



Episode 9-08 – A Bitter Pill to Swallow

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"Chief Medical Officer's log, my ongoing research into Miral's condition is beginning to yield results..." The Doctor paused for a moment then continued, "However, I hesitate to call it a condition. She is not ill as such, although her abilities are disconcerting to her parents... Which brings me to another deficiency aboard this Starship. After Commander Barton's exposure as a Section 31 agent, I can't help but feel that this was purposeful. Starfleet saw fit to provide me with a full medical staff. However, in their infinite wisdom, they failed to assign a counselor. A ship full of people who have been trapped in the Delta Quadrant for seven years previously and have been in an alien realm for yet another year with no time to re-acclimate, and no counselor." The Doctor shook his head wearily and sighed. "Despite their oversight, things haven't gone terribly wrong... yet. Lt. Paris, overall, seems far better at coping with the situation, though I am left to wonder if he is merely burying his reaction to these events without dealing with them. Lt. Torres' behavior is equally disquieting, as she is doing what many mothers would do and taking the blame herself for her daughter's differences. It is

almost enough to make me hope that Miral's abilities were caused by exposure to the Sernaix." He paused to look at the readout on his desk monitor. "At this point that seems highly unlikely. I have begun to draw extrapolations to determine whether these abilities could have been caused by Lt. Torres and Lt. Kim's encounter with the Caretaker at the beginning of Voyager's original journey in the Delta Quadrant. This line of reasoning will be difficult to prove as I must also account for why Lt. Torres has not been affected while her daughter and Lt. Kim have, and why Miral is developing different abilities to Lt. Kim. The obvious conclusion would be that the two situations are not related at all. However, my instincts have been supported by the evidence of Mr. Kim's mental bond with Miral."

The Doctor moved to a side station in his office and picked up the PADD lying there. "Aside from the obvious medical challenges currently rife aboard Voyager, I am also faced with a personal trial. Previously, I have only had one permanent assistant. Kes..." The Doctor smiled sadly as he remembered the last time he had seen the kind-spirited alien girl. "... And in more recent years, Lt. Paris. The challenge of coordinating an entire staff has been daunting in more than one respect. However, I have every confidence that I will rise above the difficulties."

Dayton looked through the transparent walls of the Chief Medical Officer's office and scowled as he watched the Doctor pacing back and forth, obviously recording his log entry. "Look at him pacing in there, Gail."

The other Doctor shook his head and looked at his female assistant. "Like he's actually a Doctor, rather than just programmed to be one." Dayton snorted derisively. "How can Starfleet actually

give that thing a commission? Has it gone to medical school? No. Has it taken spent years in residency working to become a full member of staff? No. Has it actually earned the right to be Chief Medical Officer? No."

Gail Cunningham shook her head. "Robbie, he's got the combined medical knowledge of the entire databanks of Starfleet medical at his disposal. He's had the techniques of the best surgeons and doctors from all over the Federation regardless of time period. Besides that, he's clocked more field time than Doctor Crusher aboard the Enterprise and she was Chief of Starfleet Medical once."

Dayton rolled his eyes, "At least she worked to get where she is, despite the fact that she's a good friend of Picard." The emphasis he placed on 'good' fed all sorts of connotations into his words. "And she's not the Chief anymore."

Gail sighed and pushed the fine bangs of her long blonde hair out of her eyes. She continued running systems checks on the medical instrumentation while Dayton leaned against the bed. He obviously had issues with completing a task he considered beneath him. When she added that to his attitude and his tendency to give credence to what was only rumor and innuendo, Gail decided she didn't like the Assistant Chief Medical officer very much. "Dr. Crusher gave up being the Chief because she wanted to practice medicine, not push paper."

"I heard Pulaski wouldn't complete her duties the way Crusher did, so Picard wanted to get rid of her." Dayton was idly fiddling with a tricorder as he watched Gail work. The medical assistant rolled her eyes and continued on with her duties, wondering how the hell Dayton had arrived at where he was. She knew of course: it was her habit to become completely familiar with the doctors with whom she would be working. Dayton was a crack surgeon, highly qualified in a triage situation with an impressive recovery ratio. He was the perfect doctor for a war situation, having proven himself in the Cardassian conflict. The problem lay not with his bedside manner or with his skill as a doctor and a surgeon, but with his team playing skills. He was a showboat, a hard nose and a pain when not embroiled in the action of triage and surgery. He would have never been assigned to this position on Voyager under normal circumstances and the fact that Starfleet transferred him aboard her now did nothing for her confidence about their expected survival.

Movement from the Doctor's direction caught her eye and she turned in time to see the Doctor exit the private enclosure of his office. "How are the recalibrations coming?" If he noticed Dayton's bad attitude, his body language didn't give it away.

Gail opened her mouth to speak then pursed her thin lips as Robbie stepped forward challengingly. "Other than the fact that it's completely unnecessary as everything is fresh out of space dock, just fine."

The Doctor turned to regard the assistant Chief coolly. "I disagree that it's completely unnecessary, Doctor. You shouldn't need an explanation, but Voyager had a Section 31 agent on board and the ship was put together hastily and rushed out of space dock without a shakedown cruise. I would prefer it if we find out about any problems now before we have to make considerable use of our facilities." Dayton stepped back and nodded non-committally as the Doctor turned his attention on the Medical Assistant.

"Ensign Cunningham, report." The Doctor tensed, prepared for another outburst similar to that of his Assistant Chief. He was pleasantly surprised when Gail smiled and began a detailed report. "All diagnostic systems are accurate to the 98th percentile..."

Miral giggled as she and her mother busied themselves bashing blocks into holes on the wooden play surface with rubber mallets while Tom looked on with an amused grin on his face. "I think you two are taking the ship's motto a little far."

"Say what you want, flyboy." B'Elanna grinned ferally at her husband. "But Miral is going to be an engineer just like her mom... Remind me to thank Seven for this play set."

Tom's eyebrow reached for his hairline. "You... thank Seven..." He made a big show of looking around. "All right Q, come out and return my wife..." He looked up to find B'Elanna standing in front of him, tapping the mallet against the palm of her hand.

"It's light, but enough to cause significant damage." B'Elanna growled and moved to straddle Tom's lap.

Tom squirmed under his wife, his grin growing exponentially. "Are you certain we should be doing this in front of Miral? I think Chakotay owes me some babysitting and they should be off shift fairly soon."

B'Elanna groaned, "You know you really are a pig. Besides, not *every* time I beat you necessarily means anything more than just a beating..."

"Like Freud said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," Tom offered helpfully.

B'Elanna looked at him and bared her teeth. "On second thought, maybe the Captain and the Commander would like some hands-on practice."

Tom's grin grew as the half-Klingon twisted on his lap. "My thoughts precisely." When B'Elanna's movements stilled and her gasp filled his ears, his attention was drawn to the scene in front of him. Miral's eyes were closed while her hammer still pounded a block into the board, a large toy screwdriver twisted a screw into its slot and the toy saw blade spun at a frightening rate of speed.

"Stop," B'Elanna's voice started out quietly. "Stop... Miral, honey, stop." Tom was so entranced by the scene that he barely noticed that his wife's weight was no longer pinning him down. B'Elanna's voice grew louder and more insistent as she continued her mantra for her daughter to stop. "Miral, stop now!" B'Elanna screamed, her voice filled with anger and fear and a hundred other emotions. Abruptly, everything stopped. The hammer fell to the floor, the screwdriver stopped twisting and the saw blade came to a complete halt. Miral looked up at her mother, her lip extending, her brown eyes becoming liquid. A plaintive howl filled the previously happy living room.

B'Elanna looked down at her daughter. Guilt for her harshness spread over her face and she fled to the bedroom before Tom could see her tears. Tom was torn only for a moment, when he picked Miral up and bounced her on his hip. "Shhhh... Honey. It's ok. You just scared Mommy, is all. It's ok, baby." Tom moved to pick up the stuffed Panda from its place on the shelf and set it in Miral's arms. Soon Miral had not only quieted, but was well on her way to sleep as she clenched the little bear in a death grip.

