one commented.

"Yeah, what a wuss," one guy nodded. Suddenly he was shoved to one side, it made him accidentally shoot the nearby wall instead of an alien. "What..."

Stewart quickly side stepped so the person who did it wouldn't do that to him.

"Don't worry, I'll handle this!" the man yelled. He ran forward towards the aliens, without a weapon. Of course he was shot easily, what shocked mostly everyone was that it barely slowed him down. He just stopped briefly to giggle. "Oh yeah, that's the stuff."

"Sid, seriously. Are you that desperate, phaser blasts don't usually hurt," Stewart groaned.

The man just laughed as he continued running, the aliens were freaked out but they kept firing until he was finally down. He passed out with the biggest smile on his face.

That didn't seem to be the end of it. Two of the attacking aliens at the back seemed to have a new target behind them. Before they could fire on whoever it was two of them were pushed into the wall. One of them didn't stand for that and charged forward to fight back, using their phaser as a physical weapon. Only instead it was grabbed at the last second. The man soon found himself flung upside down and on the floor, looking up at his attacker still holding his rifle.

The middle ones only had time to glance behind them before they were thrown into each other, head first. They fell to the floor on top of the other guy, creating a small pile.

"What is happ..." one of the remaining aliens stuttered, also glancing back. They were about to get a fist in their face for their trouble but they were shot by the Security teams first. Finally the last member of the alien team fell to one last phaser blast.

"Oh," Stewart said, briefly wiping the sweat from his brow. The rest of his team slowly walked over to the fallen aliens. James stood in the middle of them, he had to squeeze passed the second pile in front of him to reach them. "How did you..."

James looked a little guilty as he glanced behind him. "Lets just say there's a few holes in the walls to fix."

*"Foster to Stuart. Most of the aliens here have been dealt with..."*

*"You're welcome," Zare's voice said.*

*"Yeah... but the last three retreated and we have no idea which way they went after the T junction."*

"Okay, we'll spread out. Find them," James ordered. Most of his team shook their heads, but they went to follow his orders anyway. "On second thoughts," he muttered as he stepped over to a nearby wall panel. The ones who heard stopped in their tracks. The remaining few who were staying with him watched him bring up a schematic of Voyager. A couple hundred dots appeared all over it. Soon most of them were gone, around ten were left. "Three lifesigns, no commbadge signal in section five. That'll do. Three of you with me, the rest get these guys to the brig."

"They won't fit," Stewart pointed out.

James nodded, he glanced down at the aliens. "Right, uh... contact Shoot Me. If the *weapon* worked, get these aliens to join the ones on Deck Nine. Foster, you do the same. Put a forcefield around them and keep Annika there to guard them."

"Yikes, that's a little harsh," one crewmember stuttered.

James shrugged and walked away without saying another word.

Stewart just smirked, "well, if you can't handle the catsuit, don't invade Voyager. They'll learn the hard way."

### **Meanwhile, Deck Nine:**

Craig's team were still only just walking down a corridor, no aliens were in sight. One of the team members held a tricorder in one hand, phaser in the other, keeping a close eye on the scans.

"None registered lifesigns should be just around the bend," she whispered.

Craig nodded, he lead them as close as possible to the corner. They didn't need a gesture, they knew to hide behind it once they got there. Craig raised his weapon slowly as he made little steps towards the corner. Once he was as far as he could go without giving away he was there, he rushed around the corner, quickly pointing the weapon ahead of him. Five others behind him did the same, they stopped and surrounded him.

All six of them looked on, their eyes darted around. Each one looked puzzled as nobody was there like they thought. The only thing out of the ordinary was a tricorder lying on the ground.

Craig held his hand up as he made his way carefully over to it. They took that as a sign to stay back, so they did.

He knelt down to pick up the tricorder. His shoulders fell as he stared at it. "False lifesign readings. How did they..."

"Sir!" the woman with the tricorder yelled. Her attention seemed to be at the left wall, parallel to where Craig was kneeling.

Craig's head turned to the left, he saw what she saw. An alien device was attached to the wall, the only understandable part about it was the numbers on it counting down.

"Go!" he yelled just as it hit zero-six. His team turned around and ran as fast as they could. Craig had to jump to his feet before he could do so. He barely got as far as the corner when the device hit zero-zero. He threw himself to the ground as a fireball ripped through the wall, as well as the one opposite it.

### **The Bridge:**

Everyone had felt the ship shake as this happened. Tom quickly rushed over to Opps. "What the hell was that?"

"Explosion, Deck Nine, section two," Harry replied.

"Casualties?" Tom dared to ask.

Harry shook his head, "none. The explosion tore open a few new holes, the fire suppression system has already taken care of the rest."

Tom quickly tapped his commbadge, "Bridge to Stuart and Anderson. In case you haven't noticed, these guys are armed with explosives..."

Craig only groaned in response to that. A few of his team returned to help him up, just as a piece of the wall fell down nearby.

*"Please tell me you've gotten some of them at least."*

The team ignored him for now as they lifted Craig up and dragged him to safety.

James meanwhile had one alien against the wall, their arms tightly held across their back. The alien seemed to be laughing despite the pain he was in. The rest of his team were standing over two unconscious ones.

"So I heard," James said as he tapped his commbadge. The alien tried to struggle free as he was held with one arm, it made no difference though. "Deck Eight's secure, there were seven on Deck Nine..."

*"That's probably why they bombed it," Harry's voice commented.*

*"Not Seven, seven aliens," Tom's voice said.*

"When I last checked," James finished what he was saying. He noticed the alien he was holding was laughing. "What's so funny?"

"You'll see soon enough," the alien continued to chuckle.

The few members of James' team who left before he changed his mind, were carefully wandering down a corridor. They heard footsteps behind them, each one swung around but they were shot immediately.

Seven aliens, one of them was the man who seemed to be the leader, marched down towards them. The leader stopped to look at his team. "Get them out of here. Once you've done it, set everything up." One of the men nodded. He stayed behind as the others kept going.

They eventually reached and stopped at a door. The leader pointed to two of his group, one man and a woman, and continued on. Those two stayed behind at the doorway. The rest didn't go very far, only to the next door. The leader nodded at the two he left behind, they nodded back.

A quick tap on the wall panel beside each door, and they opened without any fuss. They charged in, pointing their weapons in front of them.

"Nobody move!" the leader snarled. As he expected he was greeted by screams and panic. To demonstrate he was serious, he pointed the weapon at the first person he saw. He opened fire immediately, the woman was thrown back into the wall as it hit her in the chest.

More screams filled the room, most of the people in it stopped where they were, frozen in fear. Only one ran, she ran straight for a nearby table and hid underneath it.

The rest of the team quickly surrounded everyone inside, they covered every corner and possible exit.

"Oh my god, you can't do this," another woman tried to reason with them. Her arm gestured to the frozen inhabitants around her. "Nobody will let you get away with this!"

The leader smiled coldly. Unlike him, the rest of his group didn't look as confident as they did when they first broke in. Some even looked uncomfortable and shocked.

"That's the beauty of it. They will," the leader cackled.

A different door at the side of the room opened. The one guarding barely even flinched like he expected it. The two from before strode in, but they weren't alone. They had four others in front, their weapons pointed at them as they walked forward.

"Good, we're all here," the leader said. "Now your Mr Paris will have no choice but to take me seriously."

### **The Bridge:**

Jessie frowned as she looked up at the alien vessel on the viewscreen, then she watched Tom pace over to Harry's station.

"What's taking so long? Deck Nine isn't very big," he said.

"Uh Tom," Jessie piped up. Tom looked across at her. "I was looking for a way to disable the tractor beam and I found something strange."

Nathan glanced back as well. "Let me guess, it's a Federation tractor beam."

"Unfortunately no, we could probably get out of that," Jessie said. "While I was scanning I noticed that there's no one there."

Tom's eyes widened, he hurried over to stand at the side of her station. "What do you mean no one?"

"I mean there's no one on the bloody alien ship. Am I not speaking English today?" Jessie snapped. She quickly tried to compose herself. "I think the invasion force was the entire crew, there were definitely lifesigns before they boarded."

Tom was confused to say the least. "Why would they do that? They'd only do that if they wanted to take over Voyager. He said that this ship was a big disappointment to him. It makes no sense."

*"Stuart to Bridge."* Tom quickly went to tap his commbadge without a thought, Jessie however sensed that his voice sounded tense.

"Good news please James," Tom said.

*"I can't."*

Jessie felt her shoulders tense up, she was right. He sounded angry now. Tom knew that as well, he looked worried.

"Why, what's wrong?" he asked.

James was kneeling beside a fallen member of his team, his skin was horribly burnt. Two others were trying to lift him up. James was about to help but they managed without him. He instead looked towards what looked like an orange forcefield to his left.

"The ones on Deck Nine aren't on Nine anymore. They must have got here when the bomb went off," he said.

*"Uh, here is where exactly?"*

Another group of Security officers ran up to them, a few looked panicked. "Lieutenant, Jeffries and Somola are down. A forcefield sprung up out of nowhere..." one said. They noticed the injured man being carried away. "Oh..."

*"What?"*

James' eyes squeezed shut, his fists clenched. "Deck Eight. The other invading teams were a distraction. They had a different target in mind. They've shut us out with forcefields, they've even disabled the transporters on the whole deck."

*"Again, where?"*

James climbed back onto his feet, his stare was still directed at the strange forcefield. He was getting angrier with every passing second. "The nursery."

The entire Bridge turned equally pale. Tom's jaw had dropped.

"Hey, I've got an idea," Jessie grumbled. Nobody dared to look her way, just in case. "How about an evil witch and Slayer double team."

Nathan chuckled nervously. "That'll do it."

Tom trembled as he shook his head. "I'm not panicking, I'm not..." He began pacing again. "Tell your teams to stand their ground for now, you should come to the bridge."

"Best idea ever," Harry said, he didn't mean it. When there was no response, most of the room got even more worried. Jessie more so. "Communications to Deck Eight are down. He's not wrong about the shut us out part. Transporters can't get through, I can't even scan the deck for lifesigns anymore. It looks like they're shutting off power to the other sections."

"What about these forcefields?" Tom asked.

Nathan swung his chair around. "Never mind that, how are they pulling this off? Don't we have computer security?"

Harry didn't know what to tell him. Almost everyone's eyes were on him too. He glanced towards Jessie, she was the only one not looking at him, her attention was on the back part of her station. He continued to work as she did. Within seconds he was kicking himself internally. "The explosion, of course."

"No, no of course. An explosion on Nine shouldn't allow them to gain control of Eight systems and block us out," Tom said.

"It didn't, but it distracted us didn't it," Harry mumbled. "As for the forcefields, they're not ours. At least they don't match any fields I've ever seen."

"Ok ok," Tom stuttered. He wasn't getting any calmer. His pacing quickened. "I assume the aliens had to drop their shields when they beamed aboard. Maybe we can send someone over, investigate their technology."

"Yeah, that's what I was going to..." Jessie muttered.

The comm beeped, at the same time Harry's eyes widened towards his station. *"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the man's voice sneered.* As well as him, the people on the bridge could hear children crying in the background. It didn't help the tense feeling in the room.

"I thought..." Nathan whispered.

Tom briefly looked at him to tell him to be quiet. He stopped his pacing and decided to lean on the banister instead. "If you think this is going to help you, you've got another thing coming. You can't..."

*"I think you'll find I can and it will," the man said. "Perhaps you'll be more willing to answer my questions."*

"Are you really so sick that you'd bring innocent children into this?" Tom said angrily.

*"I wasn't the one that brought them here in the first place," the man said coldly. "Now perhaps I haven't made my intentions clear enough. I'm not just here for a visit, as this young woman would tell you if she wasn't dead. I will kill more if you don't play along, Mr Paris."*

Jessie bit her lip to stop herself from saying something, she did it too hard and it started to bleed. Tom gave her a glance as a silent thank you for holding back for now. "You don't have to kill anyone. I told you what you wanted to know."

The leader walked towards a few of the children, they shuffled away from him as fast as they could. Fortunately he didn't do anything about it, he just smiled. Most of the children were now huddled in one big group at the centre of the room. A few others were spread out near the back.

A lot of his group still didn't look very impressed with their leader, but they didn't dare look him in the eye. He crouched down towards the woman he shot, another was beside her with an angry look on her face.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

She didn't answer him, she just looked down at the woman lying beside her. He leaned in towards her, "I said, what's your name?"

"Jacqueline," she muttered.

The leader smiled, he gestured his head towards the body. "Her?"

*"Just let the children go and we can discuss this civilly. There's no need for this."*

The leader shook his head. He moved his stare back to Jacqueline. "You and the stiff look after the children, right?"

"Her name was Joan!" Jacqueline snapped at him. "And for god's sake, let them go, they're..."

"Shh!" the leader hissed. "Tell me Jacqueline, which of the children is the most irritating?"

Jacqueline stared at him with her jaw threatening to drop, she turned a little pale. "Why... why would you ask that?"

The leader laughed, he looked towards his minions. "Just making conversation." He climbed to his feet, leaving the woman a little shaken. "Now we could talk about what I want now, Paris, but I think I should give you time to calm down first. For now, my ship will tow you where I want to go. Any resistance from your vessel will be quite disastrous." He nodded at one of his people. She reluctantly nodded back and pressed a button on a device in her hands.

*"The alien ship, it's moving. How?" Nathan's voice stuttered.*

*"I don't think I have to ask where we are going," Tom's muttered.*

"No I can't imagine you would," the man said with a smirk. "If you beam anyone to my ship, I'll know about it. Whoever you send will probably not survive to tell the tale either. I'll call you back when you calm down."

He was about to press the nearby panel, but he hesitated. "Oh and in case you haven't noticed, what with your injured Security men and all, your people are not welcome on this deck. The forcefields will expand gradually to cover the entirety of it in five minutes. I suggest you find a way to evacuate. Any attempts to try and mount a rescue, I will pick out the loudest of the children here and... well I think you get the idea."

*"Wait, if you so much as touch any of the kids, we won't help..." Tom's voice said.*

The leader cut him off with one tap. He shook his head in disbelief. "Humans, they're not very smart are they?" he asked his crew. None of them said anything, he then noticed how uncomfortable most of them were. "Is there a problem?"

One of the men stepped forward, "you didn't tell us they would be children."

"Bite your tongue," the leader snapped. He didn't notice during this exchange that one of the children had crawled right up to him. All of the kids saw this, they all looked very worried. "Now, anyone..." He stopped as he felt something bump into his leg and hard as well. He glanced down to find no one there. "What? Who dares!?"

Miral giggled behind her hand briefly, then she put her innocent face on. A lot of the boys couldn't help but groan, the other children looked even more worried than they were before. The remaining teachers who were still conscious glanced around to figure out who that was.

The leader swung around at his crew, none of them looked any of the wiser. He decided to shrug it off for now but his leg still ached, much to his surprise. "Jita, Rhone!" he barked.

His sudden voice raising startled everyone, but the two standing by the side door took that even worse.

"Bring those older children over to the centre of the room with the others. We should keep an eye on them," he ordered.

The pair he barked at glanced down at the three children they had escorted in earlier, then back up a bit at Bryan sitting with them. He looked a little out of place alongside the other three, the longer the pair looked at him the more embarrassed he got.

The two aliens gestured their rifles in the direction of the smaller children. When none of the older children budged, the pair felt a bit desperate as they could feel their leader angrily staring at them.

The man of the group started to panic as he caught sight of the leader's growing anger in the corner of his eye. He raised the rifle as he stepped forward. "Move, now!" he snapped just as he was about to reach out for one of the children's arms. Unfortunately for him he chose Duncan to do that to. He was about to retaliate when Bryan quickly shuffled in their way.

"No, don't. It's okay, we'll move," he stuttered. His head glanced back to Duncan and the two twin girls behind him. As expected he spotted a little disappointment on the other boy's face, he ignored it for now so he could reach forward to pick up one of the girls.

The two aliens didn't object, they were a little relieved as Bryan carried over the two girls and Duncan reluctantly walked over on his own. He looked around for his sisters. He got worried when he only found Sasha sitting with her friend Trinity, at the far back wall.

The leader walked to the centre of the room so he could get a good look at his captives. "I'm going to make this very simple for you all. Your adults forced me to do this, so it's really up to them how this all goes. Keep quiet and stay still, and you may get out of this in one piece. However if any of you try to escape or give us any trouble, we may have another incident like..." he pointed at Joan and Jacqueline. "Questions?"

Nobody said anything, all he heard was some of the children crying quietly or whimpering. Carl raised his hand into the air, Johnathan sitting next to him elbowed him to put it back down.

The two aliens from before re-emerged through the door carrying an unconscious woman upright on their shoulders. They dumped her in the nearby corner.

"Is there anymore you neglected to bring in?" the leader asked them harshly. The woman shook her head, the man had froze as soon as the leader looked at him. "Good. We all know these Humans will attempt a rescue, we'd better be prepared for anything."

### **The Bridge:**

Most of the people there were talking over each other, a lot of them loudly. Harry was trying to calm them down, but he was being drowned out.

Chakotay arrived on the bridge, he couldn't help but roll his eyes at the sight in front of him. "Excuse me!" he tried to get their attention.

"No, we beam over to that ship or damage it and those aliens could do anything," Tom argued.

"So what if we have their ship, they have the kids," Jodie said almost at the same time as him.

Nathan felt like he shrunk an inch or two. "Ok, I was just pointing out that we've got something."

Harry sighed to himself. "We've got more than that, but okay, no one listens to me."

"There's got to be a way. I refuse to help people that think it's okay to do things like this," Jessie said loudly, over the top of Harry.

"Yeah," Harry groaned. He shrugged.

Tom shook his head, he pointed towards her. "I'm surprised at you. You want to risk their lives by doing some daredevil rescue? I knew you were nuts but..."

Jessie grabbed his finger and squeezed it. Naturally Tom squeaked for a second, he tried to stand his ground though. "We don't know if he'll let them go if we help him. We don't know what he wants either. Also..." To Tom's relief she let go of his finger. That quickly faded when she stomped on his foot. "Don't ever point at me!"

"New rule, pregnant people shouldn't be involved in crisis meetings, especially involving kids," Harry said, knowing full damn well no one would hear him.

Chakotay stepped forward, he tried to shake the metal railings around the chairs to get their attention. "I said, excuse me!" He just then spotted the only other person not making any or much noise. With a sigh he moved over to stand beside him, not without briefly looking into his face first.

"What?" was all he got in response.

"Just checking if your eyes are still blue," Chakotay said.

James sighed, his folded arms dropped to his sides. "For now."

"There's no harm in finding out what the idiot's after," Nathan said, overlapping Tom's hurt foot complaints.

Jessie scoffed, "right, no harm. If the moron had been clear from the beginning, instead of playing *oooh I'm creepy* mind games on us, we'd know by now."

Harry continued muttering to himself, "maybe if we didn't fire back at him before the hail..."

"I dunno, the man's obviously a psycho. What he wants can't be good," Jodie said.

"There was no need for that," Tom complained once he was able to stand on his sore foot again.

"Why aren't you joining in on this?" Chakotay asked.

James stared at him with an annoyed look in his eyes. "I'm thinking, that's why."

"Right, I believe that one," Chakotay said. "Why don't you..."

"Just because I tossed you through a wall or two, doesn't mean I'm still as bad as I was. I can think during a crisis like this," James butted in.

Chakotay resisted the smirk trying to appear on his face. "Fine, I'll bite. Think about what?"

"What to have for lunch..." James replied while rolling his eyes. "Jesus, stupid question."

Jessie meanwhile had stomped on Harry's feet, obviously not at the same time, just within a few seconds of each other. He had fell to the floor. "I heard everything you said Kimberly, so you'd better watch your mouth from now on or I'll do the same to it."

"Hmm?" Harry was confused. "Same what?" Jessie glanced down at his feet, his eyes widened and he clambered backwards.

"You just proved his point," Tom whispered. Both Jessie and Jodie scowled at him. His first instinct was to back off out of foot reach. "We need to be calm or we'll never figure this out. We also need to be together in this, not at each other's thr... feet."

Chakotay cleared his throat during the brief silence. The rest of the Bridge finally noticed he was there and glanced at him. "Finally. Now we've got quite a few of these aliens imprisoned on Deck Nine..." James shook his head, Chakotay felt the dread settle over him. "Don't tell me."

"We moved them from that deck just in case the aliens in the nursery could manipulate the forcefield from there," James said. "Also it was a bit cramped."

"So?" Jessie said with a malicious smile.

"So some of them wouldn't get the *nice* view if they were cramped up at the back," James said.

Chakotay couldn't help but laugh. "That reminds me, I must tell Annika that the prisoners are big fans of her dancing." The entire room shuddered at the thought. "Anyway, they do have the advantage of holding the children hostage but we're not weaponless. We can find out a few things from our own prisoners."

"Oh, Annika, torture. I get it," Nathan smiled.

Tom shook his head. "Hey, those assholes kidnapped my kids but even I'm against torturing them with Annika's milkshake dancing. We'd be as bad as them."

"Oh she's got a new dance," Harry said, turning slightly pale. Though that was half because of the pain in his feet. "Apparently it involves hopping and pointing at her bum. Naturally she *improved* it."

"Really!? You haven't annoyed me enough?" Jessie growled at him. Just in case Harry crawled backwards again.

James meanwhile looked a little sick, then again most of the room did. "Ok so Annika can take care of the interrogation, somebody should join her though. Who do we hate?" Chakotay groaned a little too loudly. "Well I can't send Damien, can I?"

"Or can we?" Nathan smirked.

"I'm sure by the time Annika's done dancing, the aliens will have long since surrendered and or committed suicide," Chakotay said.

