



Episode 8 - In the Eye of Empyrean

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"Mr. Paris, bring us into orbit," Captain Janeway stood behind the helm watching the viewscreen that was filled with the green-brown planet. Its appearance brought to mind a ball of mud with half-dead leaves and grass mixed in.

"Aye Captain," Tom answered with a grin, then echoed her own thoughts. "It's not as pretty as the last one is it, Captain?"

"It doesn't need to be pretty, Mr. Paris. Any port for the storm." Janeway eased herself back into her chair with a look towards Chakotay. Chakotay met her gaze evenly for a few seconds, then turned back to his work. The tension was still palpable between them at times, but it was getting better. At least that is what she told herself. She pulled herself away from such thoughts and focused on the work at hand.

"Captain's Log - Stardate 55242.73

We are currently investigating the cluster of stars, in hopes of finding some answers to our current predicament. Sensor readings have led us to a Class-M planet within this region. The only planet within the star cluster. It is interesting to note that all the stars within the star cluster seem much closer and brighter now, as though they are all contained in the same area of space.

The search for a way out of this place is of secondary importance now however. Voyager's most recent battle with the Sernaix has left her once more in dire need of repair. The Sernaix are obviously quite capable of finishing any battle they begin with us and I am left wondering why they have not done so as of yet. They do not have any interest in dialog or diplomacy, leaving the conclusions that either they are playing a game of cat and mouse with us, or that they have another reason for allowing us to survive." Janeway paused for a moment to suppress an involuntary shudder. "In either case I intend to be ready for them. Lieutenant Kim and Seven of Nine have been compiling a database on the Sernaix and analyzing it for whatever weaknesses they can find. The next time we are in a confrontation with the Sernaix, I intend to survive more than by the whim of our attackers.

This planet may be the key we've been searching for. The key to the symbols found by Lieutenant Kim and Commander Chakotay. The key to our defense against the Sernaix and most importantly the key to our return to the Alpha Quadrant. To home.

Janeway clicked off the recording and authenticated the log with her thumbprint before turning her attention back to the bridge crew. "Mr. Kim, can you give me more detailed information about the inhabitants you read earlier?"

"Not much more, Captain." Harry's fingers flew over his console with practiced ease. "There are several separate concentrations of life signs spread over each of the three continents. Fairly technologically advanced, at least on par with us Captain, perhaps more so. From our readings humanoid, but that is as much as I can give you at this point."

Janeway nodded, "Open..." she started as Harry interrupted her.

"Captain, we are being hailed by the planet." Harry turned to look at her.

Janeway quirked a half grin at her ops officer, before standing up, and moving towards the viewscreen as she settled her hands on her hips. "Then by all means, Lieutenant, put them on screen."

"On screen," Harry acknowledged. The screen blinked as the view of the planet disappeared and an alien took its place. Janeway looked back quickly towards Tuvok and Chakotay, the only sign of her surprise as her command mask remained firmly in place. Chakotay's face remained impassive at the realization while Tuvok's eyebrow arched in typical fashion. For a moment, she was unsettled by the seeming juxtaposition of reactions between her two second most senior officers, but it wasn't apparent as she turned back to face the alien on the screen. For all intents and purposes, an Inryeth.

"Welcome to the eternal home of the Ayreth." The alien seemed to look at each member of the bridge crew for a moment before continuing, "I am Speaker Mateth." He focused once again on Janeway, his dark glowing eyes settling on her.

"Thank you, Speaker Mateth." Stepping easily into her role as a diplomat, she stated, "I am Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager." She watched for any sign of recognition, that perhaps this alien had already read their intentions. Either these aliens weren't as forthcoming about their telepathic abilities or they had none. "We're a peaceful people trying to find a way back to our own home. Our ship has been damaged. We would like to negotiate with you for supplies for our repairs as well as shoreleave for the members of our crew who are most in need."

Mateth watched Janeway for a few moments, "Of course, Captain. You and your crew are welcome here. If you would like, we can transmit the co-ordinates for you. You may bring whomever you wish Captain, however we would request that both you and your second in command at the very least join us on the surface for a tour of our cave system. It is the pride and spiritual center of our people." His eyes swept over the bridge crew again as if taking their measure. "I can assure you your ship will not be further damaged while in orbit around our planet."

"Thank you, Speaker." Janeway nodded, then looked towards Harry.

"We're receiving co-ordinates now Captain," Harry said, answering her unasked question.

"We'll beam down our landing party within an hour. Janeway out." She turned to face Chakotay. "I'm glad they didn't have a cloaking device of some sort, I was beginning to feel as though we're trapped in some sort of intergalactic Brigadoon." She could hear Tom's chortle behind her and she grinned herself.

"Our new friends seem rather familiar, Captain." Chakotay offered thoughtfully, not acknowledging Janeway's attempt at lightening the mood.

Janeway nodded with a back to business attitude, "Right down to offering us a tour of their caves." She thought for a moment, "They may be distant cousins of the Inryeth. Like the Vulcans and the Romulans."

Chakotay looked towards Janeway continuing speculatively, "And, like the Romulans and the Vulcans, maybe one developed telepathy while the other didn't."

"Perhaps, Chakotay." Janeway wasn't sure of that yet, but didn't vocalize her doubts. Instead, she set to the task at hand, preferring action to guesswork. She met Chakotay's gaze evenly. "You and I will lead one team, Tuvok will lead the second and Tom, you will lead the third..."

Tuvok's eyebrow arched at her order. "Captain, it is contrary to Starfleet protocol for the two most senior officers to be off the ship at the same time..."

Janeway looked at her Vulcan friend and cut him off with a raised hand, "I realize that Mr. Tuvok. I also realize that in ordering you to the surface as well that I am removing the three most senior officers from the bridge. Call it intuition and illogical, but I believe Speaker Mateth when he says the ship will be safe here. I want your impressions of the aliens we meet on the surface. Besides I intend to leave Voyager in good hands." She turned back to Chakotay and took in his slight grin; when he had not responded to her earlier attempt at humor she had backed off, but now she answered his grin with one of her own. "Chakotay, please make the away team assignments. Mr. Kim, while we're gone, you're minding the store."

Harry turned slightly in his chair, internalizing his pride and pleasure at the Captain's trust in him and nodded his head in acknowledgement, "Aye, Captain."

She smiled at Harry's calm, professional manner. The junior officer doing his damndest to live up to his promotion, very different from the wet behind the ears Ensign on his first duty assignment that she had met so long ago. In fact, it seemed ages since she'd first met that eager young officer. She only allowed herself a moment's introspection before shaking herself back to the present. "I'll be in my ready room."

Chakotay mentally assessed the teams assembled on the transporter pad while they waited for the Captain to arrive. Tom, Icheb and Dalby were going over their equipment, making a final inspection before beam down. Tuvok stood impassively while Nicoletti and Vorik seemed to be discussing the minerals and metals needed for the latest round of repairs in Engineering. Wildman, the final member of his and the Captain's team, seemed to be making fine adjustments to her tricorder as he looked towards the door. Kathryn would be the last to arrive, a few minutes late, so that no one would be

responsible for keeping the Captain waiting. Just as the thought passed through his mind, the transporter room doors opened. 'Speak of the devil...' leapt unbidden into his mind.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting." She approached him with a smile.

Chakotay handed her a tricorder and couldn't help but smile back. "Not a problem, Captain." He motioned to the transporter pad, "After you." He followed her up onto the platform, taking his position.

Janeway looked over the others who had all come to a ready stance on the pad, then with a slight nod from Chakotay she turned to the transporter chief. "Beam us down, Mr. Mitchell."

The familiar tingle of the transporter beam enveloped them and faded away leaving them standing under the glaring daylight of the Ayrethan planet. Janeway brought her hand up to shield her eyes as she scanned their surroundings. Oddly shaped plant life with huge colorful flowers surrounded them, and large rock structures that seemed have been grown from the land surrounded them, reflecting the light in rainbows that arched between them. The air was surprisingly humid, though she couldn't see any water sources visible, the light and heat would have made her guess this was a desert, but it seemed more akin to a jungle from the feeling and scent of plant life in the air.

