



Episode 8-3 - Between Heaven and Hell

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"We are Sernaix, Defenders of this Realm."

The words echoed across the bridge, an implied threat resounding in the bland statement. The bridge crew were silent, motionless, caught in the chill horror of a creature that recalled a thousand childhood stories of devils and demons; a horned devil in a blue skin, staring with eyes that were little more than black holes. A constant in all societies, the creature from beyond. The other. The unknown.

Tuvok was the first to recover; Vulcan training had its uses, even if Vulcan mythology retained horrors. "Only visual sensors are registering its presence, Captain." The words seemed to wake Janeway from her daze, and she turned to look across to ops.

"Harry, hail them;" she said, "let's see if they're any more receptive now that

they've introduced themselves."

Harry worked quickly, sending the standard greeting on every frequency and, just as he had done when the Sernaix first appeared, on some that weren't supposed to be available. He raised his head after a moment. "Nothing, Captain. No response on any channel."

The view on the screen changed abruptly; the alien visage faded, replaced by the usual, but unfamiliar, star field and an even less familiar starship. The deep ink-black of the hull was seamless, unbroken and undisturbed by any markings or apparent openings. It barely registered even on the visual that they were apparently being granted, seeming almost to swallow space. No reflections registered on the surface; it was visible almost only by the absence of the stars where it hung.

Paris shivered at the helm, swallowing the instinctive flippant comment that rose in his mind as soon as the memory of the alien released him. Chakotay turned to the console between the command chairs, running diagnostics, checking Voyager's position and status in an automatic reflex.

"Harry," Janeway began, intending to ask for deeper scans. She got no further than his name before her words were drowned out again by the rolling thunder of the proclamation, louder this time than before.

"We are Sernaix, Defenders of this Realm."

There was no accompanying image of the alien this time, simply the view of the ship again.

Paris sighed, dispelling the chill of the repeated phrase. "We heard you the first time," he grumbled under his breath.

"I'm sorry, Captain," came Harry's voice in the still quiet. "I don't know how they're doing that. It's not being received on any channel I can isolate. It's as though they're broadcasting on every channel, and on none at all. It makes no sense."

The bridge was still abnormally quiet, although the hush was beginning to give way to the more usual sounds of consoles being consulted and crew moving from one station to another as necessary. Janeway stared at the screen as she sat back down in her chair. The ship hung there, motionless, unreadable in more than one sense. "What do they want?"

She hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud and was a little startled to receive a reply from Chakotay. "I'm not sure it's a good idea to hang around and find out," he said quietly, not wanting to attract the attention of the rest of the bridge crew. "If they can fire while cloaked and come and go within our communications systems without a trace, but don't respond to hails, I'm not sure I want to wait for them to take the lead again. We've just come out of a fight; I'm not sure we're in a condition to go through another."

Janeway shook her head. "They destroyed the Cardassians for us, I would think you'd approve of them."

Chakotay looked at her. "Kathryn, this doesn't feel right; they can clearly communicate with us, so why don't they say something more constructive?"

Janeway didn't respond directly; she turned to Harry instead. "Harry, try to raise them again. And keep trying. They know we're here, maybe they just can't tell we're trying to contact them." She turned back to Chakotay. "Commander, I want you to go over the records from the Flyer - Tom was close when the second Cardassian ship exploded, maybe the sensors picked up something there."

Chakotay nodded, his mouth set tightly against the curt tone and the reprimand he inferred from her use of his title, and turned to the console again. He called up the logs with a sharp jab at the panels, taking out frustration and irritation on the inanimate. He still felt uncomfortable, as though Voyager was dangerously exposed to the alien ship hanging off the port bow - or allowing it to be seen as hanging off the port bow. The spirits only knew where it actually was, what it actually looked like - a ship that the sensors could only detect when it allowed itself to be seen, a race that communicated only on their own terms. His earlier optimism had faded and could feel the hair rise on the back of his neck; apprehensive adrenaline had him surreptitiously planning for the worst.

The worst happened.

Harry raised his head to report another round of unproductive scans and hails; before he had a chance to say more than "Captain," the ship shuddered and rocked. B'Elanna's voice crackled over the comm almost simultaneously: "Captain, we've got the ablative armor back up and running." The blows to the ship had Janeway almost stumbling from her chair; the words gave her a short-lived hope.

"Tuvok, return fire; Paris, evasive maneuvers - give Tuvok a chance to fire. Now."

Chakotay looked at her in disbelief, distracted from the damage reports rolling across the screen between them. "You're going to go up against them?" he questioned.

"Yes I am, Commander. We need to know what's going on here and running away won't tell us. Do you have a problem with that?" The question was clearly rhetorical, the words clipped. His opinion was obviously not being sought. Again. Chakotay shook his head - although not in response to Janeway's words. If she wanted to take on the universe - whatever universe - he wouldn't be able to stop her. At least he knew about it this time.

The ship rocked again; the ablative armor was giving them more protection than the Cardassians had had, but Voyager's responses were not making any obvious difference to the Sernaix. The crew rocked, barely staying on their feet or in their chairs with each percussive shock through the hull. The crimson discharges passed through the standard shields as though they didn't exist. Tuvok was draining Voyager's phaser banks, the shots absorbed by the ship ahead with no apparent effect - leading Chakotay back to the question of whether it was there at all.

"Harry, keep hailing them," coughed Janeway, choking on the smoke from a nearby burning console. Hitting her combadge, she added, "Seven, we need you on the bridge, now." Nothing about this place seemed familiar, but perhaps the Borg had encountered the Sernaix. Perhaps they had met them, assimilated them, so that somewhere in the recesses of Seven's mind was the knowledge of how to defeat them.

Paris' wild gyrations of the ship, taking her through evasive maneuvers that neither Starfleet nor the Maquis would recognize, made little difference - the Sernaix's shots seemed to follow them, chasing the ship through each twist, roll, and bank. The acrid stench of burnt electrics overloaded gel packs and stressed bulkheads seeped through the bridge.

"Tuvok - full spread photon torpedoes. Target ... target something." Frustration laced every word Janeway spoke. They were outgunned and couldn't even tell from where they were being outgunned. Seven worked solidly now at a console; the Sernaix were as unfamiliar to her as to the rest of the crew, but she had begun to run a series of scans. Most probably duplicated those run by Harry, Chakotay and Tuvok, but no matter - a fresh perspective sometimes made all the difference. This was not, apparently, one of those times.

Chakotay kept his own counsel, wondering how long it would be before Janeway would turn them around - wondering whether she would turn them around at all. Tuvok delivered status reports in a patient monotone that sounded like a death knell: shields failing, phasers failing, torpedoes ineffective. Tuvok looked at Janeway, clearly waiting

for the signal to leave. Paris yelled in pain as the helm spat a shower of sparks at him, but waved away assistance in order to continue his crazy looping advance and retreat of evasion around the matte black ship matching their pace.

Finally, Chakotay spoke: a short, sharp, litany of the injured and the dead. A hull breach on a lower deck. With each word he inwardly willed Kathryn to call them to retreat, to scatter a little of the pride that held her to the Captaincy and away from the crew and the situation.

Whether his silent plea had an effect, or whether she simply came to the conclusion that they were outgunned and technologically inferior, he would never know. He only knew relief when he finally heard Janeway order Tom to retreat, to pull them away from the Sernaix as fast as possible.

That relief was short-lived; the onscreen visual suggested that the Sernaix were more than capable of matching their speed. Voyager's rolling shudders continued as Paris dodged both the alien ship and its weaponry; B'Elanna's fury at the damage to Voyager dripped through each word as she shouted her status report above the whine and thunder of Engineering. "Shields are almost gone, warp power is going. Captain, I don't care how you do it, but get us the hell out of here."

Paris rolled them out of the path of a star, blazing white ahead in counterpoint to the blood red of the ship's fire directed at them. Janeway stood unsteadily, apparently deep in thought. Chakotay stared at her, the rest of the bridge crew fell silent - all concentrating on her. Only the hum of the engines and the occasional crack and hiss of the strained systems broke the quiet.

"Tom, move us back - take us into that star ahead," Janeway eventually ordered, quietly. She was knocked off-balance by another blow to the ship, and Chakotay moved instinctively to catch her. She acknowledged his help with a quick nod of the head as he set her upright again; then she moved cautiously forward to stand behind Tom, one hand clutching his chair for balance.

"B'Elanna," said Janeway, hitting the combadge, "put all the power we've got to the armor and warp. We're going to try something a little different."

"Got it," came the short reply. There was a subtle change in speed and Voyager strained towards the sun. The Sernaix sped along behind them now, running silent and deadly in the crimson wake of their fire.

Chakotay thought he understood what Janeway's plan was; he caught Tuvok's eye and the Vulcan nodded, and then looked towards the Captain as she spoke. "Tuvok, cut phasers and give me full power to the armor. Paris, head for the corona of that sun; take us through it. We'll see whether they can follow us through that."

B'Elanna cut in; she had been following the conversation on the bridge from Engineering. "Captain, the armor isn't metaphasic - we don't know whether it'll stand up to the corona."

"It doesn't matter. If it fails, we will be no worse than we are, waiting here for the Sernaix to decide what to do with us," Janeway said. Paris closed his eyes, wondering exactly

how it was that they came to be diving into a star, who knew where, with an inscrutable alien chasing after them. 'The miracle ship', Harry had called them. Well, if they ever needed a miracle it was now.

He made a couple of adjustments and set the course, wincing slightly from pain as he manipulated the controls with injured fingers. The Sernaix's incessant fire slowed and faded as Voyager pulled toward the sun.

In a heartbeat they crossed the last of the dark expanse of space; then the corona enveloped them, a cloud of white light stinging the eyes of all who looked to the screen - despite the shielding and damping of the image by the computer.

"The armor's holding," was the report from Engineering that everyone was waiting for. "It looks like we're safe, but I'll keep monitoring it. Janeway acknowledged the report, then a still hush fell again over the bridge; the Sernaix had ceased firing but it remained to be seen whether they would cease following. Harry had his sensors set for visual, tracking the Sernaix in the only way possible.

Voyager plowed through the corona; finally Harry spoke up. "They're coming in. Or, at least, that's what it looks like."

Janeway snapped round to face him. "Keep tracking them. Tom, take us in further - let's see if they can take the chromosphere. And yes, B'Elanna," she added before she was interrupted, "we don't know whether the shields will tolerate it. But we do know they won't tolerate the fire we've been taking."

Chakotay confirmed Harry's scans himself, taking his mind off the increasing light and the approaching chromosphere. That layer glowed a dull pink through the white heat of the corona, tinting the bridge as they drew closer. The aft visual scans behind still showed the Sernaix advancing through the corona; more slowly than before but clearly able to handle the intense heat and radiation. Then, suddenly, the alien ship seemed to slow even more as they sank through the corona; perhaps they couldn't handle it all that well after all.

Paris took them through into the chromosphere; white above, pink around them and, just 2000 kilometers below, the boiling photosphere. Chakotay wondered idly whether anyone else had descended this far into a star before. The thought seemed odd, almost bizarre, a stress-induced meandering of his mind. Chased by an alien ship that could only be tracked if they wanted to be, into the indefatigable heat of a sun, and all he could think about was whether anyone else had done this before. He distracted himself by checking the position of the Sernaix; Harry was doing the same thing and they reach the same decision.

"They're dropping back." Two voices, one comment, and relieved laughter rippled around the bridge into the rising heat. Chakotay grinned at Harry. Torres' voice came over the comm again: "Captain, we've only got five minutes or so - the armor won't shield us in here indefinitely."

