



Episode 10 – Enigmas

By: Cassatt (cassatt2222@yahoo.com)

"Computer, activate EMH log." The Doctor sighed, loudly, with the freedom born of being completely alone in sickbay. A situation to which he was becoming far too accustomed for his liking. "Computer, deactivate log," he said as he stood from his desk. "Not E-C-H, no sir, not this hologram. Never again will I get to have any further responsibilities on this ship..." He muttered as he paced.

He had fully expected to be in the Alpha Quadrant by now. A famous writer, perhaps, a concert singer, or even a worldwide choral director. His dreams had been big. Perhaps even declared fully sentient, a model for other holographic beings around the Federation to admire, to see as their savior, someone to emulate. He sighed again, more loudly than before. For the first time in a very long time, he considered asking B'Elanna and Harry to alter some of his personality subroutines so that he wouldn't have to feel.

Walking into the lab, he contemplated what he had been working on, what he thought it might mean and let those subroutines take a back seat to his primary function. He checked the readings one more time, looked into the HD

microscope one more time and activated the EMH log one more time.

"After studying the Sernaix organs and blood I have discovered what I believe may be a key to understanding how their bodies function. There is bio-electrical energy emanating on a cellular level without regard to differentiation. Upon further study I discovered this electrical energy actually originates in the mitochondria of each cell. Extrapolating upon this fact, one can assume that this same energy would then permeate a Sernaix body, as electricity commonly is conducted through anything biological in nature. Quite possibly this is the reason our weapons appear useless against them. Also quite possibly this is why the crew cannot activate anything recovered from the Sernaix. I must run an experiment to verify this fact. End log."

The Doctor paced a few more times, convincing the ethical subroutines that what he was going to do was appropriate. Necessary, even. Especially if he planned to prove to the captain that he was still a very valuable member of the crew. As far as he could tell, she'd forgotten all about him.

"That will be completed again," Sycorax ordered. As the ultimate authority, the Adimha of the Management Cadre observed the activity in the Realm with satisfaction. Attempting to determine how the Enemy's ship entered the Bubble was one more chance to discover a way out, and nothing would stop her from doing so.

"Ruzerat certainly must improve the Enemy's warp drive," Denovox said, with a touch of disdain. Her position as Satika apprentice in this Cadre allowed her more access to Sycorax than other Satika's. The Management Cadre was at the top of the hierarchy in the Sernaix Realm, and Denovox enjoyed taking every opportunity to assert her power, limited and vast as it was.

A simulation of the U.S.S. Voyager began. The intrepid class starship of the United Federation of Planets moved in reverse, heading to the phased rift in space that was caused by the simulation. As it approached the rift it entered warp speed. At the rift itself, the ship made a sharp move downward and exploded.

"Sycorax, if I may be bold and offer a suggestion," Mazern said. She was the Adimha of the Interface Design Cadre and well versed in looking for solutions where others could not. When the other Adimha did not answer, Mazern continued. "I believe that the Enemy ship's interface system shows me one factor that could be altered to facilitate crossing the rift."

"If it involves their warp drive field, I think it likely to fail," Ruzerat said. Though also a Satika and lower in status than Denovox, being in the Ship Building Cadre, she was certain of her conclusions and did not hesitate to put them forth. "I have considered all possible changes that could be made to their primitive systems. Anything else will certainly cause the Enemy's ship to explode. Again."

Sycorax put her very intimidating foot down. "Make the correction Mazern. Ruzerat, assist her. It will be completed again."

After just a minute, the U.S.S. Voyager began to move in reverse one more time. This time, as the ship approached the rift, it did not make the sharp move downward but as the aft portion of the nacelles reached the phased rift the ship exploded. The disapproval of Sycorax could be felt throughout the group.

"I believe I may have a possible solution." This came from the previously silent Graxen, Adimha of the Tactical Cadre. "The modification we made to the tertiary design of the latest Node ship could be applied to the Enemy ship's interface system. Perhaps the Enemy already has a form of this modification that we have yet uncovered. If we adjust their warp field similarly, and the Enemy ship passes through the rift unharmed, it may provide us with necessary answers."

"And why would you think we had yet to uncover such a thing?" Ruzerat asked with undisguised sarcasm.

"Because," Denovox countered, "if you had that ability, you would certainly have been chosen for the Management Cadre." She was pleased to know her comment had hit its mark as intended.

"Cease!" Sycorax ordered. "Graxen, work with Mazern and Ruzerat. Now."

"Yes, Adimha," all three responded. Within another thirty seconds, the modification had been made to Voyager's warp field.

But before the simulation could be commenced, a vision interrupted their work. It was a virtual simulation of the Enemy's holographic Doctor, there next to the ship, as though floating in space.

The Doctor walked into engineering. He'd thought to check first and luckily Harry was here, working. The perfect excuse. And sure enough, within moments of arriving B'Elanna was approaching him, questioning his rare presence in her area. She led him to Harry, while his eyes roamed, trying to figure out where they kept the things.

"Hey, Doc, I'm fine..." Harry said, a quizzical statement on his face.

"Now, Mr. Kim, one can never be too careful. I was taking a little walk and thought I'd come see you, you did miss your appointment yesterday." The Doctor took out his tricorder and began to scan.

"Well, I apologize, I've just been kinda busy and really, I'm fine."

"So it appears, so it appears. Have you been working on the Sernaix artifacts?" He thought he sounded particularly guileless and was pleased with himself.

"Sort of. We still can't get anything out of them, have no idea what they do. It's very frustrating." Harry was beginning to squirm. "Look, Doc, are you finished?"

"Just one more thing to check." He repeated the scan he'd already done. "B'Elanna must be hiding those Sernaix things? To keep them out of prying eyes, I suppose..."

"No, they're just over there, in that alcove." Harry pointed behind him.

He closed his tricorder with a flourish. "Well, Mr. Kim, you do appear to be fine. For now. But keep that follow-up appointment in two days so I don't have to add a non-compliant notation to your record."

Harry grinned. "Sure, I'll be there."

The Doctor snorted to himself. No one, it appeared, took him very seriously any longer. He took a slow survey of the engineering crew, all of whom appeared engrossed in their tasks, or in conference with one another. B'Elanna was nowhere around. He walked casually over to the artifacts, keeping one eye on the people around him but still no one paid him any attention. Looking at what was there, he saw something he could hold in his hand, a small black box with prongs sticking out of it. He quickly palmed the thing and, with a smile on his face, left engineering to return to sickbay.

"Computer, activate EMH log. I have retrieved one of the Sernaix artifacts in order to conduct my experiment. An experiment which is extraordinarily clever in its simplicity. And the very first tenet of scientific experimentation is to keep the process as simple as possible. So. To prove whether the artifact is affected by the bio-electrical energy emanating from the cellular mitochondria I will merely place some Sernaix blood in a non-conductive dish and place the artifact in the blood. Perform a scan, and presto, the captain will have her answer. End log."

The Doctor pushed his chest out a bit as he left his office for the lab. "Yes, ma'am, you will have your answer."

He removed a glass petri dish from the cabinet, bringing it to the blood vial. Opening the vial, he carefully poured 20cc's into the dish. He picked up the small black box and placed it in the blood deliberately.

"Yes, simpli..."

His program froze. Leaving him still touching the black box, now sitting in the blood, his holographic parameters shimmering but holding steady.

Unknown to the Doctor, his experiment was a success. At the very moment he touched the black box to the blood, it was activated. The box was an interlink node, used by the Sernaix to access the virtual reality Realm. The Doctor was now linked to the Realm, and through his program, Voyager's main computer was linked as well. The simulation the Sernaix had been working on found kin of sorts in the actual ship's computer and systems. The warp field modifications

attempted by the Sernaix made their way through the computer to Voyager's warp field, altering it to match the simulation, sending the ship into instant warp without warning. Sycorax and the others working in the Realm had no idea what had happened from their perspective.

Unfortunately for the Doctor, the vast amount of data coming in from the Realm overloaded the computer one second later....