"Over here, Captain." Chakotay, who'd been looking in the opposite direction from her, tapped her shoulder and redirected her attention to four figures approaching from the north. As they got closer, it was apparent that the leader was Speaker Mateth with three other Ayrethans. They stopped a few meters away from the away team, and only Mateth approached.

"Welcome, Captain Janeway of Voyager. Welcome to the eternal home of the Ayrethans." The alien held out his hand palm forward, his fingers bent slightly as though inviting inspection of his claws. Janeway mimicked the gesture and Mateth smiled.

"Thank you, Speaker Mateth," Janeway acknowledged then began to introduce the others around her. "My first officer, Commander Chakotay." Chakotay nodded towards the alien and working on instinct mimicked the movement as well. "Commander Tuvok, Lieutenants Paris and Nicoletti, Ensigns Vorik, Dalby, and Wildman and Icheb." Each of the others either nodded or mimicked the greeting to the best of their ability as they were introduced. "I hope it won't be an inconvenience for this many..."

"Of course not, Captain," Mateth answered before she could finish. "These ones have volunteered to be your guides." The three other Ayrethans stepped forward. "Sutokh, Nalbet, and Dokar." Janeway could make out differences between the Ayrethans by slight variations in color, or height of their frill, but for the most part, they looked surprisingly similar to each other as they stepped forward to give her the same greeting as Mateth.

"You won't be joining us, Speaker?" Chakotay asked, his senses alert in the unfamiliar landscape.

Mateth shrugged slightly, "If I did not have other duties to attend to I would welcome the relaxation of a tour of the Sacred Caves, unfortunately my path lies elsewhere for the moment. I will be available to you when you return." Chakotay's eyes narrowed as he watched the alien. While he did not feel as though there was a threat, it did feel as though facts were being kept from them.

"Thank you, Speaker." Janeway answered, looking towards Chakotay and silently ordering him to stand down. He could feel the command in her gaze and a part of him wanted to rebel, to force her to speak aloud, but his need for the fragile peace they were beginning to weave between them won out and he stepped back.

Sutokh stepped forward gracefully, the emerald color of his skin glowing brightly. It was seemingly impossible to determine how much of the glow was the light of the planet and how much was his own natural incandescence. His frill waved slightly as he moved. "I will lead you and your companions on a tour, Captain." He gestured towards Nalbet and Dokar. "If you split your other people into two other teams they will lead them. This way you will all have a chance to see some portion of the grounds. It is far too extensive to give you a full tour without making it an overnight excursion." Janeway nodded slightly, indicating to the other two team leaders to assemble their teams while Ensign Wildman joined her and Chakotay. Her mind was busy processing the fact that the Ayrethans had known to bring three guides, exactly the number of parties she had in mind when the idea of a tour was mentioned. Could it be simple coincidence or was it something more? Her instincts told her that the Ayrethan who moved so purposefully towards Tuvok's team was an engineer of some sort, since their primary mission was to assess the possibility of obtaining the repair materials Voyager needed. Sutokh's deep, almost purr-like voice pulled her out of her thoughts and back to reality. "If you would follow me Captain, I will show you and your team the northern quadrant of the gardens."

Janeway watched for a moment as the other two teams were led off in separate directions. Tuvok's team was heading for one of the large stone pillars, while Tom's team followed their guide off into the west. For a moment she felt some misgivings, but Chakotay's hand on her shoulder brought her out of her silent musings once more. "Of course, Sutokh." Kathryn smiled and motioned for Sutokh to lead the way. The ground was soft beneath their feet, a texture that even through their boots felt like either heavy loam or moss. Lush plants, low to the ground in various shades of blues and greens teemed around them, filling the air with a heady perfume. "Your planet is very beautiful," she spoke as they stepped out from the shadows that the monolithic structures provided and was forced to shade her eyes once more, "but its also very bright."

Sutokh regarded the sky thoughtfully then looked at the three humans who were carefully shielding their eyes, "I suppose it is. I hadn't thought about it. It is lovely to bask under on a quiet day though." He smiled disarmingly, "Soon we'll be beneath the shade of the stalori again" he motioned towards the tall, rock outcroppings, "and will remain so until we reach the entrance to the holy grounds."

"The stalori, are they naturally occurring?" Janeway looked further up the path they were taking where more of the monoliths towered from the ground.

Sutokh nodded, "Yes, they are the guardians to the entrances to the Nashala, our holy grounds. You may enter them anytime you wish."

Chakotay had remained quiet up until now, merely observing the Ayrethan. "Are all visitors granted access to the Nashala, Sutokh?"

Sutokh seemed uncertain for an instant before schooling his features. "We do not often have visitors, Commander Chakotay."

Chakotay crooked his eyebrow at Janeway his expression clearly saying, 'A nice non-answer'. Despite what his expression conveyed to the Captain, he continued. "They remind me of Hoo Doos from some of Earth's deserts. Except much larger."

"Except for the rainbows, I'd have to agree with you Commander." Janeway smiled again at Sutokh as she regarded their surroundings once more, for now ignoring Chakotay's non-verbal message, "I must say the effect is rather breathtaking. Do you know what causes it?"

"Small fragments of crystal embedded in the surface of the stalori that catch and refract the light." Sutokh stopped for a moment to allow the team's eyes to readjust as they had just passed into the shadows once again. "But I find the science of the effect diminishes in some ways, do you not?" Sutokh's eyes sought out Chakotay as he spoke and again Janeway felt the tingling along the back of her neck, reminding her of her earlier suspicions. The echo of something Chakotay might say and the Ayrethan seeking the Commander out with his eyes was almost a confirmation for her of their telepathic ability. "Earth? That is your people's eternal home?"

Janeway found herself giving Chakotay a half-hearted glare as he grinned at the alien's question. "Not all my people. Some of my people come from different worlds. Ensign Wildman and myself are from Earth," she motioned to Wildman who smiled as she adjusted her tricorder to take other readings, "but Commander Chakotay is from a place called Trebus. Although his ancestors came from Earth."

"Your people are travelers then." Sutokh spoke after walking in silence for a few meters.

Chakotay watched as Kathryn swept on the opportunity to push the alien for more information like a kestrel on a sparrow. "Yes and no." Sutokh looked at her again, seemingly curious. "We are explorers but my people, the people on Voyager, have been away for many years and we were swept away unwillingly on that journey. Then just as we were almost home, we were brought here through circumstances we couldn't control and we have no idea where here is."

Sutokh's face regarded hers as though weighing facts in his mind, then he spoke. "You are far from home once more, and yet not as far as you were before."

Janeway looked towards Chakotay, relief and frustration playing in her eyes. The Ayrethans did know something but he had to suppress a grin at Kathryn's reaction to the cryptic answer. The scientist in her liked facts, not puzzling riddles to be solved. Chakotay gave her a quick glance, asking permission to try a different method of questioning then she would employ. He caught her quick 'be my guest' glance that she threw his way. "This place. This universe is completely different from our own."

"It exists outside," Sutokh answered still leading them further amongst the monoliths though he didn't look at either Chakotay or Janeway. Wildman regarded the Ayrethan

oddly for a moment, but Janeway grabbed the obscure remark. 'Outside, outside of what?' her expression almost screamed. She turned her gaze on Chakotay as if willing him to continue.

Chakotay pondered his next statement for a moment, then spoke. "The stars here are very strange."

"This place touches all time at once. So the light that is here is always here. Yet it is outside of time." Sutokh's turned to face both Janeway and Chakotay. Janeway's eyes opened wide as she analyzed his words.

"Time still passes." Chakotay continued to push.

"Time here is an illusion. Outside of this place, all time exists. It does not pass because this place touches all." Sutokh continued at a leisurely pace, while Janeway's mind whirled with the possibilities. The Bubble was outside of time, out of sync with the normal universe, yet it touched all points along the time continuum in the normal universe. She found herself understanding the cryptic remarks with greater ease as the Ayrethan continued.

Chakotay looked back at the Captain. Her face was the contorted into the look of sheer concentration she got when studying a fascinating puzzle. "This is your eternal home."

"It has always been here, it will always be here." Sutokh watched them impassively.

A naturally occurring Bubble universe that existed outside the normal continuum of time. Kathryn, fascinated by the possibilities as she put together all the pieces and already running through theories on how something like this would occur and possible means of escape, didn't notice that they had stopped in front of one of the monoliths.