"Can we please go back to serious?" Tom sighed. Everyone looked at him. "Don't give me that stare. It's not like we're in Season One. Five takes itself way too seriously."

James shook his head. "Fine, but we have to remember that these guys have their fingers in a few places. We can't transport, we can't scan, they seem to control any communications on that deck, and they still have control over their own ship."

Tom looked over to Harry for confirmation, he nodded. "Yeah I thought that was weird too."

"Great, so does that mean we really can't do anything until we hear his demands?" Nathan groaned.

"I didn't say that exactly. We need to find out what they can see and what they can't," James answered.

Tom nodded, "in the meantime, I guess we wait."

Kiara hurried down the corridor, her head darted from side to side with almost every step. She eventually reached the turbolift dead end. With a heavy sigh she stepped inside. "Which one am I on..." she wondered out loud. "Right Seven. Deck Eight."

The computer replied with a harsh beep. *"Unable to comply. Access to Deck Eight is restricted to authorised personnel only."*

"Why?" Kiara frowned.

*"That information is unavailable."*

"Um fine," Kiara sighed impatiently. "Is there anybody there at all?"

*"Unable to comply. That information has been restricted."*

What started out as annoying had gradually changed into confusing, she wasn't quite sure what to do now. "Um, Deck Nine?"

*"Unable to comply. Access to Deck Nine is restricted to authorised personnel only."*

Anger quickly took over, "for god's sake, just take me to the next lower deck that you can." The doors swiftly closed in front of her.

His cheerful whistle as he left his office was brought to a not literal screeching halt. What immediately greeted him in his Sickbay was the sight of Lena staring vacantly in Daniel's direction. He still remained unconscious on the biobed. The Doctor carefully approached her, but thought to still keep a respectable distance so he wouldn't startle her.

"Uh... are you okay?" he asked.

Lena kept her gaze directly forward, she didn't say anything for a short while. "Is he?" she eventually said, very quietly.

"He will be, I'm his Doctor," the Doctor said, smiling slightly. He noticed her head subtly move to the left, only just. "Daniel's not exactly popular at the moment."

"Why?" Lena asked but her voice was plain. It felt to the Doctor that she didn't really want to know.

"Perhaps that's a question for when you're feeling better," he said carefully. "Are you sure you're all right? You don't look well." He didn't wait for an answer, the medical tray was nearby and the tricorder was barely an inch out of reach. One small step to his left was enough.

She didn't answer right away, Lena only stared ahead of her again. The Doctor slowly stepped to one side to pick up the tricorder. It seemed like he wasn't careful enough, her head turned as soon as he did.

"He's here because..." she said, clearly struggling with the words she wanted to say. The Doctor waited for her patiently, although his hand opened the tricorder just to be safe. Her head shook, "I um... shouldn't be here."

"Unless you mean you're well and Sickbay, then that's not true," the Doctor smiled softly. "At least I hope that's what you mean."

"Sorry, I'll go," Lena said, her head dipped. She turned to leave.

The Doctor hurried after her. "No, no, I didn't mean that." Once she reached the door and it opened, Lena seemed to hesitate. "You've been through something traumatic, something not many people can claim to. I really think you should stop being so hard on yourself. Maybe talk to someone."

"What was so traumatic?" Lena mumbled. "I was dead, now I'm not. That's good isn't it?" For a moment the Doctor was pleased she was able to finish a sentence without getting distracted, stuck or whatever the problem was. However it soon faded when he felt no feeling in her voice, almost like she was reading from a script.

"Good, now if only you believed that," he decided to say. He didn't want to sound harsh but it sounded like it was when he heard it. The lack of reaction from Lena though made it hard for him to really be sure. "I remember Jessie having several issues with her resurrection, perhaps she would be..."

"Jessie woke up in her own coffin," Lena interrupted. "She was overwhelmed by all of her powers being awakened at once. Her body had also been dead."

The Doctor paced over to her side so he could see her better. He was about to place a hand on her shoulder, but figured he shouldn't just yet. "So?"

"So anybody would have issues returning like that. I just woke up, no big deal," Lena said, her head slowly fell so she was staring directly at the floor. "Also she wanted..." The Doctor heard her voice crack a little, he decided to put a hand on her shoulder anyway. Before he could do that she said something so quietly it may as well have been mimed. Luckily his programming allowed him to hear it, "to come back." Before he could respond she walked out in a hurry.

"Damn," the Doctor sighed. He couldn't just follow her, he needed to retrieve his mobile emitter first. Half way there he also realised that it would be pointless. She was quick on her feet and she didn't have a commbadge on for him to locate her. By the time he had transferred his program she could be anywhere.

#### **Deck Six:**

The turbolift doors opened. James stepped out to join Craig and Foster, who were waiting just outside it for him. They began walking down the corridor.

"You all right?" James asked after a brief glance Craig's way.

Craig nodded, he didn't look too happy about it. "Sure. Just bruised and stuff."

"Um, we've halved the alien group like you asked but Annika seems to be rather fond of one of the groups," Foster said uncomfortably. He shuddered at the same time as the other two looked at him. "It's giving the Security teams watching them seizures."

"Tell the teams with the other group to swap with them then," James said. Foster and Craig stared at him with judging eyes. He laughed it off nervously, "right, what was I thinking?"

"May as well order them to line up to hit on a pregnant Jessie," Craig commented. He thought about what he said for a moment, then looked at James to see how he reacted to it. He didn't look mad, he seemed to be smirking, so he shrugged it off. "So we're keeping them where exactly? The brig's sort of small, off limits and not on Deck Six."

Foster pointed towards an upcoming door. They stopped outside of it. Craig didn't like what he was seeing when he read the words on the door.

James shrugged, "it was either the Holodeck or the Cargo Bays. It seemed a bit unfair to punish one group more than the other."

"Well it would have worked if the Annika group were the ones not dumped next to Neelix's crops. Hindsight would have been nice," Foster smiled.

He walked through the doors. James was about to follow him when Craig held his arm out in front of him. He stopped in between the doors, keeping them open. "I gotta tell you something," Craig stammered.

"No you don't. Anyone would have fallen for the fake lifesigns trick. I did too, I thought they were on Nine," James said. The worry on Craig's face seemed to be getting worse not better. "It's not your fault. Nobody blames you."

Craig looked down to the floor, his head drifted to the left. "No, not that but er... thanks." He had to force himself to lift his head back up, it seemed heavier than usual. "It's about Le... Ylara." He cringed, especially when he noticed James' eyes twitch for a moment. "Damn it."

"You know about Lena?" James said quietly.

Craig felt a little relief, but it wasn't enough to make him feel better. "Yeah. Kiara told me. I thought you should know..."

"I imagine she won't want everyone crowding around her, so maybe keep it between us three, yeah?" James whispered.

"Even Jessie doesn't know, wow," Craig stuttered in surprise. He shook his head, "that's not what I was going to say. I, I went to see her the other day. I don't know why, it just felt like I was on auto pilot to Kiara's quarters." James started to frown, it made Craig a little concerned about continuing. "I confessed everything. My behaviour over the last two years, my involvement in bringing her back, everything. She... just sat there, I don't know if she heard any of it."

"Craig, I really doubt that she..." James said. "Look, my kids are being held captive by a bunch of aliens and I really badly need to solve this. We can talk about this later, when it's over." He turned to continue through the doors.

Craig quickly grabbed his arm to try and stop him. "She told me something, something important. I don't think I'm the one that should have heard it."

James sighed and turned back to face him. "What, what did she say?"

"Um," Craig hesitated. His shoulders fell. "You're right. Lena's important to you too, I know, but a room full of scared children is far worse. Sorry."

"If I can do anything to help her, I will," James said quietly, briefly glancing behind him. Craig then noticed the alien prisoners were sitting against the hologrid, guarded by a few Security teams. Thankfully the room was Annika-less. "I need to get information from these people first, all right?"

"Yeah but..." Craig stuttered.

"Too late, you've got my attention now," James said. Before he could stop him again, he walked over to the rest of the Security officers. Craig followed him but kept his distance behind him. "I think it's about time we talked about our little problem, don't you?" he said to the aliens.

"You'll never get anything out us," one man piped up. "We are loyal to Shoytin..."

A few of the aliens shuffled around nervously. "Actually, afraid of is more fitting."

The first alien sighed in annoyance, "yes but I was trying to make us seem less pathetic." The second alien rolled her eyes. "There's nothing you can do or say that will intimidate us into betraying him."

"More than Shoytin does anyway," the girl muttered to herself.

"Really?" James said with the look in his eye everyone by now knew meant trouble. He tapped his commbadge. "Stuart to Hansen." Every Security officer there widened their eyes in pure horror.

*"Yes dearie?" Annika cooed. There were people crying in the background and or muttering the word why over and over.*

James resisted a shudder for now. "Carry on, I just need an open comm link with the other *brig* just in case." Everyone and I mean everyone shook their heads timidly at this. A few people thought about running but they weren't sure who they were more scared of, Annika or James.

*"Oh, sure thing. I hope there's no hard feelings for our little spat the other day, hmm. Ahem... now where was I?"*

*"Oh god no," a man's voice cried.*

*"You love big boobs and you cannot lie," Annika "rapped". There were a few screams.*

"Nope, I'd rather be beaten up," one man stuttered, he ran for his life. Some of the other officers were considering that was the better alternative as well.

The aliens looked horrified, they tried to cover their ears but that was never going to work.

*"When a catsuited girl walks in with those round things in your face, you get..."*

"Oh god, fine!" the alien who talked earlier screeched. "I'll tell you everything just please, make her stop!"

By this time half of the Security team were near the door. They stopped, each one hoping that it was over. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when James tapped his commbadge and it was quiet again.

"On one condition," the alien stuttered. James' hand went up to tap again. "No, no you don't understand. If Shoytin discovered that we talked to you, it won't end well for any of us."

"Oh sure, sure we'll keep it between us," James said, clearly mocking him. "While we're at it, why don't we get you some chairs, you look a little uncomfortable. In fact, whatever you want, just name it and we'll get it."

Craig glanced over to a smiling Foster while he only looked worried. All of the aliens but the one who was talking appeared even more nervous than before.

"I get the feeling you're not serious," the talking alien muttered.

James glanced backwards at Foster and Craig, his eyes briefly widened. "Really?" He turned back, "why would you? I don't see why I wouldn't care about the asshole aliens who took a room full of young children hostage. Hang on, let me get you that chair before I go on..."

A lot of the aliens looked a little shocked and or offended. The talking alien was the latter. "Children? Shoytin maybe many things, but he doesn't kidnap children."

James sighed as he walked over to Craig and Foster. "Would it be wrong to torture him with Annika whilst beating him up?"

"Probably, but what would I know," Craig answered. Foster nodded.

"Good," James said as he walked slowly back to the aliens. The Security officers looked worried as he didn't keep a good distance from them, he stood right in front of the one who was talking. "I'll tell you what. Next time this Shoytin calls the Bridge, I'll get him patched through to us and you can ask him yourself." He knelt down in front of him so they were more or less face to face. "I'm assuming he's the kind of leader who'd gladly tell his crew anything, right?"

The man looked scared at even just the thought of talking to his Captain, he shook his head nervously. "You must understand, if he did do this he only did it because we're desperate."

"Desperate for what? This has to be a last resort because threatening to kill children, isn't something you walk away from," James questioned.

"That's probably why he didn't tell us," the woman said quietly. Her head hung in shame. "He always takes full responsibility."

"Oh yeah, the man's a real martyr," another alien remarked. "He didn't tell us because he'd have to kill most of us before we'd help him."

The first man quickly glared at them both, then looked forward again. "Us maybe, that's why we were the distraction. He didn't trust us."

"Great, what does he want?" Craig asked. "It's got to be pretty big and important to do this."

"Marsht," the woman said like a warning.

The first alien sighed. "We're trapped in this sphere, just like you. We're trying to escape."

"If we knew how to escape..." Foster butted in.

"Shoytin knows you're here for your ship," the first alien, Marsht snapped back. "You have no reason to escape just yet."

"What makes him think we know how?" James asked.

Marsht looked down sadly. "We were a fleet of six ships, crewed by thousands."

"That doesn't answer..." Craig started to point out.

"Thanks to anomalies like the dark cloud, we are all that's left," Marsht continued. "Two of our ships were consumed by this cloud within weeks, yet Voyager escapes it unharmed in a matter of hours."

Craig frowned as James climbed to his feet, looking deep in thought. "You said you wanted to escape the sphere. What does the anomaly have to do with that?" Craig asked.

"That, we do not know. Shoytin keeps a lot of things guarded. This is one of them," Marsht replied.

### **Deck Eight:**

"You sure you got them all?" the leader snarled.

Two men nodded. "Yes. We counted thirteen children and four adults. Five if you..." one answered, briefly glancing towards Joan and Jacqueline. "But you probably don't."

"All of them had a communications device, we removed them just in case the Humans manage to fix the problem," the second man answered.

Trinity leaned in a little closer to Sasha. "Why they doing this?"

Sasha shook her head. "Dunno. They're not demons." The leader turned his head towards them, it gave them both a jump. Trinity clutched Sasha's nearest hand tightly.

The leader walked over to them and immediately knelt down in front of them. "What did you say?" Meanwhile on the other side of the room Duncan was tensing up and was threatening to get up. Bryan kept his hand on his arm to tell him to keep still.

"Nothing," Trinity said before shaking her head. Sasha did the same.

"I heard the word demon," the leader said, his cold eyes examined both of them one at a time.

"Why would they say something like that?" the nearby teacher, Grace said. The leader looked over his shoulder. "Think about it. We don't speak the same language as you, we use translators. They're young and likely said a word wrongly that translated to you *demon*."

"What does it matter if they did?" Jacqueline commented from afar. Grace shook her head and mouthed *no*. "A bunch of men and women storm into the nursery holding guns at them. What else would do something that horrible?"

"Really, that doesn't help," Grace said through her gritted teeth.

The leader chuckled to himself as he turned back to the two girls. "At least she's honest, which is more than I can say for everyone else."

"God, someone likes the sound of his own voice," Duncan muttered. It was too late but Bryan tried to cover his mouth. He wasn't done as that led to a lot of muffled words.

The leader straightened back up, his attention was on them now. "No, let him speak. I was getting a little sick of just the crying."

The alien woman monitoring a device heard a small bump, followed by the quietest of squeaks. Her head turned to look down towards the nearby table leg. For only a second she made eye contact with two brown ones peeping out from under it. They disappeared into the shadow of the table.

Duncan looked to Bryan to see if he was going to budge, he got a head shake.

"Fine," the leader said as he turned to make eye contact with everyone in his group. He slowly approached the two nearest to the main door. "You both are still loyal to me, I assume."

"Yes sir," they both replied obediently.

"Several of the crew have issues revolving around my methods. I need someone who agrees with me to take command while I'm communicating with the Humans," the leader said. The pair glanced at one another. "I'll leave who that will be up to you two." They nodded. The leader walked over to the woman holding something other than a weapon. "Status."

"A few extra people entered their *bridge*, they still remain there. There's no activity on both Deck Eight and Nine," she answered.

"So they moved the rest of our crew to a more secure location," the leader said, no surprise was in his voice. "We'll worry about them later." The rest of his crew weren't happy with that comment, but that was only noticeable in their eyes so he didn't see it. "Markal!" An alien man looked startled, he turned his head towards him. "You're with me."

The man followed him towards the teachers' office nearby. All of the aliens seemed to relax a little, even the two loyal ones.

"What do we do, he can't really be serious," the man Rhone whispered to his teammate.

"Shoytin is desperate, so shhh before he hears you," Jita stuttered nervously. Rhone nodded quickly.

Duncan made a little bit more muffled noises, Bryan reluctantly moved his hand away from his mouth. "You're welcome," he whispered.

"Sorry, he was annoying," Duncan said quietly. "Reminded me of Damien."

Bryan couldn't help but snort, he still didn't laugh afterwards, the two nearby him gave him a brief look. "Are we thinking about the same Damien?"

Duncan nodded. "He talks a lot, plus he tries to be edgy and mysterious. He just isn't funny when he does it." Bryan thought about it for a while, he shrugged as he started to see it as well. "He's an over the top prick, and that's being nice."

"You, nice? That's a good one," Bryan smiled.

Duncan's jaw dropped a little, "hey, I can be nice. I just don't get on well with assholes."

"Yeah, but that big gob of yours will get you or maybe someone else killed. Button it, okay," Bryan said, his smile already gone.

He expected to get at least a glare for that, but Duncan just looked to the floor sadly. "Yeah I know, sorry. It's just... dad or mum wouldn't let someone pick on Sasha like that, why should I?"

Sasha glanced briefly towards the two, then at Trinity. Her friend lightly nodded. Sasha leaned forward to start crawling across the floor.

"Don't," Jita whispered. Sasha froze on the spot. "Please just stay in the same place and Shoytin won't get mad, okay. This is for your own good," she said delicately. Sasha slowly sat back where she was.

"Well at least not all of them are jerks, I think," Bryan commented.

"Dunno, I just wish I knew where Amy was hiding," Duncan said as he looked around the room.

Bryan frowned, he looked worried. He did the same thing. "Oh yeah, I don't see her. Maybe she ran out before this all happened."

"Hope so," Duncan said.

The leader apparently named Shoytin had gotten himself comfortable behind the desk. Markal, the alien he demanded accompany him, stood near the door anxiously. Shoytin pulled the nearby computer up the edge, he only had to press one panel to get it to bleep at him.

"Mr Paris," he smiled.

### **The Bridge:**

Tom swung around to look towards Opps, now both Harry and James were at it. Jodie sat nearby with a pout on her face.

"Well?" Tom mouthed. Harry nodded at him. Tom turned back to start to again pace the centre of the Bridge. "It's funny how we're on any name basis as I don't remember any introductions."

*"You are correct, there weren't any. My name is Barili Shoytin, Captain of the Katane. You may call me Shoytin."*

"I could call you many names," Jessie said only in her head. James glanced over as if he heard her, he gave a small reassuring smile that made her think he did. She shook her head.

"How did you know mine?" Tom questioned.

*"Why wouldn't I, former Commander of the USS Enterprise," Shoytin said. "I naively thought you'd want to talk about the safe release of the children and my demands."*

"I do, but I assumed you were taking care of your demands already," Tom said.

*Shoytin chuckled, "partly. I still need to know how you survived the cloud and whatever else you know."*

"You didn't need to do any of this. I already told you. We left before it drained us completely," Tom said.

*"That should have been impossible," Shoytin said coldly.*

Harry's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Hang on, if you know what this *cloud* does and you're still here, surely you're in the same boat as us."

*"We have never been inside it, we had other means of finding this out," Shoytin said impatiently.*

Tom frowned, his arms folded across his chest. "So once again you know something we don't. I think we've proved that we're no use to you, so why keep this up?"

*"Perhaps I have not made myself clear. I know you have something, or know something that helped you out of the cloud. I'm not leaving your Voyager until I have it and have used it. Whether Voyager is dragged back into this cloud with me or not is not my burden. I suggest if you want to avoid that and further fatalities, that you co-operate. I do not understand why you continue to resist."*

"So if you got this imaginary thing you think we have, you'd take it with you and leave?" James questioned. He didn't have to look to know that Jessie was sending him a deadly stare, he didn't dare check anyway.

Tom looked towards Opps as well, his eyes were a little wide. His head shook and he mouthed *no*.

*Shoytin laughed, his voice sounded dark to everyone. "I'd have to make sure it works first, wouldn't I? Also you would not get it back. Don't think you'll be able to trick me by giving me any old thing."*

"Oh I wouldn't want to trick you," James commented. Harry side stepped a few times to get further away from him.

Tom cleared his throat. "No, no we wouldn't dare, not while you have the children. I still don't understand why you think we have something. Surely if we did, we would have retrieved our ship, not left it behind and escaped."

The Bridge was silent for a while, Tom thought for one second that he may have won the argument. A chuckle on the comm made him rethink that. *"Something tells me you have the power to do just that, but you do not know how to wield it. That is why you're going backwards, am I wrong?"*

Tom did the cut him off hand signal, but then cringed when he remembered he didn't have control of it. "You are wrong. We have allies that might help us, but we're not optimistic. Please, it's still not too late. We can work on this together, you obviously know a lot about..."

*"Right. You would work with the man who held your children to ransom. I certainly wouldn't," Shoytin said.*

"We would have if you didn't attack us in the first place. There was no need to be hostile," Harry said.

*"Wasn't there? We caught your Enterprise attacking helpless planets and chased it through various sectors," Shoytin angrily said. "Your Voyager and missing ally were rumoured to be firing on another world. You mean to tell me that you don't deserve any of this."*

"The children are innocent," Tom said. He heard the man laugh again. "I was obviously wrong. You don't know as much as we do or you wouldn't paint us as the villains here."

*"Oh but I do. I've seen planets reduced to nothing but rubble, stars and nebulas in the wrong places. I know where we are Captain and I know you do too. You are the only species I know to survive a Game Sphere, yet here you are, preying on the victims of this one." Everyone on the Bridge were stunned into silence. James' one handed grip on the edge of Opps had almost flattened it. "I assume you think you're putting these people out of their misery. Is that how you live with yourselves?"*

Tom shook his head. He had so much in his head he wanted to reply with, but he didn't know where to start. "We... I..." he sighed to try and stall.

"Wait," Chakotay said before he could continue. "You think we were spared so we could work with the Softmicron?" He got another laugh as a response. "You're out of your mind!"

"What happened to them being afraid of us?" Jessie said.