"Is there space in here for us to stretch out with Mommy?" Tom stuck his head into their bedroom, and then moved in far enough for him to lean against the doorframe.

B'Elanna looked up, her expression telling him she was being harder on herself than he or her little girl would ever be. "I shouldn't have yelled at her, Tom. I just... I can't do this."

"Can't do what?" Tom asked, his stomach twisting in knots.

B'Elanna sighed. "This... Miral. Her powers. I want my little girl back."

Tom moved into the bedroom and laid their daughter, now sleeping quietly, in front of her mother. "Looks like she's right here," he said softly as he rubbed Miral's back tenderly.

The half-Klingon's face softened as she stroked her daughter's faint brow ridges. "This wouldn't have happened if you had let me have the Doctor fix her genetics." B'Elanna's voice was even and calm so she didn't expect Tom to be looking down at her as if she'd grown horns and a pair of wings. "I wasn't accusing, Tom... Just stating a fact."

Tom relaxed slightly. "You don't know that for certain, B'e. Even the Doc doesn't know for yet. Besides, it wouldn't be fixing her genetics..." When he looked at his wife, he allowed his voice to trail off. This wasn't the time for this particular conversation to be rehashed.

"How are we going to do this, Tom?" B'Elanna looked up at him. "I don't know about you, but this scares the hell out of me. I mean, right now it's harmless and cute. Flying stuffed toys and flipping pancakes with her mind." B'Elanna laid the flat of her hand against Miral's back. "Do you remember the last time we had someone with unknown psychic potential aboard, Tom? Do you remember bulkheads blowing out? An attack on engineering?"

"Kes." Tom repressed a shudder and looked down at his daughter. "We don't have any reason to believe that Miral will turn out anything like Kes, B'e."

"But we don't have any reason to believe she won't, either," countered B'Elanna. She rolled off the bed and started to pace back and forth. "Even if she doesn't... Even if everything turns out all right, what kind of future is she going to have, Tom?"

Tom Paris looked down at his daughter. "I don't see why her powers..."

B'Elanna shook her head. "Children are cruel, Tom. I was a freak to them, even in the Academy, because of my temper and my ridges. Now Miral is going to have ridges, a temper and the ability to throw the offending child across the playground without laying a hand on them."

"There's no reason..."

"Tom," B'Elanna's voice was pleading, "Think about it for a moment. She's not even two and she's already coordinating three things at once with her mind. It only makes sense that the strength of her abilities and her control will increase with age."

Tom stood and moved around to stop his wife's pacing. "And there is nothing to say that the abilities won't completely disappear at puberty." Cupping B'e's face in his hands, he caught and held her gaze. "There are too many unknowns right now for us to work ourselves into a frenzy with all the 'what ifs'. Let's give Doc some time. He'll get us the answers, and then we can worry about the consequences if we need to."

B'Elanna swallowed visibly then nodded at her husband. She moved back to the bed and brought her hand down to stroke Miral's back. As her hand came within five centimeters of Miral's back, sparks flew off B'Elanna's fingernails and she withdrew her hand as if shocked. "It's numb, Tom..." Her voice was choked. She looked up at her husband, emotion clouding her face.

Tom nodded and tapped his commbadge, willing himself not to panic. "I need a site to site transport for three to Sickbay."

The shimmering transport effect faded, leaving Tom and B'Elanna standing beside the medical bed where Miral lay, sleeping peacefully. The Doctor approached immediately and began to scan

Miral's small form. As his brow furrowed, B'Elanna stepped forward and looked at him questioningly. "It's all right, Lieutenant. My scans say she's fine. However, she seems to be projecting a low power body field."

B'Elanna reached out with her good arm to turn the Doctor towards her and away from her daughter. "Are you telling me that she's projecting a Sernaix shield?"

The Doctor nodded and turned back to his primary patient. "Precisely. It seems to be some sort of instinctive reaction to external stimulus. As her brain wave activity is showing her to be in deep REM sleep patterns, she has no conscious control over her state."

B'Elanna felt a hand on her shoulder, another doctor easing her back to the next biobed to take a look at her numb hand. It barely registered on her as he scanned the affected limb, then picked up a hypospray and depressed it against the pulse point of her wrist. She looked down and the feeling started to return to her numb fingers. She nodded curtly at the other doctor in acknowledgment before slipping off the bed and fixing the Doctor with a glare. "Bring her out of it, Doctor."

The Doctor shook his head. "I think it would be an unnecessary risk to bring her out of this state when we don't know anything about what stimulus prompted it or even how she is generating it."

Dayton broke in. "Maybe if we brought her out of the REM state, the field would drop." B'Elanna and Tom both looked at the EMH expectantly.

"Too risky. We have no idea what sort of effect waking Miral up at this point will have on her." The Doctor shook his head.

"If this occurred naturally and if we weren't going to do anything more than stimulate her brain waves into a non-REM state to force her to wake up, I don't see that there would be any ill effect. It should be just like her waking up naturally." Dayton stepped forward, his gaze locked with his superior's.

The EMH stiffened at the defiance in Dayton's stance and tone. "At this point there is no risk to her health by letting her sleep. There could be a risk if we wake her up. I will not sanction any action that could endanger her health when at this point she is perfectly safe."

Tom stepped forward between B'Elanna, Dayton and the EMH. "Look, why don't we get Harry up here? He has this body field going as well, right? And he seems to have some sort of connection with Miral... Maybe he can wake her up or at least give us a clue as to what's going on."

The EMH nodded, impressed by Tom's line of reasoning. "EMH to Lieutenant Kim." Silence answered him. "EMH to Lieutenant Kim, please respond." The Doctor looked at Tom and B'Elanna, concern playing across his face. "EMH to the Bridge."

"Bridge here, Doctor." Chakotay's voice filtered over the comm system.

"We may have a problem. Miral Paris seems to have developed the ability to project a field much like the Sernaix body field. We were attempting to contact Lieutenant Kim as he has also shown this ability but he isn't responding to his commbadge signal."

"Alright Doctor, leave it to us. I'll find him for you. Chakotay out."

It didn't take long for Chakotay to track down the missing Lieutenant, though it was concerning that Harry's commbadge didn't seem to register on the ship's internal systems. That was all it

took for Captain Janeway to give Chakotay permission to track down the Lieutenant personally. An inspection of the computer access log had led the First Officer to Harry's last known location: one of the astronomical science labs. The door's privacy lock was engaged, which prompted Chakotay to key in his override.

The doors opened to reveal the ship's Ops officer slumped over the console. Chakotay stepped forward and nearly settled his hand on the other man's shoulder before noticing a slight distortion in the air around him. He pulled back his hand and tapped his commbadge. "I've found him for you, Doctor, but we'll need a site to site transport."

Chakotay felt the tingle of the transporter effect around him as he and Harry reappeared in Sickbay. "I think he might be emitting his body field as well, Doctor." The First Officer of Voyager stepped away from the biobed, leaving the area open for the EMH.

The tricorder beeped and whirred as the Doctor ran it over the prone man's body. "You are correct, Commander. Lieutenant Kim is in the same state as Miral. However, his body field is much stronger than Miral's. There are extremely high levels of certain chemical receptors in both their brains. From the readings I am getting, I would venture to say that my first supposition is correct. They are aware of and reacting to some external stimulus that we are not aware of."

Chakotay nodded and stood back with B'Elanna and Tom, putting his hand on his old friend's shoulder comfortingly as she spoke. "So what does that mean to Miral, Doctor?"

The Doctor turned a sympathetic gaze on both B'Elanna and Tom. "Unfortunately it means that we leave her as she is until we find out exactly what is causing this reaction in both of them. Unless something else happens in the mean time, it's the safest thing for now."

B'Elanna's fists clenched convulsively at her sides and she closed her eyes tightly. She felt guilt overwhelm her. Her last words to her daughter before she'd fallen into this 'sleep' had been in anger. She felt Tom wrap an arm around her waist and heard his voice. "We understand, Doctor. I'm certain you'll do what's best for both Harry and Miral." She felt Tom gently steer her out of sickbay, leaving Miral in the care of her godfather with Chakotay following behind them.

