



## Episode 11 – The Journey

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Tom Paris walked down Voyager's corridors, with a bounce in his step and a PADD in his hand. It felt good not to be carrying Miral with him for a change. Even though he loved her with all his heart, she was getting bigger and bigger every day. He sighed. The days of carrying his little girl about the ship with him were nearly over for good, he realized with a pang in his heart. Where had the time gone?

He glanced at his PADD now and then, checking the supply list for tomorrow's away mission, and began to hum a song that both he and B'Elanna liked. This in itself was a rare thing indeed, since Tom didn't particularly care for Klingon music and B'Elanna couldn't stand most every song Tom knew. The Doctor had tried to interest both of them in his type of music, but neither of them could warm up to opera.

Tom turned a corner quickly and nearly ran into a couple of the younger crewmen

aboard ship. He apologized wholeheartedly for not looking where he was going, and they said it was all right. But then they looked at him a little strangely as they moved away and continued down the corridor. Tom immediately realized his blunder. While it was a part of his job as a senior staff member to help raise or sustain crew morale, it wasn't exactly a good thing to be singing happily in the corridors as though he didn't have a care in the world, while the rest of the crew was still upset about being so close to home, and then getting lost again instead.

He continued on his way to Engineering, but slowed down a little and began to think about his away mission tomorrow. Just because Tom Paris had everything he'd ever wanted, and more, aboard Voyager, most of his other crewmates had families who were back on Earth, or elsewhere in the Alpha Quadrant. And, although no one was able to determine yet where Voyager actually was, they knew for certain it wasn't the Alpha Quadrant.

The doors to Engineering whooshed open and Tom walked in, already looking for B'Elanna. He immediately saw her across the room and started toward her. She was busy with Vorik, explaining something to him that sounded like an alien language, but then, Engineering talk always sounded that way to Tom. At least Vorik seemed to understand her, and nodded at Tom before moving away to begin doing whatever it was that B'Elanna had instructed him to do.

"Hey there," Tom said, greeting his wife casually.

"Hi yourself," she said, grinning. "How's the second best pool player aboard Voyager?"

Tom cringed. "She's the only one who can beat me."

"Well, you're just going to have to practice more, Tom," said B'Elanna lightly, as she entered some data into the console. "You know that the Captain has to be the best to save face."

"That's not how pool works, B'Elanna," he said. "Being good at pool is a skill. You have to practice a lot to be the best. And I know she's not practiced in a long time. I just don't know how she does it."

"Simple," said B'Elanna. "She intimidates the balls into submission." Then she threw a grin over her shoulder at Tom.

He smiled back. "I'll keep that in mind."

"So, what's going on?" She continued to work the console in front of her as she spoke.

Tom moved closer. "Not much at the moment. I've got some preparations to do before leaving tomorrow on the away mission, but there's plenty of time to do those later."

"I heard about that. Sounds like it could be an important diplomatic mission, Helmboy," she said, continuing to work. "Where's Miral?"

"She's being entertained by the Wildmans," he said, grinning. "They were overjoyed to get her all to themselves. I just hope they don't spoil her."

"Right. Not much chance of that on Voyager, is there?" she asked, grinning back at him over her shoulder. The two of them shared a glance that spoke volumes. Every time they left Miral with someone new, she came back to her parents more spoiled than ever before. But that was the way it was going to be, they knew. They were also grateful for all the kindnesses the crew showed them daily. Many of the crewmen volunteered for "baby duty" repeatedly, and Miral was loved throughout the ship. As parents, Tom and B'Elanna couldn't be luckier. Besides, it helped them to remember that Naomi had been spoiled by everyone, too, and she'd turned out just fine.

"So, since you're free at the moment, did you come around looking for something to do?" B'Elanna gave Tom an evil grin, which he immediately understood.

"Oh no, not me," he said, throwing up his arms to ward off her suggestion. "I don't understand a thing that goes on in Engineering, and I don't want to find out." At least he was honest.

"Hmm," said B'Elanna, good-naturedly, knowing her husband would say exactly that. "So, why are you here then?" She continued to work at her console, periodically checking it against the PADD in her hand.

Tom took a deep breath. "I just wondered if you'd be free for dinner this evening," he said.

"Dinner?"

"I thought it might be nice if the three of us could have dinner together tonight. It's been a few days since we've both been with Miral at dinnertime, and I want her to grow up knowing that her parents really do live together," he said, trying to keep the tone light. But the truth was, he really felt a need to have "family night" tonight, for some reason. Maybe it was just harder these days to leave for an away mission, now that he was leaving a family behind whenever he left the ship. That carefree Tom Paris of the past was long behind him. And he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'll try to be there," said B'Elanna. "But we're trying like hell to get this ablative armor working properly. It keeps giving us problems, for some reason we haven't figured out yet, and the Captain keeps checking in for updates."

"I understand that," he said, truly sympathizing with her. "And I know we still don't know where we are, or how to get back to Earth yet, but we're all doing the best we can."

"Right. And the last thing I want is for us to be attacked by those Sernaix ships again, without being ready for them," she said, consulting her PADD and punching more data into the console.

"I want the same thing, B'Elanna. I want to get this ship back to the Alpha Quadrant, too. But ignoring everything else around us while we try to figure out more about the Sernaix or what we're doing here, isn't right either."

"I'm not ignoring you and Miral, Tom. I just have other priorities right now," she said.

"I know, but Miral and I are only asking for an hour or so of your time," said Tom. "Can't Vorik or Nicoletti handle things for that long? I mean, maybe Harry was right." He sighed.

"About what?"

"When he said 'maybe it's the journey,' when the Captain was trying to decide whether to listen to Admiral Janeway and use the Borg technology to get us home. Maybe he was right. Maybe all of life is about the journey, and not about actually reaching a particular goal or place. Maybe this is really what it's all about."

B'Elanna stopped what she was doing and looked at her husband. His woeful tone of voice hadn't been lost on her, though she mentally berated herself for not noticing his mood before now. She sighed, and then took a deep breath and slowly grinned at Tom. "Maybe you're right. Tell you what, Flyboy. Outside of a red alert, I'll be there for dinner tonight. Deal?"

Tom grinned. "Deal," he said. "And I'll even take care of the dishes so you can get right back to your old musty engine room."

"I beg your pardon, but this engine room is practically new with all the repair work that's been done to it, and it's definitely not musty!" She crossed her arms over her chest, and enjoyed seeing the much more relaxed look on her husband's face. "Now, let me get back to work so I can actually keep my word about tonight."

"I'm leaving right now!" He quickly kissed his wife's cheek and was off, moving through the Engineering doors and into the corridor, with the pep returning to his step once more. But this time he didn't even notice it.

B'Elanna turned back to her console. She had a lot of work to do in the next few hours, in order to make that dinner date. She paused a moment anyway, and thought about how difficult it was to juggle everything. Before Tom, there was only her, and she'd often spent hour upon hour in Engineering. But that was different, she reflected. Sometimes she'd spent those hours here because it was necessary, and sometimes she did it just because there hadn't been anything else to do, and it kept her from being lonely.

And then, when she and Tom were married, for the first time she had to think of someone other than just herself. They both had demanding jobs on Voyager, and were summoned from their quarters in the middle of the night on many occasions. Then just when they'd nearly adjusted to being a couple, Miral had come along. And now finding the time to do everything and be everywhere was even more difficult yet.

B'Elanna smiled slowly. Things might be more difficult in some ways, she thought, but they were well worth it.

Maybe this was all a part of it, she thought suddenly. Maybe this was the way it was for everyone, not just she and Tom. Maybe every set of new parents went through this fear of not being good enough, this fear of being only adequate at best for their child. Yes, maybe it was actually normal to feel this way.

B'Elanna glanced at the chronometer across the way. Damn, time always seemed to work against her every time she needed it to work with her. She didn't have time to stand around and think about parental behavior today. She turned back to her console and decided to pursue that line of thinking later, when there was more time. She had work to do now.

But suddenly B'Elanna stopped again, and thought about when she and Harry had first met Azuma and the other Caprijens. She thought about how the Keeper had extricated her memories of childhood, and then later, the worst memory of her life.

She felt a shiver go up her spine when she thought of how it had felt to go back in time to the last big argument she'd had with her mother just before B'Elanna left for Starfleet Academy. That argument was still fresh in her mind after all these years. And reliving it just recently had made the hurt so real, all over again. She could still recall every word they'd thrown at each other, and she knew she would never forget that part of her life as long as she lived. She never had, and she never would.

Yes, she had wanted to go back to change things, to make it right the second time around, but Harry had followed her back there and helped her to realize that it wasn't proper to go back to right those old wrongs. No matter what had happened in the past, it

was her past, and she had to live with it. Changing something so simple as an argument might have long repercussions in the future - the future that she already shared with her husband and her daughter.

B'Elanna shivered again. She had wanted to change that moment with her mother so badly, and had very nearly done so, without considering the consequences of her actions. If she had lost her husband and child as a result of those actions, she would never have been able to live with herself afterwards.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant Torres?"

B'Elanna turned to see Vorik standing next to her. "I'm fine, Vorik," she said. "I guess I was just daydreaming. Let's see if we can get that modification ready to go in about half an hour."

"Yes, Lieutenant," said Vorik, and moved off again.

She sighed. Maybe tonight she'd tell Tom more about her experience on Caprijen. He knew a little about it, but it was something she'd not felt like discussing much since it had happened. And she knew Harry hadn't said anything about it. But tonight there might be some time to actually sit and share her experience with her husband.

B'Elanna smiled and turned back to her work. It would be good to be with her family tonight.

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The Doctor was humming an aria in Sickbay, and meticulously putting instruments away into their proper places. There had been an earlier onslaught of ailing crewmembers with sprains or splinters, and one case of indigestion from Chell's latest recipe, but that seemed to be all the excitement for today. Frankly, the Doctor didn't mind having a bit of time to himself just now since he had so much to do. He had to make sure Sickbay was in pristine condition since he was going to be out all day tomorrow on an away mission.

The mere thought of it brought a smile to the Doctor's lips as he painstakingly put away several empty vials nearby. He'd brought them out earlier to begin a new experiment, which was now being put on hold until he returned from the away mission.

Finishing the task at hand, the Doctor began to look toward the Sickbay doors. He desperately wanted to tell someone about his new assignment. It wasn't a top-secret mission or anything of the sort, and he was at liberty to tell others about it, but at present there was no one to talk to. He sighed. When he really wanted someone around, there was no one. When he was in the middle of something important, crewmen came through the doors in droves.

Ah well, he thought. He was going to be an important part of tomorrow's mission, and that was what he needed to concentrate on right now. He tried to turn his thoughts to the list of items he might need for the shuttle trip to Ayrethia. He headed toward his office to consult his PADD, when the doors to Sickbay opened and Seven of Nine entered.

The Doctor smiled. "Seven! What a nice surprise!"

Seven of Nine nodded slightly. The Doctor seemed to be in a refreshingly exuberant mood today. "Doctor," she said, greeting him. "Lieutenant Kim suggested that I try to determine why your program malfunctioned the other day, since he is busy with other duties." She moved toward the central display console and began to key in commands.

"That's a wonderful idea, Seven," said the Doctor. "It was the strangest thing. I still don't remember what happened. At first I was certain that someone had tampered with my subroutines, but Lieutenant Kim found nothing to support that theory. He said that my memory buffer was filled with garbled information, but it didn't seem to be the result of an act of vandalism."

"I have isolated the corrupt information in your subroutines, Doctor. I will now analyze the data. Please remain still."

The Doctor stopped moving and remained standing several feet away from Seven. "I'm glad you're here, Seven. It's a good idea to have my program functioning at peak efficiency as soon as possible."

"Indeed," agreed Seven.

"What I mean is, it would be a good thing to have it functioning properly quickly, since I am going on an away mission tomorrow morning." The Doctor couldn't help the bit of pride evident in his vocal pattern. It was, after all, a rare thing for him to be chosen as part of an away mission, particularly a diplomatic one. There was no apparent need for a physician on tomorrow's excursion, but the Doctor had been asked specifically by the Captain if he could accompany Lieutenant Paris tomorrow. Of course, he was flattered, but he would also have the opportunity to test his diplomatic skills - skills that he had worked hard to develop these past few years.