*"No one would want to challenge the people the Softmicron are afraid of, now would they?"*

Tom had to sit down before he could say anything, his legs were shaking at this point. "Yet you would? I don't really believe you think this. You have technology from our other ship, you know your way around our systems. It wouldn't be hard to look at our data..."

*"Interesting," Shoytin said quietly. "Very interesting."*

Tom could only groan, he was starting to get annoyed with him. "What now?"

*"I'm starting to understand why you were always a second in command, even to a child playing Captain." Tom's eyes were wide again. "Your Enterprise was easy prey but its computers were heavily encrypted. I see Voyager is as well. You seem to keep your secrets hidden well, even at the expense of your precious children."*

"We left that stupid anomaly before it completely drained us, how do you not get that?" Jessie snapped. "Are you really that thick?"

"Jessie shhh," Harry whispered cautiously. He felt a little braver doing so as James was in between him and her.

*Shoytin laughed grimly. "If it were that simple your Enterprise would have left, as would other ships."*

"It wasn't simple. Our crew were hallucinating, one man even tried to turn us around because his dead girlfriend was telling him to," Tom said quickly without really thinking about it. Luckily as he was sitting he missed the Janeway like death glare he was getting from Opps. "We basically had the ship set to auto pilot, we only had to endure an hour or so."

*"Enough," Shoytin sighed. "If that story was true at least one crewmember would have hallucinated something to convince them to disable it. Then they would turn the ship around. If you don't stop lying to me, I'll make an example out of the first child I see crying."*

Tom covered his face with his hand while his elbow leaned on the armrest. "They couldn't. As soon as we figured out what was happening, the helm was locked. Until we were out, no one could alter course. The only lie I came up with was the part about it not being simple, cos it was."

*"Don't try to act smart with me Paris, it doesn't suit you. It is also very dangerous to anger a man holding a gun at a child's head," Shoytin growled.*

"I'm not. I'm telling you what you want to know," Tom said as he pulled himself out of the chair. "We saw the problem, we worked together to fix it, we survived. That's just the Voyager way. It's not something we can give to you so..."

*"Are you trying to convince me that the only way to stop your ship would be the helm? That nobody tried to disable or destroy your engine core, or eject it. That the person who locked the helm didn't just unlock it as his or her hallucination told them to?"*

"There's no talking to you is there? We can't help you, so let the children go and be on your way," Tom said.

### **Deck Eight:**

Shoytin leapt out of his chair and marched back outside to join the others. He scanned the room for a moment before picking his target. The child stared up at him as he approached and knelt down in front of her.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Piss off!" Miral spat at him.

*"Oh god," Tom groaned.*

Shoytin just smiled at her, "hmm, I like you. You can be last." As he climbed back to his feet, Miral reached out to punch him in the leg. He walked away before she could. The look on her face afterwards would terrify demons.

He continued to scan the room, whilst doing so he backed into a nearby table. A tiny squeak from underneath it got his attention. The woman standing nearby looked very concerned, she pretended she didn't hear anything when her leader turned around.

"Sir?" she said.

"Someone under there?" he asked.

The woman frowned, "no sir, I checked." Shoytin stared at her for a while, it made her even more nervous.

*"That's it. If he touches any of the kids, I'm shooting at his ship," Jessie's voice grumbled.*

*"No god, that's the last thing you should do," Tom's panicked.*

Shoytin shook his head as he continued his staring contest with his own crewmember. He eventually nodded at her, allowing the woman to relax. That didn't last as he dropped to his knees very quickly and peeped under the table. As he expected, he was greeted by two very wide and frightened eyes. "You didn't check very well, did you?" he snarled as his hand reached out to grab whoever was there. Everyone heard an ear piercing scream as the tiny figure the eyes belonged to scrambled back out of the way.

"No," Bryan stuttered as Duncan jumped to his feet. Rhone dashed forward to grab him, Jita rushed over as well.

"That scream, you'll definitely do," Shoytin grumbled as he tried again. Amy was just out of his reach by a mere centimetre or two, she had backed into the wall. Her scared cries were irritating him further.

### **The Bridge:**

Tom almost rushed to Opps, but stopped as his brain told him to go the opposite way. The same happened again, the panic was not helping. It didn't matter which way he went, both James and Jessie were already just outside the turbolift.

"All right, all right. We'll talk, just let her go!" Tom shouted loud enough and quickly so they'd hear and hopefully stop.

The whole room went silent. Well almost, all anyone could hear was Amy's crying over the comm.

*"I'm listening," Shoytin chuckled.*

"Let her go," Tom tried to say sternly but his voice was shaking too much. He quickly checked the turbolift to see if it was still there. He saw the two he was worried about staring his way. It took all the strength he had not to cower back into his chair, out of sight. Instead he turned to one side so he could still see them, but not directly. It didn't make him feel anymore at ease than before.

*"We'll just go back to the useless chatter from before if I do," Shoytin said smugly. Everyone heard him grumble something incoherently.*

James shook his head, his fists were so tightly clenched they were starting to hurt a little. Not that he cared. Jessie reached out to hold one of them even though she was just as angry as he was. "I'll kill him," she noticed he mouthed. She nodded and squeezed his hand.

"She's terrified, I won't..." Tom stuttered.

*"Very well," Shoytin's voice groaned.*

Everyone waited for the crying to stop, but it didn't. They heard the leader grumble again. *"No... I want my daddy," Amy cried.*

Tom cringed, in fact most of the Bridge did. "That's it," James muttered before he stepped into the turbolift. Jessie went to follow but the door shut too quickly.

Tom gestured his very wide eyes at Jessie, then pointed at the second turbolift. "Stop him," he mouthed. Jessie responded with a middle finger flip while walking away as quickly as she could.

Chakotay shook his head. "Yes, I see he is a lot calmer now that he has daughters," he said quietly to himself.

*"No, sit down," Rhone's voice grunted.*

*"Ow, all right..." Shoytin grumbled. "Who hit me, answer me!?"* Everyone on the bridge heard Miral giggle.

"Oh Miral," Tom sighed into both of his hands.

Harry shrugged and smiled slightly, "she may have saved the day."

Tom disagreed, his head shook. "Shoytin, if you want this to go quickly I suggest we discuss this privately."

*"Hmph. I have no interest in meeting you."*

"I mean me in my office and you in the office at the nursery," Tom said. He grew nervous again when there was nothing but silence, at least from Shoytin anyway. The crying had died down, now it was Duncan's voice he could hear muttering in the background.

*"Fine. Ten of your minutes, I need to settle things down here," Shoytin grumbled.* The comm beeped to tell them he was gone.

Tom collapsed into his chair, Chakotay stared at him as soon as he landed. He actually looked like he felt sorry for the ex-helmsman.

"We knew Stuart's kids would be the problem here," he said.

Tom stared at him blankly. "So what, we don't listen to the threats if it's one of theirs?"

Chakotay smiled, "definitely not. I was just saying."

"Well don't," Tom groaned. "I dunno why I sent Jessie, she's more likely to join him than stop him."

"They both may be overprotective hotheads, but they're not that stupid," Chakotay said, his eyes half rolled. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Tom's whole face scrunched up as he tried to figure out what he was trying to tell him. Chakotay had to laugh at the expression he had. "The last time Amy cried for her dad, the person trying to capture her ended up in pieces on the Mess Hall floor. I mean yeah he was overprotective before but when it comes to that particular kid you better take cover, cos the crap's not only going to hit the fan, the fan's going to hit you too."

"Fine, continue panicking. It's what a Captain does best," Chakotay said, his smile long gone.

Tom stared at him suspiciously, "you know something I don't?"

"Are you sure that this is a good idea?" Jessie asked in a worried tone.

"It's better than waiting for the evil to kick in," James answered. He reached out for something and quickly put it in his pocket. It was fast enough for her to not recognise what it was. The next thing she knew he was walking away from her and out the door.

Jessie quickened her pace a bit to walk alongside him, she quickly took a peek at his face to see if he was joking. She sighed when she figured he wasn't. "If it goes wrong..."

"It won't, if I thought it would I wouldn't do this," James said.

Jessie placed a hand on his arm to hint that he should stop. When he did she walked around to stand in front of him. "I know that he threatened our daughter, and I'm just as angry as you about that, but losing your temper isn't going to help this time. It'll make it worse." James sighed and looked away. "You've come a long way from that angry impulsive guy. Also you're more than just muscle, you have the brains too. We'll think of something, okay."

James glanced back to look her in the eye, he looked a little calmer to her. "You were following me into that turbolift. What were you going to do?"

"Hey, this is about your temper Mister. If you haven't noticed already, I have a good excuse," Jessie scolded. Her eyes narrowed a little as her hand gestured to her large belly. "Besides I was counting on *you* to calm *me* down."

"That's never a good idea," James said mid wince. Jessie sighed and nodded. "Yeah I was... am angry, but I was thinking up a plan anyway. Hearing that just gave me the incentive."

"Care to share it with anyone?" Jessie said, her arms folded. "I could help."

James didn't look so sure, he shook his head. He looked a little worried when that one thing made Jessie's eyes narrow even further. "I wasn't shaking my head at the could help part."

"Hmm, I believe you, others wouldn't," she said dangerously.

"You're not going to like it," James said.

Jessie gave her eyes and him a break, she kept her arms folded though. "Oh? If it doesn't involve beating the kidnapper to death, I probably won't."

James shrugged, "it might."

Jessie smiled for a few seconds, then she shook it off. "No, no, you killing is bad and any attempt to break in could make him start shooting. Why am I liking this?"

"If I answer that will I get my foot stamped on too?" James asked warily.

"Right, a man gets beaten to a pulp and thrown around a skyscraper but still is ok enough to fight, yet he trembles at the thought of his tiny pregnant wife attacking him," Jessie rambled while rolling her eyes. James couldn't help but smile a little. "That either says a lot about me or you're very patronising. Pick."

"Can't, I've got to get back to the bridge to let the others in on the plan," James said quickly as he walked away. Jessie scowled at his back for a while before eventually following him. He stopped seconds after she did, she huffed as she was forced to stop. "Wait. Shoytin can open the comm without us noticing..."

### **Deck Eight:**

Shoytin stared straight ahead and a little down of him, his anger was boiling beneath the surface. The person in his sight was glaring at him back.

"I'll bet it was you that hit me earlier," he eventually said. "I will remember that when it is time to pick a hostage to kill." He missed another Miral laugh, most of the room didn't though.

Duncan rolled his eyes, "fine."

The two aliens standing at his side looked a little worried to say the least. "Sir, it couldn't be him, he was with us the whole time," Jita decided to speak up.

Shoytin gave her a glare that told her to keep quiet from now on. Her head turned away from it, but the damage was done, she was shaking madly.

"He was trying to intervene earlier, you had to hold him back," Shoytin said. His glare turned to the man, Rhone. His shoulders fell as the intensity of the glare increased. "Am I wrong?"

"No sir, and we did hold him back," Rhone stammered. Shoytin's eyes fell to the weapon the man was holding, and to Jita's as well, both of which were close to pointing towards the floor. Rhone understood and he quickly raised it back up to hip level, all while keeping his other hand on Duncan's arm.

"Jita!" Shoytin barked, startling the woman so much she nearly dropped her weapon. She barely made eye contact while shaking. "Bring that other child over to your group, I want to keep an eye on the screeching little brat."

"Uh yes sir," Jita stuttered. She let go of Duncan's other arm and hurried over to one of the tables. She knelt down to peep under it.

Shoytin smiled at him as he slowly turned to look around the room. "I will be negotiating with Paris shortly. If anything happens, she..." he pointed at Jita and the table. "Is your first target." She was meanwhile panicking while reaching under it. "Jita, today would be good."

"I can't... she's not there," Jita stammered.

Duncan smirked as the leader waltzed over to double check under the table. Duncan then noticed a slight movement under a different table. Luckily though no one else noticed this.

"You fool, how could you let her slip by!" Shoytin snarled towards Jita.

"I... didn't, she couldn't..." Jita's panic grew, she hurried to her feet and started to look around. Shoytin stood as well. He waited for her to dare look his way again, his hand flew at her face. She stumbled back from the blow.

"Imbecile," Shoytin spat. He turned to walk back towards the office. "Forget it, the first kid to whine will be her anyway."

Duncan glanced up at Rhone who was staring uncomfortably at his own feet, almost as if he was too afraid to watch anything. "Why do you listen to that prick? He's just a coward hiding behind minions and a phaser."

Shoytin was just at the doorway when he said that, he slowly turned to look at the boy. The look on his face was deadly. "I'm sorry, I missed some of that. Say that again."

"Sure," Duncan shrugged. Rhone mouthed the word *don't*. "You're a pathetic bully..."

"Takes one to know one," Carl whispered to Johnathan. He pretended he didn't hear him.

Duncan didn't, he kept going, "you only picked kids to take hostage cos you were scared of getting hurt. It doesn't matter, cos you will anyway, big time."

"Oh really?" Shoytin said as he slowly walked towards him. "And why's that? There's nothing your stupid crew can do to stop me."

"Yeah, keep thinking that. When my dad gets a hold of you, I'm gonna laugh," Duncan said with a smirk. "Or my mum, cos she's extra deadly lately. You're so screwed."

Sasha cringed a little once he was finally done, she shook her head a few times. "God, why can't you be quiet for once?"

Shoytin just chuckled dangerously. "Your only threat is your mummy and daddy, oh that is so terrifying." He turned to the other aliens, "if I don't kill him in the meantime, make him the first you shoot."

"It's funny when they don't know how screwed they are," Duncan laughed quietly.

Rhone smiled nervously, he tried to get Duncan to sit back down with the others. When he didn't he knelt down to look him in the eye. "He's not joking around, he will. No, he'll probably pick someone else just to get at you, that's what he does. So please, just keep quiet and no one will get hurt," he whispered desperately.

"Fine," Duncan sighed. He sat back down with the other children. He looked over to catch his eldest sister shaking her head at him.

Shoytin gave him one last glare as he walked back into the office.

Tom sat at his desk, the worry was starting to get to him. Chakotay and Jessie were in the room with him, almost on the opposite sides of the room to each other. Jessie had taken a seat opposite Tom and his desk.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Tom remarked. All he got was a grunt from Chakotay as he stared out the window. "We can't keep in touch so we have no way of knowing how it is going."

"Yes we do," Chakotay said. "If he's caught the aliens will gladly let us know."

Jessie just rolled her eyes. Tom shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "Jess, question. He keeps mentioning that he is not as bad as he used to be. I'm not exactly sure what that means. Is James only going to do as he says or will he charge in fists blazing? For all I know he means he doesn't beat people up as much." Chakotay scoffed at the last sentence. "Unless the guy kidnapped his dead mother, I mean that's understandable."

"Yeah, cos that was why he beat me up," Chakotay commented. He turned around before Jessie could say anything. "Also, will you ever let that one go!?"

"No," Tom and Jessie answered.

"To answer your question, he's not going to risk charging into the nursery with seven aliens holding rifles at children. He wouldn't do that even in his old reckless days," Jessie said.

"To be fair Jessie, what you say James is like and what he does at certain times, kinda conflict," Tom said, his nervousness started to make his teeth chatter.

"He's right," Chakotay said. Jessie scowled at them both, one at a time. "You say he's the nicest guy ever, but nice guys don't punch people for annoying them or hitting on a girl they like. Nor do they choose to save their girlfriend over a room full of people in danger."

Jessie's eyes widened, her mouth dropped open. Tom more or less did the same, the only difference was his hand reached for a mug on the desk.

"My god, why on earth would you bring that up!? Now? It's been ten years!" Jessie snapped as she climbed out of her seat.

"I understand Janeway's coffee addiction more and more every day," Tom whimpered before sipping on his mug.

Chakotay sighed, he actually looked a little guilty. "I'm sorry but it bothered me a lot back then. It bothers me now as I know how reckless the idiot still is, regardless of how many bloody kids he has. It's not just his that are in danger."

"The demons had placed a bomb inside me. I was pretty damn close to said people," Jessie said angrily.

"True, but they wouldn't have put themselves in any danger by detonating... um you, so close to them," Chakotay said awkwardly. "Don't say he had a plan to save everyone. He only told you that so even you wouldn't turn on him."

"You act like I've never called him out on any of his decisions," Jessie said while rolling her eyes.

"He still put his own feelings first and for me that equals bad," Chakotay said.

"I guess bringing up other people's ancient mistakes helps make you feel better. Who's the real self centered one here?" Jessie said as she sat back down.

Chakotay shook his head, he headed straight for the door to the bridge. "Fine, I tried."

Once he was gone Tom shakily put his cup down on the desk. Jessie eyed him with a bemused look on her face.

"Is that the coffee or just nerves?" she asked.

Tom shrugged, "both probably. He was right about one thing. Sometimes James will prove himself right and stay calm, discuss strategies and not lose his temper as much. But on other days he could toss someone around the ship or throw a desk at a wall."

"I'm not saying he's passive, nor will he ever be," Jessie said. "Despite what he says he still sometimes puts only himself in danger. However he won't endanger his or any children. Surely you know that."

"True but we all get a bit crazed when something like this happens. If what he's doing works, he could get in undetected. It may prove too tempting," Tom said.

Jessie shook her head, "you asked for my opinion, I gave it."

"All right, I believe you," Tom said. Jessie frowned at him. "Could be the coffee talking though." She looked down at the mug, it was still mostly full. "I think you should get back to the Bridge. If we keep meeting in different rooms they'll know we're up to something."

"Yeah," Jessie sighed. She got up and walked out.

Only seconds after she left the door chimed. Tom was reaching for the mug again at that moment. "Yeah?"

The person at the door walked in and the first thing they noticed was someone about to drink coffee. She sighed sadly. Tom looked at his cup awkwardly and put it down quickly.

"Kiara, what's wrong? Is Lena..." he asked.

"She's fi..." Kiara hesitated. "That's not what I'm here for."

"Oh?" Tom said.

Kiara walked forward to sit down but she changed her mind once she reached it. Instead she leaned on the back of it. "I heard that Bryan and the kids are being kept hostage."

"Yeah, er, the teachers too. They've already..." Tom shook his head to stop himself. "It's all right, we'll figure something out. Nothing to worry about."

"I might be able to help," Kiara said.

Tom sat up slightly, his arms folded across the desk. "Oh, how?"

"I wasn't very good at transporting people, so I wouldn't want to help that way," Kiara said meekly. "I'd end up transporting only half, and maybe some aliens into the Mess Hall or something."

"Yikes, we don't want to aggravate them in more ways than one," Tom winced.

Kiara nodded. "Yep. I can help, I want to, I just don't know how yet. Are we doing anything right now?"

"The aliens have tapped into a few systems..." Tom explained.

"How?" Kiara quickly asked.

"They have Federation weapons, they know about the Enterprise. It's likely they know their way around," Tom replied. "They have control of Deck Eight, everything computer related on Nine is monitored, and they have a tap to the Bridge." Kiara's eyes went a little wider. "At the very least they can hear what we're saying. Oh and despite their ship's shields being down, we can't beam over without them knowing about it. We also have the issue of not being able to use transporters."

Kiara smiled, "you don't have to use yours."

"I'm confused," Tom said mid frown. "I thought you didn't want to?"

"I don't, not on the kids or aliens. If it takes me a few tries if it's just me, that's okay," Kiara said. "I'm just worried that I'll waste the amount of powers I can use this month before I've done anything useful."

"How would you appearing in the nursery help?" Tom asked.

Kiara shook her head, "no, you mentioned the alien ship. No one's there and they can't monitor a Q transporting in. I just hope they haven't got a visual way of keeping an eye on their ship."

"Probably not, they wouldn't expect us to be there," Tom mused. He smiled and stood up. "You could go over and try to transport them back. We'd need our shields back before we can pull that off though." His smile didn't last long, "though how would you know how to use their systems? Damn it."

"I'll be able to think of something, I hope. I guess I have to be creative, and it's been a while," Kiara said.

Tom gave her smile, he pulled himself to his feet. Kiara smiled awkwardly back as he walked around her towards the door. "All right, for now you're on the bench until we come up with a strategy. This has to go well, we can't afford for anything to go wrong." Kiara gave him a nod.

Markal watched nervously as his leader sat down in the chair with a dangerous glint in his eye. One tap on the computer and he sat back comfortably. He and Markal could now hear the sounds of the Bridge, as well as people chatting.

*"You're not serious, are you? Forget the aliens, Jessie will kill us all if you do that," Chakotay's voice said.*

*Tom's voice whimpered for barely a second. "True, but the children are far more important. Three of hers are there, so in theory she wouldn't really get mad. They should be her priority."*

*"I dunno," Nathan's voice said warily. "They seem pretty adamant about getting into this rift, cloud thing."*

*"We're calling it Death Corridor Two," Harry's voice butted in.*

*Tom's shushed him, "that was between us!"*

*"Sorry." A few people were laughing as Harry spoke.*

*"Great, now we're dorks again," Tom's voice muttered.*

*"Again?" Chakotay's wondered. "If they want to die, let them."*

*Tom's sighed, "so you agree with me?"*

*"No," Chakotay's voice replied. "The mission was to get the Enterprise back, not hand it over to a bunch of morons."*

Shoytin just smirked at his crewmember at that remark, Markal smiled nervously back.

*"That's not what I'm doing. I'm suggesting an exchange of information, hopefully it'll be enough to calm him down and stop him from threatening kids like Amy," Tom's voice said.*

*Chakotay's laughed, "right, and once they have the information we have, you don't think that Shoveofftin will demand something else. Something that unfortunately we can't really part with, hence the handing over the Enterprise part."*

*"They're not interested in it, and yeah I know he will, but I need to buy us some time until we can think of a plan," Tom's voice said. "Well you guys anyway, it's been way longer than ten minutes. It's time for good old fashioned diplomacy."*

Shoytin and Markal heard footsteps, which only got quieter. A door opening and closing followed it.

