



Episode 8-7 – Retrospect

By: Seema (seemag1@yahoo.com)

The planet loomed large on the viewscreen. It was an M-class planet; the first they had seen in weeks. More importantly, according to the scans that Seven of Nine had run, this particular planet was rich in dilithium.

"A perfect opportunity for a brief, uneventful away mission," B'Elanna Torres mused, as she looked over the topographical maps of the planet

"The scans show a large deposit on the northern continent," B'Elanna said, "and lucky for us, close to the surface too. It should be easy to extract enough dilithium to last us for a few months."

Next to her, Harry Kim nodded.

"I see a clearing not too far from there," Harry said. He indicated a spot on the map. "That looks like a good place to put the Delta Flyer down."

"And the weather scans look good too. Sunny, blue skies, a light breeze from the

west," B'Elanna said. She settled back in her chair, letting a smile spread across her face. "It feels really good to get out, Harry. As much as I love Voyager, the ship does get claustrophobic after a while. It has been so long..."

"Even a boring little mission like this?" Harry teased. "You sure you didn't want to wait for something more exciting?"

B'Elanna scowled and then good-naturedly, punched Harry in the arm.

"This is good enough for me. For now," she said. "I won't be away from Miral too long."

"This is your first away mission since before she was born, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"You seem like you're doing okay," Harry observed. "No anxiety at all?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "Samantha Wildman has promised to take her when Tom goes on duty." She paused, thinking how naturally Sam handled Miral, a skill that B'Elanna, occasionally overwhelmed by her new responsibilities, envied greatly. On occasion, B'Elanna felt more comfortable with a hypospanner than with her own baby, but she brushed away those feelings as best as she could. "I can't think of anyone I'd trust more with Miral, other than the Doctor and Tom. The Captain said she'd check in also."

"The Captain seems really taken with Miral," Harry said. He leaned over and flipped a few of the switches. "I'm beginning the descent."

"Reversing thrusters," B'Elanna muttered. "And yes, the Captain does enjoy spending time with Miral. All right. We're down to impulse power now."

"Entering the atmosphere."

"Shields are holding," B'Elanna said. Her fingers flew over the control panel expertly as she ran a variety of scans. "Looks like there might be a little turbulence in our future, but nothing serious."

As she spoke, the Delta Flyer shook, nearly knocking Harry out of his seat.

"A little turbulence?" he asked amusedly as he regained his balance.

B'Elanna grinned back. "Enjoy that, Harry. That's probably the most excitement you're going to experience on this particular away mission."

Harry shook his head as he focused on landing the Delta Flyer.

"You know," he said, "strange as it might sound, I could use a little less excitement in my life these days."

B'Elanna nodded. She knew exactly what he meant.

"Smooth landing," B'Elanna commented as she went through the post-landing procedures. She carefully cut power to all systems still operating. "Nice job, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Tom isn't the only decent pilot on Voyager, you know."

B'Elanna's lips turned upward. "Should I tell my husband you're bucking for his position?"

Harry stifled a grin as he opened a small locker in the rear of the Delta Flyer.

"Let's keep that between the two of us," Harry said, still in a teasing tone of voice. He pulled out a pair of phasers and quickly ran a check to make sure the power cells had not drained. The tricorder beeped green and Harry let out a sigh of relief.

"You really think we need phasers?" B'Elanna asked with a frown. "Scans didn't show anything unusual."

"You never know."

"Always prepared," B'Elanna said, shaking her head in amusement. "All right, I think we're done here. I've locked down all of the systems. Seven's new encryption code is a beauty, though it's a little like using a torpedo to swat a fly."

"You never can be too careful," Harry said sanctimoniously, causing B'Elanna to raise an eyebrow in amusement. Harry opened the Delta Flyer's hatch and he stepped out into the bright sunlight. B'Elanna, blinking, followed with her toolkit.

"Wow," she said, looking around. Knee-high grass, gently swaying in the breeze, covered the clearing, the wide expanse of green and yellow dotted with delicate orange and white flowers. Shadowy blue hills edged the horizon. "This is... lovely. Perfect, almost."

B'Elanna held out her arms as if trying to embrace the day, the scenery, all of it. She closed her eyes, inhaling the clean, sweet smells of the meadow and feeling the warmth of the sun soft against her face. It occurred to her then that she and Tom had never taken Miral outside. Sure, there had been family outings to the holodeck, trips to the

beach or a drive down Route One, but never nature like this. With a pang, B'Elanna considered it might be months - she refused to think in terms of 'years' - before she and Tom would be able to introduce Miral to the great outdoors.

They had been so close, so damn close to Earth and now... B'Elanna opened her eyes.

Don't think like that, B'Elanna thought. We're going to get home. The Captain has promised us and she has never let us down. This is just another detour.

She glanced at Harry, who seemed to be more interested in his tricorder readings than his surroundings.

"Well?" B'Elanna asked. She peered over his shoulder to get an idea of what had captured Harry's interest.

Harry looked up from his tricorder. "The dilithium is that way. Two kilometers." He pointed towards the hills. "You up for a hike, Maquis?"

"If you are, Starfleet," B'Elanna answered, quickly banishing all thoughts of Earth from her mind. She started walking in the direction Harry had indicated. "You know, it might not be a bad idea to start a colony here." She said it casually, almost flippantly, an afterthought more than anything else.

"What?" Harry asked, shock evident in his voice. "You'd actually stay here?"

"Why not?" B'Elanna shrugged. She glanced down at her tricorder. "It's an M-class planet with a good climate and the resources we need. I'm detecting a river a kilometer to the east and it looks like there might be a forest not too far from here."

"So you don't think we're ever getting home."

B'Elanna glanced at her friend sideways. She heard the note of dismay in his voice and knew the feeling; many of the crew had been devastated when Voyager had ended up in what Tom referred to as the 'twilight zone'.

Truth be told, the idea of settling in one place was very appealing but then again, so was the idea of returning home to the Alpha Quadrant. And B'Elanna knew that she could not be selfish; she had her daughter, her husband. For the others on Voyager, their families were elsewhere; building a new life here in a static universe was not an option for them and never could be.

"No," B'Elanna said softly. She put her hand on Harry's arm. "I haven't given up. I was just joking. Not funny, I guess. I got carried away by the fresh air and the scenery."

"As long as you aren't serious," Harry said. "I'd hate to go back and have you propose to the Captain that we make our permanent home here. After all we've been through..."

"Not a chance," B'Elanna said. She unzipped her jacket and tied it around her waist. "You know, we ought to make the best of this opportunity and see if we can find some food staples to replace Neelix's leola root supply. Chell mentioned to me food supplies have been seriously depleted since Neelix's departure."

"Good idea," Harry answered. He paused walking for a moment. "I miss him, you know?"

"You're not the only one," B'Elanna said softly. She thought of all the times Neelix had managed to comfort her, to say the right thing. He had helped her through her self-destructive behavior years ago and she was grateful for Neelix's advice when her relationship with Tom was on the rocks. More importantly, Neelix had been her friend and B'Elanna sincerely hoped that Neelix was happy and content in his new life.

"Maybe settling down is the answer," Harry said. B'Elanna looked at him in surprise.

"Where did that come from? A few minutes ago you were jumping all over me for-" she paused as her tricorder starting beeping. "Harry, I'm picking up humanoid life signs."

Harry looked startled. "I didn't pick up any life signs in the Flyer, humanoid or otherwise."

"Looks like they are all around us," B'Elanna said. She whirled around, but saw nothing but endless prairie in every direction. "This is strange. They are everywhere." She showed the tricorder to Harry so he could verify the readings.

"How is that possible?" Harry asked. He gestured. "There is nothing here but grass."

"I know, but..." B'Elanna's voice drifted off as the grass evaporated and was replaced by cobblestones. She whirled around as a wall appeared about one hundred meters to the left of them, followed by a house and then another building. B'Elanna's gaze met Harry's in confusion as a village slowly materialized around them.

"Well, I guess we're not in the Delta Quadrant anymore," Harry joked lamely as he and B'Elanna stood in the middle of what appeared to be a town square. Buildings, no more than two stories high, rimmed the plaza. Humanoids, with strong ridges across their foreheads, and dressed in bright clothing were staring at the two Voyager crewmembers with fascination.

"Hello," B'Elanna ventured. She took a step towards one of the aliens. "I'm Lieutenant B'Elanna Torres of the starship Voyager. This is Ensign Harry Kim. We mean no harm."

"Welcome." One of the aliens - a female - stepped forward. She was taller than most of the others, with long silver hair which curled up at the ends. Her long, slender arms were adorned with bracelets that clinked musically as she moved. With the exception of her forehead ridges - shaped like a V over her nose - the alien looked almost completely human. Her slender body was swathed in a blue silky material edged with gold. She smiled at them. "I'm Azuma. We are the Caprijen."

"We're sorry for intruding," B'Elanna said. "We didn't realize there was anything or anyone here at all."

"It is all right," Azuma said. Her voice was calm, assuring, and B'Elanna liked the woman immediately. "We have cloaking technology which protects us from outsiders. We are a non-violent society and hiding ourselves in this manner is the only way we can protect ourselves. Unfortunately, sometimes our technology fails us, leaving us subject to discovery."

Azuma's words intrigued B'Elanna.

"Let me get this straight," she said. "Your technology allows you to cloak an entire village and mask life signs too?"

Azuma nodded. "Yes, but lately, our equipment has experienced some malfunctions and as a result, the cloak has been less than reliable. We have been unable to find the problem, but our engineers are working diligently to fix it."

B'Elanna turned to Harry, her eyes shining. He shook his head.

"The Captain won't like it, B'Elanna," he said in a warning tone. B'Elanna knew he was right, but the engineer in her couldn't pass up the opportunity to take a look at this technology. And she felt confident she could convince Harry to see her point of view.

"Could you give us a moment?" B'Elanna asked. Azuma nodded. B'Elanna put her hand on Harry's shoulder and steered him away from Azuma. "Think about it, Harry. Coupled with the ablative armor, this cloaking technology could make us almost invincible. I'm sure the Captain wouldn't object."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"Look, I know technology trades have backfired in the past, but this is different. The Caprijen mean no harm; they just need a way to preserve their way of life. We can help them," B'Elanna said.

"Isn't that what we said about the Hirogen?"

"The Hirogen wanted to hunt us, Harry. It's not the same thing."

Harry heaved a sigh. "All right, but you explain it to the Captain. After all, you do outrank me."

B'Elanna heard the note of bitterness in Harry's voice. She knew the fact that her friend hadn't been promoted after over seven years of exemplary - well, mostly exemplary - service rankled at him, even though Harry had never directly said anything to B'Elanna. Some things B'Elanna just knew instinctively.

"I'll take the blame," B'Elanna assured him. "And Harry? Your turn will come."

"What about the dilithium?" Harry asked. B'Elanna sighed. He had a point; any repairs they undertook would severely cut into the time allocated to extracting the dilithium. And the dilithium was more important than the cloaking technology, even if the Captain did agree with the technology trade.

"Just a look then," B'Elanna said. "A quick look. And don't worry about the dilithium." She flashed a smile at Harry, who still looked uncertain. She squeezed his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Starfleet. Leave it to me."

Harry followed B'Elanna back to Azuma, who was now clustered with several other Caprijens. Azuma quickly introduced B'Elanna and Harry to the other aliens, who all eyed the Voyager officers with obvious interest.

"Pleased to meet you," B'Elanna said briskly. "Azuma, I'd like to propose a trade. I'll take a look at your malfunctioning equipment, if you could assist us with locating dilithium. We need a six month supply, at the very least."

Azuma considered and then said, "One minute."

B'Elanna nodded as Azuma turned to huddle with the others. After a few minutes of discussion, some of it loud to carry over to where Harry and B'Elanna were standing, Azuma returned.

"Agreed. We will help you mine the dilithium in return for your help in repairing the Keeper," she said.

"The Keeper?" B'Elanna asked.

"It's..." Azuma hesitated. "It is difficult to explain, but if you help us, we will give you the specifications for the cloaking technology. However, the Keeper acts in conjunction with our cloak. One cannot function without the other."

"All right," B'Elanna said. "You have a deal."

Kathryn Janeway stood next to the windows of her Ready Room, staring out into the vast expanse of space, a mug of coffee in her hand. She pressed her other palm against the window, the glass cool beneath her fingers. Here, staring out at the view that rarely changed, it was so easy to lose all track of time.

Janeway appreciated this quiet time to herself; lately, she had found herself desiring a certain sense of serenity, and she knew that her crew, so recently disappointed by their failed attempt to return home, sought the same kind of solace. She recognized the signs of her crew withdrawing from her, even recognized it in her own first officer -

The door chimed, startling Janeway out of her thoughts. She blinked.

"Come."

The doors slid open as Janeway turned around slowly and took a few steps in her visitor's direction.

"T'Pel," she said. She put her cup down on the desk and gestured toward an empty chair. "Thank you for coming."

T'Pel sat down, neatly folding her hands in her lap. Her intelligent and direct gaze slightly unnerved Janeway. Despite her long friendship with Tuvok, Janeway never really had the chance to get to know T'Pel well and Tuvok had not taken the time to share much about his wife other than the bare minimum information.

All of that will have to change now, Janeway thought as she settled behind her desk. The setting seemed oddly formal, but Janeway guessed T'Pel would not particularly care for a casual atmosphere.

And there was nothing casual about the reason why Janeway had summoned T'Pel.

"I hope you find Voyager comfortable," Janeway said, keeping her tone light, conversational. T'Pel, however, maintained her stiff posture. "Your quarters are comfortable?"

"I find the accommodations sufficient for my needs," T'Pel answered in the clipped, emotionless tones so characteristic of Vulcans. "I lack for nothing."

Except for your children, your friends, your home, Janeway thought, but of course T'Pel, a very private person, would be too proud to express sentiments such as these like this out-loud.

