



Episode 8-5 - Magpie

By: Abby (Abismith@btinternet.com)

Naomi Wildman was BORED.

Part of her mind was vaguely aware that Icheb was trying to tell her something about some guy called Schroedinger, who apparently had an equation of some sort, which was very important in something called wave mechanics. However, at that precise moment she was more interested in feeding leola root to Ratty, who was sitting up in her lap, nibbling daintily at the morsel he held in his forepaws.

The introduction of Ratty to the crew, or at least to the important members of it, had been a bit nerve-wracking.

Mom had been... well... Mom about it. She'd looked a little worried, and said that if Commander Chakotay had said it was all right to keep him, then she supposed that it was. Then she told that Naomi to keep him in a cage, and to clean it every week, and not to let him get out, and to make certain that he had enough to drink and to eat, and that meant asking Chell before she took food from the kitchens....

And then she'd kissed Naomi on the head, sighed, and promised her an extra replicator ration per week, if she looked after Ratty properly.

The doctor had snorted at the sight of the little furry creature, and muttered something about being a doctor not a veterinarian. The doctor was always muttering about something though so Naomi hadn't taken much notice of him. Eventually he had pronounced Ratty free from disease, and ready to join the crew.

Then she had had to write her report for Tuvok as Commander Chakotay had told her. She had swallowed a bit at that. Naomi was secretly a little frightened of Tuvok - because he never smiled - not even at Neelix's funniest jokes, and she didn't want her report to have anything wrong in it. She had spent hours working on it, making sure that she had all the proper words and that they were spelled right. He hadn't said anything to her so she supposed that he had been OK with it.

Seven, the ex-Borg, had simply smiled slightly and raised an eyebrow. Naomi had been half-expecting her to comment that pets were irrelevant, but she just said that Ratty would assist Naomi in her studies of animal behavior.

Naomi glanced sadly at the empty regeneration alcove in the cargo bay. She had hardly seen anything of Seven since they had arrived here.... wherever here was. She missed Neelix, and Seven was her other best friend. But Seven had been busy in Astrometrics, and, when Naomi had come across her, she had seemed to be, well, thinking of something else. Naomi had once plucked up the courage to ask her about it, but Seven

had just said that she "would not understand". Naomi thought that it was probably something to do with Earth. Having lived all her life on Voyager, she truly did not understand why the crew wanted to get to Earth so badly, but she knew that it was making her mom sad, so she had left Seven alone.

Only Captain Janeway had yet to meet Ratty. She had heard her mom saying nobody had seen much of the captain at all lately. Naomi thought that she was probably busy with something important, and she wondered if she should take Ratty to see the captain. The captain always liked to meet new crew.

A movement caught her attention. Ratty had finished his leola root and had darted into his new cage, which was sitting, open, on the floor in front of her. He poked his nose into the water bowl and began to drink.

Naomi was pleased with the cage. With all the crew occupied in either Engineering or Astrometrics no one had been around to give her much advice so she had done the best she could with the ship's database. In the end she had chosen an old fashioned design - one with mechanical catches - because it had appealed to her. It was large, which was what Commander Chakotay had said. And it certainly seemed secure enough. She sometimes had a little trouble with the catches herself, so she couldn't imagine Ratty getting out.

Ratty finished his drink, and sat up on his hind paws, cleaning his whiskers. His beady black eyes were fixed squarely on Naomi. She made a small clicking sound with her tongue, and to her joy Ratty climbed up on to her lap again. She gave him another piece of leola root as a reward.

"Naomi Wildman. You are inattentive to your studies." Icheb's voice broke into her daydreaming.

Naomi did not have an older brother, but if she did, she knew that he would sound just like Icheb. His voice had that tone of exasperation mixed with superiority that elder brothers of every species had used since the beginning of time. It was probably one of those universal constants that he was always going on about - like the speed of light. On top of his work in Astrometrics Icheb had been assigned to tutor Naomi, and he took his duties seriously. Very seriously.

"I am listening, Icheb, honest, but look... Ratty can come when he's called."

"Training rodents is irrelevant," replied Icheb repressively. "If you have been paying attention, you will be able to explain the lesson to me."

Naomi cast her mind around for some clue as to what Icheb had been saying. What was it... Schroedinger..... waves.....

Seven's arrival in the cargo bay saved her the need for an immediate reply. The blonde woman surveyed the two of them, and her gaze rested briefly on Ratty. Her eyebrows raised but she made no other comment. Addressing Icheb, she came straight to the point:

"Your presence is necessary in Astrometrics. Scans have picked up what appears to be a planetary debris field, or a cluster of small asteroids. You are required to perform a detailed analysis for the captain."

Icheb looked as if he were going to protest. Then he said, in a slightly sulky tone "It would be more efficient to complete the lesson before going to Astrometrics."

"It will be a useful exercise for you, as your entrance to Starfleet Academy appears to have been somewhat delayed."

Icheb's expression reminded Naomi of the one she always wore when her mom sent her to tidy her room. It was odd how he was bossy one minute, and then sulking the next. Maybe it was a phase, like her mom was always saying about her. Personally, she was just grateful that fate, in the shape of Seven, appeared to have rescued her from Schroedinger for the time being.

Or maybe not. With a start Naomi realized what Seven had just added:

"Naomi Wildman may accompany you to Astrometrics and continue her studies there. She may benefit from some practical application of her lessons."

"But Seven...." It was Naomi's turn to protest.

"I will shortly need to regenerate," stated the ex-drone firmly, "and I require silence in which to do that. You would not be allowed to remain here in any event. I suggest that you return your... pet... to its cage, and continue with your studies in Astrometrics."

Naomi did not dare to protest any more. She hurriedly scooped up Ratty and bundled him into his cage, where he promptly burrowed under a nest of bedding. Then she obediently followed Icheb out of the cargo bay.

Seven sighed, and positioned herself in her alcove. She closed her eyes and let her regeneration cycle begin.

From under the pile of bedding, a nose appeared, followed by a set of whiskers and then a full head. Ratty looked around and sniffed the air. He fixed his glittering eyes on Seven. As she hadn't moved in a long time it seemed safe enough for him to come out. He crept to investigate the door of the cage. In her haste Naomi had only half-latched it. Ratty gave it a good sniff, and poked at it with his nose. He explored it a little with surprisingly dexterous forepaws, and then nudged it with his head. After some patient work the little creature managed to disengage the catch. The door swung open.

Ratty slipped out of the cage and disappeared behind a storage container.

Kathryn Janeway adjusted the collar of her turtleneck again. It wasn't that it was folded in, or crumpled, or even uncomfortable, really. It was just one more ritual, one more action that delayed her departure for the bridge. She studied herself in the mirror. She looked tired, she thought. Tired and worn down and old. She ran her hands through her hair, disarranging it. Now it needed brushing again. More delay. Another 5 minutes before she had to begin the daily walk to the turbolift, to take the trip to deck 1, to walk on to the bridge to greet her crew as if she knew what the hell she was doing.

At least she had managed to overcome her desire to run and hide. She glanced around her quarters. The empty coffee mugs had been recycled, the haphazard piles of clothing tidied away. And she had got through all of her PADDs, which were now neatly stacked up on the side of her desk, waiting to accompany her to the bridge. Her quarters now looked as if a functioning human being lived there. Someone who had some degree of control over her life. Or at least over her cleaning, she thought ruefully, reaching for the hairbrush.

How was the crew really going to react to this latest mishap, she wondered as she brushed her hair. At the moment they were all task orientated - repair the ship's systems,

locate Voyager's position, analyze the nature of space. But after that had been done? Then what?

This was not the same crew that had formed in the Delta Quadrant seven years ago. They were older, and wiser, and harder. Then they had started their journey with enthusiasm and optimism. They knew where they were, and where they were going even if it was going to take them 70 odd years to get there. They had had an unshakable faith that something would happen - something that would get them home.

What if it turned out that they were yet another lifetime from their friends and families?

Were they going to be able to summon all that up a second time? Was she?

And where was the command team going in all this? Somehow we have to put aside our personal issues and doubts about the other and work effectively together again. I will try; I hope we will succeed.

Her words. And, as the captain, her responsibility.

Take it in stages, Kathryn, she told herself. Make it work. One step at a time.

She put down the hairbrush. There was, after all, a limit to the amount of time that one person could spend fussing with her hair or straightening her uniform. The day wasn't going to be made any easier by not facing it. Not to mention that another... shall we say... discussion... with Chakotay would not go any way to improving what was left of their relationship. She tried to smile at the thought, but didn't quite make it.

Fixing her captain's mask firmly in place, she left her quarters to face the day's ration of the unknown.

The doctor looked at the tricorder, shook it with a flourish, and then looked at it again.

Lieutenant B'Elanna Torres watched him in mild disbelief.

"Why did you do that?"

"What?"

"Shake the tricorder. It makes no difference to the readings."

"I have been looking into medical history, and in the past it was common for medical practitioners to shake their instruments, and check their findings."

"That was in the days of mercury thermometers. You could drop kick the tricorder into the corridor and the readings wouldn't be affected."

"I have been looking into the psychology of the doctor/patient relationship, and I am experimenting with ways in which to improve crew confidence in the medical facilities."

B'Elanna closed her eyes. The doctor had been fully occupied, firstly in treating the rescued crew-members from the Pleiades, and then with the aftermath of the battle with the Sernaix. Now that the situation had settled down and the injured had been sent to convalesce, he was at a loose end. The thoughts of an idle doctor tended to turn naturally towards self-improvement. And that led inevitably to trouble.

Now, however, he was simply radiating smugness. Irritating, but safe.