"Understood, Lieutenant," said Janeway crisply. "Mr. Paris, can you take us around the curve of the sun through the chromosphere? I want to be as far away from that ship as possible when we come out - and take us to warp as soon as it's safe to do so."

Hopefully, the radiation this star's throwing off will be enough to scramble our warp signature from them."

Chakotay hoped she was right; he still wasn't entirely sure that they weren't being shown what they wanted to see by the Sernaix - the aliens were pulling back, out of the corona, away from them. They gave the appearance of being unable to deal with the heat but appearances could be manipulated. Voyager shifted again as Tom took them round the star, following the chromosphere, the heat and silent tension on the bridge building until at last they cleared the far side and kicked into warp. The unfamiliar starscape shimmered into a familiar blur and the Sernaix were left behind with the star.

Tom strode into sickbay, pulling a dermal regenerator from a rack as he passed and rapidly began to heal his scored hand - scars of his protesting console - that stung still. The vanishing marks wouldn't hurt for much longer. Sickbay was relatively full, but the medical crew seemed to be holding the worst at bay. He looked around for the doctor, and found him working at one of the far biobeds.

Tom judged that, for the moment, the doctor was too busy to be disturbed so he headed towards the protesting sounds of his daughter. Miral lay secured in a crib, unhappy about the lack of attention being paid to her, or perhaps protesting that she was hungry. Definitely protesting, in any case. Tom yawned as he picked her up; sleep had definitely become an expensive luxury since she was born. She was worth it, though. Her soft baby scent calmed him more quickly than anything else could; he could feel himself relaxing as he held her close, despite all the trouble surrounding them. Miral was slightly mollified; the howls of protest became murmurings when he picked her up, although he was sure that wouldn't last for long.

Tom looked up to see the doctor coming towards him.

"Ah, Mr. Paris. I see you've come to collect your daughter - thank you. While I'm happy to baby-sit, I'm not sure now is the best of times. And I'm not sure that her ... accompaniment ... to the ambient sounds of sickbay are entirely helpful." The doctor smiled, tempering his words. In truth, Miral's cries had made a number of the patients uncomfortable, reminding them of their own helplessness by accentuating hers.

Tom smiled ruefully. "No, I guess not. Do you need me here? I could try to find someone else to look after her," he offered. The doctor shook his head.

"No, I have the situation under control here. You'd be more useful taking this young lady back home, I think. Is everything quiet on the bridge now?" he asked.

"Pretty much so; it looks like the Captain was right and we lost the Sernaix coming out of the star." Tom lowered his voice. "Although, with their cloaking abilities, I don't think anyone's too comfortable about it just yet. We're in orbit around a Class-M planet we found, while we get some repair work done."

The doctor nodded; at that moment, he was called back to the biobeds by a tech. Tom watched him go, then looked down at Miral. "Well, I suppose we should get home, hmm?" he said, still awed by her.

Voyager hung in orbit around a Class-M planet they'd fortunately found within sensor range when they came out of the sun. The starlight from the center of the system glinted dully off her hull, the damage sustained from the Sernaix made clear by the gashes and scorching rippling across her. The planet below was young, devoid of anything that might be termed life, other than a few proto-plants and other simple organisms in pools of primordial soup. A thin but breathable atmosphere had developed with the plants. There was some volcanic activity in the southern continent, and a few odd sensor holes, but the planet was generally quiet and peaceful - a sharp contrast to the last few hours.

On the ship, the bridge was a shambles: burnt consoles, wiring hanging from gaps in the panels in the walls and ceilings, the occasional hiss of venting gas, and the unsteady hum of a stressed ship. Chakotay surveyed the damage, assessing just how lucky they had been. No shields, virtually no armor, next to no engine capacity. Kathryn had headed down to Engineering to discuss their situation with B'Elanna. Seven had gone to Astrometrics, refusing the Doctor's requests that she return to sickbay, to work on the continuing problem of where they were. Up here, the remaining bridge crew picked their way through the damage, gathering information for the series of reports Chakotay was not looking forward to reading.

He'd managed not to say anything, though now he wondered whether he should have pushed harder to get the Captain to retreat rather than face the Sernaix head on. It would probably have made no difference - after the Cardassians, she was out for some form of revenge and this fight was all the excuse she'd needed. She would never admit it, of course; after all, admitting her humanity wasn't her style.

At the back of his mind Chakotay knew he was being unfair, but he'd had enough both of being shunted to one side and of her lack of trust. Kathryn was shutting herself off again, and he could feel each wall slam into place. Maybe she was feeling guilty because they were stranded again; not that it was in any way her fault this time, but he suspected she wouldn't see it that way.

The quiet anger he'd kept buried during the attack resurfaced; now they were out of danger, the humiliation at being denied the most basic information on Kathryn's plans to board the Cardassian ship boiled up again. Her refusal to listen to him, her refusal to trust him - he thought they'd come past all that but obviously not. Perhaps he should have told Kathryn about his new relationship, rather than let her hear about it from someone else. Then again, why should he - would she have listened to him any more closely than she'd listened when he told her it was over?

Chakotay shook himself and stood. This was no time for a descent into self-pity; it wouldn't get the ship repaired and it wouldn't help the command relationship in any way. He couldn't allow the fact that he didn't much like Kathryn right now to affect his ability to work with the Captain - a pity he couldn't say the same about the Captain's ability to work with him.

The Captain's voice came over his combadge, pulling him out of his self-absorption. "Janeway to Commander Chakotay."

"Chakotay here."

"Commander, take a team down to the surface - there are some supplies we need for Engineering to get the repairs completed. Lieutenant Torres will let you have a list of what we need. Janeway out."

Yes, ma'am. Chakotay inwardly mimicked Paris' rather insolently rolling acknowledgement. That was more than abruptness; he wasn't quite sure what to describe it as. A command, certainly, but there were better ways of asking. He turned to Harry.

"Harry, you're with me - we need to take a team down to get supplies for B'Elanna. Can you meet with her to get details of everything we need, and get another four people together to take down with us?" Harry nodded and left the bridge, sidestepping a crewman repairing one of the panels by the turbolift. "We'll meet in the main shuttlebay in 20 minutes; the transporters are still offline. Let me know if you need more time." Chakotay yielded the bridge to Tuvok, asking him to recommend someone from security for the away team.

Tuvok stepped down from the security station and picked his way across to the command chairs. "Commander, I would suggest you take Lieutenant Baxter - he has some experience on the science team and may be better able to assist your primary mission."

"Acknowledged." Chakotay left the bridge, summoning Baxter to join them in the shuttlebay as he went.

The corridors were quiet; the usual hum of the ship was slightly off tonight, disturbed by all the damage they'd taken. Warp power was almost gone - the last dregs of the engines' capacity had gotten them here, some way from the star and the Sernaix, and little but impulse remained now. The armor had done its job a little too well, deflecting the Sernaix's shots and the heat of the sun to the point of almost total collapse. B'Elanna was working on it now, despite her so-called maternity leave, trying to restore their only hope of protection against another attack.

Tom bounced Miral a little as he walked; she was starting to fuss again. He hoped she was just hungry - he was too tired to be able to deal with her fractiousness, although he supposed he had no choice but to deal with it if she chose to go on. He could hardly fault her for complaining - barely born and already thrown into combat with the rest of them. She couldn't fail to be aware of the battering the ship had taken, even if she couldn't understand it. He'd be fussing too, if he were in her place. With each bouncing step she quieted a little but, as soon as he had to stop and wait for the lift, she started again. Tom found himself walking in small circles around the lift, rocking her, anything to stop the wail that was threatening. As soon as the lift reached his deck he almost sprinted out, heading rapidly towards their quarters.

The doors opened as he approached; to his surprise, B'Elanna was inside. "I thought you were tied up in Engineering?"

"I was. I am. But something couldn't wait," she replied, her voice muffled as she changed her uniform top. "Miral's hungry, right?" she asked.

"Yes," said Tom, a little puzzled. "How did you know - I hadn't realized she'd settled to a routine yet."

"Some things you just know - and it wasn't hard to guess when I started to feel like I was bursting." B'Elanna gestured absently towards her chest. "These get uncomfortable."

Tom just about stopped himself from grinning - old habits were hard to drop, but he didn't want his daughter to grow up hearing her mother call her father a 'pig' with monotonous regularity. Either he was successful or B'Elanna chose not to notice as she explained. "I've taken care of it - there some milk for her in the refrigeration unit. That should keep her going for a while."

B'Elanna crossed the room and dropped a kiss on Miral's forehead. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I've got to go back to work. Daddy'll look after you though - be good." She grinned up at Tom. "I swear, if you'd told me a year ago I'd be talking baby-talk to my daughter, I would have decked you. And if you laugh at me now, I will deck you!" Tom laughed, and kissed her.

"Behave," she admonished as she left the room. Tom's smile slipped a little as Miral's voice gathered strength.

"Shush, shush, let's get you some dinner. See if that improves your mood, hey?" A disgruntled cry was his daughter's response.

Chakotay headed for Astrometrics; the odd sensor holes they had detected on the planet were bothering him slightly and he wanted to get the supplies in as fast as possible. The continuing concern over whether the Sernaix would discover their whereabouts was also a motivating factor in getting the mission over with as quickly as possible. Seven's ability to see outside the normal spectrum of human vision could be useful in picking out the best areas to search.

He hadn't spoken with Seven in days - had barely seen her, in fact, even before the Cardassians had kidnapped her. He wondered how she'd coped with their particularly unique brand of welcome; she'd seemed a little pale on the bridge earlier. Still, he doubted she would welcome any sympathy from him - and life was complicated enough without trying to salvage a friendship out of the ashes of a relationship.

The doors hissed open and he entered the relatively unscathed cavern of Astrometrics. If there had been any damage, Seven had already repaired it. She and Icheb were working at the banks of consoles arrayed before the screen at the far end of the room. On the screen, the unfamiliar stars around them were displayed and odd notations scrolled from them as the pair ran calculation after calculation.

"Seven, I need your assistance," he announced as she turned to look at him.

"I have very little time, Commander. I'm sure you can find someone else to assist you," came the terse reply as Seven turned back to the console she'd been studying.

"Not in this case - we're taking an away team down to the planet to gather mineral supplies for the repair teams. Your enhanced visual acuity will help us get the job done faster."

"I have to decline, Commander. I am presently occupied with establishing Voyager's location and do not have the time to spare."

"We can work out where we are later, Seven; it's more important that we repair the ship as quickly as possible." Chakotay was beginning to get annoyed with her continued refusal to assist the away team. His comment was met with silence and a sideways glance from Icheb, apparently uncomfortable with the clipped discussion.

Chakotay relented after a moment; when Seven was being stubborn, nothing would shift her short of a direct order from the Captain. Sometimes not even that. Chakotay was fairly sure he wouldn't get Janeway to give that order, and he wasn't enthusiastic about humiliating himself again by asking her.

"Very well, Seven." He winced a little, aware that he sounded slightly petulant. "I'll send Ensign Kim up. Could you at least spare the time to check that our tricorders are calibrated to cover the same visual spectrum?" That was better, clipped and authoritative. He nodded and turned to go.

"Ensign Kim should remain here to assist us. It is imperative that we establish where we are, and his skills with the sensors are superior to those of any but myself and Icheb."

Seven's demand stopped Chakotay on his way out, and he turned rapidly back.