*"You know, actually giving the aliens something will solve all of our problems," Jodie's voice said. There was silence for a short while. "What? I'm not the only one thinking it."*

*"Wow," Nathan's voice whispered.*

Shoytin reached over to tap the computer twice, he then gestured for Markal to leave the room, which he did very willingly. The screen activated to show some of the Ready Room. The view swung around to a surprised Tom who was sitting down at his desk.

"I thought that since we're negotiating solo, we should talk face to face," Shoytin sneered.

Tom tried to relax his tense shoulders but the alien man's sudden appearance on his computer screen had startled him. He settled for sitting back in his chair slightly.

"Great, I like to see who I'm dealing with," he said carefully.

Shoytin moved his chair around so he could put his feet up on the desk. "Now as you were saying about telling me everything."

"I said I'd talk. I doubt you'd want the full story of our being here, we could be here years," Tom said.

Shoytin studied him carefully. "Just tell me everything about the cloud and how you escaped."

"That's the thing, we didn't have much time to study it," Tom said, causing the other man to narrow his eyes towards him. "A member of my crew, more or less, claims to have figured it out but..."

"But?" Shoytin grew annoyed at his hesitation.

"But he won't give up that information easily. If you think I'm vague and avoidy, you'll despise talking with him," Tom replied. He felt a little relieved as at least he wasn't lying. "I worried you'd start shooting if you talked to him."

Shoytin's smile returned, Tom wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. "I'm not as cold as you think I am. I took your nursery as I know how to get information out of people. You take their most precious item or person, they start squealing." Tom felt his fists clench under the table, but for everyone's benefit he tried not to show his frustration on his face. "Perhaps if you tell me what your *crewmember's* weakness is, I could help here."

"He's not that simple," Tom said. Again, not really a lie. "We tried, I tried, but he thinks we're too beneath him to understand."

"I told you, I'll speak with him," Shoytin snarled.

"I'm not risking the children's lives by bringing him in. I'll think of something," Tom said. Shoytin seemed angry again, his hand went towards the computer. "We knew the danger we were in when we were inside it. We prepared for it. Don't think I was lying when I told you that."

"Perhaps I wouldn't if I hadn't seen evidence to the contrary," Shoytin said coldly. "I once was the Captain of my people's largest fleet, now that is all but a fleeting memory. One of my subjects flew into this cloud by accident, it vanished from our sensors." Tom was about to respond, Shoytin wasn't done though. "Foolishly I sent another inside after it, only better prepared."

Tom sat up slightly, his attention was piqued. "Prepared how?"

Shoytin smirked at him, "unlike you, I share. We discovered a mass that matched the size of our lost vessel. Assuming it was adrift from power failure, the vessel that went in after it was on minimal power and had extra fuel for such an emergency. Also we kept an open channel. That was how we discovered the cloud's real weapon."

"The hallucinations," Tom mumbled.

"Yes," Shoytin nodded grimly. "I watched my second in command break down into a shell of man, weeping, as he thought he kept seeing someone outside floating by the window. He wanted to follow them, to save them." Tom felt the colour leave his cheeks at the thought. "During one of those moments I saw a woman tearing up the helm control to rescue her missing pet."

"As I watched the systems drain over those weeks, the crew's apparent hallucinations got even worse. One member of the crew looked like he was trying to fix the helm, when he stopped and stared at something for hours. You want to know what happened next?" Shoytin said.

Tom shook his head, "no I really don't."

Shoytin grimaced at the memory, "he picked up a fairly large metal piece, aimed the sharpest point towards his face and..."

"I get the picture," Tom stuttered.

Shoytin chuckled grimly, "no you don't. Your priorities and view of life can change when you see a man die like that." He stared towards Tom, his eyes fiercely determined. "I will get what's left of my people back home, no matter what the cost. I don't have any sympathy for a people that not only escaped that thing, but got off so lightly they think the solution is how great they are."

While his elbow rested on the desk, Tom's head pulled forward to rest behind his hand. "I'm sorry." Shoytin smiled. "That doesn't excuse what you have done. It also doesn't explain your desire to go back into the anomaly. Or how and why you raided our ship."

"That anomaly is a flaw in the Game Sphere's design, your Enterprise was making a nuisance of itself. I put two and two together," Shoytin smiled.

"That doesn't make any sense," Tom muttered.

Shoytin's shoulders shook as he repressed a laugh. "Would you settle for it was adrift and easy pickings?"

Tom cringed, he shook his head. "No. It was adrift inside the anomaly, likely because of it. Your story clashes."

"As does your claim to have escaped the anomaly on will power alone," Shoytin said. "I'm not asking for much, I'm not asking you to choose your children's lives over something that will hurt anyone. The choice is so simple. All I want is whatever you used to get out of it."

"The fact that your first choice was to shoot at us and your second was to kidnap children, you can see why we're hesitant with you. If you had simply asked, we wouldn't be in this mess," Tom said.

Shoytin's eyes narrowed once again, he leaned forward as close as he could. Tom stood or rather sat his ground and stared back. "From what we saw of your Enterprise's antics, we had no reason to believe you would ever help us willingly. I had no choice."

Tom shook his head quickly. "You did. You knew what you were doing. While you were stealing weapons and dodgy shields from our ship, you could have checked what they were doing for yourselves. You obviously learned enough about our systems to do what you're doing now."

"Don't test me, Paris," Shoytin snarled. "Your ship was abandoned, we were in distress, we did what we had to, to survive. Everything useful in this instance was sealed away. By the time we discovered that you were on your way as well, your people must have regained control and fled into the anomaly. They knew we couldn't follow them."

"The Enterprise was abandoned?" Tom thought aloud. It made Shoytin even more irritable. "If nobody was there, where did they go and how did it get there?"

"Do you have any children Mr Paris?" Shoytin asked dangerously.

Tom felt unnerved quite a lot, his free hand began to shake. "No."

Shoytin just smiled in response. "Of course you don't, you wouldn't tell me. I guess I might have to guess and hope I get lucky."

"What are you talking about?" Tom asked, although he knew exactly what he meant by that.

"You have a choice here. Tell your crewmember to tell me everything he knows, or you tell me the truth. Otherwise I'll start picking off kids every hour," Shoytin snarled.

Tom's jaw clenched as the hand it rested in slowly fell to the desk. It took everything he had not to lose his temper with this man. "Your crew getting home is not worth that. Surely you..."

"I've been very forgiving Paris. I should have killed a few by now and I haven't," Shoytin said. "That's not me bluffing, that's just a gesture of good will on my part."

"Good will!" Tom couldn't help but snap. Shoytin chuckled at his outburst. "I've told you all that I know, but I'm telling you that man will not share info as he wouldn't care about the fate of the kids."

*"Captain, you need to see this," a woman's voice in the background said.*

"Then maybe you should fix that in..." Shoytin said, glancing briefly to one side. "Twenty minutes." His hand reached out and the screen went blank.

"Okay," Tom said loudly. The door swiftly opened and Harry walked in with a grim expression on his face. "You get everything?"

"Oh yeah," Harry replied, his shoulders slumped.

Tom shook his head. "I miss Damien's rabbit invasions. Heck I even miss Softmicrons forcing us to crash land."

"Why don't you just tell him that James is immune to it? I imagine he'll be more than happy to be used as an exchange for the kids," Harry suggested.

Tom glanced up at him with his eyes wide. "You were serious about that? I thought that was just part of the act."

"Partially," Harry said warily. "He wants the reason why we survived the anomaly, that's the reason."

"I don't think it is, not fully," Tom said. "Even if we didn't know in advance, if we all saw a ghost talking to Nathan convincing him to turn around, we'd know what was happening."

"Maybe, but we were all starting to hallucinate near the end," Harry said. "Shoytin's ships may have been in a more concentrated section of it, or maybe they were inside it longer than we were. Without anyone thinking clearly and without a Chosen to keep us on course we'd be like them. The Enterprise is proof of that."

"You don't believe him when he said it was abandoned," Tom stated.

Harry shook his head, "no. I think he's somehow put it there just in case threatening kids didn't work. It's a safety net."

Tom climbed out of his chair only to pace the couple of metres behind his desk. "He probably put it on auto pilot and escaped to his ship." Harry nodded. "We should probably bring Damien in after all."

"What?" Harry stuttered. "How can you think that's a good idea over mine?"

Tom stopped pacing to head over to the door, he stopped next to Harry before it could open. "Your suggestion is to hand over my crew willy nilly to save other members of the crew, as well as possibly handing the aliens the Enterprise and everyone on it."

"There's just under a couple dozen of them. I really doubt with no kids as hostages that James will bend over for them," Harry muttered.

Tom slapped him on the shoulder, "the old me would have made a joke about that." Harry's eyebrow raised while Tom's lips started to curl. "The new me keeps it for later."

"Still, he's more likely to kill them after this," Harry said with a smirk of his own.

"True, but I'm still not keen on trading people for people. That's not what Captain's do," Tom said. He stepped out of the Ready Room.

Harry sighed as he followed, "they make the hard choices Tom."

Tom ignored that comment for now and tapped his commbadge. "Damien to the Bridge. We need your... help," he said like he was holding back being sick. Everyone on the Bridge stared at him in shock and quiet judgement.

*"Of course you do, but it'll cost you."*

"It already has," Tom muttered. "We'll talk about it when you get here. Paris out."

"Are you insane!" Jessie snapped. "He's not going to help, he's more likely to do something that'll make them shoot, just for laughs."

"No he won't," Tom said confidently. "All he has to do is brag about his genius. He'll love it." Ignoring everyone's stares for the moment, he made his way over to Opps, which B'Elanna was manning now. "Status?" he mimed to her.

B'Elanna pointed at one of the panels in front of her. On it was a schematic of Voyager, her finger was pointing towards the bottom of the saucer. Tom saw the tiny dot near the tip disappear as it entered the next deck.

"Here we go," he again mimed.

It was barely louder than a whisper, but in the long empty Jeffries tube it may as well have been deafening. James kept a close eye above him, the ladder to the next deck was blocked by an orange haze. He then crouched down to climb into the open tube nearby.

### **The Bridge:**

As he expected the face on Damien was smug as soon as he waltzed on the bridge, he had even folded his arms for extra effect. Tom kept his comments to himself for now, he didn't have time.

"Our guest wants to know what you found out about the anomaly we were in last," he told him.

Damien laughed, his smug look managed to get even smugger. "Does he, well good for him."

"Come on, this guy is so much more intimidating than you," Tom pretended to plead with him. Damien fell for it, his face fell. "I've never had to deal with such evil and genius."

Harry started smirking as Damien began fidgeting, his eyebrow looked ready to twitch itself to freedom. B'Elanna shook her head, resisting a smile for now.

"Since you're one of the good guys, you can't imagine the trauma I have in dealing with this... indescribable piece of scum," Tom said with a sad look on his face. It didn't look very convincing, he may as well have been slicing onions in plain sight to fake crying. It was still enough to make it believable to Damien though, he looked pretty mad at what he was saying. "We can't let him know how to deal with this anomaly, he'll get the Enterprise. It would be such a shame since without us, it'll never shake off that destroyer of worlds image everyone has of it now."

Damien's eyes started to narrow, his eyebrow was still twitching. "So... why am I here?"

"Tell me first, there has to be a way to stop this... dastardly fiend," Tom replied.

"I see. Why would I want to help you?" Damien asked.

"I always pay my loyal crew," Tom replied.

Damien chuckled to himself, "right. I'll need a lot more than that. Firstly, that Captain's Yacht of yours."

Tom frowned, "what Captain's Yacht? You mean the Enterprise's? I dunno, it looks like the ship has a hole in it when it's used and I planned on giving it a make over. It also has that four wheeler thing, I wanted to ride that bad boy."

Harry snickered to himself, "another joke we're keeping for later."

"Oh you don't know, then never mind," Damien laughed.

B'Elanna quickly tapped something on a padd, she raised it so Tom could just see it. Once again it had a schematic of Voyager, mostly focused on the saucer. A part of it seemed to separate from the ship. Tom's eyes widened.

"Holy crap, why didn't anybody tell me Voyager had one? We've had this ship for nearly twelve years," Tom stuttered, his eyes glazed over at the thought. He shook his head, "I'm so gonna race the Enterprise's. I mean no deal. However I'm sure we could accidentally deposit Annika with the aliens when we get rid of them."

"Hell we should do that anyway," Jessie commented.

Damien smiled, "throw in only to me access to Deck Thirteen's habitation lab, and a replicator that doesn't demand rations and you got yourself a blabber."

"I thought I already did," Tom remarked. "Just the replicator and Annika removal."

"Oh I don't know, you sounded desperate before," Damien smirked.

Tom sighed but a little over the top to be real, "fine!" He gestured for Damien to follow him into the Ready Room. He did while smirking away. Tom remained at the door once they were inside, while Damien stood in front of the desk.

"Okay, where should I start so your feeble mind can understand?" Damien muttered to himself.

"Why don't I?" Tom said. "The Bridge is bugged, Shoytin can hear everything we talk about there."

"Pretty stupid to call him scum and fiendish, hmm," Damien chuckled. "Not all villains appreciate an actual compliment."

"He told me to do everything I could to get you to co-operate," Tom said. "Now, why don't I explain why I really called you here."

Damien frowned, he turned around and was a little put off with the sly grin the Lieutenant had on his face. "What?"

"Right now somebody better than you... that doesn't narrow it down, is in the process of removing the aliens defences. Unfortunately until he does that we won't know if it's working or worse, giving the aliens an excuse to fire," Tom explained.

Damien yawned, "bored." He walked towards the door but Tom was directly in his path so he was forced to stop. "You're not going to pay me are you, all of that was a ruse. Why should I even listen to you?"

"Oh I'm going to pay you," Tom's smile didn't waver. "Remember that day you decided it would be a good idea to infect the kids with a virus?"

"You want me to do that again?" Damien smirked. Tom's smile disappeared immediately, his face froze. "That's one way of dealing with it. They won't expect that."

"Are you... why... oh why do I bother?" Tom stuttered. "No. Do you remember what happened when the virus actually worked on one particular kid, a one that hadn't been born yet?"

"Hmm, no," Damien sighed mockingly.

Tom felt his smirk returning to him, "I hear it ended with a certain mother making a bloody mess of your crew." Damien smiled as he remembered that one of the victims of this story was Wesley Crusher. Tom ignored that for now. "If anything, anything happens with that mother's three kids, even just a scratch, you'll have nowhere to escape this time."

Damien's smugness washed away, he looked a little pale in fact. "What? You don't have it in you Paris."

"I don't have to," Tom laughed. "Jessie's seven months pregnant and has three kids trapped with a psycho. If you thought her reaction to her unborn child's death was bad, oh boy."

Damien tried to cover his nervousness with one of his usual laughs, it didn't sound convincing in the slightest. "Why would she take it out on me?"

"Why not? Last time I checked Evil Witches don't really care who they kill. We'll just keep you two together, I was thinking of just tying you to her station or to her," Tom said.

"You're bluffing. She wouldn't let you do that," Damien tried to chuckle.

Tom shrugged casually, "my three kids are there too. I'll take that risk."

"You keep moving up on my list, Paris. I'd be careful if I were you," Damien growled. Tom shook his head while rolling his eyes. "Let's get this over with. I'll want to wash all of this good deed crap off me before it starts to stink."

"Good," Tom smiled again. "We'll start small and simple, like you." Damien made a mental note to bump him up his list again. "You know your way around our computers, I assume you can do it discreetly." He only got a nod. "We need to know how James is doing and what. Can you do that?"

Damien scoffed, "really? You can't find out what the blond bimbo is doing? All he's good for is hitting things and..." He pulled a disgusted face, "making little brats."

"Speaking of which, you're wasting time," Tom said, he moved to one side.

Damien stared at him coldly as he walked over towards him and the door.

### **Deck Eight:**

The tension in the nursery was lighter as Shoytin and another alien remained in the office for the time being. Three of the aliens were still very uncomfortable with what they were doing, but without their leader around they had relaxed their weapons so they were no longer pointing at anyone. The pair still loyal to Shoytin kept their weapons raised while they watched Markal pace nearby, growing more impatient with every step.

"Would you remain still? You're giving me a headache," eventually one of them hissed.

Markal just changed his pacing direction to towards the pair. "We thought that when you supported the ship raid plan you had lost your mind, but this? These are children," he snapped at them.

The woman of the pair rolled her eyes in frustration. "Shoytin knows the Humans won't want to risk them, you have nothing to worry about."

"Do you really believe that our wonderful Captain would do nothing if they still tried?" Markal said.

"He has so far," the woman answered.

Jita shook her head timidly. "If I hadn't have lost that little girl, you wouldn't be saying that."

"He won't kill any of them," the man of the pair snapped. "Sometimes it is necessary for a leader to take risks like this. He's doing it for us."

"Well I'd prefer he didn't," Markal snapped back.

The woman shrugged, "perhaps you should take this up with him then." The man beside her smirked.

The protester scoffed, "you're as bad as he is. Shoytin doesn't care about us. You saw what he did to Jita, and has he shown any concern for our crew that were captured? No. What kind of leader does that?"

The man of the pair responded to this with a swipe of his weapon, it swung straight into his face, knocking him to the floor. Most of the kids cried or whimpered when he did. "Perhaps learn some respect!" the attacker snapped, he even raised his weapon to strike again.

"Hikgel! Don't you..." Rhone stuttered as he took a step forward.

"He's fine," the alien woman interrupted him, waving him off. Rhone and the others each looked down to the floor to see Markal covering his face. Some of them could clearly see blood seeping through the cracks in between his fingers. "You know what's at stake here. Shoytin knows the Humans won't help us willingly and we need what they have to survive. This is just to convince them. We're not here to kill anyone."

Jacqueline scoffed, "you already have."

"Yes, but you noticed that he didn't choose to shoot a child," Hikgel said in a warning tone of voice. "Her death was necessary to make the Humans believe that we are not bluffing, which we clearly are."

"Do you really believe that? Or do you just want to?" Jita asked.

Rhone shook his head, "either way, we're working with people who believe that a life is worth snuffing out if they're fully grown."

"Enough!" Hikgel snapped, he even pointed his weapon towards him and Jita. The pair didn't look too worried, especially as they were on the other side of the room to him. "One more traitorous comment and..." Something slammed into the back of his leg, it almost made his knee buckle. He swung around to see what it was, but he could see nothing. Everyone watching him had no idea why he turned around so suddenly, they each had a look of confusion and relief on their faces.

The woman sighed to calm herself down. "Nobody said that. We're in a desperate situation and we're all a little on edge. Maybe we should stop and cool down before we talk some more. At the very least trust that Shoytin knows what he's doing." She knelt down to help Markal back to his feet, once he was up he pulled away from her roughly. "What happened, we used to be a team..."

Nobody dared to answer her as long as Hikgel kept his weapon trained upwards to target anyone standing. He was about to walk by one of the tables when something hit his leg again, this time on the side. His head quickly turned just in time to see Miral hurrying away. She didn't notice that he had seen her and gave a tiny squeak as his hand flew out to grab her arm.

"It was you all along you little..." Hikgel growled.

Amy meanwhile peeped her head out from under the nearby table, her eyes were wide. The man was right in front of her and she could clearly see what he was doing.

Miral smiled, she was about to punish him one more time for touching her when he stumbled sideways onto the floor on his own. Luckily he had loosened his grip on her when he did. Most of the kids gasped at this, but one in particular just laughed with a proud look in his eyes.

"My leg, god!" Hikgel immediately cradled his right leg.

Miral looked around, a pout developed on her lips. Then she noticed Amy retreating back under the table. The pout disappeared quickly.

"That was awesome," Duncan continued sniggering but quietly. He stopped when a few of the people looked at him.

The woman walked over to help pull the fallen guy up to his feet. "What's the matter with you? Are you intoxicated?"

"Something hit me, and hard!" Hikgel snapped at her.

Miral giggled quietly as she sat down next to the table Amy was under. When no one was looking she put her hand out underneath it, hoping the other girl knew to high five it. Nothing happened though.

"Oh please, there was nothing there but air you fool," the woman groaned.

"Right!" Hikgel snarled. He was forced to use the wall as support as his leg struggled to hold any weight. "So no one saw the red haired girl, huh?"

All of the remaining aliens looked towards Miral, she quickly withdrew her hand and put on her cutest innocent face. Most of them melted at the sight of it. Now that he knew the truth, Hikgel was immune to it and it just made him angry.

"You're pathetic. She's only a baby," Rhone muttered.

"Hmph," Hikgel grunted, he stared towards Miral maliciously. She responded by doing a cute little wave back. Then to make the rest of the room hate him all the more she put her thumb in her mouth and widened her eyes further. "She's a little brat and she's not the only one. Someone else pushed me."

"So a baby pushed you and you fell over screaming," Duncan said. Bryan quickly tried to cover his mouth again, but this time Duncan was expecting it and he shuffled a little out of his reach. "I like how you guys are so honest."

Jita and Rhone laughed between themselves, Markal would have too if it didn't hurt to do so. The only one not amused was the other loyal to Shoytin alien.

"You little..." Hikgel growled. The woman put a hand on his arm and looked at him sternly. It seemed to calm him down in an instant, almost like he was afraid of her.

"Stop making a fool out of yourself Hik," she said quietly but dangerously.

"Yeah Hik," Duncan teased him.

Hikgel only growled back, he turned away to avoid getting angrier. The woman shook her head in disgust.