"Lieutenant, I am happy to inform you that you are in the best of health."

"Good. Does that mean that I can get out of here now?"

B'Elanna was already off the biobed and half way to the exit.

"Not so fast."

B'Elanna paused, and turned to face him.

"What else?"

The doctor looked uncomfortable.

"I think my mobile emitter needs a full diagnostic run on it."

"Why? It was fine the last time I checked, and that was just before we returned to the Alpha Quadrant."

The doctor shifted uneasily again.

"I know that. But since then I've been having trouble with my Cavaradossi."

"Your what?"

"Yes, I know. Half way through E lucevan le stelle there was the most awful crack in my tessatura. You see my problem."

B'Elanna glared at the doctor.

"No. I don't. Was that supposed to mean something to me?"

It was the doctor's turn to glare now.

"I thought that I was perfectly clear."

"No. You weren't. What is a Carava.... whatever it is?"

The doctor was outraged.

"You've never heard of Cavaradossi? Well, I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything else from a race that considers howling to be an art form."

He struck a pose.

"Cavaradossi is a poor painter, who falls in love with the beautiful Tosca...."

B'Elanna interrupted:

"Spare me the narrative, Doctor. It would only be wasted on someone who considers howling an art form. I gather this has something to do with your singing."

"That is what I have been saying. I have a crack in my tessatura."

B'Elanna just looked at him. The doctor sighed theatrically.

"The tessatura is the point in the voice where a singer moves from the middle register to the higher register. It is the hardest part of the voice over which to develop even tone and clarity. My tessatura is normally perfect."

B'Elanna snorted something. The doctor ignored her and continued his lecture.

"I was part way through one of Puccini's most exquisite arias, when it cracked."

B'Elanna digested this information. Finally she said:

"You mean you have a frog in your throat."

The doctor looked mutinous.

"If you want to put it that way."

"It sounds like there's a problem with in one of your vocal sub-routines."

"You're sure it isn't the emitter?"

B'Elanna sighed. Right now she had a new-born baby and a sick warp core to look after. She did not need to deal with a hologram having an attack of artistic temperament. She walked up to the doctor.

"Let me see."

She poked around and examined the emitter, whilst the doctor looked at her anxiously.

"Can you see anything, Lieutenant?"

The honest answer was, no she couldn't. Not immediately. Maybe some of the controls were a bit stiff, but she couldn't see that being the source of the problem. Still, experience had taught her that, if the doctor wasn't humored to a degree, he would just pester her for the rest of the day. And she was in no mood to sit in sickbay tinkering with a minor fault in the doctor's programming.

"Ummm, well," she improvised, "I think that something might have gotten into the control panel, but I can't see it clearly."

"I knew it," said the doctor happily. "So you can fix it?"

"Sure, I can fix it, but I need to check on the other repairs and then I have to get back to Miral. I can't do a full diagnostic in sickbay at the moment."

The doctor started to look worried again.

"Look, Doctor, if you're happy to manage in here with the sickbay emitters, I'll take the mobile emitter with me and check it while I'm looking after Miral. That's the best I can do for now. I'm afraid that repairing the primary systems is going to have to take priority over your singing career."

For a moment B'Elanna thought that the doctor was going to refuse, and her heart lightened. Then he said:

"Well, I suppose I must suffer for my art. Computer: transfer EMH program to sickbay emitters."

He disappeared briefly and then reappeared again. B'Elanna took the mobile emitter.

"I'll have this back to you as soon as I can."

As she left the doctor muttered under his breath:

"Some people might think that the EMH was a primary system."

If B'Elanna heard him she didn't let on.

The Captain's Assistant knew that she was probably in trouble. The crew was still too busy to pay much attention to her, which was how she had managed to get away with sneaking round the ship all morning, but it hadn't done any good. She had to face facts.

Ratty was missing.

When she had got back to cargo bay 2 after watching Icheb run sensors sweeps of the asteroid cluster, and listening to his unending explanations about spectra and frequencies, the cage had been open, and Ratty had gone.

Naomi frantically searched the cargo bay. She had looked in just about every place she could think of - or at least could reach easily - and was beginning to wonder if she could climb up some of the higher stacks, when Seven disturbed her.

"Naomi Wildman, what are you doing here?"

Naomi wasn't about to confess about the missing Ratty, not even to Seven. After all, both her mom and Commander Chakotay had told her to make sure that he didn't get out.

"Ummm. I'm playing hide and seek."

"Hide and seek." Seven's eyebrow rose. "I see no other person."

"I'm playing with.. um... Sally."

"Sally?"

"Um... she's imaginary," replied Naomi unhappily. She didn't expect Seven to believe a word of it.

Seven considered this while Naomi watched her anxiously. She had heard that it was not unusual for children to invent friends to make up for the loss of a loved one. Naomi Wildman was clearly missing Neelix. That was the explanation.

"You are supposed to be studying with Icheb, are you not?" she said directly.

Naomi nodded, scarcely able to believe her luck.

"Then I suggest that you find him."

Naomi fled the cargo bay.

Instead of finding Icheb, she next headed for the mess hall. When she got there, Chell was chattering away to a couple of crewmen that Naomi couldn't quite place. She wondered if Ratty had found his way to the pantry, and was busy gorging himself on leola root. While Chell was distracted by his conversation, Naomi peeked in. Certainly she couldn't see any traces of him - no trail of leola root - no sacks with mysterious, gnawed holes in them.

"Hello there, Naomi! What can we do for you today?" Chell's cheery voice sounded behind her and she jumped guiltily.

"Umm..."

"A snack maybe? Prixin Popcorn? Or a Bajoran Bagel?"

"No... umm..."

Chell winked at her conspiratorially, and patted her shoulder.

"I know what it is that you want."

"You do?" said Naomi nervously.

"I do. Your mom spoke to me this morning and I've got it right here."

Chell reached under the kitchen counter and pulled out a sealed container.

"Leola root for the little guy. We can spare plenty, now that we've managed to stock up on food supplies again. You just keep him right on nibbling. We have to get rid of it."

Stammering her thanks, Naomi left the mess hall.

Now she trailed unhappily along the corridor towards her quarters, sniffing to herself and trying swallow her tears. The Captain's Assistant did not cry in front of the crew she told herself sternly, as she chewed her lower lip. The Captain's Assistant was professional at all times.

There was no sign of Ratty anywhere, and she had run out of places to look.

There was no one in her quarters when she got back. At this time of day her mom would be on duty, and she herself was supposed to be with Icheb. Naomi didn't care about that though. She just wanted Ratty back.

She lay on her bed, hugged her stuffed Flotter to her and started to cry.

To all outward appearances alpha shift on the bridge looked as it had for the preceding seven years. Kathryn Janeway in the captain's chair, Chakotay in the first officer's, everyone else at their stations. Today there was an indefinable change in the atmosphere though. It was not the razor sharp antagonism surrounding the Equinox incident, but there was... something.

Not so much a presence of anything - more an absence. An absence of eye contact, odd gestures, shared looks. Those moments when the bridge crew was fully aware that one member of the command team knew precisely what the other was planning, even if neither of them had said anything.

It had been apparent from the moment Kathryn Janeway had walked onto the bridge. She had bid them all "Good morning" in a rather muted tone of voice, and then disappeared into her ready room with an armful of PADDs. That had surprised no one, and it had been the norm for her over the recent days. What had surprised them was the fact that she had emerged again, minus the PADDs, to take her seat in the captain's chair.

"Thank you, Commander," she had said quietly, as Chakotay stood to move back to his more usual seat. Make it work.

He hadn't replied, but had inclined his head briefly in her direction.

From then on the shift had proceeded uneventfully, incoming astrometric data alternating with ongoing reports on the status of engineering repairs.

It was an Astrometrics report that prompted Harry Kim to break the rather odd silence on the bridge.

"Captain, we're now getting the results of the astrometric scans of the asteroid cluster. There seems to be high concentrations of a number of minerals, but particularly polyferranide."

Kathryn realized that she had allowed her attention to wander somewhat, and forced herself to pay attention.

"Any sign of life?"

"Negative. Sensor sweeps indicate that this region is uninhabited. No signs of life, ships, or anyone else who might want to claim the place."

This might be the moment to offer an olive branch, she thought. Or at least a twig with some leaves on it. One step at a time.

"Opinion, Commander?"

Chakotay considered.

"Since we left the Sernaix behind there's been no sign of anyone out here, hostile or otherwise. I think that it might be good idea to take a closer look. We should get B'Elanna' and Seven's opinion on whether a collection trip is worth using the resources."

There was no discernible inflection in his voice, as he mentioned Seven's name. Kathryn wondered idly why she had been listening for one.

"I agree, Commander." She hit the com button. "Bridge to Seven of Nine."

"Seven of Nine, here," came the reply.

"Seven, can you come up to the bridge with the reports on the asteroid cluster please. And I'd like your opinion on whether or not we should attempt to recover some of the minerals."

"On my way." The link went dead.

"Right. All we need to do now is to prize Lieutenant Torres away from her daughter, to look at this." Kathryn tried a small smile. It wasn't a very good joke, but it was the best she could manage.

Seated at the desk in her quarters, B'Elanna Torres put down the diagnostic tool that she had been using, and glared at the doctor's mobile emitter, as if it were the cause of all her troubles.

"I'll break his tessatura for him," she muttered under her breath.

As she had suspected there was nothing wrong with his emitter. The problem with his precious voice was almost certainly a fault in one of his vocal subroutines. Considering the damage the ship had sustained - first in the transwarp corridor, then from the subspace mine and finally at the hands of the Sernaix - he should consider himself lucky that the worst that had happened to him was being a bit croaky.