"Ensign Kim has been assigned to the mission and will not be available to assist you. You don't seem to be aware of the condition Voyager is in; I suggest that you turn those sensors inward for a moment and check the status of the ship. We do not have the luxury of allowing anyone else to play detective with the cosmos with anyone else right now, Seven. Ensign Kim will be coming down to the planet with the rest of the team; I suggest you check the tricorder calibration quickly." He left, tamping down the anger that had flared briefly in the face of Seven's single-mindedness.

The shuttlebay was cold, as usual. Chakotay shivered a little - the temperature in here was always colder than anywhere else on the ship. Sometimes it felt as though the vacuum cold of space seeped in with each shuttle takeoff and landing, then never quite left. Harry was still in Astrometrics, though he hadn't yet called to tell the Commander that Seven wasn't going to let him leave.

The crew was doing last-minute checks; the shuttlebay hadn't taken too much damage. The maintenance bays nearby had borne most of it, and the couple of shuttles in there would need some close attention before they were in any condition to fly. The Delta Flyer seemed to have escaped the damage altogether, apart from a couple of marks from flying debris when one of the canisters of parts had opened on impact.

Chakotay ran through the series of pre-flight checks that Tom deemed necessary for the Flyer; twice as long as the checks for a regular shuttle, but this was not quite a regular shuttle. Chakotay watched the shield readout scroll past, idly contemplating whether they could install the ablative armor on the Flyer as well. It would certainly be useful.

Harry poked his head around the door, and Chakotay sighed with relief. He hadn't been trapped in Astrometrics. "All set, Commander - containers are stowed, and I have all the kits ready. Let me know when you want us on board."

"Come on up, Harry - tell the others to find seats where they can, and come over here. I'll need you up front, with the sensors."

The team was on board, strapping in, when Chakotay heard feet slamming into the deck as someone came flying across the shuttlebay floor. "Chakotay, wait!" It was B'Elanna, clutching a PADD as she leapt up the ramp to the small ship. "I want you to get as much rubidium and terbium as possible. It's all listed on here, and if you can't get terbium then I need more of the xenotime." She was forcing the words out as fast as possible. "I know I've given Harry that list, but the primary post-conductive field generators on the port nacelle have more damage than we realized and we need these to re-establish the warp field properly and ... and I've lost you, haven't I, Chakotay?"

B'Elanna grinned as Chakotay looked at her blankly. "Just get it all, in this order, okay? Then I'll be happy."

"Okay, understood. Why couldn't you say that in the first place?" asked Chakotay, laughing. The team were chuckling lightly behind him - the sound was good to hear; Chakotay wasn't sure he'd heard anyone laugh since they had been thrown here by the subspace mine.

"Because it's too much fun to tease you - now, get going, I need this stuff yesterday," retorted B'Elanna, ducking back out of the Flyer. Chakotay watched her cross the deck, then, as the doors to the corridor closed behind her, he signaled to the shuttlebay operator that he was ready to leave.

Mendez's voice came over the comm. "The shuttlebay is locked down, you're clear to leave whenever you want to, Commander. "

"Acknowledged. Chakotay out."

The hanger doors opened lazily; they were a conceit more than a necessity. The atmosphere in the shuttlebay was preserved by forcefields, not the doors, but numerous studies showed that most people were happier with the thought of a few tons of metal between themselves and space. Walking around in a shuttlebay open to the stars was enough to make any but the most experienced space walker uneasy.

Once the doors were fully open, Chakotay nudged the Flyer's controls. The engines flared briefly as they rose, then throttled back as the shuttle looped away from the main ship - small against the size of Voyager, lost quickly against the terrain of the planet below to anyone watching them leave.

The team on the Flyer settled down for the flight; Harry distributed copies of B'Elanna's wish list once he'd added the latest round of requests to those he'd gathered earlier, then returned to the forward sensor console.

"Here," he gestured to Chakotay, "that area looks reasonably stable, but it looks like it's been active in the last few hundred years or so. That should make it easier to collect what we need, hopefully it'll have been forced upwards by earthquakes. There's no volcanic activity apparent for a few hundred kilometers from there, though. We should be safe enough."

"Looks fine, Harry," concurred Chakotay as he glanced over. The planet's atmosphere was slightly turbulent and it took most of his concentration to bring the Flyer down through the layers. The clouds below them spread out mackerel-tinged shadows on the ground below. The wisps were deceptive, hiding currents rising from the undulating land. Clear air turbulence was a menace even now; unpredictable and undetectable. Fortunately, it was no more than a menace - the Flyer could take anything that the atmosphere could throw at them; it was just rather uncomfortable for those jostled within. The turbulence smoothed out as quickly as it had arisen, the horizon steady now in the far distance and blurred by cloud where the planet met the sky.

Back on Voyager, Tom was still pacing the corridors. Miral had eaten and been bathed, and then he had changed both their clothes. Miral had clearly enjoyed the water - or perhaps she just enjoyed trying to drown her father! Still, she'd been happy and the colicky cries had subsided for a while, but even the pleasures of messing about in the water had palled.

Nothing seemed to work for any length of time, though; she continued to cry. Not the sharp screams of pain, or the fussing of hunger or discomfort, just a continual wail that had Tom feeling as though he was the worst of fathers. He held her more closely, rocking her, whispering to her and hoping against hope that she would quiet down. She did, a little, but still she hiccupped and sobbed. In desperation now, he called B'Elanna, hoping she'd have some idea what he could do.

"I'm sorry Tom, I don't know - all I did was walk her and she slept eventually. Do you want me to come up and try and feed her again? I'm busy here but I could come up for a little while." Tom shook his head, then remembered they were talking over the comm system.

"No, no, don't - it's ok, I can manage. The ship needs you more than it needs me right now, I'll just take her for a walk or something."

"Are you sure?" B'Elanna sounded concerned, and Tom tried to reassure her. She had too much else to worry about right now and, after all, he was Miral's father. He needed to prove - to himself - that he could look after her.

"Yes, I'm sure - we'll be fine, I promise." The promise sounded hollow to Tom, punctuated as it was by his daughter's sobs, but either it convinced B'Elanna or the combadge didn't pick up the sounds Miral was making.

B'Elanna's "Okay" closed the conversation, and Tom continued wandering the corridors. He kept up a running commentary for Miral; she seemed quieter when he spoke, so he talked. And talked.

"Now, Miral - these are the officer's quarters. Very spacious; that's the Captain's over there - she has the biggest quarters of anyone on the ship. Those are Commander Chakotay's - I can't remember what they're like, I haven't been in there for a while. Those are Tuvok's over there -he and T'Pel are sharing them now."

A signal from the doctor interrupted Tom's monologue. "Mr Paris, I need some assistance here in sickbay - some of the medical crew are getting tired and we're just mopping up the odds and ends now; an extra pair of hands would finish things more easily."

"Doc, I'd love to - but I've got Miral here, and she's still fussing. B'Elanna's busy in Engineering, and I can't think of anyone who's free to look after her instead." Not for the first time, Tom wished Neelix as still with them; he would have been a natural for a babysitter, after all his experience with Naomi.

"I can hear Miral - bring her with you; now we're not in the middle of battle, she'll be a good distraction for the people still waiting here. Besides, I've got something for you that might help."

Tom was curious as what the doctor meant - but anything that might help him deal with Miral's tears would be a good thing. "Okay, Doc, I'm on my way." He walked more quickly, heading for the turbolift and singing a little off-key to Miral as he did so. "We're off to see the Doc, the wonderful Doc of Voyager ... nope, that doesn't scan, Daddy's going to have to rethink these lyrics, Miral." He looked up as the lift arrived, suddenly checking that there was no one around to hear him. Much as he adored Miral, some things he didn't want to be teased about later. She hiccupped as they entered the lift; it sounded suspiciously like laughter and he grinned at her.

"That's all right, you're allowed to laugh at me. God knows you'll do it enough later in life, you may as well start now. Your mother will definitely teach you the fine and subtle art of teasing your father." Tom leaned back against the wall of the lift, feeling more awake than he had done for a while.

The lift eased to a halt moments later, opening onto a corridor near sickbay. The queue of wounded that had formed there earlier was gone now, and the corridor was silent but for Tom's footfalls and Miral's grousing as they headed for the sickbay doors.

The doors slid open with the customary hiss, and the sounds of the doctor and his patients rose into the silence. Quiet murmurs, the occasional gasp or groan, and a request for a hypospray; the regular give and take. Heads turned to see who had entered, a number of faces lighting up at the sight of Miral in Tom's arms. She chose that moment to crank up the volume, her fussing returning to a near-yell. Tom rocked her a little more closely, adjusting the way he held her in his arms, raising her head up a little more.

The doctor approached, smiling. "Here, Mr Paris. See whether she prefers this - it'll leave you a little freer as well." He held out a contraption of fabric; Tom looked at it, puzzled.

"Thanks, Doc. I think. What is it?"

"It's a carrier - you wear it like a back-to-front carrysack; Miral will be held against you by it. It's supposed to soothe her, she can hear your heartbeat that way. Try it - it'll leave your hands free in any case, so you can move around. I found it in an old database and replicated it. I've been meaning to give it to you or B'Elanna but there just hasn't been time recently."

Tom took the carrier, extending one hand gingerly.

"Here, let me take Miral while you put it on," said the doctor. He took Miral carefully, cooing over her as he adjusted his hold on her. Tom smiled at the picture they made, then turned his attention to the contraption that the doctor had handed him; the straps slipped on easily enough and the whole thing snapped together in the back. He looked down at the way the carrier pouched out in front of him and wondered whether this was what B'Elanna had felt like, pregnant with Miral. It was cumbersome but, yes, he supposed he had a little more freedom than he had with Miral in his arms.

The doctor coughed and Tom turned round; at the doctor's smile he realized the doctor been trying to attract his attention while he'd been distracted by this thoughts. He colored slightly in embarrassment at being caught day-dreaming.

"Here, let me help to maneuver her into it." The doctor held Miral up, supporting her head still, as Tom pulled open the carrier. The infant was gently lowered in; Tom made sure she was comfortable. Her head lolled back a little against the backrest, and Tom looked over to the doctor.

"Is this all right?" The doctor nodded.

"Yes, it's fine - there's plenty of support there. She'll be fine - just watch her legs, make sure she doesn't kick you. That could be painful," advised the doctor. Tom mentally winced at the idea and checked where his daughter's legs reached. For now, it was all right. He'd have to be careful as she grew, however.

Down on the planet, the Flyer settled slowly and carefully on a small plain. Around them the ground rose in abrupt, jagged, hills - clearly forced upwards by tectonic activity, recently enough not to have weathered to any degree. Chakotay shut down the engines, leaving the ship still ready to leave at a moment's notice. Experience, and Starfleet policy, had him carefully resetting the flight envelope parameters to take them up and into orbit with the minimum of effort. While the team assembled the mining kits and stacked the first batch of containers, ready to move out, Harry checked and rechecked the sensor information, confirming the planet's breathable atmosphere and the lack of any apparent irritants or allergens. At last, satisfied that their initial readings from orbit were confirmed on the ground, he signaled Baxter to let the Flyer's ramp down.

Cool air rushed in as the Flyer opened; the air outside was damp and chill, condensing a little as it encountered the warmer climate of the Flyer. Baxter was first out, leading with his phaser. The lack of life on the sensors was not an absolute guarantee and he wanted to be prepared if they met with the unexpected. Following him came the rest of the team, Chakotay and Harry last off the ship. Nothing unexpected met them - nothing animate. What was unexpected were the colors; the thin atmosphere of the planet and the translucent layers of clouds above produced a startlingly beautiful effect. Where the ground sheared upwards, the minerals revealed in the strata shimmered in a metallic spectrum; dazzling white, silver, copper, jade green and shades of blue bled together in the hazy light. The debris on the ground scattered light across the sides of the Flyer, spilling colors across her.