"I think it's nice that she has a pet," Chakotay said with a small grin.

"Well, of course, it's nice, I just never thought we'd be carrying pets on board." Janeway looked at him askance, but also had a grin playing on the corners of her mouth.

Tom turned around from the helm. "She could have come up with a better name, though. Ratty?"

"I guess Naomi didn't think to consult you, Tom," Chakotay said, his grin in full force now.

Without warning, the bridge lights flickered momentarily. Tom spun back to the conn. "Harry..." Janeway's question was cut off as the ship lurched into warp, falling back out one second later. The inertial dampers went offline sending everyone to the deck, the lights shut down, then immediately came back up along with the dampers.

Tom scrambled to his feet, checking the conn frantically. Chakotay quickly got back to his seat and began looking for answers on the console. Harry was doing the same. Janeway, now back in her chair, tried to catch the breath that had been knocked out of her.

"Harry, what happened?" She called out, standing again to face the young man at ops.

His fingers were still flying over the console. He raised his eyes to hers. "Captain, I'm afraid I can't tell you much. All of the data is garbled as to why. What happened is that we went into warp and immediately dropped back out, the ship's systems went offline as the computer shut down and came back when it reconfigured itself. That's all I can tell you...." He looked back down and began working again, a look of confused concentration on his face.

Chakotay stood. "Captain, it appears there are no damage reports, other than minor injuries from the dampers' problem." He turned to Harry as well. "Harry, can you tell us where we are? How far we've traveled?"

"We couldn't have gotten that far in this damned place," Janeway muttered.

"Actually, Captain," Harry said, raising his head again, "we have. The navigational check indicates that we are out of the Bubble. We're in Sector 19658 of the Alpha Quadrant..." He looked back down and tapped a few more interfaces.

Janeway met Chakotay's eyes, both reading the other too well. Veiled excitement was seen.

"But Captain, Commander," Harry continued, "something's wrong. Next to us is Sector 1385, or should I say part of 1385 and on the other side of that is...Sector 39J." He raised his eyes to them once more. "That's impossible," he stated softly.

The two commanding officers looked at each other again. Janeway opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by Harry one last time.

"There is one more piece of data the computer is giving me, but I ..."

At the hesitation, Chakotay's impatience showed. "Just tell us, Harry."

"According to the navigational database, the computer has done an extrapolation in attempting to pinpoint our exact location. We appear to be in the 31st century. In the Alpha Quadrant, but not a recognizable one. We are, however, orbiting a planet."

A heavy silence descended on the bridge. Janeway looked at Chakotay one more time, their eyes locking. She broke the contact.

"Harry, what can you tell us about Sector 19658?"

"Well, according to our database, so as of 2371, this sector is... or was uninhabited, and outside of Federation space."

"Scan the planet."

The beeps of the computer were the only sounds heard.

"Captain," Harry's excited voice cut through the tension, "It's M-class and there is a Starfleet signature on the planet..." His fingers were still working. "But..."

Chakotay interrupted him. "No more 'buts' Harry, please..."

Harry looked up and gave a slight grin as soft laughter was heard moving throughout the bridge, the tension broken, if only for a moment. Janeway, however, gave a small snort.

"But, we're unable to scan anything else around this signature, the scans just don't register. The computer does recognize the remnants of Sernaix energy, however, so perhaps that's why the scans aren't working."

"Sernaix?" Janeway said, running a hand through her hair. "In the 31st Century, in the Alpha Quadrant?"

"Or whatever this is..." Chakotay said quietly, looking at her.

"Harry. Keep working on the computer situation, try and figure out what happened." She turned to Chakotay. "Commander, I want you to take a shuttle down to the surface and find that signature..."

Tom interrupted her. "Excuse me, Captain, but if Chakotay is planning on taking the Flyer, he'll need a pilot."

"Thank you for volunteering Tom, but I need you to stay here and keep control of the ship."

Chakotay watched the helmsman's eyes dart from his to Janeway's and back again. "Yes, ma'am," Tom answered.

"Tom, don't worry," Chakotay said, "I'm taking an older one."

"Yes, sir." Tom smiled and turned back to the helm.

"I'll walk you to the shuttle bay," Janeway said, already starting to move off the bridge. Chakotay followed, noting the stiffness of her posture, feeling his stomach muscles clench in response.

"What the hell are we doing in the 31st century, Chakotay..." The doors to the shuttle bay closed behind them, giving them some much needed privacy.

He opened the hatch to Sacajawea and stepped inside, with Kathryn right on his heels. Leaning over the helm he instructed the computer to begin the power-up sequence and then turned to her. She was pacing.

"Trying to get home, Kathryn," he said quietly.

She stopped and threw up her hands in supplication. "And when might that happen?!"
"I know that's only a rhetorical question. But I'll give you an honest answer. When it happens."

"You know how I feel about that answer..."

"Do you have a better one?" Chakotay stared hard at her. He could see the hooded look in her eyes, her shoulders slumping.

"Look, I don't think I ..."

He interrupted her. "I will not hear it, Kathryn. You retreat on me now and you really will be alone, damn it. We'll figure some way out of this. We always do. But together."
Her shoulders gradually lifted back to their command position and her eyes softened. Her gaze was locked with his. "Fair enough, Chakotay," she said.

"Thank you."

"Any time," she said with a very small grin.

He looked at her askance, feeling a grin forming of his own. He turned back to the helm to begin pre-launch. "Harry's patched through a bit more information about the planet. Looks as though there are no humanoid life signs, at least as far as he can tell. Some animal life. Too bad we're not somewhere that was in Federation space or we'd know more..."

Kathryn gave no response.

He turned his attention fully to her. He could see she was far away, could almost hear the wheels turning in her mind, feel the energy radiating off her. "You're going to start contemplating space-time travel, aren't you?"

"No humanoid life signs? That's good," she answered.

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. "Space-time travel is something that should only be considered by omnipotent beings, Captain."

She placed her hands firmly on her hips. "Just find what's giving off that signature, Chakotay. And keep checking in with us, with me, every fifteen minutes for this one. I don't want any surprises, like a Sernaix welcoming party..."

"Then I should have some back-up with me..."

"No. I'm not sure why, but I don't want anyone else on the crew to know what you find, before you and I have had a chance to talk about it," she said decisively.

"Since when do you trust that sort of instinct?"

"Since now," she answered.

"Fine."

She put a hand on his forearm and gave it a slight squeeze. "Be careful."

He patted her hand gently. "I will be."

She broke her gaze from his, nodded and left the shuttle. He sat down in the pilot's seat and concentrated on the task at hand.

From the air, the planet was not the lush environment he usually associated with M-class. He knew it was an association strictly in his own mind, one that came from too many years away from home. Each of the M-classes they'd run across in the Delta Quadrant had been different, unique and not so unique. None had been exactly like DorvanV and none had come close to Earth.

This planet was barren of green vegetation, at least in this hemisphere. Harsh sunlight shone on a small mountain range with the usual boulders and rocky terrain found in a post-volcanic environment. He flew low to get a closer look at the area he was to investigate, running scans over the surface to confirm what his eyes told him. Jet black Sernaix debris littered the area and he could see that there was no way any Sernaix had survived whatever had destroyed this ship, assuming it was a ship.

He landed and checked in with Kathryn, telling her there would be no Sernaix ambush as far as he could tell. She sounded pleased but a little distracted. As he ordered the shuttle's systems to remain on partial power, he thought about what his captain was likely doing in orbit over his head. Figuring out a way to take them back to the 24th century, he had no doubt. Neither was he particularly surprised. After all, Admiral Janeway hadn't thought twice about breaking the Temporal Prime Directive and they'd had more than their share of time travel to suit his tastes. But this, he thought, this was close to insane. They didn't even know if this Alpha Quadrant was the same as their own Alpha Quadrant, or why it was so different. He sighed deeply. He also had no doubt that this would be like dozens and dozens of other times. Once she got a possible solution into her head, stand back.

