

The Son of Voyager

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Part 1: Awakening

Chapter 1

His eyes opened.

Confusion. He could see a faint image of himself in a glass or clear plastic panel before him. He could see his black hair and piercing blue eyes. His skin was a healthy tan and he looked like a typical teenage boy.

He had faint memories, conflicting memories.

[Where am I?]

[Who am I?]

Looking around he saw that he was in some type of a medical chamber, or a glass coffin. He saw a release handle and pulled it.

The lid of the chamber raised up and he made to move off the bed. There were tubes and wires attached to various places on his body preventing him from escaping. He began to work on removing them.

After a few minutes of removing the medical attachments, some painful, some a relief, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. Or would have if his legs could have supported his weight.

Sprawled on the floor at the side of his bed, he worked up his resolve to go for another attempt at standing. He pulled himself up using the side of the bed and managed a shaky standing position on very weak legs.

He looked around the room and saw some twenty or thirty canisters like the one he had just escaped. He looked at his own canister and saw a label with familiar names on it. 'Paris-Chakotay'.

He felt a sense of identity with those names. He was Paris, Thomas Eugene Paris but at the same time, he was also Chakotay, son of Kolopeck. He shook his head in confusion and looked at the neighboring canister. The canister contained a teenage boy and was labeled 'Geron-Ayala'.

The faces of Geron Tem and Greg Ayala came to his mind and he could see a resemblance to both of the men, his friends in the face of this boy.

A noise caught his attention. Another of the canisters opened and he saw a girl with faint klingon cranial ridges and flowing auburn hair fighting to loose herself of the tubes and wires.

On shaking legs and with great effort he made his way to the girl and began to help her.

"You're naked." The girl said accusingly.

"So are you." The boy replied, then fought his way over to a coat rack some fifteen feet away.

"Who are you?" She called out in a hoarse voice.

"I... I'm not sure. My bed was labeled 'Paris-Chakotay'." He answered unsurely as he made his way back to her bed, wearing a lab coat and carrying one for her.

"What does mine say?" She asked, looking for her own label.

He pointed to the label and said, "Janeway-Torres."

An odd look came over her face and she stopped struggling with the tubes and wires. After a moment, he began to help her to free herself again and she silently helped him.

After she was freed, she tried to get to her feet. With his help, she didn't fall to the floor, but he supported most of her weight. He could barely support his own so he guided them to lean back against the bed.

"I don't know what's going on." She said in puzzlement.

"Me either, do you remember anything from before you just woke up?" He asked carefully.

"Yes, I remember a lot of things, but they don't make sense... I think I have two people's memories. Those of Kathryn Janeway and B'Elana Torres.

He thought about it and said, "Me too... but with Tom Paris and Chakotay."

"What's the last thing you remember?" She asked carefully.

"Being brought to the Delta quadrant from the Badlands, both my memories remember people being transported off our respective ships and then nothing... I was here." He said in a distant voice.

"Me too. I rememb..." She began to say as another canister opened.

The girl made her way to the opening canister and read the name before trying to help the occupant. 'Kim-Tuvok'.

The boy arrived at the canister with a lab coat and they helped the delicate young girl disentangle herself from the tubes and wires. They couldn't help but notice the mix of Vulcan and Earth/Asian features the girl possessed.

"Intriguing." The Vulcan girl said as she examined her situation.

"Quite." The boy said with a classic Tom Paris smirk and handed her a lab coat.

The first two teens to awake passed on their observations to the third. In typical Vulcan fashion, the third restated what they had said then formed a hypothesis based on the known facts.

"I conclude that each of us is a combination of the genetic material of those persons listed on our canister, somehow we have been imbued with the memories of our genetic donors. A cursory examination of these medical devices leads me to conclude that they are some sort of maturation chamber." The third said logically.

"First order of business would seem to be assessing our current situation in regards to our freedom. Are we prisoners? Patients? Lab experiments?" The second reasoned.

"I agree." The first said then continued, "What should we call each other? When all these canisters open up it's going to get awfully confusing around here."

The second pushed herself away from the bed and began to walk from canister to canister. "They all seem to be unique pairings, no crossovers. Let's go by the names on our canisters for now and we can come up with something more comfortable when we are more aware of our situation." She said with authority.

"Sounds good to me Janeway." Paris said with a gentle smile.

"Is that agreeable with you Kim?" Janeway asked seriously.

"It is acceptable." Kim said without a glimmer of emotion in her look or voice.

"Paris, find anything you can use as a weapon and secure the door, Kim, see if you can access that computer over there and find out any additional information while I start opening canisters." Janeway said with captain's authority.

Paris thought about rebelling against her orders. She was commanding him, expecting him to follow her orders without question. Then he decided that in this instance she was right. If they didn't assess their situation and secure their current location, there might not be a need for a discussion.

Paris looked around the room and found a piece of equipment that looked similar to a hydro spanner. Regardless of its practical use as a tool, it seemed a perfectly satisfactory blunt object.

Janeway had opened about five canisters and helped their occupants to their feet as Paris watched from his position by the door when Kim said, "If the information in this computer is correct, we are the only people in this facility. An entity called the Caretaker used this medical facility to grow experimental creatures in hopes of finding a unique genetic code that would be able to withstand a particular virus. The caretaker's array exploded nearly one standard year ago and when it did, the lab technicians abandoned the lab in fear that the Kazon-Ogla or the Kazon-Nistrum would find them and slaughter them."

Janeway thought about the information and had to ask, "Any information about Voyager?"

"Or the Crazy-horse?" Paris threw in with irritation at her oversight.

"Or the Crazy-horse?" She conceded.

"Yes, there is a reference to the surviving members of both crews going aboard Voyager as the Crazy-horse was used to ram the array. Then Voyager left... on a course that appears to be the most direct route back to the Alpha quadrant."

Janeway considered this for a moment then made a declaration. "We are assuming that these reports are accurate and truthful. Paris, help Geron-Ayala, Carey-Winger, and Wildman-M. Delaney get on their feet. When they're strong enough and able to get around, take them as a team and investigate outside this room. I'll get Nicoletti-J. Delaney and Chell-Henley to help me revive the others, then look for sources of food and perhaps some more suitable clothing."

Paris just nodded and went to his task. Janeway was rubbing him the wrong way with her orders, but he couldn't deny that the things she was saying made sense and an argument now would be counterproductive to their well being. But the time would come.

"Paris, come here, I think you should see this." Janeway said with puzzlement in her voice.

Paris made his way over to the unopened canister and gasped when he saw the obviously Cardassian boy lying asleep. Or to be more precise half Cardassian. The label said Sudor-Seska.

"Which of them do you think was the Cardassian? Seska or Sudor?" Janeway asked Paris quietly.

"It had to be Seska, Cardassians don't have telepathic abilities and Lon Sudor is from Betazed, and I know he is telepathic." Paris said with shock in his voice.

"So Seska was a Cardassian spy on your ship. That leads me to the question... what do we do with Sudor-Seska?" Janeway asked, obviously wanting his advice.

"I think the wisest course of action would be to leave him as he is for now, until we better understand our current situation. Later when we are sure of our resources and capabilities we can make a further decision." Paris said in a voice of speculation.

"I agree." Janeway said and moved on to the next canister. "Before you take your team out for recon, check with Kim to see if there is a floorplan available in the computer." Janeway said as she tried to revive the girl, Dalby-Telfer.

Paris nodded grudgingly and went to speak to Kim.

"Kim, have you come across a floor plan of this place?" Paris asked as he approached the half-Vulcan.

"No, but I haven't been looking for one. I appear to have found something directly related to our current situation." Kim said with Vulcan efficiency.

"I can't make out the language, but it looks like an abort sequence." Paris said, looking at the alien display.

"I came to the same conclusion. The sequence was awaiting a confirmation to abort the biological experiments in this lab." Kim said with an almost emotional quietness.

"They meant to abort us before they left the lab, but someone forgot to acknowledge the request so the computer kept maturing us until we were

complete." Paris said, not speaking to Kim but voicing his thoughts as he put them together.

"Apparently we were a key press away from oblivion." Kim said in confirmation.

"Could you try to find me a floor plan?" Paris asked, his mind snapping back to his task.

"Of course." Kim said as she turned back to her work.

"Geron, Carey, Wildman. Are you ready to move out?" Paris turned and projected his voice across the room.

"Yes sir." The girl and two boys responded with military precision.

"Your floor plan." Kim said behind him.

Paris turned back and accepted a device that looked like a large, overgrown version of a Starfleet padd.

"Let's move out." Paris said, making his way toward the door.

His team moved as one to join him at the door and, as a group they cautiously moved out into the hallway.

* * * * *

"Janeway, I believe that I have found an explanation for our donor's memories." Kim said loudly enough for Janeway to hear.

Janeway approached and started reading over Kim's shoulder.

"I can't make this language out, what does it say?" Janeway said cautiously.

"If I am translating it properly, it says that we were given our donor's memories so that we could serve as storage units, in hope that a combination of our genetics produced a virus resistant organism. If such a virus resistant organism were created from us, then the knowledge of the location of the origin species and medical history would be preserved. There is a local race, the Ocampas, who have telepathic abilities. They were used to collect the memories of our donors and store them short term, until our brains were matured to a point where we could house the memories ourselves."

Janeway was shocked. The only race she knew of that could perform memory transference on that level were the Vulcans and it was a rarity to

the extreme. "Why did they house the memories in us and not permanently in the Ocampa?" Janeway asked casually.

"The memories were foreign to the Ocampa and they would automatically purge them over a long period of time. Since we were in essence empty, devoid of our own memories, the Ocampa could purge the memories into us and relieve themselves of the burden of carrying them and, at the same time they could keep the knowledge safe for later use." Kim said clinically.

"Have you discovered why we were created? They could have certainly found any information they wanted from our donors." Janeway asked in concern.

"I believe that we were just the first step in a lengthy process of combining and recombining DNA from various species. As I understand the process, we were never intended to achieve consciousness, only be a receptacle for our donor's memories and DNA patterns. Once we were sufficiently matured, we were to be put into stasis and combined with other species to create hybrid beings in hopes of stumbling across a genetic combination that would be resistant to a particular disease that was concerning the Caretaker." Kim said, nearly betraying emotion in her voice.

Janeway stood aghast at the horror of their intended fate. To be breeding stock for another being's quest for a cure to a disease was beyond barbaric, she couldn't find words for the crime that had been committed against them... But they were alive and aware now, they needed to take every precaution to preserve their lives, and return to the federation, the closest thing to a home that they would find.

* * * * *

Nearly an hour after leaving the maturation bay, Paris and his crew returned with news of the facility.

"Janeway, this station seems to be deserted. We have found several other rooms like this one, but none of them show any signs of life. There are also thousands of stasis chambers, but they seem to have been set to kill their occupants before our hosts left, I wouldn't recommend going in there." Paris said efficiently.

"My team found crew quarters and a mess hall facility that is stocked with something vaguely resembling food. Dalby says she can probably do something with it to make it edible, she and Chell are working on that now.

Nicoletti and Kim have been working on stabilizing Vorik-Johnson. Apparently, his human/vulcan physiology is having difficulty functioning without the assistance of the maturation chamber's life support." Janeway said with concern.

"What do you think we should do next?" Paris asked cautiously.

"I think we need to establish a command structure to optimize our efficiency. Starfleet protocols would suggest that..." Janeway started when Paris interrupted.

"I agree that we need to establish a chain of command, but I don't think that Starfleet protocols have any place in our current situation." Paris said loudly enough to draw the attention of the other occupants of the room.

"How can you say that? Our best chance to survive is to make ourselves into disciplined Starfleet officers." Janeway said with a slight klingon growl creeping into her voice.

"I can say that because half our crew is made up of Maquis. And the only reason the Maquis even existed is because the disciplined Starfleet officers sold our homes out from under us to the Cardassians." Paris said with his own growl.

"So what are you saying? That you want us to operate like a guerilla camp?" Janeway asked with a loud sneer of derision.

"No, I'm just saying that I don't agree with us automatically falling into line as a Starfleet crew. I have fundamental problems with some of Starfleet's politics and policies." Paris said matching Janeway's volume, then continued in a more reasonable tone, "Why don't we form a democracy, there aren't so many of us that we can't sit down as a group and discuss what type of command structure we should use. Honestly I don't see either Starfleet or Maquis methods being appropriate in our current situation."

Janeway calmed herself, then considered Paris' words. "I won't concede to the points against Starfleet, but I will agree to the discussion." Janeway said, then noticed the group of people listening to their conversation.

"I don't expect you to concede anything Janeway, I'm only asking that you come to the discussion with an open mind, and I'll try to do the same." Paris said with a gentle smile.

"What is the condition of Vorik?" Janeway asked of Kim.

"He is stable, I believe the proper term for his condition is 'diabetic' if I remember my earth history correctly. He will require regular monitoring of his blood sugar levels and insulin injections at least four times a day." Kim said with Vulcan efficiency.

"Why isn't he conscious?" Paris asked, concerned by the diagnosis.

"I am. I just have a headache." Vorik said in a pained voice.

Kim went back over to Vorik's side and began using a scanning device to determine the source of Vorik's pain.

A skinny light blue skinned boy with brown peach-fuzz hair poked his head through the door and said, "The food is ready for anyone who is hungry."

Immediately people began making their way toward the door as Kim said, "I will remain here to monitor Vorik and Sudor."

"I'll have my meal then come back to relieve you." Nicoletti said and left the room, not waiting for Kim to confirm the plan.

Kim raised an eyebrow in a typical Vulcan fashion as she watched Nicoletti leave the room.

Chapter 2

Paris looked at his... food? as Janeway stood to get everyone's attention.

"Paris suggested that we form a democracy to elect a leader. I'd like to begin that process now. Who do we want to consider for the position as leader?" Janeway asked seriously.

"We need an experienced leader so that means Paris or Janeway. I know Chakotay, I trust him, so if I've got to choose now, I'll throw in with Paris..." Dalby said firmly.

Paris thought about what Dalby said and responded, "Thanks, but we need to consider the situation we're in. Do we want a Starfleet command structure, a Maquis cell or something else. Once we've decided what type of... government we're going to form, then we'll have a better idea of who'll be the best leader for it."

A murmur went through the mess hall and Paris looked at Janeway to find a nod of agreement.

"How about a sort of a democratic dictatorship. We're a small group so this is something simple and effective. No bureaucracy. One leader, the rest followers. If he... or she... screws up, we kick 'em out and replace 'em." Carey said to the group.

"He's got a point... but power corrupts. How about this? We hold an election every thirty days to replace our democratic dictator... let's just call the position 'leader'. Every thirty days we can elect our leader. And if a simple majority of the people vote to change our system of government, we'll meet again and come up with something else." Paris said to the group.

"What about law and order?" Janeway asked with concern.

"We'll make them up as we go along. If everyone will just try and be considerate of each other, we shouldn't need to make a big book of laws to follow. When we elect our leader, try to elect someone with the same moral compass that you follow." Paris said simply.

"This is a recipe for chaos. Without rules and regulations there won't be any order." Janeway said in a pleading voice.

"In a larger group I would agree with you. But with just us... it may not be so much of a problem. If it is, then we'll begin to draft laws. For now, the

only laws we'll have are the ones made by our leader." Paris said and was interrupted.

"I'm going to relieve Kim, Wildman's got the absentee ballot for my vote." Nicoletti said as she got up and left the room.

"Anyone else want to be considered for the position of leader before we vote?" Paris asked the group.

No one answered and the room was silent until Kim entered.

"Kim, we're going to elect a leader. Janeway and I have been suggested. Our government will consist of the leader and everyone else... fairly simple. Any questions?" Paris asked with a smile.

"How will we vote?" Kim asked without emotion.

"Show of hands?" Paris asked Janeway.

"I think we should speak first to let everyone know what we're planning to do if we're elected." Janeway said in thought.

"Go ahead." Paris said and sat down.

"My first priority would be to secure the station and create defenses. Next we would secure a spacecraft and explore the system we are living in and try to find the means to follow Voyager." Janeway said firmly.

Paris stood and said, "I think both of us would like to follow that plan, the only difference might be our methods."

There were a few chuckles from the group then Dalby stood and said, "Who else is ready to vote?"

There were several mumbles of agreement and Paris said, "Raise your hand if you want Janeway to be our leader."

Six hands went up, most notably Kim and both of Wildman's hands.

"Okay, raise your hand to vote for Paris as leader." Paris said confidently.

Paris received a clear majority and nodded.

"Thanks for the vote everyone. I'll do my best to make you proud. First thing, Janeway is my second. If she tells you something, it's just the same as hearing it directly from me. Now that that's out of the way... Janeway, take Carey and survey the shuttle bay. See if they left us anything to work with. If you need more help just tell me who you want and I'll do my best

to get them to you. Kim, I need computer access, communications, and scanners. Let me know when you're ready for help and you'll get it. Chell, mess hall, room assignments, clothing, and whatever you can arrange for relaxation. Geron, assess our need for security and find us some weapons. Dalby, I know you've got field med. See to Vorik. I'm going to deal with Sudor. Everyone else, we need to explore this station for anything that might be usable. Until we have communications, this room is going to be our headquarters. If you find something usable, bring it here or tell Wildman what and where it is. She'll be in charge of resource management." Paris said firmly.

A small rush of excitement flowed out over the room as people started pairing off to explore the station.

"Janeway, a moment of your time." Paris said quickly.

"Yes?" Janeway answered hesitantly.

"There's a chance that you'll be in charge next month. With that in mind, I was wondering if you would join me for dinner so I can keep you up to date on everything that's going on." Paris said quietly.

"I think you've got Chakotay's know-how and Mr. Paris' charisma. It's very likely that I won't get a shot at being the leader." Janeway said with resignation.

"As long as we're united in our vision, it doesn't matter which of us is in charge, we just need to stay focused on the goal... which is to reach Voyager." Paris said with a note of resolve.

"Agreed."

* * * * *

Paris walked to the chamber holding Sudor-Seska and began opening it.

"You sure Cap?" Dalby asked from Vorik's bedside.

"Yeah. Don't worry Dalby." Paris said with assurance as he started removing tubes and wires from the naked Cardassian boy.

"What?" The boy asked in a trembling voice.

"Shhh. Just hold still. I'll have you undone in a minute." Paris said quietly.

"Who... who are you?" Sudor asked weakly.

"I'm called Paris." He said with a gentle smile.

"I've met Tom Paris, you're not him... except your eyes..." Sudor drifted off in thought.

"We're genetic hybrids of the Voyager and Crazy Horse crews. Some lab tech forgot to push the kill button to abort us, so here we are, a year after Voyager left for the Alpha Quadrant." Paris said as he disconnected the last of the wires.

"Who am I?" Sudor asked in a shaky voice.

"As near as we can tell, you're the hybrid of Lon Sudor and Seska... who was apparently Cardassian." Paris said as he looked into Sudor's black eyes.

"She was... Obsidian order sent here to watch you... I remember her..." Sudor said with a visible shiver.

"Here, let me help you up so you can put on this lab coat." Paris said in an authoritative voice.

"So I'm... I'm Cardassian?" Sudor asked with a tremble of fear in his voice.

"Half... but you're another hybrid, just like the rest of us." Paris said in a soothing tone.

"Oh God, I'm a monster." Sudor gasped.

"No Sudor, that was Seska, not you. No one blames you for her choices." Paris said, trying to believe it himself.

"No, you don't understand. Sudor, Lon Sudor was a... he was like a drug addict, but his drug was emotions. Most Betazoids learn to erect walls to protect them from others emotions, but he... he... learned to enjoy them... he craved them... finally, regular emotions weren't enough, he needed stronger and stronger emotions to give him his thrills. He joined the Maquis for the opportunity to kill Cardassians... to terrorize and torture them. He would wring every last drop of emotion out of them before he would finally kill them." Sudor said, then seemed to realize where he was and said, "I'm the hybrid of a murdering psychopath and a psychotic bitch."

Sudor folded himself into a fetal ball in his bed and began to cry.

"Sudor? Please, I can't promise that you're not going to have problems because of all that... but you didn't do those things. That was Sudor and

Seska, you are yourself and you need to remember that you aren't responsible for anyone's choices but your own." Paris said softly.

"Don't call me Sudor... Please... anything else." He said as he tried to conceal his tears.

"What do you want to be called?" Paris asked quietly.

"I don't care, just not anything that has to do with either of them." Sudor said through sniffles.

"How about Bey... like my brother... er, or Uncle... Beyval?" Paris asked carefully.

"Really? You'd let me be named like your brother?" He asked hopefully.

"Yes. I can't tell you how anyone else is going to feel, but I'm not going to judge you by your species or your genetic donors. I want to get to know you, and... honestly... We're all new here and I could really use a friend. I was kind of hoping it could be you." Paris finished shyly.

"That would be good... But you'll have to show me how. Believe it or not, Sudor and Seska didn't have any real friends. Just a long line of people they used." Bey said sadly.

"Then you'll be able to do something that neither of them ever could." Paris said with a smile.

"Yeah. If I've got a real friend, then I'm nothing like them... I can be something better than either of them." Bey said with a smile.

"Sounds like a plan. Come on Bey, I bet you're hungry. We've got something... sort of like food just down the hall." Paris said as he helped Bey out of his bed.

"Cap?" Dalby asked hesitantly.

"Don't worry Dalby. Bey is okay." Paris said, flashing Dalby a warning look.

"Bey?" Dalby asked in confusion.

"Yeah. Suits him, don't you think?" Paris asked with a big smile.

"Sure Cap. By the way, I think I figured out Vorik's problem with the headache. We're just about to go and get something to eat." Dalby said as she turned her attention back to her patient.

"Well then, let's get out of here and feed these guys." Paris said as he slung an arm around Bey's shoulders.

Bey started at the movement, but quickly accepted the casual hug and enjoyed the feel as Paris led him out of the room.

* * * * *

"Oh good, there you are. I was just about to come looking for you." Carey said with excitement.

"Just a second Carey." Paris said as he led Bey to a seat.

"You two just sit down and I'll get something for you to eat.

"I can get that. Go ahead and talk to Carey before he busts." Dalby said with a big grin.

"Thanks Dalby." Paris said and turned his attention to Carey.

"We found two short range shuttles. They need a little work, but the people who left must have been in a hurry because they're both nearly operational." Carey said with excitement.

"That's great news. As soon as you and Janeway have assessed the conditions of both shuttles, we can begin repairs. Try and figure out how many people you'll need and when." Paris said seriously.

"You got it. The shuttle bay is two levels down at the end of the hall if you want to see it yourself." Carey said quickly.

"I'll probably be down in a while. I'm going to wait around here for a little bit to see if any other teams check in." Paris said happily.

"See ya then." Carey said in a rush and left the room.

"You're in charge?" Bey asked in wonder.

"Yeah, we had a little election during lunch. It's just for a month." Paris said with a shrug.

"So you kept me asleep." Bey said in a whisper.

"Yes. I was the first to wake up and I've only been awake a few hours. We left you asleep until we knew if we were alone on the station, if we had food... things like that." Paris said as he took his seat beside Bey.

"I bet there were some who didn't want to wake me up." Bey said into his food.

"Maybe. But no one said it out loud. We didn't know if you'd be violent when you woke so we waited a little while. Bey, I know there're going to be problems, but I'm on your side. If you have any trouble, come to me." Paris said seriously.

"I don't need you to fight my battles." Bey said darkly.

"That's not what I meant. If you have trouble, come to me and I'll be there to listen and share it with you." Paris said, looking Bey in the eyes.

"Thanks Paris. I'll do that." Bey said with a smile.

"How are you doing Vorik?" Paris asked, feeling that he'd been rude by focusing solely on Bey.

"Much better. Dalby has a healing touch." Vorik said with a smile.

"You're smiling." Paris said with surprise.

"I am only half Vulcan and have not been trained to suppress my emotions." Vorik said shortly.

"Actually that's only half of it. Neither of my donors knew Vorik, but Chakotay knew Paul Johnson for many years and never saw the man smile.

"He only did it in private. He believed that to smile was to show weakness." Vorik said with a chuckle.

"I'm glad you didn't inherit that from him. You're much better this way." Paris said fondly.

"Thank you Paris. Do you think my medical needs are going to be a problem?" Vorik asked with concern.

"I don't know. Why don't you and Dalby work on inventorying medical supplies. Then we'll know." Paris said as he noticed that Bey had finished his food.

"So what did you think of the food Bey?" Paris asked hesitantly.

"Room for improvement." Bey said with a look of apology.

Vorik nodded in confirmation.

"Do you want to give it a try? Maybe you'll be able to make something that tastes better." Paris suggested.

"I could try." Bey said and looked around the room.

"Chell is in charge of the kitchen, so make sure you let him know before you start doing anything." Paris said simply.

"I'll tell him now. It may take some time to find ingredients." Bey said as he got up from his chair.

* * * * *

Kim walked into the room and handed a piece of metal to Paris.

Paris looked at the thing that looked like a Starfleet symbol, but with four animalistic slashes diagonal across the symbol instead of the neat horizontal bars across the front.

"Communicator?" Paris asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I have been able to route communications through the main computer. This is the first communicator I have made. I could use the assistance of three people to make enough communicators for everyone." Kim said seriously.

"Okay. The next three people are yours. Good work." Paris said with a serious look.

"I have instituted a rudimentary translator program. It is insufficient at this time, but I believe that as soon as the lexicon is sufficiently populated, we will have full access to the computer by voice commands." Kim said without emotion.

"Good, good." Paris said in thought.

"I will begin to assess the scanners on my return." Kim said and turned to leave.

"Kim, I had something to ask you. Vorik, if Bey is looking for me, tell him I'll be right back." Paris said and walked to Kim's side.

Vorik nodded as he watched as Kim and Paris left the room.

Chapter 3

"Kim, I'm just curious about something." Paris said nervously as they walked down the hall.

"What would that be?" Kim asked without looking at Paris.

"Vorik seems very... free... emotionally. I was just wondering if you're really as tightly controlled as you're acting?" Paris asked curiously.

Kim was silent as she walked into what appeared to be a control room.

As soon as the door shut, she pushed Paris against the wall and with one fast pull, opened his lab coat, revealing his tanned, naked body.

"Maybe not." She said in a breathy whisper.

"Kim?" Paris said in surprise.

"Did you know Harry Kim always wanted to do this to Tom Paris?" Kim asked as she nuzzled Paris' neck.

"Um, no. Didn't have a clue." Paris said as Kim began to nibble his ear lobe.

"Looks like you want this too." Kim said as she let her hand drift down to his rapidly growing erection.

"Uh huh." Paris said, since the blood that operated the speech center of his brain seemed to be rushing elsewhere.

"Want you. Now." Kim said as she opened her own lab coat and rubbed her naked body against Paris.

"Uh huh." Paris said, and felt quite proud for having done that much.

Kim directed his erect shaft to her mons and impaled herself on him with surprising force.

"Umpf." Paris gasped at the unexpected sensation, then instinct took over as he began to thrust, matching Kim's furious pace.

Paris' pace began to quicken as he reveled in the glorious feeling of thrusting into tight velvet.

"Come on, come on." Kim begged as she increased the pace even more.

This proved to be his undoing, and he reached his climax, she achieved her own. She curled one leg behind him and forced him deeper with each

thrust of his completion. Holding him in time with the ebb and flow of her orgasm.

One perfect moment.

"That one's for Harry." Kim whispered into Paris' ear as she eased away from his body.

"How about one for you now?" Paris asked with a smile.

"No, thanks. I just had to know what it would be like to be with you. I had some incredibly vivid fantasies of what Harry Kim wanted to do with Tom Paris and I just had to know..." Kim said as she started to fasten her lab coat.

"You're bleeding." Paris said when he noticed the blood on her thighs.

"We're all virgins... or we were. Don't worry about it. I considered that when I planned this." Kim said as she finished fastening the lab coat.

"You planned it?" Paris asked in confusion.

"I didn't know that you'd follow me back here, but I was sure that we'd be alone sometime. If I didn't have you, those fantasies would have driven me to distraction. Now I can maintain my focus on my duties. It's perfectly logical." Kim said with her Vulcan attitude firmly in place.

"If you say so." Paris said hesitantly as he fastened his own lab coat.

"The lexicon is nearly thirty percent complete. It should be complete by morning." Kim said, looking at a display.

"I... I guess I'll let you get back to work. I'll send you help with the comm badges as soon as people come available." Paris said unsurely as he walked toward the door.

"Yes sir." She said, completely focused on her work as Paris left the room.

* * * * *

"Was there a problem?" Bey asked with concern.

"No... It was... nothing." Paris said as he tried to shake the random thoughts out of his head.

"We've found crew quarters. It looks like they had a staff of twelve. Someone's going to have to double up." Chell said seriously.

"No problem... I'm willing to double. Would you like to double with me Bey?" Paris asked with a smile.

"Really? I mean, yeah... sure." Bey said in a stunned voice.

"I bet Wildman and Nicoletti will want to double... Just make a sign up sheet and let people work it out themselves. It'll just be good to have a shower and a bed." Paris said tiredly.

"And clothes." Chell said.

"Really?" Paris asked with surprise.

"Yes, they're uniforms, but there's a pretty good stock of them in the storeroom. I think we'll have all the sizes we'll need." Chell said happily.

"That's great." Paris said as Geron walked into the room.

"How goes the search Geron?" Paris asked hopefully.

"Gerry, and these must have been some peace loving people because I haven't found a single weapon on the station." Gerry said in frustration.

"Then we're going to have to get creative. It would be naive to think that we'll be left alone here. We need to be prepared to defend ourselves if someone drops by unannounced." Paris said in thought.

"Maybe I could help." Bey said quietly.

"How's that Bey?" Paris asked curiously.

"I know a lot about weapons, I mean, they're construction and stuff like that. If you want, I can have a look around and see if I can improvise something." Bey said hesitantly.

"That'd be great. Gerry, would you mind if Bey made a round of the station with you to search for weapon components?" Paris asked, begging for cooperation with his eyes.

"Sure, I guess." Gerry said as he looked between Paris and Bey.

"Thanks. I'm going down to the shuttle bay and see what Janeway's come up with." Paris said, pulling himself up from the chair.

"We'll meet you down there in a little while. This probably won't take long." Gerry said and led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"What's the good word?" Paris asked as he spotted Janeway walking out of a shuttle.

"The word is 'do-able'. It's going to take some work, but I can rig both of these shuttles and get them working. I'd estimate... a week for the first one. Probably another week for the second." Janeway said in a considering voice.

"Good. I think things are starting to come together. We have food, clothes, sleeping quarters, and soon, transportation." Paris said as he was thinking out loud.

"I notice that you didn't have any weapons on your list." Janeway said as she removed a panel from just inside the shuttle's door.

"Gerry couldn't find any. Bey is going to try and improvise something." Paris said as he moved closer to watch her work.

"Who are you talking about?" Janeway asked without looking up.

"Gerry is the name Geron-Ayala wants to be called and Bey is Sudor-Seska's name." Paris said as he looked into the shuttle from the door.

"I can see how you got Gerry from Geron, but Bey?" Janeway asked incredulously.

"It fits him. Get to know him, he's a good guy." Paris said softly.

Janeway made her final adjustment and put the panel back into place.

"Come and see the shuttle. I think you'll agree with me in saying, it's slightly better than nothing." Janeway said and walked inside.

Paris followed hesitantly and saw what she meant. It was small... too small.

"I know. This will get us somewhere in the local system, but there's no way we're going to catch up with Voyager in these things... even if we *could* hold everyone." Janeway said and threw herself into the pilot's chair.

"Then we'll just have to figure something out." Paris said in thought.

"Yeah, that's an understatement." Janeway said with a chuckle.

"Leave that to me. If you can get us a working shuttle, I'll try and work something out for the longer term." Chakotay said seriously.

"I can't wait to see what." Janeway said and turned to the pilot's controls.

She pressed a button and the panel came to life. Another press and the door closed and sealed.

"Impressive." Paris said seriously.

"You ain't seen nothin yet." Janeway said and pressed a third button.

Paris immediately smelled a change in the air.

"Well? What do you think? Not bad for an hours work." Janeway said happily.

"What's left to make it spaceworthy?" Paris asked, looking around.

"Not much. Some minor adjustments to the nacelles. A little tweak to the navigational systems. Maybe some of Kim's help on the scanners. The scanning technology is about fifty years behind ours." Janeway said as she looked up at Paris.

"As soon as Kim has communications established, you're next on her list." Paris said seriously.

"Thank you. I'm glad to see that you're taking this seriously." Janeway said in an authoritative tone.

"I am. Thank you for not fighting me. I need to get back to the mess hall now. People should be checking in and I need to redistribute some laborers." Paris said as he turned.

"As long as you don't redistribute Carey. He's fantastic with the engines." Janeway said seriously.

"He's yours as long as you need him." Paris said and looked at the door, trying to find the release mechanism.

Janeway pressed the button on her consol and the door opened.

"Thanks." Paris said as he stepped out of the shuttle.

* * * * *

"There you are." Chell said impatiently as Paris walked back into the mess hall.

"What did you need?" Paris asked curiously.

"Aside from ingredients that I can actually cook with? Not much." Chell said in frustration.

"Has someone been giving you trouble about the food?" Paris asked in concern.

"Only everyone. It's not my fault that the previous occupants of this place ate plain yogurt for every meal." Chell said, looking like he was about to cry.

"Calm down Chell..." Paris said in thought.

Chell nodded and took a deep breath.

"Let me see what I can do to help you. Just give me a few minutes to work on it. Okay?" Paris asked hopefully.

"Thanks Cap. I don't mean to whine, I'm just doing my best and getting nothing but complaints... I'm not a cook." He said desperately.

Paris nodded and continued into the mess hall.

He looked around to find three people sitting and chatting.

"Finished exploring?" Paris asked quietly.

"Yes sir." Wildman answered respectfully.

"I need for the three of you to work with Kim on building communicators for everyone." Paris said in an even tone, sounding more informative than commanding.

The three nodded and went to work with Kim.

* * * * *

Chell walked into the room and Paris asked, "Any luck with the food inventory?"

"May I ask you a question?" Chell asked timidly.

"Sure, what would you like to know?" Paris asked as he turned his full attention to Chell.

"Why did you choose me to work in the kitchen?" Chell asked with wide puppy eyes.

Paris thought about it, then said, "Because I remember Mr. Chell from the Crazyhorse. He was always so energetic and wanting to celebrate every accomplishment, no matter how small. I just thought that you would be

right for the job..." Paris trailed off at the wounded expression on Chell's face.

"I'm not him." Chell said in a soft voice, almost apologetic.

"I'm not asking you to be him. But I have to make decisions based on the knowledge that I have. Are you saying that you don't want to be in charge of the food?" Paris asked gently.

"No sir, I really don't. I can run a replicator with the best of them, and I can cook a meal for myself if I have a recipe and all the ingredients, but I don't have any talent for improvisation. I'm completely overwhelmed by the job." Chell said, looking as if he were going to burst into tears.

"Then I have another job for you. One that I believe you are perfectly motivated for." Paris said firmly.

"Yes sir?" Chell asked hopefully.

"Talk to the others, get to know them and find out if any of them is an experienced cook. All jokes aside, what we had for lunch won't keep us going. I was able to choke it down, but we need to have something more palatable before long or we're going to start losing unhealthy amounts of weight." Paris said in a low, serious voice.

Chell looked at Paris in question for a moment, then said, "I'll find someone to do the job. I didn't realize the gravity of the situation, if I had, I wouldn't have complained."

"You were being honest with me. You feel that you aren't the man for this job. I don't know who could do it better and I don't have time to find out for myself. If you can take care of this for me, I'll find something more suited to your talents." Paris said sincerely.

"Thank you, and I don't mind the rest of the job, I mean keeping track of the crew quarters and all of that, it's just the cooking that I have no talent for." Chell said simply.

Paris nodded as he noticed Bey and Gerry walking into the room, each carrying a box.

"Did you find anything?" Paris asked hopefully.

"He says he did, I still don't know what he's planning to make with it." Gerry said seriously.

"I tried to explain." Bey said helplessly.

"What are you going to make?" Paris asked quietly.

"I think I have everything I need to make a phase pulse whip." Bey said with difficulty.

"A what?" Paris asked as Gerry flashed him an 'I told you so' expression.

"Okay, the Ferengi have a weapon that is fashioned after the principles of a whip rather than the Earthers' weapons that are fashioned after a gun. I have had access to some Ferengi weapons and understand the principle of their construction. I believe I can make something very much like one of their stun whips." Bey said with frustration.

"What do you need to get started?" Paris asked, willing to give Bey the benefit of the doubt.

"I think I have everything I need in this box to construct one weapon. If it works... I could probably scrape up enough materials to make one for almost everyone. All I need now is a work area and time to assemble this." Bey said, pleading with his eyes for Paris to let him try.

"Okay, Chell? Could you assign Bey and I a crew cabin? That way he'll have a private place that he can get started working." Paris asked Chell who was almost ready to leave.

"Yes, come with me." Chell said happily and led the way.

* * * * *

"Can you find your way back to the mess hall?" Paris asked Bey as he watched him unpacking the boxes of supplies.

"Yes. Left out the door, right at the intersecting hallway, take the lift down one level. Third door on the right." Bey said without looking up.

"Good. I'm going to be down there attending to whatever comes up. Join me if you finish or need to take a break." Paris said and walked to the door.

"Paris?" Bey called, looking up from his work.

Paris answered by meeting Bey's eyes with a look of inquiry.

"Thanks for making me your friend. I've been conscious less than a day and I'm already happier than either of my genetic donors ever were." Bey said with a genuine smile.

Chapter 4

"How's it going Bey?" Paris asked as he walked into their crew quarters.

"I thought I would be able to finish this tonight, but the isoiner circuitry doesn't seem to want to cooperate." Bey said in frustration.

Paris smiled and said, "Why don't you knock off for the night and look at it with fresh eyes in the morning. I bet the circuitry will be in a much better mood then."

Bey looked at Paris in confusion, then broke into a smile and nodded.

"I brought you something to eat. It's been a while." Paris said and sat a bowl of food beside Bey.

"What is it?" Bey asked cautiously.

"Something better than what you had earlier, I promise." Paris said with a smile.

Bey didn't need any further encouragement. He started eating and was soon making sounds of appreciation.

"Vorik was able to find some flavorings and made what he calls 'peach'. It tastes more like a strong apricot to me, but it's close enough." Paris said casually as he sat at the table.

"I don't know what any of those things taste like, but this flavor is good." Bey said happily.

"And those wafers were stored in the supply room. We're assuming that they're ration bars. Personally, I like them better than the peach yogurt." Paris said gently.

"S'Good." Bey said, barely between bites.

Paris chuckled and said, "I'm glad you like it."

Bey looked at Paris curiously, then shyly smiled.

"Did you have anything else you wanted to do before bed?" Paris asked as he stood.

"Why? Are you ready to turn in?" Bey asked casually.

"Yes. I'm really tired. But if you need to be up for a while, I can wait." Paris said as he walked to the far side of the room to look at the bed.

"No. Actually, I'm at a good stopping point. Give me a minute to finish this and I'll be ready." Bey said quickly.

"No rush. We're not punching a time clock." Paris said casually as he looked around the room.

"A what?" Bey asked curiously.

"Never mind. I keep forgetting that neither of your donors are human. Some of my Earth sayings won't make sense to you." Paris said casually.

"Seska always found the Human tendency to use nonsensical sayings very irritating." Bey said absently as he scraped the last of the 'peach' yogurt out of his bowl.

"And what do you think about it?" Paris asked as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Honestly, when I find how the saying is derived, I find it very interesting." Bey said and carried his bowl to the bathroom sink to rinse it out.

"Well, you know how Humans tend to operate on schedules, right?" Paris asked, a little more loudly so Bey could hear him.

"Yes, they like to create charts to fill every available moment of their day." Bey said as he walked back into the room.

"Not all of us do, but probably the ones you encountered did." Paris said in thought.

"Chakotay did." Bey said simply.

"Okay, you got me there." Paris said with a smile.

"Punching a time clock?" Bey prompted.

"A time clock was a device that imprinted a timestamp on a card when you inserted it. That way the person who paid for your services, knew when you arrived to work." Paris said in thought.

"I understand, but 'punching'?" Bey asked curiously.

"As I understand it, the older versions of the time clock had a lever or a button that you had to press to cause the clock to imprint. I guess when you aren't trusted to be at work on time and have to prove it, you're not too gentle with the lever or button." Paris said casually.

Bey laughed and said, "I can see a line of Humans walking to the clock and taking turns slamming it with all the force they can to show the indignity of it."

Paris smiled and said, "I didn't think of it that way until I explained it, but I can see it too."

A moment of silence fell between the two until Bey finally said, "There's only one bed."

"I expected that." Paris said as he looked up at Bey with a casual smile.

Bey smiled with relief and said, "I'm so glad you decided to be my friend. I can't imagine anyone else who'd be willing to share a bed with me."

"Give them time Bey. I'm sure it won't take too long before they see the good guy you really are." Paris said as he began to take off his shoes.

"I wish I could be as sure as you are." Bey said as he sat beside Paris and started doing the same.

"Give it time." Paris said as he stood and pulled off the oversized shirt he had been given earlier then folded it neatly.

Bey looked at him and said, "I guess we'll need to go to the supply room and get a few more changes of clothes. These are all we have."

"In the morning I'll ask Chell. He's in charge of the supplies." Paris said and pulled down his pants.

Bey sat and looked at Paris in stunned fascination.

"It's okay isn't it?" Paris asked with concern at Bey's expression.

Bey shook his head quickly and said, "Fine. I just. I don't know. Flashbacks I guess."

Paris looked at Bey curiously and asked, "Flashbacks of what?"

"Seska and Chakotay." Bey said shyly as he pulled off his shirt.

"Oh." Paris said quietly as he sat on the bed.

"Don't worry Paris. I'm not expecting you to..." Bey trailed off in embarrassment.

"That's not what I was thinking." Paris said quietly.

"What then?" Bey asked as he looked into Paris' eyes.

Paris saw the helplessness and need for comfort in Bey's eyes and said, "I've been elected leader. I'm in charge, but that won't work here."

"How do you mean?" Bey asked in confusion.

"If I tried to... do anything... sexual. It would feel like I was taking advantage of you because I'm the leader." Paris said with difficulty.

Bey closed his eyes and slowly nodded.

"That's why you're going to have to initiate anything that happens between us." Paris said in almost a whisper.

Bey's eyes snapped open in shock.

"I like you. You know that. I find you attractive. But anything that happens between us will have to be because you want it to... I just can't be in charge here too..." Paris trailed off.

Bey gently smiled and with a look of resolve, pulled his pants down.

"Are we ready for bed?" Paris asked slowly.

"Yes. Very ready." Bey said with a peaceful smile.

Paris got between the covers and waited anxiously as Bey got in beside him.

Bey got in the bed, then pressed the button to turn off the light, plunging the room into complete darkness.

After a long moment of silence, Bey asked, "May I touch you?"

"Yes Bey. I think I'd like that." Paris said calmly.

Paris shivered as Bey's fingers glided across his chest, apparently verifying his position before Bey gave him a gentle hug and rested his head on Paris' shoulder.

"Would you mind if I just hold you tonight?" Bey asked cautiously.

Paris responded by adjusting his position so he could take Bey into his arms.

"I think that sounds perfect." Paris said in a contented voice.

Bey hesitantly moved around to get more comfortable and his body lined up along Paris' left side, his semi-erect penis pressing into Paris' hip.

"May I..." Bey began to ask.

"Just do it. If I don't want to do something, I'll let you know." Paris whispered.

Bey cautiously scooted up slightly, then began to kiss Paris gently.

Long minutes passed as the gentle kissing continued, not insisting, but just expressing love and devotion.

Finally Bey stopped the kiss and rested his head beside Paris'.

After a few seconds, Paris turned his head and began to kiss Bey, just as gently, trying to express his own caring.

Eventually the two went to sleep, holding each other peacefully, content in the night.

* * * * *

Paris slowly opened his eyes to complete darkness.

As he became aware of his surroundings, he felt Bey, still pressed into his side and resting on his shoulder.

"Good morning." Bey said with a gentle voice.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" Paris asked, feeling completely relaxed.