"I am aware that Lieutenant Paris is currently forming an Away Team, but I was unaware that you are a part of it, Doctor."

"Yes, I am, Seven," he said, smiling. "The Captain herself came to see me earlier, and asked if I could spare the time from my medical duties tomorrow in order to be a part of the mission." He smiled broadly, as Seven glanced quickly around sickbay, and then threw the glance in the Doctor's direction.

"I know it doesn't seem very busy in here right now," continued the Doctor, understanding the meaning behind Seven's glances. "However, this is the first break I've had in days."

"Of course, Doctor. Please remain still," said Seven, her fingers flying over the keypad on the console in front of her.

The Doctor realized he was moving around again and forced himself to stop walking and quit fidgeting. He just wasn't good at being still. "I'm pleased that the Captain is treating me with the same respect she shows other senior staff members," he said. "Sometimes, when I begin to think that she forgets I'm even here, she proves me wrong," he

continued, beaming. "In fact, Seven, this mission will be very important for me, you know. It's a chance to be more than just a hologram, more than just a well-trained and resourceful physician. It is a chance to be...to be..."

Seven glanced at the Doctor quickly, thinking that perhaps his program was malfunctioning again. But she immediately realized he was simply searching his database for the appropriate word to express his thoughts. She glanced at her console once more. "Yes, Doctor?" Sometimes when dealing with the Doctor, it was best to appear interested in what he was saying in order to accomplish the task at hand.

"A person," he stated. "It is a chance to be a person." He stopped, the enormity of what he'd just said hitting him for the first time. "A person," he repeated softly. "Seven, did you hear that? For perhaps the first time, I am being treated as a person."

"I do not think you have been treated as less than a person in the past, Doctor," said Seven, continuing to work.

"No, but this is different, Seven. I'm being sent into this situation, not as a doctor, but as a person, as a diplomatic representative of this ship, of Voyager."

"I'm sure you will perform your duties well," said Seven, obviously not understanding the reason for the Doctor's exuberance.

"Mr. Paris and I will be visiting the Ayrethans," continued the Doctor, "along with two of Commander Tuvok's security officers. This will, of course, be my first opportunity to see the Ayrethans interact in their environment, and to interact with them. This can be very helpful in understanding any species and their culture."

The Doctor had paused, and seemed to be expecting a response from her. "Indeed," replied Seven.

"We have two things to accomplish on tomorrow's mission," he said smugly. "Engineering is in need of additional minerals from the planet's surface, and the Ayrethans have generously agreed to give them to us, which is why we're taking a shuttle instead of simply beaming down to the planet. And," he paused for effect, "we have been invited to dine with the Ayrethans! Seven! Do you realize what this means?" Seven looked up quickly, but the Doctor didn't seem to require an answer to his question, so she continued with her work.

The Doctor didn't notice. He was simply glad to have an audience. "This means that we will have an incredible opportunity to study them - and perhaps find out more about our own dilemma."

"Our dilemma, Doctor?" asked Seven.

"Are we really inside a Bubble universe? And if so, why? How did we get here?"

"A subspace mine left by the Borg..." began Seven.

"Yes, yes, I know. But there are more unanswered questions than ones with answers, Seven. For example, how do we get out of here, and where will we be if we do leave? How long have we really been here? In our time, months have passed, but if this is a Bubble universe, does that mean that time outside the Bubble has stopped, has stood still?" He paused a moment, but then considered other things aloud. "Who is responsible for this Bubble universe? Do the Ayrethans know? Can they tell us more than they've done thus far?"

"It is my understanding that the Ayrethans are not forthcoming in divulging information, Doctor," said Seven of Nine.

"That is true, Seven. But it is also one reason Mr. Paris and I are going down to the planet tomorrow. The Captain said she needs a fresh perspective of the Ayrethans and their culture, and that perhaps Mr. Paris and I can bring that back to her. She said that perhaps we will also be more successful in getting information from them than anyone else has had to date, including the Captain and Commander Chakotay." He smiled. "Mr. Paris was previously on Ayrethia, of course, but only for a short period of time. Evidently, he had to return to Voyager with Icheb for some reason or other. And, according to the Captain, it just so happens that both myself and Mr. Paris can afford to take the time off from our usual duties tomorrow and supervise the away mission. It seems that Voyager needs more 'medical' attention than her crew at the moment."

"How can both you and Lieutenant Paris be in charge of the away mission, Doctor?" asked Seven.

"Actually, Seven, Mr. Paris is the Away Team leader. I am his second in command." He smiled at her, and Seven turned back to her console.

Suddenly, the Doctor thought of something and became alarmed. "Seven! My matrix is still functioning properly, isn't it? I mean, I will still be able to consume food and beverages during our meal with the Ayrethans tomorrow, won't I?"

"Of course, Doctor. None of your subroutines have sustained damage. You also have not lost any of your evolved programming. All that has changed is that a few hours of memory has gone from your buffer, from one time frame, one day. It is also probable that it happened when the inertial dampers went off-line."

"But can't you fix it?" asked the Doctor. "Can't you un-garble the information that Lieutenant Kim found, and do something?" He was not content to lose any part of a day from his memory banks. It could be very important information, after all. In fact, it could be break-through information of some kind. He was constantly working on very important experiments. What if he'd found something vital? He began to pace, as Seven of Nine continued to scan the data.

"Doctor, I am unable to repair the corrupted data in your memory buffer at this time," said Seven.

"What? What do you mean you can't repair it?" His voice sounded frantic, he knew, but he suddenly felt so vulnerable.

"I have made a copy of your corrupted buffer, Doctor. I will run another diagnostic in the morning while you are on your away mission. But do not worry, the missing day will not affect your ability to function properly as a diplomat tomorrow."

The Doctor grimaced. Seven just didn't understand. "But why can't you run the diagnostic now?" He really tried not to whine.

"I must report for duty in Engineering. I have been asked to assist with the repairs to the ablative armor," she said, shutting down the console in front of her and turning to the Doctor.

"Fine. I understand completely. My program takes second place to the ablative armor," he said sarcastically, and started toward his office.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Seven?" He turned to her.

"Good luck on your mission tomorrow. I am pleased that you are being utilized to your full capacity."

The Doctor smiled at her. "I thought you didn't believe in luck, Seven."

She considered his words. "Perhaps my logic was flawed."

"In what way?" he asked.

"I considered luck to be a thing," she said. "And perhaps it is not a thing at all, but the presence of good wishes instead."

"Perhaps you're right, Seven," said the Doctor softly. "Thank you for your good wishes."

Seven of Nine nodded toward the Doctor, then turned and exited Sickbay.

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B'Elanna pushed down the handle on the old-fashioned toaster that Tom had replicated some time ago. Why he thought toasted bread tasted better out of this thing than a plain old replicator was beyond her understanding, but that was just one of the things she didn't understand about her husband. His idea of fun was often different from hers, too, but at least they were going to teach Miral about a variety of interests.

She turned and smiled. Tom was holding Miral and feeding her milk from a bottle that the Doctor had rigged. The Doctor had also taught Tom how to use a sample of B'Elanna's DNA to replicate an exact duplicate of her breast milk. She sighed. These little technological advances made life so much easier. Now she didn't have to be present every time Miral needed feeding. Her daddy could take care of her meals as often as her mommy, and they could both bond with their daughter.

The toast popped up from the toaster, and B'Elanna put it on Tom's plate. "Dinner's ready, Poppa," she said, as she carried both their plates to the small table at the other side of the room. She moved the cradle closer, and Tom carried a sleeping Miral over and gently placed her in the bed.

"Look at that," said B'Elanna softly, "She's getting so big." They both stared down at the sleeping form. "This is one piece of furniture we can get rid of soon. She's almost outgrown it already." She touched the cradle gently, her daughter's first bed.

"Well, the next piece will be bigger," said Tom. They both looked around the living quarters that seemed to get smaller and smaller. B'Elanna sighed, and then they sat down at the table to eat.

"Aren't you going to eat more than that?" asked Tom, eyeing the salad in front of B'Elanna.

"This is a huge salad, Tom, and I have lots of good things in here to eat. I won't starve. Promise." She grinned at him. "I wasn't in the mood for meat and potatoes today."

"Hey, don't knock it. It's good for you! I don't know where Chell came up with this, but it tastes great, too. And, keep in mind we're back on replicator rations now, so I'm actually conserving rations and eating well, all at the same time!"

B'Elanna watched Tom eat heartily. "Sounds like you're one of the happiest members of Voyager's crew these days."

Tom sighed. "Yeah, I guess I am. Sometimes I find myself feeling bad for feeling so good."

B'Elanna grinned at him. "I know what you mean. I'm working as hard as I can to get Voyager home again, just like everybody else, but I guess I'm not doing it for the same reason they are." They were both quiet for a moment. "Maybe it really is the journey, you know."

Their eyes met across the table, and Tom put down his fork and reached over and covered his wife's hand with his. "You seem quiet tonight, B'Elanna. Is anything the matter?"

"I'm just tired," she said, removing her hand gently and continuing to eat her salad. "I guess I thought I'd repaired these engines for the last time, and I'm still trying to adjust to the thought that we're lost again, too."

"Maybe you're working too hard. The Doctor..."

"The Doctor said I'm fine, Tom. I'm as healthy as I was before I gave birth to Miral. In fact, I'm feeling so good I could beat you at a game of Parrises Squares, hands down," she said with a glint in her eyes.

"Oh, come on...you've only beat me at that game twice in seven years, B'Elanna," said Tom easily. "I don't think you should get your hopes up about beating me again any time soon."

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"What?" he asked innocently.

"Get my hopes up? Get my hopes up?" She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Tell you what, Captain Proton, you find a babysitter for tomorrow night and reserve a holodeck for us, and I'll show you that I'm in better shape than before I had Miral."

Tom grinned. "Oh? You really think so?"

"Why? Don't I look all right?" she asked.

Tom knew what that tone of voice meant anywhere. "Hey, you look great! Just great, B'Elanna! But that's not the point."

"You get us some holodeck time and I'll show you what the point is," she said sweetly.

"It's a deal," he said, smiling. Getting some time alone with B'Elanna was becoming more and more difficult to do.

"Great," she said, smiling back at him with that gleam in her eyes that said he'd better be ready to play the best game of Parrises Squares he'd ever played in his life.

"Hey," he said suddenly, gently, and again covered her hand with his. She looked up. "I love you," he said. "I mean, I really love you, and Miral." B'Elanna was quiet, watching her husband search for the words he was trying to say. "I never thought I'd have this, you know. A family, someone who cares about me." He looked squarely into B'Elanna's eyes. "A wife who loves me for who I am, and not for who I might have been if I hadn't messed it all up." He took a deep breath. "I never thought I'd find you."

B'Elanna felt the moisture gather in her eyes. She covered his hand with her free one. "Tom..."

"Sometimes I think I'm going to mess this up, somehow," he said, pushing on to tell her all of it. "I keep thinking I'm going to do or say something wrong, and I'll lose you. Or, maybe this is all just a big dream and I'll wake up one day, on Voyager, three years after we got lost in the Delta Quadrant." He felt the tears gather in his eyes and tried to lighten the mood. "And I'll walk down the corridor and turn the corner and run right into the head of Engineering. And she'll call me a p'tak and slug me in the arm."

B'Elanna smiled. "Well, I wouldn't worry about that first part, but don't think you're too good to be called a p'tak now and then." They looked into each other's eyes and shared a smile.

"Sometimes I don't think I'm good enough for you," he said simply.

"And sometimes I walk into these quarters after putting in a day's work in Engineering, and I'm surprised all over again when I see you there, holding Miral in your arms on the couch. And I look at the toys and baby things scattered all over the place, and I wonder how I got so lucky." She paused and swallowed the lump in her throat. "And other times, I'll think about you and Miral during the day, and I'll convince myself that when I do get back to my quarters neither of you will be here. I start to wonder if it's just something I dreamed of during the day to keep from feeling so lonely." Her voice was nearly a whisper now, but Tom heard every word she said. "And then I see you, and everything's all right again." Her voice started to break.