He got out of the shuttle, armed simply with a phaser and a tricorder. The bright light of the sun was warm, but not hot and as he looked to the sky he saw that this atmosphere offered nothing in the way of cloud formations. The color was somewhere between blue and green. He wondered what the length of day was and whether the planet's two moons would look like those of Dorvan. Grateful the oxygen content of the air was a little bit higher than that of Earth, he took a deep, cleansing breath. It felt wonderful. He opened his tricorder and got to work.

The walk to the Starfleet signature took him over golden dirt that had no vegetation growing in it. Some rocks with veins of pink and purple hues were the only consistent thing he saw. Scanning them he noted they were embedded with crystal formations, but no mineral compounds useful as fuel. He picked one up to take a closer look, and actually saw many colors inside the veins. He wished he could study it in greater detail, and if this had been a simple away mission gathering foodstuffs, he would have. He put it back and kept moving. After about twenty minutes, with a slight break to contact Kathryn again, he was amidst the bulk of the Sernaix debris, which slowed his progress considerably. Surprisingly, the signature was still readable. He finally approached the bottom of one of the foothills, the rocks and boulders becoming as common as the pieces of the alien vessel. The tricorder told him what he was looking for was one of the boulders.

Coming upon the boulder, he saw the flash of a metal object. He picked the item up off the top of the large rock. It was the butt of a Starfleet phaser. He immediately recognized two things about it, and his heart stopped, dead in his chest. It was a model that had been issued two years prior to the fated journey into the Badlands. It had hash marks on it, put there by a resistance fighter to indicate how many Cardies he or she had killed. It was Maquis.

He was stunned. A Maquis phaser? It wasn't one that he specifically recognized, but he was certain of its origin. Sitting on a planet outside of Federation space, surrounded by Sernaix debris in the 31st century, looking a bit weathered.

He must have been sitting there for longer than he realized, as Kathryn's somewhat anxious voice came over the comm. He assured her everything was fine, he'd found the item in question, but didn't give her details. After cutting communication, he wasn't certain why he'd done that. He had been envisioning their discussion of this situation. Sure in his own mind that this was something he had to investigate, he was just as sure that she would balk at it. She wouldn't want to take the time, but rather be hell bent on getting them back home, wherever and whenever that was.

After attempting more scans, not being surprised at the interference from the Sernaix debris, he contemplated his options. He sighed again. Aside from the fact that there was nothing he could invent that would satisfy her curiosity without proof, there was equally nothing that would lure her to investigate. The bottom line, he discovered, was that he really couldn't imagine lying to her. The trust they had reestablished was far too important to him.

"Computer, activate EMH," Ensign Finley said. She winced in pain, limping to a biobed.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency," the Doctor replied in a pleasant tone of voice. A look of confusion crossed his face. "I haven't said that in a very long time," he muttered. "Nevertheless, Ensign, what seems to be the problem?"

"I think I sprained my ankle, it hurts to walk and it's swelling up like a balloon, I can feel it inside my boot..."

He took out his tricorder and began to scan her foot. "And what have you been up to, a little hoverball on the holodeck perhaps?"

"No, it happened when the dampers went off line...ow!" She jerked her foot back as he tried to get her boot off.

"You actually have a slight fracture of one of your metatarsals. The dampers went offline? When did that happen?" He, more gently this time, pulled off her sock and reached for the osteogenic stimulator.

"Just a short time ago..."

"I wasn't aware, hmm." He worked the regenerator, switching to the dermal one set for deep tissue repair.

"Well, maybe you forgot," she said, trying to grin but wincing instead.

"If you're trying to be funny, Ensign... I do not forget." He peered down his nose at her, but she merely shrugged, once more concentrating on the foot in question.

Two more people came in, one with a slight head injury, one with a sprained wrist. Followed by ten others with equally minor problems. He was able to keep up with the onslaught, but felt that he could have used Mr. Paris' help. Could have used it a great deal, as a matter of fact, along with some warning that people might be needing his services.

When the last injury was repaired, he went to the sickbay console and tried to find out what

happened before talking with the captain about his lack of notification of a potentially harmful incident on the ship. The computer, however, told him something that only made him feel more humanly confused. Yes, the inertial dampers had gone offline. Unfortunately, they went offline on a day that didn't exist in his memory buffer. He stood there for a few minutes contemplating the latest hour of his existence. Perhaps the captain had told him about the situation, after all. He had no idea. He sighed a deep sigh and opened a channel to the bridge.

"Doctor to Lieutenant Kim," he said, keeping his voice modulated and calm.

"Yes, Doc?" Harry, on the other hand, sounded, well, harried.

"I am in need of your assistance. My program seems to have been ... tampered with."

"Well, I'm a little busy at the moment, can it wait?"

The Doctor found himself snorting. "Of course, if making certain that the medical officer of this ship is functioning properly is not a priority..."

Harry interrupted him. "Fine, fine. Give me a minute to discuss priorities with the captain. Kim out."

The sound of the comm link ending only served to make the Doctor more irritated. "Kim to the Doctor," Harry's voice echoed in sickbay.

"Yes, Mr. Kim?" Once again, he attempted to keep his voice calm.

"I can be there in ten minutes."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said, not having to fake the relieved tone of voice.

"No problem, Doc. Kim out."

In an effort to keep himself occupied and not thinking about the ramifications of lost memory sectors in his buffer, he looked for something to do. He finished cleaning up from the round of treatments, loading analgesic hyposprays with efficiency. Those minor tasks accomplished, he went into the lab and received another shock. There on the floor was a fairly good sized blood stain that had dried on the carpeting, with a petri dish and a broken vial nearby. Again, he had no memory of where this blood came from. He opened his tricorder and scanned it and was surprised to see that it was unidentifiable.

"Unidentifiable?" he said aloud. "How is that possible? Clearly I was running an experiment, or someone was..." After letting this information sift through his program he came to the conclusion that it could be Sernaix blood and sighed yet again. "Well, I must not have started the work, not even done the initial scans." He hoped that at some point he could obtain another sample, to learn what he could about these new aliens, to help the captain figure out how to fight them.

He went to the cabinet and got the sonic cleaner, running it over the dried stain, disintegrating it on a molecular level and sucking the atoms into the cleaner's filter, then gathered the broken glass and put it in the recycler. Harry walked in as he finished.

They went back out to the treatment room. Harry began to run the diagnostic while the Doctor paced. He watched the lieutenant's face, rapt attention and confusion appearing there in turn. This did nothing for the Doctor's frame of mind, such as it was.

"Well, Doc," Harry looked up for the first time, "I'm afraid this might be a bit beyond me at the moment. Maybe it's just that my mind is too occupied with this other problem. It looks as though your memory buffer is filled with, well, garbled information. I suggest you call Seven to take a look

at this. I think she can help."

Something in the Doctor's emotional subroutines snapped. "Yes, I suppose you'd like that wouldn't you? Having Seven here, working by your side," he said.

"Huh?"

"I don't appreciate being used as an excuse to spend more time with Seven, Lieutenant Kim."

Harry looked perplexed. "What are you talking about? This is me. I'm sorry, I just can't figure out what's wrong..." Enlightenment appeared on his features. "Doc. Seven and I are just friends. Really."

He felt things realign, but embarrassment was beginning to come to the forefront. He shouldn't have let the young man know he'd overheard part of his conversation with Seven. "I apologize, Harry. Please, if you would, contact Seven and see if she's free."
"No problem, be happy to. Don't worry, we'll find out what happened...."

Completing the shutdown sequence for Sacajawea, Chakotay contacted Kathryn, telling her he'd be in the ready room as soon as possible. But he didn't leave the shuttle. He sat in the semi-darkness of the small craft, surrounded by the outside brightness of the shuttle bay, considering one final time how to approach her. How to convince her. He had to know where this Maquis phaser came from and how it had ended up as a remnant of a confrontation with the Sernaix. It'd been seven years since he'd seen one. His people had destroyed all Maquis weaponry they owned when they united with the Starfleet crew. He steeled himself mentally, stuffed the phaser butt inside his jacket and headed to his quarters, to put it out of sight.