"The entrance to the Nashala," Sutokh announced.

The steps beneath their feet were well worn with age and the light in the caverns seemed to be naturally occurring, as he could not discern any sort of artificial light source. These were the first things that Tuvok noted as they walked further down the steps into the Ayrethan's holy grounds. His musings were disturbed by a sigh of relief from Lieutenant Nicoletti. Both he and Ensign Vorik looked up at the same moment, scrutinizing their human companion. She seemed to wilt somewhat under their attention before explaining, "It's much cooler here, sir and the light isn't so hard on the eyes."

"Indeed," Tuvok answered. While environmental conditions largely did not concern him, he did welcome the relative heat and bright light of the Ayrethan planet, despite the high humidity. A quirk in Ensign Vorik's eyebrow indicated that the younger Vulcan felt the same.

"I'll start scanning for the minerals we need for repairs, sir." Nicoletti started calibrating her tricorder once more.

Vorik arched his eyebrow. "As this is a holy area for the Ayrethans, it is illogical for us to scan for the mineral deposits we need here, Lieutenant. It would be unlikely for the inhabitants to allow us to mine what we need from a place they consider spiritually important."

Nicoletti looked at Tuvok questioningly, if they couldn't do the scans for the minerals they needed... then why were they there? Tuvok met her gaze evenly; it was obvious that Lieutenant Torres did in fact set the mood for the entire Engineering section, as it seemed that all of Voyager's engineers had all picked up some of the half-Klingon's impatience.

Nalbet spoke up in a half-whispered voice, "Actually we are in the last caves of the holy ground in this area." He indicated the furthest west wall. "If you scan in that direction you may find the minerals you seek, and the Elders would likely grant you permission to extract the substances from there."

Tuvok watched the alien closely. Its body language did not lead the security chief to believe any ill will, but it was becoming apparent to him at least that the aliens were indeed keeping certain facts from them. The guide spoke little, his movements were more efficient than graceful - more than either Mateth's or Sutokh's - and he seemed to know a great deal about the various minerals that Voyager's engineers had been sent to gather. Tuvok added this observation to everything else he had observed and spoke.

"You are an engineer for your people." It was a statement, not a question, which Tuvok posed to the other.

Nalbet nodded slightly, "Yes, my function would be closest akin to one of your engineers."

Tuvok analyzed this amongst the other observations he had made. Logic dictated that it was not coincidence that his team of Engineers would be guided by a local Engineer to a site that would allow them to make detailed scans for the minerals that were required without having made those needs known to the local government. The Captain had not had any further conversation with Mateth after the initial contact ensuring that he was in attendance both times she had spoken with their contact within the government here.

"We encountered a race identical to your own a short time ago." Tuvok watched the alien closely for a reaction. There was no overt shock or surprise; it simply looked at him as if expecting him to continue. "They called themselves the Inryeth."

Nalbet stopped and regarded him for a moment with glowing eyes. "This is our eternal home, so I would not have knowledge of others that did not live here. It would be outside of my function, but perhaps Speaker Mateth or one of the Elders would have more answers for you in this regard."

"Indeed." Tuvok continued to walk alongside Nalbet as the engineers continued scanning. "There was one significant difference between your people and theirs." Nalbet regarded him again, obviously having thought the subject to be closed. Tuvok continued without expression, "Their people were openly telepathic."

Nalbet to his credit did not show any outward signs of discomfort. His movements remained unchanged, his crest still seemed to move slightly in an unfelt breeze, and his color did not deepen or change in anyway. However Tuvok sensed this was part of what was being held back from them. Finally Nalbet spoke, "The difference is not in the ability but in our willingness to share it."

The security chief regarded the alien and nodded. "Your people are telepathic."

"We share an awareness of each other's consciousness and the consciousness of others. It is reflexive, a part of us. It is not a conscious effort to read each other or yourselves. It merely is." Nalbet watched as Vorik and Nicoletti shared readings.

"Then you have known our intentions and needs since we entered orbit." Tuvok surmised.

Nalbet looked at Tuvok, his expression open. "Our people would not have welcomed you otherwise. Our eternal home would have been barren to you."

"Indeed." Tuvok's eyebrow arched, the only outward sign of his alarm at the far-reaching telepathic abilities the race seemed to possess as a whole.

"Commander Tuvok," Vorik called as he approached, drawing Tuvok's attention away from Nalbet. "Would it be possible for us to go further into the cave system? We are reading what may be large deposits of certain elements that have been on Lieutenant Torres' 'Wish List' for some time. They are at the outside edge of our tricorder's range from this location, however. If we were to go deeper into the cave, we would be able to get a more definitive reading."

Tuvok regarded the younger Vulcan coolly, "Are these elements critical to the repairs to Voyager's propulsion and shields?"

"No, sir," Vorik answered.

Tuvok seemed to consider it carefully, "Have you located the mineral deposits needed for the critical repairs at this point?" Vorik nodded. "I am reluctant to extend our time here for elements that are not currently critical to our situation."

"These elements are critical to proper maintenance of the replicators, life support, and other systems aboard ship. While currently all these systems are functioning within normal parameters, if we are isolated in the Bubble for an extended duration it will be necessary to perform the maintenance on these systems," Vorik answered.

Nicoletti watched in fascination while the two Vulcans interacted. She had asked Vorik to speak to Tuvok as she found the security chief difficult to reason with. What would have been difficult for her, seemed instinctual for Vorik as he calmly offered a logical reason for their further scans and exploration. She smiled slightly as Tuvok nodded.

"Agreed, Ensign." He turned back to Nalbet. "Would there be any objection to us continuing to scan further into the subterranean system?"

Nalbet seemed to consider. "No. No objections. You are welcome to whatever you may find within the caverns as long as all minerals you need to extract are beyond the west wall."

"Very well, we will continue deeper." Tuvok nodded to the two engineers watching as they walked slowly down the tunnel, taking their scans.

Nalbet regarded Tuvok, "I will return to the surface at this juncture. This tunnel does not require a guide to go further, it has no branches from it or dangers. When you wish to return simply come back." Tuvok regarded him for a moment, judging for any deception. In a moment he nodded his acceptance, deciding it was an act of trust by Nalbet; trust that they would not desecrate their sacred place in anyway. With that he turned and followed Nicoletti and Vorik further into the caverns.

Dalby stood to the side running scans on the various plant life, watching while Tom and Icheb walked the central garden with the Aryethan. He grinned as he watched the pair interact with the alien. Tom Paris had spent too much time with Janeway in his opinion, by the look of rapt fascination he was giving the alien. 'Apple doesn't fall too far from the tree,' Dalby grinned. For all of Paris' problems previous to Voyager, Janeway had transformed him into a right proper Starfleet Officer. Dalby shook his head ruefully as he considered himself, 'And you're not the only one, Paris.' On the other hand, Icheb looked as though he'd rather be anywhere but wandering through a flower patch listening to an overgrown, glowing frilled lizard. 'Ah well kid, you want to be Starfleet, get used to plastering a happy face on.'

Tom watched, as Dokar seemed to glide across the mossy path under their feet. The brilliant green of his skin contrasting with the light gold of his frill as it glistened in the sun. The Aryethans were fascinating to look at and Dokar was interesting to listen to. At first, the conversation had lulled whenever Tom asked a direct question, so now he just listened while Dokar extolled the wonders of his planet only occasionally offering comment or praise on a subject already broached. "The gardens are certainly beautiful and the light show is spectacular." He gestured at the rainbows of light that seemed to jump from building to building.

"A naturally occurring phenomena that has been harnessed as part of our technology." Dokar continued speaking. "That same light is used to light the holy caves that run beneath the gardens. The basis for our technology is our planet. They exist together, one nourishing the other. It is very ancient, and even our best minds do not fully understand how it works." As they walked along admiring the flora, a light silence fell over the group again.

"Lieutenant Paris, did you fly with Nova Squadron when you were at the Academy?" Icheb broke the silence.

The non sequitur caught Paris off guard as he looked at the young Borg, and slowed so that they would fall back from Dokar. "Uh, yeah, I did. Why do you ask Icheb?"

"I am considering trying out for the Squadron when I enter the Academy," Icheb answered, obviously bored with his surroundings.