Tom stood and pulled her into his arms. So she felt this way, too. He took a deep calming breath. Maybe he wasn't so nuts after all.

"Tom," she said, pulling back so she could look up at him. "Since Miral was born, I've felt insecure about being a good mother to her, but I always know that you're here to compensate for any of my shortcomings."

"B'..."

"No, I need to say this." She took a deep breath. "When I was on Caprijen with Harry, the Keeper sent me back to when my mother and I had our last big fight." Tom nodded. She'd told him that much. "I wanted so much to go after my mother, to change what had happened, to fix things between us. And I would have, Tom...I would have done it, with no regard for the time line." She paused. "But then I thought of you and Miral. By changing that one moment in time, that one moment of my past, it might have had repercussions where you and I, and Miral, are concerned. I might not have joined the Maquis, I might not have been on Chakotay's ship when the Caretaker beamed it to the Delta Quadrant. I might not have met you."

"We wouldn't be together, and we wouldn't have Miral," said Tom softly.

She nodded and forced a grin. "So I guess I'm just going to have to continue to live with the memories of that last argument with my mother, and make sure it doesn't happen that way between Miral and me."

He grinned back. "Maybe it's the journey."

Suddenly, Harry's words hit both of them squarely. "Maybe it's the journey," she whispered. "And maybe we're both just feeling normal things, things that other couples feel, too. I mean, there was just me to take care of for so long, and then there was you and me for such a short time, and now there's Miral, too."

"I know. It's overwhelming sometimes," said Tom. B'Elanna nodded. "But," he grinned, "I wouldn't change it for anything."

"Not anything?" she asked.

"Not anything," he whispered. He leaned down and kissed her gently. "Come on, let's eat. The Engineering staff will be wondering where their chief is, and I don't want to be responsible for keeping her away."

She laughed, and they both sat and began to finish their meal. "So, tell me about this away mission you're going on tomorrow," she said, changing the subject.

"The Doc and I are leading an Away Team down to Ayrethia first thing in the morning. Our first priority is getting those minerals you need."

"Remind me to update that list before you leave," she said, automatically switching into Engineering mode, and thinking of something else she could use that the planet had in abundance.

"Okay, but we're leaving at 0600."

"Fine. Wait, did you say the Doctor is going with you?"

"The Captain asked if I minded if the Doc tagged along. I don't think she can spare too many other people right now. Besides, he's always wanting to get off the ship, and the Sernaix haven't been around lately."

"I know that Harry and Seven's been working on his buffer to see if they can retrieve the information he lost when the dampers went off-line."

"Any luck?"

"Not that I know of, but it was only the information from that one day. He'll function just fine tomorrow."

"Good," said Tom. "I don't need anyone along who doesn't know how to conduct himself on an away mission," he added, thinking of Icheb.

"I wouldn't worry about the Doc," she said, pushing her plate back. "And now, I'm going to take you up on your offer to take care of these dishes. I have to get back." She stood and looked at the sleeping baby in the cradle. "Mommy will be back soon," she whispered.

Tom pulled his wife aside and kissed her gently. "Don't work too late," he said into her hair as he hugged her.

"I won't." She moved toward the door, but then turned back again. "Hey, Helmboy." Tom turned. "You be careful tomorrow. Don't forget you've got a family to get back to."

Tom grinned. "I won't forget."

B'Elanna grinned back, then left their quarters for Engineering.

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Tom Paris walked into the shuttle bay with his personal gear in a pack. He'd already checked the shuttle for supplies earlier this morning. Ensigns Mahoney and Abernathy were already present and had started loading their supplies onboard the shuttle.

"Greetings, gentlemen," Tom called out as he moved to the front of the shuttle to begin pre-launch checks.

"Morning, Lieutenant," called Mahoney, and a slightly less enthusiastic greeting followed from Ensign Abernathy.

"Hey, not happy about the early wake-up call, Abernathy?" called Tom.

"I really hate 0600 duty, Lieutenant," called Abernathy. "I'm a night person."

"After all these years, Ensign?" chided Tom. "Seems to me you'd get used to it by now."

Just then, the shuttle bay doors opened and the Doctor entered, wearing his mobile emitter and carrying his own small pack. He smiled broadly and climbed aboard the shuttle. "Good morning, everyone," he called out.

"Morning, Doc," said Tom. The other two greeted the Doctor, as well.

"I'm glad I'm not late," said the Doctor, taking his seat just behind Tom. "Lieutenant Kim came into Sickbay earlier, complaining of pain in his right arm."

"Oh?" asked Tom, as he signed off on the final flight plan.

"Yes, evidently he played too much pool in Sandrines last night."

"Oh," said Tom. "Well, B'Elanna had to go back to work after dinner, and Naomi Wildman asked if she could sit with Miral for awhile. So, I dragged ole' Harry out for a game of pool."

"A game?" scoffed the Doctor. "According to Lieutenant Kim, you beat him six games out of six." The two security crewmen grinned in the back of the shuttle. It was refreshing to see the Doctor treat Lieutenant Paris the same way he treated them.

"That's not difficult to do, Doc," said Tom. "And we were only there a couple of hours. I had to relieve Naomi and get ready for our mission this morning."

"Six games, Lieutenant," said the Doctor again, hoping to make a point.

"Yes, but six wins over Harry does not even begin to match one win over the Captain," said Tom absently.

"The Captain? That is what this is about, beating the Captain at pool?" asked the Doctor, incredulously.

"What's wrong with that, Doc? It'll happen eventually."

"It will not happen, Lieutenant," replied the Doctor smugly. "The Captain is the best pool player on Voyager."

"What?" Tom turned to the Doctor, all ears. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Nothing. Just that you will not win. Others have tried, and no one has succeeded," said the Doctor.

"Well, it's a dream I have, Doc," said Tom, turning back to the front. "And we all live for our dreams, don't we? There. All ready to launch," he said, completing his instrument readings. He turned to the back. "You two ready?"

"Ready," said both ensigns simultaneously.

"All right. Here we go," said Tom. He slapped his combadge. "Lieutenant Paris to the bridge."

"Yes, Lieutenant," replied Captain Janeway.

"We're ready to go," said Tom.

"Acknowledged. Have a good trip, gentlemen," said the Captain, as she closed the comlink. The shuttle bay doors slowly slid open.

Tom Paris piloted the shuttlecraft out of the shuttle bay and set his coordinates for Ayrethia.

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After an uneventful flight to the surface, Tom set the shuttle down. The coordinates given to him earlier by one of the Ayrethans settled them onto a nice, flat area of land.

The Away Team left the shuttle and entered the bright daylight that was prevalent on Ayrethia. Everyone shaded his eyes except for the Doctor. Bright sunlight didn't bother his holomatrix.

Strange plant-life surrounded them, and large flowers of every hue and size imaginable, was only meters in front of them. Large boulders seemed to sprout from the ground. The Doctor was amazed. Tom had seen it before, but it was a still a stunning site to see again. He turned his attention to the two Ayrethans who were walking towards them.

The Doctor noticed that the Ayrethans were at least six feet tall, and had dark eyes, but it was their emerald green skin that fascinated him.

"Good day," said Tom, and held out his hand, palm forward, with his fingers bent slightly. Both Ayrethans smiled and imitated the gesture. The Doctor watched intently and then did the same, as did the two security officers behind him. The Ayrethans seemed pleased.

"Good day to you all, and welcome to the eternal home of the Ayrethans. I am Toram," said the first Ayrethan. "And this is Hamus. We received your earlier request for

supplies, Lieutenant Paris, and took the liberty of sending others ahead of us to begin gathering them together."

"Sounds great, thank you," said Tom.

"You are most welcome, Lieutenant Paris of Voyager," replied Toram.

Tom introduced the others. "This is the Doctor, our ship's chief medical officer," said Tom, nodding in the Doctor's direction, and this is Ensign Mahoney, and Ensign Abernathy, two members of our security team."

"It was unnecessary to bring security personnel with you to our peaceful planet, Lieutenant Paris," said Hamus. His voice was deeper than Toram's, but just as peaceful-sounding.'

"It's just our custom," said Tom amicably. "Our chief of security insists on sending a security detail when he's not with us, and our Captain allows him to be a bit over-protective."

"Of course, Lieutenant Paris. Please, come this way," replied Toram, and both he and Hamus moved slightly ahead of the Away Team, and began to walk down a well-trod path. "We are to meet the excavators at a cavern approximately two hundred meters ahead."

Tom and the others followed the two Ayrethans down the path and listened to them tell about their sacred land. The Doctor was very interested in Ayrethan culture and asked many questions, but Toram seemed to prefer explaining Ayrethan history to his guests, including legends about the stone pillars. He graciously side-stepped most of the Doctor's questions and brought the conversation back to his storytelling at every opportunity.

"And this," said Toram, "is the entrance to the cavern, where the excavating is being done for your minerals. Three of the items on your Chief Engineer's list are present here. The fourth, which has a similarity to zinc, is not found on Ayrethia, but we have substituted something which will perform effectively for your needs."

"Thank you for your efforts," said Tom. He and the three other Voyager crewmembers and the two Ayrethans stood above the cavern and watched below as a handful of Ayrethan workers went inside the excavation site, which looked like a large cave, to get the minerals, and then returned to the open area again to stack them onto four rudimentary carts.

Tom made a mental note. The PADD in his hand contained the only evidence of a fourth component, lithium, being added to the list. B'Elanna had given the PADD to him just as he was leaving for the shuttle bay earlier this morning. Yet, Tom quickly surveyed the piles below and knew without doubt that the latest addition to the list was being piled neatly below them.

"This is rather interesting, Mr. Paris," said the Doctor in a low voice next to him. "I wasn't aware that we needed lithium."

"B'Elanna added it to her wish-list this morning," said Tom. "Evidently our supply is getting low, with all the hits from the Sernaix we've been taking lately." The Doctor gave him a questioning look, but Tom ignored it.

"I see," replied the Doctor, and Tom was glad the Doc had taken the hint not to continue that line of thinking just now.

"This is great, Toram and Hamus," said Tom. "This looks like more than enough of each mineral. Our Engineering department will be pleased, and so will our Captain."

"Yes," said Hamus. "We are aware of your needs, and have endeavored to supply additional supplies of each." He seemed to give a silent signal to the Ayrethans below, and they suddenly stopped bringing minerals out of the excavation site and readied the carts for ground transfer.

"We are ready to transport them to your shuttle now," said Toram, turning and leading the way.

"When he said 'transport'," whispered Mahoney to Abernathy, "I don't think he meant by using transporters."

"Looks like they're going to move all of it on those carts," agreed Abernathy, in a low voice.

The workers followed the group above back to the shuttle. They were strong and quick, and within two hours the contents of Tom's list were packed onto the shuttle. Tom knew of nothing that would please his wife more than the shuttle full of the minerals he was bringing back.

"Toram, we appreciate all that you've done for us," said Tom.

"It is our honor," replied Toram, with a slight bow of his head.

"We have had several encounters with people who, unlike the Ayrethans, seem to exist only to fight, and are not peaceable. They attack without provocation," said Tom.

"We are peaceable," said Toram.

"Yes, and we're glad of that," said Tom. "But we're also confused by many of the things going on around us. For example...."

"We are excavation masters," said Hamus.

"And you certainly know what you're doing," agreed Tom. "We didn't expect to need all these minerals only a short time ago. We were on our way home to the Alpha Quadrant when there was an explosion and we were thrown...here. And since we don't know where 'here' is, we thought maybe you could shed some light on that for us."

"The Elders know a great deal more than us about what exists and what does not," said Hamus.

"Yes," agreed Toram. "The Elders are the most knowledgeable of our people. They will be joining you for the midday meal."

"Fine," said Tom. "Thank you."

"Come, it is time to join them," said Hamus. He and Toram began to move down the main pathway, and Tom and the rest of the Away Team followed them.

"Mr. Paris," whispered the Doctor, moving along side Tom, "don't you find it odd that they don't have the answer to a single question regarding our whereabouts?" asked the Doctor in a low voice, as they followed the two Ayrethans in front of them.