"The best ever." Bey said with contentment and felt for the light switch beside the bed.

"Me too. I don't know what Tom and Chakotay were doing wrong. It seems a crime to sleep alone when you can sleep like we just did." Paris said happily.

"I agree. What could be worth giving this up?" Bey asked as he rested his head on Paris' shoulder again.

"The bathroom." Paris said regretfully.

Bey let out a giggle at the statement and scooted out of the bed.

Paris hurried into the bathroom.

A moment later he returned to the bed and scooted in, followed immediately by Bey.

"I think I'd like to stay like this with you all day." Paris said in a dreamy voice.

"It sounds nice. But we have too many things to do." Bey said with regret.

"I know. But when things get settled, we'll have to plan a day in bed for the two of us." Paris said with a smile.

"Wouldn't that be hard to explain to the others?" Bey asked curiously.

"Not really. We just tell them that we want to spend the day in bed together." Paris said simply.

"But... You mean you want to tell everyone?" Bey asked apprehensively.

"Well, I won't if you don't want me to. But I don't see any reason we should hide the fact that I like you. I don't want anyone thinking that you're available." Paris finished with a smile.

"Somehow, I don't think there is going to be a long line of people wanting me." Bey said seriously.

"I don't know. If the others get to know the great guy that I'm discovering, they're going to be eaten up with jealousy because I got to you first." Paris said, then gave a casual kiss to Bey's right ear.

Bey giggled and said, "You're the one I'm worried about. I think half the girls are wanting you for themselves. I wouldn't be surprised if one of them tried something with you before very long."

"One did." Paris said slowly.

"What?" Bey asked with concern.

"I don't want to name names because it was a one time thing. One of her donors liked one of my donors and she, sort of cornered me..." Paris said uncomfortably.

"Did you... do it?" Bey asked quietly.

"Yes. Once. Then it was over. I'm sorry Bey. I didn't want to hurt you by telling you, but I thought it would hurt a lot more if you found out and I hadn't told you." Paris said in a hesitant voice.

A moment of silence stretched out between them until Bey finally said, "Thank you for telling me. You're right. If I found out later and you hadn't told me, that would have hurt worse."

Paris smiled and scooted down a little so he could give Bey a proper kiss.

"I'll always be honest with you Bey. Always." Paris said seriously.

"I don't know if I can promise that." Bey said hesitantly.

"Seska?" Paris asked quietly.

"Yes. Her whole life was devoted to lying. She was so good at it that she could even fool telepaths... there were times that she didn't remember what the truth was." Bey said distantly.

"If you have a problem with it, just let me know as soon as you recognize it. I promise not to be angry or hold it against you." Paris said seriously.

"Thank you. I promise that I'll try to be honest. I'll try harder than she ever did." Bey said as a vow.

"Then I'm not worried. How about one more kiss, then we start the day." Paris asked gently.

Bey's response was to pull Paris into a firm kiss that lasted long minutes.

* * * * *

"Good morning. How is everyone doing today?" Paris asked happily as he entered the mess hall.

"Very well. Vorik said that he will have breakfast ready in a few minutes." Nicoletti said peacefully.

Wildman glanced at Nicoletti and smiled shyly.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who is well rested. Both of you look so relaxed that you're almost glowing with it." Paris said speculatively.

Wildman looked away from Nicoletti quickly, then down at the table before her. Nicoletti laughed and said, "I guess you could say that. I'm curious as to why YOU look so rested."

"Probably for the same reason as you." Paris said non-committally.

"But I thought you were rooming with the Cardassian." Nicoletti said slowly.

"I'm sure that you can understand why being referred to as 'the Cardassian' might be uncomfortable for him. I think it would be best if we just called him Bey." Paris said seriously.

"You're the leader." Nicoletti said in resignation.

"I'm not asking as the leader, just as a fellow crewmember. Bey is one of us and I'd like for him to feel like it. Referring to him or anyone by their

species is just a way of dividing us. I'm not asking you to like him, I'm only asking that you give Bey the same courtesy and respect as any other member of the crew." Paris said with hope.

"I guess I can see that. I'm sorry Paris, I wasn't thinking." Nicoletti said shyly.

"We're all adjusting Nicoletti. There are bound to be a few bumps along the way." Paris said with a gentle smile.

"So are you and Bey... you know... doing it?" Nicoletti asked with a girlish chuckle.

"Nikki!" Wildman said in a scandalized voice and slapped her playfully on the shoulder.

"We're in the process of becoming a couple. That's all I'm going to say on the subject." Paris said and could feel a slight blush rising in his face.

"They haven't done it yet, but he wants to." Nicoletti said to Wildman, as if translating.

Paris laughed and stood as he said, "I'm going to see if Vorik needs any help."

* * * * *

"Good morning Vorik, how are you doing today?" Paris asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"Great. Chell volunteered to help me so I'll have breakfast ready in no time." Vorik said happily.

"You're looking much better today. How are you feeling?" Paris asked curiously.

"Aside from the ebb and flow of my energy thanks to my hybrid physiology, I'm feeling extremely well." Vorik said, then tasted the mixture he was working on.

"Chell, would you get the crackers from the supply room? I think this is almost ready." Vorik asked with a smile.

"Yes. I'll be back in one minute." Chell said and hurried out of the room.

"I think he's worried about you." Paris said as he looked at the empty doorway.

"I think you're right." Vorik said in a non-committal voice.

Paris turned to look at Vorik and asked, "How do you feel about him?"

Vorik got a peaceful smile and said, "Well, if you would have asked me how a half-Vulcan and a half-Bolean would interact, I would have said they'd drive each other crazy within an hour. But he's so... happy. I find myself wanting to just enjoy his company every minute of the day."

Paris smiled and asked, "Can you tell me something honestly?"

Vorik looked up from his food preparation and nodded seriously.

"Is there any reason that you can't?" Paris asked curiously.

"Well. If we... got together... Wouldn't it be likely to cause problems with the others?" Vorik asked with concern.

"I don't think so. But if it does, they can deal with it. Do whatever it is that makes you two happy. I'll support you however I can." Paris said seriously.

"Thank you Paris. I see the logic in your argument." Vorik said, trying to maintain a serious look.

"Don't pull your Vulcan routine on me. You're no good at it." Paris said with a chuckle.

"Where do you want them?" Chell asked as he hurried into the kitchen.

"Just set it on the counter. We'll open the packages as we serve them." Vorik said professionally.

"What else can I do to help?" Chell asked hopefully.

Vorik looked at Paris and received a nod of encouragement.

"Come here for a second." Vorik said gently.

Chell hurried to Vorik's side.

"Chell, last night when you thought I was asleep, you gave me a hug and a kiss behind the ear." Vorik said quietly.

Chell got a look of fright and glanced at Paris who held up a hand in a 'wait' motion.

"I liked it Chell. If you have those types of feelings for me, I'd like to explore them with you and see where they lead." Vorik said as he looked deeply into Chell's eyes.

"R... Really?" Chell asked in disbelief.

"Really Chell. Paris just talked with me about it and made me realize that we should try to find happiness wherever we can." Vorik said peacefully.

Chell hesitantly moved forward and pulled Vorik into a hug.

Vorik happily accepted the hug and gave Chell a gentle kiss.

Paris smiled and left the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Is breakfast almost ready?" Dalby asked as she walked into the room.

"Yes. Just a few minutes more." Paris said as he walked to an unoccupied table.

Dalby automatically fell into the seat next to him.

"Any word on Janeway or Carey?" Paris asked casually.

"They might still be working on the shuttle. They were so lost in it last time I checked on them last night that I doubt they've even thought of sleep." Dalby said with a smile.

"We slept quite well as a matter of fact." Janeway said from the doorway, followed closely by Carey.

"How are you doing this morning Janeway?" Paris asked as he made a gesture to offer them seats at his table.

"We made a lot of progress last night. My earlier estimates turned out to be a little pessimistic." Janeway said seriously.

"Really? How long till we have a working shuttle then?" Paris asked with interest.

"Well, if we can get some breakfast and get right to it, we should have the first shuttle done before the end of today." Janeway said happily.

"That soon? What happened?" Paris asked in surprise.

"I had originally planned to replace the navigation array and sensors that were inoperable. But Carey spotted redundant systems that I hadn't noticed. After working a few bypasses, we have all the command controls operating. Now we just have to work our way through the secondary and safety systems. And I wouldn't mind another look at the atmospheric

processing engine, it doesn't *feel* right." Janeway said in a continuous ramble.

Paris smiled and said, "Janeway, seeing you like this makes me glad you didn't get the job of leader. I don't think you would be nearly so excited by organizing workgroups."

Janeway smiled and said, "You may be right, but don't expect me to decline the position of leader if it's offered to me."

"I have no doubt that you'll accept and that you'll make a fine leader when it happens." Paris said in contentment.

"Paris. You were right." Bey said as he rushed into the mess hall.

"About what?" Paris asked seriously.

"The isolinear circuitry was in a much better mood this morning. It's done." Bey said proudly as he held out the product of his labor.

"What is it?" Janeway asked as she looked over the device.

"Bey can explain it best." Paris said with a smile.

"Why don't I just show you?" Bey asked as he held out his hand for the weapon.

Janeway hesitantly handed the half-Cardassian the weapon and watched him cautiously.

Bey looked around the room, then walked to the farthest table and tented a napkin in it's center.

He walked back to Paris and the others and said, "I needed a target."

"Whenever you're ready Bey." Paris said with interest.

In one fluid movement, Bey turned and flexed his arm, allowing the coil of the whip to fully extend.

As the whip 'popped' a pulse of energy flew out of it and across the room. In a burst of energy, the napkin was vaporized.

"Impressive." Kim said from the doorway.

"At least." Paris said, stunned by the grace and dangerous beauty of Bey as he operated the whip.

"You said you can construct more of these, right?" Paris asked carefully.

"Yes. I think I can scavenge enough parts to construct enough for everyone." Bey said as he coiled the whip and sat it on the table.

"Is it difficult to learn to aim?" Janeway asked in thought.

"No. I'd say a half hour of practice should be enough for anyone to be able to operate one with reasonable accuracy." Bey said seriously.

"Good. How many people do you need to help you mass produce the whips?" Paris asked in his full 'Captain Chakotay' voice.

"One. If Gerry is available, he is familiar enough with weapon construction that I can show him what to do." Bey said as he took a seat.

"As soon as he checks in, he's yours." Paris said, then looked around the room.

"Janeway, do you and Carey need any additional help?" Paris asked carefully.

"No. Anyone else would just be in our way." Janeway said firmly.

Paris nodded, then asked, "Kim, how many people do you need to help you in the command center?"

"Nicoletti, Wildman and Dalby could complete communications devices while I assess the condition of scanners, shields and long-range communications." Kim said seriously.

"They're yours for as long as you need them. Contact me with updates." Paris said firmly.

Kim nodded without a hint of emotion.

"Is anyone hungry?" Chell asked in a cheerful voice as he walked into the room carrying a tray of plates.

"What is it?" Janeway asked as a plate of food was placed before her.

"Our best estimation of waffles with maple syrup." Chell said as he placed plates before each person present.

"It looks... interesting. Thank you." Nicoletti said cautiously.

"Hold on. We have a special surprise." Chell said with excitement as Vorik came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of mugs.

"Here you go." Vorik said as he placed a mug before each person.

Paris smelled the cup and finally asked, "What is it?"

"Taste it and tell me what you think." Vorik said with an expectant smile.

Paris carefully tasted the drink, then his eyes went wide in surprise.

"It's coffee!" Paris said quickly.

Janeway almost jumped at the cup beside her plate.

"Well, it technically isn't coffee, but I was able to fashion a close approximation in taste and was even able to find some caffeine to give it a kick.

"It's wonderful Vorik. When the shuttle is done, I'll make sure you get the most comfortable seat." Janeway said with a look of ecstasy.

"This food is really good." Wildman said in astonishment.

"Thank you. It was Chell's idea to try for waffles. After that we worked together to get the taste right." Vorik said happily.

"She's right. You did a great job with this meal." Paris said after taking a bite.

"Just let us know if you would like another serving. We made extra." Chell said with a smile.

No one answered, but the sounds of happily eating people was all the reply Chell or Vorik needed.

* * * * *

Paris and Bey were talking about what general supplies they were going to need in the long term when the Mess Hall door opened.

"Look who finally decided to join us." Paris said with a teasing smile.

"Blow me Paris." Gerry said as he walked in.

Bey laughed at the irreverent comment.

"I take it you didn't sleep well." Paris said, trying to hide a smile.

Gerry flopped into a chair and said, "I just saw Nicoletti and Wildman groping in the hallway. I started doing the math and realized that if we all pair off, some of us guys are going to be doing without."

Paris looked at Bey with question.

Bey gave an unconcerned shrug, so Paris said, "Some of us guys are taking care of each other."

Gerry looked at Paris with wide eyes, then got a look of concentration before saying, "Chell and Vorik?"

"Bey and I." Paris said seriously.

"You gotta be shitting me cap! You and a Cardie?" Gerry said in shock.

Paris stood immediately and said, "Bey isn't a Cardie, he's a hybrid like the rest of us. He had no more control over his donors than you did. And if you talk about him like he's less than the rest of us, I'm going to knock you out."

Gerry looked up at Paris for a long moment, judging just how serious he was before saying, "Yeah. Sorry Cap. Sorry Bey. I'm just sore because it looks like I'm not going to be getting any."

"I think Dalby might be feeling the same way." Bey said cautiously.

"What?" Gerry said as he looked at Bey carefully.

"She was sitting there, watching Nicoletti and Wildman and looking just about like you do now." Bey said seriously.

Gerry stared off into space for a minute, then said, "Okay, I'll see if I can talk to her. Hopefully no one else will get to her first."

"I don't think anyone else will get her today. She's working with Wildman, Nicoletti and Kim. But you'd better not wait too long." Paris said seriously.

"I can see that. What do you have for me to do today?" Gerry asked as he relaxed back in his chair.

"Bey, would you mind getting Gerry his breakfast while I fill him in?" Paris asked hopefully.

"Sure, be right back." Bey said and hurried away.

As soon as Bey was out of the room, Paris said, "I was originally going to ask you to work with Bey today. But after that Cardie crack, I don't think I want to put him through that."

"I said I was sorry Cap." Gerry said in a slight whine.

"Yeah. But it's just words unless you mean it." Paris said seriously.

"You can't expect me to let it go after everything I've been through fighting them." Gerry said with irritation.

"That wasn't you Gerry. That was Greg and Geron. All you've been through is what happened since you woke up yesterday." Paris said seriously.

Gerry closed his eyes and nodded.

"Now, we need weapons. Bey's phase pulse whip works. If you can treat him decently, and I mean for real, not just to try and make me happy, then you two can work together. Otherwise he'll be working alone and it will take him twice as long to get them done." Paris said firmly.

"Got it. You said you and him are together?" Gerry asked cautiously.

"We're getting there." Paris said seriously.

"Alright Cap. I'll treat him decent." Gerry said seriously.

"Are you guys ready for me to stop pretending to be getting the food?" Bey asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Yeah Bey. Just finished." Paris said with a smile.

"Good. It's getting cold." Bey said as he carried a tray of food and coffee to Gerry.

"Look at this. It's like real food." Gerry said in astonishment.

"It tastes even better than it looks." Paris said with a smile.

"I'm going to start gathering parts for the next phase whip." Bey said quietly.

"Hold on Bey. Let me finish and I'll go with you." Gerry said quickly.

"You don't have to." Bey said hesitantly.

"No. Cap just reminded me that everything I remember isn't from me. I forgot for a while, but now I understand. You and me, we're the same. Hell, we might have even been grown in neighboring petry dishes, that makes us kind of like brothers." Gerry said hopefully.

Bey smiled, then chuckled as he said, "That is the most round-about logic I've ever heard, but if it means you won't mind helping me today, I'll take it."

"Yeah, that's what it means." Gerry said as he continued to wolf down his food.

"You don't have to hurry, enjoy your breakfast, then we can start." Bey said seriously.

Gerry stopped his eating for a second, then took a sip of his coffee.

"Yeah. This is good, I should enjoy it." Gerry said honestly.

"There's more if you like. Just tell me how much." Bey said with a smile.

"One more just like this, coffee and all." Gerry said seriously.

"I'll be back in one minute." Bey said casually as he left.

"Thanks Gerry. Let me know if there's ever anything I can do to repay you for this." Paris said seriously.

"There is no obligation between friends, right Cap?" Gerry asked hopefully.

Paris smiled and said, "Right."

Chapter 5

One Week Since Awakening

"JANEWAY TO PARIS!" Sounded on the comm badge.

The abrupt sound jolted Paris from his sleep.

"Janeway?" Paris asked groggily as he picked up his comm badge in the dark.

"I need you in the shuttle bay immediately!" Janeway's voice said with such menace that Paris came fully awake in an instant.

"I'm on my way, what happened?" Paris asked as he pressed the light switch beside the bed.

"I don't know yet. I just came to check on the progress of the shuttle Freedom, and the shuttle bay door wouldn't open. The bay is repressurizing now." Janeway said in a nearly hysterical voice.

As Paris finished pulling on his pants, he realized that Bey wasn't in his usual place beside him.

Icy fingers of dread ran up his spine as he realized that when he went to bed, Bey was in the shuttle bay working on the primary weapon on the shuttle Independence.

"Bey was in there." Paris said into his comm badge as he fastened it to his shirt.

"So was Carey." Janeway said in a helpless tone.

In the week that they had all been awake and functioning, people had paired off. The strange thing was that everyone seemed almost fanatical about their devotion to each other.

Maybe it was the removal of the illusion of 'classes' and social pretenses that made the difference.

* * * * *

Paris arrived at the shuttle bay at a run.

"I swear to God that I could repressurize the thing faster just by blowing into it with a straw." Janeway said in frustration.

"What do you think happened?" Paris asked with full worry in his voice.

"I don't know. Carey was working on the thrusters... I should have stayed with him..." Janeway said as tears filled her eyes.

"I should have made Bey take a break. He'd been working on that pulse cannon all day. It just makes him so happy to be able to help..." Paris said as tears filled his own eyes.

"COME ON YOU ANTIQUE PIECE OF SHIT! OPEN!" Janeway screamed as she pounded ineffectively on the shuttle bay door.

Paris pulled her into a comforting hug and whispered, "Hurting yourself won't make it go any faster.

"The Klingon inside me disagrees with you." Janeway said as she huddled into Paris' chest.

The sound of the door beginning to open stopped further conversation and they broke apart to see what was inside the shuttle bay.

"The Freedom is missing." Janeway said in disbelief as she walked into the bay.

"Look around for Bey or Carey. We'll worry about the shuttle in a minute." Paris said as he rushed into the room.

"If they were in here when the door opened, their bodies would have been blown into space." Janeway said darkly as she ran to the shuttle Independence and tried to get the door to open.

Paris was by her side, hoping against hope that Bey and Carey were inside. A hiss sounded as the shuttle door opened slowly.

Janeway rushed inside before the door was fully opened.

"Thank God!" Janeway gasped from inside.

Paris felt a flood of hope flow through him as he hurried into the shuttle behind her.

His hopes fell as he saw the unconscious form of Carey sitting in one of the passenger seats.

Silence fell over the shuttle as Janeway checked Carey for signs of injury.

Paris walked out of the shuttle in a daze as the possibilities flooded through his mind.

"Call Dalby for medical assistance. I think he's been stunned." Janeway called from inside the shuttle.

"Yeah, Dalby, I'll call her." Paris said absently and walked to the comm panel just inside the door of the shuttle bay.

"Paris to Dalby." Paris said, then waited the three seconds that they had discovered was needed for the computer to recognize and perform the command.

"Dalby, I need you to get to the shuttle bay for a medical emergency." Paris said, trying to sound professional.

"I'll be right there Cap. Dalby out." The female voice responded.

After a moment of thought, Paris pressed the button again and said, "All hands." then waited.

"This is Paris. I need everyone to go to their work areas and look around for anything missing. Either someone has boarded our station or... one of us has stolen our only working shuttle... Come to the mess hall when you know anything." Paris finished with an ache in his heart.

[How could you do it Bey? I love you so much... how could you?] Paris asked himself as tears filled his eyes.

A minute later Dalby rushed into the shuttle bay carrying her med kit.

"He's in the Independence." Paris said in a pained voice.

Dalby looked at Paris with concern for an instant, then hurried into the shuttle.

"I'll be in the mess hall." Paris said in the general direction of the shuttle.

"I'll join you as soon as I know that Carey is going to be okay." Janeway's voice called in response.

Paris nodded and walked slowly out of the shuttle bay.

* * * * *

"What's going on Paris?" Nicoletti asked with concern as Paris walked into the mess hall.

"Bey and the Freedom are missing. That's all I know for sure." Paris said quietly.

"Oh my God! How could this happen? Who..." Nicoletti asked, then she noticed the sullen expression on Paris' face.

"Bey took it, didn't he?" She asked with sympathy in her voice.

"I don't know. I just don't know." Paris said in a dejected tone.

"Four cases of our ration bars are missing." Chell said as he hurried out of the kitchen.

"As well as several containers of water." Vorik said as he followed Chell into the mess hall dining room.

"Makes sense." Paris said quietly.

"There's an energy core missing from atmospheric control." Wildman said as she walked into the mess hall with a serious look on her face.

Paris just nodded.

Wildman hurried to Nicoletti and pulled her into a hug.

Kim walked into the mess hall and looked at Paris expectantly.

"Report?" Paris reluctantly prompted.

"Scanners and proximity detectors have been taken offline." Kim said efficiently.

Paris nodded, then thought to ask, "You say, taken offline. Not damaged?"

"Correct. The systems were turned off during the night." Kim said with the raise of an eyebrow.

Paris nodded, and his thoughts became more serious.

"The energy cell we were working on for the Independence's new weapon is missing." Gerry called as he hurried into the room.

Paris nodded as if he expected the report.

Janeway walked into the room with a worried look on her face.

"How's Carey?" Paris asked with concern.

"Dalby confirmed that he's been stunned with a phase pulse whip. She says that he'll probably be out for about another hour." Janeway said with distraction.

"Is he going to be okay?" Paris asked quietly.

"Yes. In fact, Dalby says that the whip was set to cause minimal damage... Bey is the only one who knows how to set it so precisely." Janeway said with apology in her voice.

"I'm glad he's going to be okay." Paris said in thought.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Janeway asked as she took a seat.

"Well, we're missing some supplies... from the sound of it, whoever... Bey is planning to be away for at least a few weeks. He took food, water, a spare atmospheric core for an extended journey, and a spare energy cell for the shuttle's weapon." Paris said in deep thought.

"I knew we should never have trusted a fucking Cardie!" Gerry said gruffly.

"No Gerry. I think you're wrong." Paris said firmly.

"But Cap. He stole our shuttle. How can you still side with him?" Gerry asked in disbelief.

"Mainly because I have the same memories that you do of Cardassians. If he were doing this because he's driven by some 'Cardassian' instinct to be evil, then he wouldn't have done it this way." Paris said as he looked into Gerry's eyes.

"Think about it. He was in atmospheric control. He could have just turned off our atmosphere and left us to die in our sleep. He could have destroyed our sensors and left us blind, instead he just turned off the sensors in the night so we couldn't follow him." Paris said in a definite voice.

"And he could have killed Carey." Janeway said softly.

"That's right. He only stunned Carey enough to knock him out. He made sure that Carey was safe inside Independence before he depressurized the shuttle bay." Paris said firmly.

"But he stranded us." Chell said as he cuddled into Vorik's chest for comfort.

"If you think about it, we're no worse off than we were yesterday..." Paris began to say.

"We had a working shuttle yesterday." Janeway said firmly.

"Yes, a working, 'short range' shuttle that could carry five people at most. I don't know what Bey's plan is, but I believe in his good heart and loving nature. I'm willing to trust him." Paris said quietly.

"Well, since I don't have a penis to think with, I'm going to stick with the facts. It looks to me like he stranded us here and left to find a new place to live... or maybe some new friends..." Nicoletti finished with full sarcasm.

"I think you're wrong." Paris said in a cold, professional voice.

"Well, I think it's time for a change in leadership. Janeway wouldn't let her personal feelings cloud her judgment and put us in a situation like this." Nicoletti said firmly.

"Do you think I'm wrong?" Paris asked Janeway with honest curiosity.

"I think that you want so much for Bey not to disappoint you that you might be inclined to make assumptions the rest of us wouldn't." Janeway said diplomatically.

Paris nodded at the statement.

"There's enough of us here to take a vote. Who's with me?" Nicoletti asked the group.

"You don't need to do that. Janeway, if you'll be willing to take over, I'll step aside." Paris said in thought.

"Of course I will, and for the record. I hope you're right about Bey." Janeway said with sympathy.

"Then will you promise me one thing?" Paris asked hopefully.

"What's that?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"If Bey comes back... will you promise to let him explain?" Paris asked hopefully.

Janeway thought about it seriously for a moment, then responded, "If he comes back, I'll give him whatever benefit of the doubt that I can, without putting us at undue risk."

"Thank you. Now that you're leader, what do you have for me to do?" Paris asked, feeling all eyes in the room watching him.

Janeway thought for a moment, then said, "I intend to use my captain's training and behave like a captain. In doing so, I'd like to divide the work along these lines. Paris, I'd like for you to be my executive officer. Your duties would include overseeing the daily operations of this facility and reporting back to me. I'll continue to personally oversee the outfitting of our remaining shuttlecraft."

"How is that any different than before?" Nicoletti asked in confusion.

"The only noticeable difference will be that I will be making the final decision on matters that effect us all. Other than that, we'll continue with business as usual. I had my reservations when we started this 'democratic dictatorship' but I can see that with this small of a group, that it is simple and efficient." Janeway said seriously.

"Thanks Janeway." Paris said quietly.

"Your welcome." Janeway said courteously, then said in a firm voice, "Now Paris, as your first act as my XO, would you see that the kitchen staff provide us some breakfast? I think we're all ready to start the day."

"Aye Captain." Paris said with a bit of a smirk in his expression.

"I like the sound of that." Janeway said with a teasing smile.

Two Weeks Since Awakening

"Paris I need you in med bay immediately." Janeway's voice called over his comm badge.

"On my way." Paris said, then said to Vorik and Chell, "I'll have to get back to you guys later. Go ahead and make up a loaf of the bread and call me when it's ready. If you can pull this off, the whole crew is going to be very happy."

"You got it Cap." Chell said with a smile as he watched Paris hurry out of the room.

* * * * *

Paris walked into the medical bay to find Kim laying on a treatment bed.

"You asked to see me?" Paris asked as he walked to Janeway's side.

"Yes. Kim, do I have your permission to disclose this information?" Janeway asked formally.

"Proceed." Kim said without inflection.

"It appears that Kim is pregnant with your child." Janeway said frankly.

Paris looked around the room and noticed Dalby's disapproving stare.

"I... Um..." Paris stammered.

"She has asked my permission for an abortion." Janeway said seriously.

"She can't." Paris said in a gasp, then turned to Kim and said, "You can't."

"I would not expect a Human to understand the cultural significance of this matter. To mate without the blood fire of pon'farr is a cultural taboo. It is evidence of an action of the most emotional and animalistic order. Therefore it is logical to terminate the pregnancy." Kim said without emotion.

"Wait. You're saying that because we had sex without you being in 'Vulcan heat', you're going to kill our child?" Paris asked disbelievingly.

"A child is the product of the union between chosen and bonded mates. The cellular mass within me is the product of the instability I suffered upon awakening with both Human and Vulcan memories. Now that I have gained full control of my mental discipline, the removal of the cellular mass is all that remains to free me of the evidence that I ever behaved so... emotionally." Kim finished with a look of distaste at saying the word.

"Wait, you said removal... we're in a research facility with about a thousand maturation chambers. Would you allow us to remove the embryo so that it can survive?" Paris asked hopefully.

Kim thought about the suggestion, then said, "I would agree on the provision that you genetically alter the cellular mass to remove all Vulcan characteristics. I do not wish to publicly or privately acknowledge the resulting child in any manner."

"That could hurt the baby." Paris said in a whisper.

"Nevertheless, it is a requirement if you are to proceed with my permission." Kim said coldly.

"Dalby, do you know enough about genetics to help me do that?" Paris asked desperately.

Dalby was looking on in shock at the heartless way that Kim was talking about her child.

"Dalby?" Paris asked again, more insistently.

"Um... No Cap. I know the textbook basics, but not enough to do it." Dalby said with distraction.

"I can help you." Janeway said seriously.

"Thanks Janeway." Paris said with relief.

"There is one further matter." Kim said firmly.

"What's that?" Paris asked with worry again.

"I must insist that no one outside this room be told of my role in the creation of the cellular mass." Kim said coldly.

"I swear, I'll never tell." Paris said immediately.

"Of course." Janeway said with assurance.

All three turned to Dalby with matching looks of question.

"As if anyone would believe me. I won't tell." Dalby said with a roll of her eyes.

"Dalby, do you know enough about the maturation chambers to get one set up?" Janeway asked seriously.

"Yes. Where do you want me to set it up... I mean... if it's in here, it's going to raise some questions." Dalby said reluctantly.

"Can you set it up in my quarters?" Paris asked quietly.

"Are you sure?" Janeway asked in a cautious voice.

"Yeah. Completely sure." Paris said quietly.

"I can set up one of the small tanks in about... two, maybe three hours." Dalby said in thought.

"Good, if you'll get that started, Paris and I will extract the cellular mass and begin the genetic alterations." Janeway said seriously.

"Just let me grab some tools and I'll be right on it." Dalby said quickly and ran to the far end of the room where she kept her tools.

"We'll need another genetic pattern to replace Kim's." Janeway said as she gathered the medical instruments she would need.

"I know." Paris said quietly.

"I wouldn't mind. I mean, I don't want to be your child's parent, but I'd be willing to share my genetic material." Janeway said sincerely.

"Let me ask you something first..." Paris said in thought.

"Go ahead." Janeway said softly.

"Do you think it would be ethically wrong to use Bey's genetic material?" Paris asked in a small voice.

"You still love him after everything that's happened?" Janeway asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Pretty pathetic huh?" Paris asked with a pained smile.

"No. Pretty romantic. I honestly hope that your faith in him is rewarded someday. And to answer your question, I think that if he returns, it will be because he truly loves you and he will be honored that you wanted to have a child that shared his genetic material. If he doesn't..." Janeway trailed off with an apologetic look.

"Then I'll have our child, so I'll still have part of him with me." Paris said with a look of sorrow.

"So let's stop talking and just do it." Janeway said as she turned her attention back to Kim who was reclined on the examination table.

"Yes, thank you Janeway... And thank you too Kim." Paris finished with an honest look of gratitude directed at Kim.

"I do not understand why you are thanking me." Kim said with the arch of an eyebrow.

"I'm thanking you for allowing us to do this. If you had refused, I wouldn't have liked it, but I would have respected your wishes." Paris said honestly.

"I am willing to accommodate your wish for the cellular mass to continue to develop. To do otherwise would cause undue emotionalism which is disruptive to efficiency. Accommodating your wishes in the matter will

reduce the possibility of animosity between us... it is logical." Kim said in a toneless voice.

Paris smiled and said, "Yes. Perfectly logical."

One hour later...

"This is going to be faster than trying to rewrite the genetic markers in a fully grown adult." Janeway said as she carefully worked on identifying the correct genetic codes.

"I'm just afraid that we'll hurt the baby by changing it." Paris said as he watched Janeway's every move.

"If you want to go and check on the rest of the crew, this is going to take a while longer." Janeway said in a measured tone.

"Unless that's an order, I'd really rather be here." Paris said seriously.

"I don't mind if you stay. There just isn't anything for you to do." Janeway said, not looking away from her work.

"Thanks. Everyone knows their job and they don't need me looking over their shoulders anyway." Paris said softly.

"No one feels that way. Everyone sees your visits as a sign of interest and appreciates that you take the time to visit with them. In fact, I've had one crew member say those very words to me." Janeway said with a smile in her voice.

"Really? I thought they might feel like I didn't trust them or that I was checking up on them." Paris said with surprise.

"Not at all. It's part of your charisma. When you make your rounds, it's like you're just stopping in to visit for a while. They know that if they're having problems, they can tell you and you'll see that they get help. Aside from that, now that you're not the 'leader', you seem much more relaxed and approachable." Janeway said, then looked up from her work.

"Are you done?" Paris asked in surprise.

"I'm done tagging the code of the cellular mass... I'm sorry, baby. Now I need to start identifying and tagging the corresponding codes in Bey's genetic structure." Janeway said frankly.

"I'll get his genetic sample. Thanks again for doing this." Paris said as he walked to the stasis unit that housed the genetic material from everyone on the base.

"It's my pleasure. Since I was able to get the Independence finished, I've been feeling like I don't have a way to contribute to the station." Janeway said in thought.

"I wish you'd told me sooner. I could have found another project for you." Paris said as he approached with the dish containing Bey's genetic sample.

"I don't need busy work. I can find that for myself. I'm just... we're not making any progress toward getting off this station." Janeway said in thought, then put the sample into her micro-scanner.

"Well, there's that ship graveyard that we've been looking at for two weeks." Paris said frankly.

"I know. But with our limited scanning ability, the risk is too great. We've seen signs of small ships weaving through those wrecks, apparently scavenging them. We have one working shuttle, we can't risk having it damaged or destroyed." Janeway said in thought as she set the controls of the micro-scanner to decode the genetic material before her.

"I was thinking the same thing last week... even with two shuttles, I felt that the risk was unacceptable." Paris said softly.

"The chances of us finding anything usable is remote. Anything that was once of value has probably been picked over or taken already." Janeway said distantly.

"I agree. But I don't see what other alternative we have. We can't stay here. Eventually someone is going to investigate this asteroid and find us. If that happens... well, I don't see us surviving the encounter no matter how that goes." Paris said grimly.

"We could meet up with a peaceful species." Janeway said in a pained voice.

"I spent a few days pouring over everything the scanners have picked up the past few years. From what I observed, I think it's safe to say that there are no peaceful species in this sector. At least not with the capability of space flight." Paris said in a defeated tone.

The scanner made a clucking noise to indicate that it had finished its decoding.

Janeway began to work on identifying the correct genetic codes as she said, "I know the Ocampo are around here, and by all accounts, they are a peaceful people."

"Then they must be planet bound, because all I've seen in this sector of space is one space battle after another. There aren't any fleets from what I've seen. The most ships I've seen travel together is three at a time, and in one of those battles, I saw one of the ships turn on his own allies. From the behavior I've observed, I'd say that these people are tribes, all fighting for domination of this area of space." Paris said in thought.

"So you think we have a bunch of small clans fighting for dominance. Occasionally two or three might band together for a common purpose, but then they start in-fighting. Right?" Janeway asked speculatively.

"Yes. And they're barbaric. When they've disabled an opponent, they don't stop until they've destroyed him. If any escape pods are ejected, they hunt them down and destroy them too. If you're ever in the mood to be sick to your stomach, I can recommend a couple of particularly disturbing battles." Paris said seriously.

"Not that I want to be queasy, but I may have to review some of the battles so I can see the strategies they use." Janeway said in thought as she continued to work.

"There are two that I think you should look at because they seem to be some of the more powerful clans. The scanners identified the ships as Kazon-Nistrum and Kazon-Ogla... they seem to show up more often than the others so knowing what techniques they use could be helpful. As far as the rest... they show up so infrequently, that it wouldn't be worth your time." Paris said carefully.

"I'll do that. In fact, if you'll set it up for tomorrow, I'll spend the morning watching the scanner images. I'd like to know what to expect if we ever get the opportunity to face them in space."

"To do that, we'll need a ship." Paris said frankly.

"I know. Hopefully Kim will be able to spot one on the scanners that might be fixable enough to use." Janeway said as she tagged genetic markers.

"Would you like me to get you some coffee?" Paris asked casually.

"Yes, that would be a great help. I've got a while longer on this." Janeway said in thought.

"I'll be right back." Paris said in a distant voice.

"Don't worry Paris... she's going to be fine." Janeway said with a smile as she looked up from the screen.

"She?" Paris asked cautiously.

"I wasn't sure if I should tell you, but... yes. It's a girl." Janeway said with a smile.

"I guess I'd better start thinking of baby names." Paris said as his eyes seemed to light up.

"After you get my coffee." Janeway said firmly.

"Aye Captain." Paris said formally, then broke into a smile.

* * * * *

"The maturation tank is all set up and ready to go." Dalby said as she walked into the med bay.

"We'll be ready for it in about an hour." Paris said as he watched the progress of the genetic resequencing on the micro-scanner.

"I just wanted to say that I'm happy for you Cap. Even though you didn't plan this, I'm glad you're going to have a kid." Dalby said shyly.

"Me too. I just hope the genetic resequencing doesn't hurt her." Paris said as he kept his eyes on the screen.

"Her? It's a girl?" Dalby asked with a smile.

"Yes. What do you think of 'Wendy' as a name?" Paris asked as he glanced away from the screen.

"Wendy Chakotay? Um, I think you'd better try again." Dalby said with a queasy look.

"I see what you mean. Do you have any suggestions? I'm really not coming up with anything." Paris said helplessly.

"Trixina, Saralinda, Berthetta, Lurlene..." Dalby said in thought.

"And you shot down Wendy?" Paris asked with disbelief.

"Hey! Those are my kid's names... well, I guess they're my sisters now..." Dalby trailed off in thought.

"No offense Dalby, but... I think I'll figure it out for myself." Paris said with a pained, apologetic look.

"Whatever, I just wanted to let you know it's ready and waiting for you. I'm gonna go grab some grub before I head down to level four to scavenge for supplies. Do you want me to pick you up some food while I'm at it?" Dalby asked curiously.

"Yeah, if you wouldn't mind. I don't want to leave this." Paris said, his gaze fixed firmly on the display again.

"I can tell. I'll be right back, you just watch after little Hilda there." Dalby said with a smile.

"No." Paris said firmly.

"Gladys?" Dalby asked as she took another step toward the door.

"No." Paris said, this time with a chuckle in his voice.

Chapter 6

I walked down the ramp exiting the ship and was assaulted by the bright sunlight.

I paused for a moment to try and get my bearings when I felt a tug on my neck.

My master pulled forcefully and growled some command to me which I have come to understand means, 'Come on you lazy slave or I'm going to beat you!'

Well, he was going to beat me anyway. But if I didn't hurry and follow obediently, it would be here and now rather than later in his cabin.

As I hurried to follow, I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of a hooded figure watching me.

I turned my head to see who was watching me and made eye contact for just a moment.

I quickly turned my gaze ahead of me.

Never make eye contact with anyone... It just leads to another beating.

* * * * *

After leaving the makeshift landing area in the desert, we walked into the small village.

We stopped outside a building where my master disconnected the leash from my slave collar and grunted a command that I now know means, 'Stay here you lazy slave, or I'm going to beat you!'

I stood as ordered, feeling the aching in my bare feet from walking across the burning sand.

I didn't dare even reach down to try and soothe them for fear that I might be seen by someone.

I could feel the tingle of the sunburn on my exposed skin.

I wore one tattered scrap of cloth draped over a string around my waist to cover my groin.

One gust of wind and I was fully exposed for all to see.

The cloth and my slave collar were all that I wore.

My mind drifted back to the time before... my family... my home.

* * * * *

"What is your name?" A computerized voice asked from behind me.

I turned and looked with surprise at the hooded figure who had watched us leave the ship.

"Am I speaking your language?" The figure asked.

It was strange, I could hear him speaking in another language, but a device he was wearing was speaking in my language, the language of the Ocampa.

I nodded hesitantly, not daring to look into the eyes of the stranger.

"What is your name?" The stranger asked again.

"Kro 'kath." I said without thinking.

The figure shook his head in disapproval, then said, "That is a Kazon word. Do you have an Ocampan name?"

I nodded and whispered, "Kel."

My name. My own name. I hadn't said it or heard it spoken in such a long time...

"Kel, give me your hand. I promise that I won't hurt you." The stranger said seriously.

Hesitantly I reached my hand out to him, ready to withdraw it in an instant.

The stranger grabbed my hand by the wrist and turned it palm up, then quickly pressed a device into the palm of my hand.

I heard the device hiss, then he took it away.

"Kel, what I have just given you is a drug that causes a hypnotic trance. Do you understand?" The stranger asked in a firm voice.

"Yes." I whispered as I looked at my hand to find it undamaged.

"I'm sorry I have to do it this way, but I need you to tell me the truth and if you don't agree to what I'm going to ask of you, I need to be able to make you forget." The stranger said seriously.

"I understand." I said as I felt a strange sensation, like someone else was answering him and I was just watching the events from a distance.

"It is my intention to take the ship you arrived on. In the process of taking the ship, most, if not all the crew will be killed." The stranger said in a considering voice.

I remained still and silent.

"I cannot force you to do anything that is in direct opposition to your nature. I need to know if you are willing to help me take the ship." The stranger asked carefully.

"Yes." My voice said without me being able to control it.

"If the situation calls for it, will you be able to kill?" The hooded stranger asked firmly.

There was a moment of silence, then my voice answered, "I will kill Kazons".

"Good, that's what I'd hoped. When do you expect to be going back to your ship?" The stranger asked seriously.

"Normally, the master returns to the ship at sunset." My voice said, completely independent of my own thoughts.

"Do you know where to find and how to operate an emergency breather unit in the event of a loss of atmosphere?"

"Yes."

The stranger nodded, then asked, "If there were an emergency on your ship, how would you know?"

"There would be a loud buzzing sound." My voice said without emotion.

"Good. Then listen carefully. You are to forget about meeting me and everything that we've talked about. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"When you hear that buzzer, I want you to immediately get the nearest breather unit and put it on."

"I understand."

"Then I want you to hide. Get under a piece of furniture or in a storage room and stay there until the buzzer stops." The stranger said firmly.

"I understand."

"When the buzzer stops, you will remember everything we've talked about. Go to the engine room and wait for me there."

"I understand."

"I'm going to leave now. Act normally and forget that you saw me or talked to me."

"I understand."

* * * * *

I snapped back to attention as I noticed a Kazon walk through the door I was standing beside.

What was I thinking about? Oh yeah, my family... my home...

* * * * *

My master came out of the building stinking of alcohol and holding a giggling woman at his side.

This was a good sign.

When my master found a woman for the evening, I would only have to stand by and serve them, and with any luck she would satisfy all his 'appetites' before she left the ship.

He quickly attached the leash to my collar and gave it a tug as he led the woman toward his ship.

As I followed I noticed that the woman smelled like old cheese.

* * * * *

We walked up the ramp and into the ship as the sun was setting.

In another time and place, I might be able to stop and enjoy the sight.

My master was being rougher than usual with me, yanking my leash and nearly throwing me where he wanted me to go.

Once we were in his cabin, he commanded me to stand then started to undress himself.

One or two grunted words to the woman prompted her to do the same.

I remained standing, looking forward, seeing without seeing as my master sought his own gratification, using this woman's body much as he had used my own so many times.

My master grunted the word that usually gave me a sense of relief.

I don't know the literal translation, but the basic meaning is 'lubricate me'.

I grabbed the ceramic pot of lubrication and hurried behind him.

I got some on my hand then did my best to get my hand between them and coat his shaft.

He let out a gurgled growl that I took to mean, 'Enough'.

I replaced the lid of the pot and put it back in its place, then moved back to my standing place to await further orders.

All of a sudden a buzzer sounded and before I could think, I had grabbed the emergency breather unit from beside my master's bed and hurried into the clothes closet.

Distantly I could hear the voice of my master calling out, not to me, but on the communications equipment to the others on the bridge of the ship.

I huddled tightly into myself, imagining the beating I would receive when my master found me, but couldn't force myself to leave my hiding place.

I noticed that my master's voice was becoming fainter and his words were becoming slurred.

The woman who had shared his bed screamed and I could hear her pounding on the door to the cabin.

* * * * *

When my master and his companion finally fell silent, time seemed to lose all meaning. The only sound that could be heard was the buzzer that indicated that there was a problem.

I was frozen in place with the breather unit on my face, unable to force myself to move.

Then the buzzer stopped and the memories flooded back to me.

The engine room. I have to go to the engine room.