"If you two need anything..." Chakotay offered, putting his hand in the center of her back as a gesture of comfort.

Tom nodded. "Thanks, Chakotay. We'll let you and the Captain know if there are any changes."

B'Elanna heard the exchange as though from a distance, the knot of anger and fear growing in her stomach like a tumor.

Both Miral and Harry were still sleeping sixteen hours later. Their body fields were intact and Miral's was even growing stronger. The Doctor did yet another scan which came up with no evidence of the external stimulus to which he was certain that both patients were responding. "Ensign Cunningham, focus the scan wavelength by zero point zero one every fifteen seconds."

"Aye sir." Gail moved her fingers over the controls, slowly focusing the scan. They worked in tandem for several minutes, the medical assistant correctly anticipating the Doctor's needs and orders. It soon became evident that the stimulus his patients were responding to wasn't going to be found through this scan procedure.

The Doctor shook his head. "I don't understand. This is the frequency on which Sernaix technology should be detectable."

Gail looked at the Doctor, "We'll find it, Doctor. There's just some part of the equation that we're missing." She moved behind the EMH and settled her hand on his shoulder. "We should look at all the pieces of the puzzle again."

The Doctor's eyebrow arched but he gestured for the Ensign to come into his office. "Puzzle pieces?"

Gail blushed. "It's the way I look at all medical problems. Like a puzzle... Study the shapes long enough, find the pattern and you'll be able to put it all together."

"A clever analogy." The Doctor favored her with one of his full smiles. "So just what do the shapes from our puzzle tell you?"

"Well, I think you're right to suspect that they are reacting to the Sernaix. That is the only time that Mr. Kim has generated the body field. So far, we've scanned all the frequencies that we know Sernaix technology works on. So either we don't know all the frequencies, which is possible, or it's not their technology that the patients are reacting to. Do we know if a Sernaix body shield resonates at the same frequency as their technology does?"

The Doctor's brow furrowed. "It is possible that they are somehow reacting to the physiognomy of the Sernaix, but that would imply they are detecting it somehow and that it recently got much closer to Voyager."

"More questions than answers at this point... But we'll figure it out." Gail reached out across the table and settled her hand over the Doctor's.

The Doctor looked at Gail, appreciative of the support. "Of course we will, Ensign." He paused as though considering something. "Would you mind if I called you by your first name? The medical departments on most vessels don't run on strict protocol. Gail, isn't it?"

"Of course I wouldn't mind, Doctor, and everyone calls me Gail." She took a breath and focused on the Doctor as a gentle smile spread across her face and a sparkle lit up her green eyes. "Of course, my full name is Abigail. For some reason everyone just shortens it to Gail."

"Well, if you'd prefer it, I'll call you Abigail," The Doctor offered, his tone warm and friendly.

She nodded happily. "Abigail would be lovely, Doctor."

Tom set the hot pizza down in front of B'Elanna. "Ham and pineapple as requested." He felt his heart twist as B'Elanna didn't seem to take any notice of his presence. She simply continued to look out of the viewport as she gazed stars outside, distorted into long, bright streaks by the warp field. "B'e... Miral is ok. You know the Doctor won't let anything happen to his goddaughter."

B'Elanna suddenly fixed him with a hard glare. "Ok... If you define ok as unconscious in Sickbay." She stood and paced the length of their quarters. "The powers were bad enough when she was tossing her toys with her mind... Now it's shields up when she goes to sleep?"

"B'Elanna, you know that's not what happened," Tom began, only to be cut off by another outburst from his panicking wife.

"She's a baby, Tom. How is she supposed to control this? She doesn't have a chance. Harry's a grown man and he can't control it." B'Elanna's fists clenched and unclenched. The tension in their quarters could have rivaled the tension on the bridge during a red alert.

Tom shook his head, keeping his composure as B'Elanna panicked. "She's done fine so far. Just give the Doctor time."

"Time, time... Miral may not have the time. You don't have any idea what's really going on with her. Neither does the Doctor." The half-Klingon woman finally stopped her pacing. She braced herself against the viewport, her hands splayed against the transparent aluminum. Tom moved behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist comfortingly, trying to provide physical support and comfort since his words only seemed to enrage her further. Another burst of violent temper from his wife pushed them both away from the wall. B'Elanna disengaged herself from his arms and whirled on him. "Damn, I wish you hadn't stopped me from having the Doctor remove her Klingon characteristics. If her genetics had been changed she wouldn't have developed this ... whatever it is."

Tom was stunned and his eyes widened as her words cut through him like a hot knife through butter. His eyes narrowed then. Her words communicated one thing to him. 'Your fault. Failure. Your fault.' And with that old mantra running through his mind, Tom turned and walked out of their quarters.

Tears began to run down B'Elanna's face before any other reaction could come to her. "What have I done...? Oh gods, what have I done..." Her legs suddenly felt like rubber beneath her body and before she could fully register it, she was kneeling on the carpet of their quarters. All her nightmares of old ran through her mind: thoughts of her father not being able to deal with two Klingons, thoughts of allowing her temper to drive away the people she cared about. Then, no longer able to deal with the all the stress, she crumpled to the floor, the tears still falling like a hard rain.

The Doctor breezed into Engineering, following a suggestion of Abigail. "Oz... Can I have a word with you?"

"Enjoying your freedom, Doctor?" Oz asked conversationally, his disembodied voice echoing off the walls of Engineering.

"Yes, thank you. It's especially refreshing now that I don't have to use my mobile emitter to visit all areas of the ship, since the Engineering crews just recently finished the final calibrations on the ship wide emitter arrays. There's a certain freedom to not having to worry about downloading my program," the Doctor replied happily. Then he realized that his exuberance might be less appreciated by the only other being whose freedom would depend on the technology, but who was being denied its use.

Oz, for his part, didn't seem especially troubled. "I can see where that would be refreshing. Of course, the mobile emitter offers other advantages that the onboard systems don't."

"Naturally! Do you realize that on one particular away mission the Captain sent me on, I actually had the pleasure of adopting and raising a child?" The Doctor went off on one of his tangents.

Unlike most being confronted with the Doctor's anecdote, Oz was actually intrigued by the notion. "Really... A male raising a child... Fascinating. You aren't even a biological life form and they entrusted you to raise one of their offspring?"

The Doctor settled at one of the Engineering consoles. "Actually, they didn't realize that I wasn't a member of their species. My holomatrix was altered so that I would appear to be one of their species."

"Really... And you're comfortable with altering your appearance in that manner? Perhaps it's just the manner in which I was uploaded, but I think I will stick to my own form when I get my holographic body," Oz interjected. "It fascinates me, the way so many species rear their children. Of course, the Sernaix handle things very differently."

It was the mention of children that brought the Doctor back on track to what he was really here for. "I don't mean to interrupt your line of thought, but I actually came here with a purpose."

"Harry and Miral, no doubt," Oz replied, his voice almost amused.

The tone of his voice set the Doctor on edge, feeling as if the shipmind wasn't taking the situation seriously. "Yes, well, we need to understand what's going on with them. Abigail, one of my assistants, suggested that I come speak to you since you are... were a Sernaix."

"Very clever, this new female of yours," Oz commented. The Doctor's brow furrowed and he opened his mouth to comment that she wasn't *his* female, but Oz continued his train of thought. "They're protecting themselves. They sense their enemy all around them."

The Doctor rubbed his chin as he considered the shipmind's words. "Then they're reacting to you?"

"Of course not." Oz's voice seemed almost offended at the Doctor's first conclusion. "No, my holographic friend, I said that they can sense their enemy."

The Doctor's eyes widened. "Then there are Sernaix..."

"When have you ever been able to see them before?" The shipmind's voice was amused once more.

The EMH turned, intending to take this information to the Captain when he realized he'd never actually managed to ask his question. Turning on his heel so that he was once again facing the interior of engineering, he vocalized the real reason he had come to visit the disembodied Sernaix intelligence. "I can understand that they are protecting themselves, but why are they unconscious?"

"Power, Doctor..." Oz murmured his answer in the confines of the engine room. "It's all a matter of power and conservation."