### **The Bridge:**

Tom hurried out of the Ready Room, he immediately noticed Harry gesturing him over to the back stations where he and Damien were. "What?" he only mouthed as he approached them.

Harry pointed at the panel Damien was looking at. Tom looked but to him it appeared to be a garbled mess. Damien noticed his confused face and rolled his eyes. His fingers quickly tapped the station, the screen nearby started to show text for Tom to read.

"The forcefield generators they've installed are drawing power..." was all it said. Tom glanced towards Damien just as he shrugged and pulled a nonchalant face. Before he could say anything he tapped something else, more text appeared. "Sorry, forgot you were all idiots. I'll explain so you understand. If Layer messes with one more system, he's gonna get an explosion in his face."

Tom's head tilted to one side, his eyebrow went up. "Layer?" he mouthed. "Typo?" Damien shook his head. Tom tried his best not to smirk, but it didn't work. Then his eyes widened in horror, "explosion?"

Damien shrugged casually again. Tom's eyes returned to normal just so he could scowl and then point at Jessie behind him. Damien rolled his eyes. "Fine," he mimed.

The panel was hot to the touch, James could see it starting to smoke as well. He tried to work quicker. The tricorder in his left hand seemed to be screeching at him. His right finger tips were already red from the heat, but they kept tapping. It beeped once he was finished. "Good..." he mumbled to himself as the right hand reached inside the open panel to reconnect two wires. The tricorder calmed down for the time being.

James looked at it, then back up at the panel. Quickly he picked up the nearby cover, put it back where it was and crawled a little further down the Jeffries tube to another one. The tricorder screeched again, forcing him to crawl backwards. Just in time as the panel in front of him had smoke already billowing out of it.

"Damn it, no..." he grumbled to himself as he opened the previous panel again. Leaving the tricorder on the ground, both hands went into the wiring this time. As he worked at it the nearby panel looked like it started to cool off. He was beginning to do the opposite, his left hand almost slammed into the nearby wall but he held it back for now. Instead he put the cover back angrily.

He felt he had no choice but to crawl back the way he came.

Damien snickered quietly to himself, but stopped when Tom slapped the back of his head. He glared at the ex-helmsman before getting back to work.

Some text appeared on the screen. "I think the idiot's spotted the overload, but all he can do is re-route it." Damien pulled a face. The *re-route it* bit was replaced by *move it*. The *overload* part then was changed to *exploding thing*.

Tom bit his lip to hold his temper for now. He gestured Harry to come with him as he walked over to Jessie at Tactical. "Jess, if he so much as smirks..." he whispered.

"Got it," Jessie whispered back. She rushed over to take Tom and Harry's place, Damien's smirks were a thing of the past.

The pair quickly stepped into the Ready Room. "Overload?"

Harry sighed, "somehow he was spotted trying to mess with the systems they have."

"I got that part," Tom stuttered.

Harry smiled meekly, "I don't know what but the last connection he was trying to sever triggered one of their forcefield generators to overload. As Damien says it looks like James noticed it and tried to cut that off at the source."

Tom was getting more and more anxious by the second, he was shaking. "Harry stop, forget about explosions or overloads. They know he's trying to thwart them, you know what that means."

Harry's face turned extremely pale so quickly he nearly passed out, or at least he felt like it. "Oh. Ohno, it's okay..." Tom's head shook while his eyes widened. "From what Damien says the overload was triggered by something he did. I think it's automatic."

"So a booby trap then," Tom said. He shuddered as his brain made him remember Annika's Milkshake dance. "Stupid brain." He noticed Harry was looking disgusted. "You too, huh?"

Harry nodded, "yeah to both. I imagine they'll notice when it does explode. The overload's already in progress, all that can be done now is move it. I'm sure from what I saw that's what he's doing. I hinted to Damien to cut off the ones that the aliens would notice."

James arrived at the end of the Jeffries tube, the doors opened for him immediately. He didn't climb out right away as he was greeted by sparks flying around the junction and smoke billowing out of a nearby panel.

Just as he rushed over to the panel to open it, the forcefield above him disappeared for a few seconds, which he didn't see. He quickly began to work at this panel like he did the others. The forcefield stuttered as it reappeared a lot lower than it was before. The buzz it generated made him look up and see that it was only a foot away from his head. Again it flickered out of existence for a moment. His attention darted to the panel again, then the tricorder which continued its warning squeals. He tried to work a lot quicker but it made him almost disconnect the wrong wires and tap the wrong command in.

He was out of time. The last thing he did was turn his head towards the entrance to the Jeffries tube.

### **Deck Eight:**

Shoytin watched as the woman he was with's face turned very pale, while watching the tricorder like device in her hand. When she started to shake he walked over to snatch it off her.

"Don't worry, I won't make you do it," he said to her with a smile.

The woman stared after him as he walked out of the office. Every member of his crew looked towards him as he entered the nursery. He eyed Markal and his newly broken nose with contempt, then turned his attention towards Hikgel and his other loyal crewmember. Without a word he tossed the tricorder device towards her, she caught it. One look at it told her what she needed to know.

"Rhone, come with me," she barked.

With Shoytin in the room, he didn't dare argue with her. Rhone quickly followed her through the main door.

"Sir, may I ask what's happening?" Hikgel said carefully.

Shoytin smiled in such a way even Hikgel was getting worried about what was going to happen next. "I wouldn't worry about it. Our upcoming guest will have the honours."

### **The Bridge:**

B'Elanna glanced behind her at Opps' back station, "Tom, explosion on Deck Eight."

Tom quickly ran over to her, glancing at Damien on route. "What happened?"

Damien laughed nervously as he could feel Jessie glaring at him. "Funny story..." His ear was grabbed and then pulled hard, he tried his best not to squeal.

B'Elanna pointed towards the ship schematic she had on her screen. "I'm not sure," she lied. "It looks like one of the forcefields they put up overloaded."

Tom's was starting to drown in his own sweat, he desperately tried to wipe the stuff off his forehead and cheeks at least. He wasn't quite sure what to say or ask outloud.

"Was there anyone there?" Jessie asked, but she knew the answer already. She walked over to opps, dragging Damien by the ear behind her. "What do we do?" she mouthed in B'Elanna's direction.

"Mind if I weigh in here?" Damien grumbled, raising his hand. Jessie shook him roughly to shut him up.

Tom stared vacantly down at the floor. "There's nothing we can do. Their forcefield overloaded probably due to incompatibility with our systems. It's nothing we've done, I'm just worried that they'll still blame us..." He could feel both B'Elanna and Jessie stare at him, he didn't want to look to make sure.

"But..." Jessie stuttered.

B'Elanna bit her lip briefly before she spoke. "Nobody's there, it was a malfunction," she said to her. "Okay?"

Jessie stared at her helplessly, however the anger was still brewing. "No, no it's not okay. They'll think... they might..." she tried desperately to think of a way to explain without making it worse. "What if they detect the explosion and automatically assume we're about to charge in to rescue the kids? They could just..."

Damien used that moment to pull himself out of Jessie's grip. "Did I mention we don't have to pretend they're listening anymore?" Everyone turned their heads slowly to glare at him. "You're welcome, sheesh."

### **Deck Eight:**

The woman from the office had returned to the nursery, she stood near Jita. Her body was still shaking terribly. "I thought it was a problem with the forcefield generators. Why did I look into it further?"

Jita looked on in sympathy, her hand went up to the other woman's shoulder. "It's not your fault, Yana. If you didn't report it and Shoytin found out, he would have..."

"So? I don't want to hurt anyone," the woman whispered. Shoytin looked across at them both, he pointed a bit further to their left. Jita took that as a hint to separate or else, so she quickly side stepped to one side.

Meanwhile Miral was taking advantage of the aliens being distracted to peep her head under the table Amy was hiding under. "Teach me to push that hard. So funny. Please."

Amy's eyes were so wide they started to water, she timidly shook her head. "Can't."

Miral pouted, "why?"

The doors to the nursery opened. "Ohno," Yana stuttered. Rhone and the unnamed girl re-entered, dragging somebody in with them. As soon as he was dumped onto the floor, everybody who were watching noticed the burns covering his face and left arm.

Sasha however recognised him even with the burns and she gasped. "Daddy!"

Duncan looked up in shock, then turned his head towards the door and saw for himself. He quickly looked back to his sister, but he wasn't the only one. Shoytin smiled, he waltzed right over to where she sat. She trembled as he knelt down in front of her.

Shoytin just laughed as he reached forward to pick up Sasha. "You know, I thought we'd have to wait for him to wake up. Now we don't have to." He rose to his feet, taking her with him. The rest of his crew froze on the spot as he made sure to make eye contact with them all, with a devilish smirk on his face. "Our guest chose a kid for us anyway."

"Son of a..." Duncan grumbled. He quickly got to his feet but Bryan grabbed him to try and pull him down. Jita, being the closest, rushed forward to also stop him. "Leave her alone!"

Shoytin just rolled his eyes. "Bring our new guest into the office." He was too busy walking to the office to notice everyone's hesitation. Once he was gone the unnamed woman and Hikgel were the first to move, to no one's surprise they did as they were told.

"No," Duncan muttered as he pulled himself out of both grips on him. He rushed forward after Shoytin, the rest of the aliens quickly dashed forward to block and or grab a hold of him.

While that was happening Amy peeped her head out from under the table, Miral put her arm out to stop her. It didn't, she just attempted to crawl around her. "Sowwy," Miral whispered to her. All it took was a gentle push to make the older girl fall and roll onto her side, just so she'd be hidden by the table again. Amy started to whimper as she landed.

"Get off me, no!" Duncan yelled as all of the remaining aliens kept a hold of him.

Shoytin shook his head as his two loyal crewmembers dropped their new prisoner onto the floor. "There's always one kid fancying himself a hero, huh? Maybe I should leave him to last," he snickered.

The two stared at each other with the same worried look on their faces, they turned to face their leader and gave him a fake smile and laugh.

"Don't look at me like that," Shoytin said to Sasha, much to the other two's relief not them. She was blinking away tears and pouting, but with her head turned to try and hide it from him. "Daddy's the one that's gonna kill you, not me."

"What sir?" Hikgel stuttered, fear started to get to him.

Shoytin didn't even have to look at him to show his irritation, he only had to grunt. "Not literally. I'm not a monster." He smiled again when Sasha tried to reach for her unconscious father on the floor. "I'm not the one who risked his daughter's life trying to stupidly rescue her. Hmm?"

"Sir, are we really going to do this?" the woman asked carefully. Shoytin shot her a glare which made her wince and her shoulders slump.

"Maybe um..." Hikgel stammered, he looked to the floor to avoid the same glare. "Maybe we can talk to Paris, negotiate the release. They're clearly desperate if they're willing to do this. They wouldn't risk their kids if they had the information we needed."

"No," Shoytin scoffed. "Paris knows, he just won't admit it. What he doesn't know is if his reckless plan has killed anyone yet. For now, lets just let him wonder."

### **The Bridge:**

Chakotay watched Tom pace backwards and forwards in front of him as he sat in his old chair. Every now and then they'd both hear a bang from the back, neither of them really cared to look, they knew what it was.

"Shoytin didn't call, that is strange," Chakotay said.

Tom stopped for a second to whimper, then got back to pacing.

"Maybe I'm being optimistic, but that sounds like a good thing," Harry commented. "He must have thought it was an accident and that's why he hasn't threatened us."

"Or he's having a kid killing part..." Damien piped up, his head was slammed face down into the back station. Jessie grabbed his hair to pull him back again. "You're just mad cos either way, hubby's a bit singed." It happened again, making everyone watching wondering how a so called genius would be stupid enough to keep annoying her.

"You did say you cut off his eavesdropping," Chakotay pointed out.

Jessie looked a little bored after one more console slam, she settled for tossing him to the right instead. Damien tumbled the floor. "He's right, that might have tipped him off if he suddenly couldn't hear us anymore," she said.

Damien laughed as he struggled to lift himself up. "You guys were a mime act for ten minutes, what difference did it make?" Jessie shrugged, then kicked him in the leg to force him back to the floor. "Jeez, this is what I get for trying to help..."

Tom stopped pacing to face Chakotay and the back of the Bridge. "When you cut him off, we lost communications with him. If our kids die because..."

"Because James wouldn't give himself up to the aliens to save his kids, but would rather endanger their lives by pissing the aliens off, then..." Damien said as he climbed to his feet, glancing briefly at Jessie. Once he was sure her eyes were their normal colour he dared to continue, "good riddance to him."

He was surprised when Jessie didn't attack him for any of that, the rest of the Bridge's silence surprised him though. He rolled his eyes, "great, now he's considered more evil than me. That's just great."

Chakotay stared up at Tom, the latter was back to sweating a lot. "I hope you have another plan, just..."

"I do, sort of," Tom winced.

"I didn't just cut them off anyway, the moron's eavesdropping on a looped recording," Damien grumbled. He grew annoyed with himself. "Wait, why do I care again?" Jessie stamped on his foot. "Oh right," he squeaked whilst hopping on his good foot.

Chakotay sighed, "so what is it?"

"Well it's better than your plan," Tom said defensively. Chakotay frowned at him. "Well it is, and you really shouldn't be in that seat. Also we don't need any grave robbing today, so you can go home now."

"What did you say?" Chakotay said whilst pulling himself up to his feet. Tom backed off a metre or two.

"Um insulting things that would make you go," he stuttered.

The turbolift door opened, Kiara stepped out but stopped immediately when she saw Chakotay. Tom was already feeling uncomfortable and nervous but he still winced when Chakotay turned his head to look at her.

"Okay, so you ready?" he stammered.

"Sure," Kiara said, averting her eyes away from her grandfather.

Tom sighed in relief, "great, I just have one small detail I'd like to amend."

"What?" Kiara asked.

Tom's eyes drifted over towards Damien who was busy muttering to himself. He was also leaning on the barrier behind the command chairs, only standing on his good foot. Kiara looked over as well. She was about to object when Jessie shrugged and stamped on his other foot, causing him to fall to floor while still clinging onto the bar.

"Why?" Kiara sighed.

"Someone should go with you, he's the only one I want to risk," Tom answered. Chakotay coughed mockingly. "Well there's another but he's the lesser of two evils."

Damien gasped in horror from the floor, "how dare you!" Jessie groaned, she gave him a quick kick in the stomach to stop him from complaining.

"I don't know, it looks like Jessie needs him more than I do," Kiara said with a meek smile.

"Why you taking it out on me, it was your freak that killed your kids, not me," Damien complained anyway.

"Uhoh," everyone said.

"Which Evil Jessie do you think we're going to get? Skin removal or man removal?" Chakotay said with a smirk.

Jessie smiled sweetly. Damien's eyes widened, he quickly scrambled away before she could do anything... yet. He stood behind Kiara. She didn't look that thrilled about it. "So, what are we waiting for Lena Junior? Lets save the day."

"Ugh, coward," Kiara groaned. She clicked her fingers, the two disappeared in a flash.

Jessie scowled in Chakotay's direction. "For your information I'm leaning more towards pain in the ass removal."

"You didn't understand what I meant by man removal, did you?" Chakotay said.

Jessie's anger fizzled away, she just looked confused. "Yeah, I was confused about that cos Damien's no man."

Tom sighed in relief, "ookay, so that's phase one of the plan underway. Time for phase two."

"Which is?" B'Elanna questioned.

Tom hurried over to where she was. "James risked an explosion in the face and um..." he looked over to catch Jessie narrowing her eyes at him. "Probably escaped unharmed from one, without anyone knowing he was there..."

"Tom," B'Elanna warned him he was only making it worse.

"Fine, I tried," Tom pouted. "It wasn't my plan." Chakotay rolled his eyes. "The whole point was to get some of our control back. Hopefully we can use it before the aliens figure out what we've got back."

"Great, as usual we're half assing it. Nope, not even quarter," Chakotay commented.

Tom slammed both of his hands down on the station, it startled everyone. "We haven't got time for this! If James was caught we could be already too late." He quickly checked to see how far away Jessie was from him before continuing. "We've got a three out of fifteen chance that Shoytin may pick one of his kids, and then what."

"We'll have a repeat of the Mess Hall demons incident, I know," Chakotay groaned. Jessie stared him down with an expression which topped any of Janeway's old death glares. He tried to wave it off but she was also walking towards him. "Relax, I was just trying to scare Tom."

"I'm already scared," Tom admitted. He turned to B'Elanna, she gave him a soft smile. "So what we got?"

"Well the good news is the overload started when he disconnected most of the forcefield network," B'Elanna answered.

Harry winced as he moved away from Tactical. "What's the bad news?"

"Apart from the overload's resulting explosion drawing attention to it?" Nathan said quietly. He didn't notice that Jessie was standing not far from him, she gave him a light slap across the head. "Hey."

"I still can't use transporters or scan for lifesigns," B'Elanna replied.

Tom's shoulders fell, his hands leaned on the station. "So... a few forcefields are down and they probably know about it. No offense but I expected better of James." He spotted a glance between Chakotay and Jessie in the corner of his eye, he looked up as dread started to sink in. "Please, please tell me he didn't get caught on purpose guys."

"Shoytin threatened to pull the trigger on a kid if we dared to try anything. The last communication we heard, he wanted to kill Amy first," Jessie said while trying desperately to keep her temper. "What do you think?"

Tom desperately looked at B'Elanna, she looked concerned as well. "I don't know. I really, really hope not. There was always a chance their hacker would figure out what he was doing, that's a huge gamble."

"Chakotay?" B'Elanna almost growled.

Chakotay didn't dare look her way. "Don't look at me, he was going to go and hack his way inside. I only suggested that he target one system and return."

"That's not a plan, that's barely an edit," Tom complained, his hand covered his face. "Okay, forcefields are down. Where?" B'Elanna looked at him in surprise. "If Kiara can't do anything it's all we got left."

"It's about time."

For a few seconds his sight was blurred, then the burning pain kicked in. Even just opening his eyes stung. All of that was forgotten when his vision cleared up and James could see Shoytin sitting in a seat in front of him. Sasha squirmed in his arms, tears streaming down her face. He lunged forward but a hand grabbed his shoulder and something metallic was shoved roughly into his cheek. A brief glance to the right and he saw it was one of the aliens' phaser rifles.

"You shouldn't make your daughter wait," Shoytin taunted him. James was about to move forward anyway until he noticed the small Federation phaser in the man's hand. "It was awfully foolish of you to try to disable the forcefields. Did you not think we would see it?"

"You really don't want to do that," he said.

Shoytin glanced down at Sasha, she turned her head away and whimpered. "Do what?" He laughed quietly as he climbed to his feet. "I didn't do anything. You forced my hand. If my daughter was here, I would co-operate. I'd do anything to bring her home safely."

"As if you could have children," James muttered.

Shoytin's smile faded, his features darkened. "Meaning what?"

"I thought it was pretty obvious," James didn't answer.

Shoytin clenched his jaw, he took one step closer and then knelt down in front of him. "Are you stupid? I could kill her in an instant." Sasha squeaked, she tried to reach for her dad again but they still weren't close enough.

"I will kill you," James warned him.

Shoytin chuckled, he straightened back up. "That's a yes. I'll give you one more chance..." Hikgel and the woman seemed very relieved, the woman showed it with a sigh. "Tell me how Voyager survived the cloud anomaly."

James slowly looked up to look him in the eye. "What do you know about it?" he eventually answered.

Shoytin growled, his phaser hand raised. "Stop playing games!"

"That's exactly what we're doing," James snapped back. "But you know that already, am I wrong?"

"Yes I know about the Game Sphere and all of its trickery. I don't want to hear about what I already know, so..." Shoytin said.

"The anomaly tricks people into staying inside and drains all the power it can until they're destroyed. A sphere like the one we're in does the same thing," James said.

"You're toying with her life, don't you know," Shoytin growled.

James shook his head, "no, you're just killing yourself. They both have a weakness, something immune to its tricks."

Shoytin sat back down in the nearby seat without breaking eye contact. "I know that as well. Tell me what it is."

"Me," James replied.

There was a bright flash of light, it quickly faded to reveal Kiara and Damien. They both looked around, Kiara sighed in relief when she saw a tractor-beamed Voyager on a nearby screen.

"This looks like the ship, finally," she said.

Damien shuddered, "I could have done without the trip to Neelix's kitchen. I've been through enough torture."

"Worth it," Kiara smirked. Damien glared at her. "Now, where should we start?"

"Whatever we do, we have to make sure they don't know it until it's too late," Damien said, rolling his eyes. Kiara directed a frown at him. "Ugh, there's not enough yoghurts in the universe for this."

"Just pretend the aliens are goody two shoes and Voyager is yours. They want it back into *good* hands," Kiara suggested.

Damien pulled a face as he thought about it, he ended up with a smile. "I dunno, what if I like this ship better?"

"Have both," Kiara answered quickly.

"I like your thinking," Damien sneered. He walked over to the nearest console as casually as he could. "That witch can't get me here. I don't need to be sneaky."

"Probably not. I assume she tried to transport over to your ship when she was evil, and failed horribly," Kiara said with a smile.

Damien thought about it, "oh. I forgot she can be competent whilst evil." He smirked at the young girl. "A lesson for us all."

"Fine, prove your lesson. Why don't we try to beam the aliens back first?" Kiara suggested while walking over to him.

"We don't even know if these sensors can get through, Voyager's internal ones were blocked. Hence the lack of lifesign readings," Damien laughed.

Kiara ignored him for now, "okay, fine. What about doing that first, they won't notice."

"Why don't you let the genius work here. You're just the driver," Damien said, waving her away. She stared at him intensely for a minute while he worked. When he stopped to think about something she gave him a hard slap. "Hey, I'm helping here. Don't I get credit for that?"