Tom grinned slightly, remembering when he was impatient with anything that wasn't exciting, then froze as he realized what he was doing. Giving himself a mental shake, he focused his attention on the boy. "Get through first year first, Icheb. You can't even try out for Nova Squadron until your second year and most people don't get on the team until the second time they've tried out."

"I understand this Lieutenant. However, my best chance of performing at optimum efficiency when I do try out is to have trained with one of Starfleet's finest pilots." Icheb persisted.

A full grin broke out over Tom's face at Icheb's flattery, "Chakotay already spoke to me about creating some advanced training scenarios for you. I should be able to come up with a few that will give you an edge. However, right now we have duties to perform."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Icheb seemed satisfied and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Tom shook his head, wondering how he had ever gotten to this point, then picked up his pace to catch up with the lithe, whipcord muscled alien. The alien nodded understandingly as Tom resumed his position beside Dokar as the alien continued his dissertation on their technology. "Even our cloaking device is part of the planet, which is how it can mask the life signatures of all that are on it."

'Brigadoon indeed, Captain.' Tom shook his head as he took in this information. "Many of the races we've encountered have similar cloaking technology."

Dokar nodded, "It is necessary in this realm. More so for us, as we are a purely peaceful people. Even amongst ourselves there has been no discord for so long an age that we can no longer remember a time when there was."

Icheb stirred from his boredom at this and looked at the alien critically. "Do your people belong to a hive mind of some sort?" Tom looked at Icheb sternly as Dokar shook his head but Icheb pressed on. "Then a group of individuals with no disagreements among them is highly improbable. Even on Voyager where the crewmembers are at ease and familiar with one another, there are minor conflicts. We are very much a family unit, yet even those closest to each other will argue. What you propose is possible within a collective, such as an ant hill, bee hive or the Borg, but amongst individuals it is not." Icheb stopped when he felt the firm grip of Lieutenant Paris' hand on his shoulder and looked up into his displeased face.

"If you would excuse us for a moment, Dokar," Tom said politely as he steered Icheb back towards Dalby. Speaking so only Icheb would hear, "I don't care how improbable something is, Icheb, you don't basically call your guide a liar to his face when you're on an away mission." Tom winced internally, he was going to hear about this from the Captain. This was as big a diplomatic faux pas as some of Seven's comments had been when she first came to them - but then at least she had been confined to Voyager for the most part. "Dalby, keep an eye on him while I go handle some damage control. We'll beam up momentarily, I think the other teams have things well in hand."

Dalby grinned, knowing from the look on Paris' face that Icheb had stepped on someone's toes. He watched as Paris returned to the alien to make their apologies and

explain their quick retreat. He set his hand on Icheb's shoulder. The boy looked confused at being reprimanded. "Don't worry about it, kid," Dalby offered with an easy grin. "Some of us just can't dance the dance of a diplomat. I know I can't stand to hear a load of whatever they're handing out either."

Paris returned momentarily. "Not too much damage done anyway. " Paris tapped his combadge. "Paris to Janeway."

The Captain's disembodied voice hung in the air. "Janeway here, go ahead Tom."

"My team is returning to the ship, Captain. We've secured an agreement for those of the crew most in need to come down for some shoreleave. I don't think there is any damage left for us to do down here." 'Almost literally' he thought as he looked at Icheb.

"All right." Tom could hear the amusement in her voice as she spoke. "Good work and we'll see you in a while. Janeway out."

As that connection closed Tom tapped his combadge again. "Paris to Voyager. Three to beam up. Lock onto my co-ordinates." A moment later the familiar whine and tingle of the transporter beam enveloped all of them.

Tom's voice from Kathryn's communicator had interrupted Sutokh. She held up her hand to the Ayrethan for a moment as Tom explained what his team had accomplished and asked for permission to return to Voyager in his own oblique way. Once the channel was cleared, Kathryn couldn't keep the smile off her face. "I don't think he could stand being away from B'Elanna and Miral that long."

Sam answered Kathryn's grin with one of her own. "I had a hard time pulling a full duty shift on Voyager when Naomi was that young."

Sutokh watched them with a smile. "Your people understand well the joy of having young and embrace it."

Chakotay watched as Kathryn's grin became slightly less genuine and she once again took a step behind the protective shield that was her Captain's persona. Speculating on the reason why she retreated had been one of his pitfalls in the past, so he pushed it aside. Instead Chakotay focused on the stalori ahead of him and the glittering light they seemed to emit. With a start, his vision discerned the familiar symbols carved into the side. "Captain." Kathryn's attention was immediately drawn to him and she came to stand beside him, inspecting the symbols closely as he ran his tricorder over them.

Kathryn looked at Chakotay as she arched one of her eyebrows as she drew her fingers over the indentations. "They're the same."

"The ancient marks interest you then?" Sutokh seemed mildly amused.

Kathryn turned to Sutokh again. "They were put here by your people?"

"They are older than I remember," Sutokh answered.

Kathryn turned back to Chakotay, almost rolling her eyes. She liked asking a direct question and getting a straight answer, which was something that just didn't seem to happen on this planet. Chakotay set a gentle hand on her shoulder and nodded reassuringly.

"The marks seem as old as the stalori." Chakotay stated as he turned and watched Sutokh impassively.

Sutokh smiled. "They are as old as the memory of my people."

Chakotay almost laughed when he saw Kathryn turn away and look briefly into the heavens, as though pleading with the powers for help to understand their enigmatic new friends. For him it was no more frustrating than speaking to his own spirit guide and he had a sudden flash of insight into what Kathryn communing with her own guide must have been like and a light chuckle escaped him.

Kathryn's attention was on him in an instant and one of the glares she normally reserved for Mr. Paris at his worst was leveled at him. The tension was palpable for a moment, they were still both on a hair trigger where the other was concerned. Chakotay rationalized with himself that his laugh had set Kathryn off, but he still felt the tell-tale flare of anger that she would react that way to him.

Finally it was Ensign Wildman who came to their rescue. "Captain. Commander." She purposefully made eye contact with both of them in order to break their concentration on the other. "If you like I could take the readings of the markings back to the ship and start the process of analyzing them while you continue the tour."

"Thank you, Ensign." Janeway spoke a moment later. The tone of thanks was genuine, and while the tension was still between herself and Chakotay, Sam had diffused the explosiveness. Wildman approached Chakotay and they set their tricorders to transfer data. Moments later Ensign Wildman was on her way back to Voyager, leaving Janeway and Chakotay to their own devices.

Sutokh watched the pair eyeing each other warily and stepped forward. "Perhaps you would like to investigate our sacred caves now." He gestured towards the entrance way in the base of the monolith. "As you said Captain Janeway, it is hot and bright here. The caves are cool and soothing. I am certain you would enjoy the experience. "

Janeway's eyes brightened at the prospect of exploring the sacred caves, her adventurous spirit coming to the forefront once again. She looked at Chakotay who smiled slightly at her.

Seeing Kathryn's 'kid in a candy shop' reaction to the idea of exploring the caves swept him along with it, despite the current state of unrest between them. His own interests in anthropology compelled him as well. "Are there any prohibitions we should be aware of before we go, Sutokh?"

"None," Sutokh smiled. Janeway was approaching the entrance, and she already had one leg through the waist height hole in the side of the monolith before Chakotay could come to her side, taking her hand to brace her as she started to slide inside.

Bent over at the waist, her hair starting to fall over face, she looked up at Sutokh. "You aren't coming with us?"

"There is no need for me to guide you there. Just follow the stairs down. There is only one direction in and out, and it is quite safe. I will wait for you here." Sutokh watched as Janeway disappeared into the hole completely.

Chakotay looked towards Sutokh. "Thank you. We'll keep in regular contact with our ship and be back here in a couple of hours." Sutokh nodded in answer. "Can you move down a couple of steps, Captain?" Chakotay called through the hole, then after a moment swung his legs inside and followed her into the dim light within the monolith.

"Down the rabbit hole, Chakotay." Kathryn's playful quip seemed to be an indication that she was doing her best to ignore the tension that still flared between them.

Chakotay bowed slightly, "After you, Alice." Kathryn grinned and moved down the stairs.