The team stood still; nothing moved except for a slight breeze which riffled through the vegetation that fringed the plain. For a moment they just watched the play of light, all wide-eyed - even Chakotay, who had seen more light-effects on more planets than he could even begin to recall. He was the first to shake his head and bring himself back to the job at hand.

"Chakotay to Voyager."

"Voyager here. Report, Commander," came Tuvok's voice.

"We're down safely, no surprises here. We'll begin the mining operations and check in hourly as usual. Let us know if anything changes up there."

"Acknowledged, Commander. Voyager out."

The comlink was cut, and the sound died away on the breeze. Chakotay turned to the rest of the team, who were now looking to him. The exchange with Voyager had brought them back to the present, and their task.

"All right people, we'll divide into teams. Harry, you're with me. Baxter, can you take the first security watch?" Baxter nodded. "The rest of you pair up whichever way works best for you. You've each got a set of Torres' requests? Harry, you've downloaded the sensor plans to the PADDs as well, and reconfigured the tricorders with Seven's instructions?" Harry nodded as well. "Okay, then, let's spread out and see how quickly we can get this done."

Harry took over. "First thing we need to do is set up the monitors - Ayala and Boylan, you take those and spread them out. We need to keep an eye on the activity here, the fault lines in this area aren't finished with by any means. The sensors indicate it's stable now," he said, noticing their nervousness, "but we'll just keep an eye on it. Spread the monitors out in a triangle - there, there and there," he indicated, pointing. "I'll patch them back into the ship, so we'll get a warning long before anything happens." The team nodded, moving out as Harry had indicated.

They began to work once the monitors were located and settled. Chakotay and Harry moved off in the direction of the sun, picking a point where the ground had been forced upwards 30 meters in a shear. The crystal and mineral deposits slanted across the face of the shear; in the shadow of the sun, they glinted only dully. Chakotay pulled out a tricorder and began scanning the debris, crumbled about where the shear had been

forced out of the ground. The upheavals in the terrain made their job surprisingly easy - it looked as though there would be little that they would need to physically mine for. Most of B'Elanna's requests - even the more esoteric ones - were freely available or well exposed by shears.

They worked steadily for a while, exchanging few comments. Chakotay started to wonder whether Harry was all right; he was usually a little more voluble than this. He cleared his throat, and Harry turned round.

"Harry, are you all right?" The direct approach seemed the best; he wasn't quite in a frame of mind to try to second-guess what might be troubling Harry. The thought had crossed his mind that Harry had, some time ago, appeared interested in Seven. It might have been his own recent relationship that was the problem, but he wasn't going to assume that it was - he wasn't even certain Seven would have discussed it with Harry. He could reassure him if it was that, but better to let the young man bring it up first.

"I ... I guess so. Commander, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Go ahead." Perhaps the problem was Seven, after all. Chakotay braced himself for jealousy or just curiosity.

"Were you ever homesick in the Delta Quadrant?" The question was unexpected, and Chakotay took a moment to think his answer through.

"No, I don't think so," he said eventually. "Remember, I had little to go back to. The Maquis had no home, and my own home no longer exists. I adapt reasonably easily to new situations so, no, I wasn't. You were, weren't you?" he asked, knowing the answer full well. The ensign's homesickness in the first few years had been legendary, and Chakotay wasn't sure it had completely worn off.

"Neither was I, I think." Harry's comment was unexpected, and Chakotay's surprise showed on his face. "Oh, I know it seemed like it but ... compared to the way I feel now, it wasn't homesickness. This is worse than anything I felt before."

"Harry," Chakotay said, "I suppose that's not entirely surprising. We came so close to home, after everything we'd gone through."

Harry nodded. "And the Delta Quadrant ... well, it wasn't home, but at least we knew where we were. Here, we can't get a fix, we have no point of reference. Do you realize, we knew within moments of coming out of the Caretaker's pulse that we were in the Delta Quadrant? We've been here days and we still don't have a clue where we are. That makes me feel further from home than I did before, and ..." Harry looked around, then lowered his voice, "it unnerves me. In a way that I never was before."

"Harry, you aren't the only one. I think this is affecting a lot of people on the ship that way; being completely lost is never a comfortable situation. We've been thrown into a situation where we can't tell where we are, can't tell who people are, and it's bound to affect you. I heard people mention in the mess hall that they're getting more stressed by this than by anything that's happened before, and most of them don't even know the full extent of our situation. People are getting headaches - and not just from Chell's more colorful menu names - and odd dreams, and insomnia. All classic stress symptoms."

Harry nodded. "I've been having the oddest dreams - like something painted by Salvador Dali. Not particularly frightening, but vivid. Colors are emphasized and it seems like I'm getting the oddest combinations of historical figures. I had a dream with Cochrane and Cleopatra in it the other night." Harry blushed as he recalled the details of the dream, and Chakotay fought a grin at the sight; Harry caught it, though, and laughed. "I know, it sounds weird, doesn't it? You don't want to know what they were doing!"

Chakotay laughed openly. "No, I don't think I do, by the sound of it," he said, chuckling still. Harry seemed happier, the laughter having drained away some of tension and strain of homesickness. They had no idea where they were, but at least he was with people he knew and trusted.

Once Miral was settled, Tom turned his attention to the array of bumps, scratches and bruises that remained in sickbay. He dug out a dermal regenerator and spread a series of hyposprays on a trolley; painkillers mostly. Maneuvering around Miral, he began to treat the crewmen that had been left to the end - both those placed at the back of the queue by the triage team and some stragglers who had come in later, once the immediate crisis was over.

Miral continued to fuss, though quieter now, and Tom found himself amused by a stream of suggestions about things he could try to calm her down when she was crying. One ensign suggested something called a pacifier - Tom was intrigued by the idea, but the doctor frowned a little as he overheard it. "If you must, Mr. Paris, but make sure it's properly designed. You don't want to damage her teeth - and if she inherits her teeth from her mother's gene pool she'll probably shred it as soon as they come in anyway!"

Tom finished closing up the already healing cut on the ensign's arm with a shot of painkiller.

"Thanks; maybe that'll help me sleep better," said the crewman.

"You're having trouble sleeping, Blain?" asked Tom. "Since when?"

"Oh, just the last week or so - I've been waking up with odd dreams. Nothing too scary, just very vivid." The doctor overheard the conversation and spoke up.

"You and the rest of the ship. Don't worry about it, Mr. Blain - it's stress. Unsurprisingly." The doctor's tone dripped his usual sarcasm, and his voice faded into the background as a number of other crewmen in the room offered their own weird and wonderful dreams from the last few weeks. Tom smiled as he turned to treat the next patient.

"Well, that's something I don't have to worry about - Miral doesn't let me sleep, much less dream!"

Laughter echoed in the room, and another crewman prescribed aromatherapy for Miral's fussing as Tom patched up a nasty graze on his temple; his mother had said it was the only thing that calmed his sister down. She would use a scented oil to massage the baby - apparently it worked every time. Tom grinned and said he'd try it, although he privately

thought that the idea of coating an already squirming Miral in oil was a recipe for disaster.

The doctor came round again just as Tom was finishing up. "You know, Mr Paris, there just may not be anything you can do, I'm afraid. All babies go through growth spurts - humans at 3 weeks, 6 weeks and 3 months. Sometimes it's just uncomfortable. This may be that; there's so little information in the databases about human/Klingon children's development that I can't predict it - Klingon infants grow faster than human infants, though, so it wouldn't be unlikely for her to be going through it already. It would fit with her general development so far. If it gets too much, come back here to sickbay - I'd love to help with her, and sometimes you just need to let someone else deal with her. She's also a good distraction for the patients - there was a lot less moaning and grumbling once you walked in with her."

Tom laughed. "Are you sure it was Miral, and not my winning personality?" he quipped. The doctor just looked at him steadily, then smiled at the tired young man before him. The dark circles under his eyes and the tousled hair were testament to the sleepless nights and the stress of just being on Voyager at the moment.

"Perhaps it was, Mr. Paris. Perhaps it was." He smiled. "Bring her back anyway, whenever you like."

Paris nodded his thanks and turned to leave; Miral was still grumbling to herself as he exited the doors.

On the planet the pile of minerals was growing; B'Elanna's list was getting shorter as they completed requests. Chakotay estimated that they were halfway done just as the monitors around them erupted with a violent warning. Too late; the ground shook around them, twisting and tearing under the strain. Gaps opened up across the plain, and the shears around them heaved upwards again. The team flattened themselves to the ground, but Chakotay heard a scream from the other side of the plain.

A moment later the ground was quiet again; the monitors stopped the incessant, useless, wail. Chakotay and Harry stood up slowly, assessing the damage around them. The landscape was re-shaped, new veins of minerals catching the sun. A little way away, the rest of the team stood slowly. All but one, Boylan. He lay still on the ground, moaning quietly. Chakotay assumed it was he that had screamed; the others seemed fine. Gesturing to Harry and the others to get back to the Flyer, he ran across to Boylan. The man's face was white, but he was conscious.

"I'm all right," he said. Chakotay snorted.

"Don't be stupid, heroics aren't going to help anyone. What hurts, where?"

"All of it. Ahhh." Boylan winced. "My leg, I think it's the worst. I fell - one of those fissures opened up underneath me and I fell to the side."

Chakotay assessed the damage - the leg was clearly broken, probably in several places. White shards of bone broke through the skin and uniform just below the knee. Otherwise

- although that was enough - he looked unhurt. Chakotay scanned him rapidly with the tricorder; it wasn't medical standard, but it could do enough to confirm his suspicions about the leg. Broken in three places, badly. The tricorder showed no other injuries, so Chakotay picked Boylan up and carried him across to the Flyer. The motion as Chakotay moved him was enough to made the crewman pass out, as Chakotay hoped - although he was still gentle as he moved him. Unconscious, he was a lot easier to carry, and the crewman needed the relief from the pain.

Back in the Flyer, Chakotay placed Boylan in the biobed at the back of the ship. "Baxter, you've got some medical training, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, you're looking after him then. Three breaks, two clean. The third will need the Doc's attention." Chakotay moved to the helm as he spoke, and opened a channel to Voyager.

"Delta Flyer to Voyager."

The Captain answered. "Go ahead, Commander."

"Captain, we're returning to orbit - we have most of the minerals but we have an injury; Boylan took some damage in an earthquake which the doctor needs to take a look at. The seismic monitors will need to be reconfigured as well before we come back down, they didn't provide any warning before the quake hit."

In the background, on the bridge, he could hear Seven's voice calling the Captain urgently and he caught the word "Sernaix". The Captain's voice came over the ship's comm again.

"Belay that, Commander. We have the Sernaix on long-range visual and we need to move out to try to lose them. We're in no shape to take them on; you're on your own for now. We'll draw them away from you. Janeway out." Chakotay shivered inwardly at the thought of being stranded on the planet with the Sernaix for company, but heard the apology in Kathryn's voice. There really was nothing else to do - it would take them half an hour to get back to Voyager at this point in its orbit, and that would give too little a margin for them to outrun the Sernaix. If only they could hide. Hide. A sudden recollection crossed his mind, and he called up the previous sensor readings they'd taken.