"Not much surprises me anymore," said Tom. "But I could sure use some lunch. How about you, Doc?"

"Certainly, Mr. Paris. I'm looking forward to it," said the Doctor sarcastically. "It isn't important that we know where we are, how we got here, and why, let's just have lunch."

"Calm down, Doc," said Tom. "The Elders will be joining us for the midday meal. It'll be interesting to see if they can answer some of our questions."

"And if they give us the same sort of non-answer answers, Lieutenant, where do we go from here?"

"I don't know, Doc," said Tom. "I just don't know."

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Captain Janeway made her way through the doors to Engineering and looked around for her chief engineer. B'Elanna was in the back corner, running a diagnostic on a panel unit while Vorik stood near her, holding Miral stiffly in his arms. For the moment, Miral seemed perfectly content to stare at the Vulcan while he held her.

"I see that Engineering is in good hands," said the Captain, with a smile on her face.

B'Elanna turned. "Sorry, Captain," she said, nodding toward Miral. "Something needed my attention here, and one Wildman is in class and the other one is on duty. And my husband is on an away mission. I didn't know what else to do but bring her here."

"It's all right, B'Elanna," said Captain Janeway, taking Miral from Vorik, and grinning at her. Even though Vulcans didn't exhibit emotion, she swore she could detect his relief nonetheless. "And I do understand your dilemma. How are things going here?"

"I wish I could say 'fine' Captain. I think we have it figured out, but the reconfiguration is going to take some time." She looked at Miral and sighed.

"B'Elanna, Commander Chakotay has the Bridge for the duration of alpha shift, and I'm on my way to my quarters to finish some reports. If you'd like, I can take Miral with me and keep her until you're finished here," said the Captain.

B'Elanna managed not to show her surprise at the Captain's offer. "I appreciate that, Captain, but I'm not so sure Miral will continue to be this well behaved."

"That's all right, Lieutenant. I'll take my chances," she said, holding the baby and actually cooing to her. "If it's all right with you," she added quickly.

"Uh sure, Captain, that's fine with me if you're sure it's okay with you." B'Elanna could just imagine Miral screaming loudly the entire time she was with the Captain.

"We'll be fine, B'Elanna, don't you worry." Kathryn Janeway saw the look on her chief engineer's face, and knew what it meant. She moved a bit closer to B'Elanna and said in a low voice, "And if she cries and screams, I promise not to hold it against you."

B'Elanna grinned. "Understood, Captain." She managed to take a deep breath. "And thanks."

"No thanks needed. I need my ship in order, and this way I can spend some quality time with the youngest member of my crew and allow her mother time to repair my refractive shielding at the same time," said the Captain.

"All right then," said B'Elanna. The Captain was taking matters into her own hands, and B'Elanna felt a lot better about that.

"I'll ask T'Pel to help me get the necessary items from your quarters," said Captain Janeway.

"You might regret this, Captain," said B'Elanna quickly. "I mean, Miral isn't always this quiet." She noticed that Miral seemed awfully taken with the Captain, and wondered not for the first time what it was about Kathryn Janeway that captivated people. She sighed. She had been captivated by her, too, and still was. She didn't know of anyone else who could've commanded a starship for over seven years without time off, and still manage to care for the people aboard it.

"I'm sure we'll get along just fine. Carry on, Lieutenant," said Captain Janeway, as she exited Engineering, grinning at the baby in her arms.

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The Captain and Miral entered the Captain's quarters exactly half an hour later, after a brief stop in the mess hall, where Kathryn assured Chell that it wasn't his cooking that was keeping her away, it was the work that still needed to be done.

She'd heard through the grapevine that Chell had been lamenting about the fact that the Captain didn't seem to stop into the mess hall quite as often as when Neelix was head

chef, and she'd felt the need to take a quick moment to assure him that he was doing a great job.

The Captain sighed. Sometimes being captain meant tending to all the little details that needed to be done, as well as the big ones. When she temporarily forgot that the crew needed their Captain's personal reassurances from time to time, she had Chakotay to remind her of those things. Thankfully, Chakotay was well tuned in to the rest of the crew.

Kathryn looked down at the sleeping baby in her arms, and then glanced around her quarters for Miral's bassinet. She had contacted Tuvok's wife, T'Pol, and asked her to bring Miral's small bassinet and a few toys and a bottle of milk from the Paris's replicator to her quarters. Evidently, T'Pol had already done that and gone back to her own quarters. Kathryn saw the bassinet up near the viewport, and the basket of toys near it.

She held the sleeping Miral and managed to pull the bassinet from the viewport area and down near her desk. She gently put Miral inside it. "My, but you're getting to be such a big girl," she said softly to the sleeping form in front of her. "It's difficult to believe you're nearly five months old," she whispered, and realized her voice was close to breaking. "You're not going to be able to fit into this thing a month from now."

Captain Janeway took a deep breath and moved away from the bassinet to look out the viewport. Five months. It had been five months since their near-return home. Five months since the Borg mine blew Voyager back to Hell. Maybe this wasn't the Delta Quadrant, but it was close enough. If only they knew where Hell was this time.

She sighed, then moved back down to her desk to get some work done. As she pulled her computer screen toward her and grabbed a PADD from her desk, she chanced a glance at Miral.

Miral began to make soft crying noises, and the Captain put down her PADD and moved to the bassinet again. After a moment, the soft noises became more pronounced and Kathryn picked the baby up and held her close. "Shhhh..." she said. "It's all right, Sweetheart, your mommy is busy doing her job in Engineering. But you're with the Captain now, and we'll be fine together until she comes for you. We'll be just fine."

Miral whimpered a bit longer, but then suddenly stared at Captain Janeway, and the tears stopped.

"Well, that's a good girl, Miral," said the Captain. "Let's you and I take a look at what's in that toy box, shall we?"

The Captain took Miral to the couch and sat her in the corner of it. She propped her up with cushions so Miral would be comfortable and safe, and then brought the toy box up from the floor and began to take out the soft colorful toys inside it, one by one. She lifted a small pink stuffed one to her face and smelled it. It smelled like a newborn baby. In fact, all of the toys smelled like Miral, fresh and new.

Kathryn took a deep breath. To hell with the dozens of reports on her desk. Maybe this is what she really needed - some downtime away from the reports, the crew, the constant

questions (mostly her own) about where they were. Time away from thinking about when they would get home again. She just needed some time away from it all, time to think.

And then Miral grinned her mommy's grin at Captain Janeway. And the Captain smiled back.

Maybe some time away from the Sernaix, the Inryeth and the Ayrethans was just what she needed. Yes, maybe a nice break from it all would help her to re-evaluate their situation from a new perspective.

As she held a stuffed dog out in front of Miral, who squealed gleefully and batted it with her hand, Captain Janeway couldn't help but hope that Tom Paris and the Doctor were having more luck at getting information from the Ayrethans than she and Chakotay had gleaned earlier.

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"And now," said Hamus to Tom and the rest of the Away Team, "it is nearly time for our midday meal. Speaker Mateth will be joining the table today," he added in a way that made Tom think this wasn't an everyday occurrence.

Tom and the other three members of his Away Team followed the two Ayrethans into what Tom thought must be the main gathering place, or Town Square of sorts. Four large tables were placed in the center area. Plates and eating utensils were already on the table, as was the food. Long slender glasses held a sky-blue colored liquid. The Elders and the Youngers were gathering quickly, and sitting at what must be their usual places.

"Here," said Hamus, gesturing toward an area at the outermost table. "This is your eating-place. It has been an honor to assist you with your needs today." And then Hamus and Toram nodded once at the Voyager crew, and were gone.

There were four place settings in front of them, and the Voyager crewmembers sat to eat. The Doctor glanced at the blue beverage in front of him and wondered what atrocity this race had come up with to challenge the delicate digestive organs of humans. Well, today there were three of them sitting next to him, willing to give it a try. He sighed. Thankfully, he was a gifted medical practitioner and had often been able to find a cure for ailments that neither he nor any other Voyager crewmember had seen before. He was also grateful that Lieutenant Kim had made certain that his holomatrix would be able to sustain a variety of solids and liquids without it interfering with his program.

Tom looked around. All the Ayrethans had settled down for the meal. The only empty places at the table were the six that were directly in front of the Voyager crew. Just then, six Elders entered the arena and walked single-file to the vacant chairs, and sat.

Tom recognized the Elder across from him as Speaker Mateth. The rest he didn't know. "Speaker Mateth," he said, rising and making the gesture of greeting that seemed to be expected by the Ayrethan people. The other three crewmembers rose from their chairs and imitated the gesture.

Speaker Mateth seemed pleased, and nodded silently. Tom and the others resumed their place at the table.

"It is a pleasure to have you join us for our midday meal," said Speaker Mateth, and then he introduced the other five Elders at the table with him to the Voyager crew.

After the pleasantries were exchanged, Speaker Mateth reached for a slice of what Tom thought was bread. As soon as the Speaker did this, others around the tables began to reach for food, and eat, and speak to each other in soft tones.

The Doctor noted that the soft green hues of the Ayrethans' skin glowed brighter from time to time, and then dimmed. It seemed to happen whenever they were experiencing differing emotions.

"Thank you for the invitation to join you for the midday meal, Speaker," said Tom. "We also appreciate your generosity in sharing your planet's minerals with us."

"Again, it is our pleasure. Our planet is rich in minerals and ore. And it is rare that we have visitors."

"Yes, I remember you mentioned that before, when our Captain was here," replied Tom, reaching for the bread.

"Your Captain. I must apologize again that I was not able to spend more time with her when she visited our eternal home. But I have received a very nice appreciation note from her, saying she enjoyed her stay with us."

"She enjoyed visiting Ayrethia very much," said Tom, and all six Elders before him looked pleased. "Tell me, Speaker, are you aware of another race who resembles the Ayrethans a great deal in appearance, but exist some distance from here?"

There was sudden near-silence among the Ayrethans, but Speaker Mateth didn't seem bothered at all by Tom's question. He continued to pour more liquid into his glass from a glass pitcher. "Many races are similar in appearance, Lieutenant Paris from Voyager."

"Yes, that's true, Speaker, but often we find that races who have a lot in common are actually distant relations." He paused, but no one else seemed to have anything to say. "In this case, we recently met a race called the Inryeth, who seem very much like yourselves, except for their technological development."

"Advanced technological means does not guarantee any race superiority, nor does it guarantee success in battles against enemies," said the Speaker.

"That's very true," said Tom. He could see that they weren't getting anywhere fast in this conversation. Maybe the Ayrethans didn't like to answer direct questions, but Tom was absolutely sure they knew more than they were saying. "But do you know of the Inryeth?" Tom didn't like pushing the point, but he didn't have the several days it might otherwise take to get an answer. He just hoped the Ayrethans would attribute his eagerness for answers to a quirk of his race.

The silence around the tables seemed to go on for a long time. Finally, Speaker Mateth put his eating instruments down and looked across the table at Tom. His greenish hue had increased only slightly. "Lieutenant Paris of Voyager, we are aware of the race you mention. The Inryeth were once members of the Ayrethan race. This was a very long time ago, what you would call hundreds of years ago, however, and no Ayrethan before you today has known the Inryeth." He paused briefly. "The Inryeth sect broke away from the Ayrethans because of a difference of opinion, and we are no longer affiliated in any way. Therefore, I cannot answer other questions you might have about them." He picked up his instruments and began to eat again, closing the subject. Others around them began to eat again, too, and to speak softly.

Tom opened his mouth to ask more, but then closed it again. He didn't want to upset Speaker Mateth, and it was obvious that in the Speaker's mind the subject was closed for the day.

"I must say," said the Doctor, "that this liquid refreshment is quite...refreshing. May I ask what it is?" Tom silently thanked the Doctor for the quick change of subject.

"It is a selected blend of the genu and fontanu plants that grow near the water," said the Speaker. "It is a favorite drink of the Ayrethans. We will be pleased to send the recipe along with some of the fresh plants back to your ship's kitchen."

"Thank you, Speaker. I'm certain it will be enjoyed by our entire crew," said the Doctor, with a smile on his face. There was no telling what Chell would do with this dry, bitter-tasting concoction. The only thing that could possibly make it worse would be the addition of Leola Root extract. The Doctor nearly cringed at the thought. Sometimes he almost regretted asking that his taste sensations be made to evolve.