"That was for what you did to Lena," Kiara grumbled.

"Oh," Damien laughed. "I already told you, it was a mistake."

"So why didn't you say so?" Kiara stuttered in disbelief. She then shook her head, silently berating herself. "Forgot I was talking to a moron."

Damien shrugged, "I gotta get my kicks somewhere."

Kiara's face went blank. That didn't last long, it scrunched in disgust. "Eew."

"Hey I'm not the bad guy in this one," Damien said sadly. "Why don't you slap around Craig or smother the watcher guy with a pillow. It's fun."

Kiara's eyes narrowed, "which is?"

"I imagine both," Damien sniggered. He got back to work, still laughing away to himself.

"Why... why would you want to do that?" Kiara asked quietly. Damien's head turned her way, she saw that same old mischievous smile but his eyes didn't match. She swore she saw a little anger in there, it took her by surprise. "Oh my god. Did you like Ylara?"

"No," Damien laughed bitterly. "That bitch did nothing but belittle me and smack me around. Did you know she once forced me to clean her bathroom?"

Kiara looked disgusted again, Damien stared blankly as he didn't know why. "Each to his own," she muttered. He still wasn't sure what she was reacting to, he just shrugged and turned back to the console. "I know you'll only find this hilarious, but you must know that you may have broken her. It wasn't her that killed Ylara. Lena, she didn't deserve your bile."

"I told you," Damien muttered angrily. Again Kiara was surprised. "It... was... a... mistake. I thought she was Ylara."

"Still, you were going on about revenge like she was your friend," Kiara said. "My mistake, I thought I was talking to the *almighty and evil* Damien." She shook her head and walked away.

"Hmph," Damien huffed, he decided to ignore her and concentrate only on his work.

### **Voyager, Deck Eight:**

"You expect me to believe this?" Shoytin said, a smug smile formed on his face.

"I can prove it," James sighed in annoyance.

Shoytin shook his head, "yes I'm sure. I imagine I'd have to let people go to prove it."

"No, it's all in our databases," James said. Shoytin scoffed. "I suppose it would be quicker to prove it on you."

"I see. So you intimidate me into letting you use the computers. You take me for a fool?" Shoytin snarled.

"Yeah but not for that reason," James answered.

Shoytin raised the phaser again, angering James further by pointing it into Sasha's arm. "This is bordering on child abuse."

"I told you what you want to know. You even have what you need to survive the anomaly," James said. "There's no..."

"How convenient!" Shoytin snapped. "You know what I see? Paris sends one of his lackeys to disable the forcefields, but just in case it fails he gives the minion a backup deception..."

"Paris had nothing to do with this, I never listen to him!" James snapped over the top of him.

Shoytin continued anyway, "*if you're captured, pretend to be this mystical Slayer thing and if he doesn't believe you, give him the proof he needs. We'll do the rest.* How stupid do you think I am?"

Sasha struggled against him. "Stop it," she cried.

"See, even your own daughter thinks it's insane," Shoytin growled.

James shook his head, "I don't have to prove it with a computer. You don't have to compromise anything..."

"Really, so explain to me how one person defends the entire ship's navigation systems from tampering," Shoytin said.

"I was the one that locked out the helm control. I had to stop one member of the crew trying to eject the warp core..." James explained.

"Sounds very simple," Shoytin mockingly said. "Sounds nice and clean. Very believable. If you were this super hero, how are you here?"

James rolled his eyes, he laughed bitterly. "I'm no hero, and I'm definitely not *super* either. Who says that?"

"Daddy," Sasha whimpered.

"But I am what you need to get into that anomaly. Look through the database on your own, I'm sure your hacker will easily manage to get in," James said. "In case you need further proof..." His hand grabbed a hold of the rifle sticking in his face. Shoytin noticed it starting to bend downwards when the two aliens panicked, the one not carrying the rifle swung her own into James' face. Unlike Markal the blow didn't knock him to the floor, it only dazed him. The two aliens shared a panic stricken glance, this time they both struck him over and over.

"No, leave him alone!" Sasha sobbed.

Shoytin sighed, he turned his chair back on what was happening, blocking her view of it. "I'm no monster..." he whispered to her. "But daddy did blab too soon, would you believe him?" His head turned back slightly, "enough, I need him conscious!"

The aliens froze on the spot, only their eyes moved to keep watch of James struggling to sit back up again.

Shoytin climbed up to his feet, and placed Sasha into the seat instead of him. He slowly walked around it to stand in front of James.

"Maybe... maybe he's not lying," Hikgel stuttered. "Look at him, one hit almost knocked Markal out."

The woman scowled at him, "it's a bit late to be having second thoughts now."

"You panicked first," Hikgel snapped back.

"Enough," Shoytin said calmly but there was a dangerous tint to his voice. The two aliens knew to shut up. He snatched the rifle that James had grabbed earlier to inspect the damage to it. The two aliens noticed the slight bend and they grew even more nervous. "Do not concern yourselves. Humans could be stronger than we are and he could have been trying to break free, not prove a point." He turned to Hikgel, "watch the girl."

Hikgel nodded, he hurried over to stand on the other side of the chair. The sight of her still sobbing, her face drenched with tears, made him feel awful. He hated it, so he mentally tried to slap himself out of it. Instead he just grew angry at himself and her.

"Do we have anything we can tie him up with?" Shoytin asked.

The woman nodded, "yes sir." She hurried back into the nursery.

"Well then, let's see what truth comes out when there's a little pain," Shoytin said quietly as he knelt down.

"Hmm, this must be the sensors," Damien said to himself out loud. He pressed one button and the lights went off. "Maybe not." One more push brought them back on. His face lit up as well. "Ah of course, ranaan must mean the same thing in their stupid language. Lights on, illuminate what you can't see, ie the sensors. I'm way too clever for this crap."

Kiara didn't look impressed, she just looked bored. "Sure, like reading was the same word as cup holder."

"Ah cleverness went right over your head, no surprise," Damien laughed. He pressed a few more buttons and waited. Nothing happened this time though. "Oh, why didn't it..."

"You're not as smart as you think you are," Kiara muttered in response.

Damien pretended to consider that, he then laughed quite loudly. "Good one. Maybe it still needs a little power." He pressed yet another button. The screen showing Voyager nearby slowly got covered up by a black metal screen moving down. "That's almost as useless as the Enterprise's viewscreen being holographic."

"Here I was expecting another warp core shield joke, which has gotten very old," Kiara sighed.

Damien giggled, "oh boy, that was a good one. Almost as good as my Jeffries tube slide on the so called Deck Twenty Nine. Or what I like to call the bottomless pit. Good times, puts Deck Thirteen to shame."

Kiara's face scrunched up in confusion, she wasn't quite sure what to say to that besides, "huh?"

Damien glanced over his shoulder to look at her, "seriously, watch Nemesis."

"Right, can you use the alien's computers or not?" Kiara asked impatiently.

"Of course! I just have to lower myself to the average Joe's level to understand their ludicrous console designs," Damien answered.

"Yeah that's the problem," Kiara commented. Assuming she was agreeing with him, Damien smirked and returned to work. She groaned as one more button push made the cup holder in the centre seat disappear into the arm. "There's gotta be something I can do," she whispered to herself. Without realising it she started to pace in a circle around the alien bridge. "Aliens have kids, they will shoot if we try something that they can see. We can't beam them out, we can't charge in even if there were no forcefields, what they want we can't give them. Also their ship is pretty much useless here." It suddenly came to her, not one but two things she could do. "I got it!"

"I doubt that," Damien mumbled.

"I think it's minor enough, all I have to do is tell Voyager that..." Kiara said. A flash of light enveloped her, cutting her right off. A second later she was gone.

"Hmm, maybe..." Damien said quietly. His finger pressed one more button. The tiny screen next to it activated, his face lit up. "Ah ha, that's the one."

### **Voyager's Bridge:**

B'Elanna and Harry were attempting to share Opps but they kept clashing everytime they each tried to

do something. Harry tried to reach over to the part she was working on, his hand got slapped for his trouble.

"I'm using that," she snapped.

"Ouch okay, I'm gonna forgive that cos of your situation," Harry pouted.

"Yay," B'Elanna said sarcastically. "I assume cos you keep hogging my side that you haven't found anything that can help."

"No, nothing," Harry shook his head. "They haven't yet rebooted the shield, but other than that there's no change."

B'Elanna smacked the station, it even beeped as if it was complaining about it. "Chakotay, next time you decide to give James some advice, make it useful."

Chakotay didn't dare say anything, he kept his gaze straight ahead towards the helm. In the corner of his eye he saw Tom's head turned towards him from the other chair. "What?"

"If you told James that he dropped something or a lace was loose, he'd just keep walking. How the hell did you convince him to change the rescue his own kids plan?" Tom asked.

Chakotay turned his head, he immediately saw the suspicion in his eyes. "I didn't order him, if that's what you mean."

"It's not," Tom stated.

"I don't know what to tell you. I suggested the forcefields should be his main focus. I'm as surprised as you that he listened," Chakotay said.

"So it wasn't really your plan, it was his," Tom groaned into his hand.

"Does it matter? It clearly didn't work!" B'Elanna snapped at them both.

Harry winced not just because of that, but the station beeped at them at the same time. "Comm link to Deck Eight has been activated, but he still can't hear us."

*"Answer at once," Shoytin's voice said coldly.*

Tom gave Harry a wave as he stood up from his seat. Both Harry and B'Elanna went to tap the same command.

"Paris here," Tom managed to say although his teeth were threatening to chatter. His whole body was starting to tremble as he feared the worst.

*"Nice try."*

Tom felt a lump grow in his throat, he tried desperately to swallow it while looking around at everyone. He was very thankful that Jessie was nowhere to be seen.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

*"You know what I mean. I do like your creativity, not many people would come up with a ridiculous story like this to cover your tracks."*

"What?" Tom frowned, he was definitely confused. "I really have no idea what you're talking about."

B'Elanna and a few other's eyes widened as they just managed to hear Sasha's now much quieter crying. They didn't hear it for long, *"you managed to escape the anomaly because of one super*

*powered freak, who just happens to know how to hack, as well as keep an eye on a whole ship. I've read more realistic children's books."*

"Where are you getting this?" Tom asked carefully.

*"I have him right here. It didn't take much to get him to talk," Shoytin answered. "Usually I have to do the torture first, not the other way around."*

"I don't... who and what are you talking about?" Tom stuttered.

*Shoytin groaned impatiently, "you sent your hacker to disable our shields, he's right here. Do not pretend it didn't happen, it's a waste of both our time."*

"Hacker? Oh god," Tom pretended to sound annoyed. "I told him not to try anything."

*"Oh, is that how we're playing it? All right. Let me catch you up then," Shoytin said.*

Harry cringed, "someone's trying to activate the viewscreen."

Tom quickly nodded at him. B'Elanna tapped the station while he did so. The viewscreen then activated to show the inside of the nursery office. Shoytin blocked most of the view of it, not for long though. The image span around, once it stopped everyone could see Sasha sitting in the chair, trying desperately to dry her eyes but with no success. Behind her was James lying still on the floor, with a few extra bruises on top of his burn wounds.

Shoytin let that image stick for a bit before the image span round to show him again. He knelt down so they could see his face. "She's got five minutes." The whole Bridge froze, Tom could feel the nervous sweat coming back. "Give me the truth, prove it or I'll wake him up and make him watch."

Tom felt himself laughing but he had no idea why. "Trust me, you do not want to do that."

Shoytin smiled, "why not? I've been very lenient so far. She should have been dead as soon as he was brought in."

"It'll be the last thing you ever do," Chakotay warned, his lip threatened to curl into a smirk.

"Four minutes," Shoytin muttered.

Tom didn't know he could panic anymore than he had done so far, but he was managing it. "Look, look... the guy you've captured has a really, I mean really violent temper. He's killed people. You kill his daughter, well... even I don't know how far he'll go. Please, just..."

"Should I be afraid, really? Is he really this *Slayer*, or is this just a way to control me?" Shoytin said.

Chakotay shook his head, "you'll find out soon enough."

"Chakotay, really?" Tom whispered back at him. He noticed the Commander's face looked deadly serious, he didn't know what to make of that. Tom's attention quickly went back to the viewscreen. "If he's told you who he is, then surely he told you that he's the reason we survived the anomaly." Shoytin only scoffed in response. "How are we supposed to do this if you don't believe anything we say?"

"See it from my side. Would you believe it?" Shoytin answered.

"Okay, let me explain something to you. Imagine we're telling the truth," Tom said as he slowly approached the viewscreen. "Your timer runs out, you wake up the Slayer and you kill his daughter in front of him. I'm right and he loses it; he'll kill you, your crew without breaking a sweat. You won't even be able to shoot him, he'll just finish the job, while your people might try to kill off some kids in the panic. Pretty big gamble for both of us right?"

"I'm okay with the killing the crew part," Chakotay muttered to himself.

Tom ignored him for the time being, "if you decide to believe me, you'll get what you came here for. On the other hand if I'm lying and you believe me, it'll get us both quite literally nowhere. I have nothing to gain from this. If you don't and you kill her, well nobody wins there either. It's your choice."

He was relieved when it appeared like Shoytin was thinking about it. B'Elanna shook her head, she didn't see it ending that easily.

"You do realise that in your believe it scenario, I take your Slayer and you'll never get it back," Shoytin pointed out.

"This is why I didn't want you to know about him. I don't give up members of my crew, it's not our way," Tom said. "However if he told you so freely, he would be willing to exchange the kids for himself. I would if I could."

"That's the thing," Shoytin smiled.

"Here we go," B'Elanna muttered.

"I have no guarantee, no safety net that he'll co-operate with me, Slayer or not. I imagine he's only taking the hits because..." Shoytin said. Again the screen span to focus on Sasha, this time she seemed to notice it. Her eyes lit up a little.

"It's okay, we'll get you out of there," Tom said softly.

Sasha's bottom lip was trembling, her eyes threatened to burst into tears again. "Mummy..." Tom turned around towards the back of the bridge, sure enough Jessie was just leaving a turbolift carrying a few books. She dropped them on the floor when she saw her. "I'm sorry."

Shoytin laughed as most of the bridge cringed and wished it was all a bad dream. "Oh, is that where you got your looks, sweet annoying thing?" he taunted just before entering the screen by foot. He picked Sasha up, making the already tense atmosphere on the bridge even more suffocating. "I was wondering."

"You son of a..." Jessie grumbled.

"Jess," Tom continued to cringe. It didn't matter, Jessie was already at the front of the bridge, with only Nathan and the helm getting in her way.

"Put her down or I'll personally go down there and rip your fingers off!" she snapped.

"Oh," Shoytin sniggered. "Mummy's feisty, I like her."

Tom quickly dared to walk over to Jessie's side, he didn't dare touch her though. "Remember the bit about the killing your crew. I dunno how I forgot to mention this but..." he gestured his thumb in her direction.

"I see, so she's one of these Slayers too?" Shoytin chuckled. "Does it run in the family now?"

"No but you're one of the dead men," Jessie growled.

Shoytin pretended to look shocked, "you know, it's been more than five minutes. I'll leave it up to you if you want to watch as well. I know you managed to get that control back at least." The screen went off quickly. Tom looked around to Opps.

"I panicked," Harry stuttered.

"Five minutes to what?" Jessie angrily asked, although she already had an idea. She didn't wait for an answer, she hurried over to the books she dropped.

"Uhoh," B'Elanna remarked. "Are you sure..."

"Oh I'm sure!" Jessie snapped. All of the books were dumped on Tactical, the first one was opened immediately.

Tom looked at everyone else helplessly, the last person he looked at was B'Elanna. "Why haven't we got Red Alert on?" he asked in a tired voice.

"I really have no idea," B'Elanna answered.

Shoytin noticed the computer was blank once again. He placed Sasha back into the seat, then walked over to where James lay.

"Get me something to wake him up," he ordered.

Hikgel and the woman looked at each other, she eventually nodded nervously and ran out of the office. Hikgel remained where he was, tightly clutching his rifle to his chest.

"Are you really going to do this?" he stuttered.

Shoytin rolled his eyes, he passed the other man a deadly glare. Hikgel quickly swallowed the lump in his throat, he knew that look well. As Shoytin was turning his head back a hand shot forward and grabbed his throat. All he could see were a pair of intense eyes glaring into his own as he struggled to breathe.

"Uhoh," Hikgel panicked. He raised the rifle up, but wasn't sure where to shoot. He was torn between his Captain's attacker or the girl in the chair. It didn't matter, he noticed he had been left with the broken rifle and it would probably only shoot the floor in this state. By now his leader was being lifted off the ground, he struggled to pull the hand off but it was useless.

Hikgel ran over to help. James saw him coming, he swung his spare left arm into his path, knocking the man flying backwards onto the floor. His attention went back to Shoytin as his face started turning purple.

"Is this proof enough?" he asked coldly.

Hikgel clambered to get up. "Toren!" he yelled as he dashed outside.

What nobody noticed during this commotion was Sasha climbing down from the chair. She went to run but saw exactly what was happening, she started to shake.

"Daddy?" her scared voice got James' full attention. His head turned her way, his own face softened at the sight of hers. He looked back at the man clinging to life in front of him, then again at his terrified daughter. The anger was all but gone, but he worried what would happen to her if he let this man live. The look on her face though, he didn't want her to see this.

Shoytin barely had any breath left in him, he was close to passing out. James shook his head, he was about to let him go when Hikgel charged back into the office. He wasn't alone though.

"Let him go, or I'll kill them both!" he shouted. James looked around and saw who he was talking about, he couldn't help but cringe.

"I kick your ass!" Miral screeched as she struggled in the man's arms.

James sighed. His hand lowered, Hikgel relaxed a little as Shoytin was returned to the ground. He didn't loosen his grip on Miral though so he stopped.

"You first," Hikgel growled.

"All right, fine," James groaned. He continued to lower Shoytin but at the last second he tossed him towards Hikgel. The man jumped in shock as his leader slammed into the wall directly beside him. Miral used his reaction to slip out of his arms.

Sasha assumed it was safe to run as well, only she ran right up to her dad and hugged his leg tightly. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Asshole," Miral grunted, giving the alien man a kick before running off. Unfortunately it gave him time to recover from his shock and grab her before she could get away.

"Hey, no! No!" he snapped, pulling her right back to in front of him. "That's not what I told you to do."

"You said let him go, I did," James said.

Hikgel shook his head, though that wasn't the only part of him that was shaking. He looked petrified. "No, you tried to kill him. That's two mistakes, so two kids."

"He didn't give me any choice, I did warn him," James said.

Miral gave Hikgel a punch in the leg. It only made him madder so he picked her back up. "I'll tell you what. We either have two hostages as well as you. Or you two separate, and we can go back to having one."

### **Meanwhile:**

It was dark and empty, almost hollow. Everything about it, including the air seemed like it belonged somewhere else. It was the perfect place for her to go. It reminded her of her own place on Voyager, not just that, but in this timeline as well. She was an outsider, dragged unwillingly into it. The only difference was, she didn't want to drag the other fourteen decks into hell with her.

Lena didn't know what she wanted. For now having some peace and quiet, away from prying and sympathetic eyes was enough.

Her thoughts drifted back to Kiara. Despite how she felt, she was relieved to see her again. She had silently hoped that she would feel the same way. Lena knew better though, everytime the girl would look her in the eye she could tell the opposite was true. She didn't blame her one bit.

At first Lena thought it was her head playing tricks on her when the walls seemed to get brighter. Then everything around her was swallowed by a brief but blinding light. The light quickly faded.

It didn't take her long to realise that she was no longer on Voyager. The place she was at now looked familiar, but felt different, darker. Cold and lifeless. Just as she felt, she thought.

Her eyes were drawn to the leather chair in the centre of the room she was in. It felt like it was inviting her over, yet at the same time something inside pushed her further away from it. An internal voice saying, "you don't deserve it." As usual it was her own.

Looking around she noticed all the computers, work stations, screens were blank. Chairs were left discarded, as if someone left them in a hurry. There was damage, yet another difference. The bulkhead near the entrance to the Ready Room had collapsed in on itself. If it wasn't so dark she would be able to see inside it.

Lena continued to stare through the gap, hoping to see something.

Another flash of light, this time behind her, got her full attention and she turned around to see what it was. The man standing there now was more than familiar. It felt like it had been years since she last felt like this, she had almost forgotten what it was like. All she wanted to do was hurt him.

"Q?" was all she said.

"Lena my dear, long time no see."

Her right hand clenched, she felt an overwhelming urge to throw it into his smug face. She resisted for now. "Why am I on the Enterprise?"

Q seemed a little disappointed, at least his smug face had toned down. He glanced around the empty Bridge. "Hmm yes, I suppose the old girl's seen better days. Although she suffered worse under Jean Luc's command at times."

"I said why?" Lena mumbled. "Why show me this illusion?"

"We needed to be alone and it's no illusion," Q answered.

"I heard..." Lena made sure to look around again. The lack of light or even just power, as well as the damage, the emptiness. It made sense to her now. Almost.

"Yes your Enterprise is still trapped," Q answered as if he read her mind. "Just think of this as a representation, a visual aid for your mortal mind to comprehend. The Continuum is difficult to explain to ones not like us."

That made even less sense to her, but at least she understood why the Enterprise still had enough power for her to breathe. "Why?" she asked.

"The little one is in a spot of bother. Apparently she was about to abuse powers she shouldn't for her own personal gain," Q replied.

"Kiara?" Lena said. She understood less and less, "I don't under... you do it, all the time."