"I know Tuvok is glad to have you here," Janeway said. Of course, Tuvok had not said so to her in so many words, but Janeway had seen her old friend in the mess hall with his wife, had seen the way he looked at her with a mixture of respect and if the emotion could be applied to Vulcans, love. "I know he missed you while we were in the Delta Quadrant."

"As I missed him," T'Pel replied and Janeway knew this was the closest to an admission of love she would ever get from a Vulcan. Janeway lifted her cup of coffee, sipped, and winced at the bitter cold brew.

"Would you like something?" Janeway asked, getting up from her chair and heading to the replicator. "My coffee is nothing less than toxic."

"No, thank you. I do not require food or drink at this time."

Still facing away from the Vulcan, Janeway grinned. The coffee cup materialized and Janeway took a sip.

"Ah, better," Janeway said. She smiled. "When we were in the Delta Quadrant, we would do anything, most anything that is, for a good cup of coffee. It seemed, at the time, good company and coffee could make most of our problems disappear."

"And now?" T'Pol questioned. Janeway shook her head as she settled into the chair next to T'Pol's.

"I'm concerned about the crew's morale," she said. "We were so close to home. Only one light year away and now..."

"I understand."

"When Neelix was on-board, he served as an unofficial sounding board for many of the crew. He could pick up on any mood and possessed a knack at peeling away the layers to get to the heart of the matter," Janeway said. She sighed. "He was a valuable member of the crew and while I wish him well, I do miss him, T'Pol."

T'Pol remained silent, but her dark eyes were alert with anticipation.

"I can't be everything to my crew," Janeway confessed. She glanced down into her coffee. "I would like to be, but there are some days..."

"I understand," T'Pol said. This time her voice was infused with warmth and for that, Janeway was grateful.

"My crew needs someone they can talk to," Janeway went on. "They know they are free to come to me at any time, but many of them don't. Some go to Chakotay, but more of them chose Neelix. Now that Neelix is gone, there's a void. I know it's a lot to ask, but would you be willing to serve as the ship's counselor?"

T'Pol tipped her head to the side as if considering the request. Janeway took another sip of coffee, feeling the warm liquid coat the inside of her throat. Her hands shook slightly as she put the mug down on the desk and she wondered when she had become so vulnerable.

I can't let this be like the last time, Janeway thought as she contemplated the mug on the corner of the desk. Her last descent into melancholy had occurred nearly two months ago when they had passed through an expanse of space completely devoid of life or scientific phenomena; she had cut herself off from the crew, choosing to dwell in self-pity and regret, even shutting out Chakotay, whom she counted among her closest friends. Janeway lifted her chin defiantly and turned to T'Pol, who was nodding slightly.

"I will do it," T'Pol said quietly. "It would be an appropriate position for me and I wish to be of service to the ship."

"Thank you," Janeway said. "We - I appreciate it."

"Chakotay to the Captain."

Janeway detected the note of urgency in Chakotay's voice, the first real sign of emotion she had heard from her first officer in days.

Well, you haven't been spending much time with him now, have you? she thought. But she pushed the thought away, knowing their relationship was already better than it had been since Voyager had ended up in this bubble of space. In time, Janeway thought,

we'll be back to where we were. And she fervently hoped that they could repair the damage to their relationship sooner, rather than later.

"Janeway here. What is it?"

"We need you on the Bridge."

"On my way."

Janeway rose, as did T'Pol.

"Thank you," Janeway said. "I'll let Chakotay know about our conversation and he'll inform the crew."

T'Pol nodded. Janeway headed for the door and then stepped aside so that T'Pol could exit first.

And then with a sharp intake of air, Janeway entered the Bridge.

"What is it?" Janeway demanded as she marched down the Bridge to where Chakotay was standing. He nodded at the viewscreen; a serene, cloud-covered M-class planet took up much of the screen. A planet, Janeway realized in shock that looked very much like Earth right down to the number of continents sprinkled across its surface. She swallowed hard and turned her attention to her first officer.

"We're picking up a distress call," Chakotay said. He turned to Tuvok. "Tuvok has pinpointed it to this location."

"Any indication what it is?" Janeway asked, frowning; there was no sign of a ship or anything else out there.

"I am scanning all frequencies now," Tuvok said. "I'm detecting no vessel, only a ripple of energy, a continuous burst..." His voice drifted off as he leaned closer to examine the readings on his console.

"You sure there's someone out there?"

"This isn't usual phenomena," Chakotay said, an edge to his normally crisp tone. "And it's a moving energy wave, spiraling downward towards the planet. The fact that it's emitting a distress call of some kind-"

"You think it's a ship? Hail it," Janeway said sharply. "At least let whoever is out there know we heard them."

"There is no response," Tuvok said. Janeway took a step towards the viewscreen, eyeing the planet with a mixture of fascination and longing. "I am retrying on all frequencies. Still no response, but the distress signal is a continuous pulse."

"They're ignoring us?" Janeway asked in disbelief. "Keep trying, Tuvok." She looked over at Chakotay. "Isn't this the planet where scans indicated large reserves of dilithium?"

"It is," Seven of Nine said from her station directly behind the Captain. "This planet was among those Lieutenant Torres and Ensign Kim planned to visit."

"The energy wave has dissipated," Tuvok said. He tapped a few keys on his console. "However, I am picking up a life sign on the planet. Captain, it's Sernaix."

"Damn. Shields up and go to red alert. Tuvok, are you picking up any Sernaix ships in the vicinity?" Janeway asked.

"I am not picking up vessels of any kind, Sernaix or otherwise, on long-range sensors," Tuvok said. His voice was calm, evenly modulated, but Janeway detected the note of unease in her security officer's tone. She knew exactly what he was concerned about; Sernaix ships were seemingly impenetrable to Voyager's scanning technology. The last time they had encountered the Sernaix, the attack had seemingly come out of nowhere and now they had detected a single Sernaix life sign with no indication of another alien ship anywhere in the vicinity. This particular circumstance didn't bode well, Janeway knew, and she shared Tuvok's anxiety.

"Continue the scan," Chakotay advised needlessly. "I doubt any of us are eager to see the Sernaix again. Let's try to avoid them if we can."

"Captain." Tom Paris whirled around from the helm. "If the Sernaix are down on that planet, B'Elanna and Harry are going to need us."

"I agree," Janeway said. She settled herself into her chair. "Set a synchronous orbit around the planet, Mr. Paris. When we're in range, hail the away team."

"When you said 'hiking', you weren't kidding," Harry said. He tried to keep his panting minimal; lately, he had been hard pressed to find time for exercise programs on the holodeck.

Occasionally, he had managed to indulge in a Captain Proton scenario or two, but without Tom Paris - who had embraced fatherhood wholeheartedly - the holodeck lacked its usual panache. As a result, Harry had begun spending his free time practicing his saxophone or playing various strategy games in the mess hall with the Delaney sisters or anyone else who happened to be around at the time.

And neither hobby had particularly prepared him for the steep ascent into the cold and damp caves located just beyond the Caprijen village.

He was at least relieved to see that B'Elanna was slightly out of breath also as they followed Azuma up the rocky trail. Azuma, on the other hand, appeared to have no problems whatsoever as her breath remained even and controlled.

"We are not far from the Keeper," Azuma told them. The light from Azuma's lantern played off the walls of the cave, creating shadows that conjured up memories of imaginary monsters that hid in closets and beneath beds. Harry knew there was nothing to fear in these caves, but still, he kept one hand on his phaser.

The trio turned a corner and suddenly the narrow passageway widened into a large chamber, one illuminated by lanterns hanging every few meters. The walls here were of a beige hue, rather than the gray and black shades of the passageway.

"Look." Azuma pointed in the direction of a gray box. It was nondescript looking, to say the least, measuring about three meters wide and four meters tall. "That's the Keeper," Azuma went on proudly. "It has been a part of our people's heritage for almost a thousand years."

"That's a long time," B'Elanna said. She pulled out her tricorder. "No wonder it's been acting up. I'm picking irregular spikes in the power flow. Does anyone perform regular maintenance on it?"

"Our engineers routinely run diagnostics, however, the latest malfunctions have been difficult to repair."

B'Elanna crouched in front of it, examining her tricorder readings. She noted some unusual bursts of energy patterns, some of them powerful enough to burn out fuses, and others so weak, they barely registered on her tricorder.

"Anything?" Harry asked her.

"I'm noticing..." her voice drifted off as she stared at the gray box in fascination. B'Elanna reached out, touching the smooth metal delicately with the tips of her fingers. "It's unlike anything I've seen before. The technology, it's incredible..." her eyes closed as she swayed.

"B'Elanna!" Harry exclaimed as his friend fell back into his arms.

She was a little girl.

As she looked around, B'Elanna recognized the playground immediately. On Kessik, only two blocks from the house where she lived with her parents.

The sun was warm against her skin and the grass soft and cool beneath her bare feet. B'Elanna turned around slowly, facing up to the sunlight. And then, two strong hands, lifting her towards the sky.

B'Elanna laughed as she flew through the air.

Those same strong hands caught her and when she found herself on the ground, B'Elanna looked up.

Father. Mother. Both. Smiling down at her.

"Again, Daddy," B'Elanna said, clapping her hands together. "Do it again."

B'Elanna's eyes flew open and she saw Harry and Azuma staring at her.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked urgently. "What happened to you?"

B'Elanna shook her head, pressing her hand against her forehead. Her mouth felt dry, scratchy.

"Water?" she requested.

"One minute," Harry said. He rummaged through his pack to find the canteen. He poured some of the water into a glass and held it to B'Elanna's lips. "Careful, now."

B'Elanna gulped down the water, relishing the coolness running down her throat. She closed her eyes, licking her lips.

"Want more?" Harry asked.

"No, no, I'm fine now," B'Elanna said. She glanced at Azuma. "What the hell happened?"

"You experienced a vision," Azuma said.

"Yeah," B'Elanna said. She got to her feet and moved away from the box. "I guess you can call it that."

"Was it a... pleasant experience?"

B'Elanna considered. She had felt completely happy in her 'vision,' as Azuma called it. Free, light-hearted, wonderful, loved.

"Yes," B'Elanna said. She smiled. "I was at the playground, near my home on Kessik. My parents, both of them, were there and it... it was a good day. I was four years old again and my father was swinging me up in his arms."

Harry crossed his arms against his chest.

"So?" he asked. "What is it?"

"The only way I can explain it is in this way," Azuma said. "Somehow, the Keeper manages to extricate memories from people and bring them back vividly. In that way, we have the ability to relive the happiest moments of our lives. However, it has never affected an outsider before."

"It's got some effect," B'Elanna said. "It was a pretty powerful experience."

"Look, I don't like this," Harry said nervously. "Let's figure out what's wrong with this thing and get on with our mission."

"Agreed," B'Elanna said, but she kept looking at the box. She wanted to touch it again, but knew that Harry would not like it. But still...

"Entering orbit now, Captain," Tom announced.

"Anything on sensors?" Janeway got up from her chair and stood directly behind her helm officer, her hand resting gently on his shoulder.

"Nothing," Tuvok answered. "However, I have pinpointed the Sernaix' location. It appears to be one individual; his life signs are weak. He is approximately one kilometer from the Delta Flyer."

"Voyager to B'Elanna, come in," Janeway said crisply, doing her best to keep the concern out of her voice. The bridge fell silent as everyone waited for a response. Janeway noted that her helm officer seemed especially interested, as he had turned away from the viewscreen and focused all of his attention on her.

"Janeway to Harry, come in."

"Harry here." Harry's voice sounded scratchy over the commlink. "Sorry about that, Captain. Looks like there's a little bit of interference with the comm signal."

Tom let out an audible sigh and turned back to his console, his shoulders visibly relaxing. Janeway stifled a smile; seven years ago, she would have never predicted that Tom Paris would settle down to a life of relative domesticity and stability. Paris' devotion to wife and daughter, the way he looked at them, and the utter peace on his face when he held Miral in his arms struck a nerve with Janeway.

Inadvertently, she glanced at Chakotay, and then quickly recovered her composure.

"Harry, there's a single Sernaix not too far from your location."

Another pause and then Harry, his voice still slightly fuzzy, answered, "Thanks for the warning, Captain. We'll be on the look out."

"As soon as you finish the dilithium extraction, return to Voyager," Janeway said. Her voice, steady and calm, belied her nervousness.

"Understood. Kim out."

Janeway glanced over her shoulder at Chakotay who had moved to stand just behind her.

"Do you think it's a coincidence?" she asked softly. "What do you think the Sernaix are up to?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Chakotay answered. He glanced towards the viewscreen. "The Sernaix are nothing, if not unpredictable."

"Unpredictability's all part of their charm," Tom said. He flashed a quick smile at the Captain, a small reflection of the ladies' man he used to be. "Makes them irresistible."

"That must be it," Janeway said wryly, allowing herself to smile back at her helm officer. "Tuvok, beam the Sernaix directly to sickbay and notify the Doctor. Assign a security detail."

"Aye, Captain."

"Kathryn..." Chakotay's voice was deliberately low as he leaned close to the captain. She held up a hand, already anticipating his objection.

"I won't deny medical aid to anyone in need," she said in an equally quiet voice.

"It could be a trap."

"Objection noted," Janeway said. She glanced at Tuvok, who was standing near the turbolift. "Erect a force field around sickbay. I don't want to take any chances," she said, raising her voice so everyone could hear. She headed towards the door and then turned to face her bridge staff. "Chakotay, Tuvok, you're with me. Tom, you have the Bridge."

B'Elanna enjoyed quiet. She hadn't realized it until this moment when she was alone in the cavern, the door of the box open to reveal the intricate circuitry within. Harry and Azuma had left her to the delicate task of diagnosing the Keeper's problems, while they went to set up the dilithium retrieval operation.