Tuvok watched as Vorik and Nicoletti continued taking their readings. They had confirmed two of the more rare elements from a list of Voyager's more long-term needs were in fact present in abundance. Tuvok, in an effort to make his time more productive since both the engineers insisted that they did not require his assistance, slipped into a light meditative trance, reflecting on their present predicament and the Aryethans.

A flash of light pulled him from the trance state and he found himself standing in a hallway, in what was unmistakably Starfleet Headquarters facing Seven of Nine and Captain Janeway. "Perhaps, Captain, it would be prudent if I escorted Seven of Nine back to her quarters." He could hear himself speaking yet had no ability to effect what he said. It was akin to the dream state that Vulcans went into every night to process the day's memories.

"Prudent won't make a difference here, Tuvok," Janeway shook her head. "As long as she's within the confines of Headquarters she'll be fine." Janeway turned her gaze back out towards San Francisco proper.

Another light flashed before his eyes and he was once again in the caves, once again observing the two engineers working. Tuvok moved forward. "Did either of you experience an anomaly in the last two minutes?"

"No sir," Vorik turned and started to scan Tuvok for any residual effects. "I am noting a slight increase in chroniton radiation, however it is not as prominent as we have detected during other temporal incursions and it is dissipating at a much more rapid pace than we have seen previously in either the Alpha or the Delta quadrants."

"Have you finished with your scans?" Tuvok asked. Both the engineers nodded.

"We should be able to get everything we'll need to repair and maintain the Voyager's systems for the next six months under normal circumstances." Nicoletti seemed to run through some calculations in her head, "If we keep running into the Sernaix at the same rate, it'll last two."

"Indeed," Tuvok arched his eyebrow at the young engineer, "Then I suggest we return to Voyager. We need to investigate the cause of the temporal distortion." Tapping his combadge, Nicoletti and Vorik arranged themselves in the standard pattern behind him. "Tuvok to Voyager."

"Kim here, sir. All systems are nominal. It's a bit early for your second check in, sir, is there a problem?" Harry inquired.

"There has been a temporal distortion of an indeterminate nature, Lieutenant. What is the status of the away teams?" Tuvok waited for the report.

"Lieutenant Paris' team returned over a half hour ago with the Captain's permission. Ensign Wildman returned to Voyager shortly after that to analyze some evidence the Captain's party found. The Captain and the Commander remained on the surface, made their last check in and are currently somewhere within the cave system about ten kilometers from your current position." Harry gave his summary and awaited further orders.

"Please prepare to beam us up," Tuvok straightened into an 'at ease' stance waiting for the transporter beam to envelop him.

Moments passed before Harry continued somewhat apologetically, "Commander, we can't get a proper transporter lock on you. You aren't that far underground, but there is definitely interference. We get life sign readings for both your team and the Captain and the Commander, but we can't get a lock."

"Then we will proceed to the surface. Await our next communication," Tuvok advised as he nodded towards the other two.

"Aye sir." Harry acknowledged, "Should I contact the Captain and the Commander?"

Tuvok contemplated it for a moment. "Negative, Lieutenant. Until we have a more definitive answer for what may have occurred I am reluctant to advise the Captain of it."

"Acknowledged, sir. Kim out."

As the connection clicked off, Tuvok started down the tunnel at a jog, Vorik easily pacing him. With a sigh and a shake of her head, Nicoletti followed.

"Check out these holo-simulations, Icheb," Tom handed the young Borg a pad with several file names listed on it. "Safeties on. They'll give you a good start until I have a chance to customize some scenarios for you."

Icheb nodded, "Thank you Lieutenant. Especially after..."

"Just don't make me explain it to you again, Icheb," Tom smiled. "I'll take care of the Captain." Icheb nodded and headed off in search of a free holodeck. Tom felt strong

hands pull him close, then wrap around his waist as teeth nipped the tender spot against the back of his neck. Tom grinned unable to resist the temptation.

"Jenny, I told you. Not in messhall, B'Elanna might catch us."

"P'taq," B'Elanna growled then bit him slightly harder. "You're lucky Jenny is holding Miral for me." She looked in the direction Icheb had gone. "So, what was all that about?"

"Borg diplomacy," Tom answered as he turned around to face his wife then caught her arm.

B'Elanna's brow furrowed, "Borg diplomacy? What's that?"

"Exactly," Tom answered and was promptly shoved. "Icheb challenged the probability of one of the things our hosts said down there. He didn't exactly understand the idea of just letting something lie."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "When has any Borg understood that?" Tom shook his head as they walked to where the Delaney sisters sat holding Miral. He knew it was mainly reflex for his wife to lash out at Seven now, but it was still amusing.

"Come to daddy," Tom said, taking Miral from Jenny's arms with a smile. The twins smiled at Tom and shook their heads before excusing themselves and walking away. "What was that about?"

"Nothing to worry about helmboy," B'Elanna sat across from Tom as he slid into the booth still cuddling Miral to him. "So, how was the planet?"

"Hot, bright and muggy," Tom said as he tickled Miral's tummy. "With huge gardens, and these rock towers that create rainbows. Like something out of a fairy tale." B'Elanna smiled at the picture he painted. "You know he who negotiates the shore leave, gets the spoils. I checked and Chakotay put us all on the first round of shoreleave rotation and the Ayrethans said we could start sending people down anytime." Tom stood up, holding Miral close and held out his hand to B'Elanna. "So what do you say? The weather would probably agree with you both."

"Tom, shouldn't we wait until the Captain and Chakotay come back?" B'Elanna was trying to stop herself from giving in to the impulse that Tom was planning.

Tom shook his head and grinned. "No, in fact the Commander asked me advise those on the top of the list that they could start their leave time as soon as it was negotiated."

"Then what are we waiting for?" B'Elanna asked, pulling him towards the messhall doors. "It had better be as nice as you say it is Tom. After all this is the first planet our daughter will have ever been on."

"These caves are amazing, Chakotay." Kathryn was running her tricorder along the walls. "The mineral content, the precious stones, not to mention the light that radiates from the walls. It has to be a function of the light refracting at the surface. There are no generators down here, no power sources I can read."

Chakotay watched her as she moved from wall to wall, tapping settings into her tricorder, almost prancing as she moved. It was the most animated he had seen her in months and he was loath to interfere, but it couldn't be helped. "Captain, we're already far too deep. We should head back now otherwise we'll be late for when we agreed to meet Sutokh."

"Just a little further, Chakotay." Kathryn turned to him. "This is too fascinating to leave just yet." Her eyes pleaded with him to just give in gracefully and not make her make it an order.

Chakotay took a deep breath, "All right. You're the Captain." Chakotay saw her spine stiffen slightly and regretted his words: even though he hadn't meant the last comment as a jibe, it was obvious that she had taken it as such. He came behind her and settled his hand on her shoulder, "That wasn't meant as it might have sounded, Captain."

Kathryn turned and looked him in the eyes. She nodded her acceptance of the apology. "Don't you wish you could sometimes just know exactly what the other person meant without having to interpret it?" she asked, cocking her head to the side. She grinned crookedly at him before moving further down the passageway, scanning intently as she went. Chakotay sighed. Things were getting better - he just had to keep believing that. "Chakotay, I've found something here."

Chakotay looked forward to find that the tunnel curved and that Kathryn was already out of sight around it. He jogged quickly towards the sound of her voice. "What is it Captain?" She was crouched in front of the wall, running her finger along an invisible line followed closely by her tricorder.

"It's an entrance, Chakotay." Kathryn was busily taking readings from the wall, her entire attention focused between her tricorder and the wall. "I'm working on how to open it."

"Captain, are you sure it's wise? These are the Ayrethans' sacred grounds." Chakotay's voice was stern.

"Nonsense, Chakotay." Kathryn's tone didn't change. She was still caught up in the excitement of her find. There was an audible pop and the wall shimmered out of existence, leaving a black void behind it. Scanning the interior from the door she announced, "It's clear." She looked back at Chakotay. "It's a secret chamber. Don't you want to explore it?"

Chakotay smiled and shook his head. "It'll be hard to explore in pitch blackness." His tone was teasing. Kathryn arched her eyebrow and reached inside intending to run her hand along the inside edge of the door. As soon as her hand crossed into the darkness, a soft glow started in the air around her hand, then stretching out from there.