Gail pinned up her hair once more as another large lock of it escaped its clasp at the top of her head. She tried to make sense of the readings that she and the Doctor had collected from Miral and Mr. Kim. She still couldn't see the pattern in the puzzle, but she was determined to do so even if she had been - she checked her chrono - off-duty for the last twenty minutes. Shaking her head at herself, she went back to concentrating on the data that had been collected, only to be disturbed once more by the clucking of someone's tongue from behind her.

"Kiss, kiss, kiss..." Robbie Dayton stood behind her, a derisive grin on his face. "Still trying to kiss up to the Doctor, Gail? You looking for a promotion or a boyfriend?"

Gail turned back to the data and tried her best to ignore the rude behavior of her colleague, hoping that he would go away.

He didn't.

"You know, I don't think that the EMH series, especially the Mark I, was created to be anatomically correct. I could check the specs for you, if you like..." Robbie continued, malingering behind her. "Of course, Janeway let him fiddle with his program so much he's probably..."

"Robbie..." Gail snapped, turning abruptly.

The Doctor continued, oblivious to her anger, "Well, from what I heard, she does have a 'thing' for holograms." Dayton sneered at Gail, "Maybe you and she should compare notes."

Gail stood and stalked up to him until she was toe-to-toe and nose-to-nose with Robbie Dayton. "You, Dr. Dayton, are displaying conduct unbecoming a Starfleet officer. Whether or not you agree with a hologram's appointment to the position of Chief Medical Officer of this vessel, the fact remains that he is the Chief Medical Officer and has been for the last seven years. If Starfleet saw fit to confirm his appointment then it isn't for you to second guess their judgment." She took a step back, drawing her slender frame to its full height and pushing her chest forward. Her green eyes glinted with anger. "As far as what I am doing here, I am completing my duties as a medical officer aboard this vessel. There is a highly-valued officer and a young child both suffering from an unknown affliction and if you can't see how that would take precedent over my free time, then I'm not entirely certain that you understand what being a medical officer is really about. Maybe if you put aside your pride and actually got to know the Doctor, you'd find out that he is a valuable member of this crew, not just a hologram."

Dayton watched the young woman for a few moments, then his eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "You talk a good game, Cunningham, but that's all it is... A game. It's got nothing to do with why you're pulling an extra long shift in Sickbay."

"Believe what you want, Dayton." Cunningham turned her back on him focusing once more on the collected data in front of her. "It doesn't matter to me any more than you matter to me."

The only indication of Dayton's exit was the telltale swish of the Sickbay doors closing behind him. Gail took a deep breath and concentrated once more on the task at hand.

The Doctor stood with his commlink open. "You can see why I would want to call a senior staff meeting to discuss these developments, Captain. The information that Oz has provided about Miral and Mr. Kim's condition..."

"... Is incomplete and as mysterious as always when dealing with that damned shipmind. I swear he only gives details when you don't want the information he's peddling." Janeway's voice sounded even rougher over the comm system. "You're right, though, we need to discuss this as a group. I'll have Chakotay call a senior staff meeting immediately and you can present your findings." Janeway paused for a moment. "Make sure you take good care of my goddaughter, Doctor."

The Doctor rolled his eyes as he responded, "Rest assured, Captain, I am taking the very best care of *our* goddaughter."

He could hear the grin in Janeway's voice. "That's all I ask, Doctor. Janeway out."

"Doctor, I need to speak with you." The Doctor turned towards the sound of Abigail's distressed voice. She was standing just in the doorway of his office and everything about her appearance spoke of her distress. Her lips were thin, her face was pale and she had a frustrated look in her eyes.

The Doctor moved towards the doorway. He took Abigail's hands in his and drew her deeper into his office. "What's wrong? Have you discovered something about Mr. Kim and Miral?"

Gail shook her head. "Oh no, I'm sorry, Doctor. I didn't mean to scare you like that. No, it's a personnel issue."

"Really," The Doctor pulled out a chair for her, motioning her to take a seat, and moved around to his side of the desk. He leaned forward. "It must be quite serious for you to be this upset."

Abigail nodded. She put both hands on the surface of the desk near the EMH. Her body language clearly communicated that she wished to take him into her confidence. "It's Dr. Dayton. I believe it was a mistake for Starfleet to assign him to Voyager."

The Doctor leaned back and looked at his assistant. "I don't understand. He's an excellent surgeon, highly qualified and suited to the situation we're in..."

"He's also rude, arrogant and has no respect for you as a Doctor," Abigail growled. She stood and started pacing back and forth.

The Doctor smiled at Abigail's loyalty. "I realize how disturbing it must be for you, but unfortunately, until there is wider acceptance of holographic rights, some people will continue to be prejudiced against photonic life forms. It's a cross that for now I will need to bear. I only won one battle... I didn't win the war."

Abigail's brow furrowed and she clenched her fists, bringing them down against the top of his desk. "People like that don't belong in Starfleet. It's against everything we stand for." Her nostrils flared slightly and she pursed her lips. If the Doctor hadn't known better, he'd have sworn that she was taking it personally. "You are the finest Doctor I've had the privilege of serving with. Just because you are a hologram shouldn't have any bearing on how you are treated." She reached out across the desk and took the Doctor's hands in hers. "You're very noble, Doctor, but an attitude like his bears correcting."

Normally her actions would have warmed the Doctor, but something inside of him twisted slightly, sensing that something was not quite right in their interaction here. He withdrew his hands slowly, but maintained his friendly visage. "Abigail, if you like I can speak to him about what he said. If you insist, I can refer this matter to Commander Chakotay, but as long as I haven't heard him say or do anything wrong, any further action would have to be justified by investigation. I would prefer to try and win him over before I start tearing my staff apart with acrimony."

"Someone like him can't be won over, Doctor. You didn't hear what he said about Captain Janeway." Abigail rose and paced slightly.

The Doctor looked up at her, his expression serious. While he could dismiss comments about himself, he, like every other member of the senior staff and most of Voyager's original crew, was protective of Janeway to an almost paranoid degree. "Enlighten me."

"He said she had a 'thing' for holograms and implied that was why she allowed you to modify your program." Abigail spat out the words as if they tasted bad.

The Doctor found himself blushing for a moment, remembering some rather interesting daydreams he'd programmed for himself once upon a time. "Well, although I admit that wasn't very kind of him and I wouldn't suggest for health reasons that he makes those implications anywhere near Commander Chakotay, those comments aren't any more vicious than the wilder rumors that abounded aboard this ship's grapevine for the seven years we were trapped out here." The Doctor shook his head. "Admittedly he bears watching, Abigail, but I can't sanction

any action more than that. I will have a talk with him myself." The EMH moved around the desk to stand in front of the young nurse.

Abigail grabbed his hands and looked into his eyes. "Please, Doctor. Remove him from Alpha shift. Put him on Beta or Gamma. Don't subject us to his constant prying and wild innuendo."

The Doctor slowly removed his hands from the nurse's grip. The tone of this conversation had changed subtly and the Doctor searched for a way to bring it back onto a more even keel. "I'm afraid, Ensign Cunningham, that until I've had a chance to speak with Dr. Dayton and assess the situation for myself, that's all I am willing to do."

Abigail dropped her gaze, seeming to understand that she had overstepped her bounds. "I understand, Doctor. Of course, your judgment is best." She turned and moved slowly out of his office with only a small backward glance over her shoulder.

It was the backward glance that left him feeling less certain about the encounter.

B'Elanna hunched over the malfunctioning console in the shuttle bay that controlled several of the shuttle cradles. She could have delegated, but she needed something - anything - to take her mind off her troubles. The more she focused on manually re-aligning the relays, the easier it became to block out the distracting thoughts from her mind.

She became so focused on the task in front of her that she didn't notice the soft footfalls behind her until she felt gentle hands wrap around her waist. It startled her into combat mode. All the accumulated stress and anger came out in a startling growl and a flash of movement that had her 'assailant' pinned to the ground in an instant.

"Hey, I'm all for kissing and making up, but in public?" Tom's jovial face smiled up at her.

She growled again and turned aside. "Idiot. You know better than to sneak up on me, I could have injured you."