The Captain's tone in their recent communication had indicated that there was no time to waste; the Sernaix were nearby, and B'Elanna had no desire to see those blue-skinned, horned creatures again.

Harry had been reluctant to leave, but B'Elanna had assured him that she would be fine.

"Go. You heard the Captain," she had said. "I can handle this, don't worry."

And now that they were gone, B'Elanna was able to examine the Keeper's technology to her heart's content. So rarely did she get the opportunity for exploration; most of the time she reacted to problems, coming up with quick fixes. The chances for in-depth research proved few and far between. Even when B'Elanna did find a free moment or two, she often spent the time helping the other engineers on her staff with their duties.

She pulled out a phase link coupler from her kit and squinted at the blinking circuits. A few of the circuits looked like they had fused together, creating lapses in the routing paths. Whoever had last repaired the Keeper had attempted to reroute some of the power flow, but B'Elanna could see that an overload was imminent.

She shuffled through the items in her toolkit before settling on an inverse flux capacitor. B'Elanna deftly removed several of the burned out circuits and replaced the wiring.

"Let's see if this makes a difference," she said. Her voice sounded unnaturally hollow and loud in the cavern and B'Elanna shivered. Maybe she shouldn't have persuaded Harry to leave...

She took a deep breath and resumed working.

Time seemed to slip away from B'Elanna as she fused wires together and cut away at the defunct equipment. Her vision blurred and she blinked a few times, trying to focus.

Come on, B'Elanna, she muttered to herself. Stick with it.

The phase link coupler slipped out of her hand and B'Elanna cursed under her breath. She reached for it, and her boot slipped. As she recovered her balance, she was aware of someone else in the room with her. She turned and gasped.

"Daddy?"

"Report!" Janeway barked as she led the way into sickbay, Chakotay and Tuvok close behind her.

The Doctor looked up from his patient.

"The Sernaix has several internal injuries. I've stopped the bleeding and repaired some of the tissue damage," the Doctor told the three officers. "However, he has sustained a concussion and cannot be moved at this time."

Janeway circled the biobed, keeping her eye on the unconscious alien the whole time. She had never seen a Sernaix up close before and now, as she looked at its lanky body, the blue-tinged skin, the horns, the alien appeared much less intimidating.

"Will he live?" Chakotay asked.

The Doctor nodded. "Yes."

"Good to hear. I'd hate to explain to the Sernaix how one of their people died onboard my ship," Janeway said.

"The physiology is interesting," the Doctor said, seemingly unaware of Janeway's last comment. "I've made note of several unique features that I have not seen anywhere else, including some vestigial organs. I am, however, unable to discern what function is performed by these additional viscera."

"I'm sure you'll discover their purpose soon enough," the Captain responded, her gaze still fixed on the alien.

"Indeed, I hope to," the Doctor said. He lifted a small gray box with a collection of slides within. He pulled out one slide and handed it to the Captain.

"What am I looking at?" she asked curiously, holding the slide up to the light. She could make out a cluster of cells tinted purple. She pulled out another slide from the gray box; this one featured another sample, this time tinted blue.

"I've taken the liberty of taking some tissue and blood samples," the Doctor said in a low voice. "For research purposes, of course."

"Of course," the Captain said, unable to keep the note of cynicism out of her voice. She handed the slides back to the Doctor and turned her attention back to the alien. Janeway noted that despite its appearance of frailty, the alien was all muscle and bone. Strong, without doubt, and this observation sent a shiver down Janeway's back.

Their physical and technological superiority posed a serious threat to Voyager and Janeway knew that this was her opportunity to perhaps head off any chances of further attack. She looked up from the alien and back at Chakotay and Tuvok.

"Chakotay, contact the Sernaix. Let's set up a meeting. Let them know we have one of their people and we'd like to talk," she said briskly.

"Captain," Chakotay said. "I'm not sure I like the idea. We know nothing about the Sernaix." He looked at Tuvok for support, but the Vulcan remained characteristically tight-lipped. It's okay to take sides once in a while, Tuvok, Chakotay thought, feeling fury bubble up inside of him. Even if voicing your opinion means going against the Captain.

"This is our chance to learn more," Janeway said evenly. "I can't pass up the chance for a face to face meeting with the Sernaix here on Voyager."

Chakotay bristled at the suggestion. "What about the security issues?" He threw the comment out there, knowing Tuvok would have to respond now.

Tuvok, still stone-faced, replied, "I will assign extra crew to the security detail."

"The Sernaix have fired on us before, with no cause, I may add. We shouldn't invite them onboard without thinking it over carefully," Chakotay argued.

Janeway circled around the Doctor and came to stand directly in front of her first officer.

"Chakotay, I have thought about it and I've made my decision," she said softly. "You have your orders."

Chakotay stared back at her, grim-faced.

"I understand, Captain," he told her. "I'll contact the Sernaix."

Chakotay turned and walked out of sickbay. Janeway sighed and looked back down at the alien. He looked peaceful, almost tranquil, and she wondered if perhaps all of the animosity between Voyager and the Sernaix wasn't all just a big misunderstanding.

She sincerely hoped so.

She was aware of the Doctor and Tuvok both staring at her. Janeway cleared her throat.

"I'll be on the Bridge," she said. "Contact me if there is any change in the Sernaix's condition."

"Aye, Captain," the Doctor nodded.

Tuvok fell into step with Janeway as they proceeded out of sickbay and down the corridors towards the turbolift. The security officer's silence unnerved Janeway; she could always count on Tuvok to give her his honest opinion and the fact he had offered nothing at all during her brief discussion with Chakotay sparked her curiosity.

"Tuvok," Janeway began. She stopped and leaned one shoulder against the wall.

"Am I making a mistake? No, don't answer that. I suppose it wouldn't be the first time and it certainly won't be the last." She sighed. Chakotay's negative attitude towards her suggestion bothered her greatly. She looked up to see Tuvok eyeing her carefully and knew he had picked up on her thoughts. "What do you think?"

"He is your first officer," Tuvok said firmly. "His opinion should matter."

"I wasn't asking about Chakotay," Janeway said firmly. She sighed and crossed her arms against her chest. "I just want to know what you think."

"I am uncertain as to what the best option is for Voyager. We are in an uncharted area of space that defies definition. Once again, we are in a situation where we must make the best of every opportunity as it arises. The Sernaix have displayed hostility to us in the past, however, a meeting may prove beneficial in erasing any tensions between us."

"So you agree?"

"I said I was uncertain."

Janeway sighed and continued walking. So much for a black and white answer. But then, she considered; she wasn't necessarily looking for another course of action, only validation of the decision she had made to invite the Sernaix aboard Voyager. In that case, she thought, you got exactly what you were looking for; a diplomatic non-response from Tuvok and a flat no from Chakotay. Where does that leave you, Kathryn? And she knew the answer to this question, the answer that had motivated her for the last seven years.

"I'm doing the best I can, Tuvok," she said, not pausing to let her friend catch up with her. "I promised this crew I would get them home. I'm going to do that, no matter what it takes."

"B'Elanna?" Harry approached warily as he held the lantern high to illuminate his path. The light threw shadows across the craggy walls of the cave. His Starfleet-regulation boots crunched the gravel beneath his feet and occasionally, he could hear the drip of water and the scampering of some small invisible animal. The damp, chilly air sent shivers down Harry's back and he sincerely could not wait to get out of this cave.

"B'Elanna, you here? We're back."

Harry glanced at Azuma who followed closely behind. The two of them, along with several other Caprijens, had spent the last three hours mining dilithium. The Caprijens had developed extraction techniques that made the usual tedious process more efficient. All in all, the group had managed to collect enough dilithium to last Voyager for at least nine months.

If we're still stuck in this twilight zone nine months from now, Harry thought, and shuddered at the idea.

"B'Elanna!" Harry called again. They rounded the corner and entered the large cavern where the Keeper was housed. Azuma stopped short and Harry nearly bumped into her. "Sorry. B'Elanna!"

B'Elanna was lying on the ground, the contents of the toolkit scattered at her feet, the front panel on the Keeper still open. Harry looked at Azuma.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked, his voice rising to a feverish pitch. He knelt beside his friend. B'Elanna looked peaceful, almost as if she were sleeping. A sheen of perspiration coated her forehead, but her breathing was even.

"This is what happened to the others..."

"What?" Harry barked. "This has happened before?" He pulled out his tricorder and scanned B'Elanna. "Her life signs are stable, but she's in a coma."

"Yes," Azuma nodded. She sighed. "That's one of the problems with the Keeper. It has been adversely affecting its users, drawing them so deeply into their memories that they remain there."

"Are you saying B'Elanna is trapped inside her own memories?" Harry asked incredulously. He shook his head. "This is unbelievable. Why didn't you tell us what was going on?"

"Like I told you before, this has never affected outsiders before," Azuma said.

"You still should have told us!" Harry exclaimed. All of his goodwill towards the Caprijens evaporated as he glanced down at B'Elanna. How would he explain this to Tom?

"Especially since she had that previous, whatever you call it, vision?"

"I'm sorry," Azuma said, her tone conciliatory. Harry looked up and saw that Azuma appeared genuinely sorry. She twisted her hands nervously in front of her. "If I had known this would happen, I would have never brought you here..."

"How do we revive her?" Harry demanded. He placed his fingers against the side of B'Elanna's neck and after a few seconds, pulled them away, satisfied that her pulse was strong and constant.

"I- I don't know."

Harry stared. "You don't know?"

Azuma shrugged. "Usually they wake up when their memories have run out."

Harry glanced back down at B'Elanna's prone figure. Who knew when her memories would run out? If she started at infancy, or even at age four as she had mentioned before, it might be years before B'Elanna woke up again. Especially if the memories ran in real time.

"You should have told us," Harry repeated. "I would have never agreed to the trade if I had known what was going on here and B'Elanna wouldn't have either."

Azuma's lips tightened into a straight line and Harry sighed.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you," he said. He turned off his tricorder and reattached it to his uniform. "I'm going to the surface. You stay with B'Elanna."

"Where are you going?" Azuma asked frantically.

"I'm going back to the Delta Flyer to hail Voyager."

The boxes sat against the wall, neatly packed and ready to be loaded into the transport. Two sleeping bags were rolled up tightly and rested on top of the cooler. B'Elanna viewed the assortment with disinterest. The annual camping trip for the Torres family, except that her mother would not be joining them this year. Instead, her father's brother and his children - her cousins, whom she barely knew - would be coming along.

In a way, B'Elanna was happy to be going - she had felt an urge to get out of the house ever since the fighting had begun again in earnest. It seemed that these days everything was an issue between her parents. Little things such as what B'Elanna should wear to school or what was for dinner were magnified until their voices erupted in anger, echoing throughout the house.

B'Elanna had tried to get away from the loudness; she had locked herself in the bathroom furthest away from the scene of most of her parents' quarrels, the kitchen. But still those loud, angry voices carried through the walls, and B'Elanna, crouched in the bathtub, would bite down on her lip, wondering when the fighting would cease.

Today though, on their departure morning, both mother and father appeared to be in good moods.

"I think that's the last of it, B'Elanna," her father said, nodding at the stack of boxes. He placed one large hand on B'Elanna's thin shoulder. "I don't think we've missed anything."

"You've forgotten this," her mother said, coming up behind them. She held out a red sweater. "It gets cold in the mountains, B'Elanna. Take this with you."

B'Elanna reluctantly took the sweater; it was nearly summertime and she wanted to be free of heavy clothing, but she also knew that her mother was right.

Klingons were unusually susceptible to cold and despite the fact she has half-human, B'Elanna's Klingon side managed to get the upper hand in every instance.

"We should be back next Saturday," her father said. His tone was conversational, almost warm. The politeness of his words made it impossible for B'Elanna to believe that her parents had been arguing only the night before.

Her mother smiled down at her. "You will have a good time, B'Elanna," she said. Those long fingers, the features of which her mother was most vain, stroked B'Elanna's cheek gently.

"You don't want to come?" B'Elanna asked. "Why? You always come."

"Not this time," her mother answered, exchanging a cryptic look with her father. "Next summer."

"We should go," her father said, his voice sounding unnaturally bright.

"It won't be the same without you," B'Elanna insisted.

"Not this time, B'Elanna."

"We'll be late for the transport," her father said.

B'Elanna gazed at the camping supplies and then reluctantly, picked up her sleeping bag roll. Her father picked up the cooler and the other sleeping bag, while her mother lifted the box containing cooking supplies. The three of them walked out to the waiting transport together.

After they finished loading up the transport, B'Elanna turned to her mother.

"I'll miss you," B'Elanna said. The hoarseness in her throat surprised her, and apparently surprised Miral Torres also.

"It's only for a week," her mother said softly. She planted a light kiss on the top of B'Elanna's head. "You won't even think of me, not for a moment, while you are there. You will have so much fun with your cousins. Think about them, not of me."

"Let's go," her father said. B'Elanna hugged her mother fiercely and then climbed into the transport, sitting all the way against the back of the seat so that her long legs barely skimmed the floor.

As they pulled away from the house, B'Elanna waved to Miral Torres, who stood out on the front lawn, arms crossed against her chest. It was, B'Elanna thought, the first time she had ever seen her mother's proud posture slump.

When Janeway arrived on the bridge, she saw Chakotay, however grudgingly, had done as she'd asked; the narrow blue face of a Sernaix filled the viewscreen, a scowl

spreading across the alien's finely sculpted features. Janeway involuntarily shuddered as she noted the intricate tattooed patterns that covered the Sernaix's face, torso and upper arms. She took a deep breath as she remembered Voyager's last encounter with the Sernaix; she hoped this one would go better and if not... well, she preferred to hope for the best but was ready for the worst.

Chakotay turned as Janeway approached.

"Meet Adimh Liven of the Crimson Stone," Chakotay said in a low voice. "'Belligerent' doesn't begin to sum up his attitude towards us."

Janeway nodded and then faced the alien.