Kathryn turned a triumphant grin on her first officer. "Come on Chakotay. Sutokh did say it was completely safe." Chakotay nodded and followed close behind as she stepped into the chamber, still scanning. "This is amazing. The tricorder can't detect any sort of device that would be causing the glow. The way it started you would think it would be a reaction between our bodies and the atmosphere in here, but there isn't any indication of

any change other than the light in the room. The tricorders sensors must not be sensitive enough to pick it up. I'm going to try recalibrating them."

Chakotay watched over her shoulder for a few moments, watching her recalibrate the tricorder. Then he moved deeper into the room, running his hand against the smoothness of the stone. "This doesn't feel natural. No imperfections." A cold chill ran up his spine, Janeway was completely silent. Spinning back towards her, she was standing still, staring at the wall that had once been the entrance.

Nicoletti kept her vision focused on the entrance to the stalori, she could see in the far distance, keeping her mind focused on her goal rather than the pain that was building within her limbs. She hadn't realized how far they had gone until Tuvok had started their forced jog back towards the surface. Managing to keep pace with the Vulcans had proved difficult, but she'd done it, even if she was still behind them by several meters. Being behind them however, provided her with the perfect view of Tuvok suddenly stiffening and falling forward.

"Commander Tuvok," her voice echoed in the caves as she sprinted to his side, pulling out her tricorder as she did. Vorik skidded to a halt and came to crouch along side her.

"Another temporal incursion?" Vorik asked.

Nicoletti nodded her head, "Chroniton radiation level is slight but it's there. Something's happening, whether we can see it or not." She snapped her tricorder shut and took command of the situation. "Let's get him to the surface, we can contact Voyager from there. The sooner he's in Sickbay, the happier I'll be."

"Aye, Lieutenant." Vorik arranged Tuvok's body then pulled him into a fireman's carry setting out after the Lieutenant who was already moving down the corridor at an accelerated pace.

Scanning the wall for the fifth time and finding nothing, Janeway started recalibrating her tricorder. "Captain... Kathryn." She whirled on him. "How many more times are you going to recalibrate your tricorder? It's not like your replicator, you know. It's not out to get you." He smiled at her disarmingly.

She stopped for a moment and ran her fingers through her hair, her tone fraught with frustration. "We can't contact the ship, Chakotay, and we're trapped."

"We'll miss check in in about fifteen minutes, Kathryn." Chakotay watched her closely from his comfortable position against the wall. "Harry will try to raise us, he won't be able to and they'll come looking. We'll be back aboard Voyager in time for Chell's Warp Core Chili." Kathryn turned her back towards him and continued to work on her tricorder.

Her stomach was twisting in knots. Everything Chakotay said was making perfect sense, but her body almost tingled with the sensation that if she didn't get out now, something terrible was going to happen. Her hands trembled as she continued

recalibrating her tricorder. 'Come on Kathryn. You're being stupid. Pull yourself together. It's just you and Chakotay.' She shuddered as that thought passed through her mind. 'Harry will realize that we need help in a few minutes and will have you out of here in no time.' She tried to summon the steady nerve and strength of her Captain persona to the forefront and found there seemed to be nothing to cling to.

Chakotay watched with growing frustration as Kathryn blocked him out once again to go through the motions of working with her tricorder. Anxiety laced tension filled the small chamber, and Chakotay could feel his ire rising. He took several deep breaths to center himself then stood, moving behind her. "Kathryn, you yourself said that Sutokh said it was perfectly safe. Come sit..." His hand grazed her arm, causing an almost electrical sensation to pass between them.

Whirling at the sensation, Kathryn's eyes widened and she took a step back from him. The sensation to flee was almost unbearable. "Commander." Her voice was harsh with fear.

Eyes narrowing at the use of his title and the tone of her voice, his hand shot out, intending to restrain her, hold her here to face him. Skin met skin, and a sensation like a whisper of wind ran from the point of contact up over their arms and spread out across their bodies, making them shiver with the rush.

Kathryn pulled away her hand as though it had been burned, turning it palm up to inspect where he touched. As though she expected to find it raw and bleeding. Her spine stiffened, and she turned back towards the wall, concentrating intently on the tricorder readings in front of her, her mind still reeling and not truly comprehending what she was focusing on.

Silence reigned as Chakotay stood, watching her go through the motions once again. "You're afraid of being trapped in here with me, aren't you?"

Kathryn turned back slowly, the hairs on the back of her neck standing as she faced him. His eyes bore into her, as though he was reading her very soul with his gaze. She stood, uncomfortable under his scrutiny. Their eyes met and she took an involuntary step back, her conscious mind retreating from what her subconscious already knew. "Chakotay..." She shut her eyes trying to block the unfamiliar thoughts, memories and feelings that threatened to overwhelm her. His thoughts, his memories, his feelings... she knew them all instinctually, just as hers were with him.

B'Elanna stretched as she returned from her walk around the upper gardens. Tom was holding Miral so she could see the rainbows that arced from the stone towers. "...And so the great queen declared the warrior princess her heir to the great sky kingdom and they all lived happily ever after." She could hear her husband's voice floating through the gardens as he spun a tale for his daughter.

"Tom, you know Janeway has promised Voyager to Naomi. So, don't you go and get Miral's hopes up." B'Elanna teased as she rejoined them in the lower gardens.

"Enjoy your break?" Tom asked as B'Elanna retrieved Miral from his arms.

"Yes, thank you." She knit her fingers with his as they started to walk the lower gardens once again. "I owe you one, Helmboy. I can't think of a nicer planet to be Miral's first."

Tom stared out into the bright sky, avoiding thinking and saying the obvious. His attention was drawn back with a gentle squeeze on his hand to his wife's understanding smile. "The scent of these plants is heavenly. Between them and the sun, I could curl up and take a nap. I wonder if Captain Janeway would let us bring some into hydroponics? Or maybe T'Pel could use some of them in the garden she's working on."

"I don't see why not." Tom had focused on a patch of what looked like dark blue lilies when he felt a flash of light.

He was still in a garden, but B'Elanna and Miral were no longer beside him. A little girl stood before him holding out a flower. She seemed to be offering it to someone standing beside him, but he couldn't make himself turn to see who it was. Then the flash enveloped him again.

"Helmboy?" B'Elanna sounded bemused. "If you like those so much we'll make sure T'Pel gets some for the garden... You don't have to try to burn their image into your retinas."

Tom looked back at the flowers, shaken by the experience, but threw it off to face his wife. "Of course not, the only image I want burned into my retina is your lovely face."

B'Elanna snorted and looked down at her daughter. "Whatever you do, don't fall for a charmer like your father. Even after they have you they don't give up with the inane comments."

"So you married me to shut me up?" Tom gave B'Elanna a mock hurt look.

Nodding, she let go of his hand and wandered deeper into the garden. "That was the general idea, Helmboy." She cast a backward glance at him smiling wickedly and winking.

Laughter filled the garden as Tom sprinted to her and caught her hand in his own once again.

Nicoletti emerged from the stalori, immediately turning to help pull Tuvok through the opening. Settling him on the ground, she stood, turning away and tapped her combadge. "Nicoletti to Voyager. We need an emergency transport to Sickbay. Commander Tuvok collapsed in the tunnels."

"Kim here." Harry's voice was edged with concern. "Prepare for transport."

"That will not be necessary, Lieutenant." Nicoletti turned back to find Tuvok slowly

lifting himself from the ground. "It would appear that another temporal anomaly has occurred. After I lost consciousness I was inundated with vivid memories. Memories of events I do not believe have occurred yet."

"Vivid memories, sir, or dreams?" Harry's disembodied voice asked curiously.

Tuvok's eyebrow arched, "I would say memories, Lieutenant. Why do you inquire?"

"Because I've had some vivid 'dreams' since we came into this sector of space, Commander. Since just before we met with the Iryneth." Harry seemed uncertain, "I've no idea if it's related at all."

"Indeed," Tuvok's eyebrow arched, "I suspect that Commander Chakotay's theory that the Iryneth and the Aryethans are related does indeed have merit beyond what we first suspected, however proving it may be most difficult, if not impossible. Our experiences could indeed be related. I must contact the Captain." Tuvok tapped his combadge, "Tuvok to Janeway." Silence met his hail. "Tuvok to Janeway, please respond." Tuvok remained seemingly impassive. "Tuvok to Kim."