Tom moved closer and gently turned her face so she was looking at him. "Now, when would that be anything new?" He brushed her cheek with one finger. "You didn't really think I'd need that long to cool down, did you?" B'Elanna's face was carefully neutral, so much so that Tom knew that there was something wrong. "You didn't think I was walking out on you, did you?"

"You did walk out, Tom," B'Elanna hissed and turned away from her husband.

"Look at me, B'e..." Tom said. His voice, while not angry, sounded as if he was giving an order. "Look at me or so help me I'll make you injure me while trying to make you."

B'Elanna couldn't help but let a slight chuckle escape at Tom's lame joke. She turned to look at him once again. "I wasn't leaving you. I was leaving the fight. If we had kept going, all that would have happened was that it would have escalated into something neither of us needs right now. So I walked away from it before any more of my buttons got pushed, or I could push any more of yours." He bent in slightly towards her. "I'm sorry if I inadvertently pushed another of your buttons while I was trying to diffuse the situation."

B'Elanna let go a breath that she hadn't known she'd been holding. "Just warn me before you do it again, you silly p'taq. All right?" She leaned in closer towards him.

"Deal." Tom's mouth moved closer to hers.

"Senior staff, please report to the briefing room." Chakotay's voice echoed through the shuttlebay.

"It's revenge..." B'Elanna hissed as she pulled herself off the ground and brushed her clothing off, straightening the lines of her uniform. She tapped her commbadge. "Carlton, I need a maintenance crew in shuttlebay two. Cradle Ten-B is malfunctioning."

The disembodied voice echoed back to her. "Aye, Ma'am."

Tom shook his head. "Then he'd be doing it to Harry... Or Tuvok while T'Pel was here."

B'Elanna grinned. "You heard about it too, huh?"

"Yeah, except he wasn't exactly sober when he told me." Tom answered her grin with his own mischievous smile. "You know, I'm going to have some choice stories to tell..."

"Don't you dare." B'Elanna held up her hand and started to walk away from her troublemaking husband.

Tom pulled himself up and trailed behind her. "But you don't even know what I was going to say."

"I don't need to, flyboy," B'Elanna growled.

Tom sighed and shook his head. "So much for kissing and making up."

The Doctor stood and looked around the table at the familiar faces. "All my findings have pointed to one conclusive fact. Mr. Kim and Miral are reacting to the Sernaix in reasonable proximity to the ship. How they detect their presence, I can't be certain. We haven't been able to conclusively detect the stimuli they are reacting to, but we've eliminated every other reasonable possibility." He directed his gaze to B'Elanna and Tom, then to Seven of Nine. "Including an uncontrollable surge in their powers."

"When you eliminate all other possibilities, whatever remains, however unlikely, must be the answer." Tuvok nodded approvingly. "Eminently logical."

Tom grinned. "You mean, 'Elementary, my dear Watson,' Tuvok."

"If I had meant that, Mr. Paris," Tuvok looked at the young man tolerantly, "I would have said it."

Janeway stood and lifted her arms. "Gentlemen... Let's get this meeting back on track shall we."

"Thank you, Captain." The Doctor directed a disapproving glance towards both Tom Paris and his unwitting accomplice Tuvok. Tuvok didn't seem to notice. Tom actually looked pleased with himself. "Oz has confirmed my suspicions."

Janeway paced in front of the viewport, and then turned to face the others. "Which brings us to the conclusion that our elusive 'friends' are lurking out there again."

"Captain, we're behind the enemy line around the Alpha Quadrant... What would the Sernaix be doing out here?" B'Elanna turned her gaze towards Janeway, trusting that the Captain would have some insight into their enemy's motives.

She didn't disappoint.

A half grin spread across her face. "They're fighting a war on two fronts."

"It is not logical to spread your resources in such a manner," Tuvok offered.

"The Sernaix don't care about logic, Tuvok. We've already seen that." Janeway held up her hand to prevent anyone else from speaking while she brainstormed out loud. "If they cared about logic, they wouldn't drag out the battles. They wouldn't prolong them by giving unworthy opponents a fair chance." She paused to organize her thoughts. "They care about glory. They don't strategize. They pick the biggest, meanest opponent and challenge them to a fight. They're a schoolyard bully spoiling to take the next person down, toying with their prey."

Chakotay grinned and nodded. "They're arrogant enough to try to fight a war on two fronts," he summed up.

"Which means we aren't out of the game yet. We just have to figure out what they're doing out here, and then beat them at it." Janeway looked around the table and was pleased to see nodding heads all around.

Tom shook his head. "This is all great, Captain, but the fact remains that we're one lone vessel in the Delta Quadrant... Again. And now we've got cloaked, battle crazed aliens surrounding us, and our only clue to the fact that they're there is that my daughter and my best friend both have their own personal version of 'shields up.'"

"I know, Tom..." Janeway moved behind her helmsman and set a gentle hand on his shoulder. "We've got the first part of the equation, though, and that's a start." She looked down at him with a bemused grin. "Besides which, what you just said sounds like an average day in the Delta Quadrant to me."

B'Elanna looked to the Doctor once more. "What progress have you made on bringing Harry and Miral out of their 'sleep'?"

The Doctor took a deep breath. "So far the only clue I have is that Oz told me it's all about power and conservation. And that they're protecting themselves from their enemies."

B'Elanna growled. "Come on, Seven, let's go take apart that self-righteous, riddle-speaking shipmind and force him to give Doc the answer."

"Lieutenant," Janeway's voice was a stern warning. "I understand your frustration, but before we go trying to strong-arm answers out of Oz, let's remember that when we've really needed him, he's come through for us. In this case, I'm inclined to not push him for more answers and let the Doctor work on what he's got." She moved behind her engineer and put both hands on her shoulders. "The Doctor has always come through for us. Let's give him a chance to work this out as well." Janeway directed a confident smile at the hologram. "Make it a priority, Doctor."

"That goes without saying, Captain." The Doctor returned Janeway's smile with a grateful look.

Janeway stepped away from B'Elanna. "If there's nothing else..." She looked around the table waiting to see if anyone spoke out. "Dismissed."

Chakotay moved out of the briefing room, heading towards his office. He always felt a sense of exhilaration after a staff meeting like today's, when everyone knew that they were on the verge of solving yet another piece of the puzzle.

"Commander... Chakotay..." Seven's voice brought him out of his own musings and he turned to face the young woman. The smile he focused on her was warm and friendly. If nothing else, his brief relationship with Seven had turned his attitude about the ex-drone around. "How are you holding up, Seven? B'Elanna and Tom are pretty obvious about how they're taking Miral's condition, but you're more like Kathryn..."

Seven arched her eyebrow and nodded. "That is logical, as she is the one who guided me to my humanity. May I walk with you?"

Chakotay slipped his hand behind Seven and settled it in the small of her back. "Be my guest, Seven." After a few moments, he looked at her with a gentle smile. "What's on your mind?"

"You were the one who found Harry..." Seven started her voice slightly tremulous. Chakotay stopped and turned to face her.

"He's going to be all right, Seven. When I found Harry he looked like he'd fallen asleep on the job. No sign of pain or seizures. If it was anything like what Tom and B'Elanna reported about Miral, he just fell asleep as his body field came up. The Doctor will take good care of him." Chakotay looked at Seven, becoming more concerned upon seeing the vulnerability in her expression.

Seven nodded. They turned and continued walking. "How do you deal with this uncertainty? The Captain put herself in danger with alarming frequency when we were originally in the Delta Quadrant."

Chakotay nodded. "More than a few times for you, as I remember."

Seven cocked her head to the side, considering Chakotay's expression, then continued, "Your feelings for her existed at that time as well. How did you prevent yourself from interfering each time she was in danger? I am finding it difficult."

"Trust." Chakotay turned and looked at Seven once more. "I had to trust her to know what she was doing. For the most part she always did. The only times I didn't trust her were times when things went horribly wrong."

"Like the alliance between the Borg and Voyager..." Seven stated bluntly.

Chakotay grinned somewhat sheepishly. "Yes, Seven, that would be one of the times."

"And Equinox..." Chakotay nodded again. "Do you believe that things went awry because you didn't trust her, or do you believe that you didn't trust her because you knew things were going to go awry?"