"There's one other thing no one seems to be able to shed any light on for us," said Tom as lightly as he could manage.

"The Youngers of our race have pursued specialized interests," said Speaker Mateth. "They are conversant about their areas of expertise," he said.

"I understand," said Tom. This was another of those non-answer answers he was getting used to from the Ayrethans. "But Voyager and our crew were lost in the Delta Quadrant for seven years, and then we found a way home, back to the Alpha Quadrant." He paused, but once again, no one said anything. "But just as we made it back, a mine blew our ship out of that universe, and here." Again, all was quiet. "We're just not sure where 'here' is," he said.

"All places in time are relative to those who reside in them," said the Speaker.

"Then," said the Doctor, jumping into the conversation, "where is this place in time, Speaker? What do you call it?"

Everyone was suddenly quiet at the tables again. "Why, this is the present," said Speaker Mateth, and continued to eat. The others continued to eat again as well.

Tom and the Doctor shared a glance, and Tom said, "Whose present is this?"

"Why ours, of course. And now, it's yours as well," said the Speaker. Evidently, he was the only one who was to speak directly to the Voyager crew during the meal.

"All indications aboard our ship suggest that we're in some sort of Time Bubble," said Tom. "But we don't know more, like why it exists, or where, and how do we get out of it and return home." Tom's comment was followed by silence, of course, but he noticed that the Speaker didn't deny the idea of a Time Bubble. "Do you know how we can get home, Speaker?" asked Tom bluntly. As he expected, everyone quietly stopped eating again.

"This is the eternal home of the Ayrethans, Lieutenant Paris of Voyager, and now it is the eternal home of Voyager, as well," said Speaker Mateth easily.

"But we didn't choose this to be our eternal home, Speaker," said Tom.

"Neither did we, but it has been chosen well for us," said the Speaker.

Tom sighed. Why did he feel as though they were talking in circles? "Speaker, I don't know how it was chosen for you, or why, but we have to get Voyager back home again, back to the Alpha Quadrant. There has to be a way out of this Bubble, but no one else we've encountered will tell us how to get out. No one else seems to know anything about this Bubble."

Suddenly, a Younger Ayrethan called Sokmal jumped up from the table. He was seated four chairs away from Speaker Mateth and had heard every word spoken since the meal had begun. "No one else will tell you about the Bubble because they know nothing about it! They only know that they exist here. Our god created it to stop the evil goddess from controlling the galaxy," he blurted out.

"Shush, Sokmal!" said Speaker Mateth harshly. His greenish hue actually glowed a couple of shades darker, but only momentarily. "You will leave the table of the midday meal," he said, suddenly calm again.

The others at the table remained quiet, as Sokmal left the table and walked down the central path and out of sight. The Doctor noted that the general glow of the green skin tones around the table was much darker green now. Only the Elders' skin tones remained normal in color.

The Elders sat back from the table, obviously having finished eating. The others at the tables began to clear plates and paraphernalia from their own place settings, and then moved single file down the main path in front of them. A moment later, ten Youngers appeared from another path and began to take away the empty plates in front of the Elders and the Voyager crewmen.

When the others were gone, only the six Elders and the four members of the Away Team remained. Speaker Mateth spoke. "I must apologize for the outburst of the Younger," he said. "The Time Bubble is something we are not at liberty to discuss. We Elders recognize the value of silence, but the Youngers often forget the lessons learned by others."

"Lessons learned from mistakes made in the past?" asked Tom.

"By other generations of Ayrethans, long before their time."

Tom understood that he would find out no more information today, and he didn't want to offend the Elders by trying to continue a conversation that was so obviously finished. "I want to thank you, Speaker, as well as the other Elders present, for sharing your midday meal with us."

"It has been our honor, Lieutenant Paris of Voyager," said Speaker Mateth. "And now, Elder Ipthar will take you for a brief tour of our gardens and through our holy grounds, before you return to your ship. The other three members of your crew have not had an opportunity to see these things for themselves, and I'm certain they will find the walk a rewarding experience." He nodded toward the Elder to his right, who in turn nodded once toward the Voyager crew. The Elders stood, and so did the Voyager crewmen. "I shall meet you again at your shuttlecraft prior to your leave-taking," he finished.

"Thank you," said Tom. The other Elders, including Speaker Mateth, nodded once and then left, single-file, down the primary path through what Tom again thought of as the Town Square. The only Ayrethan left with them was Elder Ipthar.

"I am certain you are anxious to see our holy land," said Ipthar. He had a low, calm voice that seemed to be a trait the Elders shared.

"Oh, yes!" said the Doctor. "I've heard a great deal about your holy land!" And he fell into step alongside Ipthar.

Although Tom had already seen the gardens and the holy land briefly, the walk would be good for them all after the huge meal of whatever it was they'd just eaten. Whatever it was, it had tasted great.

The two ensigns followed, bringing up the rear of the group. The food had been good, even though the blue liquid in their glasses had been a bit strange. The walk would be intriguing, but they were more than happy to follow behind and let Lieutenant Paris and the Doctor do the talking. The Lieutenant had proved that these Ayrethans just weren't easy to talk to.

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The Captain was staring at the monitor on her desk in her quarters. The same figures, the same information. It didn't change no matter how many times she recalculated and reconfigured the data.

She sighed, then turned her attentions to the sleeping baby beside her desk, in the bassinet that was nearly too small for her. She couldn't help but smile.

Suddenly her door chime rang. "Come," she called out.

Commander Chakotay entered the Captain's quarters, and moved instinctively to the area in front of her desk, where he knew he would find her. He held several PADDs in his hand and deposited them on her desk, next to her computer.

"Captain," he said in greeting. "Here is all the updated information regarding our location from the various workstations on Voyager from the past twelve hours."

"I see," she said amicably. "And have you reviewed them, Commander?"

"No," he said. "I just received them all within the hour, and I knew you'd want to see them right away."

Very good, Chakotay, she thought to herself. She looked at the pile of PADDs. "I might need some help in deciphering them later," she said.

"Fine. I'll be here," he said. "But I see you already have assistance." His eyes shone as he looked over at Miral.

"I'm simply babysitting while her mother repairs my refractive shielding," said the Captain.

"I understand, Captain," said her first officer, grinning at her.

The Captain gave him one of her famous "watch it, mister" looks, and decided to ignore the humorous glint in her first officer's eyes. "So tell me, Commander," she said, leaning forward, "even though you haven't had time to read all these PADDs, what seems to be the overall conclusion?"

He sighed. "No one can conclude anything definite."

"I see," she said.

"You don't sound surprised, Captain."

"I'm not. Have you heard from the Away Team?" she asked.

"Not recently, but they were due to have a midday meal on the planet, which is the primary meal of the Ayrethans. The team isn't expected to check in for another couple of hours yet," he added.

"I just hope they come away with something better than we did, Chakotay," she said wistfully. "Sit. I'll get us some coffee." She gestured to the chair in front of her desk, then moved up to the replicator.

Chakotay sat in front of her desk and stared at a sleeping Miral Paris, as the Captain ordered coffee for them both.

"She seems to be comfortable," he said, as Captain Janeway returned with two steaming mugs.

"She knows she's in the Captain's quarters," she said. "And she feels safe with me," she added slyly, as she took her seat.

"I can understand that," said Chakotay, still smiling.

After a moment, Kathryn looked at him suddenly, the light banter put aside for now. "Are we being careful enough, Chakotay?" she asked. "Should we be concerned that our primary pilot and the Doctor are on the planet's surface with only two of Tuvok's security officers, and no further backup?"

"I don't think there's cause to become alarmed, Kathryn," said Chakotay. "Give them time. From what we know about the Ayrethans, everything takes more time than you and I are accustomed to." She nodded. Chakotay took a moment to consider. "I don't recall your ever asking me for an opinion on something like this in the past, Kathryn," he said in a tone that was more Chakotay than the ship's first officer.

She glanced at him over the rim of her coffee cup. "I'm trying to make some changes in my character," she said, and a small grin played about her lips.

Chakotay grinned back. "Don't change it too much, Kathryn," he said softly.

Kathryn looked at him quickly, touched by his comment and his tone. But now was not the time to acknowledge it, she reminded herself. They still had a crew to get home, and that should be their constant focus. She sighed as her gaze took in the stack of PADDs in front of her.

"Have you been eating properly, Captain?" asked Chakotay, changing the course of the conversation amicably.

"What?" Her thoughts had certainly been wandering.

"Eating. Food. Have you been eating lately?"

"Of course," she said, and picked up the first PADD on top of the pile. "You really meant what you said about helping me out with these?"

But Chakotay ignored her. "How about dinner tonight?"

She sighed heavily for his benefit. "Chakotay, I have a great deal of work to do."

"You still have to eat," he said. "Besides, if you have dinner with me tonight, I'll not question you again about whether you're eating properly or not."

"Really," she said, knowing him better than to believe that.

"Not for at least two days," he said.

"Yes, but when you suggest dinner, you mean an evening meal - as in, the entire evening. That's what we do, eat and drink the entire evening. And if we plan a working dinner, we rarely get around to doing the 'working' part."

He smiled. "But we have good intentions."

She shook her head and grinned, even though she tried not to give in. Suddenly, Miral whimpered in her bassinet, to Kathryn's left. She immediately leaned over and stroked the baby's cheek gently. "Shhhh...it's all right, Sweetheart," she whispered. "You're just fine. You go back to sleep." Kathryn tugged the blanket up another inch and adjusted the pink bunny next to Miral.

Chakotay watched Kathryn intently. Who would have thought Kathryn Janeway, the fearless Captain of Voyager, would be so taken with Miral? He'd watched her hold the baby and smile and coo at her on several occasions, and he found it endearing and enjoyable to watch. He also found it very interesting that Miral truly did seem to know she was safe with the Captain. "So, how about it, Kathryn?"

"Sorry, what did you say?" She turned back to him, now that Miral had gone back to sleep.

He grinned. He knew she had been in another galaxy only a moment ago. "Dinner?"

"Chakotay, we've shared several meals lately. Haven't I consumed enough food for you to know that I'm not starving to death?"

"Hardly," he said. "If you recall, Captain, all of those meals were interrupted or cut short in some way. We haven't had a quiet reflective evening in a long time."

"But we still ate." What he said was true, though. They hadn't really taken time off-duty to just relax and talk. That was often when they did their best strategizing, too.

"We never once got to dessert and coffee," he reminded her.

She laughed. "True." She paused and looked at him. "What you said about our not taking the time for a quiet evening is true, too. I can't recall the last time we just relaxed together for a bit." He didn't respond, but met her gaze evenly. "Tell you what," she said, lightening the mood. "I'll eat the dinner if I don't have to cook it."

"That thought never entered my mind, Captain," he said, with a slight grimace for her benefit. She laughed. "Dinner's on me," he said.

"Your replicator rations?" she asked.

"Only for the coffee and dessert," he said. "I'll cook the rest."

She smiled. "I was hoping you would say that. I haven't had a nice home-cooked meal in a long time." And she hadn't - not since the last time he'd cooked for them. She was suddenly very grateful that she and Chakotay couldn't read each other's thoughts

anymore. The memory of those awful few moments when they were inside the cavern on Ayrethia came to mind, and she nearly shivered. She forced the unpleasant memory away.

"Well, then, if there's nothing else at the moment, Captain," he said, standing. "I'll be happy to take a few of those PADDs back with me and summarize them for you."

Kathryn grinned and handed him half of them. "I was hoping you would say that, too," she said and stood.

Chakotay nodded and moved toward the door. He turned. "Nineteen hundred hours. My quarters."

"I'll be there," she said. "Shall I bring anything?"

"Just an appetite," he said, grinning.

"I can manage that. See you then," she said, as her first officer exited onto the Bridge.

The Captain stood for another moment, thinking about how easily they had managed to slip back into their camaraderie of the past. In fact, it hadn't happened consciously at all, and the entire conversation had been comfortable, enjoyable. And she knew it had been the same for Chakotay. They certainly knew each other well enough for her to be sure of that much.