Q nodded, his face was still oddly serious. "I did and my powers were revoked. I made sure that during her time with me that she understood the rules."

It didn't seem that bad to her. What could she have done that was as bad or worse than him? "So they'll take her powers away?"

"You think we're being harsh," Q said.

Lena shook her head, "no of course not. Your whole existence seems to be about tormenting Kiara and me." Q's face fell, she didn't expect it or care either. "Why don't you just leave us alone!?"

"I brought you here to help you," Q protested.

"Help me? What about Kiara? It's the only reason I'm even talking to you or at all," Lena said.

Q nodded, he slowly walked over to the central seat and soon got himself comfortable. "Believe it or not but I'm not the bad guy here." The resulting look on her face made him wary of saying anything more about that. "The Continuum did not want to lose Kiara. On the contrary. The issue for them is she's obviously too Human."

"Oh I'm sorry," Lena muttered. The anger she thought was no longer there was threatening to spill. It wasn't a good thing, she hated it. "Why didn't I think of that before I had the audacity to exist. Whatever can I do?"

"Lena," Q said gently to her surprise. "We do not blame anyone, at least not you. The unfortunate truth is Kiara can no longer exist as both Human and Q. She has to choose."

"You are proof that doing selfish things with their power isn't limited to Humans," Lena pointed out.

"I didn't say it was," Q said. "A minor teleportation spell or two, a niggly at best. Sedating intruders holding hostages; risky and a little unethical. Disabling intruder's weapons, definitely could cause more problems than help. Erasing their memories, power abuse at its worst."

Lena wasn't sure what he was saying. "What hostages?" she wondered out loud. "She did all those things?"

"Only the first one. The Continuum retrieved her before she could really do some damage," Q replied. "Of course they're taking it out on me too. I trained her, therefore she's my responsibility in your stead."

"You poor thing." Lena didn't mean it. "If she wasn't ready, why let her leave?"

"As long as she's bound to Humanity, she'll never be ready," Q said in a tone that told her they weren't his words. He was only repeating them. "The Continuum knew it would come to this all along. Her recent behaviour has just inspired them to move things forward now."

Lena shook her head timidly. "No, she only wanted to help people. That's the opposite of self gain by the way. I thought that what you people do is just that. Or are having powers just an ego boost?"

"Rescuing a group of kids, even the two Slayer ones, from desperate aliens isn't something they would trouble themselves over. It's a mortal problem," Q answered.

"So if she chooses Humanity, she loses her powers. What happens if she picks a Q life?" Lena questioned.

Q seemed forlorn at the question. "She doesn't. They've elected you to choose her fate."

Dread washed over her like a wave, the anger went away with the tide. "Me? Sometimes I can't even decide whether to breathe out or take a step. How can I? It's not for me to choose."

"She's still a child by Q terms, and if I'm not mistaken that despite her appearance she is in Human ones as well," Q answered. "You're her mother. Also to answer your previous question, if you choose the Q existence she'll have to return home."

"But..." Lena's voice started to crack as her body trembled. "For good?"

Q nodded only once. "If she were to live as a Q, she'd have to leave her Human life behind completely. Kiara wouldn't be the first."

The fake Enterprise surroundings were slowly fading away into black. It didn't matter, it wasn't real. Lena remembered her recent time on Voyager feeling the exact same way. Empty yet familiar, colder and unforgiving. It would fade away like a bad dream, only it would drag her back in. This illusion was eerily alike.

"I'm sorry, if it were up to me..." Q seemed genuinely apologetic. He seemed to notice the illusion was fading away as well, it wasn't just her. "I wouldn't make you pick."

"But you did," Lena said quietly. "I know now. You took Kiara away and then you saw fit to take away everything I had as well. Voyager, my family... I watched as they were destroyed. I was left alone, but you did nothing to stop any of it. It was all part of the plan, wasn't it?"

Q was shocked, it was so obvious to her, his fake Human face had paled to a ghostly white. "There was nothing wrong with that timeline, Q. It was fine until you and your friend came along. You chose to take Kiara away, not once, not twice but now a third. Surely your precious timeline has been fixed. Please just stop, I can't take anymore of this!" she pleaded.

"I didn't want it this way, I promise you that," Q said.

Lena didn't, couldn't believe him. "Liar, I was there. You saw my pregnancy by that horrible Q as something good. You saw an opportunity, you took it. You didn't seem torn at all!"

"You do remember your previous life," Q said, there was a little fear on his features now. "That's not possible."

"I was dead for almost two years and yet here I am. So why the hell not?" Lena muttered.

"You weren't supposed to remember for a reason," Q said.

"Why?" Lena asked. "To fit your *I'm Kiara* trick, which you yourself exposed five years ago. Why didn't you restore it then?"

Q pulled himself out of the chair. He slowly approached her. "To spare you from exactly this. The pain, the confusion of a lost past."

"No, you just wanted to be cruel. Don't deny that. All powerful Q's can't spare one nano second to save innocent children, but still have time to kick up a fuss when one thinks about trying. That says it all," Lena said.

"Enough of this, Q!" a booming voice echoed over the darkness. Lena sensed it come from all around her. It began to concentrate between her and Q. Then she saw a figure fade into view. Before either of them could say anything, the figure spoke, "the child is your responsibility. Choose."

James' eyebrow raised. "What?"

"You heard me. It's either both or just her!" Hikgel snapped. The woman from before walked in, holding the only good rifle. "Let her go back to her seat, I'll let this one go, and you don't try anything while we restrain you..." His eyes darted to where James lay before, two metal devices a lot like handcuffs were there now, broken in two pieces each. "Better this time."

James felt Sasha's grip on him loosen, he looked down to find her pulling away. "No, what are you doing?" he kept a firm but still gentle hold on her shoulders.

"But... Miral," she said quietly.

"This should be easy, why have two kids in danger when you can just pick one!" Hikgel yelled.

"Easy?" James snapped in surprise. "You're asking me to choose between keeping my daughter safe but still trapped in here with you, and risk getting another child hurt or worse. Or put my own daughter at risk to spare someone else's."

"Yes," Hikgel tried to cover his fear with a laugh, it wasn't convincing anyone. "Simple. Any father would pick their kid first. Are you really so twisted that this is a hard choice for you?"

James again looked down at his daughter, she stared up at him, her eyes pleading with him to let her go. "It says a lot..." he said, slowly looking back towards Hikgel and his teammate. "That I'm not the twisted one here."

"Prove it. Choose," Hikgel said.

The woman shook her head, "you couldn't have just threatened a simple exchange, your kid for this kid?" She knelt down beside Shoytin to check on him.

"No," Hikgel nervously laughed. "Cos we know he would have picked this one. We'd lose our advantage against him." Miral started kicking her legs fiercely, each one slammed into Hikgel's upper legs, he cringed with each one.

The woman turned a little pale as she inspected the huge bruise around her leader's neck. "I... you call this an advantage?"

"Maybe I really knew he'd keep a hold of his own kid and risk this little monster, this way we get two," Hikgel muttered, slowly moving the attacking girl further forward from him so she couldn't hit him. "Seriously, only a guy who would do that to our Captain would care about a little demon like this!"

Miral made a disappointed aaw sound when every kick she just hit air. She then looked down at the hands holding her, her eyes started to sparkle.

"Daddy," Sasha said. "I don't wanna hurt Miral. Please."

James knelt down beside her, all while keeping his arm over her shoulders. "I don't either. But, I refuse to let these so called people touch you again."

"But..." Sasha protested, her eyes welling up again. Her shaking hand reached forward to touch his face, only she stopped at the last second. "My fault."

There was a nasty crunch, then a man's scream. "Aaaw you little parasite..." Hikgel grumbled. He tried to stop her, but the little girl's teeth just clamped further down. The woman groaned, she leaned over to try and take her away from him.

"That's not true at all," James said softly. "I failed, so this is my fault."

"Aaaw!" Miral moaned as the woman held her now. Hikgel had gladly swapped her for the rifle, which he was also happy to point at her.

Sasha pouted, "you hurt, Miral's here. I just want to help."

"I know you do," James said.

"Ugh, what kind of freak of nature doesn't pick his own kid's safety?" the woman grunted.

Hikgel nodded, "I know I would, these Slayers are obviously sick in the head." He pointed towards Shoytin.

"That's not true," Sasha grumbled. "He..." James lifted her up from the ground, he then stood up. The two aliens seemed a little relieved. "Daddy?"

"I want my daughter to be safe more than anything, but..." he said, sounding slightly hesitant. "What kind of asshole would I be if I endangered somebody else's daughter to do it?"

"So you choose to let this one go back to the others and let us threaten your kid?" Hikgel was surprised. "Wow, that's cold."

James shook his head, his other arm went around Sasha as well, pulling her closer to his chest. "I never said that..."

"Fine, the demon stays," Hikgel smiled. Miral responded by blowing a raspberry, though none of them were really sure who it was aimed for. Then she folded her arms tightly in a huff.

"No," James said, glancing briefly at his daughter's face, then at Miral. "She doesn't," his voice cracked. Sasha smiled up at him proudly before cuddling into him.

Hikgel stared at his companion, surprise all over his face. She matched it. "Never saw that coming," he said. "All right, put her down on that seat and walk away."

James hesitated as his daughter snuggled into his shoulder, clutching him tightly. This didn't feel right at all. "God, what am I... what am I doing?" he whispered so quietly, he didn't want her to hear it.

She heard it anyway and smiled up at him again. "I don't want Miral getting hurt like you, cos of me." When his eyes closed tightly her head shook, "it's ok daddy. You'll win, always do. I'm not scared."

"Hurry up!" Hikgel snarled.

As James opened his eyes, a tear escaped one. "Cos my daddy's a hero," she said, giving him another cuddle. "He always finds a way out, no matter what."

"Enough of this, you're stalling," Hikgel grew angry. He was starting to panic again, he stepped forward to point the rifle at James instead. "Put her down!"

James' eyes squeezed shut again, this time when he opened them they looked determined. He gave his daughter a little kiss on the forehead before placing her gently down on the chair.

"Good, now... show us this proof that you helped with the anomaly, on the databases!" Hikgel stammered nervously.

"Hikgel," the woman warned him.

"You saw what he did to Shoytin, but you didn't see what he did to me when I tried to stop it," Hikgel hissed. "It's true."

James shook his head, not that Hikgel could see it much as his back was still on him. "Miral's still here."

"Not until you're back over there!" the woman snapped, pointing at his earlier spot on the floor.

Hikgel marched over to stand mostly between James and Sasha, his rifle kept pointing at one of them for a few seconds before moving to the other.

"I'm hearing different orders here," James said.

"If it's true you're taking a big risk by not separating them further. We don't need computer proof if you're so sure," the woman said.

What was left of Hikgel's restraint snapped like a puny twig, his face flushed red. "Shut up and put that demon down, I know what I'm doing!" he screamed in her direction.

The woman was taken aback by his outburst. She lowered Miral to the ground anyway, then gave her a gentle push to the door. Miral just stood there though with a confused look on her face.

"Good, now..." Hikgel said, not noticing Miral's reaction. He gestured his head toward the computer. "All you've proven is that you're a violent waste of super strength. Prove that you're the reason Voyager is here and then we can leave." James stepped forward but Hikgel quickly pointed the rifle back at the seat. "One little computer trick like the forcefields and I shoot. Understand?"

Miral looked up at the woman who held her, then forward at the other three. "Go," the woman whispered, giving her another push. The little girl pouted, her eyes widened. As James moved forward towards the table she could see Sasha sitting in the seat clearly, Hikgel still kept his rifle trained on her. It made her mad again.

James reached forward to drag the computer closer. His fingers went to tap something when the screen flickered off and back on in a space of a second, his fingers just hovered hesitantly.

"You really want your kid dead don't you?" Hikgel snarled.

James' jaw clenched, the left hand did as well. It was all he could to tame the anger for now. "You want proof that I helped. I'm not even sure how..."

"What?" Hikgel snapped.

The woman's eyes widened as Miral ran forward instead of leaving, she quickly grabbed her arm to pull her back. Despite the obvious struggle, the woman carried her outside.

"I may be able to show you what I did to shut down the helm, but other than that..." James said. "What I did in Engineering is impossible to show, there's no camera or anything up there."

"Then show me the first thing," Hikgel snapped.

"I'll have to explain it, it's complicated," James said quietly as he worked.

Hikgel grunted, all it took was one little kick to make the chair roll into the wall. Sasha let out a little squeal as it did. He kept his rifle pointed at her as James swung around to see what happened. It took all the restraint he had, even some he didn't think he possessed, to stop himself from attacking the man.

"Do not insult me again," Hikgel warned slowly.

"Why me? Can't you get your kick from doing nothing while a planet inhabited by billions die?" Lena said bitterly.

The unknown Q didn't even blink, let alone react. His face was completely blank. "You have us all wrong young lady. It's not our job to babysit the universe. We oversee larger events."

"Oh so stopping Kiara from saving kids and pestering me are more important than people dying. Good to know," Lena said.

"You misunderstand. We orchestrate but we do not get involved. Kiara knew this yet she violated that rule," the new Q said.

Lena shook her head, "I understand fine. We mortals do all the dirty work while you do what you want to us, all the while judging us as inferior. I've done nothing to you, yet you force a decision like this on me... when five years ago you were telling me I shouldn't exist!"

"I believe I've been misquoted here, so I'll explain..." Q said awkwardly.

"You are very much mistaken," the other Q interrupted. "We maneuvered you and the other into the here and now, for a much bigger purpose than yourselves. Kiara was a... fortunate accident which gave us the eventual means to do so." While he was talking Lena noticed Q become uncharacteristically shaken and worried. It didn't suit him at all and it was a little unnerving to her. "Whether or not the girl joins us is of no consequence to us, though it is to you. You dub us as cruel, believing we are taking choice away from you when we are giving it back."

"What if I don't choose?" Lena questioned.

"We foresaw that conclusion, the majority of the Continuum decided that permanent exile from it would be for the best," the Q answered. "I on the other hand believe the girl has potential. As Q here would put it, she possesses the qualities of a mortal, which could keep the Q from falling into an evolutionary decline."

"I... I don't understand," Lena stuttered, her attention fully on the original Q. "You said she couldn't be both."

"She can't. She'll still possess some qualities of Humanity, yet she can not be among them if your choice is the Q," the Q answered.

Lena's head fell, something he had said earlier popped up in her head, like she had just heard it. "Me and the other," she looked back up. "Why say that and mention Kiara as a happy accident? Who is this other?"

"I'm sure you already know," the Q said.

"No. Only Kiara and I were forced into this version of the timeline, or whatever you idiots call it," Lena said. "There wasn't another."

"Your understanding is limited to the four dimensions. Do not concern yourself, it is natural for a Human," the Q replied.

Lena couldn't help but groan, "I thought that fifth dimension thing was a bad joke. Don't tell me it's actually true."

She finally got the Q to do something other than talk and stare blankly, although it was only an eyebrow raise. "Hardly. Space and time is infinite, it's beyond your full understanding."

"I don't actually care," Lena muttered. "I didn't care... no feel anything and now this. This is just trivial to you, but this is her life we're talking about. That's not something I can decide in a few minutes. Maybe that's something outside of your understanding."

"You have her memories, fabricated or otherwise. You are the best to make this decision," the Q said.

"Maybe I used..." Lena said.

Q seemed to panic, he quickly interrupted. "Kiara may still be a child, but she has proved many times that she is capable of making her own decisions. Look at the apparently two grown men dabbling with witchcraft, without a second thought to who it was hurting." He said the last half of the sentence looking straight at Lena sympathetically. "Kiara had that same choice, but she was mature enough to know what she was doing was wrong. So she tried to use one power to rescue children, that's no different than the other Slayer using his to try to do the same."

"He has a name," Lena muttered.

Q let himself smile, "yes, Blondy." Lena rolled her eyes in response. "My point is it should be up to Kiara to choose where her life goes. Lena here has only just returned from death, that isn't fair. It's not something we understand, so forgive us for that at least."

"No," Lena refused. "I could say I was done with you but I have Kiara to think about. One of the last things she said to me before she left, was that she felt like she didn't belong. She wanted to help but felt useless, especially when she failed to use her powers correctly. That was why she left, to control them better."

She felt the tears threatening to escape, she tried to hold them back for now. "I wanted her to stay so badly, I still do. I wanted to make up for all the bad times, the days where I blamed her for what *you* did to me. I was being selfish though, I realise that. What kind of mum puts her own happiness over her daughter's? Only me. The kind that shouldn't exist."

"I won't get in her way this time. If these are the only choices I have, then I don't choose to keep her here with me, trapped and miserable," Lena stuttered. She couldn't stop them now, the tears rolled down her cheeks. "She should be free."

"You are sure?" the Q said plainly. "This is your final decision?"

Lena nodded, "yes."

The Q nodded. He immediately faded back into the darkness, the Q she knew was about to object when he did the same, leaving Lena all alone again.

What she didn't know was that she really wasn't. Kiara had been there all along, a silent and invisible observer. She tried to yell out for her one more time, but she vanished as well.

### **Voyager's Bridge:**

"Well, that's odd," Harry commented.

Tom and Chakotay both turned their heads towards him and B'Elanna.

"Shh! I'm trying to concentrate," Jessie grumbled. She turned one more page in the book she was engrossed in, only to lose her temper and toss it to one side. "Are any of these in bloody English?"

"Um," Tom cringed. "I think I'd rather have odd than that."

Jessie tried to separate what she thought was two pages stuck together, only they weren't. "Oh screw this, I'm just going to start reading outloud from them."

Harry started to panic, he wasn't the only one though. "We've got sensors back on Deck Eight."

"I have no idea how the hell you say that," Jessie muttered. "Han-chi, so... ugh!" That book was thrown aside as well.

"Great, how did you do that?" Tom asked, quickly pulling himself up onto his feet.

B'Elanna shook her head, "we didn't." She frowned as Opps started beeping in various different spots. Harry checked the ones at the back. "Something's wrong down there. It's almost like..."

Tom noticed Chakotay smirking in the corner of his eye. He didn't even bother to check to make sure, he ran over to join the others at Opps. "Like what?"

### **Deck Eight:**

"Our computers wouldn't allow you access. How could you do the same to our ship?" Hikgel snapped.

James was starting to shake and not from fear. "I'll tell you what. Why don't I just punch you all into comas, destroy your computers. I'm sure that will work!"

"That's it," Hikgel spat.

For a second it was pitch black, then the lights flickered back on. Hikgel and the woman glanced around nervously, they noticed the computer panels on the wall were doing the same, as well as looking garbled.

"What the..." she said.

"Finally," James sighed. He grabbed a hold of the rifle, easily pulling it out of Hikgel's hands. The alien didn't have time to react to that before it was smashed into his ribs. Hikgel doubled over just to get a knee in the face.

"Ohno..." the woman stuttered. Her head darted between Sasha and the exit, in the end she chose the exit and made a run for it. It didn't matter, Hikgel flew straight towards her, knocking them both into the wall, not literally this time.

Sasha climbed down from her chair and ran over to James. He knelt down to pick her up. "You did it."

"Not yet sweetie," James said quietly as he straightened back up. His head turned towards the exit. "There's still some aliens left to deal with."

The lights flickered back off one by one, each one hissed and crackled as they did. Sasha started to tremble. "Is this the plan?" she squeaked.

James looked down at her, well tried to, the entire office was black. "Not exactly," he whispered his answer. With a sigh he made his way over to where he remembered the door being.

Something moved behind him, he felt it before he heard something swing through the air. A sharp piercing pain spread across the back of his leg, just below the knee. It buckled immediately, bringing him down to his knees.

"Dad...?" Sasha stuttered as the grip on her was loosened. She thought she would fall again once it was gone completely, her legs brushed against the carpet. "What happ..."

"Run!" she heard James tell her in a panicked voice. Just then the lights flashed on for a second. All she got in that mere second was that her dad was down and there was a familiar man crawling behind him, holding a stained knife. "Now!"

Sasha let out a little squeak as she hurried to get on her feet. This time she didn't want to hold her dad back by being there, she did as he told her to; run.

### **The Bridge:**

Nobody noticed the alien ship on the viewscreen not only stopped using its tractor beam, but had turned around so it was nose to nose with Voyager.

"Um, we're slowing down," Nathan said. He looked up at the screen and it made sense, mostly, "oh."

"How did a virus get in?" Tom asked.

Harry shook his head, "I have no idea, but thanks to the aliens cutting themselves off from us, it only infected Deck Eight."

Chakotay chuckled, he climbed to his feet. "Really, no idea? I thought you were smarter than that Harry."

"Guys, the ship," Nathan tried to butt in.

"The forcefields. That's why they overloaded," B'Elanna mused. She looked annoyed with herself, "I should have seen it."

Tom jumped to his feet, he directed his fiery eyes towards the ex-Commander in front of him. "Wait a minute. You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

"Maybe," Chakotay said but his face said yes.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Tom snapped. He swung around to face Jessie who was just looking confused. "Who's idea was this?" He turned back, "yours? James'?"

Chakotay shook his head. "Why are you getting so bent out of shape?"

"Why!?" Tom couldn't believe what he was hearing. He turned to B'Elanna and Harry at Opps to see if he was alone in this, they looked concerned as well. "Systems start failing on Deck Eight and Shoytin decides to even the score by shooting. I think that's worth getting bent out of shape over."

B'Elanna was starting to get angry again, the poor Opps station got the brunt of it. "I can't get a lock on anyone. All I can do is look for Human lifesigns..."

"And?" Chakotay questioned.

B'Elanna growled, "and!?! The aliens could be physically holding some of them hostage, it's also a little slower. I need to be able to get them out in a mass or I'll just piss them off."