She listened closely for any sound of the baby stirring, but she could hear nothing. She wondered about taking Miral up to sickbay to return the emitter, and get the doctor out of her hair for the time being. She could also, perhaps, drop into Engineering while she was out. Vorik constantly reassured her that everything was progressing well, but she liked to see it for herself.

The comlink sounded. "Bridge to Lieutenant Torres."

The captain's voice. B'Elanna was mildly surprised. She had gotten used to talking with Chakotay about the progress of repairs recently.

"Torres here," she responded.

"Lieutenant, we've detected an asteroid cluster, which doesn't seem to belong to anyone and appears to contain some useful mineral deposits."

A flickering light near to B'Elanna indicated that astrometric data was being transferred to her personal terminal. She put the mobile emitter onto the edge of her desk and studied the information.

"Hmm," she said thoughtfully. "Polyferranide. That will help us repair the warp core. And there's no denying that a lot of this other stuff would come in handy as well."

"Can we spare the resources to go get it?" Well, she hoped it wouldn't take personnel away from her. There was still too much that needed fixing. On the other hand, seven years in the Delta Quadrant taught you certain things.....

"I won't lie to you, Captain, that kind of expedition would stretch us at the moment. But if we honestly don't know where we are, or how long we're likely to be here, I'd say it makes sense to stock up on what we can when we can. And the polyferranide will definitely be useful."

"Somehow I thought you'd say that, Lieutenant. Thank you for your input. Bridge out."

As the link went dead B'Elanna heard a small noise from the other room. The sort of noise that suggested that Miral was awake, and would shortly be demanding her mother's immediate attention.

"Oh, honey," sighed B'Elanna to herself, "couldn't you have hung on just a little longer?"

In response there was a full throated cry.

"Guess not."

B'Elanna stood up to see to her daughter. As she did so she brushed against the edge of the desk, dislodging the doctor's mobile emitter. Any noise that it might have made as it fell was drowned in Miral's insistent wail.

When she returned to the living area, having fed, changed, winded and soothed Miral, there was no sign of the emitter anywhere.

Sam Wildman returned to her quarters at the end of her shift, with some questions for her daughter, such as why Naomi had apparently cut classes. She found her curled up on her bed, still sniffing into a decidedly damp Flotter.

"Naomi, honey, what's wrong? Don't you feel OK?"

Naomi just sniffed some more. Sam sat beside her and began to rub her shoulder.

"Are you sick, honey? Do you want me to call the doctor?"

Naomi just shook her head, with her face still buried in Flotter.

"Well, what is it then? Icheb said that you didn't meet him for class today. Is it him? Don't you get along with Icheb?"

The little girl still wouldn't look at her mother.

"Honey I want to help you, but I can't unless you tell me what's wrong."

Naomi started to cry into Flotter again.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't I get you a chocolate milkshake, and maybe that'll help."

There was no response. Sam patted her and went back into the living area to replicate the drink. She gave the order to the computer, and then took her uniform jacket off. She

went to toss it onto her bed, and was just about to move away when she noticed that the things on her dressing table had been scattered about.

"Naomi, honey, have you been playing with my things?" she called.

There was still no reply. Sam sighed and started to tidy up.

"Sweetheart, you know I don't like you to play with these things," she continued, as she scooped up hair pins, and clips and other odds and ends. Suddenly she stopped. On her dressing table Sam kept a brightly colored sea shell, rather like a large abalone shell. Naomi had found it a couple of years ago, on one of the few Delta Quadrant shore leaves which hadn't involved the planetary natives trying to kill them.

Neelix had offered to take Naomi "beachcombing". Sam smiled at the memory. She really should have known better. The beaches of that particular planet had been littered with these shells, so Naomi had wanted to bring back sackfuls. In the end they had negotiated down to one only. Sam had it on her dressing table, and used it to hold the few pieces of jewelry that she possessed.

One of those pieces of was a silver locket. It was very plain, but held a picture of Naomi as a baby, a picture of Greskrendtregk, Naomi's father, and a small lock of Naomi's baby hair. It was an old fashioned thing and Greskrendtregk had teased her about it as he bought it for her, but lockets had been a tradition in Sam's family for as long as she could recall. She had retorted that she would put a picture of their first child into it. Of course, she had thought that he would be there to see it.

And now it was missing.

This time she went into Naomi's room.

"Naomi, honey, have you been playing with my silver locket? The one with the picture of daddy in it?"

"No."

"Are you sure, sweetheart, because it's not in the shell where I normally keep it?"

"No"

"Look, honey, I'm not going to be angry with you, but I need to find it. Have you been playing in there today?"

"No."

"So what have you been doing today, if you haven't been with Icheb, and you haven't been playing in my room?" Sam was beginning to feel worried now.

Naomi looked up at her.

"I went to cargo bay 2 and I saw Seven and then I went to the mess hall and I saw Chell and then I came back here."

"Any why didn't you go to see Icheb?"

Naomi thought.

"Because my tummy hurt."

"OK, we'll get you to the doctor."

"It's better now."

Sam gave her a suspicious look.

"OK, and you haven't been in my room?" Naomi shook her head. "Well, then I think I'd better call Commander Tuvok, and report this as a theft."

15 minutes later the dark Vulcan was sitting in the Wildman quarters. He showed no visible reaction as Sam told him about the missing locket.

"I regret to say that this is not the first such incident that has come to my attention recently. A number of crew members have reported similar thefts."

"I really don't understand why anyone would have taken it, Commander. It's not valuable - I mean it is to me, of course, but that's only sentimental value. Naomi's father gave it to me. It was his last gift to me before Voyager left DS9."

"I am unable to answer that question, Ensign. However, I would like to ask your daughter, Naomi, some questions."

"Naomi? Why? She has nothing to do with this."

"Maybe not, but there are some things that I would like to clarify nevertheless."

Sam felt distinctly uncomfortable, but couldn't see how she could refuse Tuvok's request.

"Well, I suppose so. Naomi, honey, could you come in here please?"

Naomi had been listening to this exchange from the door to her room. When she was called she slunk in, and huddled up close to her mother. She looked at Tuvok with wary eyes. He was even more frightening up close. He looked back at her impassively.

"Naomi Wildman, where were you today?"

Sam gave her a reassuring hug.

"It's OK, honey, you can tell him."

Naomi haltingly explained to Tuvok where she had been. She stopped and hung her head when he asked her why she had been searching around in cargo bay 2.

"Miss Wildman, are you are aware that various objects have gone missing from crew quarters?"

Sam interrupted indignantly:

"Just a minute. What are you suggesting? My daughter is not a liar and she not a thief! Sir," she added belatedly.

Tuvok did not react. He stated mildly, "Items have gone missing, and Miss Wildman has been seen in places that she ought not to have been. I am simply seeking an explanation."

Naomi had begun to cry again. Sam held her tighter.

"It was Ratty," she sniffled suddenly.

"Ratty?" questioned Sam.

"He's gone. I got back to cargo bay 2 from Astrometrics, and his cage was open, and he was gone, and I was trying to find him, and I didn't take anything, honestly Commander, except the leola root and Chell gave that to me."

Sam was soothing Naomi, and, at the same time, trying to remember not to glare at a senior officer.

Tuvok, however, seemed not to have noticed anything. He stood to leave:

"Thank you for your assistance, Miss Wildman. That will be all." He moved towards the door, then paused, and added:

" I do, however, suggest that you attempt to recapture... Ratty... as soon as possible."

The senior staff were assembled in the briefing room once more, with the exception of B'Elanna, who, in the absence of a crisis, was looking after Miral.

Tom Paris was present, despite his entitlement to "paternity leave". He adored his little girl, and thought she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. However, he frankly hadn't anticipated how many other crew members would also want to fuss and coo over her. He was beginning to find the sight of otherwise intelligent people mouthing inane nonsense at Miral more than a little frightening. Eventually B'Elanna had summarily dispatched him off to the relative sanity of his bridge shift, telling him it would do him good to "go play with the ship" for a while.

Kathryn was seated at the head of the table. Observing her covertly, Chakotay noted that she might not have been pacing around the room with her usual drive, but at least she was taking the meeting. An air of wary uncertainty still pervaded the room though. Even Tom appeared to have abandoned his usual asides.

Seven was completing her outline of the astrometric scans of the asteroid cluster. The full information had been as promising as Harry's brief outline had made it sound. High concentrations of useful minerals. No obvious reason why these should not be easily available for extraction.

Chakotay had not sought eye contact with Seven during her report, nor she with him. He fixed his gaze on a point just past her shoulder, as she concluded with her recommendation:

"I agree with Lieutenant Torres's evaluation. Given the present uncertainty of our position, a mining expedition would seem to be an efficient use of ship's resources.

"Well, then that seems to be settled. We're going mining again." Kathryn looked at the ex-drone. "I should think that a two man party will be sufficient. Seven, this time I'd like you to go, and take with you...."

Before she could nominate another member of the away team, Seven interrupted.

"Captain, if I may make a suggestion?"

Chakotay glanced involuntarily at Kathryn, remembering how she had received his last attempts at making a suggestion. Their brief eye contact told him that she had picked up on his reaction. He inwardly cursed, and quickly looked away.

However, she merely said, "Go ahead, Seven."

"The analysis of the asteroid cluster was prepared principally by Icheb. This will be an extremely straightforward mission. I would suggest that he forms part of the away team. It would be a more efficient use of my time to continue working in Astrometrics, and it would provide invaluable experience for Icheb."