"Harry, I need your advice on something here," he called, looking over his shoulder. The team looked slightly white, having overheard his conversation with Voyager. The encounter with the Sernaix was too recent in memory for them to be able to take the news with complete equanimity.

Harry came over from the back of the Flyer, where he'd been stowing some of the last containers of minerals they had gathered before the quake hit. Chakotay indicated the sensor holes on the screen. "I'm taking the Flyer here," he pointed to a nearby location, just large enough to hide in. "Did you come across anything else on the scans that I need to know about before we do that?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it all looked clear. The visuals we got for that area on the way just show it near a cliff - there's probably something in the composition of the cliff that dampens the sensor readings at that point."

"Good enough, let's hope it dampens the Sernaix's sensors as well."

"Ensign, lay in a course for the asteroid belt between the fifth and sixth planet," ordered Janeway once she'd closed the comlink with the away team. Take us in and see if you can find something large enough to put Voyager into its sensor shadow. Full impulse. Tuvok, have ready whatever defensive capability we've got at this point. Just in case."

Tuvok spoke up. "Yes, Captain. May I recommend that we also send a probe out, away from both ourselves and the planet? Until we know whether the Sernaix traced us here, or merely surmised that we might be here, it would be best to lay as many conflicting trails as possible. The probe could also give us some longer range telemetry for the Astrometrics team."

"Do it," Janeway nodded. Seven's voice broke in over the comm, as though summoned by Tuvok's comment.

"Captain, please report to Astrometrics."

Janeway grimaced softly to herself. She needed to have a word with, well, someone. Anyone. Anyone who could persuade Seven that a peremptory summons of the Captain was not necessarily appropriate.

"On my way, Seven." Now was not the time to get into that debate, in any case. She had more than enough to deal with, now that Voyager was lost again, and this time rather more thoroughly than last. Janeway spent the short journey from the bridge to Astrometrics running over the ship's status on a PADD. B'Elanna had managed to perform some minor miracles with the materials on hand; the shields were back up to 60%. The armor wasn't going to be available until they retrieved the supplies from the planet - she suppressed a moment's concern for the team down there - but the warp core was stabilized again and would be brought up to full power within the next 12 hours. The rest of the repair work - the transporters and the more minor issues - would be dealt with in turn thereafter.

Janeway arrived in Astrometrics to find Seven, Icheb and one of the Delaney sisters at the consoles; Seven turned to her as she entered. "Captain. We are still unclear as to our position here at the moment. I have considered each of the sensor readings and have received assistance from a number of crewmen but, to date, we are still no nearer a solution." The frustration was almost palpable; Seven didn't like confusion, and this was nothing but confusion.

Janeway really didn't want to go into all this now, but she was mildly intrigued by anything that had Seven so obviously at a loss. "Then I suggest, Seven, that you're looking in the wrong place," she said curtly. "Try calculating the point spread function for the isoplanatic patch for each area; have you checked the readings against the Hertzprung-Russell preferred locations?"

"We have."

"Then cross-check the astroseismology readings against the luminosity function for the local halo. That at least should give us some idea whether we're even in the right universe. I believe we can safely assume we're not in the same galaxy. I can't imagine that you wouldn't have discovered that by now." Janeway could match Seven for clipped, acidic, comments with ease.

Icheb nodded, hands flying across the console once more. Seven looked steadily at Janeway.

"Captain, the sensors are still impaired from our encounter with the Sernaix. Engineering refuses to work on them at present and I have been unable to obtain the assistance needed to run the necessary scans."

"You'll have to make do with what you have; we have more pressing matters to deal with - ultra-fine calibration of the sensors is low on the list of repairs to be made. In the meantime, I suggest you make do with what you have."

Janeway turned and walked out of the door; part of her wanted to stay and investigate, but her main impulse was just to get away. It would take some time before she could converse comfortably with Seven, and that time hadn't yet passed. In the meantime, she would look over the results so far in her ready room. She didn't feel like dealing with the crew right now; her own disappointment at being stranded again was enough to deal with.

Tom's legs ached mildly; he'd been walking the corridors for hours, or so it seemed, talking and singing to Miral. She had fallen asleep a couple of times but always woke up as soon as he stopped walking. Right now, she was simply fussing. He was tired, not entirely comfortable, and close to desperation. B'Elanna was still busy in Engineering and he wasn't going to disturb her - the repair work had to come first right now; it wasn't as though both of them were busy.

He'd felt the ship move out of orbit and, for a moment, contemplated going up to the bridge to take over the helm - there was no red alert, though, simply the constant yellow alert status that they been at for weeks now. He had no reason to go, other than wanting to leave behind Miral's apparent distress; that was reason enough to stay. He was a father now, he couldn't simply abandon responsibility for her to the doctor or anyone else just so that he could go and play on the bridge. Besides, he was on paternity leave - there was no immediate threat to Voyager that required his particular expertise in piloting the ship, so he just had to deal with his own problems.

A distraction came around the next corner; Naomi Wildman came running down the corridor, hair flying behind her. She skidded to an abrupt halt at the sight of him and Miral.

"Tom!" she exclaimed, "Oh, you've got the baby! Can I see her, please?" She almost wriggled in excitement and Tom recalled with amusement her absolute delight when

she'd seen Miral for the first time in sickbay - she'd been simultaneously thrilled and scared to pieces at being allowed to hold her. He could identify with that - he'd felt much the same way.

"Yes, of course you can." He crouched down a bit so that Naomi could peer into the carrier - it was easier than trying to maneuver Miral out of it. "What are you doing running around here, anyway? Late for classes?"

"No classes," said Naomi, grinning at the way Miral had clutched onto her finger. "Seven's too busy trying to work out where we are and everyone else is either working on the repairs or keeping out of Seven's way before she drags them into Astrometrics to help. What are you doing?"

"Trying to keep Miral amused; Doc thinks she's in a growth spurt at the moment and not very comfortable. When she's not comfortable she's not shy about letting us know." Miral chose that moment to punctuate his comment with a disgruntled cry. "See what I mean?"

"Can I help?" asked Naomi. "I want to babysit for you sometimes - I mean, you and B'Elanna have to work and you'll need someone to look after her, won't you? This way I can practice while you're here so you know I can do it. Please, can I help?" The words tumbled out in an excited rush, and Tom grinned.

"Sure you can help. Let's just check in with your mother." Tom tapped his combadge. "Tom Paris to Sam Wildman."

"Sam here, Tom. What's my daughter up to now?" laughed Sam.

"Nothing," said Tom with a grin, "I just wanted to check it was ok with you if she stays with me and Miral for a while -she wants to learn how to babysit."

"That's fine, Tom, thanks for letting me know. Naomi, I'll have dinner sorted out in a couple of hours or so - I'll call you when it's ready, ok?"

"Thanks Mom."

Tom closed the channel. "Okay. Got any ideas for what we can do now?" Tom wasn't entirely hopeful that Naomi could come up with something else to do, but she did.

"How about the holodeck? We can introduce Miral to Flotter!"

Tom smiled; it hadn't occurred to him to try the holodeck, which was rather ironic under the circumstances. "Good idea - let's go." Holodeck One was nearby and, unsurprisingly, free at the moment. Tom began to scroll through the available programs. "Naomi, just how many Flotter programs do you have?" he exclaimed as the list scrolled on. She giggled.

"I got a lot as birthday presents. Let's try Flotter and the Order of the Phoenix. It's one of my favorites - Harry gave it to me - he said it was an old story that he'd updated for Flotter." Tom started the program with a couple of tapped commands, then stood back to let Naomi through as the doors opened. He entered behind her, looking around with some bemusement.

They were in the hallway of an old castle, stone walls and stairs around them. Ahead of them floated a white apparition. Naomi nudged him and pointed. "That's one of the resident ghosts here. He's really nice, but not as helpful as he thinks he is." The apparition floated over, and Tom looked at it a little more closely; it looked like a man, dressed in ancient clothing, with a scarf tied around his neck.

"A ghost?" he asked Naomi.

"Yes, he almost had his head cut off," she said. Anything else she might have said was cut off by Miral's cries - the apparition had come closer, and the infant was clearly not happy with what she saw.

"Sssh, shush," soothed Tom, "it's all right Miral. Computer, end program. I don't think she's overly keen on this one, Naomi, sorry. Maybe when she's a little older." The castle dissolved around them, leaving behind the more familiar silver grid of the holodeck. "Ok, let's see what else we can find."

A list of programs appeared in mid-air in front of them on the holodeck; Tom and Naomi began to look through it. "Sandrine's - no, I don't think so. Your mother would have my hide if I took you in there ... Fairhaven - no, definitely not. Tomb Raider 47?" Tom looked at the parameters for the program and whistled. "Harry, Harry, Harry, you've been holding out on me ... when did you put this one together?"

"What is it? Can we try it?" asked Naomi.

"Uh, no. No, I don't think it's quite right for Miral - or you. Maybe when you're older," Tom smiled. They continued to look down the list of programs.

Chakotay settled the Flyer down again; they'd made the short hop from the plain to this sensor hole as smoothly as possible, to avoid jarring Boylan's leg. Baxter's first aid skills had been adequate only to provide pain relief and heal the two minor breaks; they would need the doctor to look at the worst of the breaks.

Outside the cliff rose above them, arching over the Flyer. It was darker here; the sun was blocked from view so that they sat in literal shadow, not just sensor shadow. Chakotay strained to see through the viewscreen around the helm; nothing moved. The ground below read as stable on the sensors; they'd dismissed it as a mining possibility earlier for precisely that reason - they would have needed to dig for minerals, rather than find them scattered for the taking. Chakotay re-checked the sensors: with that much rock hanging above them, he didn't want any more unpleasant seismic surprises. Stable; there was no sign of any seismic activity here at all and no visual evidence either. There was no debris, no abrupt shears newly torn from the ground. The cliff seemed to be a weathered lava plug, left behind eons ago by a long-dead volcano.

"Harry, take Ayala and scout outside - see if you can find anywhere we can shelter. I'd rather we weren't in the Flyer if the Sernaix find it; Voyager will try to pull them away but I would prefer to plan for all eventualities."

Harry nodded; he and Ayala holstered phasers then grabbed wrist lights and tricorders before descending the now-open ramp. Slightly chill air rushed into the cabin as the ramp opened, damp and cool, with the faint odor of rotting vegetation. Outside, the chill in the air was more pronounced. Harry wondered whether the sun ever reached here, below the cliff. It certainly didn't feel like it. He looked over to Ayala and gestured.

"There's an opening over there - looks like some sort of cave." Harry led the way, ducking slightly under an outcropping. The opening was little more than a vertical slit in the cliff-face, just wide enough to walk through. Behind, illuminated in the outstretched beams of their wrist lights, an almost perfectly hemispherical domed cave opened out. Harry entered, cautiously, scanning with light and tricorder for any unwanted inhabitants. The sensor readings proved accurate - no life, nothing stirred. The floor was layered with dust and the remnants of dead plant life had been brushed by the wind into the corners. It glowed gently, and Harry scanned it with the tricorder; nothing more sinister than bioluminescent fungi, taking advantage of the food source swept into the cavern.

Harry motioned Ayala in. "It looks all right - do you want to call the others in?" Ayala looked around and nodded before heading back to the ship. The same sensor hole that hid the Flyer blocked their combadges, so he waited for the others to return. It wasn't long before a wobbling light announced their presence, flooding into the cavern ahead of them. "Welcome to the hotel," remarked Chakotay. "Thanks, Harry, this is good. Ayala, Baxter: can you put Boylan down over there, away from the entrance? Looks like the breeze reaches through into here," he said, noting the same thick piles of shriveled leaves and odd branches that Harry had been investigating. "Harry, can we use these piles under the survival pack blankets?" he asked.