Harry spotted something else flashing, "we're being hailed by the alien ship. Must be Damien."

"Now I know this was your idea. You don't care about anyone, do you?" Tom spat.

Jessie tossed her last book to the floor, when she looked up she noticed the atmosphere was a little different to when she started reading. "Um, what did I miss?"

"Will you relax? Shoytin's not going to start firing on anyone," Chakotay said. "That's the part of the plan..."

"I'll just answer him," Harry muttered. "Voyager here."

"Why wouldn't he? We've just mucked up his other advantage over us," Tom snapped.

*"Hey you're lucky this thing is defective. I'm still a genius so, you're welcome," Damien's voice said.*

"Great, but you do realise that by disabling the tractor and moving you probably alerted them," Harry whispered.

*"Hmm, no I haven't. I gave them the old snip. Unless they have a window, they'll be clueless."*

Chakotay folded his arms, smiling smugly. "Then it's a good thing we have a man on the inside, isn't it?"

Jessie stared at him, her eyes were wide and her jaw was threatening to drop. "What?"

Tom frowned at her then back at Chakotay. "Wait, I thought she was in on this plan."

*"Damn, sounds like I'm missing some fun over there."*

Harry rolled his eyes, "not really."

B'Elanna sighed angrily. "Can you use their transporters to beam them out?"

Tom rushed over to Tactical despite the dangerous look on Jessie's face. "You said James wouldn't go in there. Did you lie to throw me off? How could both of you do this, you saw what happened with Sasha, this is just..."

Jessie scowled at him. As he expected he got a punch in the nose. She wasn't done though, she stomped over to where Chakotay stood. He braced himself for a similar move. "You had no intention of James returning from the virus plant. What the hell did you do?"

*"No. Oh while we're on the betrayal topic, your Q wonder kid nicked off. I thought that was a little rude. So whenever you're ready to beam me back. I want to watch this."*

"Please, James should have known that the virus would provoke the aliens. He had to be in there to stop that," Chakotay explained.

"Shoytin could have killed one of the kids before he even got there. What were you thinking?" B'Elanna snapped.

Chakotay stared down at the floor. "I'm sorry, but someone had to make the call. There was no easy way out of this." He looked back up again, daring to stare in Jessie's direction. "I figured we needed somebody on the inside, who better than what the aliens were asking for."

*"Hello? At least beam me some popcorn over and put on the viewscreen."*

"That wasn't your call to make," Tom said as he pulled himself to his feet. B'Elanna passed him a sympathetic glance, his nose was still bleeding and the area around it was black. "No, we haven't got time for this. I assume the forcefields they put up were the first to go?"

B'Elanna nodded, "seems that way, but not all of them."

"We haven't got a choice then. They already had Sasha as the main hostage. Shoytin would either have killed her by now or is using her to make James do whatever he wants," Tom said. "Chakotay may as well have sent Damien down there for all the good it will do."

"Tom," B'Elanna warned him, her eyes gesturing towards Jessie.

Jessie's eyes narrowed, she stood very close to Chakotay. "You weren't on the Bridge when James was planting the virus. I should have known you were behind the overload."

"No you shouldn't, that was the point," Chakotay muttered.

"You were whining about that demon/bomb incident ten years ago. If you really think like that, why..." Jessie questioned.

Tom meanwhile headed for the turbolift, B'Elanna hurried over to him. "Tom just let Security take care of it. You're too close to this, just like James is."

"Yeah but I'm not like him, I wouldn't risk other people's kids to save my own," Tom whispered to her.

Jessie overheard him anyway, her head turned quickly. Tom didn't dare check to see what expression she had, he had a good idea anyway. What he didn't know was that he was wrong, she just looked shocked.

"Jessie," Chakotay tried to get her attention back. "I did this because I have faith in him."

"Bull," Jessie bitterly laughed, turning her head back and forth between him and Tom.

"Yeah," Chakotay admitted, setting her back to angry again. "He was going to charge in once the virus took anyway. I just gave him a head start. Either way, Shoytin was going to be angry and do something. My way there's someone there to try and stop it."

"Someone there to be taken advantage of, you mean. Hold the fort," Tom said in Harry's direction. He nodded back grimly as Tom stepped into the turbolift.

*"Can someone tune me into the version that isn't PG. I'm getting a little bored."*

"Sure," Jessie grumbled. She headed over to Opps, scaring Harry half to death in the process. He didn't dare stop her.

*"Good, I'm getting the viewscreen signal. Huh, what's that... that's not the Bridge," Damien's voice started to stutter.*

*"Ooh, this catsuit's a bit tight, I'm getting a bit of a wedgie," Annika's voice giggled.*

The last anyone heard before the comm was cut off was Damien's chilling screams.

The nursery's lights struggled to come back on, when they did they were weaker and continued flashing between dim and off.

Yana was starting to panic as her tricorder like device wasn't helping her at all. "I don't understand."

The rest of the aliens kept a tight hold of their rifles. Even though they didn't want to use them, they kept them trained on their hostages. The panic was starting to eat away at them as well.

"Fix it Yana, you know Shoytin won't stand for this," Rhone said.

Yana shook her head timidly, "I can't. I think it's some sort of virus, it's shutting down almost everything."

Jita glanced towards the office door as it opened, but only halfway. She saw nobody there, only black. "We have to go."

None of the aliens saw Sasha run through the crack in the door. It shut behind her.

"What? We'd be no better off outside," Rhone said.

"It's not us I'm worried about. You said it yourself, Shoytin will tell us to start shooting when he comes out of there," Jita stuttered.

Sasha ran over to the group of children Duncan was with, tears streaming down her face. Duncan panicked and quickly pulled her down to sit in between him and Bryan. Markal looked over to check on them seconds later.

When nothing happened Duncan sighed in relief. He glanced over and saw Sasha rubbing her arm, pouting angrily. Her eyes were still watering though.

"Sorry, I didn't want them to see you escaping," he whispered.

"Dad, that leader man attacked him," Sasha stuttered.

Duncan didn't look worried, "why you worried? Dad's better than that creep."

Sasha stared towards the door she escaped from. "Daddy's hurt."

Markal walked over to Yana, his nerves were starting to get the better of him. "Just beam us all back to the ship. It's the only way now."

"It's not," Yana stuttered. "Every command I send to our ship is being sent back. It's not responding."

The lights would dimly return, only to flicker back off with a nasty hiss. The computer on the desk activated itself, so it was the only source of light when the main lights went off again.

There was a loud crash as Shoytin flew into the desk, smashing it to bits. During one light flicker he saw a discarded rifle lying nearby. When the light disappeared again his left hand reached forward to grab it.

James was standing, but just barely. His right leg was weakened and still bleeding. He approached slowly, then stopped when he heard movement in front of him.

The light flickered back on, allowing Shoytin to target the rifle. James ducked down to dodge it. Shoytin re-aimed, his target attempted to roll to one side. He fired again quickly, this time the blast hit him right in the arm. James fell onto his back.

The alien woman awoke to find herself being crushed by something heavy. It had winded her, she had trouble breathing back out. When the lights flickered back on she realised the weight was Hikgel. Another flicker of light and she saw the commotion in front of her. She waited for another before daring to move.

Shoytin smiled, but it was an angry smile. His body ached, it was too difficult to stand back up so he crawled over to his victim with his knife still in his right hand, and the rifle under his arm. To further his anger he noticed that the blast hadn't killed him, he tried to look at his rifle but it was too dark to see.

"Damn it," he grunted, resisting the urge to toss it to one side. James was starting to get back up, he didn't have time to check it.

The lights flickered again and the woman found the nerve to push Hikgel away from her. She waited for another so she could run.

"I don't care if you are the only way home," Shoytin snarled. He swung the rifle towards James' face. His right hand swung out to grab his wrist, just in time to hold it back. The right hand carrying the knife swung around to stab the blocking arm. A smile appeared on his face as that hand loosened its grip on his wrist.

He wasn't done. Instead of hitting him he pushed the rifle against his throat as hard as he could. "I'll rip you apart." James tried to pull it away with the arm that wasn't stabbed, but it was his burned and now phasered one, it wasn't as easy as he thought.

This time the lights flickered and stayed on for a few seconds. The woman clambered away towards the door as fast as she could.

"That's it," Markal stuttered when the lights went off yet again. "I'm getting out of here." He headed for the door and he wasn't the only one, Jita was right behind him.

"No you're... not," the woman wheezed as she entered the room. The pair stopped in their tracks. "Outside or in... they're coming... for us. Here, we have the hostages."

Yana stared in dismay, "you can't be serious. Is Shoytin still..."

"Shoytin has what we need," the woman said painfully. She leaned on the wall for support. "Provided he doesn't... kill him."

"The man we brought in?" Rhone was confused.

Jita shook her head, she stepped forward defiantly. "No, this stops now. We can still turn ourselves in, do the right thing."

"Why?" the woman asked in surprise.

Markal didn't look so sure, "actually I was leaving to escape, but co-operating means we might still be able to escape the sphere. We've lost anyway, what have we got to lose?"

"We haven't," the woman coughed. "Yana, get us all ready for transport. In the meantime we negotiate the release of the rest of our people."

"No," Yana said. "We can't. I've lost access to our ship. Voyager's shields have raised as well. We're stuck here."

"What?" the woman stuttered. "It doesn't matter. They'll listen or we'll..."

Rhone folded his arms tightly and scowled. "Oh so you are okay with killing children after all, Toren? Good to know."

"Of course not! But we have no choice now," the woman continued to stutter.

"Yes we do," Jita said. She dropped her rifle to the floor. Toren shook as the rest of the aliens did the same thing. She didn't have hers anymore either, her body shook in panic.

"No! I won't fail him," she said boldly. Before any of them could really move forward, she rushed to grab the child closest to her. The one closest was one of the twin girls.

"Don't be a fool Toren!" Markal shouted at her.

Toren shook her head timidly. The girl in her arms struggled as she side stepped towards the exit. Markal being the closest to the door knelt down to pick up his rifle again. "Don't, I'll hurt her." He froze on the spot, unsure what to do. He didn't have any choice as she picked up the same rifle and pointed it at him.

"Move!" she snapped.

Markal sighed, he did as he was told. There was nothing now stopping her from getting through the door. She ran as fast as she could manage.

"What do we do?" Jita asked.

Yana shook her head, her head turned towards the rest of the children. "We need to let them go, but the Voyager crew need to know it."

"Maybe we could..." Rhone started to say when the doors swiftly opened again. The nursery was soon filled with a dozen Security officers and Tom.

"Put your weapons down!" Tom yelled.

Craig noticed they already had first, he cringed a little. "They must have known you were coming." Tom just scowled at him. "All right, stay where you are..." He gestured to the other team members. They walked forward towards the children.

"Wait, before you do that, one of our people escaped," Yana said.

Craig quickly scanned the room, "there's only four here. That's more than one."

Tom spotted his daughter sitting by one of the tables. He rushed over to her first. "Miral?" He was unnerved as his little girl was crying. "Sweetheart, it's okay now."

She shook her head and pointed underneath the table. Tom crouched down to look too. He saw Amy sitting with her back facing them both. Tom was a bit confused.

"Let's get you and your brothers out first," he said softly.

"She just ran out with a child, you might be able to catch her," Rhone said.

"What about the other two?" Craig asked.

"They'll be in the office," Jita replied.

Craig walked over to Tom as he stood up with his daughter. "Tom..."

"No problem, I got it," he nodded. He tried to tap his commbadge with his only spare hand, but Miral was starting to struggle.

Craig shook his head, he tapped his own. "Anderson to Team Two and Three. We've got a runner somewhere on this deck, they have a kid. Be careful." He tapped it again. "I was going to say supervise the kid evacuation and I'll check the office."

"Oh," Tom sighed, a little disappointed. "So let me guess, the escapee was Shoytin?" The aliens looked towards the office nervously. Tom and Craig followed their trail of sight.

"Daddy's in there," Sasha piped up. Tom and Craig looked towards her, Tom was surprised to see her. Miral was too. "He's hurt." Bryan didn't have to look, he knew Duncan was getting up so he held his arm again.

Miral glanced up at her dad. "Someone should help him. He helped me." Craig and Tom glanced at one another. "Please."

"You don't like it when you're the one getting murdered, do you freak?" Shoytin snarled. He grimaced as the grip James now had on his arm was getting tighter, the resulting ache was intense. The forearm was starting to tingle like tiny pins were pricking him, his skin grew ice cold. There was a sickening crack. All he could do was scream.

Fortunately for him he didn't have to endure the agony for very long. A phaser blast struck his back, he toppled to the floor right beside James. He meanwhile sat up, his now bloody hand rushed to his throat. His eyes glanced up to see somebody standing at the door, pointing a phaser rifle towards him.

"Tom?" James said in a hoarse voice.

Tom cringed as he walked slowly over to him. "You look like hell." He then glanced at Shoytin lying beside him and felt a little sick. "Though, could be worse."

"What?" James said. He turned his head towards the man lying beside him, focusing mainly on what was left of the man's arm. The part he had held onto was mostly red, blood was still flowing from it. He could even see a bone, broken at the edge of the wound. "Oh..."

Tom knelt down on the opposite side, trying to avert his eyes from that sight. "Miral told me what you did."

James cringed, he tried to sit up but with both arms damaged it was difficult. "I'm sorry. She shouldn't have been there. I..."

"What are you talking about?" Tom asked, genuinely confused. Noticing his struggle, he put the rifle down so he could help him to a sitting position. "You had an awful choice; keep your kid safe with you but risk another, put her back in harms way but save the other kid. You chose to save my daughter, that can't have been easy..."

James felt sick at the thought, he covered his face with bloody hand. "Oh god. Sasha, is she all right?"

Tom nodded, "yeah she's just worried about you. And hey man, thank you, I won't ever forget this."

"No, neither will I," James said bitterly, his eyes shut tightly.

"From what Miral said, they weren't going to let Sasha go either way," Tom said sympathetically. "You did the right thing and I'm not saying that as Miral's father, I'm saying that as a fellow Human."

"Sure," James wasn't convinced. He struggled to push himself back to his feet. Tom shook his head and decided to help him with that too.

Toren ran down the corridor in a blind panic. The poor girl she had taken was crying loudly, so anyone nearby would know where she was. The path she picked was blocked by an orange shield, which was starting to fail. Figuring she didn't have time to wait for it to do so, she turned around and ran back to the junction. Instead of going straight ahead she turned left, almost slamming straight into somebody else.

"Hey," the person said, her voice sounded plain and unfeeling. Her face however didn't match, she was angry and her eyes were puffy and red. "What are you doing?"

"I..." Toren stuttered. She tried to raise the rifle but it was knocked flying out of her hands. "Um... I..." The next thing she knew a fist was coming towards her face.

Her body tumbled to the floor, however the person ahead of her grabbed the child from her before she went too far. The girl calmed down but was still sniffing in fear.

"Don't worry. You can go home to your mother now," Lena said to her. "Somebody should." She turned around to walk back the way she came.

"It seems like the aliens were surrendering before we even turned up," Craig said as he walked down the corridor.

James glanced at him briefly. "Really?" he didn't sound interested to him.

"You know Sasha was being all *my daddy did this and did that* like any proud kid would. She's not upset with you. Why are you beating yourself up?" Craig asked.

James stopped, forcing Craig to stop. He sighed, "you're one to talk aren't you?"

"Yeah but my thing killed a girl and brought back a girl who didn't want to come back," Craig said meekly.

"I handed my little girl over to psycho kidnappers. I think I have you beat," James said, his shoulders slumped.

Craig folded his arms, his head shook as well. "You weren't told to pick which one to die or save, you were asked should this second kid stay or go? If you picked Miral to stay in danger, then I'd be questioning you."

James stared at him, his brow furrowed. "Daniel performed the ritual. You could have easily been replaced by any old person, your involvement didn't matter."

Craig laughed for a second or two, "sorry. What a pair we are." He expected James to smile or laugh back, but he didn't. "At least your daughter seems perfectly happy and proud of what you did. Lena, well... that's another story."

"She was never going to come back all smiles and jokes, was she?" James said.

"Wow, you have mellowed haven't you?" Craig said, not seriously. He continued walking down the corridor. "The old you would have beat me up by now."

James' eyebrow raised. "You saw what I did to Daniel, right?" He followed him quickly. "And Shoytin... AND that Hik guy."

"Yeah yeah, hit a guy with a bed, you're such a badass," Craig smirked as he entered the Holodeck. James followed him to the door with the same confused look on his face. He shrugged it off once he walked through the doors.

The prisoners were no longer being kept on an empty hologrid. Somebody had programmed a giant version of the brig, and every one of the aliens were behind a forcefield. Luckily for everyone Annika was not locked in with them, or in the room for that matter. Tom and Harry stood on the opposite side, both of them glanced at the newcomers as they entered.

"I might have to discuss it with the others, but I think we have come up with a solution," Tom said.

Craig stopped beside him, he glanced briefly at the aliens directly in front of them both. "We're not stealing their ship, are we?"

Harry gritted his teeth and inhaled through them, his eyebrow raised. "Kinda."

"Kinda?" James said.

Tom shrugged. "We need another ship and these people need to get inside the anomaly. As I tried to tell Shoytin at the beginning, he could have asked for help right away."

James didn't like where this was going. "Tom, you know that most of these people had nothing to do with the kidnappings."

Tom chuckled, "yeah I'm not sending them on a mission with you to punish them. If I did, I'd send Annika." A lot of the aliens shuddered in revulsion, almost in unison. Craig and Harry looked impressed. "No. Apparently the second ship they sent inside the anomaly found something interesting. However since Shoytin was the only one who saw it via video comm link, we don't know what it was. All we know is that he saw it as an escape route and it made him a homicidal prick."

"No, he was that way before," Jita commented.

"So we can't *ask* him?" Craig questioned.

Tom laughed nervously, "no." James' eyebrow raised again, this time directed towards Tom. "Hey we're sharing the blame on this one. Phaser blast and a gaping hole in your arm, it turns out that is a lethal combination."

"So what is the plan?" James asked.

"Mostly same as before, I recommend some light reading," Tom answered with a smile.

"The only difference is the aliens will have to teach you how to use the ship," Harry quickly added on.

"Hopefully by the time we get there, *Ylara* will be feeling better," Tom said, making the other two men uncomfortable. Tom noticed it, "what?"

"Yeah, I really should have talked about that on the way here, instead of the pity party," Craig said quietly.

James nodded, then he frowned. "Pity party?" He then remembered something, "oh right, I said that to you before."

"Uh, what's going on?" Harry questioned.

James and Craig glanced at each other, Craig looked even more comfortable. "Yeah um, I don't think she'll be ready for a while yet," James answered.

"Mmmhmm, she's not herself," Craig quickly added on. James looked at him again, mouthing *really?* Craig responded with a shrug.

Tom and Harry stared at them both blankly. Tom leaned in close to his friend to whisper, "I owe you a day's rations." Harry nodded.

### **Kiara's Quarters:**

The doors opened swiftly. Lena slowly walked through them, she stopped barely a foot into the room, keeping the doors open. She was shocked by how bare the quarters were, there wasn't one thing that appeared to belong to her.

As she walked further inside, the doors closed behind her. The sudden noise startled her, her whole body swung around. She had been staring at them for a few minutes before she realised it and shook her head.

A part of her was thankful that Kiara hadn't left anything behind. Being in this room was more than enough to make her throat throb. She decided to leave, it wasn't helping. A few steps was it all it took to open the doors again and leave this painful room behind. At the doorway though she hesitated. The room was bare, but it was still all she had left of her daughter. The tears threatened to fall.

The room lit up for a moment. Lena's shoulders slumped, her tears were wiped away. "Q. I'm not in the mood. Leave me alone."

"Nope," a familiar girl's voice said. "Not anymore."

Lena felt her body start to shake as her head turned to look over her shoulder. She turned around completely, her eyes filling with tears again. "Kiara? What..." she tried to wipe them away again. "Why are you here?"

It was the second time she had asked her that, but this time Kiara smiled genuinely, her bright blue eyes sparkled. "I know what you did for me, I'm grateful but..." A lump started to form in her own

throat, she tried to swallow it so she could continue. "I'd much rather be here, with you." The tears freely falling down Lena's cheeks were making her eyes well up as well, she didn't try to stop it though.

"But... you, you wanted to..." Lena protested. Kiara shook her head, she hurried over and wrapped her arms around her tightly. Her face buried into her shoulder, she could feel the girl's sobs vibrating through her. Lena didn't even try to stop it anymore, she let the tears come. Her arms went around her as tightly as she could. The two collapsed to the ground, but kept their hold on each other. Their cries eventually died down and turned into sombre smiles.

## **THE ...**

Annika walked down a corridor minding her own business. What she didn't know was that somebody was following her. All she could think about was what colour or patterned catsuit she hadn't come up with yet. Suddenly it came to her. "Oh, cute little pink rabbits. Damien won't be able to keep his eyes off me."

The person behind her screamed and ran up to her. Before she could do anything about it the man threw some sort of liquid all over. He cackled evilly until he realised she wasn't really that bothered about it.

"Oh... wet catsuit. What a good look!" Annika giggled. With that she skipped off.

Damien could only stare in horror, especially now that she had two ideas to torture him now instead of one. He looked down at the container he had labelled Holy Water, which he then tossed to one side in a fit of rage.

"God damn it! Now I have to wash the episode's smut and the Annika air germs off me!" He stomped off muttering to himself. "This series used to be insane rubbish, now it's just rubbish. I hate this place and everyone in it. Oh and I hate that Tom even more, he's getting too big for his boots. OH And..."

## **THE END**