I got up out of the floor of the closet and cautiously cracked open the door to look out into the room.

The bodies of my master and his companion were laying unconscious against the door.

There were streaks of blood where the woman had torn off her fingernails trying to scratch her way through the metal bulkhead.

I pressed the release button beside the door and it opened immediately.

I stepped over the bodies in the doorway and hurried to engineering and to my new life.

* * * * *

"Good, I'm glad you made it." The stranger said as he walked around the engineering console.

I could barely hear his muffled voice speaking, but the artificial computerized voice sounded clearly from the right side of his chest.

"This is going to be easier than I thought. Come here." He said, then pointed to some controls.

"See this?" He said, then took a marking pen and made a single slash above the control.

"This is one." He said, then moved down and to the left of that control and made two slashes."

"This is two." He said and moved to another control.

Finally he had marked eight controls and said, "When I call you over the ships communications system, I'll just call the numbers I need you to push. Do you think you can do that?"

"Y... yes." I said shyly, my voice muffled by my breather unit.

"Keep that on for a while. We need to move the ship now. Once we're safely away, we can deal with the crew and restore the atmosphere." The stranger said seriously.

I nodded, then said, "Thank you."

I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was smiling, then he said, "I'll be calling you in just a minute. As I call each number, press that control. That's all you have to do."

"I've got it." I said as I looked over the controls again.

* * * * *

"One." I heard through the speakers.

I quickly pressed the number one control.

"Two, three." The voice said quickly.

I pressed the controls, then heard a low discordant beep.

"One." The voice called again.

I pressed the control.

"Three four." The voice said with a note of distraction, like he was having trouble.

I pressed them, and heard the beep again.

"One, three, four." The voice said, this time with full frustration.

I quickly pressed the buttons and heard the expected beep, then noticed a blinking button to the side.

"There is a yellow button flashing beside number three." I said, hoping it would help.

There was a long moment of silence, then the stranger responded, "Of course, the engine controller wants confirmation before doing a cold start. Hold down the yellow flashing button and keep holding it while you press one, three and four."

I held the button with my right hand, then carefully pressed one, then three and finally four with my left hand.

I felt a vibration as the engines came to life.

"Good. You're going to make a great ship's engineer." The stranger said, then I heard some beeping over the speaker.

"Press five, wait, then six." The stranger said in a voice of deep thought.

"Should I release the yellow button?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes, release it. You won't be needing it again unless we have to restart the engine." He said confidently.

I released the yellow button then pressed five, waited a few seconds, then pressed six.

"Good. Do you know your way to the bridge?" The voice asked.

"Yes, what about buttons number seven and eight?" I asked as I looked at them carefully.

"We won't need them until we have to shut down the engines. Come on up to the bridge so we can take off." The stranger said in a casual voice.

I took one last look at the engine console, then hurried out of the engine room.

There were bodies scattered in the hallway. They looked as if they had dropped in mid-step, not even looking uncomfortable.

I quickly stepped around them and got on the lift that took me to the bridge.

"Take a seat over there Kel. I don't think I'll need you to do anything, but be ready just in case." The stranger said as he gestured to a console.

I rolled the Kazon sitting at that station out of the chair and into the floor before taking his seat.

"Hold on, this might be a bumpy ride." The stranger said, then started pressing buttons in a quick sequence.

"This thing handles like an ox-cart. It's a wonder it can even get into space." The stranger said with difficulty as he worked furiously on the controls.

I looked at the main view screen and was surprised to see that we weren't lifting into space, but gliding just above the ground.

"I have to make one stop before we leave the planet." The stranger said informatively.

I looked over at him to see that he was watching me.

"You're the pilot." I said helplessly.

I could tell by the expression of his eyes that he was smiling as he said, "And you're the engineer... Hang on, we're about to land."

I grabbed onto the sides of the console and held tight as the ship awkwardly jolted to a stop.

"Do you know where we can find a cart or something to help us move these bodies?" The stranger asked as he stood.

"Yes. I have seen some flat-bed carts in the hanger bay." I said quickly as I also stood.

"Show me where. We'll have to move some bodies before we take off." The stranger said as he walked to the lift and motioned for me to join him.

I quickly ran to his side, then pressed the button to take us to the proper level of the ship.

"Hold on." The stranger said and gently placed one hand on the side of my head.

I felt a presence in my mind, beckoning to me.

I flinched away and backed into the corner of the lift.

"Please don't be afraid, I just want to fix it so we can talk without this translator." The stranger said softly.

"It is forbidden. That... what you tried to do... it is the most forbidden of all things." I said quickly, trying to explain the seriousness of what he tried to do.

"Who has forbidden it?" The stranger asked seriously.

"I... I don't know. The elders told us... All my people know it is forbidden." I said in thought.

"Kel, I wouldn't do anything to hurt you and I wouldn't ask this if it weren't important. If we are to survive, we need to be able to communicate. The time it takes for my translator to work may be the difference between life and death. Besides, it's a device and it can make errors in translation. We can't afford to take that chance." The stranger said in a softer voice.

I reluctantly nodded my head, giving my permission.

"This will take a minute. My father was a telepath... but this is about all I can do." The stranger said as he walked to me and placed his hand on the side of my head.

I tried to fight down the feeling of revulsion and violation as I felt the foreign being in my mind.

"Shhh. Almost done." The stranger said quietly.

I held still and willed myself not to strike out at this being who had saved me from my master.

"Done." The stranger said, then slowly backed away.

"I'm sorry." I said, feeling ashamed by my reaction.

The stranger reached into the Kazon robes he wore, and did something then said in his own voice, "No Kel, you have nothing to be sorry for. I'm sorry that I had to violate your beliefs like that. I promise that I will never do that again."

I nodded in understanding as I could hear the true remorse in his voice.

"Are you ready to go?" The stranger asked gently as he pressed the button to open the lift doors.

I nodded and took one step away from the corner I had been cowering in.

"Please help me clear the bodies out of the hanger bay so I can get my ship inside." The stranger said in an encouraging voice.

Please help? It wasn't a command. He asked for my help.

I walked to his side and pointed to the door to the hanger bay.

* * * * *

We walked in and looked around only finding two Kazons.

"Where is the cart you were talking about?" The stranger asked.

"I believe there are a few of them in this supply room." I said and pointed.

"Let's haul these bodies out of here before we open the hanger door." The stranger said with purpose as he walked to the indicated door.

"Why?" I asked hesitantly.

I couldn't remember the last time I had questioned anything, but if our mission was so urgent. Why did we have to bother with these corpses.

"Because I didn't evacuate all the oxygen from the ship, I just lowered the air pressure and reduced the oxygen so they would lapse into unconsciousness. They might still be of use to us for something." He said as he walked into the supply room

"So you didn't kill them?" I asked with a hitch of fear.

"Not yet. But unless we add more oxygen to the ship's atmosphere, they won't regain consciousness." He said as he walked out of the supply room pushing a cart.

"Why didn't they put on breather units when they felt the suffocation?" I asked curiously.

"Because I lowered the air pressure to knock them unconscious, then the oxygen to keep them that way. The only thing they might have felt was sleepy or drunk... Help me load these two onto the cart and we'll put them in the hallway." The stranger said firmly.

I grabbed the feet of the Kazon and helped him lift.

"On three. One... two... three." He said and we heaved the heavy body onto the cart.

"Good, just one more, then we can open the outer door." The stranger said as he moved the cart to the other unconscious Kazon.

"One... two... three." He said again, and we hefted the dead weight up on top of the first one.

"Wait here." He said and pushed the cart into the hall. A moment later he walked into the hanger bay and sealed the door behind him.

"One more minute." He said quickly, then hurried to the computer console beside the outer door.

I heard a hiss and noticed that there was a blinking light.

"That's it. The pressure is equalized now." The stranger said, then pulled the breather unit off his face.

I slowly did the same and took a deep inhale of fresh air.

"You'd better grab another breather unit after we close the hanger door. These are about used up." The stranger said as he opened the large door.

I nodded hesitantly as I saw the desert landscape through the opening door.

"You want to come with me?" The stranger asked as I saw the exit ramp extending to the ground.

I nodded immediately.

I'm lost here. I would be completely helpless without the guidance of this stranger... my savior.

"This way." The stranger said and motioned for me to follow.

* * * * *

We walked for about five minutes when I saw a small ship that was partially sheltered by some overhanging rocks.

"That was one helluva walk from here to the town." The stranger said casually.

I thought about the distance we had traveled by air and estimated that the walk must have taken days.

"I have a couple changes of clothes with me. They might be baggy on you, but they should work." The stranger said without looking back at me.

I looked down at my nearly naked body, then back at the stranger in multi-layered Kazon robes.

"It'll be good to get out of these Kazon clothes. I know they're practical here in the desert, but honestly, I feel like I'm tangled in my bedclothes." He said with a smile in his voice.

We finally reached the door of his small ship and he pressed a button on the side to enter.

"Come on in. Can I get you anything?" The stranger asked gently.

I shook my head and looked around. It was odd, but this ship felt comfortable. Like home.

The stranger looked in one box, then another and finally handed me a large bundle of clothing.

"Go ahead. It's got to be better than wearing a hankie and a shoestring." The stranger said and started to unwrap himself from the multiple layers of the Kazon desert wear.

I quickly unfolded the bundle and found it to be a set of clothing much like the style we had in my home.

I looked at the stranger with question in time to see him pull the last of the layers of clothing off his body.

He noticed that I was looking at his naked body and smiled.

His features were... they reminded me of the small reptilian creatures that lived among the rocks of my home near the caves.

"Yeah. I know I look kind of funny, but hopefully you'll get used to it." He said casually, then stepped into a pair of pants.

I shook myself out of my daze and stepped into my own pants.

When the stranger had finished dressing, he took the bundle of Kazon clothing and threw it out the door of the ship.

"Someone needs to introduce the Kazons to the concept of deodorant." He said, then turned toward the front of the ship and started pressing controls.

I heard a noise and saw the door of the little ship closing.

"Sit down Kel, we're about to lift off." The stranger said while working the controls in a comfortable and well practiced manner.

I took a seat and looked down at the controls in front of me.

"This is my language." I said in shock.

"Yeah, the original owners of this shuttle were Ocampan scientists." He said and I felt the engines power up.

"Did you... kill them?" I asked hesitantly.

"No. They were long gone when we found the shuttle." He said as we lifted slightly off the ground.

"We?" I asked cautiously.

"That's kind of a long story. Once we're in space I'll tell you. Okay?" He asked as he turned the ship and started moving us forward.

"As you like." I said automatically.

"I need to do something that might seem kind of strange to you, but don't worry." The stranger said as he maneuvered us to come along side the Kazon ship.

"I trust you." I said in a whisper.

He smiled at me, then made some careful adjustments to the instruments before him.

There was a 'whoomp' sound as a blast of light impacted the side of the Kazon ship.

"You are going to destroy the ship?" I asked before I could think.

"No. I just want it to look like it's been in a battle." The stranger said, then fired another shot.

The second shot breached the outer hull and I looked at the stranger with disbelief and question.

"That's a non-vital part of the ship. I hate to compromise our hull integrity, but it's necessary if we're going to get away from this planet." He said firmly.

I just stared at the view screen again.

"One more should do it." He said, then fired a longer sustained blast down the side of the ship, severely scoring the hull.

"Perfect." He said with accomplishment, then moved us toward the hanger bay.

* * * * *

After landing the shuttle, he said, "Get a new breather unit and get to engineering. The engines are on stand-by so you shouldn't have to do anything, but I'd like to have you there just in case."

I opened the cabinet by the outer door, pulled out two breathers and handed the stranger one, then put on my own.

As soon as we were both ready, the stranger evacuated the atmosphere from the hanger bay and equalized it with the rest of the ship.

"I'll let you know as soon as it's okay to come up on the bridge." He said in a muffled voice through the breather.

I nodded my understanding.

"Don't be worried if you feel some shuddering or vibration. That's just the hull breach. I promise that it will be fine." He said with cheer in his voice.

"I trust you." I said seriously.

He nodded in my direction then walked toward the lift that would carry him to the bridge.

I walked to the opposite end of the hall and took the lift down to engineering.

* * * * *

"Hold on, here we go." His voice came over the speaker.

I held onto the engineering console and felt the ship quake with effort as it fought against the planet's gravity.

"It's fine Kel, this is just what I wanted." He said in an assuring voice.

"I trust you." I said over the hum of the engines and the shuddering of the entire ship.

I heard his delighted laughter over the speaker, then he said, "Just keep telling yourself that and by the time we get away from this planet, you might believe it."

I couldn't help but smile at his comment as I slowly released my grip on the engineering console.

"As soon as we've broken out of the planet's gravity, you can come on up to the bridge. The engines are working perfectly." He said happily.

I felt a tingle of something deep inside me that I hadn't felt for a very long time.

I don't know the exact word for the sensation, but I knew the source. The tingle was sparked by knowing that this person, my savior was pleased.

Suddenly I realized that there was nothing I could think of that would give me greater pleasure than to know that something I did caused my savior to have that feeling.

I felt the shuddering quiet as the ship finally escaped the last of the planet's atmosphere.

Without further thought, I hurried to the bridge where I might find some way to bring pleasure to the stranger, my savior... my new master.

Chapter 7

"Kel, I need for you to watch the scanners to see if anyone is following us." The stranger said as he piloted the ship.

I hurried to my seat and looked at the display carefully.

"I'm going to vent some atmosphere and change the engine inter-mix ratio." My savior said in thought as he worked the controls.

I heard something like a 'whoosh' and then the hum of the ship's engines changed and began to run more roughly.

After a moment, the stranger asked, "Anybody following us yet?"

I looked at the display again and a feeling of dread washed over me at the sight.

"Yes. I think there's a ship coming directly for us." I said with fear in my voice.

"Good." My savior said calmly.

"Good?" I asked in confusion.

"Yes. If we didn't look helpless, there would probably be two or three of them." The stranger said seriously, then jumped up from his station and hurried to stand behind me.

"Come on. We only have about ten minutes before they catch up to us. Help me stack as many Kazons in the air lock as we can." He said quickly and ran to the lift.

I followed him as quickly as I could.

* * * * *

"Come on, we have to hurry. They'll be here soon." My new master said as he helped me load the Kazons onto the cart.

"There are two more in here." I said as we approached my old master's cabin.

"We don't have time. They're almost here." My savior said as he struggled to pull the cart.

"But he..." I began to say, then thought better of it.

My savior stopped and looked in the door, then asked, "Was this the one that was your master?"

I nodded silently.

"Well don't just stand there. Let's get him on the cart and dump him in the air lock." The stranger said as he hurried into the room and grabbed my old master's feet.

I quickly grabbed my old master's arms and pulled with all my might to relocate him to the cart.

"Oh man. I can smell this stinky woman through the breather unit. Do you mind if we save her for the next trip?" He asked with a look of disgust.

I shook my head and smiled as I moved to the front of the cart to help him pull.

"Hurry." He said and gave a blast of effort to move the cart quickly.

* * * * *

When we approached the air lock, the stranger quickly opened it, then helped me position the cart at the door.

"Just lift and throw. We don't have time to be gentle." He said and grabbed the feet of my old master.

I grabbed the hands and we heaved him into the floor of the airlock in one swift movement.

"Again." He said and grabbed the next on the pile.

In less than two minutes, we had all the bodies stacked in the airlock.

"Let's go." He said quickly and ran toward the lift.

I followed immediately behind him.

* * * * *

As we stepped onto the bridge I could hear a voice calling to us on the communications console.

I recognized that the voice was speaking in Kazon, but thanks to my new master, I understood what it was saying.

"...your emissions show that your engines are failing. Shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded."

My new master held up his hand to indicate that he wanted me to be still and silent as he walked to the communications console and pressed a few buttons, then in a panicked voice he screamed in Kazon, "They don't show up on sensors! They came out of nowhere! PLEASE HELP US!!"

He pressed another button on the console, then hurried to the helm and started working the controls furiously.

"Hold on!" He said and grabbed hold of his console.

I held onto my console tightly and looked at the main viewer.

I felt a jolt, and felt the ship groan as one maneuvering thruster fired in a burst and began to turn the ship sharply to the left.

"Now for the clincher." He said and ran to the operations console beside the helm and pressed a series of keys.

All the lights went out and everything was silent. The engines were quiet, there were no scanners, or even ventilation.

"What did you do?" I asked in a whisper.

"Right now they're probably pissing themselves trying to figure out who just attacked us. When I hit the thruster, I vented some atmosphere and opened the air locks. Get ready, we're going to make a run for that gaseous planet." He said in a calculating voice.

"I'm ready." I said as I took hold of the sides of my console.

"Just watch what they're doing behind us. We're going to go out in a blaze of glory. If you try to sneak away, they'll hunt you down, but if you run out screaming your head off, they're more likely to let you go." He said with a chuckle in his voice, then I could hear as he started working his controls again.

The lights came on and the engines came to life.

"They're going to be talking about this for the next twenty years. The story of the ghost ship that can attack without being seen!" My savior said with a laugh as he adjusted our course and pushed the engines to full power.

"It sounds like the engines are about to explode!" I said over the deafening sound.

"I know. Only someone in desperate trouble would even think about running their engines like this. Are they in pursuit?"

"No. They've moved to our former position... probably to look at the bodies." I said as I looked carefully.

"Good. That will buy us some time. Our course is set. Let's load the airlocks again in case we have to do a second show." He said quickly as he got out of his seat.

"What do we do if they come after us?" I asked cautiously.

"They won't be able to catch up to us before we have the airlocks loaded. Come on!" He said as he hurried to the lift.

I had to force myself to follow him. I was getting tired.

* * * * *

"What can I do now?" I asked in a tired voice as I followed my new master from the airlock.

"Right now we go to the bridge and check on the progress of our Kazon friends. Depending on how that goes, we start going through the ship, room by room and looking for any Kazons we might have missed before." He said as we got onto the lift.

I nodded my acceptance... anything for him.

He looked at me carefully and said, "You look tired, would you like to rest for a while?"

"No. I want to help you." I said firmly.

He nodded but looked uncertain.

We stepped off the lift and walked to our stations.

"Are they following us?" He asked seriously.

"No. They're almost out of range. They're returning to the Ocampan home world." I said seriously.

There was a moment of silence, and I turned to see what had drawn his attention.

"I didn't think of that... that's your home." He said quietly.

I shook my head and said, "I was exiled from my home for questioning the ways of the elders. That isn't my home anymore."

He nodded, then looked at his console and said, "Let's go make sure the ship is free of any stray Kazons, then we can restore the breathable air." He said quietly.

I nodded and followed him.

* * * * *

The search of the ship had been long and tedious.

We went through every room, closet, service crawlway and anyplace else a Kazon might have been able to wedge himself.

My savior took off his mask and said, "That's it. We can breathe now."

I took off my own mask and said, "Good. Wearing that mask is uncomfortable, especially when you sweat."

He nodded and lifted his hair to reveal a patch of skin that had been rubbed raw on his neck.

"Give me a minute and I'll get you some ointment to sooth that." I said quickly.

"It's okay. It'll heal." He said dismissively.

I stopped in my tracks and walked back to him to wait for his orders.

He looked at me consideringly, then down at the console before him.

"It's about time for my final trick." He said as he looked at the board before him.

"What can I do to help?" I asked hopefully.

"I'll tell you in a minute. I want to start at the beginning." He said seriously.

I nodded my acceptance.

"We're going to have some pretty high g-forces to deal with in this maneuver. But if I do it right, anyone who might come looking for us will have to assume that we crashed into that." He said and pointed at the main viewer.

I looked at the huge gaseous planet that filled the screen.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked as I took my seat and turned it to look at him.

"As soon as we hit the outer atmosphere, I'm going to correct our inter-mix ratio, stop venting atmosphere and dump our... airlocks." He finished with hesitation.

I nodded that I accepted what he was going to do.

"I've left a trail that a blind man could follow, as soon as we hit the atmosphere, that trail will disappear." He said seriously.

I nodded hesitantly. He hadn't explained the high g-forces yet.

"If I can get the calculations just right, I'm going to slingshot us around this planet to build up velocity, then cut our engines and power usage almost completely. That leads me to what you can do." He said as he looked into my eyes.

"While I'm making my calculations, I need you to gather bedding, food and whatever else you think we need and bring it to the bridge. When we start the slingshot maneuver, I'm going to shut down life support to the rest of the ship." He said seriously.

I nodded in thought.

"An object in motion tends to stay in motion. If my calculations are just right, we can point this ship where I want it to go and just sit back and let it glide. There won't be any emissions trail to follow, no electro-magnetic spikes to draw anyone's attention and no sensor pings to announce our arrival." He said carefully.

"So we'll be traveling with minimal life support... for how long?" I asked cautiously.

"It's hard to say with any accuracy. If I can get the velocity I want, two days but it could be as long as four. We just have to see what this old ship can give us." He said in thought.

"Is there anything you want from your ship?" I asked, resolved to getting the things he wanted before attending to my own needs.

"Well, I have some ration bars and water in there if you want to grab it." He said in a considering voice.

"Water? How much? Are you saving it for barter or can we have some?" I asked quickly.

"It's for us to drink. Bring up all the water jugs. When we turn off the life support, the heat will dissipate quickly and it will all freeze." He said in thought.

"I will bring it right away. You can count it when I get here. I won't drink any of it at all." I said before I could stop myself.

He smiled at me warmly and said, "I'm not worried about it. And grab two drinking glasses when you bring the water."

I felt my eyes go wide at the suggestion and hurried to the lift so I could begin to transport his precious cargo.

* * * * *

"Here it is!" I said with accomplishment as the doors to the lift opened.

My new master smiled at me and walked to the lift.

"Let me help you unload that." He said and picked up one of the containers.

"I can do it. You don't have to bother." I said quickly.

"I'm done with the calculations. Come on." He said as he carried his container to an open space on the bridge, well away from anything of importance.

I quickly lifted a container and hurried to set it beside the one he had moved.

"Slow down. We have plenty of time. Besides, it looks like you have everything we need right here." He said as he looked at the things I had brought.

"Yes. I gathered the things from your ship, then went through a few crew cabins and found fresh bedding." I said seriously.

"Well, I just remembered something else I wanted to get from my ship, so when we have this unloaded, I'm going down there... do you want to come with me?" He asked in a friendly voice.

My new master is so kind and gentle.

"Yes, of course." I said with a smile.

In just a few minutes we had the last of the supplies moved.

"Did you remember to bring the glasses?" He asked gently.

"Right here." I said and went to the container where I made sure to put them.

I handed him the glasses, and he handed one back to me.

"Would you like to do the honors?" He asked with a smile.

I looked at him with question.

"Would you like to pour us some water?" He asked quietly.

"Yes. Yes. Right away." I said quickly and grabbed the first of the water containers.

I opened the container and slowly poured it into his glass, careful not to spill a drop.

"Hand me your glass and I'll hold it for you while you pour it." He said with a gentle smile.

With shaking hands, I handed him the empty glass, then slowly picked up the water container and poured the water into the second glass.

When I stopped at just under half a glass, he said, "Go ahead and fill it up. Give yourself as much as you gave me."

Reluctantly, I tipped the container again and filled the glass to the same level as I had filled my new master's.

"Now drink with me." He said with a smile and held out the glass of water to me.

I took the glass with both hands and held it tightly, afraid to even breathe as I considered the treasure that I held.

He looked at me with happiness dancing in his eyes, then slowly began to drink.

Carefully I brought the glass to my lips and felt the cool sensation fill my mouth.

Home. I hadn't tasted water since I was back in my underground home oh so long ago.

"Relax Kel, this is just my way of saying that I'm glad you're here with me." He said, then sat down in the floor by my feet.

I looked down at him in surprise, then also sat down.

"That's better. Let's just relax for a few minutes, enjoy our water, then go down to my ship to get my tool box." He said in a casual voice.

I nodded, not understanding the gentle and casual nature of my new master.

He took another drink of his water and I followed his example.

Such decadent luxury, such a beautiful treasure to be shared...

"I guess I should tell you about what to expect where we'll be going." My new master said with a look of concern coming over his face.

I looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to tell me.

"We're going to be heading for a scientific station hidden within an asteroid." He said in thought.

I nodded hesitantly, not sure what to make of his subdued mood.

"I stole that ship in the hanger bay from them." He said in a quieter voice.

I nodded, knowing that he must have had a good reason.

"The people on that station are my family and friends. But they're trapped there. I stole the shuttle because I wanted to get them a ship so they could travel home." He said distantly.

"Why did you have to steal it?" I asked in a timid voice.

"Because they wouldn't allow me to go on my own. They would be afraid that I might get hurt or killed and they would rather be stranded than take the chance of my being injured." He said seriously.

"You must be a person of great importance to be treasured so." I said softly.

"Only to one person... his name is Paris." He said and I realized what he meant. My new master had a mate. He was here, doing all of this to provide transport home for his mate... at the risk of losing him.

"I don't think he'll ever be able to trust me again." My new master said with a pained voice.

"What will happen when you return?" I asked, considering that the others of his colony might not be able to forgive him.

"I don't know. But I violated their trust, so I'll face the consequences. I hope that my bringing them a ship will help smooth some of their hard feelings." He said in deep thought.

"Be comforted master. I am sure they will see you for the good person that you are." I said softly.

"What did you call me?" He asked curiously.

"M... master?" I said hesitantly, afraid that I might have angered him.

"Kel, I didn't rescue you from your Kazon master so I could take his place." He said firmly.

I scooted back in fear, knowing that I had angered my new master.

"Kel. I am not your master. I call you by your name and expect you to call me by mine." He said as he looked me in the eyes.

"Yes... I will but..." I said in a trembling voice.

"But what?" He asked slowly, appearing to be on the edge of rage.

"What is your name? You never told me." I asked quietly, cowering slightly in fear.

He got a surprised look, then broke into a smile.

"Okay, you got me there. Kel, my name is Bey." He said, looking to be on the verge of laughter.

I relaxed slightly and said, "If it is what you wish me to do. Then I will call you Bey."

Bey shook his head in amusement and said, "It's a start. Finish your water and lets go get my tool kit. I want to get that collar off your neck."

I looked at Bey with surprise, then took a drink of water as he had said.

"Come on. We'll be to that big blue planet soon and then we'll be stuck on this bridge for a few days." He said as he stood.

I took a final drink of my water, making sure to get every drop when I looked up at him and saw that he had his hand extended to me.

I offered him my glass but he shook his head and said, "I'm offering to help you up. Take my hand."

I placed my hand in his and he pulled my arm and helped me to my feet.

"Put your glass over here. We'll use them again later." He said as he sat his glass on top of a storage crate.

I sat my glass next to his and followed him to the lift.

* * * * *

A noise caught my attention as we stepped off the lift.

"Dammit. I forgot that when I restored the atmosphere that they'd wake up." Bey said as he hurried down the hall.

I followed behind him and watched as a large Kazon man stepped out of the airlock.

Bey took something from his hip and in one swift move, shot a beam from the coiled weapon and dropped the Kazon in his tracks.

My new master may be kind and gentle, but he has the ability to be swift and deadly.

"Kel, get to the bridge and open the airlocks." Bey said quickly.

"But..." I began to say.

"Just do it!" He said firmly and fired a pulse of energy at another emerging Kazon.

"Right away." I said and ran as quickly as I could back to the lift.

I pressed the button for the bridge and waited impatiently for the lift to take me there.

'He has to be alright. He's my savior, he has to be alright.' I thought to myself as the lift crawled up the shaft to the bridge.

When the bridge doors finally opened I ran to the operations station where the airlock controls were. As I was about to press the button to release the airlocks, I thought of something that might help.

I ran to the communications console and pushed the button to make a ship-wide announcement.

I hurried back to the operations console and in a loud, clear voice I called, "One... Two... Three!"

I pressed the button firmly to open all external airlocks.

I waited a moment, then pressed the button again to close them.

On trembling legs I ran to the lift and pressed the button to take me to the level where I had left Bey.

If possible, this ride on the lift was even longer than the last one.

'Please, great maker, creator of us all, he who guides the motion of the universe. Please protect him.' I prayed as the lift inched it's way down the shaft.

Finally the doors opened and I was startled to be face to face with Bey.

"Thanks for the countdown Kel. I'd be floating out there with the Kazons if you hadn't thought to do that." He said as he hugged me tightly.

"I was worried for your safety." I said quietly.

"Well I'm fine, thanks to you. And as far as I'm concerned, that makes us even." Bey said with a loving smile.

"Your mate is a very lucky man." I said with a look of admiration at Bey.

"My former mate more likely." Bey said with a distant look of misery.

I pulled out of the hug to look into Bey's eyes and firmly said, "When you explain that your motivation was to return him to his home, he will understand."

"I don't know Kel. Paris values trust very highly. He trusted me and I betrayed him... It might be too much for him to forgive." Bey said in a hollow tone.

"None of us knows the future. Such speculation will not help." I said, hoping that it would be enough to ease his worry.

"Yeah. You're right. Besides, if we don't get this ship pointed in the right direction, it won't make any difference anyway. Come on." He said and guided me out of the lift and back into the hallway.

I glanced at the airlock and noticed some burns from Bey's weapon.

"They're gone, you don't have to worry about them anymore." Bey said softly.

"Thank you." I whispered as I followed him to the hanger bay.

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"It looks like opening the airlocks vented a little more atmosphere than I had planned. We're at about 80% of optimum." Bey said as he looked at the readout at the operations station.

"That isn't a problem is it?" I asked, hoping we weren't in danger of losing our air.

"No. We're fine. In fact, with our plan to disable life support to the rest of the ship, we won't notice any difference." Bey said in a considering voice.

"I have inventoried and secured all the supplies. I don't think we'll need anything else from the rest of the ship." I said as I closed the last container.

"Good. I'm going to shut it down now." Bey said seriously and began to shut down all the areas of the ship except the bridge.

"How long until we're ready for the sling-shot?" I asked as I took my seat at the navigation station.

"Just a few minutes, we're about to make contact with the planet's upper atmosphere. I'm going to adjust the engine's inter-mix ratio now." He said and worked on his controls.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked as I watched the big blue planet filling the view screen.

"Yes. Come over here and continue shutting down the parts of the ship we aren't using. I wasn't able to get them all and I need to be on the helm right now." He said seriously.

I moved to the operations station beside him and began to shut down the life support section by section.

"It might get a little bumpy as we skim the atmosphere, but it shouldn't be too bad." Bey said as he worked the controls.

"I'm not worried. I understand what you're doing well enough to know what to expect." I said as I verified the readings from around the ship to see that the individual sections were responding to my commands.

"I'm glad you're here with me Kel. Besides the fact that I probably couldn't pull this off alone, it's going to be nice to have company for the quiet part of this trip." Bey said gently.

"I'm glad too. I haven't talked to anyone for a very long time... I've lost track of the time, I really don't know how long I've been a slave on this ship." I said as I finished reviewing the last system.

"You might want to get into a comfortable position. We're about to use the planet's gravity to accelerate the ship." Bey said seriously.

"I'm ready." I said as I shifted myself and held onto the sides of my chair.

"Three... Two... One..." He said, then I felt the gravity increase, pulling me tightly into the chair.

"Can you reach the controls to turn it off?" I asked with difficulty as I felt the gravity increasing.

"No. It's automatic. That's why I had to make the calculations." He said in a strained voice.

"How... much... longer?" I asked as I saw black specks starting to flicker in my vision.

"three... two... one..." He fought to say, then I felt almost weightless as the ship's artificial gravity took over and stabilized us back to normal.

All of a sudden the lights started to go dim and I looked at Bey with panic.

"It's okay. We're just switching to minimal power." He said in a tired voice.

"So what do we do now?" I asked in nearly a whisper. It seemed wrong to talk normally in the large quiet room.

"I don't know about you, but I've had a long day. How about setting up our bed while I check to see that all the remaining systems are functioning normally."

"Yes master." I said with a smile.

Bey gave me a warning look, then broke into a smile too.

Chapter 8

Four Weeks After Awakening

"It just makes sense for us to get out and do this!" Nicoletti said forcefully.

"Our goal is to get off this station and try to find a way to catch up with Voyager. Staying here and administering a junkyard ties us to this place." Janeway said reasonably.

"We're not going to get off this rock by sitting here and wishing for it. If we take control of the salvage operation of the ship graveyard, we can earn enough of the local currency to eventually buy a ship." Nicoletti said in a pleading tone.

"Paris, what do you think?" Janeway asked desperately.

"I think that her suggestion has it's merits. Our resources aren't unlimited. Even though we can probably survive for a few more months before we have to worry, eventually we will have to face the reality of diminishing supplies and do something to replace them." Paris said seriously.

"Thank you Nicoletti. I have to admit that I never considered running a salvage operation. Would it be possible for you to draw up an organizational plan to give me a better idea of how we might be able to pull it off?" Janeway asked consideringly.

"We'll get right to work on it." Nicoletti said with a note of triumph in her voice.

Janeway nodded, then looked around the group meeting and asked, "Does anyone have any further comments or concerns before we conclude our business?"

Dalby stood and took a deep breath for courage.

"Yes Dalby?" Janeway asked cautiously at Dalby's timid look.

"I was thinking that... well, Cap is about to have a baby and hasn't come up with a name yet. I just thought it might be, I dunno, kinda fun if we was to have a baby naming competition or something." Dalby said shyly.

A murmur spread through the room as Paris buried his head in his hands.

"Who knocked you up Cap? Do I need to get my shotgun?" Gerry asked firmly.

Paris spread his fingers and looked at Gerry with one eye, hoping that when he did, this would all be revealed to be a bad dream.

"Cap?" Gerry asked more insistently.

Paris reluctantly stood and cast a reproachful look at Dalby before saying, "Dalby is right, I have a small maturation tank in my room where my child is growing. I don't plan on giving up my right to name her, but if you want to make suggestions for a name. I'll accept your help."

"Whose baby is it?" Gerry asked again, this time with anger in his voice.

Paris took in a deep breath for courage and said as firmly as he was able, "My daughter is mine and Bey's."

"How'd you manage that?" Carey asked in a confused voice.

"We're on a genetic research station. It wasn't that hard." Paris said with difficulty, having a hard time saying something that was so close to a complete lie.

Janeway stood and said, "If there is no other business, this meeting is adjourned."

Voices started to rise as people gathered in twos and threes to discuss the events of the day.

"Dalby!" Paris said darkly.

"Cap?" Dalby said as she walked to stand before Paris with Gerry at her side.

"Because of our friendship, I'm giving you one chance to explain why you did that." Paris said as he looked Dalby in the eyes.

"Cap, look at these people. The 'new' has worn off and they're starting to get restless. All this thinking about running a junkyard and worrying about running out of supplies is making 'em antsy." Dalby said in thought.

"I've seen it too. If we don't do something soon to improve morale, they're going to start turning on each other and turning on you... they're going stir crazy in here." Gerry said as he casually put an arm around Dalby's shoulders.

Paris thought about the words, then reluctantly admitted, "I've seen it too. But what made you think that making an announcement about my baby would help anything?"

"Because babies are hope. Little Geraldine is going to be our future, no matter if we become junk dealers or actually do find a way off this rock." Dalby said in an imploring voice.

Paris nodded and said, "I agree with you about the future... but not about Geraldine."

"I think we'll keep that one for when we have our own anyway." Gerry said as he snuggled Dalby to his side.

"You two are really serious about each other then?" Paris asked with a smile.

"Dalby is great. Not only is she good company and interesting to talk to, but she also knows how to field strip a generator." Gerry said with a fond glance at Dalby.

"And Gerry is strong enough of a person that he isn't threatened by my own strength. And besides, just look at him... he's fucking gorgeous." Dalby said with undisguised admiration for Gerry.

Paris was assaulted by inspiration and said, "If you really want to give these people something to lift their spirits and give them hope for the future. Why don't you two get married?"

Gerry and Dalby looked at each other with question.

"A big ceremony which includes everyone on the station. Get them involved and let them see just how much you love each other. Maybe before it's done, we can get a few of the other couples hitched." Paris said with a smile.

"What'cha say babe? Wanna do it?" Gerry asked Dalby seriously.

Paris laughed and said, "I'll need to write that down in case I ever have to propose."

"Blow me Paris." Gerry said dryly, then took one of Dalby's hands and got down on one knee.

"Dalby Telfer, would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?" Gerry asked hopefully.

A hush spread over the mess hall as one by one, all the people in attendance realized what was going on.

"Yes, I would be proud to become your wife." Dalby said and tugged on Gerry's hand to bring him to standing.

A cheer rose up from everyone gathered at Dalby's acceptance of the proposal.

"Janeway, will you perform the ceremony?" Dalby asked quickly.

"It would be my honor and privilege." Janeway said with a peaceful smile.

"Paris, will you be my best man?" Gerry asked hopefully.

"You've got it Ger." Paris said warmly.

"Wildman? Where are you girl? I want you to be my maid of honor." Dalby called out over the crowd.

Wildman gave a squeak of delight and ran to Dalby's side to hug her joyfully.

Paris watched with amusement at the sight of everyone gathered around Dalby and Gerry, sharing in their happiness.

* * * * *

"You wanted to see me?" Paris asked as he walked into the Command and Control center of the station.

"Yes, have a seat. I just wanted to thank you for the way you handled the situation with Nicoletti. You didn't shoot her down, but you didn't give an outright endorsement. I'll make a diplomat out of you yet." Janeway said with a smile.

"First a politician and now a diplomat. Before you're done with me, I won't even be able to say 'Good Morning' without a formal disclaimer." Paris said with a smile.

"You're catching on." Janeway said and raised her coffee cup in a toast.

"What's our status?" Paris asked as he looked at the main view screen.

"The same as yesterday and the day before..." Janeway trailed off with a distant look in her eyes.

"What are we going to do?" Paris asked quietly.

"I don't know. We may very well end up being Delta-Quadrant junk dealers if we can't find a way to get home." Janeway said in a defeated tone.

"Maybe this *is* our home." Paris said quietly.

Janeway shook her head and said, "This is where we were created, but this isn't our home. I can't accept that."

"I know. I'm not ready to give up yet. It's just..." Paris trailed off.

"Losing him hurt you. I understand." Janeway said softly.

"I wish I did. Maybe then it would stop hurting." Paris said with anguish in his eyes.

"Someday it will, I promise." Janeway said softly.

"There is an incoming message." Kim said firmly from the communications board.

Janeway and Paris looked at each other in shock, then ran to the console.

"It's a coded message... An older Maquis code." Kim said in thought as she tried to focus on the signal.

"It's a fixed beam signal directed at us. Text only. Can you decode the message?" Paris asked quickly.

"It's repeating... just a moment." Kim said carefully as she worked out the conversion algorithm to decode the message.

"Request... permission... to come... aboard... We come... in peace." Kim said in a distant voice.

"What is the source of that transmission?" Janeway asked firmly.

"Unknown." Kim said and began to adjust the scanning array.

"It's got to be Bey." Paris said with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"Or someone whose met him." Janeway said darkly.

Paris looked at her curiously, then realized what she meant. If Bey were captured, they might have been able to extract information from him, including an old Maquis code.

"I cannot determine the source of the signal." Kim finally said.

"Why not? With a fixed beam transmission you should be able to follow it back to its origin." Janeway said as she turned her attention to the scanner controls.

"Be that as it may. I cannot determine the source of the transmission. There is nothing there." Kim said in a toneless voice.

"Whoever sent this obviously knows where we are. Why don't we just respond to the message?" Paris asked in thought.

Janeway considered the question and finally came to a decision.

"Kim, prepare to transmit. Paris, compose a reply." Janeway said firmly.

"We are aligned to transmit a fixed beam on the same trajectory and frequency." Kim said seriously.

Paris keyed in one of the more recent Maquis encryption codes, then typed, "Please identify. Do you have video capability?"

Janeway looked at the message and nodded her approval.

Paris pressed the button to transmit.

The silence seemed to be deafening in the Command and Control center as the three stood and waited for the response to their message.

Finally a signal beeped on the console.

"We're being hailed." Kim said seriously.

"Put it on the main viewer." Janeway said and stood away from the communications console with Paris at her side.

"Hello Paris." Bey said as his image barely resolved into being.

"Kim, can you clean that up?" Janeway asked seriously.

"Yes, I'm locking onto his frequency." Kim said as she worked the controls.

Paris looked at the image on the screen and noticed that Bey looked like he had lost some weight and not gotten enough sleep, but overall he looked good.

After a long moment of silence, Paris hesitantly said, "Hello Bey. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Paris, Janeway, Kim, I'd like for you to meet someone. This is Kel." Bey said and beckoned someone off screen to come to his side.

Paris' eyes went wide when he saw the thirteen or fourteen year old boy walk to Bey's side.

"Paris, I'm sorry I left like I did, but I didn't really have a choice..." Bey began to say.

"You always have a choice." Paris said in a wounded tone.

Bey nodded and said, "You're right. I could have chosen to stay on the station. But that wouldn't get us any closer to home. I've got us a ship."

Paris, Janeway and Kim looked at each other with surprise.

"A ship?" Janeway asked in confirmation.

"Yes. A long range, fully functional, heavily armed ship." Bey said seriously.

"I still cannot determine the origin of the transmission." Kim said in warning.

"Fix your sensors where you think I should be and I'll reveal myself for a few seconds." Bey said seriously and started pushing buttons on the console before him.

"Three... Two... One..." He counted down, then pressed a final button on his console.

"It is a Kazon long-range light cruiser, bearing 220, mark 4, traveling at 0.32 impulse on a direct course toward us." Kim said firmly.

Bey pushed another button on his console and the lights behind him seemed to dim.

"The ship is running unpowered and is nearly undetectable with this equipment." Kim said speculatively.

"That's the idea. The previous owners of this ship didn't just give it to me. I made quite a show of leaving, it would be best if I didn't advertise the fact that I'm still in this solar system." Bey said sheepishly.

"It sounds like you've had quite an adventure. You'll have to tell us all about it when you arrive." Janeway said in a speculative voice.

"Paris, I realize that I stole from the station and broke your trust. The ship is yours, no strings attached. I accept full responsibility for my actions and I'll accept whatever punishment you decide is appropriate." Bey said seriously.

Paris looked at Janeway with question and received a nod in response.

"Bey, I'm not leader anymore so any decision regarding punishment or guilt isn't mine to make. As far as the matter of trust... we can talk about it when you get here." Paris finished quietly.

"I'm sorry Paris. I didn't think you would lose your position because of me." Bey said with a stricken look.

"I'm the new leader." Janeway said forcefully.

Bey turned his attention to her and straightened his posture slightly.

"Is your offer of a ship, no strings attached still valid?" Janeway asked seriously.

"No Janeway." Bey said immediately.

Janeway looked at him with surprise.

"There is now one string attached." Bey said in thought as he looked at her seriously.

"Which is?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"Which is Kel. I want your guarantee that he won't be held responsible for anything that happened on this ship. I will accept full responsibility for everything that happened here. If you will grant Kel full immunity and amnesty, the ship is yours." Bey said firmly.

"No, you don't have to do that." Kel said in a small voice as he took hold of Bey's arm in a pleading gesture.

"Don't worry Kel, however this turns out. It's going to be fine." Bey said softly.

"I accept your terms." Janeway said forcefully, bringing Bey's attention back to the viewer.

"Thank you Janeway. When we arrive it would be best if you could send a crew over to man the ship. Once they've arrived, Kel and I will shuttle over to you in the Freedom." Bey said seriously.

"Estimated time of arrival?" Janeway asked over her shoulder to Kim.

"Four hours, twenty-two minutes." Kim responded immediately.

"We will have a crew ready to board when you arrive. Anything else?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"No. That's all." Bey said seriously to Janeway, then cast a regretful look at Paris.

"Janeway out."

"Bey out." Bey said and discontinued the transmission.

* * * * *

"At least he's alive." Janeway said quietly.

"But he's found someone else." Paris said in a devastated whisper as tears filled his eyes.

"That boy? I think you need to shift your thought processes back up to your brain for a few minutes and think about what you've just seen." Janeway said seriously.

"What's that?" Paris asked as he glanced at her hopefully.

"Bey trusts you. He was willing to put the fate of his little friend into your hands without question. The boy looks at Bey with love and admiration. But Bey's only actions toward the boy were of responsibility and devotion, like a parent or an older brother." Janeway said seriously.