"I'm Captain Janeway," she said. "We have one of your men on board. He is severely injured."

"He must be returned," Adimh Liven barked. "Prepare him for transport immediately."

"Our doctor says his injuries make it impossible for him to be moved without further risk to his health," Janeway said. "We will take care of him and return him to you healthy and in one piece. You have my word."

"Why should we trust you?" Liven's eyes narrowed. In the background, Janeway could make out other Sernaix gathering, perhaps in a show of support for their commander. She could see the defiance on their faces. Janeway lifted her chin; she refused to be cowed by the Sernaix.

"We have nothing to gain by holding your crewman hostage," Janeway said. She glanced at Chakotay, but his expression revealed neither agreement nor disagreement with her statement. She wondered if Chakotay did want to keep the Sernaix hostage as a bargaining piece.

Let's not give them a reason to attack, Chakotay, Janeway thought. I have to assure them of our goodwill, it's our only way out of here.

"Captain," Tuvok said. "They are powering up their weapons."

Damn, Janeway thought. "So much for good intentions."

"Go to red alert," Chakotay advised.

"Take us out of range, Mr. Paris," Janeway ordered. She then turned her attention back to Adimh Liven. "Power down your weapons, Adimh. I assure you, we will not hurt - does he have a name?"

Liven hesitated before saying, "His name is Lous."

"We will not hurt Lous," Janeway said. "But I fear transporting him will cause further harm. Believe me, injuring him further is the last thing I want. However, if you'd like -" she glanced over at Chakotay, who looked uneasy, as if he was anticipating her next action - "you are welcome to come aboard Voyager and examine Lous for yourself. You'll see he's well-cared for."

The Sernaix commander remained silent for a long moment and Janeway willed herself to remain calm. She could sense the tension in the members of her bridge crew, from Paris' clenched jaw to Tuvok's alert posture.

Calm, Kathryn, Janeway thought. She looked at Chakotay and the firm line of his mouth convinced her to try again.

"Consider this an opportunity for us to get to know each other," Janeway plunged ahead. "I believe we can help each other."

Liven finally nodded. "Agreed."

"They are powering down weapons," Tuvok announced and Paris confirmed the news with a quick scan. Janeway exhaled, feeling all tension dissipating from her muscles.

"End red alert," Chakotay said as he stalked back to his chair.

"You may beam directly to our transporter room," Janeway said to the Adimh. "Janeway out."

The viewscreen went black and Janeway faced her first officer.

"You're with me, Commander," she said. Without looking, she knew Tuvok had already departed for the transporter room, and in his efficient way, had probably arranged for the security detail to be present for the Sernaix's arrival.

Chakotay nodded.

"You have the bridge," Janeway said to Tom Paris for the second time that day. Paris nodded and left his seat as another officer came to take the helm. Janeway led the way to the turbolift, Chakotay close on her heels.

As the doors closed on them, Janeway turned to Chakotay.

"Do I have your support?" she asked softly.

Chakotay shrugged. "You've never asked before. Why raise the question now?"

Janeway bit her lip. There were so many ways to answer this question, but the truce, which had only recently developed between the two of them, was still too fragile to allow her to answer in a way that would be meaningful to both of them. Janeway looked resolutely straight ahead.

It was their usual camping ground, the one they returned to year after year. B'Elanna scrambled out of the transport, landing lightly on her feet. Already, she had seen the perfect place to pitch a tent - over in the far corner of their assigned space, beneath a trio of tall evergreens.

Behind her, her father was unloading the transport, with the help of her uncle. The cousins were here too, but B'Elanna wanted to explore. She pushed through the trees, marveling at the softness of the fresh green leaves and the dampness of the ground.

She followed a meandering path down to the edge of the river. The water splashed white against the occasional boulder and occasionally, flotsam consisting of leaves, sticks, and mud flowed downstream.

B'Elanna took off her shoes and waded into the cold water, nearly yelping as it swirled around her skinny ankles. She had forgotten how chilly mountain water could be, especially this early in the summer.

"B'Elanna!"

She turned around and saw her father. He waved at her and made his way down to the edge of the river.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked.

"Very much," B'Elanna replied. She rubbed her feet against the water-smoothened pebbles. It felt good, but she knew she had to be careful; last year, she had actually slipped and fell, cutting her forehead on a stone. Her mother had been furious with her. "Do you think we can go rafting?"

"I think we can arrange that," John Torres said. "Now, come on back to the camp site. We're getting ready for lunch."

"Okay," B'Elanna said. She picked up her shoes and slipped her hand into her father's larger one. As they walked, the blues skies of the early afternoon darkened into night and suddenly, B'Elanna was standing outside of her tent, not really sure how she had gotten there.

"Daddy?" she ventured.

"B'Elanna, there you are," her father said from the shadows. She wanted to ask him if only a few seconds ago they had been walking together from the river, but she felt somehow foolish. Perhaps she had fallen asleep; it seemed to be the only explanation. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"I was at the river," B'Elanna said. Her father frowned.

"That was hours ago," he said.

B'Elanna blinked. It wasn't hours ago, she wanted to say, only a few minutes, but she remained quiet. Already her limbs felt heavy, as if she had been walking for days and her head...

"Daddy," she whispered. She held out a hand, trying to steady herself against the tree trunk, but already the ground was spinning. She looked up and between the towering tips of the evergreens; she could see a dark patch of sky speckled with tiny white dots - stars, glowing so far away in the distance. And they were moving, spinning, circling, and as she fell into the night, B'Elanna was only dimly aware of her father calling for help.

B'Elanna sat up. She had been lying in a bed, a white sheet covering her to the waist. She felt hot, clammy, and sore, as if she'd been sick. Her muscles ached and as the room came into focus, she noticed Azuma sitting in a straight-back chair at the foot of the bed.

"B'Elanna?" Azuma asked cautiously. "How do you feel?"

B'Elanna inhaled deeply. The irritating scratchiness in her throat was back.

"Water?" B'Elanna requested.

Azuma nodded and disappeared into the adjoining room. She returned a few moments later with a glass and B'Elanna drank deeply. She coughed a few times and then looked around. The room she was in was plainly furnished; two windows were on one wall and the far wall had a single door. Furnishings consisted of simply designed wooden pieces - table, chairs, a shelf and the bed in which she was lying. There were no decorations anywhere.

"Where am I?" B'Elanna asked hoarsely.

"This is my home," Azuma said. She was still crouched at the side of B'Elanna's bed. "How do you feel? Harry has gone to contact Voyager."

"I'm feeling..." B'Elanna stopped. The sensations running through her body were not so different than what she had felt while on the Barge of the Dead. "Was it real?"

"What?"

"I was on a camping trip with my father. I could feel the water around my ankles; feel the damp soil between my toes. It was different than the last time. The first time, I knew it was a memory because the scene appeared out of focus, but this, everything was more clear, so much sharper. Was it real?"

Azuma nodded. "Yes, it was."

"I was twelve years old," B'Elanna said quietly. "I don't know that I've ever had a memory that vivid before. It was... disconcerting. It was as if I was watching myself, but at the same time, I was myself as I was at that time."

"The Keeper has that effect. As I explained to Harry earlier, it has the ability to transcribe memories into reality. It gives us the chance not only to relive certain moments, but also to change them if we so desire."

"Change them?" B'Elanna asked. She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. "A second chance?"

"Yes," Azuma said. "The Keeper is a wonderful gift in that sense. It allows us to take back our regrets, giving us the ability to alter those events which have caused harm or unhappiness in any way. Of course, we cannot make the decisions concerning the timeline lightly, otherwise we run the risk of changing everything entirely."

B'Elanna nodded. "I understand that. Temporal mechanics have always been a tricky subject to handle."

"Depending on the event in question, we usually convene as a village to discuss what is to be done. Only after all of the issues have been weighed and resolved to the best of our abilities, do we consider approaching the Keeper."

"That makes sense."

"Would you like some more water?" Azuma asked, looking at B'Elanna's now empty glass.

"That would be wonderful, thank you."

As Azuma disappeared, B'Elanna rested her chin on her knees. She thought of her father and how that particular camping trip had been their last time together. She remembered the hateful words she had said to him, the words that remained permanently branded in her memory.

'If only I could take those back...'

Her vision grew cloudy as she thought of all of the things she wished she could take back. She allowed herself a rueful smile.

I suppose that's what happens when you speak first, think later, B'Elanna thought. She lifted her head as she heard Azuma approach.

"I have one more question," B'Elanna said as she took the glass from Azuma. "Something strange happened while I was... there. It was like I had jumped forward in time. Morning darkened into night almost without warning."

"A time shift," Azuma acknowledged. "On occasion, that has been known to happen. The memory is fast forwarded to another point in time."

"That's exactly what happened," B'Elanna said. "It was strange, to say the very least."

"Yes, because you were unaware of this phenomena. Often, it takes one to the moment of regret."

"So you can effectively jump around in the past?" B'Elanna asked. She sat up straight, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "To any moment you choose?"

"Within reason, of course," Azuma said. "And with forethought, of course. Now, you should rest. I can imagine this was a strange experience for you, one you ought not take lightly."

With that, Azuma left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Not something to take lightly, B'Elanna thought as she sipped the cool water. But it would be intriguing...

I could get used to this, Tom Paris thought as he glanced around the bridge. The view from the Captain's chair was certainly different than the view one had at the helm or even at the Ops or Engineering stations. In the past, Tom had often chided Harry for spending his night shifts on the bridge, noting that Harry seemed to be on the fast track for a promotion; Harry had shrugged and offered a simple, "You should try it sometime."

But bridge duty, unless under duress, never appealed to Tom. He enjoyed his off shifts, spending much of that free time in the holodeck, tinkering or writing various holoprograms, including the inexplicably popular Fair Haven program. And of course, there was B'Elanna and now, Miral... just thinking of Miral, Tom's lips curved up. Every day, Miral did something new and he found himself incredibly amused and proud to watch each little achievement, from the first smile to the first wave.

"Incoming message from the planet," Seven of Nine announced, interrupting Tom's reverie. She pressed a few buttons and a second later, Harry Kim appeared on the viewscreen. Tom grinned at the sight of his friend and stood up.

"Hello, Harry," Tom said. "Miss us already?"

"Not that," Harry answered uncomfortably. He glanced over his shoulder, perhaps in an effort to avoid eye contact. Tom's thoughts flew immediately to the worst possible scenario.

"Is it the Sernaix?" Tom asked. He kept his voice even but the very thought of the Sernaix down on the same planet as his wife and best friend terrified him. He hadn't thought it possible after all they had faced in the Delta Quadrant, but the image of those blue-skinned horned aliens occasionally disrupted his sleep and Tom would wake up sweaty, his heart beating rapidly; only when B'Elanna opened her arms to him, did he feel safe.

"No, we haven't seen any sign of the Sernaix," Harry said, relief evident in his voice. Tom felt the tension ease out of his body.

"Then why the long face?" Tom asked teasingly, but Harry didn't smile back.

"Is the Doctor available?" Harry asked.

"He's in sickbay, treating a wounded Sernaix we beamed aboard. What's the matter?"

"It's B'Elanna. She's..." Harry paused.

"What's happened?" Tom asked, advancing towards the screen. "Harry?"

"She's fallen into a coma of some kind. We've been trying to revive her, but to no use. I need the Doctor."

"I'll beam down," Tom said. He hit his comm badge. "Paris to the Captain."

"Go ahead, Tom," Janeway's voice was scratchy over the commlink. "What is it?"

"B'Elanna needs medical attention. Requesting permission-

"Denied," the Captain answered.

"Captain!" Tom exclaimed. He paced the length of the bridge, unable to contain his nervous energy. "She needs me."

"We'll send the Doctor. I need you on the bridge."

Tom bit his lip and then he looked back up at Harry.

"The Doctor is on his way, Harry," he said, taking a step closer to the viewscreen. "You will keep me informed, won't you?"

"Of course. Kim out."

Tom turned back to face his seat but then he caught Seven of Nine's eye. She was looking at him with uncharacteristic warmth and softness. He turned back around; he didn't feel like sitting.

"Lieutenant Paris," Seven said softly. "Lieutenant Torres is a strong woman and the Doctor is a capable physician. Whatever the ailment is, I'm sure the Doctor can treat her efficiently."

Tom did not respond, but he twisted around slightly to flash her his trademark grin, the one that had melted hearts across the Alpha Quadrant, but there was no heat in his smile.

He only prayed Seven of Nine was correct.

Harry met the Doctor on the outskirts of the Caprijen village. The Doctor had come fully prepared for any possibility with several medkits. Harry heaved up one of the kits and indicated the direction of Azuma's home.

"We brought her here after she passed out," Harry said as they walked up the pathway leading to Azuma's front door. The Doctor took in the little red flowers lining either side of the cobblestone pathway and the little iron sculptures of native animals to the left of the door.

"Quaint," he commented as Harry opened the door. The Doctor evaluated the interior of the house, evaluating everything from the brightly colored curtains at the windows to the simple wood furniture. "Delightful," the Doctor continued. "Tasteful color, functional furnishings, comfortable in every way."

Harry chose not to respond to the Doctor's commentary as he led the way down a short corridor and finally into the small bedroom Azuma had provided for B'Elanna.

The two men were surprised to find B'Elanna sitting on the edge of the bed, her eyes unnaturally bright and her cheeks flushed.

"Doctor," B'Elanna said. She scowled. "There's nothing wrong with me. You didn't need to come."

"I anticipated you would feel that way," the Doctor said pleasantly. Azuma and Harry were directly behind him and the Doctor glanced at Azuma, who seemed to read his thoughts exactly.

"You can place your instruments there." She gestured at the table pushed up against the wall. "I trust you will find plenty of room."

"Thank you," the Doctor said. "Now, Lieutenant Torres..."

"What?" B'Elanna snapped. "You're all making a big deal of nothing."