Crossing the bridge, he noted that Harry was no longer there, Tuvok was running some sort of scans, Tom was yawning, and the remaining bridge crew were completely silent. They stood at their posts and for the brief time it took Chakotay to reach the ready room, it looked to him as though everyone's eyes were glued to their consoles. He hit the door chime and was given entrance.

The captain leaned forward, holding her cup of coffee in both hands upon seeing him. "Chakotay, what did you find?"

He sat across from her, feeling tired and wound up at the same time. Before he could answer, she apologized and asked him if he wanted anything to drink. He practically begged her for a large glass of cold water. Smiling, she went to the replicator and returned as quickly as she was able. He downed half of it at once and immediately felt better.

"Okay," she said, settled again, "tell."

"First of all, I left the item in my quarters because I didn't want anyone to see it. You, of course, can after we talk." He took a deep breath and another swallow of water. "I found a Starfleet phaser butt. Except ... it belonged to a Maquis." He felt somewhat gratified to see her eyes enlarge.

"A Maquis? That can't be possible."

"It is possible and it is a fact. It's Maquis."

"But how can you know that, Chakotay? You said it was a Starfleet phaser."

He felt perversely irritated at that moment. "You may want to continue forgetting that I was a Maquis, much less a captain..."

She held up her hand and interrupted him. "Wait a minute, please. Let's back up. I'm making no assumptions about your history here. How do you know it's Maquis?"

Taking another deep breath and sip of water, he willed calm. "I'm sorry. I'm not angry at you, just a little tense and tired..." He then gave her the details, describing it, explaining the significance of the hash marks. After telling her about the Sernaix debris field and the level of destruction he found and its proximity to the phaser he jumped right to what was foremost on his mind. "I want to investigate, Kathryn, I need to know how the Maquis got involved with the Sernaix, much less in the 31st century."

"What do you mean investigate?"

"I'd like to do an excavation of the debris field, so that scans can be performed. Try and locate other things that may be Maquis in origin. See if I can identify a ship, or at least a time period."

She took a long time swallowing some coffee. "I'm not sure this should be a priority with us," she said evenly.

"It's a priority with me." He folded his arms across his chest.

"I can see that. But we have other things that need to be figured out. We don't even know how we dropped out of the Bubble, how we ended up going into warp. Much less how we're going to get home from here."

"And I guess I assumed that you'd have all that decided by now." He watched her eyes narrow at his words.

"I have been considering options, Chakotay, but I haven't decided anything," she said. He made a conscious effort not to give in, but to get her to talk, then look for another opening. "And so what are the options you see?"

"Well, I think there's only two ways to get back to the 24th century. Clearly the Bubble, as we already know, has its own space-time continuum. So it really shouldn't be that big a surprise we've been dumped here 700 years in our future. We can either get back into the Bubble, figure out how the space-time continuum works there and use that to our advantage to get home, or yes, we consider space-time travel. And before you begin arguing with me, there are methods that we have in our database..."

"I know there are, and I know that none of them are reliable..."

Her eyes began to blaze. "And what choice do we have? We can't stay here!"

"Why not? There is the Temporal Prime Directive to consider..."

"That doesn't apply here, as far as I'm concerned. We're trying to return to our proper time, not move into a past we don't belong in, or a future."

He finished his water, not really wanting to have this discussion yet again with her. How many times had he done it? He sighed. "And who's to say what our proper time is, Kathryn? We've been put here. This is where we are, for whatever reason, and for all we know we're supposed to be here."

She threw her hands in the air. "Chakotay. How can we exist in a future we know nothing about? We owe it to the crew to do everything we can to get them home."

He was suddenly extremely tired. "I just want it clear that I do not agree with this course of action. And you know what I mean by that."

"I do. It means that you'll argue with me until you give in, then do what you can to support me," she said, a very small grin playing on her mouth.

"I'll let you know when I've given in," he replied, allowing a small smile to cross his face.

"Fair enough. So, I plan on assigning Harry and Seven to the task of figuring out how to get us back to the 24th century. I have great faith in their abilities to process theory and translate it into action."

It was all he could do not to roll his eyes. "I concur in their abilities. I wish them luck. Now, can you oblige me? I'd like to form an away team and begin an excavation of the planet. Immediately."

"Chakotay..."

"No, Kathryn, there's no argument you can make. How is it going to affect your project? We're clearly not going anywhere until you can figure out a way to send us back in time. Aren't you the least bit curious? This is the Sernaix. And I have the remnant of a piece of equipment that belongs in 2369, not the year 3000," he stated forcefully.

She fiddled with the now empty coffee cup. "How many crew members were you thinking of using?"

He tried not to smile. "Under fifteen. But who, exactly, is another issue I think we need to discuss."

"All right, but first... look, I'll concede to the investigation. But just for twenty-four hours. If you haven't found anything in that time then it stops. Agreed?"

This time he did smile. "Agreed."

"And if we figure out how to get back to our own time period before twenty-four hours is up then the away team is pulled back to the ship, no negotiations."

"I'll agree to that," he said. He didn't think that would be a situation he'd be facing. "Good. Now what about the crew?"

"I think it would be a good idea for me to take only non-Maquis. I don't know that any former Maquis would be able to deal with this dispassionately. I know I didn't when I first realized what I was holding. I think it would present too many problems that, frankly, I don't want to be faced with down there. I'm not even sure we should tell anyone what I found."

Her eyebrows rose significantly. "Why not? What am I missing?"

He smiled slightly. "I think you're missing how the former Maquis feel, especially now. They had a lot of mixed emotions about getting back to the Alpha Quadrant when we thought we were actually getting there. Then we were in the Bubble and people had to learn how to handle that. What I found on the planet is part of, well, our Maquis history, either in the past or in the future. I think they'll want to stay and investigate, no matter what. It could present problems for the crew as a whole, with some wanting to stay and others wanting to get home."

She nodded. "I trust your judgment on this. You have a better handle on how the crew is coping than I do. Okay, we'll keep what you discovered a secret. Pick your away team. I was planning,

however, on making a general announcement describing our situation. I know the gossip mill has already started, I've been waiting until you got back to see what you found."

He tugged his ear and grimaced. "This is going to be difficult, Kathryn. Once the official word is out, crew morale will suffer."

"I know. We'll just do the best we can. Like always." She smiled at him, one of her rare full smiles. He could have sworn, her eyes even twinkled. Just a bit. Just enough.

"Doctor, if you insist on pacing in that manner I will have to take your program offline," Seven said, her eyes and fingers never leaving the console in front of her.

"You wouldn't dare," he stated. Nonetheless, he stopped moving.

"You're not seeing anything different, are you," Harry said quietly, looking over her shoulder.

"It would appear that your original hypothesis was correct," she replied. Pulling back from the screen she turned to him. "This is likely connected." Harry nodded.

"Would either of you care to enlighten me?"

Seven faced him directly. "From the time your weekly diagnostic was run yesterday until Ensign Finley activated you, your memory is ... gone. The data is irretrievable. The main computer systems had a malfunction a while ago, data was similarly compromised. It is logical to assume that the computer's problem initiated yours."

"So you're telling me that I've just lost a day, an entire day?"

"Not 24 hours," she answered, "but essentially, yes."

"Janeway to Lieutenant Kim and Seven of Nine."

Harry tapped his combadge and answered. The captain called them to the ready room over the Doctor's vehement protestations. It seemed to him that her voice sounded particularly callous in his regard. She cared not a whit that his program had been compromised, that his memory was gone. Hearing her state that the loss of one day of sickbay's information was not as urgent as the situation the entire ship faced cut him to the quick. Harry and Seven left, promising to return as soon as they could. He knew they were empty promises.