"An extremely straightforward mission?" queried Kathryn.

"Since when have we ever had one of those?" muttered Tom under his breath.

The first smart remark from Tom. Was that a good sign, wondered Chakotay.

"Indeed," replied Seven, ignoring the pilot. "Extraction of the minerals will be possible using the technique of pulverization and then selective transport according to the spectral signatures of each mineral. The shuttle will not even have to land."

Kathryn thought about this, and then turned to Chakotay.

"In that case, Commander, I suggest that you take the Delta Flyer, with Icheb. I've been reviewing the information on the crew from the Pleiades. Take the pilot and an engineer with you, and let them familiarize themselves with the Flyer's systems. Make this a proper training mission."

"Yes, Captain," said Chakotay neutrally. He was not entirely certain what to make of this. Did it mean that she trusted him enough to send him out with a rookie crew, or that she only trusted him to do the simplest tasks?

"Do you have any suggestions as to which members of the Pleiades crew?" he asked carefully.

"No, as long as they're fit, it's your choice, Commander."

He nodded, noting in passing that Tom had remained completely silent at Seven's comment that the shuttle would not need to land. Under normal circumstances he would never have passed up that kind of opportunity to poke fun at Chakotay's piloting skills. It had come to something, he thought, when a lack of jokes at his expense would make him worry.

Kathryn, however, had moved on.

"If we're all clear on what we're doing, then let's get to it."

There was a general movement of people towards the door of the briefing room. As Chakotay left he felt a hand touch his arm. He turned to see Tuvok behind him.

"Commander," began the Vulcan, "may I have a word with you about a personnel issue?"

"Of course."

The two men left the briefing room together, and walked in silence across the bridge to the turbolift.

Once inside Chakotay was the first to speak.

"What can I do for you Tuvok."

"A security matter has come to my attention. One which I thought you should be informed of."

"Go on."

Tuvok proceeded to tell Chakotay about the thefts. Chakotay ran his hand through his hair.

"Petty pilfering. That's never been a problem on board this ship. Not in seven years."

"Precisely. There appears to be no discernible pattern or motive to these crimes. None of the objects have any intrinsic value - costume jewelry, teaspoons, metal hair combs. Some have sentimental value, others do not. Some have been stolen from ex-Maquis,

others from Starfleet officers. The only connection appears to be that all the objects are made of metal."

"Metal?" Hardly a rare commodity on a starship.

"And possessed of a certain luster."

"You mean shiny."

"Yes."

"Lots of things are made of shiny metal Tuvok. And if you want a teaspoon, why not just replicate one? What is the point in stealing one?"

Except... no, it couldn't be..... He began, almost hesitantly.

"It seems quite a... childish... thing to do...?"

"If you are referring to Naomi Wildman, I have already spoken with her."

Trust Tuvok to have grasped that nettle, thought Chakotay thankfully.

"It does not appear likely that Miss Wildman is involved. Although, you should be aware that... Ratty... is missing."

Chakotay groaned. "Not already? I'd counted on an escape eventually. I had hopes of at least a week's grace."

"Your hopes are destined to be disappointed, it seems, Commander."

Chakotay looked up at the ceiling of the turbolift, as if the answer to all his problems would be found there. Not in seven years, he thought, wryly, and not now either.

"The thefts seem inexplicable."

Chakotay sighed. Tuvok did not use the word "inexplicable" lightly. Or happily. An unexplained crime was the Vulcan's equivalent of Chinese water torture.

"Keep investigating. Under the circumstances I don't know what else to suggest."

There was a pause, then Tuvok said delicately, "I have not yet informed the captain of the situation."

Chakotay sighed again. "Let's not at the moment, Tuvok. I think she has enough to concern her at the moment. Let's wait until there is something concrete to report."

The Vulcan nodded agreement. There was silence between them again. The turbolift came to a halt and both men got out.

"I suppose I'd better round up Icheb and two bodies from the Pleiades, and get started on this away mission". There was a distinct edge to Chakotay's voice.

Tuvok stopped and looked at him, as if making a decision. Finally he spoke.

"Commander, it is clear that there are some," - he chose his words carefully - "difficulties between you and the captain at present."

Chakotay said nothing, but just waited for Tuvok to continue.

"She feels responsible for our current predicament. She is distancing herself from the crew. And you feel that, once again, she has withdrawn her support from you at a critical moment. At the very point that the command needs to be united, she is publicly demonstrating a lack of trust in you."

Chakotay reflected. Not a happy analysis, but uncomfortably close to the mark.

"I know what you're going to say, Tuvok." The Vulcan raised his eyebrow. "We've been through this before, we've always patched up our differences, and the ship has gone on."

"It is not an unfamiliar situation," agreed the Vulcan.

"This time it's different. It feels like we're back at Day 1, with her watching me to see if I'm going to take over the ship behind her back. Except that then we had no history. Now we do, and I don't know if I can rebuild on those foundations. And if I can't then, I don't think that I can function effectively as this ship's first officer. Not if she's going to be second guessing my every move. Maybe it would be better for me, and for the ship, if I stood down and let you take over. At least she trusts you."

Tuvok regarded him impassively.

"Assuming that it may take us some time to resolve our current situation, the crew members from the Pleiades must be familiarized with the ship's systems. Even if they have previous experience on Intrepid class vessels, Voyager has been significantly modified. Icheb, too, must gain experience. It is logical to use this type of away mission for the purposes of such training, and it, therefore, follows, that a highly experienced officer must command the mission."

"In other words you think I'm being paranoid."

"The captain spent seven years focused on returning to Earth. She was prepared to spend seventy. Just as she was on the verge of achieving her goal, it was taken from her. She needs time to adjust to the situation."

"I know, but the crew needs her."

"As they do you, Commander."

Chakotay blinked slightly at this statement.

"Your position as conduit between the captain and the crew, and as a voice for the Maquis, has been essential to the effective running of this ship. If the crew have been unsettled by the withdrawal of the captain, the resignation of the first officer will do nothing to reassure them."

Chakotay found himself unable to reply.

Tuvok continued, "You should also bear in mind that you yourself need to come to terms with what has happened. Take time to consider any decision that you might reach."

Chakotay let Tuvok's speech sink in. There was no denying that he had a point. A point which he should have seen himself, perhaps. He smiled, for the first time that day.

"Have you thought of applying for the post of ship's counselor, Tuvok?"

He would have sworn that Tuvok gave him a dark look, if Vulcans were capable of that sort of thing.

"Don't worry Tuvok, I'm not going to resign. Not this week at least. Oh, and Tuvok, let's also keep the escaped Ratty between ourselves for the moment"

The Vulcan merely nodded, and went on his way.

The doctor potted around the holo-Alpha-Hirogen, taking readings and humming to himself. Since he was confined to sickbay while B'Elanna was sorting out his emitter, he was at something of a loose end. He had just completed a full work up on the physiology of the Alpha-Hirogen, which he thought might make an interesting paper for Starfleet Medical. Or another interesting paper he should say. This one would be number 48.

Finishing his observation he deleted the holo-Hirogen, and touched the console to display a file entitled - Bedside Manner - The Doctor/Patient Relationship Through The Ages . His fledgling doctor/patient psychology study, and current brainchild. Number 49 on his list of interesting papers, he thought to himself.

"Computer," he said, "Open file Doctor Bedside Manner"

"File open," responded the computer obediently.

The doctor began to dictate.

"The most important component of any treatment program is the quality of the relationship with the patient. In order to build up a good rapport, the physician must be able to empathize with his patient. In today's multi-species medical practice his skill in this regard is often tested to its limit."

He paused. This was the point at which he would record his unique insight into the human experience, gained when his program had been transferred into Seven of Nine. He would describe how it had felt to eat, to drink, to be molested by alien captains... on second thoughts, perhaps he would leave the last part out.

He sat down at this desk, pondering. What if the experiment could be somehow repeated? He already had data from Seven of Nine. Maybe it would be possible to transfer into another race. The only crew member who was equipped to take part in such a scheme other than Seven was Icheb. The doctor considered this. For all his desire to identify with his patients, he was not quite certain that it went as far as wanting to see the world through the eyes of any sort of adolescent.

That left the holoemitters. Not that that would permit him to be another species as such. But it would allow him to gauge how far the crew's perceptions of different races affected their response to him as a doctor. All very valuable data for his paper.

He thought further. The idea was to determine how to inspire confidence in the patient. A Vulcan was obviously confidence inspiring. Betazoid was too obvious. Ferengi? The doctor contemplated that for a moment, and then decided that was too difficult. Not even other Ferengi trusted Ferengi. Klingon - now there was an idea. Could his skill as a doctor overcome the popular notion that all Klingons were drunken, violent and irrational berserkers?

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Klingon, it was then. All that was needed was to adjust his holomatrix to suitable parameters. He called up the Klingon models from the Sickbay database. After carefully considering what would best suit his experiment, and his personal style, he selected a fearsome looking warrior, in full battle dress, complete with a wicked looking bat'leth.

He walked round the holoimage a number of times, just to check, and then ordered the computer to adjust his matrix to those parameters.

"Parameters adjusted," reported the computer helpfully.

He promptly dropped the bat'leth, narrowly missing his foot. Those things were heavier than they looked, he thought.

He deleted the holoimage of the Klingon. He still felt like himself, but a quick glance down showed that he had the physique and dress of a Klingon warrior. He turned to the mirror to get the full effect. The image made him jump, and he laughed nervously when he realized that he had just frightened himself.