"Kim here, sir."

"I can not hail the Captain. Can Voyager bring their life signs up on sensors?" Tuvok arched his eyebrow, analyzing possible situations and outcomes.

"Negative, sir." Tuvok could here carefully hidden panic at the edges of the newly promoted Lieutenant's voice.

"While of cause for concern, Lieutenant, any further response to this at this point is a waste of resources. There are any number of reasons that the sensors are no longer reading the Captain and the Commander. Until we have evidence to the contrary, I suggest we focus our efforts on determining their current situation." Tuvok responded to the tone of Harry's voice with quiet re-assurance. "As a precaution, however please contact and retrieve all parties currently on the surface." The away team assembled themselves behind Tuvok. "Three to beam up, Lieutenant."

"Aye sir."

"Now I know why Q calls you Chuckles," Kathryn's eyes blazed as she turned on her erstwhile first officer who was comfortably seated against the wall of their prison cell, laughing occasionally. She turned back to the wall that had let them in, trying one last time to find a trigger to make it open once again. It was becoming painfully obvious that she was just going to have to sit back and wait to be rescued as Chakotay was. She growled a bit. She hated waiting. Chakotay laughed. Again. She grinned evilly and started to sing in her mind.

"Kathryn," Chakotay winced, "You are the only person I know who sings off key in her own head and you should be ashamed of yourself for knowing a song like that."

"People who intrude on other people's privacy deserve what they get," Kathryn

hissed at him and turned away once more.

Chakotay shrugged, "I can't help it Kathryn. It's like they're my own thoughts."

"It's a two way street, Chakotay and I'm not reading yours." Kathryn backed up against the opposite wall sliding down it, hugging her knees to her chest and looking at the floor. There were sounds of movement, then Chakotay's booted feet came to a stop in front of her.

"I wish you would," Chakotay's gentle voice invited her. She looked up, pushing her fears behind a shield of anger even though she knew it wouldn't help. Not anymore. Hand extended, he smiled down at her. Swallowing hard, she reached up, angry with herself that she couldn't stop the nervous tremble in her arm as she took his hand. She closed her eyes as the initial rush of foreign memories flooded her mind. When she re-opened her eyes Chakotay was seated cross-legged in front of her, still holding her hand.

The first thing that struck her was how odd it was to see the same memory from two separate perspectives. The memory that stuck out in her mind though was one she didn't share. "Barriers we never cross..." Her eyes went wide. "You were in the past." She was immediately uncomfortable with the attraction that was so evident in her younger self's eyes and the apparent disappointment when he had spoken those words. From a Kathryn still engaged to Mark not yet lost in the Delta Quadrant. She had always told herself that it was the circumstances that had fueled their attraction, but now that seemed unlikely. She decided to focus on his thoughts during the incident instead. "You wanted to tell her something else."

"But I didn't." Chakotay answered evenly.

Kathryn nodded. "No, you didn't."

Chakotay started to chuckle again. "Mating behavior... You meant that when you said it. First that song, now mating behavior, next thing you know I'll find out you meant the stick comment to sound as racy as it did." The blush rose high in Kathryn's cheeks and she looked away as she cursed her fair complexion, "Kathryn Janeway, you have a dirty mind."

"Commander..." Her voice was stern, but there was a twinkle in her eye that he hadn't seen in some time. She relaxed somewhat, just allowing the thoughts to flow.

Chakotay winced at the heartache he felt when he uncovered another memory. "You meant that too. That you couldn't imagine a day without me."

"Yes," Kathryn answered. "I shouldn't have said that out loud." They both felt the stab of pain that went through Chakotay at that comment and immediately felt the regret from Kathryn that followed. Their eyes widened as they took in the impact of the situation and their feelings.

"I frightened you with the Equinox incident." Kathryn looked ashamed. "I nearly lost your trust that day. Your friendship."

"You scared yourself too," Chakotay said, meeting her gaze. "And we rebuilt from that." He smiled slightly. "Despite what happened, Teero didn't shake your trust in me."

"That wasn't you Chakotay. I wouldn't hold you responsible for actions that weren't your own." Kathryn's gaze was level, and the link between them reverberated with the truth of her statement. "Can you believe that we nearly fell for Seven's insane conspiracy theories?"

Chakotay shook his head. "Seems far fetched now doesn't it."

"It's always about trust with us, isn't it, Chakotay?" Her voice softened as she said his name this time. The way she used to before, when trust had been easily and almost instinctually given to one another.

"I was the one who nearly broke our trust permanently." Chakotay's eyes search hers. Silence sat between them heavily before he started to speak again. "The Admiral told you about Seven and I." Chakotay could feel Kathryn's pain. "I'm sorry. As your friend I should have been the one to tell you. I should have trusted you." Kathryn seemed to back up against the wall harder as these memories came to the forefront. This wound, though he could feel that she believed him when he said it was over, was still fresh. It needed healing.

"Seven is an intriguing young woman." Kathryn seemed to fold up into herself. "No Kathryn," he squeezed her hand gently. "Listen please." She nodded still uncomfortable with the situation and the subject matter. "I have to admit that the idea that she would choose me to explore that aspect of her humanity with was an ego boost." He smiled self depreciatingly. "It was more than that though. Her intelligence, her curiosity, her willingness to explore. Those things about Seven called to me. You had encouraged me to move on so many times, and I had finally allowed myself to fully comprehend how serious you were about not having a shipboard romance."

"You lost hope." Kathryn stated flatly.

Chakotay's head came up sharply. "You didn't."

"You had implied that you felt you were under the same restrictions as I was about a shipboard romance. I assumed that that would apply to Seven as well even though she didn't have a rank." Kathryn found the courage to look him in the eye as she spoke. "I assumed that you would always be there."

"I was always by your side, Kathryn. Even when you didn't let yourself see that I was," Chakotay answered backing his claim up with memories.

"I know. I've always known." Kathryn took a deep breath, "It just wasn't the same once I knew you were with Seven. Some part of what we had was lost and I didn't know I'd miss it until it was too late."

Chakotay wrapped his other hand over hers, holding her gaze with his own. "I care for you Kathryn, you know that."

Tuvok strode onto the bridge. "Report."

"We've continued to run scans for the Captain and the Commander. None of them have been successful." Harry moved from the Captain's chair to his position at ops. "However when the last of the crew beamed off the planet we did a narrow beam search for human DNA. All scans were negative. Which would indicate that whatever their status currently is, our scans are being blocked by either technological or natural means."

Tuvok's eyebrow arched, "An interesting method of deduction, Lieutenant." He nodded in approval.

"I just got the readings your team took while they were down there Commander." B'Elanna spoke as she strode off the turbolift, with Tom not far behind her. "Any number of these metals and minerals in this concentration around the Captain and Chakotay would block our sensors."

"Indeed," Tuvok rose. "Lieutenant Kim, you have the bridge. Lieutenants Torres and Paris, I take it Miral is being cared for."

"By T'Pel actually, sir. She intercepted us on the way here," Tom answered.

"Very good, you are both with me then. We will take a class two excavation phaser with us." Tuvok walked up the ramp towards the turbolift.

"No weapons then, Sir," Tom interpreted the order as they followed Tuvok into the lift once again.

Tuvok nodded curtly, "I do not believe there will be any call for weapons."

"That's your gut instinct is it, Tuvok?" Tom quipped with a grin.

Tuvok's eyebrow rose only slightly.

B'Elanna leaned to the side. "You're losing your touch."

Sutokh watched impassively as three Starfleet officers materialized in front of him. Two were familiar from the original group beamed down as the leaders from the other two teams. "Commander Tuvok, Lieutenant Paris. May I be of assistance to you?" He regarded the third mildly - a young woman carrying some sort of backpack-mounted beam generator.

Tuvok approached and nodded slightly. "Greetings, Sutokh. We have lost contact with our commanding officers. When was the last time you had contact with them?"

The Ayrethan's expression did not change. "We have never been out of contact with

them." He nodded after a moment and responded, "I will lead you to them. They have seen enough."

"No Chakotay, I cannot accept this." Kathryn paced in front of him. "Whatever this is. How am I supposed to function with you in my thoughts?"