Chakotay shook his head. "The answer to that would depend on whom you're asking and where they happen to be at the time."

"In this case, I am asking you and the Captain is no where in sight," Seven responded observantly.

Chakotay grinned. "All right, Seven. I believe that I knew in those cases that the Captain was out of her depth. In one case, she was applying Starfleet principles to a race that wouldn't acknowledge any value to those principles." He looked at the young woman and smiled apologetically. "No offense intended."

Seven smiled a little. "None taken... You were correct. We had instructions to assimilate Voyager as soon as there was no further use for you."

Chakotay's eyes widened at the young woman's candid response. "And in the other case, Kathryn's belief in Starfleet principle drove her to defend them at all costs. That made her lose sight of the very thing that she was protecting. It was all I could do to stop her from doing something she'd later regret until the day she died."

"Then it's the Captain's principles that are her weakness."

Chakotay shook his head. "And her great strength. You'll find that with most Starfleet officers. Including Harry."

"Then it will be up to me to determine when he's taking those principles too far?"

Chakotay settled his hand on Seven's shoulder. "Trust him, Seven, but don't trust him so much that you lose sight of the big picture. That's what idealists like Harry and Kathryn do most often. They can't see the forest for the trees. It's up to the people whom they trust to show them the forest every once in a while."

Seven's brow furrowed slightly then she nodded. "I believe I understand. Thank you, Chakotay."

"You're welcome, Seven." He almost broke away from the ex-Borg then moved back to her. "Come on... Let's go get some lunch. We can see if our new chef is better than Neelix."

Seven's brow arched. "I can hardly see how he could be worse..."

The Doctor sat and studied the readouts from all the scans that they had taken. As far as he could see, there was still no answer to his most pressing problem. "Power and conservation... Power and conservation... What in these reports gives me a clue about power and conservation...?" He went over the diagrams and charts once more. There was something off, something that he was missing, of that he was certain. He stood and paced back and forth. "To conserve themselves, they're using their powers... But what has that got to do with sleep?"

Abigail stepped into the lab and looked at the Doctor. "You also conserve power or energy when you sleep. You burn fewer calories. It's a restful state."

The Doctor's eyes widened. "That's it... That's the key. Harry's field is stronger than anything he's projected before. This is the first time Miral has ever used this power." He moved to his console and punched up a new set of scans. "Just as I thought. Even though they are in REM sleep, they're still burning energy as though they are awake. Active. They couldn't maintain that level of power to their body fields and remain conscious, so they went to sleep. An instinctive protective action." He turned to Abigail, beaming. "Now all we have to do is give them an alternate energy source for their body fields and they'll be able to wake up. Once they're awake, hopefully they'll be able to regulate the power from now on. They probably were caught unawares and that's why they fell unconscious."

Abigail moved in front of the Doctor, a huge smile lighting up her face. "Brilliant, Doctor. You might want to try a low level electromagnetic field around them. The few studies that I have read on the physical psionic arts have indicated that many individuals with such powers can tap into an electromagnetic field and draw power from it."

The Doctor nodded. "Excellent idea, Abigail." Adjusting the biobeds to emit such a field, the Doctor was instantly gratified to see a slight lift in the level of consciousness from Harry and a smaller one from Miral. "It will take some time, but I do believe we've found the solution."

"We make an excellent team, Doctor." The nurse reached out and took his hands in her own. Once again, the same uneasy feeling filled him. He couldn't help but feel that there was something wrong with the relationship that was developing between himself and the nurse.

"We do at that, Ensign Cunningham," The Doctor said, trying to maintain as professional a demeanor as possible. He drew back from her subtly. Her expression turned to a slight pout.

"I thought we were friends, Doctor." She watched him closely.

The Doctor nodded. "Friendly colleagues."

Abigail smiled in response to that. "I'm certain our relationship will develop for the benefit of both of us, Doctor."

A snort of derision echoed around the lab. "Very nice, but this is sickbay and we have patients." Robbie Dayton watched the EMH and his nurse with a contemptuous gaze.

"An excellent point, Mr. Dayton," The EMH concurred. "Please carry on." He turned on his heel and exited Sickbay.

Robbie turned a hard gaze on Cunningham. "Looks like the Holodoc has some sense after all."

Abigail simply met his glare with one of her own.

"I told you the Doc would come through." Tom guided his wife into Sickbay and towards the bed where Miral lay. The pediatric force field was up so that she couldn't fall off the high perch, but she was smiling in her sleep and sucking contentedly on her thumb.

B'Elanna breathed a sigh of relief as she looked at her little girl. "Alright, you were right." B'Elanna leaned back against Tom's chest. "Remind me not to yell at her anymore, Tom... Help me keep my temper reined in."

Tom kissed the back of B'Elanna's head. "You were frightened. It's completely natural."

"No, Tom... I don't care if it's completely natural. You have to stop me from doing it again." She turned in his embrace to look into his eyes. The fear he saw in hers shook him. "With the war and the powers, it's been so easy to be frightened enough to lash out at you, at her. I can't do it again, because I don't know what I would do if my last words to her were in anger." She reached up and cupped his cheek. "Tom, please..."

The expression in B'Elanna's eyes was one that Tom Paris couldn't deny. As impossible as he thought her request was, he nodded once. "I'll try to help you, B'e, but you know, your temper... All of that... You've done really well." His words didn't seem enough to express his feelings.

"Not good enough..." B'Elanna turned in his arms to look at her little girl again. "Not nearly good enough."

Tom leaned his head against his wife's hair. "We're going to be fine, you know, B'e." He felt her shrug slightly in his embrace. "I'm serious, you know... We're going to be fine because our family is here with us, supporting us. The Doc, Captain Janeway, Tuvok, Chakotay, Harry... Our family. The family that helped you and I become who we are today. It doesn't matter that there's war on all sides. We survived the Delta Quadrant the first time, and the odds were just as much against us then." Tom smiled softly. "Everything is going to turn out fine."

B'Elanna snuggled back into Tom's embrace, wishing that she could be as positive as her husband seemed to be.

"Captain." The Doctor breezed on to the bridge and stopped just at the top of the ramp. "Could I speak with you for a few moments?"

Janeway turned in her seat wondering what could be serious enough to drive the Doctor from Sickbay to the Bridge. "Of course, Doctor." She nodded to Chakotay. "You have the Bridge, Commander." Chakotay nodded in response as she stood and moved up the ramp towards the Doctor and her ready room. As she passed the hologram, he fell into step alongside her and they both entered the private confines of her sanctuary.

She approached the replicator, bracing herself as she called, "Coffee, black." Much to her pleasant surprise, a hot mug of what appeared to be black coffee appeared before her. "Smells right. Looks right." She hefted the mug and turned towards her desk.

"Trust me... It's coffee," the Doctor grumbled and shook his head at his most recalcitrant patient.

Janeway scowled at him playfully and took a large gulp. "You're right, Doctor. It is coffee... Very good coffee at that." She settled down in her seat and looked up at him. "Has there been a problem with Harry and Miral? Is the treatment losing effectiveness?"

"Of course not, Captain. I expect that both Mr. Kim and Miral Paris will be awake in an hour, perhaps less." The Doctor settled down in the seat across from the Captain.

Janeway smiled and nodded at the Doctor. "Good work on puzzling out Oz's riddle." She leaned back in her seat and gestured in the general direction of Engineering. "Our friend the shipmind seems to like keeping us on our toes." She leaned forward, once again settling the cup on her desk. "Now, Doctor... I don't believe you came up here to tell me that everything is going fine with your patients."

"No..." The Doctor looked up at the Captain expectantly. "I need your advice."

Janeway appeared to be a little taken aback for a second, but her calm, friendly mask was in place within a moment. "All right, Doctor... Shoot."

The Doctor arched his eyebrow. "I'm having some difficulty with two members of my medical staff, one more serious than the other."

Janeway nodded and her face became more serious. "They don't like the fact that you're a hologram."

"Actually only one of them has trouble with that, and he's the more minor problem. Doctor Robbie Dayton. He's got an excellent field record as a triage surgeon; very capable. Exactly the sort of person you'd want on a mission like this."