The sound that came out was a raucous Klingon laugh. The doctor rather liked it. He laughed again, louder this time. The time the sound was even more strident. He wondered what it felt like to give a battle roar. Feeling a little self-conscious he gave a small roar. Then he gave a more confident roar. The figure in the mirror looked really rather intimidating.

Pleased with himself, the doctor picked up the bat'leth, and swung it experimentally a couple of times. Really, it didn't seem to be too difficult. Thoroughly enjoying himself now he swung the bat'leth in front of the mirror and let out a full throated roar.

This was promising to be a most interesting experiment.

"Delta Flyer away," reported Tom from the helm.

"Bridge, this is the Delta Flyer," came Chakotay's voice through the comsystem. "Launch confirmed and course laid in for the asteroid cluster."

"Acknowledged, Delta Flyer," the Captain responded. There was a fractional pause and then she added, "have a good trip, Commander."

There was another slight hesitation, and then Chakotay's response:

"We'll do our best. Delta Flyer out."

Hardly the easy banter that the bridge crew were used to, but it was a conversation. Of sorts. Make it work. One step at a time.

If the crew had thought that Chakotay's absence would ease the mood of the bridge, they were disappointed.

Every time Tom Paris glanced over his shoulder Kathryn was staring absently at the console in front of her, or the viewscreen. The atmosphere, although not strained, still did not lend itself to light-hearted chit-chat.

Reports from the away team now interrupted the familiar Engineering and Astrometrics updates. Mostly, they were from Chakotay, reporting uneventful progress in a friendly, but somewhat neutral, tone. Kathryn responded in a similar way.

Once, a message came through from a nervous, unfamiliar voice, and was cut off half way through. Clearly the Pleiades pilot was having a little trouble with the Delta Flyer comsystem. Tom smiled to himself, and glanced over his shoulder to make a quip. He thought better of it, when he saw his captain's face.

He turned back to the helm. and heard her voice behind him say:

"You have the bridge, Mr. Tuvok. I'll be in the ready room if you need me."

Tom didn't really register the Vulcan's acknowledgment, as he concentrated on keeping the ship on course for... for wherever it was headed, he thought wryly. The computer made the infinitesimal course corrections necessary to maintain position. Tom was pretty much on auto-pilot as well, as he kept an eye on the console in front of him.

He had been quite concerned at the sight of the captain. She had looked... not exactly ill, but tired and, somehow, defeated. Although she had managed to remain on the bridge for the best part of the shift - which was certainly an improvement - she still looked like someone who had had too little sleep and too much to think about.

She also didn't appear to be talking to Chakotay either. Of course, she didn't ignore him - that was hardly feasible on a ship this size. Talking, but not communicating. Tom leaned on the console, and stared at the viewscreen himself. This was not the first time they had seen something like this. He remembered the Void as well as anyone. Something sure as hell needed to happen before they got into THAT sort of situation again.

He wondered if he should speak to the doctor about it, although he could just imagine the captain's reaction if she thought he had gone behind her back like that. The only other alternative was to put his "medic's hat" on and talk to her himself. She had always given him a lot of leeway in the past. Maybe if he approached her directly, he'd just end up being maimed instead of spaced.

He turned in his seat:

"Tuvok, there's not a lot happening here at the helm at the moment. I have something that I'd like to raise with the captain. Permission to leave the bridge."

Tuvok looked quizzical, but did not question further.

"Very well, Mr. Paris. Permission granted."

Tom walked to the ready room doors with a certain amount of apprehension. The captain had been a little unpredictable recently. He was not at all certain of the reaction he would get.

Kathryn was seated at her desk, looking at the PADDs which seemed to have mysteriously multiplied since she had left the stack in there earlier. Where had they all come from, she wondered? Did Tuvok sneak in with them while I wasn't looking?

She was just trying to figure out where to start when the door chime sounded. She couldn't decide whether the interruption was an annoyance or a relief.

"Come in," she responded.

Tom Paris walked in. This didn't help with the annoyance/relief question, she reflected. Tom Paris could be either. He moved to stand in front of the desk.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Paris?" she asked.

He studied her, more closely than he had in previous meetings. She was sitting at her desk, erect and groomed, for all intents and purposes the Starfleet captain. But she looked tired. The gleam in her eye wasn't there - that hint of challenge that indicated she was just waiting for him to come up with some hair-brained scheme to ruin her day. He took a deep breath.

"OK Captain, you probably don't want to hear me say this. I know you don't usually..."

"Why don't you humor me then, Mr. Paris, and not say it?" she replied, trying to recapture her usual tone with him.

"I was wondering how long it had been since you had a medical check up?"

"A medical check up?" Whatever Kathryn had been expecting, it hadn't been that. "Oddly enough, Mr. Paris, what with all the other things that have been going on, a medical check-up just slipped my mind." She sounded acid, even to herself.

"I was going to suggest that you pay sickbay a visit later today," Tom carried on bravely.

Kathryn sat back in her chair, and fought to control her rising anger. First Chakotay trying to bully her into behaving as he thought she ought to. And now Tom Paris of all people. She suppressed the urge to ask if Chakotay had put him up to it.

"Maybe," she said, trying not to bite her words off too abruptly, "once our defensive capability is re-established and we know where we are and where home is and how to get there, I'll find the time to have a check-up. But don't count on it being anytime soon."

Tom noticed that the fire had briefly returned to her eyes. He pressed on:

"Captain, I know that you're busy and I wouldn't suggest it, but it's at times like this when people aren't getting enough sleep and aren't eating properly, that they get sick. I'm just suggesting that you have a check up, maybe get some vitamin shots, to help you keep going."

Kathryn just glared at him. Tom Paris also tended to keep going when most sensible people would give up and flee. Maybe he was taking lessons in that from Chakotay too.

"Captain," Tom said slightly desperately, "those people out there just lost their families at home - again. They don't want to lose this one as well."

Without warning, Kathryn recalled Owen Paris, and his pride in his new granddaughter. And in his son. The young man in front of her had regained so much, only to lose it again. She pinched the bridge of her nose. She could feel the beginnings of a headache.

"Lieutenant," she began, waving a hand at the PADDs on her desk, and starting an explanation about the amount of work she had to get through. Then she looked up at his worried face, and changed her mind. "Thank you for your concern," she said in a softer tone. "I'll take your suggestion under advisement."

Tom didn't move.

"I'll stop by sickbay as soon as I can, Tom," she assured him.

At this point Tom decided that he had pushed his luck just about as far as it would go. At least she had called him by his first name this time.

"Thank you, Captain," he said simply and left.

Kathryn watched him go and shook her head. Sickbay. When was she going to get the time to go to sickbay? She returned her attention to her desk, and picked up one of the unread PADDs at random.

It was forwarded from Tuvok. That was unusual. It was headed Security Report for the attention of Captain Janeway, and then merely noted, Please see report attached. Kathryn looked at the report.

For the attention of Commander Tuvok. Report from Naomi Wildman on the status of Crewrat Ratty.

Crewrat Ratty? Kathryn blinked. The only Ratty that she could think of was from a children's holoprogram. Then she remembered Chakotay had said something about it. She had asked about the rat, and he had told her about a mutiny.

She read on. The little girl had obviously taken her report very seriously. It was set out in approved Starfleet style - sectioned, headed and numbered all according to protocol. Naomi had also clearly struggled to use what she considered "proper Starfleet language". She had left nothing to chance, particularly when it came to Starfleet's advice to identify clearly all persons involved.

Kathryn treasured the description of Ratty's introduction to the Wildman quarters.

Upon arrival at our destination, negotiations were entered into between myself and Ensign Wildman (who is my mom). I told Ensign Wildman that authorization had been given by the proper superior officers (Commander Chakotay who is the First Officer and the Doctor, who is the ship's doctor, and also a hologram) for Crewrat Ratty to be assigned quarters to live with us. Terms were then agreed as follows for Crewrat Ratty that I have to look after him and clean his cage and ask Chell for his food and make sure that he doesn't get out. Terms were also agreed that Ensign Wildman is going to give me one extra replicator ration a week so that I can save up for a chocolate fudge sundae.

Note: Chell is now in charge of the mess hall which is where Neelix (Morale Officer) used to be.

Kathryn smiled at the official sounding phrases mixed with the girl's own descriptions. Maybe she should make the effort to meet her new Crewrat.

The doctor stomped around sickbay idly swinging his bat'leth. He roared a little, but even that was somehow half-hearted. His experiments in being a Klingon doctor has not been entirely successful.

He had discovered that the joy of striding around and roaring rapidly wore off. He couldn't even enjoy the sight of himself in the mirror any more. It had fallen victim to a wild sweep of the bat'leth during his initial euphoria.

He had hastily swept up the pieces and deposited them in the recycler. An onlooker might have enjoyed the sight of such an impressive warrior, armed to the teeth with a dustpan and brush, making his way across sickbay in a rather sheepish manner.

He had even tried a little Klingon opera, to while away the hours, but the parameters he had selected did not appear to allow for this. To be blunt, his alter ego was tone deaf. Or at least he assumed he was tone deaf. When he instructed the computer to play a Klingon aria for comparison, he couldn't honestly hear whether he was right or wrong.

"Howling," he muttered to himself, grumpily.

Fortunately he was distracted by his first patient of the afternoon. Ensign Taylor from Engineering had slipped in a Jefferies tube, fallen awkwardly and fractured her wrist. She was a little taken aback, to say the least, to be confronted with a Klingon warrior in full battle dress. Reassuringly, he invited her to take a seat on the biobed. Even to his own ears it sounded more like a rousing call to arms. Ensign Taylor had allowed him to treat her arm, but had eyed the bat'leth with distinct apprehension throughout the procedure.