Harry scattered some of the leaves with a nearby stick; they spread across the floor in a tumbling shower. He picked up a handful and examined them more closely; some crumbled in his hand, most remained reasonably intact.

"I think so, Commander. It looks as though they won't fall apart too badly; they should be pretty comfortable. The tricorder's not showing anything unpleasant in there."

"Good, let's get that set up then."

The team worked for a while, watched over by Boylan's pale face. The painkillers were working, but he wouldn't be comfortable until they got back to Voyager. The illumination in the cavern grew as they placed lights in a couple of corners, raising the light level just enough to see, while trying to keep the glow from leaking out too far from the entrance. Harry and Ayala worked to make something comfortable out of the Starfleet blankets and the leaves; Chakotay gathered rocks together nearby. When he had a good-sized cairn built, he fired his phaser at it until the rocks glowed red as coal. A comforting warmth spread slowly through the cavern, dispelling the faint chill of the slightly stale air. Baxter and Farley, the remaining team members, slowly went through the packs of survival rations that they had brought from the Flyer while keeping an eye on the entrance.

In a short while they settled down around the fire of rocks. The only sound in the place was a soft whistle of the wind skimming the entrance to the cavern; around them the walls glowed red with the reflected light. They had turned off the emergency lights for now, unnecessary in the glow of the fire. The entrance was a sliver of light, cut in sharp

contrast to the black walls of the cavern on either side. The light of the fire didn't quite reach there.

Ayala settled a can on the cairn and broke open a pack. "Coffee, anyone?" Harry and Farley nodded. Chakotay turned to Baxter.

"What is it safe to give Boylan? Just water, or did you give him something mild enough that he can have soup - or what passes for soup in these packs?"

Baxter looked over at Boylan; he was a little more comfortable now, settled on a bed of leaves and blankets, and seemed warmer for it. "Alex, what do you feel up to having? You should be ok with soup if you want it."

Boylan coughed quietly and his voice was drowsy. "How about macaroni and cheese? That's what I'd really like. God I was looking forward to it ..." His voice trailed off as the small amount of light coming from the entrance suddenly dimmed. They all turned to look, each abruptly alert. Chakotay moved forward slowly towards the entrance, motioning the others to stay behind.

From the side of the entrance, he peered out. The darkness within the cavern would shield him from anyone looking towards them but still, he took no chances.

There was nothing immediately to be seen; just a darkened landscape immediately in front of them and light beyond as though a cloud had passed over the sun. Then Chakotay froze; the Sernaix ship came into view. The shadow had been the ship, hovering above the cliff. It looped off now, moving slowly as though looking for something.

Chakotay let out a long-held breath. It looked as though the ship hadn't spotted the Flyer, or them. He watched cautiously though, waiting to see whether they had left anyone behind to investigate further. The ship was still moving slowly in the distance.

Chakotay looked back at the others; Boylan had fallen asleep, for which he was grateful. The others stood, phasers ready, just behind him. He shook his head. "It's the Sernaix, though it doesn't look as if they know we're here. That was just the ship's shadow." He turned back to check on the Sernaix; the ship was circling back slowly. From this distance, he couldn't tell whether the Sernaix had found the area where they'd been gathering supplies. He chewed his lip as he tried to recall whether they'd left anything behind when they cleared out. He thought not, standard procedure was to leave absolutely nothing but, with the need to get Boylan to medical attention, he couldn't be absolutely certain.

The black ship hovered lazily, casting a dark shadow on the ground. From here, it looked as though the visuals that Voyager had received were accurate - it was a dark, matte black. Little reflection came from it; it seemed only to absorb light. There were no marks on it from Voyager's phasers - Chakotay wondered whether it had in fact been hit. It was hard to see any details though; the ship hung between him and the sun, and it was impossible to see anything on the shadowed underside that faced him.

Chakotay looked back again at the team; the tension was clear, as they waited for him to make a decision. He pulled back from the entrance. "We'll wait here. They're not behaving as though they've seen us, so we're going to have to go with that for now. We can't afford to attract their attention by leaving."

They settled back around the fire, still tense. No-one spoke, and everyone jumped when a small pocket of moss on one of the rocks in the fire burst in the heat. Ayala pulled the coffee can off the fire in silence, handing round mugs of the bitter drink.

Harry was the first to speak, though he still kept his gaze steadily fastened on the entrance. "I wish Neelix were here," he said unexpectedly. "He'd almost got coffee right."

The idle comment provoked soft, but slightly hysterical, laughter from Farley and Baxter. Chakotay looked at them in some concern; this situation wasn't going to help already the already stressed crewmen. Both had performed well in the Delta Quadrant but this ... place ... hadn't even the meager security of the Delta Quadrant. At least there, as Harry had said, they'd known where they were and which way was home.

Voyager steadied in the shadow of an asteroid; the belt was relatively clear, and little in the way of fancy flying had been needed. Janeway felt herself relax, just a little. They had had the Sernaix only on visual sensors, and - for now - it looked as though they were clear. Of course, that probably meant that they were investigating the planet; the thought gave her a renewed headache but she had little time for that. Another call from Astrometrics dragged her thoughts from the away team to the ship. Besides, Chakotay was more than capable of looking after his team. If he wasn't, then he deserved his own accusations of her lack of trust.

"I'm on my way, Seven," she acknowledged, heading once more for the turbolift.

Astrometrics was as cool and dark as ever; only Icheb and Seven remained at the consoles. "Report," Janeway requested as she entered.

"Captain. Icheb has found something interesting," began Seven. Janeway turned to the young man.

"What is it, Icheb?" she asked, over-riding Seven's attempt to make the explanation herself. Icheb looked back at Seven a little uncertainly, but then began to explain.

"Captain, I was checking the luminosity function for the halo - as you suggested." Janeway nodded. "Well, while it was running I checked the spectral readings we were getting more widely - just to cross check against the overall luminosity. There's an anomaly there, I'm not sure why we didn't pick it up before ..." His voice died away a little. Janeway just shook her head.

"There's no point in conducting a post-mortem on what we should and shouldn't have picked up by now - we can look at it later to see if there's anything we need to change in procedures. What was it?"

"The redshift, Captain - if you look here," he entered some commands on the console, bringing up a series of graphs and iterations on the screen. "I've been checking the base redshift for everything the sensors have picked up, using helium as the reference, and the readings are strange. They're too low, especially the reading on this quasar that the sensors have just picked up. That's what made me look at the base shift for everything else we've found - the speed for the quasar should be appear to be more than light speed, but it isn't even very close to light speed." Janeway looked up at the screen as he spoke, nodding.

"You're right - there's nothing that appears to be over the speed of light, as you'd expect. Everything is sublight speed - mostly very sublight speed. It's as if there's no cosmological redshift effect," she mused, staring at the numbers and the rolling charts ahead.

"That's what I thought, Captain," said Icheb. "The figures are all consistent with the Doppler effect from the relative motion to us alone - I've run some tests on the star we just passed, and extrapolating from that, there's only relative motion here. That's all we're seeing - there is no cosmological redshift, no apparent increase in velocity, which we would expect if there was any lengthening of the frequency from the expansion of space-time."

"How is that possible?" said Janeway, incredulous at the readings being raised, and the answers being drawn.

"I'm not sure," Icheb answered, carefully, "unless the universe isn't expanding." Janeway looked around, staring at him.

"That's impossible," she said. "How can ... you can't have a static universe. It just doesn't make sense. Either it's expanding, or contracting - the steady-state universe theory was discredited over 400 years ago. You can't seriously mean we've found a point in space where there is no expansion? Seven, you mentioned a problem with the sensors earlier, could this be the result of it?"

Seven shook her head. "No, Captain. You were correct when you surmised that the sensors only needed fine calibration; they are more than adequate to check this sort of data."

"Which does give rise to the question why we didn't see it before," said Janeway, wrapping her arms around her as she paced the room. "No matter, we didn't. Too obvious to run a check for, I suppose - something you take for granted. Do we have any blue-shift?" she asked.

"More than you'd expect," answered Icheb, "but there's nothing coming towards us with anything other than relative motion. Captain, there is nothing in this data to indicate that space is being stretched or contracted around us at all. It's just ... there. We're moving within it, and everything else is moving, but the space itself just is. There's no expansion, no contraction - it's just static." Icheb sounded as puzzled as Janeway looked.

"A static universe - you mean, we're in a place where Einstein's General Law of Relativity applies without modification? If we weren't stuck in it, I'd find it fascinating," said Janeway wryly. "Let me think - what else would reduce the redshift?. Temperature

... what's the vacuum temperature out there - are you sure it's not just that we're passing through something less dense ... no, of course not. That would only be local." She paced the floor again, as Icheb and Seven watched the screen redisplay the results they'd calculated.

Eventually she stopped, and looked back up. "Well, it's one more mystery to add to the rest. A static universe; how much more complicated can this get? No, don't answer that; I really don't want to know! Just out of curiosity, what's the background radiation level? Is there any indication that this started with a singularity?"

Icheb checked the readings again. "Less than 1 Kelvin, Captain. It should be around 3 Kelvin ..." He stopped as Janeway waved him to silence, pacing again.

"It is static ... this goes against everything we know. How ..?" Kathryn shook her head. "A static universe, no expansion, almost no radiation."

Seven spoke up at last. "It is not entirely inconsistent with some of the early grand unification theories, Captain." Janeway stopped and looked at her. "Some of the early theories, four hundred years ago or so, postulated that a series of bubble universes developed in a false vacuum during an explosive inflationary period of the universe. The theory was never entirely disproved."

"No ..." Janeway drew the word out slowly, "you're right, it wasn't. There was some suggestion that the different bubbles would have different physical absolutes - not that any of this helps much. Was there any theory of an interaction between the bubbles?"

"It was theorized that the bubbles could merge, establishing monopoles where conflicting Higgs' fields met. The theory was not developed enough to establish whether there would be a connection between two bubbles before they merged though," replied Seven.

"Which gets us no closer to home. Seven, Icheb, can you work on this? I'm not sure I want to accept the idea that we've been thrown by a subspace mine into another bubble universe separated from our own by a primordial false vacuum - subspace is strange, but not that strange."

Tuvok's voice interrupted her. "Captain, the Sernaix seem to be moving away from the planet."

"Has there been any indication that they've fired on the team?"

"No, there have been no energy discharges on the planet that we have been able to ascertain. The Sernaix are not moving with any great speed, but they are moving away - out of the orbital elliptic. It would appear, Captain, that they have given up looking for us here."

"Understood. I'll come back up to the bridge. Janeway out." Janeway sighed with relief; at least something was apparently working in their favor. She left Icheb and Seven working steadily in Astrometrics, untangling the puzzles that had been thrown up in the last few weeks.

Chakotay got up to look through the entrance again; the Sernaix were nowhere to be seen. No shadow fell over them, and there was no sign of the ship in the distance. He strained to hear anything, anything that might indicate whether the ship was still around. All he could hear were the quiet whispers of conversation behind him and the soft whistle of the wind around the cliff; otherwise, silence.