"Vulcans seem to manage fine," Chakotay grinned. "Besides, this may only be a function of the caves. Once we leave them or maybe even this area, the link could fade."

"Worse case scenario, what if it doesn't? For Vulcans it is an extremely different circumstance." Chakotay's eyes caught hers and she drew in a swift intake of breath. The meaning beneath her words carried more weight than the words themselves.

"We'll survive, Kathryn. We always do. We might even flourish. It could be of tactical advantage someday." Chakotay watched as she stopped and turned towards him. He reached out towards her, "For once Kathryn, accept what life has dealt you." Beneath the words was a plea for more than acceptance of the link.

Kathryn's hands moved instinctively in front of her, their position meant to hold him back. "No, Chakotay. This can't be. We're still in the same position as before if not a worse one. This can't happen. It shouldn't happen. I still have to get my crew home."

Words had never swayed her before, but for now there was no need for words. Chakotay caught her hand with his own, knitting their fingers together in a mirror of a long ago memory they both shared. No words flowed now, only pure feeling enhanced by the gesture of the past.

Kathryn was certain her heart had stopped - but then it was pounding in her ears once again, the rush of pure emotion rolling over her like waves. Words she could deflect, but this rushed past all her carefully built shields. She had never been good with emotions. She wasn't certain where his feelings began and hers ended anymore. Only one certainty remained. He was going to kiss her. She could see him bending down towards her, and feel herself arching up towards him. No matter how many times she told herself this shouldn't happen, or how many times she told him that it couldn't happen. The only fact that remained was that it was happening.

A sudden rumble broke the hold they had on one another. The rock was beginning to heat up. Chakotay gently released her hand with a smile. "Told you the cavalry would find us," his voice was cheerful but a part of him wished they had had a few minutes more.

Kathryn resolutely pushed back the thought that she wished the same but before she could bury it deep, Chakotay caught it and smiled at her. They moved towards the back wall as the one in front of them started to heat up considerably, then melted and broke apart, crumbling to its constituent elements in front of them.

"It is good to see you Captain, Commander." Tuvok held out his hand to Janeway to help her over the rocks that were left. She afforded a quick glance behind her, even

though she knew he had just vaulted over the remaining rocks to land squarely behind her. Not because she had heard the noise, but because she had felt the thought before he did it. Their eyes met. This would be discussed but not here, not now.

"Thank you, Tuvok. Report." Janeway shielded herself in her role as the Captain once more but now she wasn't alone. Chakotay was there even then.

"We lost contact with you once you had been sealed in that chamber," Tuvok replied mildly. "Once we determined that it was likely the mineral content of the surrounding rock that was blocking our scans, we initiated a physical search."

Tom finished running his medical scans on Chakotay, then turned to scan the Captain. "I'm fine, Tom," Janeway quipped. "Nothing a cup of hot coffee and a hot bath won't cure."

He grimaced apologetically. "Better I get it over with here, Captain. This way, you won't have to go to Sickbay and you'll get to skip the lecture about eating, caffeine, ...". Her glare was leveled at him already. "I'm certain you know the drill." He snapped the tricorder shut. "And you're right. There is no more wrong with you than some increased adrenaline and hormonal levels. All perfectly normal reactions to what you've been through."

Janeway let loose the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "Thank you, Tom." She turned to face Sutokh, who had accompanied the others into the caves this time. "Why did this..."

Sutokh held up one clawed hand, "In time, Captain, in time." Turning with a slight bow in her and Chakotay's direction, he lead the way back towards the stalori and the surface. Leaving them with their questions for now.

Sutokh stood gazing out the starport into the odd view that the star cluster offered. "It is quite beautiful here. Thank you for allowing me to visit your ship."

"You're welcome, Sutokh. We enjoyed touring your world so I'm happy to offer you the opportunity." Janeway took a small breath, "On the planet, Commander Chakotay and I were discussing the nature of this realm with you." She takes a breath, remembering how Chakotay approached questioning the being before proceeding. "There is great beauty here but there is also great beauty in our own realm."

"The wall between what is yours and what is ours only flows in one direction." Sutokh's voice was subdued as he spoke. He knew his words would cause pain and it was not something his people did by choice.

Janeway's heart sank but she pressed on, as determined as ever, "The Bubble would burst if it continued to fill without end."

"We have never found a way to release what is captive," Sutokh replied. Kathryn

stood for a moment quietly. Something about his words catching the edge of her consciousness.

"When we were on the planet, I mentioned to our guide, Nalbet that we had encountered a race much like yours called the Inryeth. They are identical to your people in all ways including your telepathic ability. Nalbet suggested that your Elders might know if they were related to you." Tuvok regarded Sutokh as he spoke.

Sutokh stopped for a moment and regarded Tuvok with wide eyes. "I am not an Elder."

Kathryn watched the interplay between her security chief and Sutokh carefully. At first glance she was almost ready to write off Sutokh's reaction to Tuvok's inquiry to the alien's natural tendency towards cryptic answers. As she watched more carefully, her gut instinct told her there was something more to the Ayrethan's reaction.

Tuvok quirked an eyebrow, "Indeed. Captain if I may be excused, I have duties to be performed."

"Of course Tuvok. Dismissed." Kathryn and Sutokh watched as Tuvok left the ready room.

Before she could fully return her attention to Sutokh he was already speaking. "You wish to know what happened to you in the Nashala and why it happened." Kathryn sat in silence, nodding only to indicate he was correct. Caught somewhere between surprise and anxiety, she was reluctant to speak and stop the flow of information before it had begun. "Our people believe that when two individuals share an experience in the Nashala that they are not truly two but that they are one. One nula ... what you would call a spirit or a soul." He paused for a moment watching the emotions play over Janeway's face. "The Nashala sensed that two halves of the same whole were in conflict. It sought to resolve the conflict by bringing greater understanding between the two halves."

Kathryn sat quietly, not quite comprehending what Sutokh was saying. Dozens of words from various cultures flooded her mind. Imzadi. Bondmate. T'hy'la. Soulmate. The sensations of the link had passed once they had left the Nashala, but her knowledge of Chakotay remained. There was indeed greater understanding, and it frightened her. She still found it hard to accept that someone else now knew her as well as she knew herself, and that she had equal knowledge of him.

When she looked up again, Sutokh was standing. "I thank you for your hospitality, Captain Janeway. You have seen enough for now." He bowed slightly and she stood walking him to her ready room door. "We do not often get visitors to our world. You would be welcome again." She nodded silently and watched as Sutokh glided from her inner sanctum. The doors hissed shut behind him - leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Kathryn cradled a cup of coffee in her hands. For once in her life not truly interested in drinking it, but holding it more for the warmth it brought her and to give her a

focus for her random thoughts. She felt adrift now. Her view of herself was being carefully deconstructed and she found herself needing to turn to the person who frightened her most right now. The chime echoed in her quarters, pulling her attention away from her coffee.

'Speak of the devil...' Her mind brought the words unbidden into her mind. The link wasn't necessary to know who was at her cabin door. "Come."

Chakotay stepped through the doors, coming in a few steps before speaking. "I thought you'd like to know, we beamed up the last of the minerals and metals we extracted. B'Elanna couldn't be happier. Most of the critical repairs are finished and she's already making up maintenance schedules to utilize the rarer elements we obtained."

"So Voyager will go on..." Kathryn let her words trail off, at a loss for what to say next.

Chakotay nods then looks at her in consideration. "So where do we go from here, Kathryn?"

Kathryn turned to the viewport behind her. Setting her coffee cup down she watched his reflection overlaid against the unfamiliar space of the Bubble and the planet behind. "I won't deny this any longer, Chakotay. I couldn't even if I wanted to. But as to where we go from here..." She seemed to concentrate on the planet. "All I know is that wherever it is, I need to go very slowly. I need to be able to think."

She watched his reflection as he approached her from behind, his image becoming clearer as he came closer. Kathryn breathed deeply as she felt his hand on her shoulder, his face clearly indicating that he wanted to speak further. "Kathryn..." His voice echoed in her cabin. A small shake of her head indicated that she had no more words to give; instead she took his hand, interweaving her fingers between his in a reflection of a long ago gesture, and closed her eyes.

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