"But he resents the idea of working under an Emergency Medical Hologram." Janeway frowned. "As wrong as I think he is to think that way, my best advice to you is to try to win him over. Work with him, let him see that you're more than just the sum of your force fields, photonic particles and programming."

The Doctor grinned slightly as the Captain's words sounded suspiciously like something he would have said. By the barely concealed grin on her face, she knew it as well. "That is precisely what

I had planned to do... Only, the other member of my staff was trying to convince me to do otherwise."

Janeway noticed the change in the Doctor's body language, the uncertainty reflected in his movements and expression. "This would be the more serious problem."

The Doctor nodded, seemingly reluctant to speak at first. Then he found his voice and focused on the Captain once more. "Ensign Abigail Cunningham. She's a nurse - a very capable one, in fact. She helped me immeasurably with the recent situation with Harry and Miral." The Doctor paused. "I also believe that she is becoming enamored of me."

Janeway turned and a half grin hovered about her lips. She shook her head slightly. "Well, Doctor, I'm the last person who'll harp on about protocol..."

Shaking his head, the Doctor looked up at Janeway. "It isn't that at all, Captain. My problem isn't protocol. I'm not interested in her. I don't want to damage our working relationship, but the non-verbal signals I've been trying to give her don't seem to be working."

"She's persistent." The Captain sat down and looked at her Chief Medical Officer with sympathy. "Oh, Doctor... This isn't an easy situation for even a human to deal with. I think the best solution to the situation is to tell her up front and honestly. I believe you should do it as soon as possible... Before it becomes a situation that Chakotay or I have to get involved in."

The Doctor nodded solemnly. "My experience in these matters has been somewhat limited. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Be honest... Try to be gentle, but don't soften it so much that she gets mixed signals. Limit any personal touches you add to the conversation." Janeway shook her head and gestured towards the bridge. "Not that it worked for me terribly well for most of the journey, but it might be easier if you came at this purely from the perspective of a Commanding Officer speaking to one of his subordinates. I'm not certain if any of that will help, Doctor, but it's worth a try." Janeway rose and settled her hand on his arm in sympathy.

The Doctor nodded slightly and breathed out. "Thank you, Captain." He stood and moved towards the Ready Room door.

"Doctor..." Janeway looked at him seriously. "The human heart is a fragile thing. Even if you handle this perfectly, she still might not ever forgive you. Your professional relationship may not survive." The Doctor nodded towards the Captain, acknowledging her words with some trepidation. "Any personnel changes and rotations you want to make after this, I'll support fully."

"Thank you, Captain." The Doctor smiled at his Captain, grateful as always for her unswerving support. He stepped out of the Ready Room and headed towards the turbolift once more.

Harry could feel them. The enemy, the Sernaix... Sycorax. He didn't know how or why, but he could feel them all around him. It was like a nightmare where he ran and ran as black, clawed hands separated themselves from the darkness to grab and scratch. Then suddenly it was light once more. He bolted upright only to be held in place by a medical force field. This wasn't the lab... Where was he? He struggled for a moment until the familiar sights and sounds registered on his senses.

The Doctor, alerted by Harry's frantic movements, moved back towards the bed. "Welcome to the land of the living, Lieutenant. If you persist in making use of Sickbay's facilities so often, I'm going to start charging you rent."

"Doc... I need to speak with the Captain." Harry reached up and grabbed hold of the Doctor's uniform. His eyes still slightly wild after the unpleasant dream that had overwhelmed him. "The Sernaix... They're here. They're..."

"Of course they are, Lieutenant..." The Doctor tried to soothe Harry and encouraged him to lie back on the bed.

"Don't patronize me, Doctor," Harry growled and pushed himself up as far as the field would let him. "The Sernaix are here."

The Doctor fumbled a bit. Why had he chosen words that he knew would agitate the Lieutenant...? Harry more. He took a mental step back and everything became clearer. He had thought he was treating Harry with the respect that was his due, but he had the nagging suspicion that at least some of his attitude was still affected by his disappointment with Seven. In another epiphany, he could see himself through Seven's eyes. Instead of taking the physical clues for what they were, he had attributed them to her inexperience in interpersonal relations rather than acknowledging that she might not be interested in him. He now knew the discomfort that she must have felt of having someone that she thought of as a friend pushing for something more. He understood how she must have felt while she was trying to preserve the friendship and let him know as gently as possible at the same time that she wasn't interested. The Doctor breathed out and stood a little straighter. It ended now. He looked at Harry Kim and nodded. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I shouldn't have put it like that. What I meant was that we know that the Sernaix are here, and that you and Miral Paris were somehow detecting them. I'll notify the Captain immediately to let her know you're conscious." He turned to go into his office, then glanced back at Harry. "I'll also call Seven down. She's been quite worried about you since this started. Of course, I can't release you for at least several hours, so you two will have to put up with my company, but I'll try to make myself scarce." Harry could only watch in wonder as the Doctor grinned and moved back into his office.

Carlton stood behind the console. His team watched as he picked up the cargo crate that they were using to test the freshly repaired shuttle cradle. The massive claw like apparatus swung down, wrapping itself around the crate. The magnetic umbilicals attached themselves in the correct sequence and all the simulated readings looked accurate.

He slowly eased the controls into a lift position, wanting to test the hydraulics as well as the lock procedure. It didn't hurt to be thorough and he had a feeling that Lieutenant Torres would appreciate his diligence. The crane started to lift the weighted dummy high off the deck. Carlton grinned and nodded at his crew. It looked as though they'd caught and cracked another bug in Voyager's systems. Suddenly, the high pitch squeal of the alarm brought his attention back to the console. The controls had redlined without warning.

"Warning... Warning... Hydraulic pressure..." The computer's voice droned through the echoing chamber as the lighting automatically switched to yellow alert status.

"Get the hell out of here," Carlton bellowed at his crew. It was too late. The console exploded in an impressive array of multicolored sparks, throwing the engineer back against the bulkhead with a dreadful thud. Duranium tiling on the roof of the bay exploded outwards and superheated hydraulic fluid vented out and over the rapidly retreating forms of the engineering crew. Toxic gases, also released from the malfunctioning system, hissed up from the floor panels in the form of steam.

"Venting environmental systems of poisonous gas. Correcting environment in shuttlebay two." The computer's voice droned on as the doors that had previously sealed to protect the rest of the ship opened, and a combined security and medical team spilled into the bay.

The carnage wrecked by one malfunctioning system before them looked more like a war zone than anything else. Badly scalded bodies littered the deck of the bay.

The Doctor came out of his office to find Dayton taking some readings from Miral Paris. "Her readings indicate that she's coming out of it as expected, Doctor." Dayton's voice was cold as he reported his findings.

"Excellent, Doctor." He paused for a moment and looked at the human Doctor. Now was as good a time as any to reach out and try to win him over. "I think it would be in the ship's best interest if we continued the research to discover what the stimulus is that both Lieutenant Kim and Ms. Paris are detecting. Perhaps you could..."

"I'm a triage doctor, not a research assistant, Doctor. I'm sure Ms. Cunningham is more than capable of assisting you with that particular puzzle.

The Doctor was about to respond when the yellow alert klaxon filled Sickbay, waking Miral Paris rudely - something that she complained about loudly as she screamed her displeasure to the heavens. The Doctor moved to the howling infant and picked her up, balancing her skillfully on one hip. She quieted in the arms of her favorite hologram despite the howling of the klaxon that actually had less of her attention than the commbadge on the Doctor's uniform, which she couldn't detach from him.

"Doctor, prepare for wounded. There's been an accident in shuttlebay two." Chakotay's voice filled the sickbay. "Approximately ten injured crewmen. They'll be transported to you in moments."

"Acknowledged, Commander," the Doctor responded with a nod. "Dayton, notify as many surgical teams as you think we'll need."

Dayton nodded and moved into action. The Doctor looked at the child in his arms as the first mangled body appeared on the biobed beside him. He tapped his commbadge. "Lt. Paris, please retrieve your daughter from Sickbay. There's been an accident and this is something I don't think she needs to see."