"There you are," he boomed, "all finished," as he completed the regeneration of the bone. Ensign Taylor slid thankfully off the bed. The doctor turned to replace the osteogenic stimulator, as Ensign Taylor sidled towards the door.

"Ensign, before you go, I'd like to ask you a few questions about a study I'm currently undertaking."

There was no response. The doctor turned around. Sickbay was empty.

"Charming," humphed the hologram. "Not even a thank you."

He picked up the bat'leth and began to swing it aimlessly again.

He was still swinging it when his next patient came in. Crewman Dalby had been sent to Sickbay suffering from minor burns, following a closer than advisable encounter with an EPS conduit. As he entered the doctor greeted him cheerfully.

"Ah, Crewman Dalby. My next Engineering casualty of the afternoon. What can I do for you?"

Ken Dalby had taken three steps into sickbay and come to a standstill, gazing at the doctor in disbelief. He looked at the doctor. He looked at the bat'leth, and looked back at the doctor again. He came to a decision.

"Don't worry about it Doc, it's just a scrape. I'll live."

"But...."

"No, really, I can see that you're busy. I'll just replicate some gauze, or maybe I'll just leave it. My gran always used to say that you should let burns have fresh air. I'll get right out of your hair."

"Wait..."

But before the doctor could get any further Ken Dalby had fled.

It was clear that he was going to be unable to obtain any sensible data for his psychological study as long as he was looking like this. Time to adjust the parameters of his matrix again. He wandered over to the database console, carefully propping up the bat'leth against the side of it. He scrolled through the species list. Obviously Klingons just weren't cut out for the caring professions. How about Vulcans? Calm, orderly, logical - what could be more reassuring to the distressed patient?

"Computer, modify EMH matrix to conform to Vulcan appearance parameters."

"Unable to comply."

"What do you mean unable to comply.? I order you to change me into a Vulcan."

"Unable to comply," repeated the computer imperturbably.

Typical, thought the doctor. Lack of cooperation from the one thing on the ship completely unmoved by a raging Klingon warrior.

He started again patiently. "Computer, why are you unable to comply?"

"The program pathways have been corrupted [or other suitable techno-explanation]."

Corrupt pathways? Well, all he had to do was fix it. It couldn't be that hard, could it. The doctor put his hand on the console, wondering where he should begin. Of course, he didn't normally do his own matrix adjustments. That was what Lieutenant Torres, or Ensign Kim or Seven did. He shuddered slightly at the thought of what B'Elanna would

say when she found out what had happened. He suddenly found the presence of the bat'leth very comforting.

Then he had a guilty recollection of an occasion when he had experimented with other personalities. And one when he had modified his program to allow himself to daydream. He withdrew his hand from the console slowly. Maybe the wrath of Lieutenant Torres was preferable. And anyway, all he had to do was transfer into his mobile emitter, while the problem was fixed.

"Sickbay to Lieutenant Torres," he said nervously.

"Torres here," came the response. Then, "Doctor. Are you feeling all right?"

"Erm...", said the doctor non-committally. "Lieutenant, I wonder if you could stop by sickbay. Soon."

Chakotay watched as Lieutenant Stefan Riccitelli, until recently helmsman on the Pleiades, maneuvered the Delta Flyer into position to pulverize another section of asteroid.

"Phasers locking on to target," reported Icheb.

Chakotay gave the order to fire. The small rock floating in space in front of the flyer was reduced to rubble.

"Sensors are reporting high concentrations of polyferranide in the debris, Commander."

The report came from Ensign Marta Cann, a science officer, also from the Pleiades.

"Prepare to transport the ore on my mark," ordered Chakotay.

"Ready sir," responded the ensign.

"And energize."

"Transport completed, sir" confirmed Marta Cann.

"Continue scanning."

"Yes, sir."

The Pleiades had been the ensign's first posting out of the Academy. She was anxious not to make a mistake. Shades of Harry, thought Chakotay.

"Ensign, you don't need to add "sir" to the end of every phrase," he added.

"No, sir."

Riccitelli was a more experienced officer, but even he was surprised when he saw the controls of the Flyer.

"It's an.. unusual... design, sir."

"If you're with us any length of time you'll find out that Lieutenant Paris has some.... unusual... ideas."

Thus far the away mission had gone according to plan. A rare event indeed in the history of the ship. This part of what he was calling space, for want of a better term, appeared to be both unowned and unoccupied.

Despite the unfamiliar design, Riccitelli had grasped the basics of handling the Flyer quickly, and was competently executing the basic maneuvers required for the mining operation. Chakotay had heard no complaints from the back of the cabin, so he assumed that Ensign Cann was equally having no trouble in configuring the transporter to selectively transport the various ores from the debris clouds. He also assumed she was having no personal difficulties in working with an ex-Borg. The two crewmen from the Pleiades hadn't really even blinked at the sight of Icheb. Possibly because he had been liberated before he had ever been involved in assimilating anyone.

"Everything all right back there, Icheb?" he asked without turning.

There was no answer from the ex-Borg, but Marta Cann said: "He said he was going back to the hold to check on the ore."

Chakotay sighed. Icheb was supposed to be supervising the ensign, not ferreting around at the back of the ship. He decided to go and see what was going on.

When he entered the hold, the young Borg was busy methodically checking and recording the ores gathered. Chakotay watched him for a moment, then spoke.

"Icheb."

The boy looked up.

"Yes, Commander."

"Icheb, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be supervising Ensign Cann."

"The procedure is not difficult. Ensign Cann is performing the task competently. Supervision, therefore, is no longer required. It is a more efficient use of my time to begin cataloging the mineral ores."

"Icheb, the point is not just to supervise the ensign. The point is also to give you experience in working on an away mission. Working as part of a team within a command structure. You can't just go off on your own when you feel like it."

Icheb regarded him with sulky resentment. For a moment Chakotay thought that he was actually going to storm out in temper. Then Icheb said quite deliberately:

"I apologize if I have acted inappropriately, Commander. May I continue cataloging the mineral ores?"

Chakotay ran his hand through his hair and sighed. He wondered why, on top of everything else the Spirits had seen fit to give him an adolescent Borg to deal with. He sat down on a storage container.

"No, Icheb, you may not continue cataloging the mineral ores. Sit down."

Icheb hesitated. Chakotay insisted. "Sit down."

The young man sat down facing Chakotay. He put his elbows on his knees, and hung his head, intently studying his feet.

"Listen, Icheb, is everything all right?"

The boy was silent.

"Icheb, if there is a problem with the crew, or with what you're doing, then I might be able to fix it. But I can't if you don't tell me what it is."

Icheb looked at Chakotay. For a moment Chakotay saw the confused and insecure young man behind the mask of Borg efficiency.

Then he said, "It's just that.... well, I don't know what I am."

"In what way?"

"I'm on this training mission to learn to be part of the crew. Yes?" Chakotay nodded. "But I'm not a part of the crew, am I? I didn't go to Starfleet Academy, so I'm not Starfleet. I didn't fight with you, so I'm not Maquis. I wasn't ever fully part of the collective, so I'm not even really Borg."

Chakotay felt his heart go out to the young man in sympathy. He, better than anyone, knew how it felt to be caught between two cultures - and not feel a part of either.

"You are a part of the crew, Icheb. Look at Neelix. He wasn't in Starfleet or the Maquis. Or Seven."

"Seven of Nine has the knowledge of the collective. And everybody just liked Neelix.

This last was nearly a wail.

"Nobody is liked by everybody, Icheb, Not even Neelix. And you have friends on the ship."

"Friends are irrelevant," said Icheb automatically, but he didn't sound convinced.

Chakotay decided that, sympathy or no, something had to be done before Icheb slid into the Borg equivalent of full blown adolescent angst. And in fairness to the lad, days spent alternately tutoring Naomi Wildman, and working with Seven in Astrometrics, were probably a bit short on human contact. His mind skated over exactly what that little analysis said about his current feelings for Seven.

"Icheb, I think that you have been working apart from the crew for too long. When we get back to Voyager, and after the situation in Engineering settles, I have to review the crew rosters, to accommodate the survivors from the Pleiades. Would you like me to consider you for alternative duty assignments to Astrometrics?"

The young man looked at him.

"Yes please, Commander."

"Do you have any preferences that I should know about?"

Icheb hesitated again. "I'd really like to improve my piloting skills."

"Fine. Why don't you speak to Mr. Paris about giving you some advanced training. If he agrees, tell me, and I'll schedule it in for you."

Another thought occurred to him.

"Icheb, you only need to regenerate occasionally, don't you?"

The boy nodded.

"I also have to sort out some permanent living arrangements for the Pleiades crew. Would you like to be assigned to crew quarters?"

"Really? I mean, would that be possible?"

"I can't see why there would be a problem. You'd have to double up though. We don't have that much room, and we now have ten extra people."

"That would be... acceptable."

"Now, I suggest that you go forward and check on Ensign Cann."

"Yes, Commander. Thank you, Commander."

Chakotay watched the boy leave the hold. One more crisis hopefully crossed off the list he thought.

With a supreme effort of will B'Elanna Torres restrained herself from forcibly tearing the bat'leth out of the doctor's hands and giving him a short demonstration of technique, which would have ended in the holoemitters strewn in pieces around Sickbay.

"Will you just put that down for a moment, and explain to me exactly what it is you have done?"

The doctor had not picked a good time for experimentation. B'Elanna wanted to check over the status report from the last shift in Engineering. And she wanted to get back to Miral. Despite the fact that she had complete confidence in Tom - who had now returned from his stint on the bridge - she was still happier when she was there. Now she was stuck in sickbay, trying to fix yet another problem caused by the doctor's incessant quest for self-improvement. She was sorely tempted to request authorization to deny him access to his own programming.