Muttering loudly to himself he grabbed the tray of hyposprays. He headed to the replicator in the lab, slammed the tray down on the counter, and began to replicate medications. He was so angry that his tactile control failed and he actually dropped a vial trying to put it into one of the empty slots on the tray. The vial hit the floor and rolled under the counter. When he stooped to retrieve it, he saw something completely unfamiliar. A small black box with prongs.

Looking at it, he noticed it had some dried blood on one side. He scanned it but it didn't register on his tricorder at all. It must be Sernaix, he surmised, and took out the medical tricorder to scan the blood. Unrecognizable. He harrumphed as he again used the sonic cleaner to deconstruct dried blood. Figuring someone had brought it there for some purpose that, at the moment, he wasn't particularly interested in, he took the piece to his desk. Since everyone was so busy he'd wait until things calmed down, then call B'Elanna and have her come and get it. He dropped the black box into his desk drawer. That's when he saw his mobile emitter. He attached it to his arm.

"Computer, patch any requests for me through to wherever I am," he stated loudly. He left

sickbay, going where he wasn't quite certain. Perhaps the holodeck, for a round of golf. He smiled for the first time since he'd been activated.

Voyager's shuttle bay had the appearance of being the busiest place on the ship. Two shuttles were being prepared for launch by eleven crew members and Commander Chakotay. He'd asked Samantha Wildman, as one of Voyager's Science Officers, to be the second in command of the away mission. The rest of the team was comprised of ten crew members, chosen for their physical strength, stamina and reputation for discretion, for the First Officer knew Voyager's crew inside and out. And if there was any speculation as to the strange group heading down to the planet he wouldn't and didn't want to hear about it.

"So, Sam," Ensign Peter Ashmore said, laughing, "How's Ratty? Eating through your replicator rations?"

"No, though Chell's still complaining about supplies in the mess." She grinned.
"I thought he'd long gotten over it, at least that's what he said..."

"You know him," Sam said with a smile, "never misses a chance to make a complaint or two to a sympathetic ear."

Ashmore chuckled, joined by some of the others working alongside.

Doug Bronowski muttered something under his breath. Sam asked him to repeat it. "Well, I was just wondering if you thought about how it'll break Naomi's heart when Ratty is gone."

"Gone?" she asked.

"The little thing will die here on the ship no doubt. Looks as though it's going to be years before we get home, if at all..." he said.

Chakotay, working in the shuttle as well, acted as though he were part of the hull. Rose Lang spoke up for the first time. "As though the DQ wasn't hard enough, then the Bubble, and now this. Seems to me we won't be getting home."

"At least not Earth of our time period anyway. I'm just grateful that I got the chance to talk to my husband in the data stream, and my daughter," Nyema Swinn said, her voice cracking slightly. "She looked so grown up..."

Sam walked up to her and touched her on the shoulder. "Amazing how quickly they change, isn't it, Nyema? But we'll get home, I know we will."

Doug snorted. "Don't count those chickens, as my grandmother used to say."

While the others nodded in agreement, Chakotay slipped out the shuttle door and went over to the other one for a progress check. As he entered, conversation stopped abruptly. He had a feeling he knew what that meant, so he asked them if the craft was ready to launch and if the supplies were secured and if they had anything they wanted to ask him, or tell him. Not surprisingly, only Crewman Mark Fitzpatrick said anything. He always was willing to speak his mind, something Chakotay had actually been grateful for on more than one occasion.

"Sir, we were just talking about everything we've been through, trying to get back home, and, well, it just doesn't seem like it's ever going to happen. Commander," he said, "do you know what the captain has in mind?"

Chakotay sighed. "I do, and I'm not at liberty to say. You know she's doing everything she can to get us out of this." His eyes roamed the small group, not missing the one or two looks of slight disdain.

"We know she'll try whatever she can," Mark said.

"And that's the best we can hope for at the moment," Chakotay answered. "Okay, gather out in the shuttle bay for the briefing..." He left, going to other shuttle to tell them the same thing.

In a few minutes, with everyone assembled, he considered saying something of a general nature about the situation the ship faced but decided against it. Better to get them focused on the task ahead of them on the planet. It would be grueling enough without encouraging negative attitudes. He told them that they'd found a small piece of a Starfleet hull, but had been unable to locate any other piece of the ship due to interference from the Sernaix debris. Not pulling any punches, he told them this work would be difficult and that breaks should be taken as needed with copious amounts of water consumed. Stripping down uniforms was also acceptable. He didn't care about regulations at this point, he just needed bodies working as hard as they could. Comfort and stamina took precedence over Starfleet regulations.

Pausing, looking at their faces, he couldn't read what they were thinking. He took a breath and continued.

"If you run across anything at all that is not recognizably Sernaix, call out and either Sam or I will come and collect it. I'll rotate the crews every hour today, with one group digging and one removing things to somewhere else. Hopefully that will keep people from getting too tired. The replicators on both shuttles are full of ship's credits, so help yourselves. Any questions?"

Once again, Fitzpatrick spoke up. "Commander, I don't mean to question what we're doing, but is the work today helping the ship get home? I guess I'd like to know the purpose of this mission. Finding Starfleet debris from here in the future seems...." he faltered.

Chakotay put on his best diplomatic statement. "I can say that this work today may give us an answer that we need to move forward. Any other questions?" He hated lying to the crew, but justified it, knowing he'd really just stretched the truth a little bit. Only the 'we' was not defined.

As no one else answered, he dismissed them to the shuttles, and contacted the captain to tell her they were on their way. She sent a good luck message to everyone, for which Chakotay was very grateful. The shuttles powered up and left Voyager for the unnamed, unknown planet.

"So you see," Kathryn continued, "we really don't have a choice, we're going to have to find a way to travel back to the 24th century." She looked at the three people looking at her with completely impassive countenances. Icheb and Seven, she could understand, but Harry. She expected some reaction from him. "Any questions?"

Icheb was the one to speak up. "Captain, I'm afraid I don't understand. We've just begun a mapping of this Alpha Quadrant and there is very little correlation between where we are and where you wish to be. Perhaps it would be best to continue with the mapping until we know more."

"I understand your point, Icheb. Why don't you continue with that while Harry and Seven tackle the space-time issue."

Icheb nodded and returned to his console.

"Captain," Harry said, "I don't know if you remember your early quantum theory class..."

She interrupted him. "I don't know either."

He smiled. "Well, there was theory of entropy, that the universe would continue from a state of order to disorder, where the disorder would become more and more as time passed. I was wondering if there was a cataclysmic event that happened that caused the Alpha Quadrant to become so disordered as to seem, well, rearranged."

Seven spoke up. "But if that were the case, it would have had to occur sometime between the 29th and the 31st centuries."

"Why?" Kathryn asked.

"Because it was in the 29th century that the Federation developed timeships, if you remember Captain," Seven replied.

Kathryn noticed Harry's look of confusion. "Don't remind me, Seven. Captain Braxton is a person I'd hoped never to consider again. Although, come to think of it, where are the TPD cops when we need them? They could get us home in a flash, I bet. And don't worry, Harry, it's nothing you need to be concerned with."

"But if this Alpha Quadrant is rearranged due to an increase in entropy, by natural design or not," Harry said, "it would mean that the entropy arrow of time is a given, and there is little chance that what we find in the database will be applicable."

Kathryn smiled at them both. "Well, we don't have the Federation's classified theories of time travel, which would be quite helpful at the moment, but we do have everything we were taught in temporal mechanics."

Harry still looked skeptical. "Yes, there was the famous 'slingshot effect' that was used back when warp drive's capabilities were just being understood. But Captain, that's not going to work..."

Kathryn interrupted him again. "Try to keep an open mind. Let's start by reviewing the possibilities, then begin the calculations, based upon what Icheb maps out for us, shall we?"

Seven and Harry glanced at each other before accessing the database. Kathryn, adjacent to them, did the same. They discussed, argued, and worked on the problem for two hours before being interrupted by the swoosh of the astrometrics doors opening.

Tom came through them with a big smile on his face, going straight to Harry, nodding to the captain en route.