"What happened was more than simply a trip down memory lane," Harry said. He sat on the edge of the bed and B'Elanna shifted her position to give him more room. "B'Elanna, when we found you, you were in a coma."

The Doctor approached B'Elanna, his tricorder beeping wildly as he came closer. B'Elanna frowned.

"Sit still, Lieutenant," the Doctor cautioned. "I'm noting elevated levels of chroniton particles in your blood stream. There is no doubt in my mind that you have experienced some form of time travel."

"Did it cause any lasting damage?" B'Elanna asked in concern.

"No, not that I can see. Of course, it may be weeks before the chronitons you do have in your body completely dissipate."

"Good," B'Elanna said.

Harry stared at her. "What are you thinking, B'Elanna?"

"I want to go back," B'Elanna said. She lifted her chin defiantly and set her jaw. Let them argue with me, she thought. They can't stop me.

"Don't be ridiculous," the Doctor said.

"You said yourself you didn't notice any lasting damage. What's the problem with trying again?" B'Elanna asked. She got up from the bed and began to pace the length of the room. She stopped in front of Azuma. "Is it possible?"

The Caprijen woman nodded. "It is possible," she confirmed. "All you need to do is relax, breathe in slowly, breathe out equally slowly... you have already been touched by the Keeper, this is all you need to do."

B'Elanna nodded. "Good, good."

"B'Elanna, we don't know what the risks are," Harry argued. "You can't do this."

"There is no risk. He said so," B'Elanna said, pointing at the Doctor. Her expression dared the Doctor to argue with her and she fully expected that the Doctor would back down, as he often did when faced with that tone of voice. However, he set his jaw and seemed equally recalcitrant on the subject.

"I said I didn't see any effects from your recent adventures, not that there isn't a possibility of risk. There's a difference," the Doctor answered.

"In semantics perhaps, nothing more," B'Elanna said. "I just one to go back one more time. Azuma said that it's possible to time shift and I- I need to go back."

"Is there a reason?" Harry asked softly. "A particular moment?"

B'Elanna nodded, biting her lip. She closed her eyes, her entire face softening. When she opened her eyes, they were bright with moisture.

"Before I left for Starfleet Academy, my mother and I, we fought," B'Elanna said quietly. "It was the last time I spoke with her. I don't know she ever knew that despite everything, I loved her and I want her to know I honored her, as a daughter should. Even then."

"Wasn't this what your trip to Klingon hell was all about?" Harry asked. B'Elanna nodded.

"But this is different, Harry," she said earnestly. "My mother was already dead then. She never knew when she was alive. I have the chance to go back now and redo that moment. If you were given the chance, wouldn't you?"

"No, I would not," the Doctor broke in. "You could experience the same reaction once again. The danger is too great."

"You don't understand," B'Elanna said hoarsely. "You couldn't possibly understand."

Azuma took B'Elanna's arm and led her over to a chair. The alien's hand was cool against B'Elanna's feverish skin and immediately, B'Elanna felt at peace. She sank into the chair, feeling warm and comforted by Azuma's touch.

"I won't assist you," the Doctor said. "I helped you once before against my better judgment and also that of the Captain's."

"I don't need your help," B'Elanna said. She looked at Azuma who was gazing at her with compassion. "I have to do this."

"B'Elanna, no."

B'Elanna began to concentrate on her breathing. In, out, in, out, in perfect rhythm.

Just one more time, she thought. Her eyes blurred as she saw the Doctor walking towards her, hypospray in his outstretched hand. No, she thought, no please. She felt the hiss of the hypospray against her neck.

"What have you done?" B'Elanna whispered. She felt tired, so tired. She closed her eyes, intending to only rest for a moment...

She recognized the room immediately. Tiny and functional - nothing more than a bed, a dresser and the desk. The bookshelf, built into the walls, held several PADDs containing B'Elanna's sole vice - Klingon romance novels.

The suitcase lay open on the bed. Clothes were neatly folded on the floor, on the chair, on the bed.

And a packet, embossed with the Starfleet Academy logo, lay on top of the desk. B'Elanna crossed the room and picked it up. She pulled out the letter with her acceptance, a letter she had memorized over the long summer months, which seemed like they would never end.

"Dear B'Elanna Torres, We're pleased to notify you of your admission to the Starfleet Academy. As you know, the Academy is extremely competitive and your admission shows that you are a candidate possessing outstanding qualities. Your talents will be an asset-" B'Elanna paused reading as she heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Her hands shook as the letter fluttered from her fingers.

She turned resolutely towards the door. Her mother had greeted her with silence ever since the letter of admission had arrived and today - B'Elanna glanced at the cadet uniform neatly folded in the suitcase - B'Elanna would be leaving for Starfleet Academy.

"Do something!" Harry exclaimed frantically as he tried to shake B'Elanna awake, despite his instinct that such action was grounded in futility.

"I'm trying," the Doctor answered. The EMH rummaged through his medkit before finally settling on another hypospray. "I didn't expect the stimulator to have the exact opposite reaction." He pressed the cool head of the hypospray against B'Elanna's neck, discharging the medicine within with a cool hiss.

"Nothing," Harry announced. He picked up his tricorder. "Her neural pathways are firing randomly, almost too quickly."

"It's an effect of the Keeper," Azuma said from her corner. The Doctor whirled on the woman.

"This has happened to others and you say there isn't a way to revive them," he said.

"No. The memory must play out."

"We don't know where in time she is," Harry said. He looked down at his friend who had slumped down onto the table, her forehead resting on the crook of her arm. "How can we possibly stop the memory?"

"There is one treatment that we can try," Azuma said slowly. "We rarely attempt it because it is not always successful-"

"What is it?" the Doctor queried.

"An individual can enter the memories of the affected person and slowly bring her back to a conscious state," Azuma said, rising to her feet. "If done properly, it will awaken the affected. However, the danger is great to both parties if done incorrectly."

Not for the first time since they had discovered the Keeper, Harry wondered how he would explain all of this to Tom. Of course, Tom wouldn't be surprised by his wife's impulsiveness. Despite the fact that B'Elanna seemed genuinely at happy and for once, at peace with her Klingon and human heritages, her new found ability to change an outcome of the past could be nothing less than tempting.

This much Harry understood.

'Wouldn't you?' a little voice in Harry's head asked. 'Wouldn't you go back if you could?'

"Harry?" the Doctor asked. Harry blinked and realized both the Doctor and Azuma were staring at him curiously. "Would you attempt it?"

"A journey into B'Elanna's head?" Harry tried to laugh off his trepidation. He knew he would do it, knew he would do anything for B'Elanna, but the thought of entering her thoughts, those private memories...

"The Keeper doesn't seem to have the same effect on you that it does on her," Azuma pointed out.

"I didn't touch it," Harry said slowly. He touched B'Elanna's shoulder lightly and pulled his fingers away from the heat of her skin. "It feels like I would be invading her privacy."

"This isn't the time for that," the Doctor said urgently. "Will you do it?"

Harry nodded. "I'll do it."

Harry walked down the halls of the unfamiliar home. He knew this was B'Elanna's childhood home, could tell by the bat'leth hanging at the far end of the corridor, and of the pungent musky smell that was uniquely Klingon. He passed by an alcove and had to restrain himself from carefully examining the trio of pictures arranged neatly.

The house seemed unusually dark and when he peeked into a bedroom, he realized dusk had fallen and the sun had become nothing more than an amber colored line across the horizon.

"B'Elanna?" Harry called. His voice echoed eerily in the hallway. Harry turned a corner and there he saw B'Elanna, her back to him. She was bent over the bed, folding clothes carefully. Harry smiled to himself; he recognized the pattern of her folding well.

In the distance, Harry could hear another set of footprints. He peered down the hall and saw a Klingon woman dressed in traditional garb coming in his direction. Harry flattened himself against the wall, but Miral Torres passed him, seemingly unaware of his presence.

"B'Elanna," Miral said, her voice harsh.

"What is it?" B'Elanna asked, not turning to face her mother. She continued to fold, calmly, neatly, almost without any thought to the action.

"You will look at me when I speak to you, daughter."

"I'm busy."

"Yes, you are packing to go off. Just like your father. You are so much like your father."

"Better to be like him than like you!" B'Elanna spat back. She turned around now, and Harry knew the expression on B'Elanna's face well. On Voyager, it meant someone was going to leave Engineering minus an appendage or two. "He understands me in a way you never will."

"Is that so?" Miral Torres sneered. "Then why has he not contacted you all of this time? He wants nothing to do with you."

"That's not true!" B'Elanna exclaimed. "You drove him away! If it wasn't for you, he wouldn't have left me."

"So you blame me then?" Miral scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous, daughter. All humans are the same and you will discover the same when you run away to this Academy of yours."

"I'm not running away," B'Elanna said. She rounded the bed and grabbed some PADDs off the shelf and tossed them angrily into the suitcase. "I'm getting away from you. There is a difference.

I'm going to live the life I should have had. The one you keep interfering in."

"You don't mean that," Miral Torres said softly. "A dutiful and honorable daughter would not say such a thing."

"You never considered me 'dutiful' and 'honorable' before," B'Elanna retorted. She grabbed some picture frames off the shelf and tossed into her suitcase. The glass on one frame cracked; B'Elanna paused, running her fingers over the fissure. "You should be glad. I've been nothing less than a burden to you all of these years."

"That is not true."

B'Elanna shrugged, biting down on her lip. Miral reached out, as if to touch her daughter, but B'Elanna ducked, slipping away so that the bed was between them.

"I'm glad to be away from you," B'Elanna said. "I've been waiting for this day for a long time."

A long silence followed, mother and daughter staring at each other.

And then finally, Miral, sotto voce, said, "If you were a mother, you would know..."

Miral Torres turned then and walked back down the hall. As she passed, Harry thought he could see the Klingon woman's lips quiver. B'Elanna turned and headed after her mother, but Harry caught her arm.

"B'Elanna," he said quietly.

B'Elanna jerked her arm away. Her eyes were wet and she quickly drew the back of her hand across her face and attempted to smile.

"What are you doing here, Harry? Did you hear everything?"

"Every word and I've come to bring you home."

"If you heard it, you know why I can't go back with you," B'Elanna said. She sat down at her desk and rested her cheek against the palm of her hand. "It doesn't hurt any less, Harry, not even after all of this time. This is my chance."

"You can't go after her, B'Elanna," Harry said. "You risk changing the timeline."

"What difference does it make?" B'Elanna shrugged. "I want her to know how I feel. If my daughter ever said such things to me..."

"If you salvage your relationship with your mother, so many things might change."

"Nothing would change. I'd still go to the Academy."

"But it could be different this time. Think about it. Maybe this time around, you would graduate," Harry said. "Don't you see?" He crouched in front of B'Elanna. "I don't think you'd be the same B'Elanna Torres we've come to know and love. Changing this moment could change everything."

B'Elanna sniffed, keeping her eyes focused on a spot directly beyond Harry.

"I never meant a word of what I said," B'Elanna whispered. "I was so angry, that's all. We never did see eye to eye that last summer and I've always regretted that."

"I know you want to do this," Harry said quietly. "I was thinking about it myself. Wouldn't it be nice if I could just erase the last seven years in the Delta Quadrant? I'd be married now, maybe even have a kid or two. Maybe I'd even get promoted. But just because I can change it doesn't mean I should. We're the sum of our experiences, B'Elanna, and no matter how tempting it is to go back and redo our lives, we shouldn't. It would mean everything else that happened in between would have been meaningless."

B'Elanna swallowed hard. "She's right there, Harry, just down the hall..."

"And your daughter Miral is on Voyager," Harry said. "What happens if you change everything now? It's possible nothing would play out the way it has. You might even be an upstanding Starfleet officer somewhere in the Alpha Quadrant."

"It's an insignificant moment..."

"Our lives are built on insignificant moments. We make them significant, B'Elanna. Remember your daughter. Come with me now, B'Elanna. Please." Harry held out his hand. "I'd hate to have to explain to Tom what happened here."

B'Elanna bit her lip. "She's not coming back, is she?"

"No." Harry turned to look over his shoulder as if expecting Miral to walk back into the room. "The choice is yours. You can go after her and risk changing the life you have made for yourself on Voyager or you can come back with me and nothing will have changed, not at all."

B'Elanna heaved a sigh, one that seemed to shake her entire body. Harry reached out, resting his palm on her shoulder.

"What is it?" he whispered.

She glanced at him, her brown eyes watery. "I wasn't a very good daughter," she whispered. "What if I'm equally bad as a mother? What if Miral grows up to be as angry with me as I was with my own parents?"

Harry was truly surprised. B'Elanna had never expressed any insecurities before about motherhood; quite the contrary, he thought she had taken to her new role extraordinarily well. For once, Harry thought, something took precedence over those engines.

"B'Elanna, how can you say that?" Harry asked. "You're great with Miral."

She sniffed, waving her hand, as if dismissing his comment. Another surprise. Damn, Harry thought, I'm not cut out for this conversation.

"Have you told Tom?" Harry asked softly. "How you feel?"

"No, how can I?" B'Elanna's shoulders slumped. "He'd laugh it off. He, he's so good at this, Harry."

"Believe me, so are you. Everyone says so. B'Elanna, you've got to believe me. You're setting yourself up for perfection, something that's not possible. If you think going after your mother is going to change things, then that's what you should. I won't stand in your way." Harry spread his arms in a gesture of surrender, but he kept his gaze focused directly on B'Elanna. She ducked her head to the side, pressing one palm against her eyes. "B'Elanna..."

"When the Doctor put Miral in my arms," B'Elanna said softly, "I experienced a whole range of emotions, joy, uncertainty, anticipation - I was overwhelmed, Harry, and some days, I still am. I look at Miral and I can't believe I'm responsible for her. Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night and I'm looking for the real parents to come in. What if I don't do this right? Harry, I'm terrified at the prospect."