He looked back again, into the cavern. Ayala was reheating the rocks, building up the heat in the cavern again. Chakotay momentarily considered whether to tell him to stop, whether the Sernaix could sense the energy of the phaser. But, then again, they apparently hadn't spotted their life signs or the Flyer - perhaps the cliffs would shield the phaser's energy signature as well. His thoughts were suddenly distracted by something on the cavern wall, behind Ayala to the left. The light from the phaser picked out some markings on the wall there. Chakotay took a last, quick, look from the entrance to check the area was clear of the Sernaix. It was, for now.

He crossed the cavern rapidly, trying to get a fix on where he'd seen the lettering; Ayala had stopped the phaser and the light was fading back to the red glow of the fire. The others turned to look back to the entrance, phasers drawn again as they assumed he was running from something. "No, no, there's nothing out there. But here - Harry, throw me one of those lights - there's something on the wall in here." Harry tossed over one of the wrist lights which they'd taken off.

Chakotay snapped the light round his wrist and turned it on; a narrow beam lanced out from above the back of his hand and he played it across the wall some distance over his head. Up above, thrown into relief by the white light, were a series of markings. He could just reach them, and stretched his arm up to trace the indentations scored in the rock. They were clean, sharp edges. Just enough moss clung to them to reassure him that they hadn't been made recently.

"Harry, Ayala, can one of you get over here with a tricorder - I want to get a copy of these."

Harry came over, scanning the area lit by Chakotay's wrist light. "Are they Sernaix, do you think?" he asked, a tinge of nerves in his voice. The idea that the Sernaix might be familiar with the cavern in which they stood was disturbing.

"No idea," said Chakotay over his shoulder. "There aren't any marking on the ship to compare them with; can't say it looks much like anything on the uniform of the one we saw on the viewscreen earlier. Assuming that was a uniform he was wearing. They seem more inclined towards curves, and these are all straight lines and points." The markings seemed almost to be a type of cuneiform, etched simple writing. The points were possibly random, although Chakotay was reminded of the markings on his medicine wheel. Those depicted the stars in the northern hemisphere above Dorvan V; perhaps these were something similar - a star map.

"Harry, does this look like any of the star patterns we've been looking at since we got here?" Harry looked up again at the markings, then scrolled through the collected information on his tricorder.

"It's hard to say, Commander. There's no immediate resemblance but I'm not completely familiar with them yet - I'll check it when we get back."

"Hmm. Whatever they are, they're definitely not random." Chakotay traced the lines again, shifting the patterns in his mind, trying to find a basis for comparison. Abruptly, he realized one of the lines continued much further down than the others, curving inwards sharply at the end. He looked more closely at it, his head slightly to one side as something tugged at his memory. "This is the cliff - outside," he said, turning to Harry. "The profile is the same - there are markings out along this, around the perimeter of the sensor hole. Check with the records on the tricorder - if we have them. I think this is tracing out the stable area here, around the cliff. Do we have anything to check it against?"

Harry checked the tricorder, scrolling through the records. "There's something sketchy here - it's not the main set of readings that we took, but it does look like it. Here ..." he passed over the tricorder, "that looks like the same curve there - and it follows this line."

The two stood looking from the wall to the tricorder for a short while, comparing the readings and the markings. "So," said Harry at last, "it looks like we're not the only ones who found this - I wonder why they marked it here? Outlining a stable tectonic area ..."

"It's not that surprising - perhaps it's there to reassure anyone who got here that the cavern wasn't about to fall in on them. I want to get the markings run through the computer when we get back - see if it's translatable." Harry nodded, checking he'd got the markings down in detail.

Chakotay moved away from the wall, musing over the discovery as he headed for the entrance. The view was still clear; nothing unusual marred the sky. Turning to the others, he said, "I'm going to check on the Flyer, and see if I can get a better view. Stay here; I'll be back shortly."

He left the entrance to the cave at a half-run, keeping to the walls of the overhang as he edged round to the Flyer. He reached up as he got to the side of the ship, quietly repeating an access code to override the lockout they'd place on her when they left. The ramp let down, silently, and he headed for the helm. A quick playback of the visual sensors he'd left running showed nothing more than he'd seen already - the shadow, then the slow circling glide away of the Sernaix ship. He checked the visuals again - nothing; he would need to check outside, beyond the sensor hole, before he could have any degree of certainty that it was safe.

He took out his phaser, holding it loosely. He doubted very much whether it would offer any form of protection if the Sernaix were still around but, still, it was worth a try. He left the Flyer again, re-engaging the lockout as he left. Cautiously - very cautiously - he slid around to the exposed side of the ship. The cliff extended out further over her, and he left the sanctuary of the shadows slowly. There was nothing ahead, so he concentrated on peering upwards and outwards, hoping not to see a shadow or the unyielding blackness of the ship itself against the walls of the cliff above.

He exhaled with relief when he emerged, blinking slightly, into the sunlight. Nothing. There was no sign of the Sernaix anywhere.

On the holodeck, Tom and Naomi were still skimming through the programs as Miral grew fussier. At last Tom stopped the scroll. "This one," he said, pointing to a line. Naomi peered a little closer.

"Route 1?" she asked. "What's that?"

"The obvious answer," said Tom, laughing. "I should have thought of it before - I've read about it often enough. Computer, run program Route 1, authorization Paris-alpha-731-sigma."

The silver grid of the holodeck shimmered out again, to be replaced by a dusty landscape. Nearby, the hard blacktop of a road unfurled to the horizon. In the dust, just off the road, sat a vehicle.

"What is it?" asked Naomi, looking at the machine with curiosity. She ran a finger down a long fin.

"A 1966 Cadillac DeVille convertible," said Tom with pride. The car shimmered in the late afternoon sun, the black paintwork reflecting the hills in the far distance. The red leather interior glowed faintly, picking up the red of the sun. "The perfect car for an afternoon drive. I read somewhere that one sure way to calm a baby down was to take it for a drive - let's try it! He looked up for a moment. "Computer, install a ... uh ... baby seat in the front seat. Backward facing, strapped in."

"Acknowledged." A small chair appeared in the front seat, covered with a pattern in primary colors that made Tom's eyes water.

"Computer, change the pattern of the baby seat to red - the same color as the car seats."

"Acknowledged."

"That's better," grinned Tom. Naomi laughed.

"You wear shirts brighter than that, why were you complaining?"

"I don't wear shirts that clash so badly with my surroundings. Well, not often anyway - and since when are you Voyager's fashion critic, hmm?" teased Tom.

Naomi just grinned again. "I listen to what people say. It's interesting."

"I'll bet it is," muttered Tom.

"So, where are we and what is a ... whatever you said this was?" asked Naomi, gesturing to the car.

"It's a convertible car - a twentieth century ground transport vehicle, with no roof. Perfect for days like this, and we're on Earth, in a place called California in the United States. We're about 160 kilometers from San Francisco - you know, where Starfleet Academy

is?" Naomi nodded. "Ok, well, we're on Route 1, one of the old state roads that people used to get from one place to another in cars. Most cars weren't suited to cross-country terrain, so they built roads to make it easier to drive. This is one of those - it runs along the western coast of California. Get in, we'll drive. You sit in the back; we have the safeties on, so you don't need to do up your seatbelt - besides, if I remember this program correctly, there aren't any other cars around."

"What was the safety belt for?" asked Naomi, touching the black webbing strap at the side of the seat as Tom boosted her over the edge and into the car. Tom busied himself strapping a still-fussing Miral into the baby seat and spoke over his shoulder.

"People used it to secure themselves - in case of accidents. With a lot of cars on the road - and people - sometimes the cars collided. You could get badly hurt, but the belt stopped you from being thrown about too much."

"We could do with them on the ship sometimes," said Naomi, recalling a few bumps and bruises she'd received in some of the ship's more energetic encounters.

Tom laughed. "That's not a bad idea. Right, Miral, that's you strapped in - I don't want you rolling off the seat, safeties or no safeties. Shush - stop squalling, we're about to get going. Yes, yes, I know you want to be held but this is better, I promise. Well, maybe not better but different enough to be interesting."

Tom walked around the car and hopped into the driver's seat. He made a few adjustments to the seat and the mirrors, wondering who it was that had last driven, then turned the engine over. The car caught immediately and revved smoothly in response to his touch on the throttle. He released the handbrake, shifted gears into first and then pulled away with a moment's relief that he hadn't lost his touch with stick-shift cars.

Naomi grinned with delight as the wind flipped around the car, playing with her hair. "This is fun! And Miral likes it too!" she exclaimed with glee. Tom looked down at his daughter - she had finally stopped fussing and was, instead, looking about her with wide-eyed astonishment and what he would swear was a smile on her face. Relief coursed through him; finally, something that caught her attention and seemed to stop whatever was bothering her. It was no hardship to keep driving, either.

"Isn't it just?" Tom agreed. "That's Monterey behind us - we're going south, towards Big Sur. If you're lucky, we might see some whales feeding in the ocean as we go; this is one of their migratory feeding grounds."

"Whales?" asked Naomi, puzzled. "Like the humpback whales? Mom said something about them having nearly died out on Earth, but that they came back a hundred years ago. Something like that."

"Yes, that's right - Captain Kirk brought two back to Earth. Back in the twentieth century there were still quite a lot around, although they were already endangered."

"I wonder how they felt - those two that came back to Earth." Naomi's voice was quiet and Tom twisted back to look at her.

"I'm sure they were fine," he said, "why?"

Naomi sighed a little. "I - well, I suppose I'm feeling guilty. Everyone's upset that we didn't get home, but I'm ... I'm not. Is that wrong?"

"No, of course it's not wrong - why didn't you want to go home?"

"Because I am home. I don't know Earth - and Mom was getting excited about seeing my father again and I didn't even know if he'll like me, but I didn't want to tell Mom because I didn't want to upset her and she would probably have thought I was just being a silly kid and ..."

Tom stopped the car and turned in his seat. "Shush - you're not just being a silly kid. It's a big change, so of course you'd be nervous about meeting your father, and about Earth. Voyager is home, to many of us, and Earth is so completely different that - well, that I doubt very many of us really think of it as home any more. Certainly to me, and B'Elanna, Voyager is home. Our family is here, just as yours is - and believe me, I was at least as nervous about meeting my father as you were about meeting yours." Naomi looked up.

"You were? Why? You knew your dad."

"It's a long story, but in a lot of ways I didn't - just think of your dad as a new friend, once we get back to Earth. It'll fall into place, I'm sure it will - you know how Neelix was your friend?" Naomi nodded. "Well, think of your father as a friend like Neelix was. They aren't the same people, but you can act like they are."

"I miss Neelix," said Naomi. She seemed a little less preoccupied with the problems of home and her father, though.

"I think we all miss him - and we could certainly do with him right now; I'm sure he would have had a thousand suggestions for how we could cheer up Miral!" laughed Tom. Naomi grinned at him.

"This one worked, though - she's quiet. Oops," said Naomi. She'd spoken too soon, as Miral chose that moment to start crying again, in protest at the fact that they hadn't moved for a while.

"Okay, honey, we're moving - let me just get her started!" He teased his daughter, pulling a face at her while he started the car up again. Once back on the road, Miral's cries stopped as abruptly as they had before and Tom grinned, heading the car down the road with the sun sinking slowly towards the ocean to their right.

Chakotay brought the Flyer back down, easing it close to the cliff. Harry peered out of the cavern entrance, running towards the ship as the ramp lowered.

"Any sign of them, Commander?" he asked.