"Acknowledged, Doctor."

Tom Paris carried Miral into their cabin, laughing as Miral demoted him to crewman. "Hey B'e... I think we made a mistake making Captain Janeway her godmother. She's become obsessed with demoting me."

B'Elanna stood and moved to Miral and her husband, pulling her little girl out of her father's arms. "The accident... That was what I was repairing Tom... You see, it really could have been the last time I spoke to Miral."

Tom rubbed the back of his neck and watched as B'Elanna swept their daughter to the couch. He had to admit she was right in a sense. "B'e, we don't even know if we're going to lose anyone yet. The Doc's got a full medical staff working on the injured crewmen now. It isn't like the old days when it was just me and him, or him and Kes. They're probably all going to make it."

B'Elanna looked up at Tom and smiled slightly. "You know, you've turned into some sort of mutant optimist or something."

He grinned as he settled down opposite his wife on the couch. "Well, it's better than how I mutated before."

B'Elanna beamed down at her daughter. "That's right, baby... You don't know yet that you have three older..."

Tom clamped his hand over B'Elanna's mouth. "Remember, the Captain and I agreed to forget about that little incident... I think you should as well."

His wife's eyes twinkled as she nipped the palm of his hand. Tom shook his head and pulled Miral into his lap. She giggled and bounced up and down on her father's leg. B'Elanna reached out and took her daughter's hands. "I am so sorry that Mommy yelled at you, baby... Mommy promises never to do it again." She reached out and scooped her daughter off Tom's knee, cradling her against her shoulder. "Mommy loves you, baby... No matter what happens."

Tom grinned as Miral giggled and yanked on B'Elanna's hair, chanting, "Mama... mama... mama..." The look of adoration and happiness on his wife's face would have been worth never flying again. They were so focused on each other and their daughter that they didn't notice the hovering stuffed toy until it flew into Miral's hand. Tom winced as a veil of tension slowly covered the room once more. It would have been so easy to forget just for a little while about the powers, the Sernaix. He looked at B'Elanna, whose eyes had closed the instant that the toy had jumped into Miral's grasp. He slowly let the breath out again as his wife lowered the baby to her knee and smiled down at their little girl.

"Now who's my clever girl...?" B'Elanna murmured to her daughter.

Tom closed his eyes, feeling his gut wrench as he could see that the smile never made it to her eyes.

Sickbay was in a form of organized chaos as the assigned doctors and nurses moved from one bed to another, diagnosing and selecting which patients needed treatment first to survive. The EMH was in the thick of it as Carlton was the last beamed onto a biobed. Instantly aware of the new patient, the Doctor moved to assess his condition.

One of the medics who had been in the shuttlebay with the wounded arrived in Sickbay just as the engineer went into cardiac arrest once more. "Damn... I thought we finally had him stabilized."

The EMH focused his attention on the newcomer as he tried to revive Carlton again. "Report," he barked, then shook his head. The Captain was definitely contagious.

"He suffered a powerful electrical shock. Every time we stabilize him, it lasts for a few minutes at most and he goes into arrest again." The Doctor nodded at the medic's words, not noticing that Dayton had moved away from his patient and was making his way over to Carlton's biobed. "All right, prepare a hypospray of -"

"No, Doctor." Dayton's voice rang out over the confusion and the EMH turned to face his Assistant Chief. "I've seen this before. Treated it... There's a better way."

"All right, we'll give it a try." The Doctor moved aside enough to allow Dayton to step up beside the patient.

"Let him flat line." Dayton ordered. The EMH's eyes widened and Dayton focused on him. "Trust me, Doctor." He reached out and picked up a cardio-regenerator from the instrument table. When Carlton's readings were flat, Dayton adjusted the settings of the instrument and began to run the instrument over the engineer's chest. The Doctor nodded and observed his assistant's technique. Dayton set aside the instrument and picked up a hypospray, adjusting it and depressing it into Carlton's neck. "Damn it, he's not responding to revival."

The EMH moved in along side Dayton once more. "Let me, Doctor." The EMH grinned as he worked in tandem with the human doctor. "I've revived harder cases before." He picked up another hypospray and selected a different drug. He injected it into the patient's neck. Then he placed the spray over Carlton's heart and pressed the control once more to release the drug into the patient's overwrought system. Suddenly, the monitor sprang back to life.

"He's all right, Doctors... He's stabilizing." The medic smiled at the hologram and the human, who considered each other briefly then moved away to assist with other patients.

In a short time, the rapid-fire atmosphere of the emergency cooled. Patients were stabilized and reports were given. It was the first group crisis that had been handled in their sickbay and their teams had performed smoothly. The Doctor moved through the room, making final checks on each of their patients only to meet Dayton halfway doing the same thing.

The EMH nodded to the human doctor. "Allowing the patient to flat line wasn't what I expected when you said you had a better way of treating him."

Dayton smirked. "You wouldn't think it would work, but it does. The regenerator seems to be able to restore that type of damage easier when the heart isn't in use."

"Ingenious." The EMH shook his head. "I wish I had thought of it."

"Don't worry about it, Doc... I didn't come up with the treatment either. My partner in our medical unit during the Cardassian conflict did." Dayton admitted. They both watched each other. The human re-evaluating the hologram seriously. "The revival was a hell of a piece of work, though."

The EMH shook his head slightly. "Yes, well, there are several hard-headed members of the senior staff who seem to think it's a rite of passage to go through at least one, if not several near death experiences."

Dayton laughed out loud for the first time and ran his hands through his thick blonde hair. "You know, at first I thought you were a real ferret face, but I think you're actually more of a Charles Emerson Winchester..." He paused for a moment and affected a snooty upper-class accent. "The Third."

The Doctor looked at him with an odd expression on his face. "I have a terrible feeling that Tom Paris would understand what you just said."

Dayton clapped the Doctor on his shoulder. "In that case, we're going to call in some sort of favor with your friend the helmsman, borrow the TV he's rumored to possess and I'm going to introduce you to the joys of being a Swamp Rat."

The Doctor was unconvinced, but he was glad to have won some favor with his second. "Well, as dubious as I am about that idea, I'd be happy to..." The Doctor saw Abigail moving towards one of the other labs. "If you'll excuse me, Dr. Dayton."

"No problem, Doc. Just call me Robbie... Everyone else does."

The Doctor nodded in response, then mentally crossing his fingers that this went as well as the first of his problems did, he followed Abigail Cunningham into the other lab.

Abigail turned as the Doctor entered behind her. She smiled winningly at the Doctor. "You were brilliant as always, Doctor. I'm certain if Dr. Dayton hadn't interfered, you'd have saved Lieutenant Carlton without his help."

The Doctor nodded. "Thank you, Ensign. This was a team effort and I was grateful for Dr. Dayton's assistance. The only thing that matters is that the man's life was saved."

The nurse's brow furrowed. "Of course, Doctor." Abigail was confused by the EMH's businesslike manner. What had happened to the warm rapport that they had been developing? "Did you need to speak to me about something?" She took a step towards him to close the distance between them. The Doctor took a step back, maintaining the professional distance between them.

"Actually, there is." The Doctor straightened and looked at Ensign Cunningham. "I appreciate your diligence and our collaboration on the problem with Lieutenant Kim and Miral Paris. I value our professional partnership. However, I believe that perhaps there's been some miscommunication about the depth to which I would like to explore this relationship. As I am your superior officer, protocol would dictate..."

Abigail's expression switched from professional to a barely hidden look of disappointment and pain. It now took on a mask of open disdain. "You thought that *I* wanted a relationship with *you*?" She shook her head, seemingly in disbelief. "Let me assure you, *Doctor*, that was never my intention. I was merely expressing my admiration of your work and trying to promote a healthy working environment. I am sorry if *you* misinterpreted my actions." She moved towards the door of the lab, and then glanced behind her with an almost pitying expression. "I suppose it's very difficult, trying to deal with all those unfamiliar emotions and sensations. Learning to be a fully sentient member of society when you were only programmed less than ten years ago must be a challenge." She stalked out of the lab, leaving the Doctor to try to puzzle out the complexity of human emotion once more.