"I don't know what to do." Paris said helplessly.

"Do nothing. At least not until you've had a chance to talk with Bey and are completely sure where you stand with each other. The worst thing you could do right now is make assumptions or decisions based on all the speculation and worry of the past few weeks."

Paris nodded in thought and said, "Thank you Janeway. I know that he's alive and on his way back to us. I'll just focus on that for right now."

"And the fact that he is bringing us a ship." Janeway said with a smile.

"Yeah. That too." Paris said happily.

After a moment to see that Paris was feeling better, Janeway walked to the communications console.

"All hands." Janeway said then waited for the command to be processed.

"Come to the mess hall for a group meeting immediately. Janeway out." Janeway said forcefully, then turned to look at Paris with question.

Paris nodded, straightened his posture and prepared himself emotionally for the meeting.

* * * * *

"Everyone, we have some news." Janeway said to the chattering group who were speculating on the purpose of the meeting.

Silence fell over the room in anticipation of the announcement.

"We just received a transmission from Bey. He's come into possession of a ship and will be arriving in four hours to deliver it to us." Janeway said with a note of excitement creeping into her voice.

"No shit?" Dalby squeaked, then put her hands over her mouth in embarrassment.

A chuckle traveled through the room at her statement.

"It appears that Paris' trust in Bey was well placed. I don't have all the details of his time away, but you can't argue with the results." Janeway said happily.

"So he's just... giving it to us?" Gerry asked cautiously from Dalby's side.

"Yes. He suggested that we send a crew over to take possession of the ship when he arrives. Gerry, Nicoletti, Carey and Kim, prepare whatever equipment you think you might need and load it on the Independence. Assess the status of weapons, atmospheric control, engineering and the overall condition of the ship. Kim will be in command of the mission." Janeway said firmly.

After a pause for the murmurs to subside, Janeway continued, "The rest of you need to evaluate your areas and make plans to evacuate the station. We need to use military efficiency in this operation."

"Oxymoron." Paris muttered from her side.

Janeway cast him a disapproving glance, then broke into a smile.

"That's it. You have four hours to prepare." Janeway said happily.

Everyone seemed to break into chatter at once as the meeting broke up.

Chapter 9

Approximately four hours later...

The ship fired it's reverse thrusters and came to a stop along side the asteroid.

The Independence slowly made it's way to the ship and was received in the hanger bay by Bey and Kel.

"Anything we need to know?" Gerry asked cautiously as he got out of the shuttle and walked to stand before Bey.

"Only that the non-essential parts of the ship have been shut down to conserve energy. The hanger bay, engineering, the bridge and the main hallways are the only parts of the ship that currently have an atmosphere." Bey said seriously.

Gerry looked down for a second and said, "I've said some pretty bad things about you the past few weeks. I'm glad I was wrong."

"I gave you good reason. If your team will clear the hanger bay, I need to get to the station and face the music." Bey said quietly.

"Good luck... and thanks for bringing us a ship." Gerry said shyly.

"I'm sure that if you thought of it first, you would have done the same thing." Bey said with a smile.

Gerry looked at Bey consideringly and said, "I might have. Go on. We're just going to explore."

Bey nodded and motioned for Kel to walk with him to the shuttle.

As soon as the team were safely out of the room, Bey initiated the automated sequence to depressurize the hanger bay and opened the outer door again.

* * * * *

Once the shuttle bay was repressurized, Bey and Kel hesitantly exited the shuttle to find Paris and Janeway waiting on them.

"Paris..." Bey said in a frightened voice.

"Bey, I need to speak with you for a minute." Janeway said firmly.

Bey reluctantly looked away from Paris to Janeway and nodded.

Janeway motioned for him to follow and led Bey to the other side of the room.

Kel looked at Paris with an appraising eye, then quietly said, "He really loves you a lot."

Paris looked at the boy with question, then responded, "I love him too."

"Good. Bey is the best person that I've ever known and if you are the one who can make him happy, then I want him to be with you." The boy said firmly.

Paris looked at Kel curiously, then glanced at Bey talking to Janeway on the other side of the room.

"But if you can't forgive him or help him to forgive himself, then I will have him for my mate and dedicate the rest of my life to bringing him happiness." Kel said firmly.

Paris looked back at the young teenager with surprise.

"You love him?" Paris asked hesitantly.

Kel considered the question before answering, "Yes."

"Does he love you?" Paris asked, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

"I believe he does, but not as he loves you. He will always love you first and best. However, if you cannot work past your difficulties, I will do my best to provide whatever comfort I can for him and he may eventually come to love me in a romantic way." Kel said in thought.

"He's lucky to have someone so devoted to him." Paris said distantly as he glanced at Bey again.

"He is deserving of my devotion, and yours... are you deserving of his?" Kel asked in a challenging voice.

Paris thought about the question as he watched Janeway and Bey carefully.

"He endangered your relationship for one reason." Kel said, not ready to let it lie.

Paris glanced at Kel with question.

"To provide you and the rest of his family a way home. He felt it was worth the risk to his life and his future happiness with you to give all of you this gift." Kel said firmly.

"If we do work it out between us... what will you do?" Paris asked quietly.

"Rejoice because someone who I admire and respect has found true happiness." Kel said with certainty.

Paris nodded, then looked back to Janeway and Bey.

* * * * *

"Have you decided my punishment?" Bey asked quietly as he stood before Janeway.

"Yes. Stand there and be quiet for a minute while I tell you what's been going on since you left." Janeway said firmly.

Bey looked at her in surprise but didn't say a word.

"Paris never stopped believing in you for even a minute since you left. Other people on the station talked about it being part of your Cardassian nature to betray us and other such nonsense, but Paris consistently defended your name." Janeway said firmly.

Bey nodded hesitantly, not quite understanding why she was telling him this.

"He loves you. He trusts you. He never stopped believing in you. He's scared to death that you've stopped loving him and fallen for that boy." Janeway said and glanced at Kel talking with Paris.

"His name is Kel." Bey said absently, then realized that he was supposed to remain silent.

"Fine. He feels threatened by Kel. You need to spell it out for him in no uncertain terms what you feel for him so he can move on... with or without you." Janeway said firmly.

Bey nodded in thought.

"That's all I've got to say." Janeway said seriously.

"That's it? That's my punishment?" Bey asked hesitantly.

"Oh, no that's just my advice to you." Janeway said with a smile, then tapped her communicator.

"Computer: Begin recording official log." Janeway said seriously.

After the three second delay, she said, "The following is testimony and my ruling in the case against Bey."

Then she looked him in the eyes and asked, "Are you going to steal anymore shuttles or duck out in the middle of the night again?"

"No. I won't. I promise." Bey said immediately.

"Well, the crimes you've committed are stealing a shuttle... which you brought back. You abandoned your post... but you came back of your own free will. You assaulted the person of Carey... but I think the Kazon ship covers that one pretty well. So my judgment in regards to your punishment is as follows: you are to be confined to your cabin for a period of three months..." Janeway said seriously.

Bey looked at her and nodded with resignation.

"That sentence will be suspended in favor of probation for a term of one year. If you violate our rules or break the promise you just made to me, then your three month sentence will be reinstated in addition to whatever punishment is appropriate for the new infraction. Do you understand my ruling?" Janeway asked forcefully.

"Yes. Thank you Janeway." Bey said with surprise.

"Computer: End recording." Janeway said, then looked at Bey consideringly.

Bey looked back at her, trying to understand what she was looking at.

"I really hope you two can work this out. The damage done to your relationship with Paris is more punishment than anything I could do to you." Janeway said in a softer voice.

"Thank you for your advice Janeway... I hope I don't screw this up." Bey said and looked at Paris and Kel again.

"Even if you do. Don't give up. Trust him and the love you share. I do." Janeway said gently, then motioned for Bey to accompany her back to Paris and Kel.

* * * * *

"So what do we do now? A formal hearing?" Paris asked as Janeway and Bey approached.

"No. We've already had the trial, deliberations, verdict and sentencing. This leader thing is a lot faster than going through the JAG office." Janeway said with a smile.

"What was the result?" Paris asked Bey quietly.

"A year probation with a suspended sentence." Bey said seriously.

"What does that mean?" Kel asked curiously, worried for Bey.

"It just means that if I get into any trouble in the next year, then I'll be confined to my quarters for three months." Bey said gently.

Kel hugged Bey with happiness and said, "The Kazons would have flogged you in the town square and left you hanging in the sun to die."

"They still might if they ever find out what I did." Bey said as he returned the hug.

"Thanks to the stealthy way you arrived, I doubt that the Kazons will get the chance. And after we've outfitted the ship with Federation and Maquis technology, there won't be a Kazon ship who can keep up with us." Janeway said with a smile.

Kel hugged Bey tightly again with happiness and said, "I like your people."

"So do I." Bey said with a gentle smile at Janeway and Paris.

* * * * *

"Well, dinner will be in about thirty minutes. Would you three like to freshen up and I'll see you there?" Janeway asked casually.

"Um, yeah. Sounds good." Paris said as he glanced at Bey and Kel.

Janeway nodded and walked away.

"Would you like for me to leave you alone so you can talk?" Kel asked as he followed the silent pair through the hallways of the station.

"Actually, if Paris doesn't mind, I'd like for you to be there for the first part of our talk." Bey said with a cautious look at Paris.

"That's fine." Paris said in a distracted voice.

As Bey walked to the door of the cabin he had shared with Paris, he stopped at the feeling of a hand on his arm, "There's something that I need to tell you, but I'm not sure how..."

Panic shown in Bey's eyes as he stopped and turned to look at Paris.

"Some things happened while you were gone..." Paris began to say, but couldn't think of the right way to phrase it.

Kel went to Bey's side and hugged him tightly, offering support.

Bey absently put an arm around Kel's shoulders as he continued to watch Paris.

"You remember that I told you about that girl I... um..."

"Fucked?" Bey said abruptly.

"Yeah. That." Paris said hesitantly.

Bey nodded for Paris to continue.

"She got pregnant." Paris said in a mumble.

"Is she in there?" Bey asked, and glanced at the cabin door.

"No. No. I was telling the truth, it was a one time thing and it will never happen again. The only thing is... she didn't want to keep the baby..." Paris trailed off in a pained voice.

"And?" Bey said, then looked down at Kel who was holding him tightly.

"She wanted to abort the fetus. I talked to her and she agreed to let me have it on the condition that I removed her genetic material." Paris said quickly.

"And?" Bey said again and gave Kel a gentle hug.

"And I replaced her genetic material with yours." Paris said in a rush.

Silence fell over the hallway for a long moment as Bey digested the statement.

"So what's in the cabin that you're afraid to show me?" Bey asked cautiously.

"Our daughter." Paris said in a small voice, bracing himself for an explosion.

"Our daughter." Bey said in an emotionless voice.

"Yes. Genetically she is half you and half me." Paris said cautiously.

Bey nodded in thought.

"Do you want to see her?" Paris asked carefully.

"Not yet. I've been thinking about something for a couple days, but I didn't know how I was going to bring it up." Bey said in thought.

"What's that?" Paris asked cautiously.

"Well, I thought that if we could work everything out between us..." Bey trailed off.

Paris nodded.

"And if you and Kel would agree to it..." Bey trailed off again.

Paris looked at Bey with question and concern about what his suggestion was going to be.

"That we could adopt Kel and make him our son." Bey finally said and looked up to see Paris' reaction.

"Really?" Kel asked as he pulled back from Bey's chest.

Bey looked down at Kel and nodded.

Paris looked at Bey and Kel, then glanced at the cabin door before saying, "We'd better work things out, because it looks like we have a family who needs us."

Bey smiled with relief and moved forward to pull Paris into a hug.

A moment later Paris noticed that Kel was standing a few feet away, watching them.

"Come on Kel, you're part of this too." Paris said and held out an arm to invite Kel into the hug.

"Really?" Kel asked hesitantly, moving a fraction of an inch closer.

"Kel, Bey loves me enough to want to give me a son. I love him enough to want to give him a daughter. We're going to be fine and we both want you as our son. What do you say? Could you stand to have two fathers that are just a few years older than you?" Paris asked with a smile.

Kel looked at the pair and timidly said, "I think I'm still less than a year old. Ocampan's age differently than most other humanoids."

Bey and Paris looked at each other for an instant, then Paris said, "I guess since you really couldn't consider us 'born' until the maturation chambers opened, Bey and I are technically a month old. We're just going by physical development."

Kel looked at Bey with question and received a nod in return.

Kel giggled and said, "Then maybe I should adopt you. I'm older than both of you."

Paris and Bey laughed at the statement, then Paris finally said, "However you want to do it 'Old Man', just as long as we end up as a family."

Finally, the last of Kel's reservations gave way and he hurried into the offered hug.

* * * * *

"This is our little angel." Paris said as he pointed out the fetus in the tank.

"That little thing is your daughter?" Kel asked cautiously from a few feet away.

"That's right. She'll be ready to be born in about three weeks." Paris said happily.

"Have you thought of a name for her?" Bey asked as he looked lovingly into the tank.

"No. I've had quite a few suggestions but... so far I haven't heard any that I really like." Paris said and noticed Kel watching from a distance.

"Come over here Kel and look at your sister." Paris said warmly.

"My sister?" Kel said with astonishment as he stepped closer to the tank to get a good look at her.

"Angel, I'd like for you to meet your brother Kel." Paris said softly to the tank.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Angel." Kel said formally.

Bey and Paris looked at each other and shared a smile.

"I guess that's settled." Paris finally said and gently draped one arm across Kel's shoulders. Bey did the same from Kel's other side as the family watched their youngest member floating in the tank.

* * * * *

"Would you like for me to give you time alone now?" Kel asked hesitantly.

"I don't think I have anything to say that I can't say in front of you Kel... what about you?" Paris asked as he glanced at Bey.

Bey considered for a moment and said, "No. It's fine with me if you stay."

Kel looked at the two older boys cautiously, then nodded.

"Bey, I think I understand why you left and I love you for it. If there's anything you need to talk about, I'll be happy to discuss it with you, but as far as I'm concerned. I loved you yesterday, I love you today and I'll love you tomorrow." Paris said simply.

Bey smiled at the words and said, "In the past few days I'd worked out about a hundred different things I wanted to say to you to convince you to take me back... I guess that was a lot of worry for nothing. I never stopped loving you for an instant. I regret that I had to hurt you to help us all, but... as long as you're willing to forgive me, I'm willing to forgive myself."

"Anything you want to add Kel?" Paris asked as he pulled Bey into a hug.

"Only that I am grateful to be accepted into your family." Kel said and joined the hug.

"It's just about time for dinner. Let's get down there before all the good stuff is taken." Paris said with a smile.

Bey smiled as he moved to Kel's other side.

Paris and Bey each had one arm around Kel's shoulders as they started walking toward the door.

When they reached it Bey took a step back as Paris stepped forward so they could get their little formation out into the hallway without breaking it up.

* * * * *

Bey, Kel and Paris walked into the mess hall with laughter as they once again tried to navigate a doorway without letting go of each other.

"I thought Janeway said it was dinner time?" Bey asked cautiously.

"SURPRISE!!!" chorused as people stood from behind tables and started pouring out of the kitchen.

Kel clutched tightly to Paris and Bey at his sides.

Paris leaned down and whispered, "It's an Earth tradition to surprise someone with a celebration. This is for Bey."

Kel glanced around the room, then looked up at Paris with a happy smile.

"Vorik and Chell have been working for hours to make something special to commemorate this occasion." Janeway announced, then turned her attention to the kitchen doorway.

Chell walked out of the kitchen carrying a three layer cake with creamy white icing.

Bey, Kel and Paris were still holding on to each other and walked as one to look at the cake.

'Thank You Bey' was written in blue icing across the top of the cake.

Bey had tears in his eyes and hugged Kel tightly to his side. Then on impulse, he leaned over and gave Paris a quick kiss.

"Does this mean you two worked everything out?" Janeway asked with a smile.

"Yes. Everything is fine." Bey said with a grand smile.

"In fact, I can only think of two things that could make it better." Paris said happily.

Bey and Kel looked at Paris with question.

"How is that?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"If here in front of everyone, Bey would consent to be my husband and Kel would consent to be our son." Paris said as he looked at them in turn.

"Yes." Bey whispered immediately.

Kel nodded enthusiastically.

"Janeway. Since we don't have a book of laws or ceremonies to follow, could you just declare us a family right now? I want Angel and Kel to have their parents right away and besides, we've already got a wedding cake." Paris said with a smile.

Janeway raised her hands to indicate silence, then tapped her communicator and said, "Computer: Begin recording official log."

After the requisite three second delay, she continued, "This is the matter of the marriage of Bey and Paris Chakotay and the related matter of Kel's adoption to the aforementioned Bey and Paris Chakotay."

"Paris Chakotay, do you take Bey to be your husband?" She asked in a reverent tone.

"I do." Paris said as he took hold of Bey's hand and squeezed it.

"Bey, do you take Paris Chakotay to be your husband?" She asked as she turned her gaze on him.

"I do." Bey said joyfully.

"Kel, do you wish to be the child of Bey and Paris Chakotay?" Janeway asked with a gentle smile at Kel.

"Yes, I do." Kel said with excitement.

"Bey and Paris Chakotay, do you wish for Kel to be your child?" Janeway asked as her smile grew.

"We do." Paris and Bey chorused in unison.

"Then by the power vested in me by... well, by all of you. I pronounce that Bey and Paris Chakotay are married, and that Kel is their child. I further decree that henceforth their official names will be Bey Chakotay, Paris Chakotay and Kel Chakotay." Janeway said happily.

Bey, Paris and Kel pulled each other into a tight three-way hug.

"Computer: Stop recording." Janeway said more quietly and watched.

Suddenly Kel pulled out of the hug and asked, "What about Angel? Don't we have to do something to make her part of the family?"

Paris and Bey pulled him back into the hug as Paris said, "No son. In about three weeks she will have matured enough to be declared 'born' and at that time she will officially be given her name, 'Angel Chakotay' and be recognized as your sister."

Before any of the three knew what had happened, everyone in the mess hall seemed to descend on them to offer hugs of congratulations.

Six Weeks After Awakening - The Ship's Hanger Bay

"Do we get to stay on the ship tonight?" Kel asked hopefully as he watched his parents carefully transferring the maturation tank to a cart.

"Yes, that's why we're bringing Angel over today." Bey said quietly as he checked to make sure that the tank was operating properly.

"What was that thing that Aunt Janeway said to you about me? You said we could talk about it later... is it later enough?" Kel asked hopefully.

Bey gave Paris an amused smile and received a nod and smile in reply.

"I tell you what Old Man. When we get Angel settled in our cabin, we'll sit down and talk to you about it. Okay?" Bey asked with a smile.

"Okay. Come on. Can I pull the cart?" Kel asked with excitement.

"You can help me pull the cart while your father walks along side. But we have to move slowly. We don't want to slosh your sister." Bey said as he moved to the front of the cart.

Kel nodded firmly and took his spot beside Bey.

"Let's go guys. Nice and slow." Paris said as he watched the tank carefully.

* * * * *

"Wow. This is really nice, but where's the bed?" Kel asked as they entered the room.

"While you've been helping your Aunt Janeway and Uncle Carey in engineering, we've been working on making the crew cabins a little more comfortable. Our bedroom is right through that door." Paris said and pointed, then turned his attention back to the tank.

Kel rushed to the door and opened it quickly.

"You see that empty spot just inside the door. That's for Angel's tank." Bey said as he guided the cart carefully across the room and toward the bedroom door.

"We've got a really big bed." Kel said happily and jumped on the bed to 'test it out'.

Bey and Paris shared a look. Paris motioned for Bey to 'go ahead' as he squatted down beside the tank to check on their daughter.

"Kel, come with me." Bey said in a serious voice.

Kel looked at Bey curiously, sensing that something was wrong.

"We've enjoyed having you in our cabin on the station..." Bey began to say.

"I'm not going to live with you?" Kel asked in panic.

"Shhh. It's not that. Come here." Bey said more quietly and opened his arms to Kel.

Kel hurried into Bey's arms and hugged him tightly.

Bey cautiously moved them out of the bedroom and into the living room.

"You see those two doors over there? One is your bedroom and the other is Angel's." Bey said as he held onto Kel tightly.

"But... I like sleeping with you." Kel said in a small voice.

"I like you sleeping with us too. But Paris is my husband and sometimes we need to be alone together." Bey said quietly.

Kel suddenly understood what he meant and said, "I seen all that sex an stuff before. I even done that stuff... a lot."

"I know. But that was wrong. Now that you're our son, you don't ever have to see or do that stuff again unless you want to." Bey said as he coaxed Kel to his bedroom.

"But... I don't want to be alone. You can do sex stuff to me if you don't make me be alone." Kel said desperately.

Bey leaned down and kissed Kel on the top of the head and said, "Paris and I will NEVER do sex stuff with you. That's something we will only ever do with each other. But if you're feeling alone, all you have to do is ask us if you can come in and wait for us to say it's okay. Then you can come in and spend time with us and even sleep with us if you want to."

Kel nodded hesitantly.

"But if you want to be alone for a little while, this is your room." Bey said and pressed the door release.

The door slid open to reveal a nice little bedroom, very much like one of the rooms back on the station.

"This is MY room?" Kel asked cautiously.

"That's right. You can keep your clothes and things in here and no one will come in here without your permission." Bey said gently.

Kel released his grip on Bey and ventured into the room to explore it.

"But if I start to feel alone I can come in your room?" Kel asked cautiously.

"As long as you ask first." Bey said quietly.

Kel looked at Bey speculatively.

Bey stepped back and the door closed.

Kel felt a moment of panic, then heard Bey's voice come over the speaker.

'Kel, can I come in?' Bey asked gently.

"Yes." Kel called into the air.

The door slid open and Bey walked in again.

"That's all there is to it. This is part of being a family. We're going to give you all the love you could possibly want, but we also want for you to be able to be independent sometimes and not have to be in our company every minute of the day." Bey said carefully.

"You don't want me around?" Kel asked with a stricken look.

"Of course we want you around. That's why you're our son. But we also want what's best for you... just give it a try. If you're really not ready to be alone, we'll work it out... just give us some time for the two of us every now and then. We are married after all." Bey finished with a grin.

"Okay Dad. I'm sorry I was so whiney. I just felt like you were trying to get rid of me." Kel said in a small voice.

"Never. Hey, if we wanted to get rid of you, why would we have built you your own room?" Bey asked frankly.

"Yeah." Kel said quietly, then hurried to Bey for a hug.

"I'm ready for some help." Paris said from the opposite side of the room.

"Come on Old Man. We need for you to keep the tubes from getting tangled and mashed when we move your sister's tank." Bey said as he shifted Kel to walk beside him.

Kel put an arm around Bey's waist and smiled at the feeling of being included and needed to help his sister.

* * * * *

"The braces are fully in place. Even if we go on one of your 'bumpy' rides like Kel described, Angel's tank isn't going to move." Paris said with accomplishment.

"The primary power is connected and the back-up power is on standby." Bey said as he moved from his position at the side of the tank.

"I guess we're ready for that talk now. What do you think Kel? Do you still want to know what Aunt Janeway was talking to us about this morning?" Paris asked with a knowing smile.

"Yeah." Kel answered immediately.

Paris led his husband and son into the living room, then took a seat on the couch.

Bey snuggled into his right side as Kel snuggled into his left.

"The station had a ton of information on Ocampan physiology. Your Aunt Janeway did some research and found a way to slow down your natural life-cycle." Paris said in thought.

"What does that mean?" Kel asked cautiously.

"She thinks she can slow down your aging so you'll live as long as we do." Bey paraphrased.

"She can do that?" Kel asked curiously.

"Probably. what she's talking about doing is something that is pretty illegal back in the Alpha quadrant." Paris said in thought.

"Why?" Kel asked in confusion.

"To manipulate genetics to correct a disorder is one thing. But to splice genetics to alter the natural state of a being is considered to be wrong." Paris tried to explain.

"Why?" Kel asked again.

"Are you sure you're not *two* years old?" Paris asked with a chuckle.

Kel turned to look at Paris with question.

"Sorry, Human children go through a phase at about two years old when all they seem to do is ask 'why?'. To answer your question, do you think it would be wrong if someone changed you to have wings like a bird or the tail of a monkey?" Paris asked carefully.

Kel laughed at the mental image that the question caused to form in his mind.

"You could argue that all those things are improvements, so why not make those changes?" Paris continued.

"Because then I wouldn't be like a person anymore. I'd be like a thing, something you made in a lab." Kel said, becoming more serious.

"That's why people think it's wrong. And that's the decision we have to make. If we change your natural lifespan to match ours, are we correcting an error or are we making you into something you weren't intended to be?" Bey said frankly.

Kel thought about the question for a minute, then said, "If the Ocampo didn't throw me out, then I'd still be one of them and I could live with them and die with them. But they did throw me out and now I'm part of your family. So if you can fix me so I'm like you, then you're just making me more a part of your family."

Bey and Paris shared a smile before Paris quietly said, "That's some very adult reasoning son. We'll tell Aunt Janeway that you want to go through with the treatment."

"Do I still get to have the wings and the tail?" Kel asked with a teasing smile.

"I think that might be pushing it." Bey said as he tried to contain his laughter.

Eight Weeks After Awakening - Command and Control

"We are gathered here today to formally dedicate our ship before her maiden voyage." Janeway said dramatically.

"All of you have been very helpful in suggesting names for our ship, although the petition was a bit much." Janeway said and arched an eyebrow at Nicoletti.

"I still think we should call it 'The Gilligan'." Nicoletti said firmly.

"In the interest of fairness, I left the decision to Bey who brought us... the basic structure of the ship that is now before us." Janeway said and gestured to Bey to stand before the group.

Bey carefully transferred his infant daughter into the arms of his husband then moved to Janeway's side.

"Well, it was a tough decision and I ended up having to ask my husband and son for help. When it came time for the final choice, only one name stood out above all the others. Fellow crewmembers, I give you, 'The Amalgam'." Bey said and pressed the button to activate the main view screen.

There was some polite clapping as people looked to each other with confusion.

Kim stepped forward and said, "An amalgam is a unique creation that is formed from the incorporation of two or more dissimilar component parts. The ship herself is an amalgam of the various parts salvaged from the ship graveyard. Further, we, her crew are each a hybrid, or amalgam."

A murmur went through the gathering, but one voice could be heard above all the others.

"I still prefer 'The Gilligan'."

Part 2: The Return

Chapter 10

"I think we have everything." Janeway said seriously as she looked around the cargo bay.

"I can't imagine anything else we could salvage from the station. Dalby actually brought the stasis units..." Paris said as he looked at the neatly packed units.

"I was originally against her bringing them, but she made a valid point about us not knowing what we'll be facing. Although the prospect of us becoming a sleeper ship is abhorrent to me, it would be foolish to throw away what someday might be our only option for survival." Janeway said as she started walking toward the door.

"Are you ready to give the pre-launch 'pep talk'?" Paris asked in a teasing voice.

"Yes. As far as I can tell, that's all that's left to do. The last of the station's systems have been integrated into the ship and everyone seems to be settled in. Now we just have to jump out of the nest and see if we can fly." Janeway said with a note of apprehension in her voice.

"Ready when you are." Paris said, trying to hide his own insecurity.

* * * * *

Janeway and Paris walked into the new ship's galley to find a snack table set up and people milling around.

They made their way to the front of the room and Janeway raised her hands to prompt people to quiet.

"Thank you all for coming. I'll try to make this short and sweet." Janeway said pleasantly.

"Short maybe." A voice muttered from the crowd.

Janeway flashed Carey a scorching look that could peel the paint off the newly painted bulkheads.

"We are going to start the ship's clock the moment we launch. That will be zero-hundred hours. We will be operating on a twenty hour day which will

be divided into two ten hour shifts." Paris said quickly, trying to minimize the impact of Carey's comment.

Janeway reluctantly diverted her glare from Carey and said, "The schedule and duty assignments are posted on the ship's computer. Make whatever final preparations you need to and report to your duty stations. We are scheduled to depart in one hour."

A murmur of excitement flooded through the room.

In a less formal voice, Janeway continued, "I would like to recognize a few of you who have made contributions to bring us to this day. Of course I'd like to recognize Bey who brought us the ship to begin with."

A round of applause went around the room as Bey held Angel in his arms.

"Next I'd like to recognize the contributions of Dalby and Chell who spent day after day scavenging the ship graveyard and considering the possible use of every single piece of scrap they encountered. You provided the materials to transform the Kazon ship Bey brought us into a vessel worthy of Starfleet."

Another round of applause sounded as a few people near to Dalby and Chell patted them on the back.

"I would also like to recognize Kim and Nicoletti for their monumental feat of incorporating the station's central computer into the ship... honestly, I didn't think it could be done." Janeway finished with a smile.

Applause sounded again.

"Finally I'd just like to say that each and every one of you made this day possible. Every person on this ship worked impossibly long hours and made sacrifices to bring us here. To commemorate this occasion I would like to unveil the first of what I hope will one day be many pictures to illustrate our journey." Janeway said and pulled the cloth that was covering a picture on the wall.

There was a moment of silence, then clapping broke out as everyone looked at the picture of Kel curled into a ball, sound asleep in the floor beside the warp core.

Paris looked over to find Kel hiding his face against Bey's chest.

* * * * *

"Carey, are your engines up to the challenge of getting us underway?" Janeway called into the comm unit.

"Yes *SIR!*" Carey answered immediately.

"We'll see." Janeway said irritably, then turned to Paris and said, "Plot a course, heading 45 degrees mark 220. Ahead 36,000 kilometers. Thirty percent Z arc."

"The Z corridor?" Paris asked as he programmed the coordinates.

"Traveling under the planetary orbital plane would seem to be the path of least resistance." Janeway said seriously.

"Course plotted." Paris said professionally.

"Ahead three quarter impulse." Janeway said firmly.

Paris reluctantly reached up to activate the control to set the new ship in motion for the first time.

"Kim, continuous scans." Janeway said as she surveyed the space in front of them.

"Aye captain." Kim said tonelessly.

"When we've reached the Z corridor coordinates, set course for Sector 001 and engage at warp 3." Janeway said as she looked over the ship's status board for any signs of a problem.

"Already laid in." Paris said with a small smile of accomplishment.

"Captain, I'm detecting three Kazon light cruisers moving to intercept." Kim said in concentration.

"Tactical analysis?" Janeway asked immediately.

After a moment of studying the scanners, Kim said, "Assuming that our shields maintain their integrity, I would speculate that we could engage them in combat with a 68% chance of survival."

"That's a pretty big assumption on our maiden voyage. And I don't like those odds. Can we outrun them?" Janeway asked as she adjusted the main viewer to a reverse angle.

"Once we reach the Z corridor coordinates and can achieve warp, yes." Kim said seriously.

"Captain, we're being hailed." Bey said from his station.

"On screen." Janeway said firmly as she stood.

After a moment of silence, the Kazon captain finally said, "*Alien interlopers, you have stolen a Kazon ship and murdered her crew. I claim your ship for the Kazon Nistrum. Surrender now and I will see that your deaths are swift.*"

Janeway let a small Klingon growl escape as she said, "We have no dispute with you. Allow us to leave and it won't be necessary for us to destroy you."

"The lead Kazon ship is powering their weapons." Kim said in a neutral tone.

"Bey, sound battle stations." Janeway said as she took her seat.

"Battle stations. All hands, report to battle stations." Bey said firmly into his comm panel.

"I have encountered your kind once before. You seem to have a fondness for the weak and helpless creatures of this system. If you do not surrender immediately, I will execute one Ocampan for each minute that you remain in motion." The Kazon captain said arrogantly.

To prove his point, he pulled a struggling Ocampan girl into view with one hand, then took firm hold of her head and snapped her neck.

"You have one minute to surrender." The Kazon captain said with a note of triumph in his voice as he tossed the lifeless body aside.

"Paris, stop all forward momentum. Bey, you know what to do." Janeway said without emotion.

Bey nodded, then said into the comm, "Kel, emergency plan Evac 3."

* * * * *

Kel heard the call to battle stations and immediately put his sister into her baby carrier.

"Don't worry Angel, everything is going to be fine." He said as he pulled the backpack carrier onto his back.

Kel ran as fast as he could to get to the small store room that they had converted into an improvised transporter room.

His Uncle Carey and Aunt Dalby had both shown him how to operate the controls of the transporter, but he had never actually done it before.

Kel knew that when everyone was called to battle stations, there was no one else who could do it. If someone needed rescued, he was the only one who could possibly help.

"*Kel, Emergency Plan Evac 3.*" Sounded over the comm as he was bringing the controls to life.

"I'm already working on it. I'll call you when I'm ready." Kel said quickly as he started scanning the first ship for the distinctive signature of Ocampan life signs.

* * * * *

"We only have one minute. Make it count." Bey said in an urging tone to his son, trying not to sound harsh.

Laughter could be heard from the Kazon captain when he saw that the *Amalgam* had stopped moving.

"*You aliens are such pitiful creatures, willing to sacrifice yourselves to protect the lives of these useless slaves.*" The Kazon captain said with delight.

"We cherish life and believe that all people, regardless of species, have the right to live and grow." Janeway said slowly as she watched the progress of the three Kazon ships.

Paris looked at Janeway with question, waiting for her command.

Janeway muted the comm for a moment and said, "Shields, weapons and engines. Disable, don't destroy."

Paris nodded and began to target the appropriate areas.

"*Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded.*" The Kazon captain said triumphantly as his ship finally came nose to nose with the *Amalgam*.

"I think not. We cherish all life, but in your case I'm willing to make an exception." Janeway said coldly, then turned to Paris and said, "Fire."

"Bey, take out their shields." Paris said quickly.

"Firing EMP pulse cannons." Bey said and fired on the coordinates that Paris had programmed.

'Whoomp, whoomp, whoomp.' Sounded through the ship as the balls of electromagnetic plasma fired and impacted the shields of each of the three ships in turn.

"Kel, are you ready?" Bey asked quickly into the comm.

"*Almost... yes. I'm ready.*" Kel said in concentration.

"Energize." Janeway commanded.

* * * * *

Kel had tentative transporter locks on all the Ocampan life signs on all three ships. As soon as Janeway gave the order, he pressed the activation button to begin transport.

When the first three were confirmed to be fully locked, Kel isolated the transporter patterns, then began to transfer the matter stream by pulling the three sliders steadily downward.

Kel carefully watched the transport chamber, which just three weeks before had been a storage area for cleaning supplies.

He could hardly believe his eyes when greenish blue electrical sparkles appeared over all three transporter pads.

As he pulled the sliders further, the sparkling became more concentrated and he could see three shapes forming, as if by magic.

Kel glanced down at his control console to see that everything was operating correctly while he continued to pull the sliders the last few centimeters to complete the transport.

The three Ocampan looked around in terror and wonder at their new surroundings.

"Please move over here so I can get the others." Kel said gently, not wanting to startle them unnecessarily.

All three looked at him, as if trying to decide if he were real or not.

"I don't have time to explain things right now. Please come over here." Kel said in a more imploring voice.

The youngest of the three, a small girl, started to take a step, then stopped and went back to her original position.

"STAND THERE! NOW! OR I WILL BEAT YOU!" Kel screamed in Kazon as he pointed to a spot beside his control console.

All three immediately scrambled to stand by the wall where he had indicated.

Kel checked to see that the transporter was locked onto the next three and began the next transport.

* * * * *

"Kim, take out their weapons." Paris said quickly.

"Firing phasers." Kim said calmly and methodically worked to disable the weapons of all three ships.

"Paris, evasive maneuver Voyager-beta." Janeway said quickly.

"*What? Where did they?... Fire! Fire!*" The Kazon captain screamed at his crew.

"Evasive pattern Voyager-beta. Firing disruptors." Paris said seriously and began firing to disable the opposing ship's engines.

The Kazon ships moved faster than expected and were able to evade the worst of the weapon's fire.

"*You caught me off guard, but I'll hunt you to the ends of the universe and make you my own personal slave you alien bitch!*" The Kazon captain screamed at the viewer.

"Oh really? You think I'm a bitch? Let's see how much of a bitch I can really be, shall we?" Janeway said with her Klingon growl more pronounced.

"*You'll beg for death before I'm through with you.*" The Kazon captain snarled at Janeway, then turned to his side and said, "*Dispatch all fighters and destroy that junk pile!*"

"*Evac 3 complete.*" Kel said quickly over the comm.

"That's all I needed to hear. Fire all weapons." Janeway said in a low voice.

* * * * *

Kel looked at the eight frightened people gathered into a cluster against the wall and tried to think about what he should do.

A whimpering cry broke him out of his indecision and he automatically took off the backpack and squatted down to attend to his sister.

"Shhh Angel, everything is fine." Kel whispered as he took her out of the carrier and cradled her to his chest.

When Kel looked up, he saw eight pairs of eyes looking at him with wonder.

"This is my sister. Her name is Angel." Kel said as he stood from his crouched position.

"Where are we?" A young boy asked in a voice that was barely loud enough to be heard.

"We're on a starship called the *Amalgam*." Kel said as he rocked Angel in his arms gently to soothe her.

"What are these people? Are they Kazons or Ocampas?" The oldest of the girls asked timidly.

"Neither. Who they are is a long and complicated story, but what is important is that the caretaker brought these people to us before he departed." Kel said carefully.

The oldest of the boys gasped in astonishment, then asked, "So they are the children of the caretaker?"

Kel thought for a moment before saying, "They are children of the caretaker in the same way that we are. They are no better or worse."

"But the magical way we came to this place... they must be favored above all his children." The oldest girl said, becoming bolder.

"No. They are only different. Not better. They have knowledge that we lack, but we have abilities that they do not." Kel said firmly.

"Abilities?" The youngest boy asked quietly.

"Their minds do not speak. It is like the quiet time the elders imposed on us when we were young and learning control." Kel explained carefully.

"All of them are silent?" The oldest girl asked in wonder.

"No. Not all of them. There are three among them who have the ability to speak, but only as young children do. They require touch." Kel said then smiled down at Angel who was gurgling happily.

"If these people are other children of the caretaker, then they are not your masters?" The youngest boy asked with fear in his voice.

"No. They are my family. They believe that no sentient being should be enslaved by another. I have been accepted as the child of a bonded couple and been given equal standing as one of them." Kel said seriously.

"What is to become of us? Will they want to make us their children too?" The oldest girl asked hesitantly.

"They will ask you what you want to do. If you want to return to the homeworld, they will return you there. If you want to stay here and live on this ship, I believe they will accept that choice. And if you find a bonded couple as I did who want to become parents to you, then you may be asked if you want to join a family." Kel said in thought.

"It is so different here. I don't know what I'm supposed to do." The oldest girl said in a lost tone.

"Don't worry about that. As soon as the fight is over, I can take you to get new clothes and food. Then I'll find you a place to sleep." Kel said with a smile.

The lights dimmed and everyone looked around in fear and wonder.

"It shouldn't be long now." Kel said into the dim silent room.

* * * * *

"Captain?" Paris asked cautiously.

"You heard me. Destroy them. If this *p'tahk* wants to play for keeps, we're up to the challenge... but save the lead ship for me." Janeway said with venom.

"Kim, ship two. I'll take three. Bey, disable but do not destroy ship one. Fire at will." Paris said as he started his firing pattern.

"Photon torpedo away." Kim said clinically.

"Evasive maneuver Crazyhorse-alpha. On my command, discontinue the use of all energy weapons. Torpedoes only." Janeway said as she watched the battle carefully.

"Aye captain." Paris said as he moved the ship again to avoid enemy weapon's fire.

The engine of the second ship flared in a burst of flame for an instant before the vacuum of space extinguished it.

"It looks like Kim beat you to the punch Paris, are you going to stand for that?" Janeway asked with a teasing smile.

"She may have done it first. But I'll do it best." Paris said with a grin as he locked onto his target.

"Firing neutron torpedo. Full yield." Paris announced as he pressed the button.

"Their fighters are trying to surround us." Bey said from his station.

"Discontinue energy weapons now. Carey, charge primary weapon." Janeway said firmly.

Paris watched carefully as the neutron torpedo hit its target in the mid-section of the third ship.

The impact didn't have any noticeable effect, but Paris had designed the neutron torpedo himself and knew that he had just dealt them a devastating blow.

"*We're not going to have enough power to fire it.*" Carey said seriously.

"You're my chief engineer. Either you find me the energy to fire the primary weapon or I'll transport you to the Kazon ship... no, wait... they don't deserve *that*." Janeway finished with disgust.

Paris glanced at Janeway, not understanding her hateful tone.

"Paris, when the primary weapon is ready, fire reverse thrusters so all the fighters will be in front of us." Janeway said in deep concentration.

"On your command." Paris said as he readied the controls.

"*Cutting non-essential systems. I assume you'll want to keep the shields up.*" Carey asked in a patronizing tone.

"If you wouldn't mind too much... *Truk-D'h!*" Janeway said, then slammed the button to disconnect the comm.

"What's up with you two? A few days ago you were completely in love and now you're threatening to turn him over to the Kazons." Paris asked with concern.

"Ask me later. Status?" Janeway asked abruptly.

"The second ship is disabled. Their engines are beyond any possibility of repair, weapons and shields are offline. The third ship is largely intact, but the neutron radiation blast has destroyed all organic matter on the ship." Kim said without emotion.

"I think the first ship is turning to ram us!" Bey said as he watched his screen carefully.

Janeway slammed the comm button and said, "Carey, I need the primary weapon right now!"

"*Marry me.*" Carey responded in an angry voice.

"What? Carey, we don't have time for this. Release the charge so I can fire the primary weapon!" Janeway said in astonishment.

"*We do have time for this. We have the rest of our lives... of course, it's up to you whether that's two minutes or a hundred years. Say you'll marry me and I'll release the charge.*" Carey said firmly.

Janeway looked at the ship quickly approaching them and finally said, "You son of a Romulan! *Gir'nak tovo'sor!* You're lower than a *Denlb Qatlh!*... Yes! I'll marry you!"

"*Primary weapon ready to fire at your command.*" Carey said, and a smile of accomplishment could be heard in his voice through the comm.

Janeway verified the targeting before saying, "Reverse thrusters now... Firing Graviton Disruption Wave."

All the lights on the ship dimmed as the enormous pulse of energy flowed out through the nose of the ship.

Janeway looked on in satisfaction at the expression of horror on the Kazon captain's face as he saw the graviton wave approaching.

"You're my bitch now." Janeway said with a predatory smile as she watched the screen go white, then switch over to a view of all three ships and all the small one-man fighters tumbling and disintegrating in the wave of a hundred thousand different gravitational forces pulling at them from all directions simultaneously.

Silence fell over the bridge as everyone watched the last of the debris collapse in on itself and become nothing more than compacted particles in empty space.

Chapter 11

"*All hands. Stand down battle stations.*" Bey's voice said over the main comm.

"*It's over. Come with me and I'll get you something to eat.*" Kel said as he put Angel back into her carrier.

"*I'm afraid.*" the youngest boy whispered, with tears in his eyes.

The boy seemed to be dressed in scraps of cloth that had been pieced together to make something resembling a skirt. He was filthy and had obviously been malnourished and mistreated for a long period of time.

"*Come over here with me.*" Kel said gently as he pulled Angel's carrier onto his back.

The boy quickly moved to Kel's side.

"*What's your name?*" Kel asked gently.

"*H'Ree.*" The boy responded quietly.

"*That's an unusual name.*" Kel said as he motioned for the group to walk out of the room with him into the hallway.

"*It was the name of one of the aliens that the Caretaker sent to us. My mother admired him very much and wanted me to grow up in freedom without the elders teachings, so I could be like him... But shortly after we emerged from the Ocampan caves, the Kazons captured us. They killed her.*" H'Ree finished quietly.

Kel pulled H'Ree into a casual one armed hug as they walked and said, "*Everything is going to be fine. You are free now, just the way your mother wanted you to be. And you have a choice about how you will live from now on.*"

H'Ree looked up at Kel with wide eyes.

"*Feeling better?*" Kel asked gently.

H'Ree thought for a moment, then gave a tentative smile as he nodded.

"*Good, because we're here. This is the mess hall.*" Kel finished in a voice directed at the entire group.