"Hey Harry, how's it going? Calculated the latest retarded waves postulate yet?" His voice was low.

Harry looked at him from beneath his brow. "Very funny, Tom," he said in a sotto voice. "What do you want?" He tried not to show how pleased he was that Tom was there. To see him. As though nothing had changed.

"Now is that any way to greet me?" Tom said, grinning. "Of course it's not. So listen, this is what I'm thinking. This group of people needs distraction in a major way, B'Lanna's been hearing rumblings in Engineering, I heard some talk in the mess hall on my break. I'd like to start up the Sandrine's program tonight, for old time's sake, maybe have a pool tournament, that sort of thing. It's been a while - you think the program is still run-able?"

"I don't see why not, I haven't messed with it since we copied Lila into Proton."

"Yeah, Lila. She was a peach, wasn't she?"

"Tom, you're still incorrigible," Harry smiled at his friend. "You're supposed to be all centered since becoming a father..."

"Don't get me wrong, Miral's the light of my life, but," Tom said with a wink, "you know me, I still like to have fun. Okay, so I'll...."

The captain's voice interrupted him. "Mr. Paris, are you here to help us get the ship back into the 24th century? I didn't realize you specialized in temporal mechanics," she said with only a hint of a light tone.

He turned to her and gave her a dazzling Tom Paris smile. "Not at all, Captain, I'm just checking in with my co-hologrammer. I apologize for taking his time away from the problem at hand. But I have only the crew's best interests at heart."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh? And how's that?"

"I want to run Sandrine's tonight. I think the crew could use the break, the distraction. Have some fun. Actually, I'd like to have a pool tournament, for old time's sake. What do you say, Captain, up for some pool? I'll even give you two out of three," he said, continuing the charm.

"And what makes you think I'd need two out of three to beat you, Tom?" The tiniest of smiles was beginning to show.

"It's been a while since you've played me, ma'am, so you shouldn't think you can beat me so easily any more." His grin got broader. He really wanted her to be behind this, to participate. To mingle.

"I'll think about it. I have a lot of work to do, and hopefully will have a fair amount of data to review this evening. But I think it's a good idea. Have fun. Now, perhaps you could allow Mr. Kim to return to his tasks?" She folded her arms across her chest.

"Yes, ma'am. Thinking about it is all I ask, for now," he said. "Harry, thanks. See you later." He clapped his friend on the shoulder and left, a bounce in his step. Tom Paris was looking forward to that evening. Giving the crew some entertainment was one of his greatest joys. And he was happy, his life was good, he thought it was his duty to spread the feeling around a bit, particularly that day. And he dearly wanted to trounce the captain at pool.

Chakotay looked around as he took his own break, downing another liter of cold water. The sun was as high as it had been earlier in the day, clearly having moved, but not the equivalence of five hours on Earth. So it looked as though the daily cycle here was longer than 24 hours. This was good news. More daylight meant more work could be accomplished. Still, five hours had passed and their progress wasn't as great as he had envisioned.

It appeared that the more Sernaix debris they moved, the more they found. They moved and dug, and moved and dug. It was beginning to look as though the Sernaix ship had been destroyed, causing a small crater to form. Then, for some reason, dirt and rocks had piled into the crater with the pieces of the ship. He'd asked Samantha to see if she could find evidence of tectonic movement. After an hour of exploring the surrounding area, she'd returned to say, yes, this planet was not completely stable.

Not out of the ordinary for any planet. It didn't look to her as though the earthquakes had been very recent, perhaps occurring at some point in the prior few years. He could see from the progress not made that more hands would be needed. He called Kathryn

to give her a progress report and ask for more assistance. She sounded supportive but a bit distracted again. Trying to find out how the space-time travel project was going, he got stonewalled. He interpreted that to mean it wasn't going well. This did not surprise him. However, if she wouldn't tell him, he couldn't commiserate with her. Trying not to sound frustrated by this, he went back to discussing his need for more strong bodies.

It was her idea to send down ten people from the Pleiades. They had been integrated into the crew, just like the crew from the Equinox, but unlike those people, their transition had been much smoother. Kindred spirits. Lost for reasons beyond their control. Still, they didn't have many connections yet, and none were former Maquis. They were all on short shifts. He welcomed the idea with relief.

Within the half hour, ten of the strongest, picked by the captain herself, had beamed down. They were enthusiastic, happy to be asked to contribute, happy to be off the ship, curious to work side-by-side with the man the entire crew respected so deeply. They'd heard of the renegade Maquis captain who'd made a place for himself in this Starfleet crew, and meeting him had been nothing close to what they'd expected.

After giving them the rundown on what they were to do, Chakotay assigned them to relieve some people first off. Then he got to work, wielding a shovel on the outer edge of the field, where the crew hadn't gone quite as deeply. If he were honest with himself, he could say that the physical labor was something he needed. To work off the stresses of the past months, hell, years, by the simple act of digging dirt and tossing it somewhere else. It was mindless work and as the sweat poured off him he reveled in it.

With the break over, the team of now twenty spread further and continued. But no one called out. Nothing was found that wasn't Sernaix. Scans were still interfered with.

Chakotay was resting on his shovel an hour later when Samantha approached him. "Commander, would you like more water?"

"Thanks, Sam, that would be great," he said, accepting the container and swallowing a large amount of it immediately. He watched her, seeing, correctly, she had something on her mind. "What can I do for you?" He smiled.

She chuckled. "Get me home to Earth tomorrow?"

He laughed along with her, grateful to be able to. "Would that I could..."

"I know. Seriously, I have a couple of questions. Let's say this is unofficial, okay? Naomi's mother to one of her father figures?"

"Okay, unofficial. Shoot." He drank more water.

"What is this dig really about? How is this going to get us home? Finding a Starfleet ship amongst some Sernaix stuff in our future, I just don't see it."

"Sam, even unofficially, I can't answer that. The captain and I decided it would be best if the crew didn't understand the totality of what we're trying to find out here. I'm sorry," he smiled, "as one of Naomi's father figures, I'd do whatever I could for her, especially get her home. She needs her real father, I know."

Sam sighed. "Yes, she does. She misses Neelix a lot, more than she's telling me." She smiled, a softer smile than before. "I understand, really I do. And it's just nice to hear, and see, that you and the captain are working as a team again. Even if it means that secrets are being kept from us. So things are going well between you two?"

He looked intently at her. "And is that Naomi's mother speaking, or Naomi herself?" She laughed out loud. "Let's just say a combination of both."

"I see. Well, you may tell your daughter that the captain and I are getting along fine at the moment," he said, letting one dimple show.

"Would you care to elaborate on that, for Naomi?"

"Not even for Naomi," he said firmly yet gently.

Smiling, she promised she'd pass the word on to her daughter and left him to his shovel. Pushing the metal back into the dirt he chuckled to himself. As much as things changed, they stayed the same.

Another hour went by but still no shouts. They did discover one thing, however. During a scan Chakotay was performing, he noticed a fluctuation in the energy signature from the debris. A signature that had been holding steady since they first scanned the planet. Six people had just lifted a rather large piece of the Sernaix ship, moving it away to the edge of the deepening crater. This energy reading was very different from any they'd gathered so far from either ships or weaponry. Without any way to quantify it in Sernaix terms, he could only see that Starfleet computers said it was "stronger" and emanated from a more powerful source. He surmised it might be an indication of the weapon that destroyed this ship. Either that or it was the remnants of a weapon the ship itself carried. Whatever it was, for some reason it made him uneasy.

Once more Chakotay was making his way across the bridge to the ready room. Beta shift was working but the captain was still there and he had a pretty good idea of what he'd see when the door opened. Sure enough, the scene to greet him was exactly what he'd imagined. Kathryn was staring intently at her console, chin in one hand, coffee in the other. She looked exhausted. She looked stressed. She didn't look happy.

He sat across from her and waited until she focused on him.

"Well?" Her voice was as dull as her eyes.

"Nothing else. We excavated as much as we could and did manage to scan some areas but there's nothing there, Kathryn. I just don't understand it," he said with more than a touch of frustration.