The Klingon hologram roared at her again.

"I adjusted my matrix parameters to look like this, and now I can't change back."

"What did you do that for?"

"I wanted to experience being a Klingon."

Experience being a Klingon! Kahless!

B'Elanna examined the console, and the emitters.

"Well, there seems to be some corruption of the program pathways [note: or whatever]. It's difficult to see. Probably something was damaged in that last battle."

"I want to look like myself again."

"We all want that, believe me Doctor."

"Why can't you just transfer me into my mobile emitter while you sort this out?"

With the mood the doctor was currently in, B'Elanna had been hoping that he wouldn't ask that question.

"Because it's gone missing," she stated bluntly.

"Missing!" screamed the Doctor. "What do you mean, missing?! This is wholly unsatisfactory. I can't function like this. I have responsibilities to this ship and its crew. I am an integral part of its proper functioning."

The doctor's own natural tendency towards melodrama was not improved by being filtered through a Klingon warrior. To make matters worse each complaint was punctuated by a wild sweep of the bat'leth.

When one gesture came close to B'Elanna's ear, she decided that enough was enough.

"Doctor!" she roared back at him. "Stand still and shut up!"

This was enough to startle the doctor into silence.

"Now," B'Elanna continued, at a slightly lower volume, " I cannot work with you roaring like a wounded targ. Nor can I work as long as my life is in danger from that bat'leth. Now, put it down. There. Well away from me."

Looking as chastened as his appearance would allow, the doctor meekly put his bat'leth down where B'Elanna indicated - on the other side of the room.

"Now, we will get on faster, if you could adjust yourself to being a more even-tempered race."

"That's what I was trying to do, when I realized that I was stuck like... like this." He gestured to himself with evident distaste. Belatedly, it occurred to him that insulting the race of the person who was trying to fix your problem might be a mistake. "Not that it isn't very nice. In it's way," he added hastily.

B'Elanna just glared. "Sit down," she instructed him. "Why don't you pretend to be another race? Just for the moment, to give me some peace."

"What do you suggest?"

"Why don't you try some Vulcan meditations? Tuvok's always telling me how good they are for controlling irrational temper outbursts."

The doctor was about to say that he didn't think that there was anything irrational about not being happy that you were stuck in the wrong body shape, and that your mobile emitter had gone missing, but one look at B'Elanna's face changed his mind. He settled on the floor and started to think about candle flames.

B'Elanna, meanwhile, was pressing buttons on the console. After a moment she instructed the computer to restore the doctor's original appearance.

"Unable to comply," responded the computer helpfully.

"Doctor, what exactly did you do?" she repeated.

The doctor thought. "Well, I called up the image of a Klingon using the holoemitters. Then I instructed the computer to change my appearance. And it seemed to work."

"And that's all?"

"That's all that I can remember. I don't normally adjust my matrix. Usually you, or Ensign Kim, or Seven of Nine do it."

B'Elanna glared at him in exasperation.

"Did you ever stop to think that there's a reason for that, Doctor? It's because Harry, Seven and I know what we're doing."

The doctor didn't answer.

"And while we're talking about the Klingon experience, I can assure you that no Klingon warrior in history ever has, or ever will, go into battle roaring, This is wholly unsatisfactory."

After what seemed an eternity, the shift had finally ended. Kathryn gloomily surveyed the fresh stack of unread PADDs, recently dumped on the desk in her quarters. As fast as she got through one, she thought another two popped up to take its place. She seemed

to recall that once she could get through most of this sort of stuff during the shift. Maybe she just wasn't working at peak efficiency.

She picked up one of the reports at random, and read the title : Evaluation of the temporal nature of surrounding space. She wondered if Seven and Harry ever actually slept. She selected another one. Primary systems repairs - Alpha shift status report. They had certainly been quick off the mark with that one. She glanced at a third. Ship's food inventory. She looked away again. The last thing she wanted to think about was food.

No, scratch that. The last thing that she wanted to think about was reading anymore PADDs. Not for the next three-quarters of an hour at least. She was going to have a hot cup of coffee and a bath before she tackled any more of today's crises, whether major or minor. She instructed the computer to replicate her a black coffee, and went into her bedroom to strip off her uniform gratefully. She tossed it in the vague direction of the bed, to deal with later, and put on her robe. Coming back into the living area she collected the coffee from the replicator, and headed into the bathroom, instructing the computer to engage the privacy lock. The doors closed behind her, and moments later the sound of running water could be heard.

Slowly, a shiny little nose poked its way round the edge of Kathryn's desk. A pair of glittering black eyes studied the door to the bathroom, as if to make sure that the occupant was not going to come out anytime soon. Then, a lithe, furry body appeared from behind the desk and scurried across the floor, into the bedroom and towards the bed.

In her haste to get out of her uniform, and into the bath, Kathryn's throw had been slightly short. Her turtleneck rested half on and half off the edge of the bed, with one arm trailing on the floor. Ratty sniffed at it curiously, and poked his nose underneath it. Then scabbled with his forepaws, reaching up the side of the bed as if he were trying to climb it. As he tried to get purchase on the material, the garment began to move. One more tug from Ratty, and the turtleneck slid completely off the bed and fell on top of him.

There was some rustling and heaving under the cloth and Ratty emerged again, cleaning his whiskers. He began to examine the garment, sniffing intently. He seemed particularly interested in the four gleaming rank pips at the collar. He investigated them thoroughly, and then began to gnaw at the material, in a very precise fashion.

Ten minutes later, Ratty was heading towards the ship's ventilation system, with a small piece of gray fabric clamped in his jaws. Attached to this fabric were the four time honored symbols by which Starfleet Command identified its captains.

Some time after the departure of Ratty, Kathryn emerged from the bathroom, feeling cleaner, and more refreshed, but without any noticeable increase in her enthusiasm for reading PADDs. As she entered the bedroom, she noticed that her turtleneck was now on the floor.

Guess it must have fallen off the bed, she thought. This was what happened when you didn't hang up your clothes like your mom always told you to.

Sighing she picked up the turtleneck, and shook it out. Then she stopped, startled. Someone had torn a hole in the neck and taken her rank pips. For a dizzying moment she wondered if this was some subtle act of rebellion - someone was questioning her fitness as captain. Then she caught hold of herself again. She had been in the bath less

than half an hour, and the privacy lock had been engaged. There had to be another explanation.

She found her combadge and hit it. "Janeway to Tuvok."

"Tuvok here."

"Tuvok, can you come to my quarters immediately?"

She could almost hear the eyebrow going up over the link.

"On my way, Captain."

By the time Tuvok arrived Kathryn had replicated herself another turtleneck, and gotten dressed again. She could see by the slight twitch of the inevitable eyebrow, that he noticed the absence of rank pips at her collar. By way of explanation she thrust the damaged garment at him and explained what had happened.

Tuvok examined the hole in the turtleneck.

"I am afraid, Captain, that this is not the first occurrence of this nature."

"Someone's been stealing rank pips?"

"I regret to report that there has recently been a spate of petty thefts."

Tuvok briefly outlined the details.

"Why wasn't I told of this before?"

She could have sworn there was almost an uncomfortable pause. Then Tuvok said:

"I brought the ongoing security investigation to the attention of Commander Chakotay. Given the ship's current predicament, we both felt it unnecessary to raise the matter with you until we were in possession of verified facts."

She felt another brief stab of emotion at being left out of the loop. Anger? Panic? Then she stopped herself. Think it through, she told herself. What would you have done if you had known? Tossed the ball back to Tuvok and told him to continue his investigations, that's what. One or other of them should have submitted a report, but you haven't exactly been throwing yourself body and soul into ship's management, have you? We're all making judgment calls under pressure at the moment. Chakotay included. Let this go.

Make it work. One step at a time.

Kathryn ran her hand through her hair. Tuvok watched impassively as emotions flitted across her face. He let her work it out for herself.

"OK, Tuvok. I appreciate your thinking on this. Just keep me informed from now on, please."

"Yes, Captain."

"Did you say that the doctor's mobile emitter has also gone missing?"

"Yes, Captain."

"How is he taking that?"

"Lieutenant Torres is with him now. I believe she may be experiencing some difficulties."

"Difficulties? I guess we'd better go down there and take a look. Oh, and what's being done about finding the emitter? We can't have him restricted to sickbay again."

"I believe that Ensign Kim and Seven of Nine are searching for it."

"Good. Let's go then"

Together Kathryn and Tuvok headed for sickbay.

Harry and Seven of Nine moved through the Jefferies tube methodically scanning for the signature of the doctor's mobile emitter. Close behind them came Naomi Wildman, looking around her anxiously for any traces of Ratty.

They reached a junction and Harry and Seven stopped briefly to confer. Naomi sat back on her heels and fiddled with the handful of leola root that she had hastily stuffed into her pocket.

She noticed that the adults had stopped talking.

"If I could have a tricorder, then I could just scan for Ratty on my own, and I wouldn't be in your way, would I?" she suggested hopefully, one more time.

Harry and Seven exchanged looks.

"Look Naomi," said Harry patiently, "We've been through this before. You can't go crawling around the Jefferies tubes on your own. It isn't safe and you might get lost. Plus which, neither Seven or I have got the time to configure a tricorder for you, even if we could find a spare one. Pretty much every piece of equipment we have is being used at the moment."