Harry shook his head. On one hand, he was surprised by B'Elanna's truthfulness and emotional state, but he also knew that changing this particular event in her life would not give B'Elanna the answers she needed.

"I still think you're making a big mistake," Harry said in a warning tone of voice.

She drew in a sharp breath and stood up, blinking. Harry couldn't look but he knew as B'Elanna walked past him that she was actually going to do it, she was going after her mother...

"B'Elanna!" he stood up. He had to make one more try. He owed B'Elanna that much. "B'Elanna, if you go, you could lose everything! Your husband, your daughter, your family on Voyager... is it worth it?"

B'Elanna stopped, mid-step and turned around slowly.

"Look, it's okay," Harry said. He got up and walked towards his friend steadily. "I don't think what you're feeling is wrong, but you're going to figure everything out. Not right away, of course, but think of it as an engineering problem. You break it down, piece by piece, and you figure out the solution. Maybe it's not the best analogy, but you're going to be a great mother to Miral. I know that."

B'Elanna glanced down the corridor and then back at Harry. Back down the hallway, back at Harry. Time seemed to stop as B'Elanna contemplated her decision. Harry leaned against the wall, arms crossed against his chest, seemingly casual, but he was uneasy; unpredictable as B'Elanna was and her often surprising outbursts of emotion caused her to act irrationally on occasion.

Come back with me, Harry pleaded silently. Please.

"You're right," she whispered. "I'll come back with you."

Harry exhaled.

"You won't regret it," he told her. B'Elanna gazed at him sadly.

"I already do," she said.

In Chakotay's opinion, there were too many people in sickbay. In addition to himself, Tuvok and the Captain, a security detail of four crewmen stood off to the side, their hands on their phasers.

And he hadn't even counted the Sernaix: Ilix, Adimh Liven's representative, and the wounded Sernaix, Lous.

Ilix was tall and muscular, like all Sernaix, and he walked with a measured gait, a symptom of his obviously double-jointed limbs. His eyes, dark and deep-set beneath his prominent forehead, shifted between Janeway and Chakotay.

"Your forehead ornamentation..." Ilix finally said as his gaze settled on the first officer.

"Yes?" Chakotay asked coolly.

"You must be highly ranked," Ilix said. He rolled up his sleeve, revealing various artistic renderings against his pale blue skin. "As am I. I am a zvir on the Crimson Stone."

"A zvir?" Janeway asked curiously.

"When Adimh Liven steps down as commander of the Crimson Stone, I will succeed him," Ilix said as he stared at Janeway in fascination. "And you are a female of your species?"

"Yes," Janeway said. She exchanged a look with Chakotay, who was alternately fascinated and nervous about the tone of these conversations. Ilix seemed entirely too laid-back for Chakotay's tastes and his Maquis instincts were perked for any sign of intrigue on Ilix's part; the Sernaix, in Chakotay's opinion, were not the type to indulge in casual conversation.

"I have so very little contact with females," Ilix said. He stepped closer to the Captain. Tuvok reacted, his hand on his phaser. Janeway held up a hand, stopping Tuvok from further action. Chakotay sighed. "I wish to learn more about your people..."

Janeway turned to look at Chakotay and he recognized that look; she had seen an opening and was going to take it. Perhaps, Chakotay mused, I've been mistaken all along...

He shifted from foot to foot as he watched Janeway talk to the Sernaix. Her voice was low, pleading, and she gestured frequently with her hands, as if to punctuate her sentences. Chakotay glanced at Tuvok, who was also watching the conversation with interest, his eyes darting between the captain and the Sernaix. Chakotay leaned towards Tuvok.

"Talkative fellow, isn't he?" Chakotay asked. Tuvok nodded.

"Given our past encounters with the Sernaix, I do find his behavior unusual," Tuvok said in an equally low voice. "He is uncommonly friendly."

"Do you think he's up to something?"

"Perhaps," Tuvok said. His eyes narrowed slightly as the Sernaix took a step closer to the captain. "With the Sernaix, anything is possible."

"I was afraid you would say something like that."

Gradually, much to Chakotay's relief, the conversation shifted from the cultural differences between Sernaix and humanoids to the condition of the wounded Sernaix.

"As you can see, Lous is being well-treated," Janeway said. "Obviously, we mean him no harm."

Ilix eyed the Captain skeptically, all traces of goodwill gone from those dark eyes. "We have been lied to before."

"I'm not lying."

"Then explain the guards," Ilix barked out. "And the force field..."

"Your past actions have not given us any reason to trust you," Chakotay said, taking the moment to step into the conversation. He glanced at Janeway and she offered him the smallest semblance of a smile. Feeling bolder, Chakotay went on, "However, if you show you are worthy of our trust, I assure you, we will remove the force field."

"What about the guards?"

"No," Tuvok said. "According to Starfleet guidelines, they must remain at all times when non-Federation personnel are onboard."

Janeway arched an eyebrow, but said nothing at all in response to Tuvok's dictate. The Vulcan stepped back, seemingly removing himself from any further conversation.

"Well?" Janeway looked back down at Lous, whose eyes were darting back and forth, looking first at Ilix and then back at the Captain. "We didn't mean to infringe on your space. Our arrival was an accident, an unfortunate circumstance of fate."

"I find that hard to believe. Many have taken advantage of the Sernaix," Ilix growled. "We will not be seduced by mere words."

"Believe me, that's not our intention. However, we'd like to request your help in getting us out of this-" Janeway looked at Chakotay, but he shrugged. "Our scans of the area

show we've been caught in a bubble of some kind that is keeping us from our home, Earth. All we're trying to do is find a way home. As I said before, we are willing to offer you our assistance in return."

"What do you have that we would want?" Ilix snapped.

It was true Voyager had little to offer the Sernaix in terms of technology, Chakotay thought, but he could tell by Janeway's expression she was not willing to concede the point.

"I don't know. Perhaps we should talk about it?" Janeway's lips curled up. Chakotay stifled a grin.

"How do I know this isn't a trick?"

Janeway glanced over her shoulder back at Chakotay; her look told him, very plainly, that she was finding this conversation boring.

So much rides on this, don't lose your focus now, Kathryn, Chakotay thought. Next to him, Tuvok shifted position. It was a slight movement, but enough so that Chakotay was aware of the Vulcan's evident concern in the tableau being played out in front of them.

"Well?" Janeway tapped her fingers against the biobed, a physical sign of her growing impatience with the Sernaix. "What do you think? You're closing yourself off without even listening to what we have to say. Where I come from, that's a sign of an incompetent diplomat."

Ilix's eyes narrowed as he glanced down at his injured comrade and then back at Janeway.

You've got his attention now, Kathryn, Chakotay thought.

Janeway leaned forward so that only a few inches separated her from Ilix.

"Let me make one thing clear," she said softly. "In case there are any lingering doubts on your part, my only goal is to get this ship home. That has been and will always be, my only objective."

Ilix nodded finally. "Very well," he said. "I will hear what you have to say."

"You won't be sorry," Janeway said. "Commander, please see our guests to the briefing room."

Tuvok stepped aside to let Ilix pass, accompanied by two of the security guards. The other two guards remained behind to look after the patient.

Out in the corridor, Janeway and Chakotay fell into step together.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Chakotay shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm asking your opinion," Janeway said. A note of desperation crept into her voice. "Chakotay-"

"You shouldn't make promises you might not be able to keep," he said finally.

"Is that all?"

Chakotay smiled. "Yes, that's all."

"Then that's easy," Janeway said. She scowled at Ilix's back. "We've been in far worse situations than this, Chakotay. A little bluff never hurt us."

"They have technology more advanced than ours," Chakotay pointed out as they rounded a corner.

"Are you saying they are more of a danger to us than the Kazon? The Hirogen? Species 8472? The Borg?"

"We'll find out, won't we?" Chakotay said. He paused in front of the turbolift. "For what it's worth, I support you. I may not agree with you all of the time, but you never have to doubt my loyalty."

Janeway put her hand on his forearm and leaned in closer so mere centimeters separated them. In that moment, she knew the distance between them had been bridged and for that, she was grateful.

"I know," she said.

"How do you feel?" the Doctor asked. He looked at his two patients - Harry and B'Elanna - with obvious concern etched across his features.

"A little shaky, but fine," B'Elanna said. She rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them. She felt cold, incredibly cold, as if she had been frozen. She was still sitting in the same chair as before and her muscles had stiffened during her last trip to the past. She stretched cautiously, flexing her legs and arms.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed, his head bowed and his arms resting on his knees. He looked nauseous and B'Elanna bit her lip.

He had risked so much for her, she knew. Without thinking, she got up from her chair and sat next to Harry, placing her hand on his back.

"Thank you," she said softly. The depth of her confession to Harry embarrassed her; she had told him things she hadn't even dared to tell Tom. In a way, she felt relieved, thankful she had finally revealed her uncertainties to someone.

"You're welcome," Harry said. He groaned. "I feel absolutely terrible. I can't believe the Caprijens do this."

The Doctor quickly came over with a hypospray.

"This should help with the nausea," he said. "Both of you will be fine with some rest. I trust you won't be doing anything of this nature again in the near future."

"I certainly won't," Harry said. He stood up shakily, putting one hand against the wall for balance. After a few seconds, he looked normal again, much to B'Elanna's relief. She knew she would never forgive herself if something had happened to Harry.

Because of me, she thought.

"It was so tempting," B'Elanna said. She wanted to explain to the Doctor and Harry, but got the feeling they would not understand. After all, the Doctor was a hologram and Harry, well, Harry had led an almost serene life. His emotional scars, if he had any, were superficial at best. "I can't explain it any better than that."

"Don't worry about it, B'Elanna," Harry said gently. He made his way to the table where a pitcher of water stood. "It's all right."

At that moment, the door burst open and Azuma entered. Her face was flushed red and her silver hair, normally straight and shiny against her back, was wild around her face.

"What is it?" B'Elanna asked.

"You must return to your ship immediately," Azuma said. "They have come."

"Who?"

"The aliens," Azuma said. "We have picked up their life signs near your shuttlecraft."

Harry, B'Elanna and the Doctor exchanged looks. Was Azuma referring to the Sernaix?

"I'd advise against returning to the Delta Flyer," the Doctor said. "You've both just undergone traumatic experiences and if it is the Sernaix, neither of you are in a shape to take them on."

"Sorry, Doc," Harry said, as he put down his glass and B'Elanna grabbed a pair of phasers from her toolkit. She tossed one to Harry.

"Let's go," she said.

The Doctor sighed. He found a third phaser and followed Harry and B'Elanna outside, blinking against the brightness of the day.

Janeway had lost track of how many meetings she'd held here in the briefing room. So many different species had sat around this table, some friendly, some neutral, and others hostile. She glanced at Tuvok, seated to her right, and Chakotay at her left. At least she knew she had their support now.

As for Ilix, he was completely alone, but Janeway had no doubt there were plenty of Sernaix ships available to come to his aid if he summoned them.

There's only one Federation ship out here, Janeway thought. Heavens only knows how many of them are out there.

She shivered, and then immediately resented the brief show of weakness. She leaned forward, knitting her fingers together in front of her to prevent her hands from shaking, from betraying her once again.

"I told you what we want," Janeway said. "What do you want?"

"You can provide us with nothing."

"That can't be true," Janeway said with a smile. "If that was indeed the case, why are you talking to me now?"

"You have one of our men. That is unacceptable."

"You could have taken him by force but you didn't."

"Your ship would not survive our assault." A note of pride slipped into Ilix' voice and Janeway wondered if he was aware of the paradoxical nature of his comment. From their first encounter with the Sernaix, Janeway was very aware the aliens wanted nothing less than Voyager's destruction. Perhaps only Lous' presence on Voyager kept them safe.

"Believe me, I'm aware of that," Janeway said, her lips curving up into a half-hearted smile laced with cynicism. She shifted in her seat. "Are you saying that there is nothing at all we can help you with? Technology? Medical supplies? Anything at all?"

Tuvok raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Janeway knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Yes, old friend," she thought, "I know the consequences, but I'm willing to risk it. One more time. If it'll get us home, then I'm going to do that."

"I will take your proposal back to Adimh Liven," Ilix said finally. "I have listened to your proposal, Captain, and I believe this is sufficient conversation."

Janeway inhaled deeply, trying to prevent frustration from completely overtaking her. She nodded.

"Of course," she said. "I don't think I could ask for more. You've been very... receptive."

Next to her, Chakotay shifted but Janeway didn't dare look at her first officer. "But if I may, before you go, I have a question for you."

Ilix nodded. "Go ahead."

"In our first encounter, you fired upon us, seemingly without provocation," Janeway said. "We had done nothing to you. Why?"

"I apologize for that, but you must accept our reasons."

"With all due respect, I don't think I understand anything," Janeway said. "I offer you a trade and you deny it. We did nothing to provoke you but you still attacked us. Those had better be some pretty damn good reasons."

"I think you'll understand more clearly when I tell you what happened the last time we trusted," Ilix said. "Eighty thousand years ago, a race such as yours, humanoid, entered our space. They came in peace, much as you do now, and once we let our guard down, they proceeded to slaughter us, intending to claim our territory as theirs. We were able to defend ourselves and expel the humanoids from our space, but it was generations before we were truly able to recover from the genocide inflicted on our people."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Janeway said. "But you have to believe we weren't responsible for those atrocities. I told you before; our only motivation is getting home. We have no desire to stay here."

"Adimh Liven has authority to make binding decisions. He will consider your proposal."

"That's all I can ask," Janeway said. She got up from her chair and rounded the table to shake hands with the Sernaix. Ilix looked at her in confusion. "It's an ancient Terran custom, a gesture of goodwill. I hope you take it in the spirit that it's offered." She clasped Ilix's cool hand between hers. "I look forward to hearing from Commander Liven."