* * * * *

"I suppose we'd better check on our guests before we decide what we're going to do next." Janeway said frankly.

"Kel can take care of them for a minute. I'd like to discuss what just happened." Paris said slowly.

"What's that?" Janeway asked curiously.

"You just gave the order to destroy three ships." Paris said as he looked her in the eyes.

"And?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"Captain, I believe Paris is voicing his concern that your Klingon personality traits may have caused you to take more extreme action than was warranted." Kim said logically.

Paris glanced at Kim, then nodded in agreement.

"I see. So you believe that I'm unfit for command?" Janeway asked carefully, not revealing any emotion in the question.

"No. I'm wanting to be sure that we're not going to be moving across the Delta quadrant destroying anyone who crosses our path. I know we're not behaving as a Starfleet crew, but we aren't a band of pirates either." Paris said slowly.

Janeway considered the words for a moment and reflected on what had just happened.

Everyone waited to see what her reaction was going to be.

Finally she seemed to come to a decision and looked around at all the serious faces.

"Thank you for bringing this concern to my attention. I'll try to keep it in mind when we face our next opponent." Janeway said carefully.

"Thank you. That's all I was asking." Paris said with a smile.

Janeway smiled in return and said, "Thank you, all of you. Even though you might have questioned my choices at the time, you followed my orders and brought this to me when the matter was concluded. That shows me that you trust me, and I'm going to work very hard to be worthy of that trust."

"Before you start working on that, I think you have someone in Engineering that you need to talk to. We can handle things here for a while." Paris said with a smirk.

"Agreed. Paris, you have the bridge. I need to have a 'talk' with my fiancée..." Janeway finished with a dark Klingon growl, then left the room.

"I wouldn't want to be Carey right now." Bey said frankly.

Paris nodded his agreement, then said, "Check on Kel and find out if we're going to be going to the Ocampan home world."

Bey nodded and pressed his comm.

* * * * *

Kel led the group into the mess hall and motioned for them to take seats at the tables.

"Stay here and I'll see if anyone is in the kitchen to prepare you food." Kel said quickly.

The group looked at each other as Kel peeked through the door at the far side of the room.

"I'm sure someone will be here in just a minute." Kel said as he returned to the group gathered around two tables.

"Are you forbidden access to the food?" The oldest girl asked suspiciously.

Kel noticed that she was clean and that she was dressed much better than the others and surmised that she was probably the favored slave of one of the ships captains.

"No, I am not forbidden. But it would be impolite of me to go into someone else's work area and take things without permission. Besides, I don't know how to cook very well." Kel finished shyly.

The doors to the mess hall opened and everyone turned to look at the blue skinned boy with a tuft of unruly brown hair.

"Hi Kel. It looks like you have a hungry group here." Chell said cheerfully.

"Yes. Do you have anything for them to eat that won't take too long to fix?" Kel asked hopefully.

"I sure do. I'll have something ready for you in about two minutes." Chell said, then rushed into the kitchen.

Kel smiled, then turned to see everyone looking at him in wonder.

"That was Chell." Kel said timidly, feeling the stares of all the people on him.

"He is blue." H'Ree said cautiously.

Kel smiled and said, *"Oh, you noticed that."*

"Are all the beings on this ship blue?" The oldest girl asked.

"No. There's just two of them, Chell and Golwat. We have people of many different species on this ship." Kel said gently.

"You spoke his language." H'Ree said cautiously.

"Yes. It was necessary for me to learn their language." Kel said frankly.

"Did you violate the law?" An older boy asked hesitantly.

"Yes I did. But only because it was necessary for my survival." Kel said seriously.

"Kel, please contact the bridge." Bey's voice said over the intercom.

"That call is for me, excuse me." Kel said, then walked to the small comm station by the door.

"Kel to Bey." Kel said, then waited for the computer to route the call.

"How are you doing son?" Bey asked quietly.

"I'm fine. Angel is fine too." Kel said with a gentle smile.

"Good. We're going to need to know what our guests want to do so we can plot a course." Bey said frankly.

"I'll ask them right now and call you back in a minute." Kel said seriously.

"Sounds good. I love you 'old man'." Bey said gently.

"I love you too Dad." Kel said with a chuckle, then turned off the comm.

* * * * *

"I need to know what you want to do. Do you want to return to the Ocampan home world or would you like to continue on our journey with us?" Kel asked as he walked back to the tables.

"Is that what the person on the speaker just asked?" One of the younger girls asked curiously.

"That's right. That was Bey, he is one of my parents. As soon as he knows what you want to do, he'll either turn the ship toward the Ocampan home world or toward the quadrant of space he calls home." Kel said in a slow serious voice.

"Will we be able to get past the Kazons?" One of the older girls asked cautiously.

"I'm sure we will be able to find a way. Don't worry about that, just focus on what is going to make you happy and we'll work to make it happen." Kel said seriously.

The group looked at each other in silence and Kel knew that they were speaking telepathically amongst themselves. He felt a momentary twinge of loneliness at being excluded from their discussion, then movement on his back drew his attention.

Kel took the carrier off his back and placed it on one of the couches at the edge of the room where he could attend to his sister.

Angel looked at him alertly and seemed to be happy to see him.

Kel smiled at his sister then glanced at the group still having their telepathic discussion. He realized that what he had was beyond a telepathic link, he had a full emotional connection with his new family and never needed to feel alone again.

"Would someone help me carry in the food?" Chell asked from the doorway.

"Sure, I'll help you Chell." Kel said with a smile, then checked to see that Angel would be safe in her carrier if left unattended for a moment.

"Thanks Kel. Your friends sure are quiet." Chell said as he looked at the silent group.

Kel nodded with concern, then followed Chell into the kitchen.

* * * * *

"I made big meals since you all look hungry." Chell said cheerfully as he moved to the one of the tables and started to hand out plates.

"They do not speak your language. But I will relay your message." Kel said gently as he carried a tray of filled plates to the other table.

"Oh. I didn't realize." Chell said in surprise.

"Chell provided large portions since you appear to be hungry. He hopes you enjoy your meal." Kel said to the group.

"This is really good. Do your new people eat like this all the time?" H'Ree asked with excitement.

"Yes. They believe that it is important for all members of the crew to have food that is rich in flavor and nutrition. The captain of this ship eats the same kind of food that I do." Kel said seriously.

"Please tell Chell that I like his food a lot and tell him thank you." H'Ree said quickly.

Kel smiled and said, "H'Ree likes your food and thanks you."

Chell smiled happily and said, "Let them know that there is plenty more."

"I will." Kel said gently, then watched as Chell returned to the kitchen.

"If we return to the Ocampan home world and the elders will not allow us to stay, may we return here?" The oldest boy asked in a distant voice of thought.

"Yes. I'll make sure that everyone understands and agrees to that before we leave the ship." Kel said seriously.

"Do you have authority over these people?" The oldest girl asked curiously.

"No. But I worked along side them to build this ship. They look at me as their equal, no better and no worse." Kel said frankly.

The group became silent as they went into another telepathic huddle.

After a long silent minute, H'Ree stood from his place at the table then scooted his plate over two places beside Kel's.

"I want to stay here with you." H'Ree said timidly as he sat down again.

Kel smiled and said, *"If that's what you want, we'll work together to make sure it happens."*

"H'Ree has chosen to stay here on the ship with you. The rest of us would like to return to the Ocampan home world and ask the elders for permission to stay." The oldest said as she stood.

"Then I will inform the captain and we will be leaving in just a minute." Kel said as he walked to the comm panel.

"You aren't going to try to get them to stay with us?" H'Ree asked from Kel's side.

"No. This is what it means to be free. You are allowed to make choices for yourself." Kel said gently.

H'Ree nodded in thought, then looked back at the group with concern.

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"Seven of the eight have chosen to return to the Ocampan home world." Kel said seriously.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that Kel. I know you must have wanted them to stay here with you." Bey said quietly.

"All that I wanted for them is to have the freedom to choose. I am here with my family, so I have no regrets." Kel said gently.

"Your father heard you and is plotting the course now. Good work son." Bey said, and Kel could tell from the sound of his voice that he was smiling.

"What did he say?" H'Ree asked from Kel's side.

"He said that he's glad that you're going to be staying with us." Kel said as he put a gentle arm around the younger boy.

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"Paris, report." Janeway said as she walked briskly onto the bridge.

"I've put us on course to the Ocampan home world. Estimated time of arrival is twenty-seven minutes." Paris said professionally.

"Kel just called from the mess hall and said that seven of the eight that he rescued have chosen to return to their home world." Bey said quietly.

"Did they say why?" Janeway asked curiously.

"No. Kel told us their decision and I plotted the course." Paris said simply.

"Well, since we have a few minutes, I think I'll go down and introduce myself and extend the invitation again personally." Janeway said as she stood and walked toward the turbo lift again.

"How did things go with Carey?" Paris called out before she could get away.

"He'll recover in time for the wedding." Janeway said with a smirk, then stepped onto the turbo lift.

Janeway walked into the mess hall and walked directly to Kel.

"Would you like to introduce me to your new friends Kel?" Janeway asked gently.

"That might be difficult since they don't speak your language. If you want, I can translate for you. And Dad... I mean Bey, has a translation device that you could use to talk with them directly if you think that would be better." Kel said uncertainly.

Janeway smiled and said, "I think having you translate will be fine. I just wanted to extend a personal invitation to our guests so they will know that they are welcomed by all of us."

Kel smiled at the statement, then said in Ocampan, "*This is Janeway, the captain of this vessel. She came down here so she could personally invite you to stay with us. She wants you to know that you really are welcomed here.*"

The group looked at each other, obviously communicating telepathically, then finally the oldest girl asked, "*What will she do if we refuse her invitation?*"

Kel understood the emotions associated with her question and quietly responded, "*She will abide by your decision. Please allow me a moment to bring her up to date on all that we have discussed.*"

The oldest girl nodded as she watched Kel's every move.

"Aunt Janeway, I've told them that they are free to choose to stay with us or to go back to the home world. And I also said that if the elders won't allow them to stay there, that they'll be allowed to go with us... I hope that's okay." Kel said hesitantly.

Janeway looked over the group of children and young adults, all dirty and dressed in rags. After a moment to think she said, "We'll be at the Ocampan home world in about fifteen minutes. We'll do it like you've suggested and keep the invitation open until we know that they've been accepted by their people."

"Thank you Aunt Janeway, I'd give you a big hug right now but... they're kinda watching every single thing I do and..." Kel trailed off helplessly.

"I understand." Janeway said with a chuckle.

Kel felt a tug on his sleeve and turned to see H'Ree looking at him with worry.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I think your sister is leaking." H'Ree said hesitantly.

Kel quickly walked to the couch and looked over Angel to assess her condition.

"It's just drool. The young of these people are helpless when they're born and take many years to develop." Kel said as he pulled a towel out of the side pouch on the carrier, then gently cleaned her face.

"Kel?" Janeway asked expectantly.

"Oh yes, I'm sorry Aunt Janeway." Kel said quickly, then turned to the group and said in Ocampan, *"Janeway has agreed to the arrangement. We will arrive at the home world in a few minutes and if you are not accepted by the elders, you will still be welcomed to join us."* Kel said seriously.

The oldest girl stood and said, *"Please tell your captain that I am Marrah and that I wish to thank her on behalf of all of us for her kind invitation. All of us have agreed that if the elders do not welcome us, we will not grieve the loss of our people but rather rejoice at the opportunity to live among other of the caretaker's children."*

Kel turned toward Janeway and said, "This is Marrah, I guess she's their leader. She wants to thank you for inviting them to stay."

Janeway glanced at Kel and said, "It sounded like there was a lot more to it than that."

"There was a bunch of other stuff, but that was the important part." Kel said frankly.

Janeway chuckled and said, "You're just like your father."

"Thank you." Kel said as he swelled with pride.

"I'll meet you in the transporter room when we arrive." Janeway said warmly.

"Aye Captain." Kel said in his most respectful tone as he watched her leave.

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"If you are finished with your meals, I could get you some new clothes before we arrive at the home world." Kel said as he checked to see that Angel was clean and dry.

The group looked at each other for a moment, then Marrah said, *"I thank you for your kind offer, but we will present ourselves to the elders as we are."*

Kel nodded his acceptance of the decision.

"I want some new clothes." H'Ree said in a small voice.

"Well then, if the rest of you are finished, I could take you to my room and get H'Ree some new clothes before we leave." Kel said as he made sure that Angel was strapped securely into her carrier.

"Yes, we would be interested to see where you live." Marrah said seriously.

Kel pulled Angel onto his back, then said, *"Come on, it's right this way."*

* * * * *

As the group walked into the quarters that Kel shared with his fathers, everyone looked around in wonder.

"This is quite different from Kazon quarters." Marrah said as she slowly looked over the bright, tastefully decorated room.

"Yes. As I understand it, these quarters are fashioned in accordance with Human customs. The people of other races on this ship constructed their rooms differently. Come on, my room is over here." Kel said as he led the way.

H'Ree ran immediately to Kel's side as the rest of the group followed more slowly.

Kel pressed the entry button by the door, then led the way in.

"The clothes we have in storage are all for adults. Mine will be closer to your size. They might still be big on you, but they shouldn't be too bad." Kel said as he showed H'Ree to the dresser, then to the closet.

"All of these are yours?" H'Ree asked with wonder.

"That's right. My fathers wanted me to have a variety of choices. Pick out what you want to wear so we can go to the transporter room." Kel said, then noticed the rest of the group gathered in the doorway.

"Do I understand correctly? This room is for you alone?" Marrah asked cautiously.

"Yes. And let me show you something else." Kel said with excitement and walked toward the group.

They moved aside to allow Kel access to the panel by the door.

Kel pressed in a sequence on the keypad then watched as the door closed.

"The door is now locked. When I want to be alone, I can close and lock this door and no one will enter without my permission." Kel said with a proud smile.

The group stared at the closed door as they tried to comprehend what Kel was saying.

"Is this okay?" H'Ree asked as he held out a dark yellow shirt and knee length dark gray pants for Kel's inspection.

"I think those will look great on you. We will go into the outer room so you can change in private. Press the green button to open the door when you are done." Kel said as he keyed in the code to unlock the door.

"Thank you." H'Ree whispered in awe.

Kel smiled, then led the group out into the living room.

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"How many others live in this place with you?" Marrah asked as she looked at the other doors.

"Just my family. Angel's room is beside mine and my fathers' room is over there." Kel said as he pointed.

"Even the tiny one has it's own room?" Marrah asked with disbelief.

"Yeah. At least she will when she's old enough. Right now she has a small bed in my fathers' room so they can take care of her." Kel said with a smile.

"Would we be allowed to live like this?" The oldest boy asked, then wilted under a disapproving glance from Marrah.

"Yes. If you choose to stay here, you would have your own room and maybe even your own family if you wanted to." Kel said seriously.

"Would I have to... use a forbidden technique if I chose to stay?" The boy asked quietly.

"Dohn! We agreed!" Marrah said firmly.

Dohn shrank back from her harsh tone and Kel noticed.

Before Dohn could change his mind, Kel quickly said, "Marrah, you are all free to decide what will make you happy. If you don't allow Dohn to make that choice, then you are no better than the Kazons who enslaved us."

Marrah looked at Kel with anger for a moment, then turned her gaze away from him.

"And Dohn, you won't have to use a forbidden technique if you don't want to. You will be free to decide things like that for yourself." Kel said seriously.

"Is this okay?" H'Ree asked as he walked out of Kel's room wearing a baggy dark yellow shirt and short gray pants that reached nearly to his ankles.

The clean clothes were a definite contrast to his dirty face and the bruise on his cheek.

Kel looked at H'Ree for a moment, then said, "Yes. I think you look good. Are you all ready to go?"

The group exchanged looks and started moving toward the door when Dohn said, "I would like to have some clothes too, if I may."

"You're bigger than I am, so I'll have to get you some adult clothes... I know... Wait here a second." Kel said in a rush, then hurried to the comm panel on the desk by his fathers' bedroom door.

"Kel to Bey." Kel said quickly.

"What can I do for you son?" Bey asked gently.

"One of the guys needs some clothes and he's about your size, can he wear something of yours?" Kel asked hopefully.

"Are you in the cabin?" Bey asked casually.

"Yeah." Kel said quickly.

"Help yourself to whatever you need. Your father is on his way down to the transporter room so he can take care of Angel while you're on the planet."

Bey said gently.

"Thanks Dad. I've got to hurry. I love you." Kel said with a smile.

"I love you too 'old man'." Bey said gently, then signed off the transmission.

"*He said yes. Come on.*" Kel said, then opened the door to his fathers' room.

"*My dad's stuff is over here. I think it will fit you pretty good.*" Kel said and led Dohn to one of two closets.

"Thank you." Dohn said shyly as he looked through the selection.

"*That one... I think it will look good on you.*" Kel said as he pointed to a powder blue shirt.

Dohn took the shirt and looked at it with wonder.

Kel grabbed a pair of pants at random and handed them to Dohn.

"*Everyone is probably waiting on us in the transporter room, so let's hurry.*" Kel said as he ushered the rest of the group out of the room.

Dohn looked at the clothes in his hands with disbelief for a moment, then hurried to change.

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Kel turned to look when the door opened, then happily said, "*You look great!*"

Dohn looked at Kel uncertainly.

"*Come on. We need to go.*" Kel said quickly.

Dohn waited for everyone else to leave before he reluctantly followed.

Chapter 12

As the group walked into the transporter room, Dohn hesitantly said, "*I don't want to go with you.*"

Janeway looked at Kel curiously, waiting for the translation.

Rather than translate, Kel asked, "*Why not?*"

"I am afraid that if I return home that I might change my mind and choose to remain." Dohn said quietly.

"Is that really a bad thing?" Kel asked curiously, then noticed that his father had moved behind him and was checking on Angel.

"My time as a slave of the Kazons has opened my eyes to horrors that I could not have imagined before. Returning to the place of my childhood and having the chance to return to a life where the elders make all the choices for me and I can live without concern may be too strong of a lure for me to resist. I know that if I am to be free to grow, I must not return there." Dohn said with difficulty.

Kel nodded and said, "*If that is your choice, then it will be so. I will tell the captain.*"

"Let me have her." Paris said gently from behind Kel.

After a moment to get the carrier off his back, Kel turned to see his father looking at Angel with peace and love in his eyes.

"Kel? What's going on?" Janeway asked curiously.

"Oh. Um, Dohn doesn't want to go down to the planet with us. Is that okay?" Kel asked quickly.

"That's fine. Dalby, have you located the Ocampan caves yet?" Janeway asked casually.

"Yes, but they're shielded. We can't transport in." Dalby said in concentration.

"Let me see." Janeway said, as she moved to Dalby's side.

"There are intermittent gaps at the edge of the shielding underground, but I don't see any way of beaming anyone in. They're just too brief and random, it would be too dangerous with this equipment." Dalby said seriously.

"The field modulation looks familiar, can you pull up the frequency?" Janeway asked, as she looked at the display.

Dalby worked the controls and finally brought up a display of the wave modulation of the shields.

"It's a Federation signature." Janeway said, with a small nod of confirmation.

"So you think someone from Voyager put this shield up?" Paris asked curiously as he took a step closer.

"No. The equipment isn't Federation technology, but the configuration of the shields is a standard pattern. They must have stabilized the shielding before they left so the Ocampan's would be protected." Janeway said in thought.

"Does that mean you know how to get us through the shields?" Kel asked quietly.

"Maybe. Let me try something." Janeway said, as she nudged Dalby out of the way and started keying in a series of commands.

"The command code override?" Paris asked as he watched her work.

"If I'm right, my mother would have put the command code protocol in place as a failsafe." Janeway said, then pressed the final button to run her new series of instructions.

"You did it. No wonder you're the captain." Dalby said in an impressed voice.

Janeway smiled at the statement, then said, "It helps to have the memories of my mother."

"Who is going down first?" Paris asked as he looked at the group who were all watching silently.

"I am, and I'll need Kel to translate for me. I don't trust our communicator translators yet. Everyone else can wait here until I've had a chance to talk to the elders." Janeway said as she started walking toward the transport chamber.

Kel noticed that H'Ree was staying close to his side, never more than an arm's length away.

"Aunt Janeway, can H'Ree come with us too?" Kel asked quietly.

Janeway saw the look of anxiety in the younger boy's eyes then nodded her acceptance.

"Come on H'Ree, let's go talk to the elders." Kel said with a gentle smile at the boy.

H'Ree smiled and walked with Kel to join Janeway in the transport chamber.

"Energize."

* * * * *

Janeway, Kel and H'Ree looked around the large open hall that seemed to be like a town square.

The Ocampan people stopped in their tracks at the sight of the first strangers to visit in a year, and stared in wonder.

"Would you please summon the elders? We need to talk to them." Kel asked seriously.

Three or four of the Ocampans turned to look away for a moment and were obviously communicating telepathically with the elders.

"They'll be here in a minute." Kel said quietly to Janeway.

"Who are you?" A woman asked from near the front of the growing crowd of people.

"This is Janeway. She is the captain of a ship in orbit of this planet." Kel said seriously.

"Another Janeway? How nice." A man said as he walked through the crowd.

Janeway was surprised by his speaking English, but hid it quickly and responded, "I take it that you've met my mother."

"Oh, that was your mother? Well isn't that wonderful. Please, come and be welcomed. Tell me what brings you here." The man said pleasantly as he indicated for the group to walk with him.

"Toscat, Janeway and her crew have rescued a small group of our people from the Kazons. We are here to ask if they will be allowed to return." Kel said in a voice that was cold and barely respectful.

"You speak their language?" Toscat said with a disapproving look.

"As do you." Kel said defiantly, as he held Toscat's gaze.

"I am an elder, I am permitted to use such techniques when it is warranted." Toscat said firmly.

"I am no longer one of your people, so I am free to choose what I believe is right and wrong." Kel said without wavering.

"Gentlemen, please. I doubt that you'll resolve your philosophical differences today. Can we turn our attention back to the matter at hand?" Janeway asked seriously.

Toscat glared at Kel for a moment longer, then turned to Janeway and smiled as he said, "Yes. Of course. Please tell me what you propose."

"There are seven of your people who have chosen to return to you if you will accept them." Janeway said in a controlled voice.

"Six." Kel corrected.

Janeway glanced at Kel, then nodded and said, "That's right, six. Will you allow them to return?"

Toscat glanced at Kel and H'Ree for a moment, then replied, "It depends on whether they can agree to live by our laws. We cannot tolerate disharmony among our people, it will lead to our ruin."

"You exile anyone who disagrees with you. How can you believe that you're always right? The people have the right to be heard and have some control over the decisions that are being made." Kel said in an increasing voice.

Janeway put a hand on Kel's shoulder and said, "Kel. You're with us now, you can let it go."

Kel looked up at Janeway, then reluctantly nodded.

"*Is this one of those who would return?*" Toscat asked as he looked at H'Ree curiously.

"*No. H'Ree will be leaving with me.*" Kel said firmly.

"*I just wanted to see this place. My mother took me away from here right after I was born and I wanted to see where she came from.*" H'Ree said quietly.

"I brought Kel with me in case I needed him to translate for me, our translation devices aren't very dependable. Your people are ready to transport down if they are welcomed." Janeway said diplomatically.

"Bring them. If they will agree to live by our laws, they will be welcomed to return." Toscat said as his expression became composed once again.

Janeway tapped the communicator badge on her chest, then said, "Janeway to transporter room."

After a few seconds of delay a voice responded, "This is Paris."

"Start transporting down those who wish to return to the Ocampan colony." Janeway said professionally.

"Yes captain." Paris said immediately and a moment later three shimmering columns appeared.

* * * * *

"Marrah." Toscat said with a delighted smile.

"Father." Marrah said with joy as she ran to hug him.

Kel felt a strange tugging at his mind and turned to see a man looking at him with a sense of urgency.

"Come on H'Ree, I don't think they need us." Kel said quietly and started walking toward the man.

"You're Kel aren't you? The youngest person ever exiled from the colony." The man asked quietly.

"Yes. I think I remember you. Aren't you elder Daggin?" Kel asked uncertainly.

"That's right. Have you heard anything from Kes?" Daggin asked desperately.

"I'm not sure I remember her." Kel said uncertainly.

"She's much like you are. Very strong willed and outspoken in her beliefs. She left with the starship called Voyager." Daggin said quickly.

"That's the ship that we're going to try to catch up to." Kel said with a smile.

"Oh, that's good to know. Here, take this and keep it with you. When you find her, give it to her." Daggin said and handed a cloth bundle to Kel.

"Of course. I'll be happy to." Kel said seriously.

"Thank you. These aliens, are they treating you well? Is there anything you need?" Daggin asked quietly.

"They're treating me fine. I don't need anything but, um... there is one thing. Is there any way that H'Ree can learn the common language of the Humans without using the forbidden techniques? I think it would make things easier for him." Kel said as he looked at H'Ree with concern.

"Allow me." Daggin said gently, then turned to H'Ree and said, *"Do you remember in your early training when you were told that the elders would sometimes bestow a gift of knowledge?"*

H'Ree shook his head and said, *"I wasn't taught much about the Ocampan beliefs. My mother took me away from here just after I was born. She didn't want me to grow up the way she did."*

Daggin nodded then said, *"I'm going to give you the Federation common language. This is not a violation of any law, it is a gift of knowledge from the elders."*

H'Ree felt a brief touch of something in his mind and looked at Daggin curiously.

"It is done." Daggin said gently.

"Wow. That was easy. You mean that's the big bad forbidden thing that everyone is so worried about?" H'Ree asked in confusion.

Daggin smiled and said, *"Yes. But there is a reason that the technique is forbidden. It's very important that you not use it."*

"What is the reason? No one ever explained that to me. They just said that it was forbidden." Kel asked curiously.

Daggin looked around, then sent to Kel and H'Ree telepathically, *{To speak with our minds is no different from speaking with our voices and is not forbidden. But to exchange raw knowledge or experiences with another is a very powerful technique that can easily become addictive. You can lose yourself in the experience and allow your body to become weak and die without realizing it. Entire families have been lost when they secretly*

engaged in this practice. The forbiddance is in place to protect you from a very powerful and dangerous thing. Even the elders have to use the ability with the utmost discretion.}

Kel thought for a moment, then said, *{I understand. I had always thought that it was another way of keeping us ignorant and weak so we wouldn't question the elders. Why don't you tell people this?}*

{We have found that it is better to simply tell people that it is forbidden than to try to explain the dangers. Too many have thought they had the strength of will to indulge in the practice, but became addicted before they were aware of it.} Daggin said seriously.

{What about Dohn? Is there some way we can give him the language without making him do the forbidden thing?} H'Ree asked with concern.

{Dohn? The child of Thoran?} Daggin asked cautiously.

{I don't know who his parents are, but he's on our ship. He was afraid that if he came down he would be tempted to give up what he believes and stay with you.} Kel said frankly.

{Then it's probably best that he is going with you. His beliefs would most likely resurface in time and he would end up being unhappy here. Let me give you something for him Kel.} Daggin said, then concentrated.

Kel felt something unfamiliar... a wrapped package in his mind that was much like the bundle that he held in his hands.

{This is a package containing the language of the Federation people. You can give it to Dohn without using a forbidden technique. When he opens it, he will know their language.} Daggin said gently.

{Thank you Daggin. If you were head elder instead of Toscat, I might choose to stay here.} Kel said quietly.

{No Kel, you wouldn't. Though I choose to express myself differently, I hold the same beliefs to be true that Toscat does. You couldn't be happy living by our rules. Go out into the universe with my blessing and live free... both of you.} Daggin said then straightened and looked toward Toscat.

{Thank you. We will.} Kel said respectfully.

"Your people are ready to depart." Daggin said with his voice.

"Thank you Daggin. I always thought that the elders were only interested in controlling our people and keeping them ignorant. Now I understand that you're just doing what you believe is best to keep them safe." Kel said seriously.

"That's right Kel. It saddens us when we have to send someone away, but we cannot allow a rebellion among our people. The colony is too fragile. It couldn't survive." Daggin said quietly.

"I think I understand." Kel said carefully.

"We do our best to protect the individuals as well as the community. It is unfortunate that such decisions sometimes have to be made." Daggin said, then looked across the courtyard at Toscat again.

"Your captain is ready to leave now. Give Kes my best wishes if you see her. It was nice to meet you H'Ree. Go in peace." Daggin said with a gentle smile at the boy.

"Yeah. Thanks. It was nice to meet you too. I guess my mom was wrong. All the elders aren't weenies." H'Ree said frankly.

Daggin gave a full, honest laugh, then gestured to indicate for them to return to Janeway and Toscat.

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"I suppose that everything is settled here. Are you and your little friend sure that you don't want to stay here?" Janeway asked Kel quietly.

"I'm sure, how about you H'Ree?" Kel asked gently, certain that he knew the answer.

"I want to go with you and live free just like my mom wanted me to." H'Ree said happily.

"Who was your mother?" Toscat asked cautiously.

"She was Shalah. And she left here because she wanted me to grow up without you telling me how to live my life." H'Ree said firmly.

"I remember her. She was an angry and defiant woman. It seems that you're a lot like her." Toscat said with a look of mild disgust.

"And you're a weenie." H'Ree said sharply, then looked up at Kel and Janeway with question.

"H'Ree, come here and stand here beside me." Janeway said as she tried to restrain her smile.

"Good luck on your quest Janeway." Toscat said, turning his full attention to her, doing his best to ignore H'Ree.

"Thank you. And good luck to all of you." Janeway said, then tapped her comm badge and said, "Janeway to transporter room."

After the three second delay, she continued, "Three to beam up."

"On your command." Dalby's voice said professionally over the comm.

"Energize."

* * * * *

As the transporter beam cleared, Kel noticed that Dohn was standing exactly where he had been when they left.

"I take it all went as you expected?" Paris asked with a note of concern in his voice.

"Yes. All of the others swore to live by the laws of the Ocampan elders so that they could remain." Janeway said, not sounding particularly happy.

"Then it's probably for the best." Paris said with resignation.

Janeway nodded as she stepped out of the transporter chamber. As she walked toward the door she said, "I'll feel a lot better once we've left this system far behind us."

"Agreed." Paris said seriously.

"I can take care of Angel while you're piloting the ship." Kel said quickly.

Paris smiled and said, "Thank you son. Why don't you take your new friends to our cabin where they can get cleaned up and we'll work on getting them quarters when your dad and I go off duty."

"Okay." Kel said happily, then remembered the bundle that he was carrying.

Kel turned to H'Ree and asked, "Will you hold this for me so I can get Angel?"

H'Ree nodded and accepted the bundle.

Kel took the child carrier and fastened it to his back, then watched as Janeway and Paris left the room.

"Come on Dohn. I've got a surprise for you." Kel said happily as he led the way.

Dohn looked at Kel curiously, then silently followed.

* * * * *

The trio of boys walked into Kel's cabin in silence.

Kel took Angel off his back and unfastened the straps that were holding her in the carrier.

"I think I might have made a mistake." Dohn said quietly.

As Kel picked up his sister, he noticed an unmistakable aroma and said, *"Come into the next room with me and tell me why."*

Dohn followed Kel as he walked into his fathers' room and went about the business of changing his sister's diaper.

"I've chosen to live among aliens. I've turned my back on my family and the traditions of my people." Dohn said despondently.

"You've chosen to live free. If you want, you can still follow the traditions of the Ocampa." Kel said as he efficiently removed the soiled diaper and dropped it in the covered pail beside the changing table.

"But... what kind of life can I have here among these aliens?" Dohn asked as tears began to well up in his eyes.

"You can have whatever kind of life you choose. I know it's scary, but it can be a really good thing. I promise." Kel said as he quickly cleaned his sister's tiny bottom.

"Dohn. You aren't alone." H'Ree said as he looked up at the older boy who was almost a man.

After a moment, Dohn finally looked down at H'Ree with question.

"Kel and I are here so you're not the only Ocampan on the ship." H'Ree said honestly.

"That's right. And these are really good people of all different species. We're just like them because all of them are different." Kel said as he expertly fastened Angel's new diaper into place.

"But what am I supposed to do now?" Dohn asked in a lost voice.

"Right now you and H'Ree are going to take a shower." Kel said as he picked up Angel and held her against his chest.

"Shower?" H'Ree and Dohn asked simultaneously.

"Yeah. You aren't going to believe it." Kel said and led the way to a second door in the bedroom.

Dohn and H'Ree shared a look, then followed Kel into the next room.

* * * * *

"You need to take off your clothes." Kel said seriously.

"For what? You never said I'd have to do that kind of stuff if I stayed here." H'Ree asked with an expression of panic.

Kel understood his apprehension and quietly said, "It's just to get clean. Don't worry H'Ree, no one on this ship will do anything like that to you."

Dohn hesitantly started to unbutton the blue shirt that he had been wearing, trying to look brave.

"When you take your clothes off, drop them in that box by the door. It's a device that cleans clothing. It's called a fresher." Kel said seriously.

Once Dohn had the shirt off, he walked to the fresher and dropped it in.

"Good. Now the rest of it. Take off everything, then get into that cubicle." Kel said and pointed at the enclosure at the far end of the room.

"What is it going to do?" H'Ree asked as he pulled his shirt off over his head.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you." Kel said with a chuckle.

As Dohn removed his pants, he noticed that Kel was looking at his naked body.

Dohn slowly turned away as his posture seemed to wilt.

"You don't need to hide yourself Dohn, I have the same scars that you do. It's nothing to be ashamed of." Kel said honestly.

"Me too." H'Ree said as he continued to remove his clothing with no trace of his former hesitance.

Dohn didn't answer, but instead walked into the cubicle that Kel had indicated.

H'Ree dropped the last of his clothes into the fresher, then walked across the room, not at all concerned if Kel was looking at him or not.

As soon as they were both in the shower stall, Kel stood in the doorway and said, *"Do you see that control? Up is more, down is less, left is hotter, right is colder. When you're ready, raise the control up to begin."*

H'Ree reached out for the control, then looked at Dohn to see if he was going to raise any objection.

Hesitantly, H'Ree pushed the control upward and a fine mist of water started to spray from a nozzle at the top of the stall.

"It's water!" Dohn said with shock and put his face in front of the nozzle to drink the water quickly.

Kel thought about stopping him, but then remembered his own amazement at his first shower and decided to let Dohn and H'Ree just enjoy the experience.

"Let me have some!" H'Ree said urgently as he moved under Dohn to catch the dribbles that were running off his chin.

"Remember, up is more." Kel called into the stall with a smile, then stepped back and closed the door to keep the water from spraying out.

Kel heard the flow of water increase and stood smiling as he held his sister to his chest.

"Too hot!" H'Ree said with a squeak.

"Sorry." Dohn said a moment later.

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When Kel decided that they were probably over the wonder of the seemingly unlimited water he knocked on the shower stall door and said, *"If you'll turn off the water for a second, I'll tell you about the next part."*

"There's more?" H'Ree asked with excitement.

Kel chuckled and said, *"Oh yeah. Do you remember why you're in here?"*

The water stopped, then H'Ree opened the door and looked at Kel with question.

"To get clean. Do you see that nozzle on the wall over there? Press the top of it and it will dispense a cleansing agent. You can rub it over your hair

and body to clean you, then when you're done, you can turn the water on again to rinse it off." Kel said carefully.

"Won't that foul the water? Shouldn't it be saved?" Dohn asked with concern.

"No. These people have the technology to reclaim the water and restore it to purity. This is how they clean themselves." Kel said with a smile.

H'Ree pressed the top of the nozzle and a large squirt of foam dispensed into his waiting hand.

"Oh, and don't get that stuff in your eyes or mouth. It will burn your eyes and it tastes really bad." Kel said seriously.

H'Ree nodded, then started spreading the soap on his body.

"Does it burn?" Dohn asked with concern.

"No. It doesn't feel like anything." H'Ree said carefully, trying to understand the point of what he was doing.

"You'll notice the difference when you rinse off. You'll be clean." Kel said with a smile.

"It smells funny, kinda nice." H'Ree said cautiously.

Kel smiled as he closed the door again, then turned his attention to his sister in his arms.

* * * * *

"How do you feel?" Kel asked when the shower stall door finally opened again.

"Wet." H'Ree said with a joyful giggle.

Kel handed him a towel and said, *"This will help."*

H'Ree looked at the towel for a moment, then started dabbing it against his skin and found that it was absorbing the water.

Dohn stood in the shower stall doorway looking uncertain of what to do next.

Kel smiled, then handed Dohn a towel.

H'Ree was having fun drying himself and absently said, *"When you told us to take off our clothes I thought you were going to make us do those things the Kazons made us do."*

Kel turned his full attention to H'Ree and said, *"No. No one on this ship will ever make you do anything like that. But if you or Dohn find someone that you really like and wanted to do something like that someday... then it would be okay. But it would be your choice."*

Dohn had stopped all motion and looked at Kel with uncertainty.

"It's not something you need to worry about today." Kel said with an assuring smile.

Dohn hesitantly nodded and began to dry himself again.

"Oh, I forgot. Daggin gave me a gift for you." Kel said with a smile.

"Daggin? The elder?" Dohn asked with concern.

"Yeah. H'Ree asked if there was some way that you could learn the common language of the Federation people without using forbidden techniques. So Daggin gave me a mental... like a package kind of thing to give to you. When you open it, you'll know the language and you won't have to do anything forbidden." Kel said happily.

"You did that for me H'Ree?" Dohn asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I didn't want you to live here and not be able to talk to people." H'Ree said with a smile, then handed his towel to Kel.

"Your clothes should be clean now. You can get them out of the fresher and put them on." Kel said as he laid the towel aside.

H'Ree walked to the fresher and lifted the lid to peek inside.

"Wow! They're all flat and clean and folded into squares! How did it do that?" H'Ree asked with amazement as he pulled out his t-shirt and short pants.

Kel chuckled and said, *"I have no idea. It just does it."*

Chapter 13

Once both boys were dressed, Kel led the way through a second door out of the bathroom, which took them to the living room.

H'Ree looked curiously back at the door behind him, then over to the bedroom door.

"It won't be long before my parents go off duty. We can sit here and talk for a few minutes in the living room while we wait." Kel said with a smile.

Dohn and H'Ree followed silently and hesitantly took seats on the low, well cushioned furniture.

"This is very nice." H'Ree said, as he immediately snuggled down into the couch at Kel's side, leaning close to Kel.

"I think so too." Kel said as he draped an arm around H'Ree, then he looked over at Dohn to see how he was doing.

"This is so comfortable, I might just fall asleep right here." Dohn said as he relaxed back into the cushioned chair.

"Reach down to your right and push the lever forward." Kel said with a gentle smile, then he shifted Angel on his chest, so she was sleeping in a more comfortable position.

Dohn looked over the side of the chair, then hesitantly pushed the lever which was sticking out.

The back reclined and a footrest came up, lifting his feet.

Dohn looked around in surprise, then hesitantly lay back relaxing completely into the recliner.

"My father mentioned that one of his grandparents had one of these chairs when he was young, and how much he liked it. We had to talk to many other people on the ship to understand what he was talking about, but once we knew what it was, my dad and I gathered the materials and constructed this for him." Kel said happily.

"It is... amazing." Dohn said, peacefully, as he began to yawn.

"Oh Dohn, Before you fall asleep, I still need to give you the package that I got for you from Daggin." Kel said seriously.

"Oh yes... That's right. How do I restore this to its original form?" Dohn asked, as he tried in vain to sit up.

"Just pull the lever back like it was originally." Kel said simply.

Dohn reached over the side of the chair, then pulled the lever back to restore the chair to an upright position. As he sat up, he felt the chair lean forward.

"Are you ready?" Kel asked quietly.

Dohn took a deep breath to brace himself, then nodded, still a little apprehensive. "I'm ready."

Kel carefully transferred the mental bundle he had been holding, over to Dohn.

"What do I do now?" Dohn asked, when the transfer was complete.

"Just open it. At least that's what Daggin told me." Kel said with a small amount of apprehension in his voice.

Dohn closed his eyes, then a curious look came over his face.

"What is it?" H'Ree asked with concern.

"Nothing. It was sort of like a wisp. I opened the bundle, and it seemed to be empty." Dohn said with some confusion.

"H'Ree didn't feel anything when Daggin gave him the Federation language either." Kel said quietly.

"Say something to me in Federation, so I can see if it worked." Dohn said in thought.

H'Ree and Kel both giggled at the statement.

"What's so funny?" Dohn asked defensively.

"Silly, We've been speaking in the federation language since you opened the package." H'Ree said with a chuckle.

"We have?" Dohn asked, then thought about the words he had just used.

"Yes. It's very easy when you don't have to learn the language a word at a time, isn't it?" Kel said with a fond smile.

Dohn considered for a moment, then said, "Maybe it won't be so bad living here among the aliens, now."

"I can't think of anyone I'd rather live with. My Father is Human, and my Dad is half Cardassian and half Betazoid. Because of that, I don't feel like I'm among aliens, because we're all different." Kel said happily.

"I don't know exactly what those words mean, but I think I understand what you're saying." Dohn said, as he relaxed back into the comfortable chair.

"Just don't be too surprised by my Dad when you see him. He looks kind of reptilian." Kel said hesitantly.

"Like the creatures by the caves?" H'Ree asked with surprise.

"That's sorta right. But that's just how he looks, not how he acts. In fact, everyone here has been very nice to me, so I don't think you'll have any problems either." Kel said seriously.

Before Kel could say more, all the boys turned their attention to the cabin door as it opened.

Kel gently shifted H'Ree from his side and hurried to greet his fathers.

"This is my Father; his name is Paris, and this is my Dad, Bey." Kel said quickly, as he indicated each one.

Dohn and H'Ree both stood and stared at the pair of newcomers.

"Dads, this is H'Ree and Dohn." Kel said, as he motioned to the boys.

"It's very nice to meet you both. I'm glad you're going to be staying with us." Bey said, as he gently took Angel out of Kel's arms.

"Thank you." Dohn said quietly, as he stared at Bey.

"Please sit down and be comfortable. It's going to be about an hour before we go to eat, so we have a bit of time to make some decisions." Paris said as he glanced at Angel in Bey's arms.

"Kel said this was your chair." Dohn said as he stepped away from the recliner toward the couch.

"It's our chair. Anything here in the living room belongs to all of us, and we're all free to use it." Paris said with assurance as he walked to the couch.

"H'Ree, why don't you come over here with me. I want to show you the best way to sit in this chair." Kel said with a cheerful smile.

H'Ree walked to Kel's side and waited.

Kel sat down in the chair, then patted the open cushion beside him.

"Come on, H'Ree, there's plenty of room for both of us. I sit like this with Dad sometimes, and it's the best. It's real nice to cuddle together." Kel said happily.

H'Ree hesitantly sat down beside Kel, not quite sure if he was going to crowd him.

"Sit back and relax." Kel said easily.

H'Ree cautiously sat back and realized that Kel had put his arm around him and his head was resting on Kel's shoulder.

"I like this. It's really nice." H'Ree said happily as he snuggled tightly against Kel.

"Me too." Kel said peacefully.

Bey and Paris were sitting together on one end of the couch while Dohn was sitting on the other end, looking distinctly uncomfortable and uncertain of what to do.

"Have you boys discussed anything about the room assignments for tonight?" Paris asked casually.

"No. We didn't get around to that. The shower took a lot longer than I thought it would." Kel said honestly.

Bey chuckled and said, "Ah yes, I remember when you took your first shower. I was beginning to think you might just decide to live in the bathroom."

Kel smiled and said, "I actually thought about doing just that."

"I was thinking that since you boys are new on the ship and probably are feeling a little bit out of place, that you could stay here with us, until you get settled in and are feeling more comfortable." Paris said casually.

"Where?" Kel asked curiously.

"Well, Angel doesn't really need her own room yet. So one or both of the boys could sleep in there, if they wanted to. And we have a perfectly good couch right here that could easily serve as a bed, if we need it to. I just thought that you three might want to kind of stick together until you've gotten to know people around the ship." Paris said carefully.

"You mean we can stay here, with you?" H'Ree asked quietly.

"Yes. Of course you can, for as long as you want to." Bey said with a loving smile at the boy being held so tenderly by Kel.