"Our priority is locating the doctor's mobile emitter, not your missing rodent. In any event, he has survived without your assistance before. It is reasonable to suppose that he will do so again," added Seven

As reassurance, Harry thought, that had left a little to be desired.

"Don't worry Naomi, I'm sure he'll turn up when he's hungry."

The adults obviously had decided to turn left at the junction. Naomi trailed along disconsolately behind them. They had gone a little way through the tube, when Seven stopped suddenly and adjusted her tricorder.

"Ensign, I believe I have located something."

Harry checked her readings and then his own.

"I think you're right, Seven." He adjusted his tricorder slightly. "Yes, I definitely have something. It's this way."

They carried on down the tube, faster now, as the signal got stronger. Eventually, Seven halted again.

"The signal is getting weaker," she announced.

Harry backed up a bit, and rechecked his readings. "It seems to be strongest here."

They had stopped in the middle of a section of Jefferies tube. To Naomi it looked no different to any other section of Jefferies tube on the ship. There was also no immediate sign of the mobile emitter.

"I don't understand," remarked Harry, "there's nothing here, and yet the signal is very strong."

Seven had been examining one of panels whilst Harry had been speaking.

"This panel is loose," she observed. "and it appears to bear small scratches."

Harry peered at the panel. He tested it, and Seven was right, it was loose. He couldn't see the scratches though. Clearly, Seven's ocular implant had detected them. He worked at the panel until he could get it free. He lifted it off and put it to one side. Naomi crowded up to see what he was doing.

Behind the panel was a cozy little nest, made out of bits of cloth and other odds and ends. The nest appeared to have a number of metallic objects in it. It was a little difficult to see for certain, because, curled up comfortably, completely unperturbed by this invasion of his home, was a furry creature, looking at them with unblinking jet black eyes

"Ratty!" exclaimed Naomi joyfully.

The little animal crawled out of his nest and onto Naomi's lap. She tickled him, and then pulled some leola root out of her pocket. Ratty took it in his paws and began to munch happily.

Ratty's departure revealed the full extent of his haul. The nest was full of small metallic objects of all sorts. There were pins, and buttons, and jewelry - rings, chains, bracelets and a Bajoran earring - and other odd items - souvenirs from various shore leaves. There was also Sam Wildman's locket, the captain's rank pips and the doctor's mobile emitter.

"Look at this lot," murmured Harry.

"Ratty certainly appears to have been busy," agreed Seven.

"Just like a little magpie," commented Harry.

Naomi looked up, confused.

"What's a magpie?" she asked.

"An earth bird related to the crow family." Seven informed her. " It has a reputation for stealing bright objects and taking them to its nest. As Ratty is clearly not a bird, Ensign Kim's analogy is inexact."

However, Naomi had stopped listening, and was too busy making a fuss of Ratty.

B'Elanna ran another diagnostic tool over the mobile emitter. The doctor, still in his Klingon form, was sitting on the floor grumbling beneath his breath.

"I can't stay like this for much longer, Lieutenant. Surely you've finished by now."

"Be patient, Doctor," replied B'Elanna, "I'm sure that you want me to get this right."

"Yes, but I don't want any more members of the crew to see me like this."

"I know," returned the engineer, sweetly, "but I do need to be certain that your Cavaradossi has been fixed now, don't I?"

The doctor could have sworn that her checks actually started to become slower. He wondered if she was enjoying this in some perverse, Klingon, way.

Naomi Wildman, meanwhile, was fidgeting nervously. The joy of retrieving Ratty had worn off and she was beginning to feel very guilty about all the things that he had taken. It didn't help that the doctor was glaring at her, and audibly commenting that it was

plainly stupid to allow the keeping of dangerous pets on a starship. On the way to sickbay Harry had also shown her the piece of cloth with the captain's pips on it. She didn't think that Captain Janeway was going to be very happy about that.

At the moment, the doors to Sickbay opened and Captain Janeway herself walked in, followed by Tuvok.

The sight that met her, rendered her momentarily speechless.

Sitting on the floor, muttering and looking sulky, was a Klingon warrior in full battle dress. B'Elanna Torres was doing something to the doctor's mobile emitter, while Seven was working at the one of the consoles. Naomi Wildman had shot behind Harry Kim, clutching her dress to her, and was now peering out from behind him with a stricken look on her face.

She tried her voice. "Hello everybody. I'm sure that there is an explanation for this and no doubt someone will give it to me."

The Klingon spoke. "Captain, I must apologize for my unfortunate condition."

She looked at the warrior. An awful suspicion began to dawn on her.

"Doctor?" she said tentatively.

"Yes, Captain."

She looked at Tuvok. "Difficulties," she said. "I begin to see."

"Indeed," replied Tuvok.

"B'Elanna?"

"I'm just getting the problem sorted now, Captain."

"Good."

At this point Naomi Wildman piped up:

"Captain, it was really my fault, not his. Commander Chakotay told me to get him a cage and I did, and then he got out, and I couldn't find him, and he didn't mean to do it, and I know he's sorry"

Kathryn was bemused by this speech. "Who is sorry, Naomi?"

"Ratty."

Ah, Ratty.

Then Harry joined in.

"Captain, it's been really hard for Naomi. We all know how much she misses Neelix, and it can't have been much fun for her, what with everyone working round the clock in Engineering or Astrometrics."

Kathryn held up her hand. "Peace, Mr. Kim. I'm still trying to catch up here."

Before she could continue, however, the doors to sickbay slid open again. This time it was Sam Wildman who came in. She spotted her daughter, still partly hidden behind Harry.

"Naomi, honey, are you all right?"

"Mom," wailed Naomi and rushed over to her. Sam hugged her tightly.

"What's going on here?"

Everyone began to talk at once.

"Ratty got out and took things...."

"No harm was really done....."

"If someone could please restore my original matrix...."

"The pathways appear to be restored...."

"Doctor, will you just be patient..."

"ENOUGH!"

Kathryn's shout silenced everyone. Now all eyes were trained on her. It dawned on her that she had just reclaimed the role of Captain.

She looked at them all. They were heaven alone knows where, the ship was still in several pieces, and she was standing here trying to deal with a Klingon EMH and... Ratty. Something about this suddenly struck her as funny. She bit her lip, and then smiled and shook her head.

"B'Elanna, I suggest that you get the doctor back to normal as soon as possible."

"Doing it now, Captain."

She activated the controls on the doctor's mobile emitter, and the Klingon on the floor disappeared. A fraction of a second later the doctor reappeared, back to his usual form. He looked himself over.

"I can't tell you what a relief that is." He avoided B'Elanna's eye.

Kathryn turned to Naomi. "Now, as for Ratty."

"You aren't going to make me get rid of him, are you, Captain?" said the little girl in a small voice.

"Captain.." began Sam.

Kathryn held up her hand again.

"Don't worry, Ensign, nobody's getting rid of Ratty. He's already been authorized for one thing. However, I would recommend that you look at getting a better cage, and make sure that you keep the door closed this time."

"Yes, ma'am." said Naomi breathlessly.

"Harry, perhaps you'd like to give Naomi a hand with that some time?" The ensign nodded. "Good. Now if that's sorted I'm sure we all have things to do."

Harry exchanged a glance with B'Elanna. It hadn't escaped either of them that the captain had used their first names. That seemed like a good sign.

The doctor interrupted them: "I think I'm back to normal now, if anyone's interested. I can even give you an example of my Cavaradossi to prove it."

There was a pause, then Kathryn said:

"Thank you, Doctor, but I gather that the Flyer has just arrived back in shuttlebay 2. I want to go and have a look at the ore and hear how the mission went. Commander Tuvok, you're with me."

She strode out of sickbay, with more purpose than she'd shown for a while. Tuvok followed in her wake. Taking their cue from the captain, the others made their excuses and left.

Ratty was curled on Naomi's lap contentedly munching leola root. She was absently stroking his head. She still wasn't absolutely convinced that the captain wouldn't make her get rid of him. After all, stealing the captain's pips must be a pretty serious offence. She hadn't dared to look in the database to find out what the punishment was.

Not to mention taking the doctor's mobile emitter. Although he had looked funny as a Klingon.. She fished in her pocket and fed Ratty yet more leola root.

"You'll have to put him on a diet, if he keeps eating like that."

Naomi jumped, and scrambled to her feet, clutching Ratty.

"Captain. I didn't hear you come in."

"At ease, Miss Wildman," said Kathryn looking at the nervous child. "I just thought I'd stop by to be officially introduced to my crewrat. Even though he has already been in my quarters."

"I'm sorry he caused so much trouble, Captain," said Naomi contritely.

"That's all right. Between you and me, I think we needed something to lighten the mood a little." Ratty was poking his nose over the top of Naomi's hands. "May I see him."

Naomi offered Ratty to Kathryn.

"He's perfectly tame. He likes being tickled. Oh, and he likes leola root."

"I know. I read your report. It was very thorough"

Naomi was awestruck at the thought of her report actually being read by the captain.

She watched as Kathryn stroked the little furry head. Ratty curled up in the crook of the captain's arm, and appeared to go to sleep.

"He's cute, I'll say that for him."

"Captain?"

"Yes, Naomi."

"Are we really lost again?"

Kathryn sighed. She was going to have to get used to answering that question, one way or another.

"Yes, we are."

"And that's because we hit a mine left by the Borg."

"Yes, that's right."

"I heard that people said that it was Starfleet who lost us here. But if the Borg left the mine, then didn't they do it?"

Kathryn thought about that. If only it was that simple. But maybe, on one level it was that simple.

"Yes," she said finally. "The Borg did it."

Written by: Abby

Beta: KateF

Producers: Thinky, Anne Rose and Coral