Yes, it had been very comfortable. And maybe even better than that.

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"And what is this called?" asked the Doctor, pointing to a vivid orange and yellow palm-like plant that towered above them.

Ipthar, the Elder, looked at the plant and nodded. "This is a medicinal plant," he said. "It is used for treating several ailments of our race."

"Fascinating," said the Doctor. "What sort of ailments is it used for?"

"I am not a medical practitioner, Doctor of Voyager, and I cannot answer that. But we nurture this plant-life, and many others like it, as well."

The Doctor truly seemed to be enjoying himself, mused Tom. And Epthar seemed to be more forthcoming with information than most other Ayrethans, but Tom also knew they hadn't really tested him on important information.

"We are a proud people," Ipthar was saying.

"You certainly have every right to be," said the Doctor, as the group continued through the holy gardens.

"Hey, Lieutenant," said Ensign Mahoney in a low voice.

Tom turned and waited until Mahoney caught up with him. "What is it?" he asked, as they continued to walk behind the others who were slightly ahead of them.

"Do you think we'll ever find out what's going on, and where we are?" asked Mahoney.

"Sure I do," said Tom. "But like everything else, it just takes some time to figure it all out."

Mahoney sighed. "I wish I could look at it the way you do, Lieutenant. But I just want to get home."

Tom stopped and looked at Mahoney. "Don't feel bad for wanting to get home, Pete. You have a family on Earth. All of my family is on Voyager, so I have the luxury of being a patient man."

"Sure, Lieutenant. Thanks," said Pete Mahoney. Tom nodded, and moved ahead to catch up with the Doctor and Ipthar, and Ensign Abernathy. Mahoney shook his head silently. Lieutenant Paris didn't seem to recognize Admiral Paris as being a part of his family. Then again, if Admiral Paris was his own dad, he was sure he'd feel the same way.

"This other race," the Doctor said, "called themselves the Iryneth. They..."

"Doctor of Voyager," said the Elder, stopping suddenly. "There are many races here, in this time. The Ayrethans prefer a solitary existence, and we keep our own counsel. As was told to you by Speaker Mateth, this other race was once a part of us. They are now only a part of our past. The differences between us could not be met with peace, once upon this time long ago, and so they advanced their weaponry and their ways of travel, and went off to fight the enemy."

"The enemy?" asked Tom.

Ipthar paused. "There are enemies you have yet to know, Lieutenant Paris of Voyager. But there is one that you have already known. They are also the enemy of our race, an enemy we prefer not to challenge. But we will assist you in any way we can in your dealings with them."

"By giving us the minerals we need to repair our ship," said Tom thoughtfully.

"Of course. Your people are good and your Captain is fair, but you are largely a humanoid race. This enemy isn't kind to humanoid races."

"You mean the Sernaix," said Tom.

"We must continue our journey through the holy gardens," said Ipthar, turning to go. "It is nearly time to return you to your vessel."

"Wait," said Tom. "Elder, it is very important for us to know more about the Time Bubble." Ipthar's skin glowed brighter for a moment, but then returned to its natural emerald color quickly.

"As you were told before, it is not something we are at will to discuss," said Ipthar.

"All we need to know is how to leave here, how to get back to the Alpha Quadrant," said Tom.

Ipthar regarded Tom Paris for a long moment. He seemed to be making his mind up about something, but he finally broke the silence. "Your ship will not leave this place, and this time, Lieutenant Paris. This time has existed for over 100,000 of your Earth years. No one who is here is able to leave. That would result in a threat to this time's future."

Tom understood only the gist of what Ipthar said, but he put the words into the back of his mind to consider later. Right now, he had to find out what he could. "But we did leave here, Ipthar. Voyager did leave the Bubble, but briefly. We broke through to some other place, some other time, but then we were pulled back here, to this time, by a subspace rift."

Ipthar's color glowed three shades brighter for a brief moment, but returned to its normal color within seconds. His voice, however, was suddenly higher in tone and his vocal countenance was erratic. "You are mistaken. Your findings are inaccurate. No one escapes here." He paused and his voice returned to its normal range, and the tone was soft and soothing once more. "You experienced an illusion, and your readings have given you incorrect information, Lieutenant Paris of Voyager."

Tom and the Doctor exchanged a quick look. Tom saw that the Doctor didn't believe Elder Ipthar any more than he did. "The readings on our entire ship couldn't have been wrong, Elder," said Tom quietly, but firmly. And he looked Ipthar in the eye as he spoke.

But Ipthar had regained his stance. "No one has ever left here. It would never be allowed. To do so would go against the very grain of Fate, Lieutenant Paris, and that is something never to be tested. This time, and this place, is now the eternal home of Captain Janeway and Voyager. Your Captain must learn to accept her Fate, and the Fate of her people. She must understand that these are the cards she has been dealt, as you might say, and be satisfied that she has no choice but to follow the path Fate has chosen for her."

Tom sighed. All of this mumbo jumbo was making him tired. "Ipthar, I appreciate your thoughts, but Captain Janeway isn't one to accept the cards that someone else has dealt her."

"This time," said Ipthar calmly, "she has no choice."

Tom nodded slowly. Ipthar took this as either agreement or understanding, and resumed his course down the path ahead of them. After a moment, the Doctor turned to follow him. Tom nodded for Ensigns Mahoney and Abernathy to follow the others.

As Tom fell into step behind the group, he began to mull over the confusing conversation he'd just had with Ipthar. Finally, he decided to just let it go for now. He'd give Captain Janeway the few tidbits of information he'd gotten today and let her take it from there. If anyone could make sense of it, she could.

After all, this wouldn't be the first time Captain Janeway had been told she had no other choice.

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Icheb walked with purpose to the Captain's ready room door. He stopped in the corridor outside the rear entrance, and looked around to be sure no one saw him hesitate. What if she said "no" to his request? Icheb suddenly realized how much he wanted this. He took a deep breath and rang the door chime.

"Come," said the Captain immediately. Icheb felt his heart beat erratically for a moment. This was a very unfamiliar feeling, but one he knew he would have to investigate further at a later time.

The Captain looked up and was surprised to see Icheb standing uncertainly before her. She smiled and stood from her desk. "Icheb," she said in greeting.

"I apologize if I have interrupted you from your work, Captain," said Icheb, in his best manner.

"Nonsense, I could use a break. Would you like to sit down?" She gestured to a chair in front of her desk.

Icheb swallowed hard. "No, Captain. I will only need two minutes of your time."

Captain Janeway nodded. "I understand," she said, leaning back against the edge of her desk. "What can I do for you?"

"Captain, I request permission to take piloting lessons from Lieutenant Tom Paris."

She waited for something else, but Icheb seemed to have nothing else to say. "I see," she said.

"Captain, if you grant my request, I will make certain that my additional studies do not interfere with my duties," he said. "My current studies are all up to date, and my knowledge has been rated in the top point five per cent of others in the first year class at Starfleet Academy," he said, taking a deep breath.

"Icheb, I'm not concerned about that. You've exhibited a fine work ethic, and have certainly maintained your studies." She paused. "Choosing a definite field isn't something a cadet, or would-be cadet, would normally do this early," she said. "Are you certain you want to pursue this course?"

"Yes, Captain," he said. "I wish to study under Lieutenant Paris and then try out for Nova Squadron my second year at the Academy. Lieutenant Paris said that most people are not accomplished enough to be accepted into the Squadron until their second attempt to make the team. However, with Lieutenant Paris's teachings, I intend to make the Nova Squadron on my first attempt."

"I wouldn't be concerned with what might or might not happen that far down the road, Icheb," she said gently. "Things change, and sometimes people change." That was certainly true, she reflected.

"Yes, Captain."

"What does Seven think about this?" she asked.

"Seven of Nine has been busy with other duties, and has not had sufficient time to spend with me on my course requirements recently. Therefore, at Commander Chakotay's suggestion, I began to consider other avenues that I find...interesting." Once he would have thought that interesting was irrelevant, sprang a thought to the back of his mind.

"I see," said Janeway once more.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Icheb."

"I am certain that I want to study piloting, and to one day become a Starfleet pilot. I will devote myself to my studies so that someday I will be a great pilot, like Tom Paris," said Icheb, with great admiration in his voice.

The Captain smiled. "I'm sure Mr. Paris will be flattered," she said. There was a day she would've bet a month's worth of replicator rations against this scenario.

"Commander Chakotay asked me to speak with Lieutenant Paris about instructing me in piloting. I have done that, and he has agreed to help me in my piloting studies. In fact, he has given me basic holo-simulations which I have mastered. Now Commander Chakotay says I must have your approval before he can schedule shuttle time for us," said Icheb.

"I see," she said again, feeling like the proverbial broken record. Nevertheless, this was Icheb's time to talk and not hers.

"May we schedule shuttle time, Captain?" asked Icheb.

"You're sure you want to do this, Icheb?"

"Yes, Captain," said Icheb.

"And you will do as Lieutenant Paris instructs you, without question?"

"Yes, Captain," replied Icheb.

Captain Janeway nodded thoughtfully. "Then, turn your attentions to learning everything you can about shuttlecrafts, Icheb. Read Voyager's database, and study every schematic you can find. And when Mr. Paris is finished with his current mission and the reporting of it, we'll see how things stand. Perhaps he can take you out for a flying lesson or two in a real shuttlecraft, as long as you stay close to Voyager."

"Yes, Ma'am!" said Icheb. "I mean, yes, Captain."

She smiled, and chose to ignore his over-exuberance. "This ship is on constant alert for the Sernaix, Icheb. I can't take a chance that they will appear from nowhere and you two will be off somewhere away from the ship. If I say it's all right to take a shuttle out of the shuttle bay for a bit of practice, you'll stay close by?"

"Yes, Captain," he replied.

She forced a sigh for Icheb's benefit. "I'll take your request into consideration then. I'll speak with Mr. Paris and with Commander Chakotay, and if we're all in agreement, I'll grant your request. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain!" Icheb sounded a bit more eager than he intended, but right now all that mattered was that, unless something unexpected happened, he was going to get to fly a shuttlecraft!

"Good. Dismissed," said the Captain, standing and maintaining her Captain's facade.

"Thank you, Captain," said Icheb, and immediately left her ready room.

The Captain smiled and chuckled to herself. Icheb was a fine student. With guidance and a few more years to mature, he would no doubt be a fine pilot, too. She chuckled again, thinking of Icheb's obvious admiration for Tom. Lieutenant Tom Paris, a man who had matured a great deal himself in recent years, had shown that he was well deserving of some respect.

Chakotay had obviously been successful in nudging Icheb, too, she mused. She made a mental note to congratulate Chakotay for doing such a fine job in speaking with Icheb in the first place.

The Captain turned back to her desk, and took stock of all the work she had yet to do. But she had a smile on her face as she thought about the conversation she'd just had with Icheb.

Maybe it truly was about the journey, she thought suddenly, remembering Harry's words from another time, and another place.

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Ipthar, the Elder, brought Tom Paris and the rest of the Away Team full circle, and back to their shuttle. It sat loaded with the minerals they'd gotten that morning, and Tom knew

that no matter what else they did or did not learn today, at least they'd been successful in getting plenty of supplies to keep B'Elanna happy in Engineering for awhile.

As the group walked up to the shuttle, Speaker Mateth and two other Elders entered the clearing from a separate pathway.

"Lieutenant Tom Paris," greeted Speaker Mateth, "I see that you and your crew are ready to return to your ship."

"Yes, Speaker, we are," said Tom, noting that Speaker Mateth and another Elder known as Nethma, whom he'd met at the midday meal, had coincidentally entered the clearing precisely as Elder Ipthar led their group into it. "Thank you for your hospitality today," said Tom. Speaker Mateth nodded.

Then Tom noticed the dark blue lilies several meters from them, and remembered the little girl with the flower. These lilies were the same ones he'd seen near the little girl who was in his strange dreamlike trance when he and B'Elanna had visited the planet earlier, and the flash of light had enveloped him. "Excuse me, Speaker," said Tom, "but what are those flowers called?" He pointed across the way at the lilies.