"Do you want to sleep in your own bed or would you like to sleep with someone else?" Kel asked H'Ree quietly.

"I get to sleep in a bed?" H'Ree asked with a huge smile.

"That's right. You saw the bed in my room. You could sleep in there with me, or you could sleep in Angel's room, or you could sleep out here on the couch." Kel said gently.

"Where do you want to sleep, Dohn?" H'Ree asked, as he turned to look at Dohn with concern.

"You said that I can sleep alone?" Dohn asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, sure, if you want to. If you don't want to be alone, you can sleep with me or H'Ree." Kel said quietly.

"I think... I mean, if you wouldn't mind, I think I'd like to try sleeping by myself. My former master made me sleep with him every night..." Dohn trailed off with an obvious look of revulsion.

"What about you H'Ree? Would you like to sleep with someone or sleep alone?" Kel asked quietly.

"I really want to sleep in a bed... with you, Kel." H'Ree finished hesitantly, then he turned to look at Kel to see if maybe he was asking for too much.

Kel smiled and said, "Then H'Ree can sleep with me in my room, and Dohn can have Angel's room, all by himself."

"It sounds like a plan to me. Have you filled them in on the rules yet?" Paris asked softly, as he snuggled against Bey at his side.

"No. We didn't have time to talk about too much." Kel said quietly.

Paris noticed that H'Ree and Dohn were both looking at him with caution.

"These aren't going to be anything like the rules of the elders, Guys. It's just that it's important that you know how you're expected to act here in this new place." Kel hurried to explain.

"That's right. I guess the main thing that we ask is that you respect a closed door. That means if you want to talk to someone, and their door is closed, just ask permission before entering." Bey said quietly.

Dohn and H'Ree exchanged a look of confusion at the strange rule.

"It's something called privacy. It's something I never had while I was a slave, and I never even thought about it when I was living on the home world." Kel said seriously.

"So, while I am sleeping, that means that no one will enter the room without permission?" Dohn asked quietly as he watched Bey and Paris carefully.

"That's right. But Kel can show you how to work the lock that is on the door, if you want to be sure. If your privacy lock is engaged, then no one can open the door without it raising an alarm and waking you." Paris said with assurance.

Dohn thought about the words for a moment, then quietly said, "I think I would like to learn how to use the lock, please."

Bey smiled at Dohn and said, "That's what Kel said too, when he first came here. Well, after he got used to sleeping in his own room. It makes him feel safer to have his door locked when he's sleeping."

"I don't lock it anymore. I feel completely safe without it now." Kel said as he looked Bey straight in the eyes.

Bey smiled at the statement and nodded.

"Then I suppose the next thing will be to get clothes for everyone. I think that Chell can probably provide Dohn with a good supply of clothes from storage, but we'll most likely need to have some clothes made for H'Ree." Paris said in thought.

"H'Ree can share my clothes for now, and I'll take him to Blain to get measured for new clothes tomorrow." Kel said quickly.

"Who is Blain?" H'Ree asked quietly.

"He makes most of our clothes on the ship. One of his parents was experienced in making clothing, so when he's not doing his job in security, he makes clothes for people who need them." Paris said informatively.

"Yeah. He made all my clothes. He does a really good job." Kel said with a smile.

H'Ree looked down at the clothes he was wearing, then nodded at Kel with agreement.

"I'll probably be as big as Dohn in about two months, so I won't need very many." H'Ree said quietly.

"Oh, the aging thing." Bey said with a concerned look at Paris.

"Later." Paris whispered to his husband.

Angel started fussing in Bey's lap and drew everyone's attention.

"I think Angel's about ready for her dinner." Paris said with a loving smile at his daughter.

"She's not the only one." Kel said seriously.

"You're always ready for dinner, Old Man." Bey said with a teasing smile.

Dohn and H'Ree looked at Kel with question at the unusual name.

"I'm older than both of them." Kel said with a smug smile.

Dohn and H'Ree then looked at Paris and Bey with matching questioning expressions.

"It's a long story, and Angel needs to eat. Let's all go to the mess hall and we can tell you about it over dinner." Paris said as he slowly stood.

"We already ate today." Dohn said hesitantly.

Kel smiled at the statement and said, "You can eat whenever you want here. That's why we have a dining area that's open all the time. But even if you don't feel like eating, you can still come with us and sit and talk with us while we eat."

Dohn looked around the room and finally nodded.

"Get up, H'Ree, it's time for dinner." Kel said gently.

"Can we sit here like this again later?" H'Ree asked hopefully.

"Sure. I don't think we're going to be doing anything else tonight." Kel said, then looked at his parents with question.

"We're not planning on anything, but of course, if we encounter anything dangerous in space, we may be called back to duty." Paris said, then stepped into his bedroom.

A moment later he walked out of the bedroom with Angel's carrier and a diaper bag.

"Thanks for getting that, Love." Bey said with a gentle smile.

Paris winked at his husband, then made a sweeping gesture toward the door.

* * * * *

"Hi Chell, are you finally off duty?" Paris asked, as he led the way into the mess hall.

"Yes. I was just showing Brook what I had prepared for dinner for the beta crew." Chell said, as he walked away from the kitchen.

"Would you like to have dinner with us, then?" Paris asked, as he accepted Angel from Bey.

Chell looked at H'Ree and Dohn, then said, "I would be delighted to join you, that is, if you wouldn't mind if Vorik joins us too."

"Chell, any invitation to you automatically includes Vorik." Paris said, as he finally took a seat at one of the larger tables in the room.

The rest of the family settled into chairs as Bey walked toward the kitchen.

Dohn and H'Ree looked at Kel with question.

"Angel cannot eat the same food that we do. She is too young, so Dad will prepare something for her." Kel said quietly.

"We have some formula made up in the stasis unit, he'll just have to heat it. It won't take a minute." Chell said with a smile.

"You really are on top of things, Chell. I don't know how you keep up with so much at once." Paris said with sincere admiration.

"I delegate a lot. Now that I have a steady rotation of helpers in the kitchen, I just need to supervise and do the menu planning. That leaves me plenty of free time to oversee the supply room and my other duties." Chell said happily.

"Speaking of which, we are going to need to get Dohn some clothes of his own." Paris said seriously.

Chell looked at Dohn consideringly for a moment, then said, "I don't think that will be a problem. I'll need to get his measurements to be sure, but I think I can outfit him quite easily with everything he'll need, right off the shelf."

"I thought so too. H'Ree is the one who will need tailor made clothing." Paris said, as he looked at the younger boy.

"Actually, I think I might have a few things in storage that will fit him." Chell said in thought.

"Really?" Paris asked with surprise.

"Yes, the things that Kel outgrew before he started his treatments. I don't think Blain has used any of them for scrap material yet. I'll have to check to be sure."

"What treatments?" Dohn asked curiously.

Kel looked at Paris with question, not sure if he should talk about it.

"Do you want to be the one to tell them or should I?" Paris asked quietly.

"Tell them what?" Bey asked as he took his seat and sat a prepared bottle of formula on the table before him.

Paris made a 'gimme' motion with his hand, then accepted the bottle from Bey.

"The subject of Kel's treatments just came up and I thought Kel could probably explain it better than we could." Paris said, as he brought the bottle to Angel's lips.

"You know that we don't age the same way as most other humanoid species do, right?" Kel asked as he turned his attention to Dohn and H'Ree.

"Yeah. We age a lot faster than they do." H'Ree said immediately.

Kel nodded slowly, then said, "Well, they found a way to change me so I could age at the same rate as they do."

"Why?" Dohn asked cautiously.

"Because I'm a part of their family now. I want to be able to age at the same rate as they do so I can really share in their lives." Kel said carefully.

"We didn't want to mention this to you earlier because you might think that we expected you to undergo the treatments too." Bey said quietly.

"But we also didn't want you to think we were hiding something from you, so that's why we're telling you now." Paris said frankly.

Dohn looked from one man to the other and realized that they were both serious.

"It's not something that you have to think about right now. Once you've settled in and gotten comfortable with your new situation, we can talk about it if you're interested." Paris said with assurance.

"How old are you going to get?" H'Ree asked Kel curiously.

Kel smiled at H'Ree's blunt question and said, "I don't know for sure, but Aunt Janeway says that I'll probably live to be between a hundred and sixty and two hundred years old if I don't get sick or injured before that."

"Two hundred... years?" H'Ree asked with wide eyes.

"There's no way to really be sure about that. We're just making an estimate based on Human physiology." Bey said seriously.

"Does it hurt?" H'Ree asked curiously.

"No. It just made me sleepy for the first four or five times. After that I didn't feel anything." Kel said in thought.

"Except hungry." Bey said with a smile.

"Oh yeah. It made me really hungry. For about six weeks, all I wanted to do was eat." Kel said with a chuckle.

"And he had some unusual cravings too, as I recall." Chell said with a gentle smile at Kel.

"Well, from what Aunt Janeway said, my body wanted different building materials, vitamins and minerals and stuff, to adjust to the changes, so it caused me to crave what it needed." Kel said with a considering look.

"If you two decide to have the treatments, just let me know in advance so I can prepare the foods you're likely to crave. I don't think any of my helpers will know what to do if you come to them asking for something sour and chalky." Chell said with a chuckle.

"Or cheesy and bitter." Kel said with a fond smile at Chell.

"Yeah I remember; that one was fun." Chell said with a nod.

"I want to do it." H'Ree said seriously.

Paris and Bey looked at each other with concern.

"What?" H'Ree asked, as he looked from one to the other.

"It's too soon for you to make this kind of decision, H'Ree. You were just rescued today and now you have come to live with a whole new group of people. Let's give it a week, then we can talk about it again, if you're still interested." Paris said seriously.

"Why do I have to wait? You let me decide to come with you, why won't you let me decide this too?" H'Ree asked as he looked around the table.

"Because this is something that can't be undone." Bey said quietly.

H'Ree turned his curious gaze on Bey, silently asking for more of an explanation.

"Let me see if I can explain it. If you changed your mind right now or even in a week, and decided that you really did want to go back to the Ocampan home world, it might not be easy, but it could be done. But if you changed your mind about having the treatments after they had started, we couldn't reverse it. If you make this decision, the consequences are permanent and those consequences will effect the rest of your life, maybe even two hundred years of life. Imagine living for two hundred years, feeling that you'd made a mistake." Bey said gently.

"I think they're right, H'Ree. There's no reason we have to do this right now, but there are very good reasons for us not to jump into it blindly. If you really want to do it, maybe we could learn more about the procedure to see just what it is and how we would be changed." Dohn said carefully.

"That's a very good idea. I'm sure that Janeway would be able to answer those questions for you and could show you exactly how the process works." Paris said with a smile of approval at Dohn.

"Okay, I guess. I still think I should be allowed to decide right now if I want to, but I'll wait." H'Ree said with resignation.

"We're just trying to make sure you have all the time you need, and all the information as well, so you can make an informed decision." Bey said with a gentle smile.

"Sorry it took so long, but there are six of you." A woman said, as she carried a heavily laden tray to the table.

"I would have helped you, if you'd asked." Chell said quickly.

"One more person, and I might have. But I've got this." The woman said honestly.

"Brook, I'd like you to meet Dohn and H'Ree. This is Brook, she works in the kitchen when Chell is off duty." Kel said formally.

Brook smiled and said, "My formal name is Brooks Celes, but I go by Brook."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Brook. My formal name is Dohn, son of Thoran." Dohn said as he stood and bowed to her.

"And I'm H'Ree, son of Shalah. This is good." H'Ree said, then took another bite of his food.

"I'm glad you like it, but Chell is the one who prepared the meal, I simply served it." Brook said modestly.

"I don't recall making this cake." Chell said, as he glanced at Brook curiously.

"Well, I did do a little cooking." Brook said with a chuckle.

H'Ree took a bite of the cake, then his eyes went wide with wonder.

He tried to say something, but his mouth was too full for him to speak. So he patted Dohn on the arm urgently, then pointed at the cake.

Dohn hesitantly took a small bite of the cake, watching H'Ree out of the corner of his eye to see that he didn't choke.

When the taste finally registered, Dohn looked at Brook with amazement and said, "This is the most wonderful thing I have ever tasted."

Brook giggled and said, "I'm glad you like it. Chell has been teaching me how to cook."

"The student has surpassed the teacher. You blended the flavors perfectly." Chell said with a huge smile at her.

Brook saw another group enter the room and hurried to say, "I have other guests to attend to, enjoy your meals."

Everyone watched as Brook hurried away.

Dohn and H'Ree watched as the new group sat down at a smaller table.

"It won't take long for you to get to know everyone." Bey said quietly.

Dohn looked at Bey curiously for a moment, then nodded and turned his attention back to his food.

"Do you need for me to find accommodations for our new guests? I happen to have two cabins that are just about ready to be moved into." Chell said with a smile.

"They'll be staying with us for a few days, until they get used to being here. After that, maybe." Paris said consideringly, then he set Angel's empty bottle aside.

"Let me burp her so you can eat." Bey said gently.

Paris handed Angel to his husband, then started to eat his meal.

"I suppose that's a good idea. But if you two decide that you'd like to have your own quarters, just come to me and I'll get you taken care of." Chell said happily.

"Thank you, Chell, I will." Dohn said as he looked at Chell carefully.

The door opened and Chell smiled when he saw who it was.

"I had started to think that you were going to be in Engineering all night, Love." Chell said with a smile of delight as he stood.

"There were a few minor systems problems to take care of after using the main weapon. I think we have everything worked out now." Vorik said as he hugged Chell happily.

"Vorik, this is Dohn and H'Ree. They'll be staying on the ship with us." Chell said, as he led Vorik to sit beside him at the table.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I hope you like it here." Vorik said gently.

"I already like it here. I'm glad I decided to stay. I like your ears." H'Ree said quickly, then turned his full attention back to his food.

Vorik smiled at the statement, then turned to Paris and asked, "So, are we on course to the Alpha quadrant?"

"No, not yet. We're actually headed away at the moment." Paris said seriously.

"Really? May I ask why?" Vorik asked with interest.

"There is a considerable concentration of Kazon vessels assembled in the most direct path. So we decided that it would be better to get out of this system as quickly as possible, then head toward the Alpha quadrant when we're ready to hit high warp." Paris said casually.

"I'm surprised that you're not on the bridge then. I would think you would want to be piloting the ship until we were safely underway." Vorik said thoughtfully.

Paris smiled and said, "If I had a choice in the matter, I probably would be, but Janeway was very insistent about us sticking to our duty schedules unless we're urgently needed for something."

"And our family needs you at least as much as the ship does." Bey added with a gentle loving smile at his husband.

"Right." Paris said with a wink.

"Paris and Bey, report to the bridge." Sounded loudly over the comm system.

"There, you see what happens when you talk about it?" Bey said with a chuckle.

"That was Kim. She probably picked up something on her scans. I doubt that we'll be gone very long. Will you boys be okay while we check?" Bey asked, as he handed Angel to Kel.

"We'll be just fine. Call us if you need us to do anything." Kel said with a bright and loving smile at his sister.

"Angel will probably be ready for sleep by the time you get back to the cabin. So just lay her down in her bed when you get there, and you should leave the bedroom door open, so you can hear her if she wakes up and needs anything." Bey said, as he started toward the door.

He stopped in the doorway and turned back toward the boys. "Oh yeah, I just thought of something; you could hold her for a few minutes, rocking her gently like I sometimes do. That reclining chair is also a rocking chair. Rocking her will most likely lull her to sleep pretty quickly, and she will nod

off almost as soon as you lay her down. She is so sweet and such a good baby."

"Don't worry, I'll get her to go to sleep... And I'll be sure to call if I have any problems or questions. You guys better go." Kel said with amusement at his Dad's reluctance to leave Angel.

"We'll see you later." Paris said quickly, before taking hold of Bey's arm and guiding him out the door.

Chapter 14

"You don't seem concerned by your parents' departure." Dohn said, as he followed Kel and H'Ree out of the mess hall.

"I'm not. You'd just have to know Kim to understand." Kel said casually.

"What do you mean?" Dohn asked, as the group approached the lift.

"She's just like that. If she needs something, she'll call and ask for it. It doesn't matter to her if you're off duty or on lunch or asleep." Kel said frankly, then pressed the button on the lift to take them down one level.

"So she does not observe the same standards of courtesy and conduct as others on this ship?" Dohn asked carefully.

The doors of the lift opened and Kel considered the question for a moment as he led the way off the lift.

"She does and she doesn't. I think she tries to follow most of the rules, but some of them are just too confusing to her, so she does those things her own way." Kel said in distant thought.

"Would this be an example of how people of differing species make allowances to accommodate the variations in behavior?" Dohn asked carefully.

"Yeah. We all know that that's the way that Kim acts, so no one is upset by it. She doesn't expect us to act like her and we don't expect her to act like us." Kel said with a smile, as he pressed the button to open the cabin door.

"Go ahead and sit down. I'm going to try putting Angel to bed. If she starts fussing, then we'll try rocking her." Kel said as he walked across the room.

"Will you sit with me Dohn?" H'Ree asked hopefully.

Dohn looked at H'Ree curiously, then saw that he was indicating the recliner.

"Sure. Come on." Dohn said with a smile, as he took a seat in the comfortable chair.

H'Ree snuggled into Dohn's side, then said, "Make it go back."

Dohn leaned down and pushed the lever forward to recline the chair.

"I might fall asleep like this." Dohn said peacefully as he relaxed in the soft chair.

"Me too." H'Ree said, as he snuggled even closer.

Kel walked out of his parents' bedroom to see the two boys snuggled together in the recliner.

"I think your beds are both ready if you want to go to sleep." Kel said quietly.

"Do we have to go in there?" H'Ree asked irritably.

Kel smiled and said, "No. You can stay right there if you want to. I just wanted you to know that there are beds available if either of you want to use them."

"I like it right here." H'Ree said, as he closed his eyes.

Dohn noticed that Kel was looking at him and raised his eyebrows in question.

"Nothing." Kel said quietly, then looked away in deep thought.

* * * * *

"What's going on Kim?" Paris asked as he hurried onto the bridge, followed closely by Bey.

"Look at these sensor readings." Kim said, as she indicated the main monitor on her control panel.

"It looks like a sensor echo." Bey said curiously.

Kim remained silent as she watched their inspection.

"Yes. But an echo of what?" Paris said carefully.

"Do you think it might be a wormhole aperture?" Bey asked as he moved a little closer to look at the sensor readings.

"No. Whatever this is, it isn't naturally occurring. Look at the cyclical redundancy ratio, that's artificially generated." Paris said carefully.

"That was also my conclusion." Kim said quietly.

"Do you have any idea of what it might be?" Paris asked in thought.

"I have insufficient information to form a theory. But the fact that this... anomaly, exists seems sufficient reason to take pause and investigate." Kim said carefully.

"What is it about this thing that's making me think 'wormhole'?" Bey asked carefully.

"Wishful thinking?" Paris asked with a quick smile at Bey.

After a chuckle, Bey said, "Besides that."

Paris looked more closely at the readings, then said, "Maybe it's the general configuration. This... whatever it is, seems to have the general properties of an aperture, but Kim is right, it's not a wormhole."

"What else could it be?" Bey asked distantly.

"Does the computer have anything useful to add?" Paris asked in thought.

"Our computer has an eclectic mix of basic information that we were able to scavenge from the computers in the ship graveyard. Although all the information that could be retrieved is intact, it is not possible to integrate much of the information without common frames of reference. Of that information that can be accessed, I can find no match to this phenomena." Kim said frankly.

"If she could, we wouldn't be here." Bey said as he gave Paris a playful nudge.

Paris chuckled and said, "Right. Then let's look at what we know... it's outside the Ocampan system, it's artificial, it has some vague similarities to a wormhole..."

"When you put it like that, it sounds like it could be a mass transportation link of some kind." Bey said carefully.

"How do you mean?" Kim asked with interest as she turned in her chair.

"In Humanoid societies, it's typical to congregate into groups like cities or towns. Those towns need to be connected by some sort of mass transportation link. Something like roads or designated thruway passages where everyone agrees not to obstruct them so everyone can use them for travel. If you expand that reasoning to an interplanetary scale, this looks like it could be an entrance to a mass transportation link." Bey said carefully.

"That is a rather large assumption to make based on so few facts." Kim said carefully.

"That's why we're here isn't it? If logical analysis could have given you the answer, you'd already have it." Paris said in defense of his husband.

"I thought a different perspective on the situation might provide added insights." Kim said noncommittally.

Paris and Bey shared an amused look, then looked at the sensor readings for more clues.

"If we were to work under the assumption that this was a transportation link as you suggest, how would we access it?" Kim asked carefully.

Bey considered for a moment, then asked, "If we were using the original sensor configuration on the Kazon ship, would we be able to see this thing?"

"No. Kazon sensors do not have the acuity to scan in this range. Even Federation sensors would overlook this, unless they were specifically tuned to detect this variant frequency." Kim said frankly.

"Then how are we seeing it?" Paris asked curiously.

Kim considered for a moment, then said, "The Amalgam's sensors were constructed in the same manner as the rest of the ship, with component parts scavenged from the ship graveyard. One of those ships must have been designed to scan specifically in this frequency range."

"If there's some way that we can find out which ship this scanning array came from, we could check it's computer information and maybe come up with a way to use this thing." Paris said seriously.

"It could take a number of hours, perhaps days, to retrieve that information if, in fact, it even exists." Kim said in a slow, considering voice.

"If this is really a link to a mass transit network of some kind, it might mean that we could catch up with Voyager in a matter of months rather than a matter of years." Paris said frankly.

"I will begin the records search immediately." Kim said without hesitation.

"Is there anything we can do to speed up the process?" Paris asked cautiously.

"No. I will call upon the services of those who worked on modifying and installing the sensors. Until we can locate the source of this portion of the scanning array, there is little more to be done." Kim said carefully.

"Call us if there is anything we can do to help. I don't like hanging out here in the middle of open space." Paris said seriously.

"Agreed. Perhaps we could use your husband's method of cloaking to make our presence less obvious." Kim said with a speculative look at Paris.

After a moment to consider, Paris nodded and asked, "Who did Janeway name as duty officer for the Beta shift?"

"Chapman." Kim said as she glanced at Doyle Chapman at the helm station.

Paris nodded, then turned and said, "Chapman, notify all stations that we're going to be going to minimal power and running silent until further notice. Non-essential parts of the ship are to be evacuated and powered down. All communications will be text only."

"Yes sir. Right away." Chapman said quickly.

"Can you think of anything else?" Paris asked as he glanced at his husband.

"The engine. We need to do a full shutdown. Otherwise we'll be broadcasting our presence to anyone within two light-years." Bey said hesitantly.

"I think Janeway will want to be the one to make that decision. I'll go talk to her before we take that step. Will you tell the boys what's going on so they don't get too scared?" Paris asked with concern.

"I think Kel will recognize what we're doing, but I'll go down to help him explain to Dohn and H'Ree." Bey said as he gave Paris a quick hug.

"I'll see you back in the cabin." Paris said, then gave Bey a quick kiss.

"Love you." Bey whispered.

"Love you too." Paris said, then broke the hug to find Janeway.

* * * * *

As Angel, Dohn and H'Ree all slept, Kel found himself staring at the boys and dreaming about what possibilities might lay ahead for them.

He hoped that Dohn and H'Ree would choose to have the genetic alteration treatments so that they could live out their lives together. It would hurt

him to watch them grow old and die when he was barely reaching the beginning of his adulthood.

The realization came upon him that this must be the same thing that his fathers were feeling when they tried to find a way to slow his natural aging process. Because they loved him they wanted to be able to spend their lives with him.

Kel focused on Dohn and considered his own feelings.

Dohn was certainly attractive. His features were pleasing to look at and his personality seemed to range from timid and vulnerable to strong and protective.

Kel wondered if he was in love.

Probably not.

Not yet.

But Dohn had all the qualities that Kel found attractive and if it turned out that Dohn began to show some interest in return...

Maybe someday...

The lights dimming suddenly broke Kel out of his thoughts. He turned in time to see a text message appear on the terminal screen by the bedroom door.

"All Hands. All non-essential systems will be shut down and power usage will be reduced to minimum consumption until further notice. Communications will be limited to text only and should be limited to vital ship's services. Please discontinue use of all non-essential power. Thank you."

Kel walked to his parents' bedroom and turned off the light, then the door.

Next he walked to the bathroom and reduced the light to a barely visible dimness, then discontinued power to the doors.

He locked open the doors to the two other bedrooms then opened the door of the cabin and shut the door power off.

Finally he adjusted the light in the living room to about half illumination before going back to sit on the couch.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Old Man?" Bey asked quietly from the doorway.

"I'm fine. I have everything shut down except for this light and the one in the bathroom." Kel said quietly.

After peeking into the bedroom to check on Angel, Bey walked to the couch and took a seat beside Kel.

"It's just like being back on the ship before we came to the station." Kel said as he snuggled into Bey's side.

"It's like that, but it's so much better. Now we don't just have each other. We have our whole family here who love us like crazy." Bey said as he wrapped Kel in a warm hug.

"Yeah, but it's nice to be like this with you again for a little bit, just the two of us running at minimum power with only each other to talk to." Kel said in a dreamy whisper.

"You're right. That time we spent on the bridge will always be one of my most precious memories." Bey said as he gazed off distantly.

"Back then, I thought I was going to follow you back to your people and you would be my new master. And that was the happiest future that I could imagine for myself. I didn't have any other dreams." Kel said quietly.

"I didn't realize at the time just how fragile you were. Actually, I'm glad I didn't know or I might have made some other decisions and I wouldn't want for one single thing to have turned out differently." Bey said honestly.

"Me too. I tried to act strong so you'd want to keep me." Kel said with a chuckle.

Bey leaned in and gave Kel a quick kiss on the top of the head.

After a long silent moment, Kel quietly asked, "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"How did you know you were in love?" Kel asked quietly.

Bey smiled and said, "It wasn't that hard for me. You really need to talk to your father about that one."

"Why?" Kel asked curiously.

"Because he fell in love with me first. I liked him from the moment I met him and I admired him as soon as I got to know him but... I think he loved

me from the moment I opened my eyes. I don't know what he saw when he looked into my eyes the first time, but whatever it was, there was no denying it." Bey said distantly.

"So when did you know you loved him too?" Kel asked quietly.

"It's kind of hard to explain it since you've never lived in the Federation." Bey said hesitantly.

"Well, neither have you." Kel said with a grin.

"True... but I have the memories of some people who lived in the Federation, and so do all the others. The thing is, everyone else, the Humans, the Bajorans, the Bolians even the Vulcans were all enemies of the Cardassians." Bey said frankly.

Kel sat up and looked at Bey with surprise.

The hum of the engines stopped and the room became completely quiet.

"What happened?" Kel whispered with concern.

"They shut down the engines so no other ships will detect us. And you don't have to whisper, sound doesn't carry in space, only energy signatures." Bey said gently.

"Oh, yeah. What were we talking about?" Kel asked slowly.

"One of my genetic donors was a spy on Chakotay's ship." Bey said and coaxed Kel to snuggle against him again.

"Did Paris know that?" Kel asked as his mind raced.

"I'm pretty sure he knew the moment he saw me." Bey said absently, then continued, "So when all these Federation people woke up and figured out who and what they were, they looked in my maturation tank and... surprise! One of their worst enemies was laying there asleep and defenseless."

"I'm surprised they didn't kill you in your sleep... or that they ever let you wake up." Kel said in thought.

"I know. It was your father who was responsible for that. He took responsibility for me and made sure that no one hurt me. He protected me and had confidence in me and after a lot of hard work, made me see my own worth." Bey said with a gentle smile.

"I didn't know that. I just thought you were another member of the crew." Kel said in wonder.

Bey chuckled and said, "No. At least not at first. Paris loved me and never gave up on me. Finally the day came when I realized that if he had so much faith in me, that maybe he was right and all I had to do is accept that regardless of my species or genetic donors, I was free to be whoever I wanted to be. And I wanted to be the person that Paris thought I was."

"So when did you know you were in love?" Kel asked as he snuggled tighter into Bey's side.

"I guess the moment that I really knew for sure, without any shadow of a doubt, was when I was stealing the shuttle to try and find us a ship." Bey said with a chuckle.

"Are you serious?" Kel asked with wonder.

"I think I loved him before that, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't until I was willing to give up everything to get him a ship that I really knew it in my heart. To tell you the truth, I didn't want a ship. I don't particularly want to go back to the Federation." Bey finished with a chuckle.

"You don't?" Kel asked with surprise.

"No. There's nothing for me there. I'm a half Cardassian with a Human husband. There's no place for me in the Federation or on Cardassia. There might not even be a place for me on Voyager if we can catch up to them." Bey said frankly.

"I didn't think of that." Kel said grimly.

Bey kissed Kel on the top of the head and said, "We don't need to worry about it. We've got your father watching over us so we'll be fine. Trust me when I say that he'll never let anyone hurt us."

Kel smiled as he said, "*That*, I understand."

* * * * *

"How are my favorite guys in the whole universe doing?" Paris asked cheerfully as he walked into the open cabin door.

"Shhh. The boys are asleep." Bey said quickly, then motioned for Paris to join them on the couch.

"How is Angel?" Paris asked more quietly as he took a seat between Bey and Kel.

"She's sound asleep in her crib." Bey said as he snuggled against Paris' side.

"Yeah, she went right to sleep after dinner." Kel said as he hugged his father gently.

"It looks like she's not the only one." Paris said with a smile as he looked at the boys asleep in the recliner.

"A full belly and a comfortable chair can do that." Bey said with a chuckle.

"When did you know you loved Dad?" Kel asked his father carefully.

"What brought this up?" Paris asked with surprise.

"I just wanted to know. That's all." Kel said evasively.

Paris looked over at the recliner, then back at Kel before saying, "I guess from the first moment that I met him. When he opened his eyes in that maturation pod it was like I could see everything he was thinking and feeling. I could see the hopelessness and the pain his memories caused him and I knew that Bey had to be a wonderful and genuinely good person to feel such despair over things that he didn't even do. After that, the big challenge was to get him to see the wonderful person that I did..."

Paris leaned down to whisper, "He fought me a little bit on that part."

Kel giggled at the statement, then said, "Thanks for telling me. I just wanted to know in case it happens to me someday."

"Give it time Kel. He has a lot of new stuff to sort through before he'll be ready to deal with his feelings. Just be honest with him and be there when he needs you and if it's meant to happen, it will." Paris said with assurance.

Kel looked at his father with surprise for a moment, then snuggled against him again and said, "Okay. I will."

* * * * *

"What happened?" Dohn asked as he blinked his eyes.

"You fell asleep in the chair." Kel said quietly from the couch.

Dohn looked around at the dimly lit room and noticed that all the doors were open.

"We're running the ship at minimum power. It's nothing to worry about, we're not in danger." Kel said quietly.

"Why are we at minimum power?" Dohn asked as he came more awake.

"The ship's sensors found something that could turn out to be a shortcut to find Voyager. So we're waiting here until we can find out if we can use it or not." Kel said as he sat up on the couch.

"Where are your parents?" Dohn asked as he looked around.

"In their room. They have to work in the morning so they went to bed." Kel said gently.

"Do you need to sleep too?" Dohn asked quietly.

"No. My job is to take care of Angel while my parents are working. She sleeps a lot during the day so I can sleep when she does if I need to." Kel said with a small smile.

"If you'll show me what to do, I can watch her while you sleep." Dohn said seriously.

"Thanks, I'll let you know if I need your help." Kel said as he stood and stretched.

"Would you take H'Ree? I need to use the toilet." Dohn said shyly.

"Sure. Hand him to me and I'll put him in my bed." Kel said quietly.

Dohn carefully shifted the recliner to its upright position, then gently lifted H'Ree and handed him to Kel.

"When you're done I'll be in here."

* * * * *

When Dohn returned to the living room, he saw Kel standing at the doorway to his bedroom.

"Is H'Ree sleeping well?" Dohn asked as he approached.

Kel turned with a slight smile on his face and said, "Yeah. I was just watching him to be sure he didn't wake up."

Dohn looked in the door and smiled at the contented look on H'Ree's face as he slept.

Kel turned away and said, "Why don't I show you your room so you can go to bed when you're ready."

Dohn didn't answer except to follow Kel to the next room.

"I've turned the power off to the door while we're running at minimal power, but I'll turn it back on for you now so you can lock the door when you're ready.

"How do I activate the lock?" Dohn asked cautiously.

"Just press the red button. When you're ready to unlock the door you just press the green one. There's a way to put in entry codes, but you can learn about that later. You won't need it now." Kel said seriously as he restored power to the door controls.

"If you open the panel, there's a hand actuator that will allow you to manually unlock the door if it loses power. Just pull the lever, then you can slide the door open easily." Kel said as he demonstrated opening the control panel.

"That seems easy enough to remember." Dohn said seriously.

"There's one other thing that I wanted to tell you when H'Ree wasn't around." Kel said in a quieter tone.

Dohn looked at Kel with question.

"When I came here, I sometimes had problems with nightmares about what the Kazons had done to me. I would wake up feeling very afraid and alone. I just wanted you to know that I'm going to leave my door opened so that if you wake up during the night, you'll be welcomed in my room." Kel said carefully.

"I am sure that I will be fine." Dohn said seriously.

"I hope so. But just remember that I went through the same things that you did and I know how it feels. If you wake up feeling scared or alone, H'Ree and I will be in the next room. You can wake me up if you need to talk, or you can just crawl into bed with us. You don't have to be alone if you don't want to be." Kel said seriously.

Dohn stood silently for a moment, then quietly said, "I will remember. Thank you Kel. Thank you for saving me and listening and accepting me."

Kel was surprised when Dohn leaned in and pulled him into a firm hug.

After a moment to enjoy the tight embrace, Kel quietly said, "Thank you for choosing to stay. I know it wasn't an easy decision, but I really think it was the best one. Just please promise me one thing."

"What would you like me to promise?" Dohn asked hesitantly as he released Kel from the hug.

"Please just promise that you'll try to be happy. If there's anything wrong or bothering you, don't keep it to yourself. I'll do anything I can to help you."

Kel said gently as he looked up into Dohn's eyes.

"I promise."

Chapter 15

"Kel. Wake up." A voice intruded on Kel's peaceful slumber.

"Dad?" Kel asked as he cracked open one eye.

"We're about to leave for work now and I need for you to watch after Angel." Bey said gently.

As Kel came more awake, he noticed that he was being snuggled from both sides by H'Ree and Dohn.

"I'm awake, now." Kel said with a contented smile.

"Have a good day, son. Just call if you need any help making the guys more comfortable." Bey said with a loving glance at the three boys in the bed.

Kel fought to keep his giggles quiet as he said, "I don't think they can get much more comfortable, but I'll call you if we need anything."

"I'll leave it up to you to get these guys settled in." Bey said with a smile, then handed Kel his sister who was sound asleep.

Kel smiled down at the little girl in his arms. He looked up as Bey leaned in to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Kel whispered, then watched as Bey left the room.

Kel rested back with his sister in his arms and a warm body snuggled against him on both sides. He was perfectly content to simply drift in the peaceful moment.

* * * * *

"I have retrieved the information on the phenomenon we are facing." Kim said quietly as she approached Paris' workstation.

"What did you find?" Paris asked with immediate interest.

"Something that concerns me greatly." Kim said frankly, allowing her Vulcan facade to slip slightly.

"So it's not an artificial wormhole?" Paris asked cautiously.

"Actually, according to the information we have just translated, it is a peripheral access to a hub of artificial wormholes. Most of them would carry us away from the Alpha quadrant, but there are three that will take us roughly on Voyager's most likely projected course." Kim said seriously.

"That sounds great! So what is it about this that concerns you?" Paris asked curiously, then noticed that Bey had leaned in to hear their conversation.

"I recall an old Earth saying about when things appear to be 'too good to be true'. While this transit hub access appears to be exactly what we need to reach Voyager in a reasonable amount of time, it could also easily be some sort of trap. We don't have the ability to scan past the aperture. A probe wouldn't be able to transmit any information back to us once it entered. The information we retrieved from the wreckage database could easily be a lure to cause someone to do what we're considering. If we decide to enter this wormhole, there is no way to know where, or if, we will emerge." Kim quietly finished.

After a moment, Paris turned to Bey and asked, "Any ideas?"

"No. If we can't find a way to gather more information, then our choices seem to be, do it or don't." Bey said frankly.

"I concur. If we are in agreement, I will present these findings to Janeway." Kim said seriously.

"Yeah. We'll be ready if she wants to call a conference." Paris said with a concerned look at Bey.

Kim accepted the answer, then walked across the bridge to Janeway's station.

* * * * *

Dohn opened his eyes suddenly, then looked around in panic.

"You're safe. Remember? You're on the Amalgam." Kel said quietly.

"Oh. Yes. That's right." Dohn said slowly, then asked, "How did I get here?"

"I don't know. You went to sleep in your own bed. But I don't mind that you're here. It really feels nice." Kel said honestly.

Dohn seemed to think about it for a moment, then reluctantly admitted, "Yes. It is nice."

"I think we should wake up H'Ree so we can all go and have breakfast. It's just about Angel's feeding time and she starts crying when she gets hungry." Kel said honestly.

"Would we have time to... clean? I forget the word. The thing with the water." Dohn said with difficulty.

"Shower." Kel said with a smile. "I know, it's a strange concept. Yes. You can go and shower now while I wake up H'Ree."

"Thank you." Dohn said quietly, then hurried out of the room.

Kel wasn't sure exactly what Dohn was thanking him for, but he didn't think much of it as he woke H'Ree.

* * * * *

"Paris. Can I talk with you?" Janeway asked as she approached.

"Of course, you're the leader." He said with his best 'flyboy' grin.

She smiled slightly, then said, "I'm calling a meeting of the entire crew in the mess hall. Considering where we are, there's no way we can leave the bridge completely unmanned, and since we're playing dead, the person on the bridge won't be able to attend the meeting by video link."

"I understand what you're about to ask, and I'll stay. Bey knows how I feel about things, so if there's a vote, he has mine." Paris said gently.

"Good. Keep a close watch on those Kazon ships. If any of them seem to notice us, don't hesitate to break radio silence. It won't matter at that point." Janeway said frankly.

"We'll have a good hour to react if they start heading this way." Paris assured her.

Janeway gave his shoulder a quick, reassuring squeeze, then returned to her station to compose her message for the crew.

* * * * *

"Good morning, H'Ree. Did you sleep well?" Kel asked gently.

"Yeah. It was really nice." Kel said happily. "I woke up once or twice and it was really great when you were there. That made me happy."

"I'm glad. Having you there made me happy, too." Kel said quietly.

"Where's Dohn? I thought he was here." H'Ree asked thoughtfully.

"He *was* here. He's in taking a shower, right now." Kel said with a smile.

"A shower? Can I do that, too?" H'Ree asked excitedly.

"Shhh. You'll wake Angel." Kel said quietly, then said, "You can take a shower if you like. You can either go in and ask Dohn if you can take a shower with him, or you can wait until he's finished and take one by yourself. Whatever you like."

"Can't I take a shower with you?" H'Ree asked curiously.

"Yeah. That'll be fine, as long as I can get Dohn to watch Angel while we're in there." Kel said frankly.

"Let's do that." H'Ree said with his excitement seeming to want to bubble over.

"Get up and pick out some clean clothes. We can't run the fresher while the ship is at minimal power." Kel said honestly.

"Is that why it's so quiet?" H'Ree asked curiously.

"Yes. It's nothing to worry about. We're not in any danger or anything. We're just being quiet so we can investigate something and decide what we're going to do next." Kel said frankly.

"Okay." H'Ree said happily, then held up a blue shirt and asked, "Is this okay?"

"I think that'll look great on you." Kel said with a tender smile.

* * * * *

Bey watched as people entered the mess hall by ones and twos. He smiled when he saw Kel walk in with Dohn and H'Ree at his side and Angel on his back in her child carrier.

"What's going on? The text message said that everyone on the ship is supposed to be here." Kel asked quietly.

"That's right. Paris has to stay on the bridge, but everyone else is going to be here." Bey said seriously, then turned to Dohn and H'Ree and said, "You guys look nice. It seems like you really enjoy that shower."

"Yes. It's the most wonderful, decadent thing I've ever felt." Dohn said with a smile.

"I'm glad you enjoy it." Bey said honestly, then looked down to H'Ree and asked, "How are you doing today?"

"I'm hungry." He said frankly.

Bey chuckled, then said, "You can have something to eat right after this meeting. I don't think it will take very long."

Just then, Janeway moved to the front of the room and raised her arms.

"Please, everyone. If you'll give me a moment of your attention, all your questions will be answered." She said in a firm voice that let a little bit of her Klingon growl slip free.

As the crowd quieted, she continued, "First, I'd like to introduce everyone to Dohn and H'Ree. They were some of the Ocampan we rescued during our battle with the Kazons."

Nearly everyone in the gathering followed her gesture to the two Ocampan boys who were standing with Kel.

"Now, the reason for this gathering." Janeway said, drawing everyone's attention back to her. "We've found a conduit. In the simplest terms, it's an artificial wormhole. We've retrieved information from one of the scavenged computers that tells us that this wormhole can take us to a point near where we expect Voyager to be."

Silence fell over the room as everyone digested that statement.

"It's time for us to make a decision. We can play it safe and set our course for the Alpha quadrant, or we can take a chance and take the wormhole, which could easily be a trap." Janeway said frankly.

Murmurs filled the room. Finally, one voice spoke up, "Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith!"

Janeway smiled as she countered, "And sometimes it's important to do what's safe."

Bey was surprised when Kel stepped forward, so that he could address Janeway directly.

In a voice loud enough for all to hear, Kel said, "If we don't take the chance, we will likely spend the rest of our lives trying to reach Voyager. We will eat, sleep, and live that purpose every single day."

Kel looked around to see that everyone was listening, then continued, "And every single day, we will know that we passed up an opportunity to fulfill that purpose."

"That's a good point, Kel." Janeway said as she gave him a smile.

Kel returned the smile, then walked back to stand with his family.

"I was elected to be your leader. That means that I've been given the honor and the responsibility of making decisions like this. But I feel that in this situation, you should be aware of the decision being made and have an opportunity to voice your opinions." Janeway said frankly.

"I have a question." A man's voice said from near the back of the room.

There were a few gasps and the level of tension in the room went up dramatically.

"Who's that?" H'Ree asked curiously, noticing the reactions.

"That's Carey... Janeway's fiancée." Bey said quietly, then added, "He sometimes makes group meetings difficult."

H'Ree nodded and watched to see what was going to happen next.

"I think we all know what your decision is going to be. I mean, that's why we elected you leader. It's not for your 'sparkling personality', it's because we trust you to get us home." Carey said firmly, then added, "So I've only got one question."

"What's that?" Janeway asked hesitantly.

"Since this might be a trap that will kill us all, would you marry me 'before' we enter the wormhole?" Carey asked hopefully.

Janeway smiled, then said, "Sure. Anytime you want."

"Everyone's here. What about now?" Carey asked simply.

"Who should we have officiate?" Janeway asked as she looked around.

"Kim can do it. I'm sure she's got at least one wedding ceremony kicking around in that big Vulcan brain of hers." Carey said frankly.

Janeway looked at Kim with question and received a nod as a response.

"You guys should probably think about what you want to do." Bey said to the boys. "We're still close enough to the Ocampan homeworld that we can take you back there if that's what you want."

Kel looked at Dohn, then at H'Ree before saying, "We've already made that decision. All along it's been a choice between living in safe slavery or risky freedom. If the wormhole leads nowhere, at least I'll know that I went in of my own free will."

Bey looked at Dohn to see if he agreed with Kel's words.

"Yesterday was the first time I ever did anything courageous. I think, today will be the second."

Bey smiled at the words, then looked to see if H'Ree was following what was going on.

"I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff over a deep chasm. The voices of my people are calling to me telling me to step back. But the voice of my mama is telling me to spread my arms and fly." H'Ree said as he looked up at Bey.

Bey smiled and pulled the three boys into a hug.

* * * * *

"We gather in body, in spirit, in heart, in will and in intent." Kim said to the assembly.

"The first step to civilization is the establishment of family units. They redefine us as being greater than our individual selves."

"To that end, we are here to witness the union of Janeway Torres and Carey Winger."