She sipped her coffee. "I'm sorry. Would more time be a help?"

"Nine hours was just about everyone's limit, even with the extra hands. If we're still here in the morning, I'll take the team back and expand the search. I'll bring a carton of analgesic hyposprays, too." The joke sounded flat to his ears, too.

"We'll still be here."

"What happened?"

He saw a spark of anger flash in her eyes and was relieved to see it. It was the dull affect that bothered him more. Anger he could deal with. But she wasn't answering him.

"Kathryn, what happened?"

"Nothing happened. Exactly nothing. Every calculation we've tried, every temporal theory of space-time that's ever been thought about, discussed, and even proven, every one of them has been a failure." She slammed her cup down hard.

"How do you know they're going to fail?" he said, trying to keep her talking.

"We've run calculations so many times I thought the computer was going to start complaining. The major stumbling block in all of them is the fact that this Alpha Quadrant and the Alpha Quadrant we know appear to be two separate things. Trying to calculate how to get from this point in space-time to a specific point in another space-time, when the starting point and the ending point may not be equivalent - apparently it can't be done. Or at least that's what Seven and Harry are trying, ever so diplomatically, to tell me." Her eyes drifted to a point somewhere near the viewports.

"And you don't believe them, do you?"

Their eyes locked. She took another drink of her coffee. "No. I don't. I can't."

"Because to believe that, you'll have to believe that we won't get home," he said softly. "I understand it all, Kathryn, you know I do. My problem is that I believe in you, in your determination." He watched her eyes soften, just a bit. "So, what's the plan of action?"

"My plan of action is to keep going over it all until the thing we're missing becomes apparent. I've let Harry off so he can relax his mind, I've told Seven and Icheb to regenerate. I need them at their peak efficiency when we tackle this again first thing in the morning."

"And why is it that you never seem to have the need to take a break?"

"I don't have that luxury."

He laughed softly. "Nonsense."

Her eyes narrowed. "It is not nonsense."

"That's right, I forgot. You are not human like the rest of us. You don't have the same needs that the rest of us do..."

She interrupted him. "Chakotay, let's not go there, please."

"I wasn't talking about that, Kathryn. I was talking about simpler things. Dinner. Some hours off to unwind and not think about our situation. To give yourself a breather, so that your mind is rested and ready to tackle this again."

"It sounds like you could use that. Am I right?"

He smiled. "Yes, I would like to try. This phaser find is driving me to just this side of crazy, I'll admit. I'm tired, worn out, my muscles ache, my mind is trapped and I'd like nothing more than to have some dinner with you."

"Your muscles ache? I thought that's what you had the crew for?"

"I did my share of digging. Actually, it felt good. Slightly cathartic."

This time she smiled. "You don't look like you spent the day digging in the dirt."

"You don't think I would traverse the ship covered in sweat and dirt, much less enter the ready

room like that, do you? I think my entire group probably hit the showers so fast we might have overloaded the system. Now, dinner? There's something I did find that I'd like to talk over with you - after we eat."

She sighed. "Okay. Dinner. My rations. Did you hear what Tom and Harry have planned for this evening? They're starting up Sandrine's, for the crew. There's even a pool tournament."

"After what I heard today I think that's an excellent idea. People are having a very difficult time right now. There was a fair amount of talking about what we're facing. Discouragement seems to be the feeling of the moment. Good for Tom," he said emphatically.

"Morale is sinking? Damn."

"Yes, though that's not all that surprising. And, well, I think it would be a good idea for the crew to see you tonight, in Sandrine's, having some fun. Mingling. I'd like to go, see if I can talk to some others, find out how widespread this is and if there's anything I can do to help. What do you say? Wanna shoot some pool?" He deliberately gave her one of his most disarming smiles.

"Tom actually said he'd give me two out of three, if you can believe it," she said, a smile beginning to play across her features.

"That's one cheeky pilot we've got," he deadpanned.

"Yes, isn't he." She shrugged. "Well, I guess it would be a good idea. Go, mingle with the crew, have a little fun with them. Maybe enter the tournament. Show Tom up..."

"Good. So we'll have dinner and then go to Sandrine's. For the good of the crew." He tried not to grin.

She looked at him from beneath her brow. "Yes, we'll go. For the good of the crew." He lost the battle and grinned outright. She returned it, chuckling, as she closed her console. However, she picked up the PADDs just before leaving the ready room at Chakotay's side.

Chakotay silently thanked Tom again, once they arrived on the holodeck. Sandrine's was fairly crowded and he could have sworn the place looked larger than it used to. He wondered if they'd expanded the perimeter of the room, just to accommodate as many people as possible. It was nice to be back, though he could feel tension come from Kathryn when they arrived. He knew she'd get past it soon enough. Steering them to the bar, greeting people along the way, they ordered some synthale, then, as agreed, they split up to mingle.

He kept one eye on the captain as she went from group to group. She spent more time with B'Elanna and T'Pol than anyone else. But watching her, he felt grateful they were there. She was animated, obviously enjoying the company, even laughing out loud with B'Elanna over something. He relaxed and went to the next table on his mental checklist.

After an hour of deliberate mingling, he found an empty table and started in on his second ale. The mental image of the Maquis phaser butt made itself glaringly obvious in his mind. It was driving him crazy, that they hadn't found anything else on the planet. It made no sense. It was almost as though it had just dropped from the sky, out of time and out of place. Within a few minutes, Tuvok joined him. As much as he respected the Vulcan, he was tired, his mind was now more than occupied and he wasn't in the mood to talk.

"Good evening, Commander," Tuvok said.

"Evening, Tuvok."

"It is promising to see the captain spending time with the crew. T'Pel informs me there has been an increase in requests for her counseling time today."

He sighed audibly. "Yes, the captain needed to come see for herself how everyone's doing."

"And the two of you arrived together."

He nodded and waited.

"That is gratifying as well."

"What exactly does that mean, Tuvok? Gratifying." He could feel irritation beginning, and willed it away. He didn't need to get into it with this man. Not tonight.

"That the command structure of the ship is no longer compromised." Tuvok sipped his drink and looked at him placidly.

"I wasn't aware that it was - compromised, that is."

"When the two commanding officers are not in harmony, the structure is compromised."

Irritation returned. "Was there a problem with how the ship was running that I wasn't made aware of? How well the captain and I are getting along is not exactly anyone's business but ours."

"I assure you, Commander, that my interests are purely for the good of the crew."

"Yes, I feel quite assured now, thank you," he said, knowing full well the sarcasm was not missed.

Tuvok raised one of his eyebrows and Chakotay waited. "And if the two commanding officers of this ship have resolved some of their differences, it can only contribute to the harmony this ship will need as it faces the next hurdle."

Chakotay exhaled loudly. "I appreciate that fact, more than I need to be reminded of it."

"I meant no harm by my remarks. It was merely an observation that the two of you are spending more time together and the time spent seems to be agreeable to you both. The captain needs your support."

That did it. Chakotay got up quickly, afraid to stay for fear of what he'd say. Like demanding to know where the hell Tuvok was when Kathryn hid herself away when they were first pulled into the Bubble. Like where the hell Tuvok was when he could have used someone to talk to, having to keep the ship together and his anger under control so he wouldn't just dump Kathryn out the nearest airlock....

"Mr. Tuvok, I understand that no harm was meant. And I'm sure the captain will appreciate your continued support as we face our next hurdle. And yes, she and I are getting along just fine now. Hopefully things will stay this way from now on. Now, I need to keep mingling, to keep myself available to the crew. I trust you and T'Pel will have a pleasant evening." He nodded in response to Tuvok's assent and left the table quickly.

The red in front of his eyes faded. He headed directly to the pool table, suddenly wanting to knock a few balls around. It looked as though one game was just finishing. Tom met his eyes with a question. He mouthed "me next." The younger man gave him a mock feral grin. Chakotay smiled as he picked out a cue.