The Elders turned to look. "Those are sacred flowers," said the Speaker. "They are called Eternal Hermionnes. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," said Tom. He hadn't thought of these flowers again, and they unnerved him more than he might have expected. When the others just stared at him, Tom tried to explain. "I saw them once before, when I was on your planet. And after I did, I experienced a...well, it was a dream-like state."

"A dream?" asked Speaker Mateth, and Tom saw that all the Elders seemed very interested. "Well, yes, I guess it was a dream," said Tom. "It was nothing special, just a quick snapshot of a little girl with a flower. That's all."

"It seems that many of our crew are experiencing strange dreams, Speaker," said the Doctor. "I've had several crewmen visit me in the middle of the night lately, asking for sleeping aids."

"Is this so?" asked the Speaker, and Elders Ipthar and Nethma exchanged a look that was not lost on Tom Paris.

"Excuse me, Doctor of Voyager," said Speaker Mateth, "but what sort of dreams are your crewmembers experiencing?"

"Oh, the usual sort mostly," said the Doctor, happy to be asked his opinion. "But I will admit, there has been an awful lot of them lately, and my patients claim that the dreams are very different from ones they've had before. In fact, more crew members have complained of having odd and very lifelike dreams than ever before." The Doctor frowned, pulling together all the recent episodes in his memory banks.

"Why do you ask, Speaker?" said Tom.

Speaker Mateth paused a moment before answering. "We believe dreams are windows to the 'nula,' which is what you call a soul. When our people have these...dreams...they use a 'dahtelnula' or a meditation, to decipher them. We also believe these dreams should be given strong considerations. They often have very real reasons for existing." Here, Speaker Mateth paused again. He looked to Elder Nethma for what seemed to be an agreement to speak further.

After a moment, the Speaker continued. "Lieutenant and Doctor of Voyager, a few of us, the eldest of the Elders, are on occasion able to see flashes of main timelines, or that which you would call the future. But we know them as our knowledge of what is to come, in our present. We call them 'Visions' because they show us what to expect, or they tell us of something we should consider."

"You're saying that you can see the future? You know what will happen next?" asked Tom.

"On rare, and treasured, occasions, yes," answered Speaker Mateth.

"But this is not something we share with our Youngers," said Elder Nethma quickly. "They do not experience these visions, and are not told of ours."

"But you are a telepathic race, aren't you?" asked Tom. It was evidently time for truths to be told.

"Our Younger are aware of our telepathic abilities," said Speaker Mateth, "and many of them possess these abilities already. However, they do not experience the Visions."

"When and if a Younger experiences a Vision," continued Ipthar, "he is told about them then, but not before, and not ever if he does not experience one himself."

The Doctor frowned. "Our Commander Tuvok experienced one of these 'Visions' as well," he said. "The engineers who were with him at the time said he experienced a slight increase in chroniton radiation. However, his readings were within normal range by the time he reached Sickbay."

"You might suggest to your Commander Tuvok of Voyager that he make use of a dahtelnula," said Elder Ipthar.

"Commander Tuvok meditates enough as it is," said the Doctor, sarcastically.

Tom jumped in, since the Elders didn't seem to understand the Doctor's tone. "Speaker Mateth, is there a way to know what these Visions mean?" he asked.

"Each Vision is meant only for the individual who has it," said the Speaker. "There is a message there, but whether or not the one who has the Vision heeds the word is entirely up to him. And now," he said, changing the subject, "It is time for you to return to your ship and your Captain." He gestured toward the shuttle.

Tom knew they were being told their time was up, in a nice way, of course. There would be no more information from the Ayrethans today, if anyone could even consider that anything they'd gotten was actual information. "Thank you again," said Tom, as he gave the standard greeting, which also served as farewell. The rest of Tom's Away Team gave the farewell hand sign, as well. And then the Voyager Away Team members climbed aboard the shuttle and prepared it for takeoff.

The three Ayrethan Elders stood together on the ground and watched as the shuttlecraft lifted from the ground and headed back to Voyager. Speaker Mateth sighed deeply. "Now it can go either way," he said gravely, more to himself than to the others.

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"And that's all they said?" asked the Captain, from her position near the viewport in the Briefing Room.

Commander Chakotay was seated at the conference table, as was Commander Tuvok and the four members of the Away Team to Ayrethia.

Tom Paris sighed. "That's all I can remember, Captain," he said. "Can any of you add anything else?" he asked the Doctor and Ensigns Abernathy and Mahoney.

They all shook their heads. "No," said the Doctor, "and we were together for nearly the entire time, Captain. I believe the four of us have pieced together the day's events as succinctly as possible."

Captain Janeway smiled, but she was tired, and what she'd just heard hadn't done much to lighten her spirits. "And I'm sure you will all be just as detailed in your reports," she said, out of habit.

"Of course, Captain," said the Doctor, already beginning to compose his in his head.

"And he really said that I have no other choice, Tom?" she asked again.

"That's right, Captain," he said.

"Well, I've been told that before," she said to no one in particular. "And I not only don't like that answer, I don't accept it."

"That's just what I told him," said Tom, grinning. This was definitely the Captain speaking.

"All right then, you're dismissed," she said to the four crewmen. As they started for the door, she called "Mr. Paris, I need a moment."

He turned and waited for the others to leave the room, and stood silently by until the door closed behind them. Commanders Chakotay and Tuvok remained in their seats. Tom stepped forward. "Captain?"

"Mr. Paris, Icheb has requested that you teach him the finer points of flying shuttlecraft." Tom tried not to grin. "Do you believe you're up to it, Lieutenant, with being a new father and all?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said.

The Captain considered. "It's not always easy, you know, being someone's hero."

"Captain?" asked Tom.

"Evidently, Icheb looks up to you. He wants to be like you." Tom didn't know quite how to respond, and so he didn't. "Mr. Paris?"

"Yes, Captain?" He looked across the room and into her eyes.

"Go and teach Icheb how to pilot. Be firm, but be fair. Do not allow him to do only what needs to be done, but also that which should be done."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said softly.

The Captain moved closer to where Tom stood in the back of the room. "Teach him to be half the pilot you are, and I'll be happy."

Tom swallowed the lump in his throat. "Thank you, Captain. I'll do that," he said.

"Good. Dismissed," she said, and as Tom quickly exited the Briefing Room, she moved back toward the front, and nearer to Chakotay and Tuvok. "So, gentlemen, have we learned anything new today?" she asked.

"Just more of the same, Captain," said Chakotay. "The Ayrethans like to talk in circles."

"That is true," said Tuvok. "However, we do know that they acknowledge this as a Bubble Universe and that they have further knowledge of how it came to be."

"True," said the Captain, considering his words. "And they seem to know the Sernaix well enough."

"And they accept the Inyareth as part of their heritage," said Chakotay.

"Yes," she said. "I don't know if I believe in these Visions," she added, and Chakotay and Tuvok shared a glance. They were much more spiritual than their scientific-minded Captain. "But right now, I'm more interested in this place," she continued. "Where are we in relation to everyone else? And how do we get home..." she said softly. This always seemed to be the question she needed answered.

Finally, the Captain turned to her two Commanders. "Let's think about all we've learned today. In the morning we'll read the reports from the Away Team to see if they've recalled anything further." They both nodded. "Dismissed," she said, as she turned back

toward the viewport yet again. Commander Chakotay and Commander Tuvok left the Briefing Room together, and entered the Bridge to continue their duties.

"So, I have no choice, do I? We'll just see about that," she whispered to her reflection in front of her.

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Captain Janeway rang Commander Chakotay's door chime at precisely nineteen hundred hours. They'd both worked a long shift, and she'd barely had time to take a bath and change into a fresh uniform.

"Enter," called Chakotay, and Captain Janeway came into his quarters.

She looked around. It had been awhile since she was last here, but it still felt familiar, and inviting. "It's only me," she called out.

Chakotay came into the room and smiled. "Just checking the dinner," he said.

"Something smells delicious," she said, closing her eyes and inhaling the wonderful aroma.

"And it'll be ready in a few minutes," he said, crossing to the bottle of wine he had left open to breathe on the table across the way. He poured them each a glass.

"Nice," she said, after taking a drink from the glass he'd handed her. "Just how many bottles of this wine do you have left in that hiding place of yours anyway?" she asked.

He grinned. "Hopefully, as many as we'll ever need," he said, taking a drink as well, and thinking about how Icheb was the only other person who knew for sure. And there was certainly no question that Icheb would never tell.

She smiled back. She hoped they didn't need too many more bottles before they reached home again. Kathryn moved to the couch across the room, and sat back comfortably. It was good to let down her hair, so to speak, and talk frankly about their situation with the one person she could actually relax and do that with. "Do you have any new revelations?" she asked.

"About?"

"Anything," she said. "The Sernaix, the Ayrethans."

"Like you, I'm convinced the Ayrethans know the Sernaix," he said. "How they know each other, and what their relationship is, or was, I don't know. We may never know."

"Agreed. But I think we have to continue trying to find out," she said. "There's something there that we're missing. And the answer could supply us with a missing part of our puzzle."

"That's true," he agreed. "But I think there are more important things we need to know first."

"Such as?" she asked.

"Where we are, and how we got here," he said.

She sighed. "And why we're here...how did we get out, and what pulled us back in again..."

"So you don't believe it was our imaginations, either," he said.

"An 'illusion' I think is the word you're looking for," she said. "And no, I most certainly do not believe that story. You still have the Maquis phaser you found on the planet, so you tell me: Is that phaser an illusion?"

He took a deep breath. "No, it's real," he said, sitting in a chair opposite her.

"Then why do you think they want us to believe it isn't, that our experience outside this universe was an illusion?" she asked, leaning toward him.

He paused. "They want us to stop thinking about leaving here," he said. "They want us to accept this as our eternal home." They looked at each other.

"Exactly," she said. "And I'm supposed to accept the cards I'm dealt."

Chakotay grinned and shook his head. "Kathryn, if you accepted the cards you were dealt, we'd all have settled on some planet back in the Delta Quadrant years ago."

"I'm going to get us home again, Chakotay," she said softly, and he turned to her. He knew the look on her face well.

"You will, Kathryn, of that I have no doubt." He stood and went to check on their dinner, and Kathryn thought about how good it was to share her thoughts with Chakotay. She put her head back against the couch and closed her eyes. She'd missed these quiet evenings they used to share so often.

And she'd be damned if she lost them again.

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The Doctor was still busy writing his report on the events of the day when Seven of Nine entered Sickbay. He saw her from his office window, and went out to greet her. "Seven, hello!"

"Hello Doctor," she said.

"I'm so glad you're here! I had a wonderful time on the away mission today. Lieutenant Paris..."

"Doctor, I am here to continue working on your memory buffer," she said, moving automatically to Sickbay's central terminal.

"That's wonderful news, Seven, but I'm just finishing my report on our mission for the Captain. Perhaps you'd like to look it over?" He just couldn't help but be proud of his part in today's venture. It was true that Lieutenant Paris had been in charge of the mission, and that the Doctor had not been vital to its success, but his report would show his contribution nonetheless. And he was extremely proud of it.

"You may complete that as soon as we have recovered the missing part of your program."

"Recover the missing part, Seven?" asked the Doctor, suddenly intrigued. "Are you saying that you've had success in discovering how we can repair my program and recover the missing hours from my database?"

"I have an idea which I believe will work, Doctor. I suggest we take a copy of your matrix from yesterday morning, before the new data was created and then deleted. Then we will also make a copy of your current program, delete today's events from it, and overlap the two copies. We may find the gap in your program."

"Create two copies of my program and overlay them?" asked the Doctor. "Do you really think this will work?"

"Yes. I have discovered a 'wall' of unknown origin within your program. This wall appears to be separating yesterday's newly-acquired information from your original memory vortex."

"A wall, Seven?"

"I use that term for lack of a better one, Doctor," said Seven, continuing to work the console in front of her. "When we are able to discover the exact location of this wall, we can then determine a way to eradicate it from your program."

The Doctor felt a strange sort of emotional sensation.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" asked Seven, noticing the newer sensations in his program buffer displayed on the screen in front of her.

"I suppose so, Seven," said the Doctor slowly. "I just feel so...violated."