"Let all assembled be aware and spread the word that this union creates a family, the very foundation of our society. Any who would attempt to cause disharmony or to break this union should be reviled and driven out. Because there is no place for such a person among those who value decency and harmony."

"Janeway Torres. Please state your vows to Carey Winger before this gathering so we all may understand the strength of your bond."

After an uncertain glance at Kim, Janeway looked to Carey and said, "Others look past the part of me that is Klingon. You look directly at it, and you're not afraid. You're not intimidated by my strength. My vow to you is that I will remain strong for you and allow you to be strong for me, so we can unite as equals."

"Carey Winger. Please state your vows to Janeway Torres before this gathering so we may all understand the strength of your bond."

"I promise to talk back, to take issue and to fight with you every single day. Because you deserve someone with his own mind and with a backbone. Your

strength inspires me, and I'll do everything in my power to be strong enough to inspire you." Carey said frankly.

"So shall it be." Kim said reverently.

Silence fell over the gathering and people started looking around, silently asking each other if it was over.

Bey looked at the boys and noticed that Kel had an arm loosely draped around Dohn's waist and Dohn had an arm around Kel's shoulders.

Suddenly, Kim called out, "Join me in a cheer of celebration for the newly married couple. Janeway Winger-Torres and Carey Winger-Torres!"

Everyone in attendance let loose a lusty cheer for the newly married couple.

After a time, the cheer finally dissolved into laughter.

"I need to get back to the bridge. Are you boys going to be okay?" Bey asked with concern.

"We're fine." Kel assured him as he worked to get the child carrier off his back.

"Call me if you need anything." Bey said as he hugged his way down the line of boys, ending with Kel.

"You know I will." Kel said indulgently.

Bey leaned down and gave Angel a gentle kiss on the forehead.

The boys watched as Bey gave them one last, reluctant look before leaving.

"Every time he has to leave us it seems to be with such unwillingness, that I feel bad that he has to go." Dohn said as he looked at the doorway.

"You should look at his mind. It actually hurts him to leave." Kel said quietly.

"You're not supposed to read others without their permission." Dohn said firmly.

"I don't. Sometimes it just happens without me meaning to, mostly when I'm tired." Kel said as he checked to see how his sister was doing.

"Can we eat?" H'Ree asked hopefully.

Kel looked around and spotted Chell.

"If you'll go tell Chell that we're hungry, I bet that he'll make sure that we get some food." Kel said gently.

H'Ree spotted Chell, then happily ran away.

As Kel took care of his sister, Dohn watched with admiration.

* * * * *

"*Bey to Kel.*" Sounded over the intercom, which startled Kel, since they had been running silent for so long.

Kel walked to the comm station by the door and said, "Kel to Bey."

"*Are Dohn and H'Ree with you?*" Bey asked quietly.

"Yes. We're still in the mess hall. Did you need for us to do something?" Kel asked with concern at the tone in his dad's voice.

"*Right now we're starting up the engines. As soon as we're up to full power, we'll be entering the wormhole.*" Bey said nervously. "*Your father and I would like it very much if you'd bring Angel and the boys up here to the bridge. Whatever is going to happen. We'd like to face it as a family.*"

"Yeah. We'll be right there." Kel said quietly.

"*I love you, Old Man.*" Bey said gently.

"I love you too, Dad." Kel said tenderly, then shut off the comm.

* * * * *

Kel walked onto the bridge with Angel slung on his back and Dohn and H'Ree following a step behind.

"When are you going to do it?" Kel asked nervously.

"Kim is negotiating with the wormhole gate interface. As soon as she can get it to open, we'll be going through." Paris said frankly.

Kel felt an arm on his shoulder and looked up to see that Dohn was holding him protectively. He cautiously slipped an arm around Dohn's waist to hold him in return.

"The entry code has been accepted. You may proceed when ready." Kim said impassively.

"Can your scans tell you anything about what's on the other side of the wormhole?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"As expected, our equipment registers only a void." Kim said frankly.

Kel felt H'Ree back up against him. He instinctively put his free arm around H'Ree to hug him. As he did, Dohn did the same thing and their hands joined on H'Ree's chest.

"Helm. Take us in." Janeway said firmly.

"Aye, Captain." Paris said professionally, then glanced at Kel, Dohn, H'Ree and Angel before activating the thruster controls to slowly move them forward.

When the nose of the ship entered the yawning chasm in space, a sudden force seemed to seize them and pull them forward.

Within the blink of an eye. They were gone.

Part 3: Rendezvous

Chapter 16

"Kim, are you able to target our destination?" Janeway asked as the main screen filled with the image of a swirling, and apparently unstable, wormhole.

"I need helm control!" Kim barked.

"You have it." Paris said immediately.

There was a long tense silence as Kim worked the controls of her station furiously.

Everyone watched the main screen as they seemed to be engaged in the spacial equivalent of white water rafting, speeding down one then another wormhole at a rapid pace.

The ship lurched as they made a sudden turn into a side tunnel that was barely visible.

"We are on course to what should be our intended destination." Kim said as she tried to get her breathing under control.

"All stations, report." Janeway called.

"I'm getting some damage reports, but they're all minor." Bey said from his console.

"Hull integrity is optimal." Paris said professionally.

"Engines fully operational." Carey's voice called over the intercom.

"How long before we're out of this thing?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"Approximately three point two seven minutes. I suggest that you make an announcement for all hands to brace for sudden deceleration. Our inertial dampers may not be up to the task." Kim said as she studied her console carefully.

"All hands, secure your stations and brace for sudden deceleration in three minutes." Janeway announced into the 'all call' of the intercom.

"Shield integrity is falling. We're at eighty-five percent." Bey said with sudden concern.

"Retune the shields to a higher EM frequency. We're interacting with the force that's generating the wormhole." Kim said anxiously.

"Got it!" Bey said immediately.

Paris looked over at Kel, Dohn and H'Ree, huddled together just a few feet away.

"You boys need to find something stable to grab onto. We're probably going to feel a sudden jolt when we come out of the wormhole." Paris said seriously, then added, "Make sure you protect Angel."

"Over here." Kel said as he guided the others to walk to the rail by Bey's station.

Paris divided his attention between his console and the boys as he awaited their sudden stop.

"Wormhole exit in one minute." Kim said firmly.

"All hands, sudden deceleration in one minute." Janeway called.

Time seemed to stand still as everyone waited for the end of their rapid voyage.

"Shield status?" Janeway called suddenly.

"We're up to ninety-eight percent." Bey said professionally.

"Everyone, be alert and ready for anything when we come out of this thing. We have no idea of what will be waiting for us." Janeway said firmly.

"I'm charging energy weapons." Paris said seriously.

"Torpedo status, loaded and ready to fire." Bey said next.

"Primary weapon, fully operational and ready to charge." Carey called over the intercom.

Bey looked at the boys. Kel had draped himself over H'Ree, holding onto the rail on either side of him. Dohn had one hand holding the rail and his other draped over Kel's back, protecting Angel.

"Five." Janeway called over the intercom.

"Four."

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

There was a sudden wrenching jolt that sent everyone forward for an instant.

A moment later, the inertial damper caught up to what was happening and the sudden stress was relieved.

The sound of a baby's giggle of delight filled the room. Apparently, Angel wasn't at all traumatized by the experience.

"Kim. I need a sensor sweep, then detailed scans of the area." Janeway called as she settled back into her seat. "Bey, start working the starcharts and see if you can determine our location. Paris, I need status reports, weapons, shields, hull integrity, crew and damage reports."

No one responded to Janeway's demands other than to perform their required tasks.

"Dad, if you don't need us here, I'm going to go down to the transporter room to make sure that nothing got shook loose down there." Kel said quietly.

"That's a good idea." Bey said with a smile at Kel, then said to all the boys, "After that, why don't you guys relax for a while after all the excitement? Then, when we're off shift we can go with you to get Dohn and H'Ree some new clothes."

"You don't have to bother. I can do that." Kel said immediately.

"You can if you like, but really, it's no bother." Bey said as he tried to match the visible constellations with the star charts of where they 'should' be.

Kel leaned in and gave Bey a quick kiss on the cheek before stepping away. He then hurried to Paris and gave him a hug around the shoulders and a quick kiss before leaving.

"I have it!" Bey called out. "We're approximately twenty three light years beyond our target."

"How are we in relation to Voyager's most likely projected course?" Janeway asked as she sat forward.

"In a straight line, it would take us three days to reach it. If we set a parabolic course, we'll intersect with it in a week, but we'll also be making progress toward the Alpha quadrant." Bey said professionally.

"Damage reports are in. There's nothing significant to report. Just a few bumps and bruises." Paris called out.

"According to my scans, we are relatively close to a populated planetary system. If we establish contact with them, it might be possible to ascertain if Voyager has visited this part of space." Kim said frankly.

"Let's take some time to get our bearings before we do that. It might be a good idea to monitor communications so we can get a sense if they're friend or foe before we risk making contact."

Kim gave a single nod as she worked her controls.

"There's a small nebula one point two light years ahead if you want to mask our presence while we decide what to do next." Bey said frankly.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone worked on their assigned duties and waited for Janeway's decision.

Finally, Janeway said, "We're here. But the fact of the matter is, the probability of us actually being able to locate Voyager is astronomical."

Kim turned and opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Janeway held up a finger in her direction and said, "Don't."

After a single nod, Kim turned her attention back to her scans.

"Up to now, catching up to Voyager has been our primary objective. But now that we're here, I think we're going to have to accept that we've done all that we can toward that goal and acknowledge that proceeding toward the Alpha quadrant is now our primary objective." Janeway said seriously.

"So, we're giving up?" Paris asked cautiously.

"No. We'll still look for clues and if there's any possibility of finding Voyager, of course, we'll pursue it. But at this point in time, there's nothing more we can do to further that goal. Until the time comes that we have a reason to do otherwise, we need to focus on the goal of reaching the Alpha quadrant. Assuming that Voyager is doing the same, it's our best chance of joining up with them." Janeway said as she looked around the bridge, and seemed to be hoping that someone would challenge her evaluation.

"Logical." Kim said without looking away from her scanners.

Paris finally nodded as he said, "The universe is a big place. Focusing only on finding Voyager would be like searching for a needle in a haystack."

"Statistically speaking, the chances of finding Voyager would be approximately three times ten to the twelfth power greater... assuming the haystack is of a standard size." Kim said informatively.

Janeway rolled her eyes, then said, "Thank you, Kim."

Paris and Janeway shared an amused look, then Kim suddenly said, "Captain, I'm detecting a transmission on, what might be, a Federation frequency."

"Really?" Janeway asked in surprise as she hurried to Kim's side.

"The signal is too weak and distorted for verification, but there is a sixty-three percent chance that the signal is of Federation origin." Kim said seriously.

"Can you determine their location?" Janeway asked excitedly.

"No. But their bearing is three oh six, mark seventy three." Kim said quickly.

"Helm, set course and engage at best possible speed." Janeway said firmly.

"Aye, captain." Paris said as he entered the coordinates.

"Kim, keep monitoring that frequency and let me know as soon as you can verify that it's a Federation signal... and if it's Voyager." Janeway finished hopefully.

"Yes, captain." Kim said as she kept her focus on her console.

* * * * *

"Do you think I'll be able to get a job, like you?" H'Ree asked as they walked down the corridor.

"Sure. As soon as you find something that you like doing, we'll get you a job doing it." Kel said easily.

"I don't think that we have any skills that would be of use to these people." Dohn said quietly.

"I don't know about that." Kel said thoughtfully. "It's not like I showed up here knowing how to run a transporter. They needed someone to do it and I wanted to learn, so they taught me."

"I think I'd like to work in the kitchen with Chell. It'd be fun to make food for people and watch them enjoy it." H'Ree said with a grin.

"Yes. I think doing something that makes other people happy is a good kind of job to have." Kel said as he pressed the button to open the door to the transporter room.

As soon as the door opened, they saw the scattered debris strewn across the floor.

"Is the transport unit damaged?" Dohn asked as he looked around.

"I don't think so. It looks like the shelf that held our breathers and weapons and stuff came loose and dumped everything on the floor." Kel said frankly. "We'll have to get everything picked up before I can see if the transporter is okay."

"Where do you want this stuff put?" H'Ree asked as he stepped forward.

"Actually, would you take care of Angel while Dohn and I put things away?" Kel asked hopefully.

"Sure. She's funny, especially when she leaks." H'Ree said with a smile.

"Just wait until diaper time, we'll see how funny you think *that* is." Kel said with a grin as he unhooked the child carrier from his back.

"Should I sit over there?" H'Ree asked as he pointed at a clear space along the wall.

"Yes, sit down, and I'll hand her to you." Kel said gently.

After a moment, Kel sat the carrier beside H'Ree, then transferred Angel into H'Ree's waiting arms.

"She likes me!" H'Ree said at the happy expression on Angel's face.

"Of course, she has very good taste." Kel said as he stood.

Dohn was watching from the door with a tender smile.

"Do you want to help me put these things away?" Kel asked gently.

"Would it be best if we first found a way to secure the shelving to prevent the same thing from happening again?" Dohn asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Let's take a look at what went wrong and see if we can find a better way to make it work." Kel said happily as he walked to the shelf.

Dohn walked fully into the room and to Kel's side.

* * * * *

"Captain. I have verified that the signal has Voyager's carrier frequency." Kim said seriously.

"Can we make contact?" Janeway asked as she walked to stand by Kim's station.

"Not yet. But the transmission seems to be repeating at random intervals. When they next transmit, I should be able to lock onto their frequency and boost the signal enough to receive their audio transmission." Kim said professionally.

"Good." Janeway said firmly as she watched the comm equipment for any sign of a transmission.

A small, irregular pattern flashed on the screen for an instant, and Kim worked to lock in on it.

Janeway held her breath and strained to hear what they were saying.

"...any ship within range. We are under attack..." sounded over the comm system.

Janeway froze in place as she recognized the sound of her own voice, or at least, the voice that she once remembered as being her own.

"The signal is weaker than I anticipated. It may not be possible to establish two-way communications as of yet, but if we transmit on their frequency, I am reasonably certain that they will receive our transmission." Kim said carefully.

"Let me know when you're ready to transmit." Janeway said firmly.

After a moment, Kim turned to Janeway and nodded.

"Starship Voyager, this is the starship Amalgam. We have heard your distress call and are in transit to your location. We should have two-way

communication shortly. Please advise how we can be of assistance." Janeway said in a loud, firm voice.

Silence filled the bridge as the entire bridge crew waited anxiously for a reply.

Finally, after long minutes of waiting, the faint sound of Captain Janeway's voice responded, "...received. Over one hundred Videan ships..."

Janeway waited for a moment longer, but no more of the message came through.

"Kim, keep trying to get a lock on that signal. Bey, dive into the computer records and see what you can find out about Videans." Janeway said seriously.

"May I call on Nicoletti for help? She's a lot more familiar with the indexing of the incorporated databases than I am." Bey asked quickly.

"Good idea. Find out as much as you can." Janeway said firmly.

* * * * *

"Hi Blain. Do you have a minute?" Kel asked as he led Dohn and H'Ree into the security office.

"Sure. I was just tinkering with a personal project. What can I do for you?" Blain asked curiously.

"H'Ree just arrived on the ship yesterday and I was wondering if you could make some clothes for him." Kel said frankly.

"Hold still." Dohn said quietly from over Kel's shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Kel asked as he froze in place.

"Your sister is leaking again. I just wanted to clean it up." Dohn said as he dabbed a towel around the little girl's mouth.

"H'Ree, was it?" Blain asked as he stood.

"Yes, sir." H'Ree said timidly as he looked up at the much taller man.

"Just hold still for a minute while I get some measurements, then I'll see what I can do for you." Blain said gently as he took out a tape measure.

When Blain started measuring him, H'Ree seemed uncertain and looked to Kel for assurance.

"He just needs to know how big you are so he can get you clothes that are the right size." Kel said gently.

Tears began to well in H'Ree's eyes, but he remained still until Blain had finished.

"I'm all done. Stay here for just a minute while I see what I have in my storeroom." Blain said gently as he slowly backed away.

As soon as Blain was out of the room, Dohn moved forward and pulled H'Ree into a firm hug.

Neither Kel nor Dohn needed to ask what was causing H'Ree's reaction.

"You're safe here. No one will make you do those things anymore." Kel said gently.

"I'm sorry. I know he wasn't going to hurt me." H'Ree sniffled.

"Your brain may know that, but your body still remembers those unwelcomed touches and causes you to react as you did then." Kel said gently. "It will just take time for your body to realize that you're in a safe place."

Dohn looked up at Kel, his own tears freely falling.

"Did I do something wrong?" Blain asked as he walked back into the room, carrying some folded clothes.

"No. You didn't." Kel said as he turned his attention to Blain. "Something reminded H'Ree of the bad stuff that happened to him before. It happens sometimes, it's not your fault."

"Oh. Well, I have these clothes that I made for you when you were H'Ree's size. There's just a few things, but if he grows like you did... well, it'll probably be enough. Just let me know if you need more." Blain said gently.

"Thank you, Blain. We will." Kel said as he looked at H'Ree with concern.

"What about your other friend... Dohn? Is that right?" Blain asked cautiously.

"Yes. I was told yesterday that they should have a stock of suitable clothing already made in my size." Dohn said cautiously, still squatting and holding H'Ree close to his chest.

"That's right. You'll probably be able to find some things in there that will fit you. But sometimes it's nice to have one or two sets of clothing that fit

really well. It can make your day just a little bit happier to be comfortable and to feel like you really look good." Blain said seriously. "Once you get settled in, consider stopping by."

Dohn hesitantly nodded.

"Come on, guys. We'd better get back to the cabin before the dads get off work. They might get all anxious if we're not there when they get home." Kel said with a grateful smile at Blain.

Dohn stood and kept a hand on H'Ree's shoulder.

As they were walking to the door, H'Ree stopped and turned. "Thanks for the clothes."

"It was my pleasure, H'Ree. Stop by again the next time you need clothes." Blain said gently.

H'Ree nodded, then walked with Dohn out the door.

"Thanks Blain." Kel said sincerely, then followed H'Ree and Dohn.

* * * * *

"Voyager is hailing us. We have two-way communication, audio only." Kim said from her station.

"Proceed." Janeway said firmly.

"This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager. Thank you for answering our distress call." Captain Janeway said from the speaker above them.

Janeway stood from her station and looked up as she said, "I am Captain Winger of the Amalgam. Would you advise us of your situation?"

"We're under attack by Videan ships. They're intent on harvesting our flesh." Captain Janeway said frankly.

"By everything we've been able to learn about the Videans, their technology shouldn't be any match for yours." Janeway said slowly.

"Normally they wouldn't be, but we've got nearly two hundred ships swarming around us right now and they've been attacking us for ten days. Yesterday I finally came to the conclusion that we can't keep this up indefinitely." Captain Janeway said as the weariness could be heard in her voice.

"Acknowledged. We are traveling to your location at best possible speed. We anticipate rendezvous in approximately forty-eight hours. Perhaps, if you could attempt to travel in our direction, we could meet up sooner." Janeway said carefully.

"That shouldn't be a problem. Running seems to be our only effective option at the moment." Captain Janeway said frankly.

"Just hang in there. Our ship may not be the most beautiful thing you've ever seen, but she's armed to the teeth." Janeway said in an assuring tone.

"I'll take function over aesthetics any day." Captain Janeway said with a weary chuckle, then the sound of an impact could be heard in the background.

"Forty-eight hours. Amalgam, out." Janeway said solemnly.

"Voyager, out." Captain Janeway responded, then the transmission ended.

* * * * *

"Well? Any ideas of what we can do to prepare for our second battle?" Janeway asked as she looked around the bridge.

"Considering that they're being attacked by a swarm, I think the old Maquis chaff mines might be effective." Paris said frankly.

"Do we have the resources to construct them? Or the time, for that matter." Janeway asked thoughtfully as she looked more to Bey than Paris.

"Yes, and... maybe." Bey said thoughtfully, then continued, "With Gerry's help, I think I can manage it."

"Any other ideas?" Janeway asked as she looked around the bridge.

"I believe that the fractal shield projector might be useful in this situation." Kim said calmly.

"It's an intriguing idea, but I'm hesitant to use it when we could use those shields as an added layer of protection for the ship." Janeway said frankly.

"I doubt that anyone will expect us to use our shields offensively. It might be just what we need to throw our enemies off guard." Paris said seriously.

Kim arched an eyebrow at Paris. She obviously hadn't been expecting his support for her idea.

Janeway thought for a moment, then said, "It sounds like a choice between being defensive or offensive. The Klingon in me has already cast her vote. Kim, prepare the projector. Once we're in battle, we'll decide if it's use will be of benefit."

Kim inclined her head in a nod of acknowledgement as well as a show of respect.

"Is that it? Any more ideas?" Janeway asked as she looked around.

"Chapman and I were discussing something while we were integrating the helm systems." Paris said thoughtfully, then glanced at Doyle Chapman at his 'stand-by' station.

"Let's have it. We need to explore every option." Janeway said firmly.

Paris looked to Chapman expectantly, encouraging him to explain.

Hesitantly, Chapman said, "Well, it's not so much of a weapon as a modification to our targeting systems. We were thinking that it might be useful in a battle situation to allow someone to man a station and have, sort of, 'random' weapons access. They could lock on targets and the computer would route their target request to any energy weapon not currently targeting. So when they fire, they won't know if they're going to be firing a phase pulse or a disruptor beam."

Paris nodded his agreement, then added, "From our standpoint, it would allow us to make use of weapon systems that would otherwise be idle. And from our opponent's point of view, it would add to the unpredictability of our attack."

Janeway considered for a moment then slowly nodded, before asking, "And all you would have to do to make it work is write a program?"

"Essentially, yes. I think that mainstreaming the user interface to function with all our different weapons systems might be the biggest challenge." Chapman said thoughtfully.

"Do it." Janeway said firmly.

Chapman nodded, then turned to his station to work.

"Engineering? Any problem with us maintaining maximum warp for two days?" Janeway asked into her comm panel.

"No problem, *Captain Winger*." Carey responded with an obvious smile.

"Don't get a big head. I just didn't want to give Captain Janeway too much to think about while she's in the middle of a battle." Janeway said affectionately.

"Whatever you say, *Captain Winger*."

* * * * *

"Bey to Kel." Sounded over the comm.

"Kel here." Kel answered immediately as he turned on his view screen.

"I'm sorry, but Paris and I are going to be working late on some weapons modifications. I just wanted to call so you wouldn't worry." Bey said regretfully.

"Is there something wrong?" Bey asked cautiously, hearing the tension in Bey's voice.

"We've located Voyager." Bey said frankly.

"Really?" Kel asked with surprise.

Bey nodded, and Kel could see on the view screen that he didn't seem to be at all happy.

"You guys go on and have dinner without us. We'll be down as soon as we possibly can." Bey said with a smile that seemed to be a little bit forced.

"Okay. Just focus on your work and don't worry about us, we're fine." Kel said reassuringly.

"I've got to get back to work. Give Angel a kiss for me. Bye." Bey said regretfully, then signed off.

Kel turned away from the comm and saw Dohn and H'Ree looking at him with concern.

"You heard Dad. Are you guys ready to go to dinner?" Kel asked as he tried to put on a cheerful face.

"I know that you're disappointed that your fathers won't be joining us." Dohn said as he walked to Kel and put an arm around him.

"Yeah." Kel quietly admitted.

"What are we going to do when we reach Voyager?" H'Ree asked curiously.

Kel shrugged slightly, then said, "We have a package to deliver to Kes. Other than that... I guess we'll just go along with what everyone else does."

"But, if I'm understanding correctly, the plan is to join up with this other ship and continue on with them to their home." Dohn said hesitantly.

"Yeah. That's right." Kel said quietly, then thought to add, "And when we go to dinner, there are probably going to be some really happy people. Try to be happy for them."

"You're not happy." H'Ree said as a statement of fact.

"No." Kel admitted, then said, "But I'm not really 'unhappy', either. I mean, I guess I'm just nervous. I kind of expected us to be living on the Amalgam for a really long time. Now it feels like everything that I was expecting is gone and I don't know what's going to happen next."

Dohn chuckled in sympathy as he held Kel a little bit tighter, then said, "I'm scared, too. But, I think, as long as we care for each other, we'll be able to face this new and uncertain future together."

"Me, too!" H'Ree said as he stepped forward and put his arms around both older boys.

"Yes, H'Ree, you, too." Dohn said as he moved one of his arms to include H'Ree in their hug.

Kel closed his eyes and drifted in the peaceful feeling of being held and protected. Deep inside him, he felt the realization awaken that *this* was the future that he had been searching for.

* * * * *

"Are you about done?" Paris asked as he walked into the cargo hold where Gerry and Bey were working.

"With this part, yes. We've just about got the delivery system ready to go. Gerry came up with an adaptive inter-phasic shield that I can't wait to see in action." Bey said as he kept the majority of his attention on his work.

Paris looked around, then said, "You were able to make six of them?"

"Yeah. I was originally going for four, but since we had everything we needed to make six... why not?" Bey finished with a grin at Paris.

"Chapman and I just finished the basic configuration of the new targeting system. He's testing it now. Tomorrow we'll work on the user interface, but the nuts and bolts part of it is basically ready to go. We're planning on him operating it from an auxiliary station when we're in battle." Paris said casually.

"If there's time, you should think about getting someone else trained to run it. I mean, Chapman is your backup pilot. What if you're called away and he's running the helm? Who's going to man that station?" Bey asked curiously.

"Who else could do it? We're stretched pretty thin when we're at battle stations." Paris said frankly.

"What about Dohn?" Bey asked as he looked up from his work.

Paris thought for a moment, then shook his head before saying, "I won't ask him to kill."

Bey smiled up at his husband, admiring the strength of his convictions.

"Chapman can cover it." Paris said assuringly.

"Maybe. But I don't think sheltering Dohn from making the choice for himself is the right thing to do." Bey said honestly.

Paris looked at Bey with surprise, then carefully considered his words.

"We define who we are by the choices we make. Withholding that choice from him gives him one less chance to grow." Bey said quietly.

"I suppose you're right. What he chooses has a lot more meaning than what's chosen for him." Paris said gently.

Bey nodded, then closed the panel on the torpedo he was working on.

"All done?" Paris asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'm all yours, now." Bey said with a big smile.

Paris stepped forward to pull Bey into a deep kiss.

"Would you two go on and get outta here before you make me puke?" Gerry asked playfully.

"Are you going to be okay on your own?" Bey asked with concern.

"Yeah. I'll be outta here in about two minutes." Gerry said confidently, then made a shooin' motion.

"I'll see you in the morning." Bey said as he started to walk away at Paris' side.

Chapter 17

As the boys walked into the mess hall, their attention was immediately drawn to the new picture occupying the space beside the picture of Kel on the wall

"That's Captain Kreeg'Ah." H'Ree said as he pointed at the picture.

"Yes. I've seen him before. He looks really surprised." Dohn said speculatively as he stepped nearer to the picture.

"Yeah. I think that's the look he had when he realized that Aunt Janeway was going to blow him up." Kel said honestly.

After a moment, Dohn quietly said, "Good."

"If you boys are hungry, help yourselves to the buffet. We're on a skeleton crew down here since everyone's preparing for us to meet up with Voyager." Chell said as he rushed to place another tray of food on the steam table.

"You guys go ahead while I fix a bottle for Angel." Kel said with a smile.

"Would you show me what to do? I'd like to know how to prepare her food, in case you're busy." Dohn asked hopefully.

"Me, too. I wanna help, too." H'Ree said quickly.

"Sure. Come with me."

* * * * *

"Hey guys! How is everyone doing?" Bey asked cheerfully as he walked into the mess hall with Paris following close behind.

"Are you done with your work?" Kel asked hopefully.

"We're done for the moment. I think both of us were starting to space out a little bit. You can only concentrate for so many hours before you have to take a break." Paris said frankly.

"We were just about to eat. Will you eat with us? Chell set up a buffet, so you can help yourselves." Dohn offered helpfully.

"Thank you, Dohn. We'd like that." Bey said warmly.

"How's Angel doing?" Paris asked as he moved to H'Ree's side and watched him feeding the baby.

"She's a good baby. H'Ree wanted to feed her. That's okay, isn't it?" Kel asked cautiously.

Paris smiled and said, "Of course. We'll take all the help we can get."

As Bey returned to the table with a plate of food for himself, Paris automatically walked to the steam tables.

"How long is it until we meet up with Voyager?" Kel asked quietly.

"About two days. I think we'll have plenty of time to get our weapons prepped before we meet up with her." Bey said casually.

"Are you nervous?" Kel asked with concern.

"A little. But I'm trying not to think about it." Bey said honestly.

Paris took his seat at the table, then looked at Dohn and said, "Bey and I were discussing something, and there may be an opening on the bridge if you're interested."

Dohn looked at Paris with surprise at the announcement and it took a moment for him to ask, "What can I do?"

"We have a new weapon modification and we were thinking that it would be nice if we had an extra person trained to use it." Paris said frankly.

"It's only if you want to. If you don't, it won't be any problem." Bey hurried to add.

"That's right. We'll completely understand if you would rather not." Paris assured him.

"I don't understand what you're talking about." Dohn said honestly.

Bey gave a sympathetic smile, then gently said, "What we're saying is that the position for a weapons officer. If you choose to train on the position, it's likely that you would have to kill our opponents in battle. I don't know about your personal beliefs, but if you would have a moral problem with it, we won't ask you to train there."

Dohn sat silently for a moment, considering what he believed and how he felt about what they were asking.

"You don't have to decide right now. Please take the time to consider this carefully and make the choice that you're most comfortable with." Paris said seriously.

Dohn closed his eyes and seemed to have entered an almost meditative state.

"Please know this, whatever you decide, I will be proud of you and help you however I can." Kel sent telepathically to Dohn.

"Thank you. I believe that I already knew that. But you saying so brings me peace." Dohn responded in kind.

"Please don't worry about it now. Let's enjoy this food before it gets cold." Bey said cautiously, not quite understanding what was going on in Dohn's mind.

Dohn opened his eyes, then quietly said, "If I were still living in the Ocampan underground, shielded from our enemies and secure in the knowledge that I was safe, then I might have the luxury of holding to absolute convictions about the sanctity of all life. But I have freely chosen to live here, in the outer world. Part of the new reality that I have to face is the struggle to survive. To kill or be killed. If I am to participate in this world of yours and become a part of it, I must accept that as a fact."

"I'm afraid that given our situation, that's true." Paris said regretfully.

"Also keep in mind that we not only fight to protect ourselves, but also those that we love. For me, that includes everyone on this ship." Bey said frankly.

"Yes." Dohn said with a slight nod.

"When would you like to start your training on the weapons station? We can do it as soon as you're ready." Paris said gently.

"Can we do it after the meal? I want to learn as much as I can so I can do my job efficiently, and without error." Dohn said seriously.

"You got it. When we're done here, I'll take you up to the bridge and walk you through the controls. Tomorrow, I'll set it up so that you can get some practice targeting." Paris said with a reassuring smile.

"Thank you." Dohn said quietly.

"I want a job, too." H'Ree said as he looked around at all the serious expressions.

Bey smiled at the sight of Angel, being gently held in H'Ree's arms as she finished her bottle.

"I think that since Kel is our transporter chief, that he might appreciate it if you would help us out by being another caregiver for Angel." Bey said gently.

"But I'm already doing that." H'Ree said frankly.

"Yes, you're being very helpful, but what I'm thinking is that we could teach you how to change her, and bathe her and all the other things that we have to do for her on a daily basis, so that we know if we're all called to duty at the same time, we can leave her in your care without having to worry." Bey tried to explain.

"You mean that I'd watch her *all* the time?" H'Ree asked anxiously.

"No. But it means that if all of us have to go to work at once, we'll know that we can leave Angel in your care until one of us is free to take over." Bey said with an encouraging smile.

"By doing this one job, you can ease their worries that their child is being properly cared for." Dohn said seriously.

H'Ree looked at Dohn with surprise at his assessment of the situation, then looked down at Angel and noticed that she had finished her bottle.

"She's done, what do I do now?" H'Ree asked cautiously.

"Kel, hand me a towel and I'll show H'Ree how to burp her." Bey said gently, knowing that the decision had been made.

* * * * *

"Janeway, I didn't expect you to be on the bridge this late." Paris said as he walked onto the bridge with Dohn at his side.

"Carey's got some brilliant idea for how he can retune the warp field to increase our velocity. I think he's full of... himself, but I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt." Janeway finished with a smile.

"You're waiting for him to fail so you can lord it over him." Paris said with a grin.

"If it were to go that way, I can't say that I'd be disappointed." Janeway conceded.

Paris chuckled, then said, "Dohn has volunteered to train as our backup weapons officer on the auxiliary station."

"No. I don't like that." Janeway said thoughtfully.

Paris and Dohn both looked at her with matching expressions of surprise.

"Am I to assume that you were considering letting Dohn man the auxiliary station to cover the new weapon modification?" Janeway asked curiously.

"Yes. That's what I had in mind." Paris said slowly.

"While that might be useful in about forty-four hours, I don't see it as being a viable position in the long term. And it could actually solve another problem that I have, since Blain's relocation to engineering." Janeway said seriously.

Paris reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"How about this? We could start Dohn out on the auxiliary station, like you were planning, but once we're in a situation where he can receive some additional training, perhaps we could have Bey and Gerry work with him to learn about all the different weapons systems. After that, we could have someone, maybe Blain, if Carey can spare him, work with him on hand-to-hand and sidearm training." Janeway said thoughtfully.

"How do you feel about that, Dohn?" Paris asked curiously.

"Please, let me confirm my understanding." Dohn said hesitantly.

Paris nodded to prompt him to continue.

"You wish for me not only to be in charge of firing the weapons during battle, but to eventually be in charge of their maintenance. And, beyond that, for me to be trained to do combat, like an enforcer?" Dohn asked cautiously.

"Well, I'm not sure what an enforcer is, but I get the idea. And that's not exactly what I'm saying. In the short term, the objective will be to teach you these skills, but in the longer term, we would want to get you to the point of being able to train and lead others. It's too soon for us to make any predictions, but what I'm proposing is that we put things in place now with the ultimate goal of you leading a security 'team'." Janeway said frankly.

"But, I would only ever use force to defend myself or those in my care. Someone else would be better... anyone else would be better to lead a security force." Dohn said helplessly.

"And I bet that you would agonize over every decision and feel concern for every enemy in our path." Janeway said speculatively.

Dohn cast his eyes down and reluctantly nodded his agreement to her accurate assessment.

"Good. I wouldn't want anyone in the job that 'enjoys' killing. I tend to be a bit... hot headed." Janeway hesitantly finished.

"A bit." Paris said with a grin.

"Think about it, Dohn. Who would you rather have with their finger on the trigger? The person who you know would fight to defend you or the person who really gets a kick out of watching things and people blow up?" Janeway asked seriously.

"Yes. I can understand what you are saying. I just don't know if I'm strong enough to be what you want me to be." Dohn said frankly.

"You aren't." Janeway said simply, then added, "Not yet, anyway."

Paris nodded his agreement.

"If we do our jobs right and give you the right training and encouragement, then I think that you'll grow into the position that we're creating." Janeway said seriously.

"She's right, Dohn. The more I think about it, the more I can see how perfect this is. Honestly, we need someone on the bridge who will speak up and defend the cause of peace." Paris said frankly.

"*That* would be my job?" Dohn asked in wonder.

"Following my orders will be your first job." Janeway said firmly, so there was no misunderstanding, then she added more quietly, "Speaking up for peace will be your second."

Dohn looked Janeway in the eyes and calmly said, "I accept."

"Good." Janeway said with satisfaction, then turned to Paris and said, "You'd better get to training our new Chief of Security, hadn't you?"

With a grin, Paris said, "Aye, Captain."

* * * * *

"Is taking care of Angel really a job?" H'Ree asked quietly.

Bey smiled at the question, then gently said, "Yes. Given our situation, where everyone has duties to perform, it will make all of our lives much easier if we know that we have someone that we can depend on watching out for her."

"Yeah. And with other people on the ship getting married and dating and stuff, it probably won't be too long before someone else has a baby. By then you'll know all the stuff that you need to know and be able to help them, too, so that they can be free to do their own jobs." Kel added helpfully.

"I didn't think of that. I'd really be able to help a lot of people that way." H'Ree said thoughtfully.

"You know, we still have a few unused cabins on the ship. It wouldn't take a lot to furnish one to be a childcare area. When Angel is old enough, she's going to need toys and a safe place where she can crawl and play. If we set that up in another room, then it will be available when others need to use it." Bey said distantly.

"We could all help. I bet if we ask around, we can get all kinds of ideas for some really good toys that we can make." Kel said cheerfully.

H'Ree smiled at the idea, then his expression changed to one of indecision.

"What's wrong?" Kel asked immediately.

"There is a smell..." H'Ree said hesitantly.

"Time for your next childcare lesson. Changing a diaper." Bey said as he stood.

"How can something so small make a smell so big?" H'Ree asked cautiously.

"That is one of the mysteries of the universe." Bey said frankly, then motioned for H'Ree to follow him into the bedroom.

* * * * *

"How was it?" Kel asked quietly as Dohn and Paris entered the cabin.

"There is much for me to learn." Dohn responded in an equally quiet voice.

"I think he has an understanding of all the controls, now. Tomorrow we're going to do some simulations so he can get used to targeting and firing." Paris added, then asked, "Why are we whispering?"

"Angel and H'Ree are asleep." Kel answered simply.

"Where's Bey?" Paris asked as he looked around.

"Looking at the vacant cabins." Kel answered, and noticed Dohn's look of concern.

Kel quickly continued, "We've been discussing making one of the empty cabins into a play area, not only for Angel, but also for any other children that might be born on our voyage."

Paris looked at Kel curiously, obviously not understanding the point of such an undertaking.

"Dad suggested that H'Ree could care for children while their parents are performing their duties. Right now, he is finding a space that he can dedicate to that purpose." Kel said honestly.

"You know, that's a good idea." Paris said with a nod.

"He also suggested that we start constructing appropriate toys for Angel, and the other children that follow, before there is a need for them." Kel added slowly.

"I didn't even think of that. We don't have anything at all for Angel to play with." Paris said with concern.

"And she is not at an age where she *can* play." Kel reminded him.

"I guess not." Paris said slowly, still sounding concerned.

The cabin door opening caused all three to turn at once.

"You know that cargo hold that we sectioned off, down by engineering?" Bey asked in a quiet, but excited voice.

Paris slowly nodded.

"It's in the center of the ship, so it's probably one of the most protected places that we have. I checked, and the bulkhead's secure. Being so central, you'd almost have to pass by it going to or from your crew cabin to your duty station... it's perfect." Bey said happily.

"So, I guess this means that you're going to be starting up a daycare center." Paris said with a smile.

"Not me, no. I'll help H'Ree to set it up, but once it's going, it'll be all his." Bey said seriously.

"He's just a child, himself." Paris said with concern.

"So is Kel. In fact, so are we all, if you think about it. There's no one on this ship who is biologically old enough to be considered an adult." Bey said frankly.

"I think I could pass." Paris said with a challenging smile.

"Maybe." Bey conceded, then continued, "H'Ree wants a job. Right now, the job is just to take care of Angel, but as he grows, so will the job, as other people have babies and need childcare."

"I should have known that you would have already thought this through. Just let me know what I can do to help you and you'll have my full support." Paris said with a loving smile at his husband.

"As soon as I have some free time, I need to take H'Ree down to the room that I was looking at to get his ideas on how we can adapt it to his needs. Depending on what he decides, I'll get with the appropriate people to make the modifications to the room." Bey said seriously.

"Just let me know when you need me to do something." Paris said in a low sultry voice.

Bey looked at Paris inquiringly for a moment, then broke into a smile.

"Bedtime." Kel announced as he stood.

Dohn looked at him with question.

"They've got that look. They're about to do sex." Kel said frankly.

Dohn's eyes went wide with surprise.

Paris turned away as Bey fought not to laugh, finally, he said, "Goodnight, boys."

"Goodnight. Have a good... sleep." Kel said knowingly.

* * * * *

"Do you want to sleep in your own room tonight? Or would you rather sleep with me?" Kel asked curiously.

"You would not mind?" Dohn asked hesitantly.

"Actually, I like it when you sleep in my bed. It makes me happy." Kel grinned.

After a moment to consider, Dohn quietly said, "It does me, too."

"Come on. Just be quiet. You don't want to wake H'Ree." Kel said as he led the way.

* * * * *

When Kel woke the next morning, he was surprised to find that H'Ree wasn't beside him, and Dohn was. Beyond that, Dohn was awake and watching him.

"What's going on?" Kel asked quietly.

"Your Dad woke H'Ree, so that he could watch after Angel." Dohn said gently.

"Were you watching me sleep?" Kel asked curiously.

"Yes. And I was thinking that I would like very much if I could continue to do so, on a daily basis." Dohn said honestly.

"I think I'd like that, too." Kel said with a smile.

"I was thinking that I would like to have the procedure to extend my life cycle." Dohn said carefully.

"I'm glad to hear that. I think that's a really good decision."

"Kel, the primary reason would be so that I can have you with me for years to come." Dohn said hesitantly.

"As your brother?" Kel asked cautiously.

Dohn shook his head.

"As your friend?"

Dohn shook his head again.

"As your... husband?" Kel asked hopefully.

Dohn's look became regretful as he said, "I don't know. I may never be able to be the husband you deserve. There are certain acts..."

"Do you love me?" Kel whispered.

Dohn nodded.

"Do you want to hold me and go to bed with me and wake up with me?" Kel asked hopefully.

Dohn nodded again.

"So, it's just the sex things that you don't want?" Kel asked carefully.

"No. At least, not now. Maybe someday..." Dohn fought to say, but was interrupted.

"It's okay, Dohn. Let me tell you how I feel about it, and you can tell me how it sounds." Kel said seriously.

Dohn nodded his agreement.

"Holding you, going to bed with you, waking up with you, kissing you... hold on, is kissing okay?" Kel asked curiously.

"Yes. I believe I would like that." Dohn said with a smile.

"Good. Me, too." Kel said seriously, then continued, "Okay, all of that sounds really great. If you want to be my boyfriend, we can do that stuff all the time for as long as you want. But if you ever want to get married, like my dads are, then I'm going to want for us to have sex."

Dohn slowly nodded.

"In six weeks, or six months or maybe even six years, we might be ready for that. I can wait. To tell you the truth, I don't want to do sex stuff right now, either. All that stuff with the Kazons is still too fresh in my head." Kel said honestly.

"So, you don't mind waiting?" Dohn asked hopefully.

"That's what I just said." Kel said with a smile, then gently added, "If we get married, someday, I want for us to have everything right. So we'll take as long as we need to, to do that."

Dohn nodded his agreement.

"We'd better get up, in case H'Ree needs any help with Angel." Kel said regretfully.

"I believe he went with your dad, to look at the childcare area." Dohn said gently.

"Oh. Well then, would you like to kiss me?" Kel asked with a teasing smile.

Dohn returned the smile and nodded.

"Then, I guess you'd better."

* * * * *

"I was wondering if you were going to make it." Paris said when Dohn walked onto the bridge.

"You said zero hundred hours, didn't you?" Dohn asked cautiously.

"Yes. Don't worry, you're on time. But when we went in to wake H'Ree, you were looking awfully comfortable." Paris said with a smile.

"I was. But I promised that I would be here at zero hundred hours, and so I am." Dohn said simply.

"Right. Go get on the security station while I get the simulator software going." Paris said as he started pressing keys on his console.

"Excuse me, security station?" Kim asked curiously.

"Yeah. Janeway and I came up with that last night. Dohn is going to be our Chief of Security and he's getting the auxiliary station." Paris said with a smile.

"So, our Chief of Security has no training whatsoever." Kim confirmed.

"That's right. We're starting with a blank slate, so we can train him to do it right from the beginning." Paris said confidently.

"I would like to volunteer my services in his training. I have much knowledge of security procedures and protocols to impart." Kim said seriously.

"Okay, but keep in mind that he doesn't have a military background. If you can tailor your lessons to be understood by a civilian, I think you could provide him with valuable information." Paris said firmly.