"Thank you, Captain. And if Lous is well enough to leave, I shall take him back to my ship."

Janeway nodded at Tuvok. "Have Lieutenant Paris meet you in sickbay," she said. "If Lous appears healthy enough, by all means, he should return to his ship."

When Tuvok and Ilix were gone, Janeway swirled around in her chair so she directly faced Chakotay.

"You were right about one thing," she said. "We will never be friends with the Sernaix, especially now that we know of their history with other humanoids. At least we understand what drives them now."

"I didn't want to be right," Chakotay answered. "I always hope you'll prove me wrong. As you have on previous occasions."

"This isn't a contest about right and wrong, Chakotay," Janeway said. She sighed and slumped down in her chair. "We lose sight of that sometimes, I think."

Chakotay remained silent and Janeway was suddenly grateful for his solid presence at her side. She got up from her chair, suddenly feeling energized.

"An alliance is out of the question right now," she said over her shoulder as she headed towards the exit. "But what happened today, it's a good start."

B'Elanna, Harry, and the Doctor approached the Delta Flyer cautiously, their phasers drawn. From all outward appearances, the Delta Flyer appeared undisturbed. B'Elanna pulled out her tricorder.

"I'm picking up life signs inside the Flyer," she said, keeping her voice low. She glanced at the shuttle. "I believe they are Sernaix."

"How did they get in?" the Doctor asked.

"Good question," B'Elanna said. She rounded the Flyer carefully. She was very aware that the Sernaix inside could detect their presence at any moment. She noticed that The Caprijen including Azuma had arrived, armed with various clubs, pikes, daggers and other primitive weapons. While she didn't have much faith in their weaponry, B'Elanna was certainly grateful for the added strength the Caprijen would doubtless provide. "I'm not picking up any signs of tampering."

Wait -" she paused by the security panel next to the hatch. "It appears they used some kind of reverse algorithm to crack through the security encryption. Harry, there's alien code mixed in with ours. I've never seen anything quite like this before."

She squinted, trying to make sense of the unfamiliar markings, but was unable to get a good readout before Harry grabbed her arm and pulled her to the side.

"What?" B'Elanna hissed. Harry showed her his tricorder in response. The Sernaix inside the Delta Flyer were approaching the hatch. Evidently, they had been detected.

The Caprijens, along with Azuma, drifted away from the Delta Flyer, but remained nearby. B'Elanna didn't blame them for backing away; this wasn't their fight. Hell, it's not even my fight, B'Elanna thought. The ache in her head grew stronger and she had to lean against the Flyer for a moment to compose herself.

She checked her phaser, making sure it was set to the highest stun level. Truth be told, despite her hearty dislike of the Sernaix and their "shoot first, ask questions later" attitude, B'Elanna had no intention of killing anyone.

So much for an easy away mission, B'Elanna thought as she stepped away from the shadow of the Delta Flyer. She crouched in front of the hatch as the Doctor and Harry took their positions opposite of her.

At that moment, the hatch flew open and the two Sernaix appeared.

"Harry!" B'Elanna hissed as she noticed one of the Sernaix had already drawn his weapon, a thin stiletto type blade, one that looked exceptionally sharp. But Harry had already jumped to his feet, his phaser out.

"No!" B'Elanna screamed, knowing instinctively that the Sernaix would beat Harry to the draw. She lifted her phaser and fired. She took a few steps forward and fired again, just as the Sernaix leaped in Harry's direction. The other Sernaix was heading towards B'Elanna, his almond eyes narrowing as he waved his equally menacing blade in her direction. B'Elanna fired again and again, but to no avail. The Sernaix continued to approach her. B'Elanna backed away, fumbling with the settings on her phaser.

"What the hell is going on?" she hissed over her shoulder at Azuma, who appeared at her shoulder.

"Is that an energy weapon?" Azuma asked.

"Yes, of course," B'Elanna said. She hastily raised the levels on the phaser, setting it to "kill."

"Those don't work!" Azuma yelled as the Sernaix drew closer. B'Elanna fired again and yet the alien kept approaching her.

"You're telling me now?" B'Elanna screamed. She saw a couple of the Caprijen men had chosen to get involved in the fight and were helping Harry, but the Sernaix was still approaching her, undeterred by the phaser fire. In fact, by the leer crossing that ugly blue face made B'Elanna think perhaps the Sernaix reveled in the phaser fire... why?

"Give me that!" B'Elanna screamed, spinning around. She grabbed a wooden club from one of the Caprijen men, and flung it in the Sernaix's direction. The club struck the Sernaix in the nose and for a moment, the alien paused, as he howled in pain. "What works?"

"Nothing, just ancient weapons such as those. The aliens possess the capabilities to absorb energy through some device upon their person," Azuma explained.

B'Elanna pondered this newest revelation about the Sernaix's ability to absorb all of that energy to... to do what?

"Well, you'd better come up with a plan," B'Elanna retorted. She whirled around, looking for something she could use to defend herself. She glanced over her shoulder to see the Sernaix staring not at her, but at the Doctor.

B'Elanna made the connection between Azuma's earlier comment and the Sernaix's obvious interest in the EMH.

"Doctor!" B'Elanna yelled. "Take yourself offline!"

"Acknowledged," the Doctor said, obviously perturbed by the Sernaix. He reached for his holoemitter, but the Sernaix had already covered the distance between the two of them and was plunging his long, skeletal fingers into the EMH's holomatrix. The Doctor blinked out and then came back, slightly fuzzy and distorted.

"Help me!" B'Elanna exclaimed. She was already heading in the direction of the Doctor and with the help of several Caprijens, they managed to push the Sernaix away long enough for B'Elanna to grab the holoemitter.

"I'll see you later," she said under her breath as she took the EMH offline. She sincerely hoped that the Sernaix hadn't caused serious damage to the EMH, but that would be something to deal with when they returned to Voyager.

If they returned to Voyager...

B'Elanna turned her attention back to Harry. Along with some other Caprijens, he was attempting to disarm the Sernaix, but all of their actions seemed to be grounded in futility.

How could the Sernaix, against so many people, still have the upper hand?

"B'Elanna!" Azuma screamed.

B'Elanna whirled around to see the second Sernaix alien coming straight at her. She dropped the holomitter and grabbed a dagger from one of the assembled Caprijen. Already, her muscles ached with tension as she crouched, waiting for the Sernaix to attack.

"Show me what you've got," she taunted him. The Sernaix laughed at her, a laugh that shook his reed-thin body.

"You are a foolish woman, humanoid."

"You aren't the first person to tell me that. I'm sure you won't be the last."

The Sernaix leaped at B'Elanna, but she ducked out of the way, grateful for the first time in years for the Klingon exercise programs Tom had created for her.

They circled each other warily, neither daring to make the first move. Around them, the Caprijen watched with bated breath. B'Elanna tried to ignore the shouts coming from nearby; she guessed Harry must be in the thick of fighting and she couldn't allow herself to be distracted by anxiety for her friend.

"Surely we can talk about this," B'Elanna panted.

"There's nothing to talk about," the Sernaix sneered. He reached out, the tips of his long fingers barely skimming B'Elanna's cheek. B'Elanna jumped out of the way, bumping into Azuma.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," B'Elanna assured the alien woman. She inhaled deeply and held her dagger out in front of her. Just beyond the fountain, she saw Harry trip, fall, the Sernaix standing over him, a look of triumph etched across that narrow blue face...

B'Elanna lunged forward; the suddenness and speed of her action took the alien by surprise and the dagger plunged into the soft skin in his side. The alien snarled and reached for B'Elanna's neck.

"Not so fast," she breathed. She pushed against him as hard as she could, sending him flying in the opposite direction. The Sernaix scowled, but made no move to retaliate.

"Are you giving up?" B'Elanna challenged.

"We do not give up. We are the defenders of the realm." The Sernaix stumbled to his feet.

"Yes, I got that the first time you said it," B'Elanna told him, recalling Voyager's first encounter with the Sernaix and their bold statement. "Look, we don't want to hurt you. Just leave us alone and we'll be out of your way-"

The Sernaix stopped, his eyes twitching and glassy. He glanced over his shoulder at his fellow Sernaix who was still standing over Harry's prone body. And then, just as mysteriously as they had arrived, the Sernaix vanished.

B'Elanna rushed to Harry's side. The ensign struggled to sit up. She helped him gently, her hand at the base of his back and the other behind his shoulders. To her horror, B'Elanna saw that Harry was bleeding profusely from his shoulder. She beckoned to Azuma, who brought the Doctor's medkit. Quickly, B'Elanna found a coagulant factor and injected it into Harry.

"That should slow the bleeding," she told him. "I don't want to bring the Doctor online, because the Sernaix seemed to absorb energy and they seemed especially interested in him. I don't want to give them a reason to come back."

B'Elanna pulled a cloth bandage out of the medkit and pressed it against Harry's wound, hoping the pressure along with the coagulant would stem the bleeding.

"That explains why my phaser was practically worthless," Harry said as he struggled to his feet. He swayed slightly, groaning as a fresh stab of pain hit him.

"Easy, Harry." B'Elanna took his arm and led him to the Delta Flyer's still open hatch. "I think you've played hero enough for one day. Sit still for a moment, okay?"

Harry sat down on the ramp leading into the Flyer, shaking his head ruefully. "I haven't felt this bad since Tom and I were captured by Akritirians."

B'Elanna nodded, recalling the time early in Voyager's time in the Delta Quadrant when Harry and Tom had been falsely imprisoned under horrific conditions. Even now, Tom refused to discuss the graphic details of that incarceration with her and until today, B'Elanna had never heard Harry mention the incident either.

B'Elanna pulled out her tricorder and scanned Harry. "You will live to fight another day, Starfleet. I wonder what the Sernaix wanted."

Harry, his face pale, shook his head.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Harry said. Now that she had attended to his primary wound, B'Elanna took stock of her friend. He had several cuts on his face as well as an angry welt forming on his cheek.

"Can you stand?" she asked gently as she rose. Harry nodded and with B'Elanna's assistance, he stood up, albeit still a bit shakily.

"Are you leaving?" Azuma asked. B'Elanna turned around to face the Caprijen woman.

"I'm afraid we have to," B'Elanna said. "Harry is hurt and we need to get him back to Voyager as soon as possible." B'Elanna didn't continue, but she was already thinking of her baby, feeling a desperate longing to get home to hold Miral in her arms.

"We have doctors who can treat your friend," Azuma said. B'Elanna smiled at the woman gratefully. Even though Azuma had not been entirely honest with them, B'Elanna still felt a curious affection for the friendly woman.

"I know," B'Elanna said softly. "But we really do need to get back to our ship. Our Captain will want to know about this encounter with the Sernaix." She also knew that sooner or later, she would have to make a full explanation to Janeway regarding her actions on the planet. Despite the fact she felt Janeway would understand what had happened with the Keeper and would excuse her behavior, B'Elanna felt a sense of urgency to explain everything directly and as quickly as possible.

"The Sernaix?" Azuma looked confused.

"The aliens. The blue horned aliens who were just attacked us," B'Elanna said. "They call themselves the Sernaix. 'Defenders of the Realm.'" B'Elanna said the last part in a tone tinged with sarcasm.

"We never knew what they were called," Azuma said. Her silver eyes drifted to a spot somewhere beyond B'Elanna. "They simply came, time after time, taking everything we had. When we developed the cloaking system, they bothered us no more. We were... safe."

"What about the Keeper?" B'Elanna asked abruptly, causing Harry to glance at her with obvious concern. "Do the Sernaix know about that?"

"No, we do not think so," Azuma said. "But in their hands..."

Harry and B'Elanna exchanged a look; they knew so little of the Sernaix, but the thought of the Sernaix, with their powerful technology, capturing the Keeper troubled both Harry and B'Elanna.

"The modifications I made to the Keeper should hold you until you find a more permanent solution," B'Elanna said.

"Thank you," Azuma said. "We're grateful for your assistance."

Harry moaned and B'Elanna looked at her friend in concern. Blood had already soaked through his bandage; evidently the wound was deeper than she had earlier thought.

"We've got to get back to Voyager," B'Elanna said. She squeezed Azuma's hand. "Good luck to you."

B'Elanna helped Harry to his feet, letting her friend lean all of his weight on her.

"Come on," she said softly. "We're going home."

On the trip back to Voyager, B'Elanna piloted the Delta Flyer while Harry gave a complete debriefing to the Captain and Chakotay, both of whom were stunned by the Sernaix attack.

"I didn't expect an outright attack on my people like that," Janeway said. "Not after the recent meeting we had."

"Well, they weren't looking to make friends, I can tell you that," Harry said. B'Elanna nodded in agreement.

"It was definitely a 'shoot first, ask questions later' scenario," she said. "And we learned some interesting things about the Sernaix."

"I look forward to hearing about your encounter," Janeway said. "I'll meet you in the shuttlebay."

"Understood. Delta Flyer out."

Harry groaned as he settled himself into his seat. B'Elanna glanced at him.

"There are some painkillers in the medkit," she said. "That should help."

"Good idea," Harry said. He rose from his seat and made his way back to the shuttle. B'Elanna pulled up a view of Voyager. They were only minutes away from landing in the shuttlebay and she was incredibly relieved to see the starship on the viewscreen. Home, she thought, Voyager is home. Acknowledging Voyager as home made her feel slightly

ashamed of the fact that she had even suggested settling on the Caprijen planet earlier. As if anything could replace Voyager...

"B'Elanna?" Harry called.

"What is it?" she didn't turn around, instead kept her focus on bringing the Delta Flyer in for a smooth approach. The shuttlebay doors slid open and the force fields that separated the bay from the vast expanse of space dropped.

"I found something," Harry said. He made his way back to the front of the Flyer, his gait slow and measured due to some of the injuries he had sustained in the fighting. B'Elanna turned slightly to give Harry her attention. "What do you think of this, B'Elanna?"