"I understand, Doctor," she said with an unusual note of empathy in her voice. "But please try to put those...emotions...aside for the time being. Your program is undamaged. We must find the reason for your loss of data, and perhaps we can restore it completely."

The Doctor nodded. "I hope so, Seven. Just tell me what you need me to do."

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Tom Paris carried his tray away from the food counter and over toward the tables in the Mess hall. None of the dishes had looked particularly appetizing, but then again after seven years in the Delta Quadrant, and just as Neelix's dishes were starting to look inviting, they were all having to adjust to Chell's cooking.

Tom looked up and saw Samantha Wildman sitting alone and staring at a PADD in her hand as she ate.

"Mind if I join you?" asked Tom.

Ensign Wildman looked up and smiled. "Not at all, Lieutenant," she said, putting her PADD down beside her tray. "This is a welcome change from reading data."

Tom sat. "It seems that everyone has a PADD in hand anymore," he said, pushing the blue thing on his plate over to the side. "It's no wonder all the data looks the same. We don't take the time to process what we're reading."

Sam grinned. "So, are you suggesting we ask the Captain to let us slow down our research a bit?"

"What? Are you kidding?" said Tom. "I never suggested anything of the sort. Whatever the Captain wants, she gets, as far as I'm concerned."

Sam laughed. "I agree. We all want to know where we are and how to get home again. And no one's working harder than the Captain at finding out."

"Right," said Tom. "Do you know what this is, by the way?" he asked, pointing to a pink and white star-shaped object.

"I don't know, but it tastes good. Sort of like pasta," she said.

Tom tried it. It did taste like pasta. "Sam, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What?" she asked.

"How have you managed to care for Naomi, plus do your job all these years?"

"What do you mean 'how' have I managed it, Tom?" she asked. "I just did. That's what a parent does. You just manage to do it somehow. Even when you feel overwhelmed, inadequate, overly emotional, you still get it all done."

Tom sighed. "Yeah, well, so far it's all getting done. But every morning I wake up and wonder if everything will get done today."

"But it will, Tom. Every day you'll somehow manage to get it all done once more, and you'll feel exhausted. But that night, when you kiss your daughter good-night and look at the calm peaceful look on her face, and you know that she's happy, you'll smile and know that it was all worth it. And it will be worth it again tomorrow," said Samantha.

"But you were all alone, Sam. I have B'Elanna to share the responsibilities with. How did you do it alone when Naomi was just a baby?"

Samantha was quiet for a moment, but the look on her face told Tom she was surprised at his question. "I never felt alone, Tom. Not once. I always had you and B'Elanna and the Captain and Commander Chakotay and Neelix, and so very many others on this ship to help me. Naomi has grown up with the entire Voyager crew as her mentors, and as her family. And I'm so grateful to all of you, Tom." Samantha Wildman looked down into her cup of coffee for a moment. "I'll always be grateful for that," she said softly.

Tom was quiet, and considered her words. "I guess in a way Naomi has belonged to all of us," he said.

"And so does Miral. She has some great people on board Voyager to aspire to," she said, smiling. "Tom, don't worry."

"About what?" he asked, trying the green thing on his plate.

"Being a good parent."

Tom looked up. "Is it that obvious?" he asked.

She smiled again. "You and B'Elanna are both having normal healthy feelings, I'd imagine. You're wondering if you're good enough parents to Miral, are you giving her enough of your time, are you caring for her properly. There are a thousand questions you're probably asking yourself every day."

"You're right about that," said Tom.

"I asked myself those questions everyday, too. And sometimes I still do," she said. "By the way, didn't you grab a glass of this blue drink?"

Tom looked at her glass and saw the same light blue drink he'd had earlier on Ayrethia. "Uh, no." His stomach suddenly cringed as he recalled the bitter taste.

"It's really good," said Sam.

"It is?" asked Tom incredulously.

"Yes, it's great. You should try it," she said, and then drained her glass and stood. "Don't worry, Tom. What you're feeling is perfectly normal, and even healthy. I'll see you later, Lieutenant," she said grinning, and then she was gone.

Tom took a deep breath. Okay, maybe these thoughts he was having really were just normal ones. He suddenly felt better than he had in days.

He even felt good enough to take a bite of the thing that looked like Leola Root Pie.

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"Please stand still, Doctor," said Seven yet again.

The Doctor stopped where he'd been pacing. He took a deep breath and folded his arms across his chest. When he suddenly realized how much he reminded himself of impatient humans aboard the ship, he immediately unfolded his arms and tried to recapture what he thought of as his professional demeanor. "Anything, Seven?" he asked, trying to sound calm.

"Doctor, this 'wall' is in your holomatrix. I believe I have devised a way to 'knock it down' so that your memory buffer will be restored to its full capacity."

"That's wonderful, Seven!" said the Doctor, moving toward Seven's console to look for himself.

"Doctor..."

"I know, I know. Stand still," he huffed, again stopping and folding his arms across his chest. But this time he didn't care.

"I must take you off-line for one full minute in order to revitalize your program, Doctor."

"But..."

"When you are reinitialized, you will hopefully have regained your full memory," said Seven, entering more data into the console in front of her.

"Hopefully?" asked the Doctor. "Did you say..." he began, as he shimmered out of existence. Seven sighed. Sometimes the Doctor could become easily agitated.

After a full minute, Seven punched a button on the console. "Computer, activate the Emergency Medical Hologram," she said.

The Doctor shimmered into his full existence, and in the same spot he'd stood a minute before. "Please state the nature..." he began. "Oh. Never mind. Seven..." he started to say, and then his eyes became wider and he stopped and looked at Seven of Nine. "I remember," he said slowly. "I remember."

"What do you remember, Doctor?" asked Seven, moving from behind the console to the Doctor.

"The experiment. I was conducting an experiment on the Sernaix blood sample." He struggled to remember. "I decided to test the bio-electrical energy emanating from the cellular mitochondria, so I retrieved a Sernaix artifact from Engineering."

"I am surprised that Lieutenant Torres would allow you to take a Sernaix artifact from Engineering, Doctor," said Seven, frowning slightly.

"Well, she didn't actually, Seven. I...just took it." He managed to look ashamed for a brief moment. "And then I brought it here. It was a small black box..." Suddenly he

remembered that he still had the box, and left Seven alone while he went into his office and pulled it out of a drawer in his desk. When he returned, he handed it to Seven. "This is it, Seven," he said excitedly. "This is the box I was doing the experiment on."

"Interesting," said Seven.

"Actually, I didn't find it interesting at all," scoffed the Doctor. "I had barely begun the experiment when...when...strange, that's all I remember. The next thing I recall is someone telling me the dampers had gone off-line, and I was completely unaware of it." He thought for a moment. "At first I thought someone had tampered with my program. I contacted Mr. Kim and then cleaned up the Sernaix blood samples and put the black box away while I waited for him to come to Sick Bay to run a diagnostic on my program."

"But you do not recall anything about the tests you ran on this box?" asked Seven.

"No. Strange." The Doctor was perplexed. Maybe there really was a problem with his program.

Seven of Nine took the box with her to the console she'd been working on earlier. She keyed information in to the console, and then ran a diagnostic on the box.

"What is it, Seven?" he asked.

"This is no ordinary box, Doctor. It is an interlink node, similar to the one used by the Borg to connect drones to the hive mind."

"What?" said the Doctor. "But how can that be, Seven? And why didn't I detect that?"

"I believe you did detect it, Doctor. However you are unaware that you did because your memory buffer stops at that point," she said, again working the console in front of her and reading the results.

The Doctor sighed. "So we've hit another 'wall' then?"

"No, Doctor. Your memory simply stops there, and then it begins again when you were treating Ensign Siddik's metatarsal fracture."

"Yes," he said, remembering that he had asked her if she'd damaged her metatarsal by playing hoverball on the holodeck. "You mean there's no memory between those two moments in time, Seven?" he asked.

"Correct. There is a gap of six minutes, Doctor," said Seven.

"I don't understand," said the Doctor.

"I believe I do, Doctor," said Seven. "If the Sernaix interface device works using the same theory as the Borg interface device, you and I might be able to retrace your actions and discover the reason your program shut down entirely for six minutes."

"Then let's start with the Sernaix blood sample, Seven. I cleaned up the dried blood with the sonic cleaner when I couldn't recall why I'd been working with it, but it might be possible to retrieve some of it from the cleaner's filter."

The Doctor and Seven began to retrace the Doctor's footsteps in hopes of discovering the reason for the six minutes of lost time in the Doctor's database.

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"So, Icheb," said Tom. "The Captain tells me you're going to enroll in the flight program at Starfleet when we get home."

"Yes, Sir," said Icheb. "I want to be a pilot."

"Well personally, I think that's great," said Tom.

"Yes, Sir."

"There's nothing quite like the feel of being in control of a starship. You know, Icheb, when we left Federation space, the Voyager was a brand new Intrepid class starship, with upgrades that was the first of its kind," said Tom, with a wistfulness in his voice that was lost on his young student.

"And you were the Captain's pilot when you reached the Badlands and were pulled into the Delta Quadrant, Lieutenant?"

"Uh, no Icheb. I was just along for the ride at first. I didn't become Voyager's pilot until after we reached the Delta Quadrant. But that's a long story, Icheb," said Tom. And one he didn't care to recall very often.

"But the Captain realized you were the best pilot she had and put you at the helm," said Icheb, and Tom detected the admiration in Icheb's voice.

"Yeah, well, it was something like that," said Tom. He sure didn't intend to talk about that today. "Just concentrate on what you're doing there."

"Of course, Lieutenant," said Icheb, as he brought the shuttle around. "Icheb to the Bridge," he said after activating his com badge.

"Yes, Icheb," said the Captain's voice.

"We are approaching Voyager," he said.

"Good. We'll be expecting you," said Captain Janeway, as she nodded toward Harry to open the shuttle bay doors. "Safe landing, gentlemen," she said, then disconnected her com link and grinned over at Chakotay.

Icheb brought the shuttle in to dock and shut the engine down. He did a quick post-flight check, and then he and Tom exited the shuttle and battened it down before leaving the shuttle bay and heading down the corridor. "Lieutenant?" asked Icheb.

"Yes, Icheb?"

"I was wondering if you would teach me to play pool one day."

"Pool? I didn't know you had an interest in the game, Icheb," said Tom.

"I find it intriguing, Lieutenant," said Icheb. "And I hear that, next to the Captain, you're the best pool player on Voyager."

Tom sighed, even though he knew Icheb meant it as a compliment. It seemed that everyone on board ship now knew about the Captain beating him again the other night. But then he smiled. Maybe by teaching Icheb to play, he'd get a little more practice in himself. And then one day he'd ask the Captain for a rematch. Tom smiled. One day he would beat the Captain. He just had to. "Icheb, let's get a few more flying lessons under our belt, and then we'll start on pool lessons," he said, and clapped Icheb on the shoulder.

"Yes, Sir," said Icheb, and smiled.

"But right now, Icheb, I have a wife and baby to get home to," said Tom.

"Good night, Lieutenant, and thank you for the flying lesson," said Icheb.

"You're welcome, Icheb. You did a great job," said Tom, and Icheb smiled then continued on his way down the corridor.

Tom took the turbolift to the appropriate deck, and two minutes later he was walking down the corridor toward his and B'Elanna's quarters. He was humming a song and consulting a PADD in his hand. As he turned the corner, he nearly bumped into Ensign Siddik. He apologized, and continued on his way.

Suddenly, it occurred to Tom that Ensign Siddik had given him the same look that others had been giving him lately. It was a look that said how odd it was that he was so happy, while others were still concerned about getting back home again.

Tom sighed. He knew that people were hurting, and that most people had families to get back home to. He would do everything he could to help Voyager get home again, but he wasn't going to pretend that he wasn't happy in the meantime. He had a wonderful wife who kept him on his toes and gave his life meaning, and he had a beautiful little girl whose daddy loved her with all his heart.

Tom Paris had a lot to get home to this evening, and his home was right here on Voyager. And it had been for a very long time. Voyager's pilot was making the most of the journey.

Tom smiled to himself as he entered his quarters, and his home.

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