But it turned out that knocking a few balls around, even with Tom's continual joking banter, only

allowed his mind to wander again. Back to the phaser butt. What he was fast beginning to term 'that damned phaser.' He took a shot and heard a chortle from Tom.

"Hey, Chakotay, what is with you?"

"Hmm, what're you talking about?"

"That was a pretty easy shot. One I know you wouldn't normally miss," Tom said with only a slight grin.

He was right. Chakotay shrugged nonchalantly and watched Tom line up his attempt at sinking the three-ball. It fell into the pocket easily.

Tom continued, looking over the table. "I know it can't be my sizzling company that's distracting," he said, bending over and lining up the next shot. "So why don't you tell me what's bothering you." He tapped the cue ball expertly and acquired another point. He was wanting to talk to someone besides Kathryn, but knew it couldn't be the pilot. Tom's mouth was just too, well, unreliable. He said in all seriousness, "Maybe it is just your sizzling company."

Tom looked at him askance. "Yeah, right." He sank another ball. "Well, that leaves just the eight ball, mister." Standing upright again, he walked around the table, patting Chakotay's shoulder on the way. "Sorry, maybe next time," he said. He lined up the shot and ended the game.

Chakotay let loose a laugh. "Since when are you sorry you won a game, Tom?" Tom shrugged and grinned.

At that moment, Kathryn approached the table. Walking directly up to Chakotay she stopped two feet in front of him holding her hand out. "Commander, your stick?"

He couldn't believe it. He heard laughter from various people sitting nearby, the loudest from the pilot not six feet away. Meeting Kathryn's eyes, he knew that she knew exactly what she was implying this time, there was no question about it. There was a certain daring smokiness in her look. He'd never seen it before and it threw him.

"Well?" she said.

He decided to give as good as she had. What the hell. "Anytime you want it, all you have to do is ask, Kathryn," he said, using her given name for good measure. He handed the cue to her with a smile and waited. Their eyes locked.

She gave him a smile, broke eye contact and told Tom to rack the balls up. With one last look at her over his shoulder, Chakotay left the pool table, chuckling to himself. That had been interesting. Not quite interesting enough to occupy his mind, however, for here came that damned phaser again.

He got another synthale from the bar and headed to a corner table to think. After a few minutes of thinking, which was fast becoming full out brooding, he was pleased to see Michael Ayala coming up to his table.

"Hey, Chakotay, mind if I join you?" Michael said.

"No, not at all. Please, do," he answered. They chatted for a while as it had been a couple of weeks since they'd sat and talked. Ayala was one of Chakotay's oldest friends, almost as close to him as B'Elanna. He'd recruited Ayala before he found B'Elanna in the alley, and Michael had been instrumental in making the young woman feel at home on the Liberty. Once more he was

reminded how much he trusted this man, trusted him with his life, and so much more. Ayala hinted that he was curious about the situation with the captain and his friend, and Chakotay obliged him, saying as much as he was comfortable with, knowing it would go no further than the two of them.

During a short lull, while they were both drinking more of their ale, the phaser butt appeared behind Chakotay's eyelids. He made an instant decision to tell Michael. Watching Michael's eyes change as he talked, Chakotay knew it had been the right decision. The other man was listening in that calm way he had, taking it all in, contemplating the meaning, the possibilities even as Chakotay continued with the facts. He ended the recitation and finished his ale.

"You know, Chakotay, not everyone got rid of their Maquis weapons when we joined Voyager," Michael said slowly.

"What do you know that I don't?"

"Well, I'm torn, you still being the commanding officer. Can I tell you with an assurance that you won't punish the person? I mean, I think you need to know, and it might answer some of your questions, but..."

"Michael, I'm so desperate for answers right now, that yes, I promise I won't do anything about it. Spill."

Ayala emptied his glass with one swallow. "Well, Dalby kept his phaser against orders. He said it was his good luck charm. He had hash marks on it."

"So did a lot of people. And I can't see how it could be Dalby's. Besides how would we tell?"

"I'd recognize it. It was my phaser he always borrowed to put in the marks. I'm sure I would know if it's his."

Chakotay stared at him, though his mind was elsewhere entirely. It couldn't be Dalby's. That would make no sense at all. Still, he had nothing to lose. "Okay, let's go to my quarters, that's where it is. You take a look at it."

Michael nodded seriously and followed Chakotay out of the holodeck.

Entering his quarters, Chakotay called for the lights to increase. Neither man had said a word since they left Sandrine's, their silent communication the same as it always had been. Words were unnecessary. This was a quiet mission, two Maquis trying to learn the fate of an unknown third.

He opened the cabinet in his bedroom and picked up the phaser. It had reached such importance in his mind that the simple piece of metal he held almost glowed in his hand. He carried it to the living area and handed it to Michael.

The younger man inhaled sharply. Chakotay's heart stopped. Michael cleared his throat. "It's Dalby's," he said emphatically.

Chakotay's mind was numb. "How... how can you be so sure?"

"See this hash mark?" He pointed to one that was slightly askew. "That happened when Henley knocked his hand accidentally. I was there. Dalby was angry. They almost got into a fight over it. I'm sure. It's Ken's."

Their eyes locked. Neither knew what to say, or how to interpret this. After a few minutes of silent contemplation, Chakotay knew he had to call Kathryn and tell her. He got, what was in his mind, an unneeded assurance from Michael that he wouldn't talk to anyone about it. At the door, he reached out to shake hands and Michael pulled him into a quick embrace. It felt good, just like in the old days, when physical signs of affection and camaraderie were more frequent than since they'd all been on Voyager. Without another word, Michael left Chakotay.

He sat on his couch and tried to put his mind to the obvious question. How? After an unknown period of time, he tapped his combadge.

"Chakotay to Janeway."

"Janeway here, Chakotay. Are you coming back for more pool?"

"No. I need you to come to my quarters."

"Hmm, Commander, I don't know how to take that..."

He heard the innuendo in her voice and shook his head, wondering what had gotten into her. Titles were in order, clearly. "Captain, it's about what I discovered on the planet this morning."

Silence was the only response for at least a minute. "I'll be right there. Janeway out."
He spent the time waiting staring at the piece of metal in his hand.

Kathryn entered but he didn't rise from where he sat. He felt drained. She joined him, and for the first time, saw the now infamous piece of phaser. He took a deep breath and told her what he'd found out.

"That's impossible, Chakotay, it can't be," she said with assuredness.

He shook his head. "It is, Kathryn. There is no question. This is from Voyager."
She was stunned, and clearly could say nothing. She stood up and began to pace. After a minute of this, he got up as well, intending only to gently force her to talk.
At that moment, the ship was rocked, hard. Kathryn stumbled. He caught her in his arms. Hers instinctively went around his waist. Their eyes locked. They both forgot what had been so important just the moment before, or what the rocking meant. Chakotay slowly pulled his hand away from her back and brought it up to her cheek, brushing the soft skin with his thumb, her eyes never leaving his. She allowed the contact.

Then she smiled and reached up to her chest to open communication with the bridge. The beta shift operations officer sounded flustered and was unable to tell them much, other than that the ship had been moved by an unknown force.

Chakotay let go of her and without a word spoken, they both turned and headed out, calling Harry on the way, to meet them at the bridge.

Neither of them sat in their command chairs. Kathryn was pacing, Chakotay was standing next to Harry at ops. The young woman from beta shift stood behind them both, watching to see what Harry was doing.

"Well?" Kathryn said for the third time, on her twelfth pass in front of the big chair.
Harry sighed but this time answered. "The space-time Bubble has weakened subspace in this area. We registered a signal from the planet's surface, but I don't know it's effect."

Chakotay muttered, "The excavation..." He met Kathryn's eyes. She nodded in agreement.

"Harry," she said, "where are we?"

Harry's fingers were still working. After an interminable minute he looked at them both, one at a time. "From what I can tell, a subspace rift opened nearby and Voyager was pulled back into the anomaly. We're in the Bubble."

Captain and Commander stared at each other.

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