Harry showed her a small black metal square, each side about a centimeter in length with a thickness not much more than human fingernail. Small hair like prongs stuck up from the square.

B'Elanna frowned, fingering the cool metal. She could feel the ridges of microtechnology beneath her fingertip. "Put it in the toolkit. We'll take a closer look in Engineering." She turned her attention back to the viewscreen as the console in front of her blinked, indicating that all was in preparation for the shuttle to land.

"Right." Harry slid into his seat as B'Elanna maneuvered the Flyer into the shuttlebay. They set down gently and Harry smiled. "Nice job, Maquis."

B'Elanna shrugged off the praise and then helped her friend exit the Delta Flyer. As promised, the Captain was waiting - with Miral cuddled in her arms - for them.

"Good to see you," Harry said. He attempted a smile, but B'Elanna could see, despite the painkillers, Harry still experienced some residual pain. She speculated the knife wound to his shoulder was deeper than she had thought.

"I'm glad to see you're both in one piece," the Captain responded. "Are you all right, B'Elanna?"

"Nothing wrong with me that a good night's sleep won't take care," B'Elanna said. "And how is my baby?"

"I kidnapped her from Ensign Wildman on my way. Captain's prerogative," Janeway said as B'Elanna took the baby. B'Elanna smiled, brushing her lips lightly against Miral's head, breathing in the baby's fresh, clean scent.

"Hi," B'Elanna whispered against the baby's cheek. Miral grabbed a chunk of B'Elanna's hair, clutching it in her chubby little fingers and B'Elanna held her baby closer. Never would she have thought a baby could make her feel so complete. Holding Miral and instinctively understanding the little sounds the baby made caused B'Elanna to smile.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Harry said. He pulled out the Doctor's holoemitter and brought the EMH back online.

"Please state the nature of the- hello there, Captain," the Doctor said. "I have to say, it's good to be back onboard. My trip to the planet was considerably more adventurous than I would have predicted."

"So I hear," the Captain said dryly. "Any reason for the attack, Mr. Kim?"

"B'Elanna and I debated reasons on our way back, but we haven't come to any firm conclusions," Harry said. "The Sernaix were obviously after something, but I'm not sure

what. None of our systems, other than the security systems, appeared to be tampered with."

"You've obviously learned a great deal about the Sernaix," Janeway commented. "Perhaps we can use that knowledge to our advantage."

"Everything we've discovered has been purely physiological, nothing to do with technology. Their energy absorption techniques make many of Voyager's weapons next to useless. Not a good sign if we have to face the Sernaix again in a combat situation."

"As fascinating as this conversation is," the Doctor interjected, "Ensign Kim has sustained some injuries due to his ill-advised heroism and it's necessary to get him to sickbay."

Janeway cast an amused glance in the direction of her medical officer. "Very well, then. Ensign," she said, "you can fill me in on the way."

"You're just jealous we had to take you offline and you missed a chance to play hero," B'Elanna said cheekily. She gestured in the direction of the door. "After you, Harry."

"I owe you both an apology for my actions down on the planet," B'Elanna said. She watched as the Doctor ran a dermal regenerator over Harry's various bruises and scratches. Janeway had taken custody of Miral once again and was cooing - uncharacteristically - at the baby in a way that amused B'Elanna greatly.

"It's expected from you," the Doctor said. "There you are, Ensign Kim. Good as new, if not better. Frankly, Lieutenant, if you weren't so headstrong, things would be a lot more simple around here."

B'Elanna scowled. "I should have left your program offline."

"It's all right, B'Elanna," Harry broke in. "I can understand that the possibility of revisiting your past, of being able to change those things which have always nagged at you - it is tempting. Like I said before, I don't know if I would have been able to turn away either if the Keeper had offered me a similar chance."

"I know," B'Elanna said. She ran her fingers over the edge of the biobed. "Getting back to the Alpha Quadrant didn't matter to me as much as it did to other people. I had no one waiting for me the way you did and then I made contact with my father. That conversation, brief as it was, convinced me that maybe the two of us could have a relationship in the future. Now I've lost that chance. As for my mother, well, I don't even know if she's alive or not. To have had that opportunity..." her voice drifted off as she focused on Janeway, who appeared completely enthralled by Miral.

"It's all right," Harry repeated. The Doctor nodded his agreement, compassion crossing his holographic features. B'Elanna looked up as the sickbay doors opened, revealing Tom and Chakotay.

"Hi," B'Elanna said softly as Tom wrapped an arm loosely around her waist. "I'm glad to see you."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Tom said teasingly. He looked at the Doctor. "Can I take my wife home now, Doctor?"

"Yes." The Doctor nodded. B'Elanna took Miral from Janeway and then followed Tom out the door.

Janeway exchanged a glance with Chakotay as Harry slipped off his biobed.

"One minute, Ensign," Janeway said. "We have something to discuss."

Harry looked curiously at Chakotay, who remained somber and unsmiling. There was no hint of anything on the first officer's face and Harry couldn't help but feel uneasy as the Captain appeared equally serious.

"Of course," Harry said. He rounded the biobed so he was directly facing the Captain. The Doctor remained where he was, but his facial expression displayed equal curiosity.

"I believe you need this," Chakotay said, handing Janeway a small rectangular case.

"This is long overdue, Harry," Janeway said quietly as she opened the box, revealing a single pip resting against a blue velvet background. "But your actions, today and in the past, have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are deserving of the rank of lieutenant." She carefully attached the pip to Harry's collar, her fingers brushing lightly against his neck. The pip secured, Janeway took a step back and admired her handiwork. "There will be a party tonight to celebrate your promotion in the mess hall at 2100 hours. I believe Chell will unveil a new dish-" Janeway grimaced at the prospect - "in your honor."

"Sounds, um, delicious," Harry said, color rising in his cheeks.

Chakotay clapped Harry on the shoulder.

"That pip looks good on you," Chakotay said. "Congratulations. You earned it."

Harry beamed as the Doctor added his own well wishes. Janeway folded her arms against her chest, letting a slow smile spread across her lips.

"Now you're dismissed," she said. "Lieutenant." She laid emphasis on the final word.

"Aye, ma'am," Harry grinned. He nodded at Chakotay. "I'll see you on the bridge."

Janeway sighed as Harry left the sickbay and Chakotay leaned towards her in anticipation. The Doctor, recognizing when his commanding officers needed a private moment, discreetly excused himself. "Well?" Janeway asked, frowning, all signs of her earlier good mood dissipating. "You heard what B'Elanna and Harry had to say about their encounter with the Sernaix. Maybe I'm mistaken, but I thought we had reached a level of understanding with Ilix."

"Perhaps the Sernaix on the planet didn't know about the meeting here on Voyager," Chakotay suggested. "It could be they were looking for their injured comrade and when they couldn't find him, they chose to break into the Flyer."

"I hope you're right," Janeway said, her gaze focusing on the Doctor, puttering away in his office. "But I find it hard to believe a race as advanced as the Sernaix would suffer a breakdown in communication. I have the funny feeling they're up to something."

Chakotay didn't say anything but he had the sinking feeling Kathryn was right; the Sernaix had something up the proverbial sleeve, and frankly, he didn't want to know what that was. He rested his hand lightly on Janeway's forearm and met her gaze intently.

"Whatever it is, Voyager is more than up to the challenge," he assured her. A flash of cockiness and determination crossed Janeway's face and Chakotay knew, when push came to shove, the Sernaix didn't stand a chance against Kathryn Janeway.

Tom returned to the bridge, leaving B'Elanna alone in their quarters with Miral. Miral was drowsy as she rested against B'Elanna's shoulder, her tiny fingers shoved into her mouth. B'Elanna rocked gently back in forth in the new chair Tom had replicated for her shortly after Miral's birth.

This, B'Elanna thought, was the perfect moment - one filled with all the dreams and aspirations she had for her own child. Idly, she wondered if her own mother, that other Miral, had enjoyed a similar moment with her.

What had been Miral Torres' last words to her?

"If you were a mother, you would know..."

B'Elanna's throat tightened. She had never put much weight on Miral's words, thinking it one those of useless comments mothers hurled at their daughters in volatile situations, but now, holding her own Miral in her arms, B'Elanna began to understand truly the significance of what her mother had been trying to tell her.

"Miral," B'Elanna whispered to her now sleeping daughter. "I'm glad we're alone because there's something I've been meaning to tell you. Rather, it just occurred to me and I'm afraid you're going to have to indulge your mother in a little bit of silliness, just for a moment or two."

B'Elanna carefully got up from the rocker and carried Miral to the crib. She laid the baby down gently. Gently, she covered Miral with a little pink blanket embroidered with a graphic of Voyager - a gift from the Captain - and touched Miral's soft cheek with her fingers.

"I'm only just now realizing you're going to grow up into your own special, unique person." B'Elanna smiled in anticipation of all of the milestones Miral would encounter. Some would be pleasant, others would be wrenching - but B'Elanna knew she would treasure every moment. "I'm sure we're going to have a lot of disagreements as you get older. I won't always do what you want me to do and I'm not always going to see things your way. In fact, there are going to be times when I stand in your way. You're going to have to be patient with me because there are no manuals on how to be a good mother, but I'm going to do my best for you and I hope you understand that."

In her crib, Miral's little pink lips opened slightly and then closed, the lips turning up into the tiniest semblance of a smile. B'Elanna carefully smoothed the blanket over Miral's round body, resting her hand lightly on Miral's stomach.

B'Elanna bit her lip, blinking back the tears that pooled in her eyes. "I'm glad we had this talk."

As she stood alone in the quiet of the quarters she shared with Tom Paris and their daughter, B'Elanna was very aware of all of the signs of the life they were building together, all of the little touches which made this home.

And that realization made the knowledge of what she could have had - and more importantly, what she could have lost - all the more painful.

In the privacy of the turbolift, Harry reached up to finger the new addition to his collar. He smiled to himself and then, as the doors opened onto the bridge, he composed himself into the very image of what he imagined a lieutenant should look like.

"I see you finally got your pip. Congratulations," Tom said, turning around in his chair to face Harry. Harry offered his friend a smile as he headed to his station. "But don't forget, I still outrank you."

"For now," Harry answered cheekily.

"Gentlemen," the Captain said, but there was no heat to her voice; she was obviously enjoying the light moment as well.

Harry activated his console, taking a moment to reacquaint himself with this area of space. He ignored the others as they chatted idly back and forth as he reran a sweep of the sensor grid. Nothing out there but stars, the occasional M-class planet and... the console beeped at him. Harry's fingers flew over his console as he attempted to make sense of the readings. There was, theoretically, nothing out there, but that energy distortion, the pattern of the waves looked vaguely familiar.

"Captain!"

"What is it, Harry?" the Captain rose to her feet, propelled by the urgency in Harry's voice.

"I'm picking up an energy ripple..." he worked furiously, watching as the wave patterns took form on his consoles. "I think it might be the Sernaix!"

"Hail them," Janeway ordered crisply. She advanced towards the viewscreen, hands on her hips.

"No response. I'll try again on all frequencies. Sorry, Captain, still nothing," Harry reported in frustration as he watched the scanning band run through all possible channels. "They're ignoring us."

"And I thought we were friends," Janeway said, the words dripping with sarcasm. She turned towards Harry, a questioning look on her face, but he had turned his attention back to his console. Still no Sernaix ship visible, only energy ripples - damn, what kind of technology did they have anyway? By studying the wave distortions, he could just decipher the outline of the ship.

"I got you now," Harry said under his breath, as he rendered what he thought might be a reasonable facsimile of the ship. "You're a beauty, aren't you?"

"Captain!" Tom's voice jolted Harry out of his thoughts. "I'm picking up some kind of directed energy pulse coming directly towards us."

"Evasive maneuvers! Tuvok!" Janeway whirled around, just as Chakotay ordered a red alert.

"I'm powering-" Tuvok didn't finish his statement as Voyager was rocked by a powerful blast, causing most of the bridge crew to lose their balance.

"Damage report," Chakotay said, twisting around in his chair to face Tuvok.

"Minor damage to decks three and four," Tuvok reported. "No injuries reported."

"Shields are at forty-three percent, Captain!" Harry called out. Janeway exchanged a look with her first officer, who had now risen to join her at the helm. "I doubt we can sustain another blast of that intensity without serious damage or casualties."

"Reroute all secondary power sources to the shields," Janeway ordered. "And take all unnecessary systems offline."

"Aye!"

"Captain?" Tom turned away from the helm, a puzzled expression on his face. "The Sernaix are gone."

"Gone?" Janeway glanced at Chakotay. "Harry?"

"Nothing," Harry confirmed. The wave distortion patterns had indeed disappeared from his console. "They're not out there, Captain."

Chakotay stood very close to the Captain, keeping his voice low.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

Janeway turned to face him grimly. Perhaps all of their talks with the Sernaix had been in vain. Chakotay had been right; they were dealing with an enemy who had no desire for peace. Looking back now, Janeway wondered how she could have been so easily deceived. It hurt to have to admit this, but Janeway kept her voice steady as she spoke.

"My guess is that Adimh Liven didn't like my proposal," she said. "Though, I would have appreciated a note to that effect much more than another display of the Sernaix's weaponry."

"Would you like me to try hailing them?" Harry called from his station. Janeway shook her head.

"No, Lieutenant," she said. "I got the message."

Chakotay shook his head. "They could have destroyed us if they wanted to, but they didn't."

"It's a warning. Nothing more, nothing less. I guess we really are all alone out here."

Janeway took another look at the viewscreen; there was nothing out there except for the blackness of space. Janeway squared her shoulders.

"Chakotay," Janeway said. "Put Voyager on a twenty-four hour tactical alert. Harry, Seven, update the database with everything we know about the Sernaix. Next time we face them, I want to be ready."

Written by: Seema

Beta: Cimorene

Producers: Thinkey, Anne Rose and Coral