"No, looks like they're gone - at least for now. Nothing from Voyager, and I don't want to raise them on the comm - I'd rather wait for them to let me know it's clear. If the Sernaix

have found them, I don't want to give them a comlink trace to follow. I've left the ship out far enough so that she's not blanketed this time. We'll hear them if they -" he stopped, listening intently.

A crackle in the cabin was followed by Janeway's voice. "Voyager to the Delta Flyer, report."

Chakotay grinned at Harry. "Speak of the devil," he said as he moved back to the helm. Harry shook his head and smiled, pleased to hear from Voyager at last. "Delta Flyer, go ahead Voyager. I take it we're clear of the Sernaix."

"They've left the system - did you encounter them at all?" came the rapid reply.

"They poked around, but that was all. We'll be up as soon as we can get Boylan on board -"

Janeway cut off Chakotay's words again. "No need, Commander. Engineering have one of our transporters working, we'll beam him aboard with the minerals you've got so far. The rest of you can stay down there and get the rest - we'll do what we can to assist with the sensors to locate the veins you need, I'd rather not stay around here too long. Voyager out."

Both Harry and Chakotay blinked at the stream of commands and the abrupt end of the communication. Chakotay recovered and turned to Harry. "Well, Harry, it looks like we've got our orders. Get Baxter and Ayala to bring Boylan out here where the transporters can get at him."

Harry moved off, and Chakotay busied himself at the helm. A stream of information was coming over the link already; Voyager had switched their sensors back to examine the planet more closely. Chakotay's combadge signaled an incoming message.

"Commander, I would prefer it if you would ensure that all mining operations are completed as quickly as possible," Seven's voice echoed in the ship. "The sensors have been diverted from Astrometrics, and it is crucial that we restore their function as soon as possible if we are to make any progress with determining our location."

"Understood, Seven," said Chakotay wearily. He wasn't in the mood to get caught between Seven and Janeway's egos right now, and held back from pointing out that he hadn't exactly requested that the sensors be diverted. He felt like suggesting that, if she was at a loose end right now, she come down and help them get the material mined. He wasn't sure he wanted her company, though - for a number of reasons, not least of which was that he had quite enough problems with the Captain already, and wasn't prepared to give her more fuel for her misunderstandings. A thought occurred to him.

"Seven, I'm sending up some information on some markings we found here in a cave - maybe they'll be useful. Chakotay out." He uploaded the tricorder information; even if it wasn't useful, perhaps it would keep her quiet for a while.

Engineering was finally quiet; the shields were up - the armor was still not functioning - and they had a transporter working. The warp core was behaving itself, if rather low on dilithium. Everything that could be fixed was, at least until they had more material to work with. B'Elanna took advantage of the quiet to go looking for Tom and Miral - she hadn't heard from Tom in a while and she was wondering how he was coping now.

"Computer, where is Tom Paris?"

"Lieutenant Paris is in Holodeck One."

Well, that wasn't entirely surprising. B'Elanna wondered what Tom was corrupting Miral with now - he surely wasn't trying to teach her to play pool already? She grinned at the idea, and set off for the holodeck.

The doors opened onto a late afternoon scene; an ocean ambled into low tide to her left and, slowing before her, was one of Tom's beloved cars. She stepped to the side and he pulled up by her.

"Come to join us?" he asked, with a lazy smile. Naomi grinned at her.

"We've been whale watching," she said excitedly. "And look - Miral's gone to sleep!"

B'Elanna blinked at that piece of news, and looked a little more closely at the bundle on the seat on Tom's right hand side. Miral was quiet, eyes tightly closed and an impossibly small fist bunched by her mouth.

"Oh Tom ... thank you. Oh, sweetheart," she whispered, leaning across Tom to the baby, "you look adorable."

From the back seat, Naomi bounced happily. "Come and sit here, it's fun."

"Tom's driving?" B'Elanna looked at her husband and grinned. "Yes, I'm sure it's fun ... what was the speed limit at this time, Tom, hmm?"

Tom shrugged and smiled. "Doesn't matter - no policemen in this simulation. Besides, it's been too nice a night to go tearing down the highway." B'Elanna laughed.

"Why not - they'll let me know when the mining's finished. I've got a little time to spare." She was about to get into the car when Naomi's combadge chirped, and Sam Wildman spoke.

"Naomi, it's time to come home - I've got dinner ready here. Tom, thank you for looking after her."

"My pleasure, Sam, she's been good company."

Naomi leant over to say goodbye to Miral, very carefully brushing a finger against the infant's clenched fist. "Bye Miral, I'll see you soon." She grinned up at Tom and B'Elanna. "Thanks! This has been fun!" She jumped over the side of the car, to Tom's amusement, and shot out of the holodeck at a half-run, ready to slow up as soon as anyone looked like they were going to chastise her for running.

The doors closed behind her, shutting out the corridor and restoring the peace of a quiet California sunset. B'Elanna leant down to kiss Tom. "Hello," she murmured. Tom raised his arm and tugged gently on the back of her neck, pulling her down a little into his kiss.

"Hello yourself."

"Mmmm. Peace and quiet. Just the three of us, and none of us are yelling. I like that," said B'Elanna softly. She wasn't willing to risk waking Miral. Tom laughed, equally quietly, then shifted his hand to B'Elanna's waist.

"Here, get in," he popped the door open. "You can sit on my lap." He tried for a leer, but managed only a wistfully tired smile. B'Elanna smiled a little more widely; he looked adorable. Tired, ruffled, and one hand spread over his daughter, a finger held tightly in her clenched palm.

B'Elanna slid onto his legs, leaning back on the steering wheel. Not wildly comfortable, but she couldn't afford the luxury of sleep right now and, anyway, she needed to be able to see Miral as well. Something occurred to her. "When did she last eat? I had to take a break for a moment a couple of hours ago and top up the supply - was she okay with replicated milk?"

Tom shifted B'Elanna slightly, his leg slightly sore from driving; it used muscles he didn't often exercise at Voyager's helm. "She was fine - there was some left from earlier anyway, she wasn't all that hungry then. I used it as a pattern for the replicator."

"Good. So," asked B'Elanna, yawning, "what did you and Naomi talk about? Are you getting in some practice at talking to children so that you know how to deal with Miral?"

Tom smiled. "Something like that - Naomi wanted to have some practice looking after Miral; she wants to babysit. At the rate she's growing, it won't be long before she's able to, either. I think she also needed to just talk to someone - she was worried about the fact that he wasn't looking forward to getting home, and seeing her father - I think I managed to reassure her, but I was wondering whether I ought to let Sam know. I think she's feeling a bit guilty about being relieved when almost everyone else is disappointed. I have to say, I know how she feels."

B'Elanna looked off into the distance, thinking. "Well, it doesn't look like we're getting home any time soon but, yes, maybe we should tell Sam. The Captain's pulled enough peculiar rabbits out of equally unlikely hats in the past, so maybe we'll be home tomorrow. You never know. And you're infecting me with ancient weird expressions! Rabbits out of hats ... " She laughed and swatted at Tom. "Come on, Flyboy, let me into the back seat and drive!"

Tom smiled at her laughter and let her clamber over to the back seat, assisting with a hand on her thigh - and getting another swat and a gurgle of laughter in return. He started the car up and set off again, finding B'Elanna hanging over the seat next to him, looking down at Miral. "She is gorgeous, isn't she?" murmured B'Elanna, suddenly thrilled all over again with her daughter.

"Mmm, she is," said Tom, looking at B'Elanna.

"The Delta Flyer is secure in the shuttlebay. Chakotay out." Janeway stood in the middle of the bridge, looking down at the planet below as Chakotay cut the link. At the tactical station, Tuvok was scanning for signs of the Sernaix; they had picked up a faint trail, not unlike a warp trail, and he was trying to track it. In the meantime, the Captain had a decision to make about which direction they would head in.

She reviewed the information Seven had passed to her earlier; she was still not quite sure she believed that they were in a static universe, but every test they could think of confirmed it. The odd star alignment that Chakotay and Harry had found etched in the cave on the planet was, perhaps, more immediately useful. Seven had determined that the markings coincided with a group of stars, around 200 light years away, if viewed from an angle at 47 degrees to the galactic elliptic.

Judging by the brief report she'd just had from Chakotay, it seemed unlikely that the Sernaix had made the markings - and their trail pointed away from that area of space. Then again, 200 light years was a long way. Unless they had engines far beyond Voyager's capabilities they would be too far away for the Sernaix to inevitably take a direct route home - and they hadn't seemed that much faster in battle. But then again, she thought wryly, ships being stranded far from home weren't as uncommon as she'd like.

Ensign Jenkins was at the helm; Janeway wondered idly how Paris was doing with Miral.

The ensign looked round. "Any particular direction you want me to take us in, Captain?" she asked.

She thought again; maybe it was worth heading in the direction of that star group. She had no better idea and, in its favor, it was away from the Sernaix - that group of them, at least. She nodded and looked at Jenkins.

"Set a course - bearing 000, mark 47. Warp two, Ensign. I'd prefer not to stress the engines too much right now."

Janeway turned towards her chair, then paused. "Mr. Tuvok, you have the bridge. I'll be in my ready room."

"Yes, Captain." Tuvok nodded an acknowledgement and moved down from the security station as Janeway disappeared through the doors of the ready room.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 55011.7, We've been caught here - wherever here is - for ten days now; so far I've lost one crew member and almost lost another six; not to mention all those lost from the Pleiades on the way here. Is that some sort of record? It is ironic that, in returning us to the Alpha Quadrant to save the lives of 20-odd crew, the Admiral has been indirectly responsible of the deaths of many more. Still, it seems I've always chosen the complicated route - this is no exception; just a rather unexpected

result of the decision I took to fire on the Caretaker's array. I had, stupidly, allowed myself to hope that the worst of the consequences of that decision were behind me.

The crew isn't avoiding me. Yet. It seems only a matter of time; my first officer is certainly not going out of his way to talk to me, but that's to be expected. What else did he expect me to do? His track record is such that it didn't seem unreasonable to expect him to go straight into the mouth of a Cardassian hell to retrieve Seven. There's something odd there, though, something not quite right between the two of them. I'll leave them to work it out, I haven't the time to worry about it now.

The situation we're in is quite enough to worry over. The suggestion that we're caught in some static bubble universe, confirmation of an obscure four hundred year old theory, seems almost too much to take. It is too much to take. The sensor readings seem like those for a model designed by a failing first-year astrophysics student - one so poor that he's forgotten to account for standard redshift, something even ten-year-olds seem to be taught about. A nightmare.

A nightmare on top of another nightmare; the Sernaix. Like something out of a grandmother's fairytales, the Grimm variety. It's hard not to assess them on appearance alone, but their subsequent actions only confirmed every cultural prejudice that flared when I saw them. Why did they attack? Why didn't they see the team on the planet - and what are their shields made of? Even the armor the Admiral brought back doesn't have that capacity. Tuvok is working on it, but I don't hold out much hope of an answer right now. One crew member dead - from the Pleiades, I hadn't even had a chance to meet him yet. One too many, and it's my decisions that killed him - my decision at the array, my decision twenty-three years from now in a future that will no longer happen.

Nightmares. I've been having the oddest of dreams lately; the doctor has mentioned in a briefing that others are experiencing the same thing. It seems to be a stress reaction. That would be appropriate. The dreams leave me wondering when Q will appear - it seems to be one of the characters from his Civil War re-enactment; a woman standing on a balcony. I wake up and the first thing I do is look for him to appear. I think, now, I'd actually be grateful to see that white flash of light and his arrogant expression. It would certainly explain all of this much better than anyone of us could.

End log.

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