"I will endeavor to do so." Kim said calmly, appearing to be satisfied with their negotiation.

"Okay, Dohn. Your console should be ready to go. Remember to identify your target, lock on, then fire." Paris said instructively.

"Yes, sir." Dohn said efficiently, then went to work.

* * * * *

"Kel, the computer said you were in here." H'Ree said as he walked into the transporter room.

"Yeah. I was just going through everything to make sure it's all working right." Kel said as he looked over his diagnostics.

"Angel missed you and wanted to see you." H'Ree said as he turned around to present Angel in her child carrier.

"Good morning, Angel. I missed you, too." Kel said as he moved away from his console and paid attention to his sister.

"Bey showed me the room he wants to use. It's ugly right now, but I think we'll be able to make it be a good place for Angel to play." H'Ree said happily.

"I'm glad you're doing that. I never minded taking care of Angel while I was doing transporter stuff and helping other people do things, but I'm going to be free to do a lot more stuff when you're watching her." Kel said honestly as he went back to his transporter console.

"At first, I thought you were making up something for me to do and pretending it was a real job, just so I'd stop asking. But taking care of Angel really does help, doesn't it?" H'Ree asked seriously.

"Yes. She needs someone to take care of her all the time. Dad and I, mostly, would find ways that we could do our work and take care of her at the same time. But that's not always easy, and sometimes it's not even possible, then someone else has to do our stuff because we can't." Kel said frankly, then hit a few buttons to initiate the next set of diagnostics.

"I never did anything important before." H'Ree said timidly.

"Don't worry. You'll have all of us to help you, if you need it." Kel said as he turned to smile at H'Ree.

* * * * *

"Status." Janeway barked as she walked briskly onto the bridge.

"Holding course and speed. ETA to Voyager is thirty three hours." Paris answered immediately.

"Long range scans do not detect any spacecraft." Kim said efficiently.

"Shields and environmental systems all stable. All personnel show at station keeping." Bey said seriously.

"Dohn, how are you doing, this morning?" Janeway asked when she noticed him.

"I am running simulations to practice my weapons efficiency. I am currently trying to best my previous score." Dohn said calmly.

"Good. Get the practice in while you can." Janeway said with an approving nod.

"You seem to be a bit late this morning. Touring the ship?" Paris asked curiously.

"Actually, yes. Since it's possible that we may be having visitors in the next few days, I thought I'd look around to be sure that everything's tidy." Janeway finished with a smile.

"I assume you're talking about Voyager and not the Videans." Paris said teasingly.

"Watch it, Mister. I still remember one or two maneuvers that require 'bait'." Janeway said with a grin.

"Noted." Paris said with a grimace.

* * * * *

"Dad?" Kel asked as he approached Bey's work station.

"What's going on, Old Man?" Bey asked gently.

"Is everything really going to be okay?" Kel asked anxiously.

"Of course. Why do you ask?" Bey asked as he turned in his chair.

"Because we're going into battle. Aren't you scared at all?"

"No. Not really. I've got you and Angel and your father, and now H'Ree and Dohn. So, I have every reason to fight with everything I've got. And if that turns out not to be enough, then I suppose that whatever happens next will happen to all of us together. So, as long as I've got all of you with me, I'm not worried." Bey said gently.

"Kel, were you needing something?" Janeway asked curiously from her station.

With a smile, Kel hurried over to her and said, "No, Aunt Janeway. Dad was just telling me why he's not worried. I was a little bit nervous for a minute, but I'm better now."

"Good. We've got a fine ship and an excellent crew. There's nothing to worry about." Janeway said confidently.

Kel smiled at the words, knowing without using his telepathy that she meant it.

* * * * *

"Janeway, we have Voyager on subspace." Kim said efficiently.

"On screen." Janeway said immediately.

Janeway waited to see what Captain Janeway's reaction was going to be.

"You sound... older..." Captain Janeway stammered.

"Don't worry, Captain Janeway, I'm old enough to do this." Janeway said firmly.

"Excuse me, but your appearance... are you Klingon?" The Captain asked cautiously.

"One of my ancestors was. How can we help you?" Janeway asked crisply.

"Oh, yes. I wanted to notify you that the Videans have a transport ship approaching with an estimated three hundred more fighters. They haven't caught up to us yet, but if we stop for a battle when you arrive, that transport will probably be arriving at an inopportune time." The Captain said seriously.

"Can you send us the specifications on the transport?" Janeway asked seriously.

"Of course. Transmitting, now." The Captain said as she looked off screen and nodded at someone.

Janeway glanced at Kim and saw her indicate that the data had been received.

"We will study this data and get back with you shortly." Janeway said professionally.

"Before you go, how is it that a Klingon came to be in the Delta Quadrant?" Captain Janeway asked curiously.

"Let's save that discussion until we can meet in person. I promise that I will answer as many questions as I am able at that time." Janeway said diplomatically.

"I'll look forward to it." Captain Janeway said dryly.

"Amalgam out." Janeway said, then waited until Kim closed the link.

"Your mom's kind of a bitch." Paris said frankly.

"You didn't think I got all of it from my Klingon side, did you?"

Chapter 18

"We should be seeing them on our long range scans any minute. Is everyone ready?" Janeway asked from her station.

"I know that you feel that this battle is important, but I don't understand who our opponents are. Isn't there some way to negotiate with them?" Dohn asked hesitantly.

Janeway turned in her seat and said, "If there *were* any way, I'm sure that Voyager would be talking to them instead of fighting them. But, from everything we've learned, there's no way to reason with the Videans because they're so desperate."

Dohn still didn't seem to understand.

Bey could see his confusion and quietly said, "By all accounts, their entire species is infected with a horrible plague that they call the Phage. They might have been a perfectly peaceful and reasonable people back when this all began, but at this point, they're struggling to survive by harvesting the flesh of other races to replace what's being destroyed by the disease."

Paris nodded and continued the thought, "If we were to lose this battle, they would capture the crews of both ships and dissect us. You, me, Kel and even H'Ree."

"I understand." Dohn said regretfully, then quietly added, "I will fight."

"I have located Voyager on the long range scans. She is being attacked by three hundred seventy two fighter style ships." Kim said grimly.

"All hands!" Janeway called out and automatically waited the few seconds for the computer to direct the announcement, "Battle stations. We are at red alert."

"Energy weapons are hot. Ready to fire on your command." Paris said efficiently.

"All torpedo tubes loaded and ready to fire." Bey called out next.

"Shields at full. Hull integrity at one hundred percent." Kim announced.

"*All engineering systems fully functional. Primary weapon standing by and ready to charge.*" Carey said calmly over the intercom.

"Kim, open a hailing frequency to the Videan ships." Janeway said in a low, controlled voice.

"Aye, Captain." Kim acknowledged, then said, "Hailing frequencies open."

"Videan ships. This is the starship Amalgam. Withdraw immediately or we will be forced to destroy you." Janeway said firmly.

"This Federation ship attacked us without warning or provocation, we are merely defending ourselves." A man's voice said in a slightly whining tone.

"Captain Janeway? Could you possibly share your account of how this incident started?" Janeway asked into the air.

"Of course." Captain Janeway said immediately, then added, *"The file footage is being transmitted now."*

"On screen." Janeway said firmly.

Janeway watched only a few seconds of the video. The small ships were swarming to attack, seemingly out of nowhere. Finally, she said, "I'm satisfied that Voyager did not provoke or attack your people. I say again, withdraw or be destroyed."

"We will be within visual range in one minute." Kim said quietly.

Janeway nodded as she waited for the Videans to respond.

"We fight for the survival of the Videan people!" The faceless voice declared as a call to war.

"This conversation is over." Janeway said and looked to see that Kim had disconnected the transmission.

"We're within scanning range. Voyager's shields are currently at thirty percent and falling." Bey said intently.

"Open a secure channel to them." Janeway said firmly, then quickly added, "Audio only."

"Aye, Captain." Kim responded automatically.

"Welcome to the party, Captain Winger." Captain Janeway said with tense humor.

"We wouldn't have dreamed of missing it." Janeway said dryly, then seriously added, "As soon as we're in visual range, get past us and let us cover you while you stabilize your shields."

"Acknowledged." Captain Janeway said immediately.

"Here we go." Janeway said as she placed her hands on her firing controls and waited for the Videan ships to come into view.

"Chaff mines, away." Paris called out suddenly.

"Kim, adjust your sensors to compensate for the chaff mines interference. Three oh eight point one one." Bey said as he quickly fired disruptors at a series of ships that were lined up like ducks in a shooting gallery.

"Captain Janeway, we've just deployed two chaff mines that will disrupt sensors. The frequency to compensate is three oh eight point one one." Janeway said into the air.

"Adjustment made." Captain Janeway quickly responded.

"Paris, adjust your targeting to the more distant fighters and leave the nearer ones to me." Kim said intently.

"I know what you're up to. You just want to try out your new weapon." Paris said with a grin.

"Adjust your targeting." Kim snapped.

Paris smiled as he started firing his phasers at more distant targets.

"Amalgam, do you need for us to take some of the heat off of you? It looks like you're about to be swarmed." Captain Janeway asked with concern.

"No. Thank you. I think we've got this." Janeway said, sounding more confident than she felt.

Suddenly, there were multiple flashes of exploding ships all around them and every ship within a hundred meters of their shields was obliterated.

After a moment, Captain Janeway replied, "*It appears that you do.*"

"Paris! Watch that swarm at your two o'clock!" Janeway snapped.

"I was just pulling a Kim and luring them into my trap." Paris said, then made a show of pushing one button to set a chain of events into motion.

The whoomp sounds that followed caused everyone to look up at the main screen.

The three balls of electromagnetic plasma almost simultaneously impacted three clusters of Videan ships, leaving them hanging, unpowered in space.

"Non-lethal weapons? That's not like you." Janeway teased.

"Dohn's being a good influence on me." Paris said with a smile, then noticed another contingent of fighters approaching.

Before he could react, alternating phaser and disruptor fire began efficiently picking the fighters off, one by one.

"Nice shooting, Dohn." Bey said over his shoulder.

"The transport ship has just appeared on long range sensors." Kim announced.

Janeway brought up the scans on her console, then said, "We'll be discontinuing energy weapon use in about two minutes. Make 'em count."

"Amalgam, we've been able to stabilize our shields. Thank you for covering for us. However, the Videan transport ship will be arriving shortly. It's time to disengage and regroup." Captain Janeway said decisively.

"Captain Janeway, you can go if you like. But I think the Videans have already proven that once they've got your scent, they're not going to let you get away. We need to finish this." Janeway said seriously.

"I've never been one to shy away from a fight. If you want to stand, we'll stand with you." Captain Janeway said firmly as Voyager maneuvered alongside the Amalgam.

"As nice a sentiment as that is, and it really is... lovely, could you possibly stand with us symbolically and stay *behind* us literally? We're about to fire our primary weapon and things could get.. messy." Janeway carefully explained.

"Acknowledged. Would you like for us to get some of those fighters off of you?" Captain Janeway asked as Voyager glided back.

"No need." Kim said as she once again activated the fractal shield enhancement which sent spikes of shielding in every direction, skewering the small fighters trying to attack them.

"We'll be right over here, if you need us." Captain Janeway said slowly as Voyager backed away a little further.

"We'll be back with you when this is over. Amalgam out." Janeway said firmly, then looked at Kim to be sure that she had terminated the transmission.

"Here we go." Janeway said as she noticed the progress of the Videan transport ship. "Discontinue the use of all energy weapons."

"Photon torpedoes loaded and ready." Kim said firmly.

"So are Neutron torpedoes." Bey added helpfully.

"Hold those torpedoes. If the primary weapon fails, we may need them." Janeway said seriously.

"Primary weapon charged and ready to fire." Carey called over the intercom.

"Why, thank you, Honey." Janeway said sweetly as she waited for the Videan transport ship to show on her short range sensors.

Paris rolled his eyes at Janeway's antics.

"There." Janeway said triumphantly as she locked in on her target, then absently added, "Reverse thrusters, now."

Paris activated the thrusters just as the lights dimmed.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at the main view screen as the enormous pulse of energy erupted from the nose of the ship, obliterating everything in its path.

Paris glanced down at his tactical display and was satisfied to see that the Videan transport ship was exactly in the path of the approaching wave of destruction.

The main screen sparked and flared with hundreds of small explosions as the wave progressed.

Paris noticed that a few stray fighters that were far enough to the sides to have been missed by the graviton wave were moving in to attack. But before he could react, he saw that alternating phasers and disruptors were firing in their direction.

"Good work, Dohn." Paris said with a smile in his direction before looking back to the main screen in time to see the enormous Videan transport ship dissolve under the assault from all the conflicting gravitational forces impacting it at once.

"Hold your fire." Janeway commanded, then turned to Kim and said, "Hail the remaining Videan ships."

"Channel open." Kim responded immediately.

"Videan fighters, withdraw. We have no interest in pursuing you, but if you continue your attack, we will finish this." Janeway said coldly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Kim said, "All the functional Videan ships are withdrawing."

"Good enough. Stand down red alert. Get me the status of weapons, shields, hull integrity, crew injuries and damage reports." Janeway called out authoritatively.

"All weapons show fully operational." Bey said immediately.

"Shields stable, integrity at ninety six point four five percent." Kim said dispassionately.

"Hull integrity... perfect. I don't think a single one of their shots made it through our shields." Paris said, sounding to be surprised.

"All stations reporting, no injuries, no damage." Kim said a moment later.

"Well, I suppose as fights go, we came out of this one pretty well off." Janeway said in a bewildered tone.

"I expected at least a skinned knee or a bloody nose." Paris sympathized.

"Well, then. I suppose that since we don't have anything to repair... or even to clean up... our next chore will be to talk to Voyager." Janeway said reluctantly as she looked around.

"Can't we go chase after the Videans, first? I mean, just for a little while?" Paris asked hopefully.

"Unfortunately, no." Janeway said to Paris regretfully, then turned to Kim and said, "Open a channel to Voyager."

"That was quite an impressive display. Although we've investigated the use of a graviton wave as a propulsion method, we've never thought of using it as a weapon." Captain Janeway said enthusiastically.

"Yes, Captain. I believe that you had some questions for us. Would now be a good time?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"Yes. Do you have transporter capability?" Captain Janeway asked curiously.

"Yes. Of course. Send us coordinates and we'll beam over shortly." Janeway said, trying to hide her irritation.

"Kel... please report to the transporter room." Bey said quietly into his comm.

"I'm already here, Dad." Kel responded a moment later.

"I think it would be best for a small team to make first contact." Janeway said thoughtfully as she looked around the bridge.

"I can look after things while you're gone." Bey said as he looked her in the eyes, letting it be known in no uncertain terms that he did NOT want to go.

Finally, Janeway said, "Paris and Dohn, you're with me."

Dohn looked at Janeway with surprise, not sure he had understood her correctly.

"Be careful." Bey said gently to Paris.

"You know me better than that." Paris said back, with an impish grin.

"Did you want for me to accompany you?" Dohn asked uncertainly.

"You're my Chief of Security. According to regulations, I have to take you with me on a 'first contact' mission." Janeway said, seeming to be serious, then started walking as she said, "Let's go."

Paris walked immediately to her side.

"Just stay with us and remain silent as much as possible. I'll introduce you as my Chief of Security, and they'll probably make some assumptions about you... that will work in our favor." Janeway said thoughtfully.

"Have you ever seen how Kim stands on the bridge?" Paris asked curiously.

Dohn glanced at him and hesitantly nodded.

"Just stand like that and say nothing and everyone will leave you alone." Paris said assuringly.

Janeway led the way as they walked into the small transporter room.

"How was it?" Kel asked Dohn excitedly.

"We have to go to Voyager, now. I will tell you all about it later." Dohn said to Kel warmly.

"Be careful." Kel said with concern.

Dohn glanced shyly at Paris before saying, "You know me better than that."

Kel was surprised for a moment by the response, but soon dissolved into giggles.

"Kel, would you transport us over to Voyager? You should have the information to link to their transporter." Janeway asked with a smile.

"I've got it, Aunt Janeway. When we were on the homeworld, we were asked to deliver something to an Ocampan named Kes, who left with Voyager. Should we do that now?" Kel asked seriously.

"I think we'll wait and see how this goes, first. If all goes well, then perhaps you could go with Dohn and H'Ree and deliver it yourselves." Janeway said warmly.

"Thank you, Aunt Janeway. I'm ready to transport, on your command." Kel said confidently.

"Energize."

* * * * *

As the transporter beam cleared, Janeway was standing, facing the face she once saw in her mirror, at least, in some of her distant memories.

"Welcome to Voyager. As I'm sure you know, I'm Captain Kathryn Janeway, this is my first officer, Commander Chakotay, and my head of security, Lieutenant Commander Tuvok." Captain Janeway said proudly.

"Thank you, Captain. I am Janeway Winger-Torres, to my right is my first officer, Paris Chakotay and to my left is my Chief of Security, Dohn." Janeway said cautiously, waiting for a reaction.

"Winger, Torres, Paris, Chakotay? How is this?" Captain Janeway asked cautiously.

"Perhaps we should find a place to sit down where we can discuss this. It could take a few minutes." Janeway said hesitantly.

Tuvok raised an eyebrow at the obvious understatement.

"Yes. I have a feeling that you may be right about that." Captain Janeway said somewhat distantly, then seemed to come back to herself and continued, "Right this way."

* * * * *

"I hardly know which questions to ask first." Captain Janeway said as they settled into seats in her ready room.

"Let me save you some time." Janeway said simply, then continued, "A little over a year ago, Voyager and the Crazy Horse were brought to the Delta Quadrant, against your will. When the caretaker of the array that brought you here had you in his possession, he extracted genetic samples from all the surviving members of your crews. While you were there, he also had some Ocampan scientists telepathically probe each of you and make copies of all your memories. Those Ocampan scientists then took the samples to a space station and created a series of hybrid beings. So far as we've been able to ascertain, the purpose was to create a being that was resistant to a particular virus that was of concern to the caretaker."

Captain Janeway slowly nodded as Commander Chakotay and Tuvok looked on impassively.

"Once the hybrids were created, the memories collected from the crews of Voyager and the Crazy Horse were transferred to the hybrid beings, for safe keeping. What happened next is a bit vague, but it seems that after the caretaker's array was destroyed, the Ocampan scientists were threatened or afraid... for whatever reason, they left the station, destroying thousands of hybrid clones before they did. Somehow, either due to a negligent scientist or a computer error, one group of hybrid clones was not destroyed. That would be us." Janeway finished seriously.

"So, if I'm understanding what you're saying, you're a combination of me, B'Elanna Torres and Crewman Winger." Captain Janeway said incredulously.

"No. Winger is my married name. My husband is Carey Winger. But I *am* the hybrid clone of Kathryn Janeway and B'Elanna Torres." She finished calmly.

"And you are..." Commander Chakotay began to say, staring at Paris with something akin to horror in his expression.

"That's right, Dad. I'm what happens when we cross you with Tom Paris."

Chakotay stared, open mouthed, at the announcement.

"Might I inquire if a hybrid were also created using my genetic material." Tuvok asked carefully.

"Yes. She is known as Kim Tuvok. I think you might be proud of her." Paris said frankly.

Tuvok quirked an eyebrow, but didn't respond otherwise.

"If you were created in a lab in the past year, how is it that you're here, now?" Janeway asked suspiciously.

"Once we awakened and discovered our situation, we determined that catching up with Voyager would be our first priority. After all, you're the closest thing to family that we can hope to have. And the Alpha Quadrant is the closest thing to a home." Janeway said seriously.

"So you used what you could scavenge from the ship graveyard to create a ship and somehow found a way to catch up to us." Captain Janeway speculated.

"I knew we should have destroyed that ship graveyard before we left." Chakotay huffed.

"Commander." Captain Janeway hissed.

"Yes. Once we had a ship, we found some sort of alien wormhole transit network and discovered how to activate it." Janeway confirmed.

"And you want to join up with us, and continue on to the Alpha Quadrant." Janeway said slowly.

"Yes. If that's possible." Janeway confirmed.

"I think we might need to think about this for a few minutes." Captain Janeway said slowly as she stood.

"I can understand that. It's quite a bit to take on faith. If there are any other questions that I can answer, you know where to find me." Janeway said pleasantly.

"Tuvok, would you show our guests back to the transporter room, please?" Captain Janeway asked hopefully.

Tuvok gave a single nod, then gestured toward the door.

"What, no kiss goodbye for your long lost son?" Paris mock pouted at Chakotay, only to receive a scowl in response.

Janeway rolled her eyes at him, then led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"Do you believe them?" Captain Janeway asked, once they were alone.

"Yes. I don't want to, but knowing the caretaker, it sounds just like something that he would have done." Commander Chakotay said regretfully.

"Well, then, what do you think?" Captain Janeway asked cautiously.

"It's wrong. They shouldn't exist." Chakotay said past gritted teeth.

"But they *do* exist. Now, how are we going to deal with it?" Captain Janeway asked reasonably.

"This goes against everything that I believe about family. By the very existence of this Paris Chakotay abomination, I'm put into the position of having an illegitimate child with Tom Paris, of all people. That forces us into a relationship that neither of us want or deserve." Chakotay said, then suddenly stood and started pacing the room.

"That's true. But the cold hard fact is that these genetic hybrids *do* exist. What right do we have to deny them to accompany us? Can we even consider denying them the possibility of finding a home?" Captain Janeway asked gently.

"You're right, of course. But I just want to be clear on one point, genetics or no, I'm not acknowledging any sort of relationship to that... thing." Chakotay said as he put his hands on the table and looked her in the eyes.

"Nor will I ask you to. I will only ask you to treat these beings with as much courtesy as you would any other alien species. I think that allowing them to accompany us is the right thing to do. But what you or any of the crew decides to do about acknowledging a relationship with these people is entirely up to the individual." Captain Janeway said decisively.

"I just hope 'they' can understand that." Chakotay said seriously.

"We'll make sure that they do. I think that, for the time being, we should limit contact between their crew and ours." Captain Janeway said thoughtfully.

"Agreed." Chakotay said firmly.

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Kel asked as soon as the transporter beams released their passengers.

"Let's just say, I don't think that they're going to throw a parade to welcome us." Paris said frankly.

Bey chuckled as he pulled Paris into a hug and said, "I could have told you *that*. I mean, someone walks up to you out of nowhere and says, 'Hey, this is your kid! I know that you didn't want it or know about it but, you know what? It doesn't matter! Deal with it!'. How would you react to something like that?"

There was a long moment of silence before Paris finally said, "But that's what I did to you... with Angel."

"And I love Angel more than my own life." Bey said quietly, then added, "I'm just saying that not everyone will see this as a blessing."

"I guess I just naturally assumed that the family connection would be strong enough that they'd overlook the 'created in a lab' part of the equation."

Paris said as he held Bey close to him.

"I'm sure some of them will." Bey said as he returned the hug.

"Janeway, I have an incoming message from Captain Janeway of Voyager."

Kim said over Janeway's badge comm.

"Can you tell me what it says?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"USS Voyager has granted us permission to accompany her on the voyage to the Alpha Quadrant. However, we are restricted from contacting the Voyager crew. If a member of Voyager's crew wishes to contact a member of the Amalgam crew, then Captain Janeway will contact you to discuss it."

Kim said efficiently.

"That's probably best." Bey said gently as he continued to hold Paris.

After a moment, Paris reluctantly nodded.

"As soon as we go off shift, I'm going to take you back to the cabin and kiss that frown right off your face." Bey said with a grin.

"I'm going to hold you to that." Paris said with the beginning of a smile.

Kel looked at Dohn inquiringly and received a slight smile and a nod.

Kel smiled in return.

* * * * *

"Do you think either of your parents will want to contact you?" Bey finally asked, once they were back on the bridge.

"I think Chakotay made his feelings abundantly clear. Tom... probably won't. He's been set up and knocked back down so many times that he has some serious trust issues. But it's okay. Looking at the family he's already had, I can really understand it if he doesn't want to be saddled with more." Paris said regretfully.

"I believe that Tuvok will see the logic in claiming me as one of his children and as a member of his house." Kim said seriously.

"What about Harry?" Paris asked curiously.

"He is so... emotional. I cannot begin to speculate what his decisions will be." Kim said honestly.

"What about you, Janeway? Any thoughts on whether or not your donors will want to take the step and be your parents?" Paris asked curiously.

Janeway wearily smiled at the question, then shook her head. "I don't think there's any chance of that. What I'm most worried about is that *Captain* Janeway might reject us *en toto* as being 'things' created in a lab, having less value than 'actual' life."

"You don't really believe that, do you?" Paris asked with concern.

"I don't know." Janeway said honestly.

* * * * *

A short time later, Paris noticed that Janeway had received a message that concerned her.

Normally, that wouldn't have drawn his notice. But when she walked off the bridge without a word, he began to wonder if things might be in the process of going horribly wrong.

"*Paris, would you come to the med bay?*" Janeway asked seriously.

"On my way." Paris said as he stood.

"I've got you covered." Bey said as he watched Paris go.

"Thanks." Paris said with a grateful smile, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"You've got me worried, Janeway. Last time you called me to the med bay was to tell me that I was going to be a father." Paris said jokingly as he entered.

"Not this time, Paris." Janeway said with a smile, then added, "I think that this time, you're going to be a son. Tom Paris has requested to be allowed to contact you. I called you in here because I thought you might want to have this conversation privately."

Paris was stunned for a moment, but before Janeway could walk out of the room, he rushed to say, "Thank you."

Janeway nodded, then continued on.

* * * * *

When the viewscreen came on, Paris had the oddest sensation of looking into one of his dreams.

"You're my son?" Tom Paris asked cautiously.

"If you want to look at it that way." Paris said quietly, then added, "I'm the genetic hybrid of you and Commander Chakotay."

"Let's just call you my son. It's a lot easier to wrap my brain around." Tom said with his rakish grin, then thought to ask, "What's your name?"

"I'm Paris Chakotay." Paris said hesitantly as he watched for Tom's reaction.

"I bet Chakotay looked like he just sucked a bushel of lemons when he heard that." Tom chuckled.

Paris smiled and said, "More like a truckload."

"Listen, I'm on my break right now, so I can't be on here very long. I just wanted to make contact and find out if you're even interested in... you know... having some kind of relationship." Tom finished shyly.

Paris chuckled and tried to inconspicuously wipe the tears from his eyes as he said, "Yes. I'm very interested. I don't know how our captains feel about it, but I'd really like it if you could come over here and visit. I'd like to introduce you to my family."

"Your family? Wait! Don't tell me! I want to find out face-to-face. I'll find some way to work it out with the captain. I go off duty in about two hours." Tom said with a broad smile.

"Okay. Thanks." Paris choked out, not even worrying about the tears that were running down his cheeks.

"Break's over. Gotta go. See you in two." Tom said quickly, then ended the transmission.

It took a few minutes but Paris was finally able to gather his emotions and return to the bridge.

* * * * *

"What happened?" Bey asked with concern.

"Tom... Paris, he called me. He wants to come here." Paris said as he tried to keep his tears from returning.

Bey smiled broadly and fought the urge to leave his station and hug his husband.

"That is, with the captains' approval." Paris said with a smile in Janeway's direction.

"Your captain wholeheartedly approves of Tom Paris visiting. I'm happy for you, Paris." Janeway said with a smile.

"Maybe one of your donors will want to find out about you, too." Bey said to Janeway quietly.

Janeway shook her head and said, "I know them too well. Regardless of what either of them actually feel, their cast iron personas won't allow them to take that step and reach out. Do I like it? No. Am I upset by it? Not really. It is what it is."

Chapter 19

"Paris, I'm here to relieve you." Chapman said as he approached.

"What? I've still got another half hour before my shift is over." Paris said in surprise.

"There's a rumor going around that one of your genetic donors wants to come here to visit with you. So I've got this. I hope it turns out to be wonderful." Chapman said quietly.

"Thanks. When your parents come to visit, I'll do the same for you." Paris said as he stood.

"It's a deal." Chapman said with a hopeful smile.

As Paris left his station, he noticed that everyone on the bridge was watching him, and their eyes were filled with hope and longing that sometime soon they might also be going to the transporter room to greet the people that were vital in their creation.

* * * * *

"How does it feel?" Kel asked quietly as Paris walked into the transporter room.

"To tell you the truth, I'm a little bit scared." Paris said with a self deprecating chuckle.

"I'm happy for you." Kel said quietly.

Paris looked at him for a moment, then said, "Be happy for us. You're my son, so that means that you're also about to meet your grandfather."

"Are you going to tell him about me?" Kel asked in surprise.

"Of course! I told Tom that I wanted him to meet my family, that includes you." Paris said seriously.

"Thanks." Kel whispered as tears welled in his eyes.

Paris walked behind the transporter controls to pull Kel into a firm hug.

* * * * *

The hug went on for long, silent minutes before it was interrupted by a beeping tone on the transporter console.

Kel broke away and examined the console before saying, "He's early. I guess he wants this as much as you do."

"I guess so." Paris said as he straightened his posture and fought to get his nervousness under control.

"Here he comes." Kel said as he linked with Voyager's transporters and initiated the transport.

Paris watched with wide, hopeful eyes as the sparkling image in the transporter started to take form.

Kel slowly dragged the sliders down the console to complete the transport.

Paris had to fight the urge to move Kel out of the way and yank the sliders down, just to get it over with.

Finally, the sparkling of the transporter stopped and before them stood the man that Paris remembered being, at least, one of them.

When Tom saw Paris standing, waiting for him, a wide smile crossed his face.

"Welcome to the Amalgam." Paris said quietly and fought to keep his voice from cracking.

"Thanks. It's great to finally be here." Tom said as he stepped off the transporter pad.

It took a moment for Paris to snap out of his daze and he rushed to say, "Tom, I'd like for you to meet Kel, he's our transporter chief... and my son."

"You have a son?" Tom said with surprise.

"And a daughter." Paris added cautiously, not able to tell if Tom were happy at the announcement.

"That's wonderful!" Tom said as he stepped forward and pulled Paris into a joyful hug.

Paris couldn't do more than return the enthusiastic hug as his emotions seemed to be on overload.

"What should I call you?" Kel asked timidly as he watched the scene.

Still holding Paris in his arms, Tom looked to Kel and said, "How about you call me Tom for right now. It may take me a few minutes to get used to being called 'Grandpa'."

Kel nodded his agreement to the arrangement, then was surprised when Tom extended an arm and invited Kel into their hug.

After a moment more of hugging, Paris quietly asked, "Would you like a tour of the ship? I bet that the entire crew would like to meet you. Most of them remember you, from when you arrived on Voyager."

Tom chuckled and said, "Maybe later. Right now, I'd like to see where you live... your home."

Paris smiled as he pulled out of the hug, then said, "I think you'll really like it. We made it mostly like a human home, so you'll probably be really comfortable there."

"And we have a spare room, right beside mine, if you want to spend the night, sometime." Kel added hopefully.

Paris reluctantly stepped away from Tom and led the way out of the transporter room.

"You won't get in trouble for leaving the transporter, will you?" Tom asked Kel as he followed them.

"No. They call me on my badge when they need me to be there." Kel said honestly.

Tom smiled and said, "I suppose that makes a lot more sense than having people on duty, doing nothing, waiting around until they're needed."

"We don't have enough crew to be able to do that. Most of us have multiple duties to be able to do everything to keep us going." Paris said frankly.

"Yeah. I work the transporters, but I also help Uncle Carey in Engineering, when he needs me." Kel announced proudly.

"Engineering?" Tom asked with surprise at the sight of the young teenage boy.

"Kel's been a tremendous help. In fact, when I show you the mess hall, you'll get to see a picture of him at the end of one of his longer days." Paris said with a fond glance back at his son.

"Here we are! This is our cabin!" Kel said excitedly as he rushed ahead to put in his passcode for the door.

Tom looked around the hallway before saying, "I can see that this used to be a Kazon ship, but you've really cleaned it up."

"It took a week just to get rid of the smell." Kel said with a crinkled nose as he waited for Tom and Paris to enter the cabin.

Tom laughed as he said, "I can imagine."

* * * * *

H'Ree was sitting in the recliner with Angel in his lap when they entered.

"Tom, I'd like for you to meet H'Ree, and in his lap is my daughter, Angel." Paris said proudly.

"Is this your father?" H'Ree asked cautiously.

"That's right, H'Ree. He wanted to see where I live." Paris said with a grand

smile, unable to contain his joy.

"May I?" Tom asked as he walked to the recliner and looked down into the bundle in H'Ree's arms.

"She's just been bathed and changed, so it should be safe to hold her, if you want." H'Ree said as he carefully lifted Angel and offered her to Tom to hold.

"She's my sister." Kel supplied as he watched the scene before him.

"She's Cardassian?" Tom asked in confusion.

"She's one quarter Cardassian. But her Cardassian features seem to show through most prominently." Paris explained gently.

"She's absolutely beautiful." Tom smiled.

"Yes. She is." Paris confirmed.

"Dad... I mean, Bey, called a few minutes ago and said that he should be here soon." H'Ree said as he had most of his attention on Tom holding Angel.

"That's fine, and you can call him Dad if you want. Even though we haven't worked out all the family arrangements exactly, you live here and you *are* a part of our family." Paris said seriously.

"So you have three children?" Paris asked as he finally looked up from the baby in his arms.

"Four... maybe. H'Ree and Dohn live here and are part of our family, but we haven't done anything official about it, yet, so none of the traditional labels fit exactly right." Paris said cautiously.

As the cabin door opened, everyone inside could hear Bey saying, "...maybe they're in here."

Bey and Dohn stopped inside the door when they saw Tom Paris standing in their living room, with Angel in his arms.

"Dad, this is my husband, Bey. And beside him is Dohn. He may decide to be our son." Paris said gently.

Tom stared at Bey with a surprised expression for a moment, then his expression softened as he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Bey. I guess this means that you're my son-in-law."

Bey smiled at Tom's words and took them as a symbol of his acceptance.

"Yes. From what I know of Human customs, I believe that's right." Bey said happily.

"What does that mean?" H'Ree asked curiously.

"What's that, H'Ree?" Paris asked gently.

"Son-in-law?" H'Ree asked as he looked up at Paris inquiringly.

"When your son or daughter marries a man, that man is known to you as your son-in-law. That means that he's your son, not by genetics but by marriage." Paris carefully explained.

"So, is Dohn going to be your son-in-law when he marries Kel?" H'Ree asked curiously.

Paris looked at Kel then at Dohn to find them listening with interest.

"Yes. I suppose he would." Paris said with a smile.

"Then what does that make me?" H'Ree asked curiously.

Paris looked from Bey to Tom hopefully, but neither seemed to have any idea of what the right answer might be.

"Since we're all here, why don't we decide that right now? H'Ree, would you like for me and Bey to be your fathers? Or would you like for it to be Kel and Dohn?" Paris asked gently.

"But, do you want me?" H'Ree asked cautiously.

"Of course we do. You're already part of our family. All we're doing now is to figure out if I'm going to call you my son or my grandson." Paris finished with a smile.

"Well, if my vote counts for anything, I think you should pick Paris and Bey. I'm not ready to be a great grandfather." Tom said with a grin.

H'Ree looked around uncertainly for a moment, then looked at Paris and asked, "If you're my father, then does that mean that Kel is my brother and Angel is my sister?"

"That's right. And Dohn will be your brother-in-law." Paris said with a smile.

"Let's do that! I want to be just like Kel and be Angel's brother who takes care of her." H'Ree said happily.

"We'll talk to your Aunt Janeway about it later to make it all official." Paris said warmly.

"Everyone, please sit down and make yourselves comfortable." Bey said when he noticed that they were all standing in the middle of the room.

"Come over here, grandfather, this chair is the best, especially when you're holding Angel." H'Ree said as he ushered Tom to the recliner.

"My grandparents used to have one like this." Tom said before sitting down.

"That's what Paris told us, so we made it for him." Bey said with a loving smile at his husband.

Tom got comfortable and noticed H'Ree watching him.

"I think there's room for one more, if you want to scoot on in here with me." Tom said with a smile.

H'Ree didn't need to be asked twice. He climbed into the space and fitted in just as if it had been made for him.

Paris and Bey sat together on one end of the couch as Kel and Dohn sat on the other.

It took a moment before Dohn could work up the courage to do it, but he finally put his arm around Kel and held him gently.

"Paris, I'm so happy for you. I know what it feels like to not have a family, or at least not any that behave like family. I never seriously considered being a father before, but I think that if I could only have one wish for my son, it would be to have this, what you already have. I don't know if that makes any sense." Tom finished quietly.

"Dad. It's not *my* family, it's *our* family." Paris said warmly.

"I bet I'm the only Ocampan anywhere, ever, to have a grandfather." H'Ree said happily, snuggled into Tom's side.

Tom thought about what H'Ree had said, then looked at Paris and Bey with concern.

"There's something that I can tell you that will ease your mind about that, but it's something that can't be repeated." Paris said seriously.

"We'll keep it in the family." Tom assured him.

"Thanks to the information and equipment from the Ocampan genetics lab, where we were created, we've been able to develop a genetic therapy to manipulate Ocampan base genetic codes." Paris said quietly.

"I can see why you'd want to keep that quiet." Tom said gravely.

"I can't say for sure that it would be illegal in the Federation, but I'm certain that it would be the topic of some heated debate." Paris said frankly.

Tom nodded his agreement to the assessment.

"So, as you probably have guessed, we've developed a genetic manipulation process that can alter the natural lifecycle of Ocampan, extending it to be more in line with other humanoid species that we're familiar with." Paris said carefully.

Tom turned his attention to the boy at his side in the chair and said, "So that means that I'll have you around for snuggling for a very long time."

"They won't do it to me, yet. I already said that I want to, but they said that I can't decide what I want for myself." H'Ree said grumpily.

"That's not what we said." Paris responded gently, "We just wanted for you to have a little time to live here with us so that you'll be really sure about what you want. Because, once we start the treatment, you're committed to it, there's no turning back."

"See?" H'Ree said with exasperation.

"Once everything's settled with Voyager, we'll talk to your Aunt Janeway about starting the treatments, how's that?" Bey asked with a smile.

"Dohn, too?" H'Ree asked hopefully.

"If he wants to." Bey said as he looked toward Dohn with question.

Dohn glanced at Kel, held close to his side, then quietly said, "Yes. I want to undergo the procedure."

"Good. Well, if that's settled, who's ready for some dinner?" Bey asked with a smile, breaking the delicate mood.

"Kel, can you help me make Angel's bottle? I'm still not sure I'm doing it right." H'Ree asked hopefully.

"I'm sure that Chell already has a few bottles made up that you'll just have to warm up. I'll show you how to make Angel's formula sometime when Tom isn't here." Kel said gently.

"You can call me 'grandpa' or 'grandfather' if you want to, Kel. I think I've had enough time to adjust to it, now." Tom said as he encouraged H'Ree to get up from the chair.

"Thank you, Grandfather. I would like that, very much." Kel said happily.

"I'll get Angel's carrier." H'Ree said as he raced toward Paris and Bey's bedroom.

"I'll get the diaper bag." Kel said more slowly as he followed.

"You guys have a wonderful home." Tom said as he looked around.

"Please, think of it as your home, too. We'd be happy to have you here whenever you can visit." Paris said sincerely as he stood.

"That's right. That bedroom, right over there, is yours, whenever you want to use it." Bey said as he pointed.

"I'll remember that." Tom said as he fought to maintain his welling

emotions.

* * * * *

"This is my grandfather!" H'Ree announced happily as they walked into the mess hall.

The people eating in the mess hall all smiled at H'Ree's enthusiastic declaration.

Gerry stood and walked to the group before saying, "My name is Geron Ayala, but you can call me Gerry."

Tom laughed before saying, "I could have guessed that without you ever telling me. You look just like them."

"Thank you, I think." Gerry said uncertainly.

"We're just going to have dinner, would you like to join us?" Paris asked hopefully.

"Yeah. As soon as Dalby gets here." Gerry said seriously.

"That's Dalby Telfer." Bey whispered to Tom.

"Dalby Telfer-Ayala." Gerry corrected with a happy smile.

"Right. They just got married." Bey said with an affectionate grin at Gerry.

"It's funny, but we haven't had a single marriage on Voyager since we've been in the Delta." Tom said consideringly.

"Maybe it's because you're trying to get back to your old lives and we're just starting our new ones." Bey said frankly.

Tom looked at Bey with surprise, then said, "You know, that might be it."

"Everyone, please sit down while I go get Angel's bottle." Bey said with a tender smile at his 'father-in-law'.

"I'll get it, Dad. You sit down." Kel said as he started toward the kitchen.

"I'll help you." H'Ree said immediately, as he hurried to follow, carrying Angel in her carrier on his back.

"It's still hard for me to believe that Kel is your Transporter Chief... and your son." Tom added with a grin as he took his seat.

"There are plenty of jobs for everyone on the Amalgam. Dohn is our Chief of Security and H'Ree is our... I don't know what title we should give him." Paris faltered.

"Chief Babysitter?" Bey suggested with a smile.

"Although I think he would be honored if we gave him that title, we can

probably come up with something a little better." Paris said warmly to his husband.

"What are you talking about?" Gerry asked curiously.

"We're setting things up so that H'Ree can take care of Angel when we're all working. We were thinking that, when other babies are born, H'Ree could do the same for other people and operate sort of a daycare center and playground." Bey said seriously.

"That sounds like a great idea. Way to think ahead, guys!" Gerry said happily.

"H'Ree's going to heat up her bottle, he didn't want me watching over him." Kel said as he returned to the table.

At Bey's look of concern, Kel added, "Chell's keeping an eye on him, if he needs any help."

"Did I miss anything?" Dalby asked as she approached the table.

"Please, join us." Bey said immediately.

Dalby took the seat beside Gerry as he explained, "The guys were just saying that they're going to be setting up a daycare."

"And Dalby, I'd like for you to meet my father, Tom." Paris interjected.

"It's nice to meet you, Tom. I'm Dalby Telfer-Ayala." She said with a contented smile.

"I heard that you just recently got married. Congratulations." Tom said sincerely.

"Thank you." Dalby said warmly, then cautiously asked, "Do you happen to know anything about my donors? How they're doing?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know either of them that well. I've run into Crewman Dalby a few times, he isn't my biggest fan. And I'm pretty sure that I haven't ever spoken a single word to Crewman Telfer." Tom said honestly.

"But as far as you know, they're doing alright?" Dalby asked hopefully.

"Yeah. They're both alive and well." Tom said gently.

Dalby seemed to be relieved at the news.

"I can give them a message for you if you want." Tom offered quietly.

"No. They can contact me if they're interested. I just wanted to know that they survived. That's enough." Dalby finished with a smile.

Gerry looked at Tom and seemed to be conflicted.

Tom recognized his struggle and quietly said, "Geron and Ayala are both alive and doing well, too. I don't know Geron, actually, at all. But I see Ayala on the bridge almost every day."

"Is he happy?" Gerry reluctantly asked.

"I really don't know anything about his personal life when he's off duty. If I were going to guess, I'd say that he gets up and goes to work every day then spends his free time on the holodeck during his off duty hours." Tom said thoughtfully.

"I forgot about the holodecks." Dalby said with a smile.

"Computer generated fantasy garbage... We're better off having real lives with real people." Gerry said firmly.

"Real life can be pretty wonderful." Paris said with a tender smile at Bey.

"I guess I can see that, now." Tom said quietly.

"*Kel, are you available to receive an incoming transport from Voyager?*" A female voice asked on Kel's badge.

"Yes, I'm on my way." Kel said as he stood.

"I'll go with you." Dohn said as he immediately followed.

"This should only take a couple minutes. Go ahead and start without us." Kel said with a smile at his family, then hurried away with Dohn following close behind.

"I wonder who's visiting now." Bey said contemplatively.

"I'm sure we'll hear all about it, soon enough." Paris said with a smile.

Bey nodded, then looked to Tom and said, "Everyone's hoping that their donors will choose to contact them."

"Is that how you think of us? As donors?" Tom asked reluctantly.

"No. We think of you as parents, but we also know that we may not be accepted by you. Somehow, even though we never discussed it, we collectively decided to call you our donors, so that if you decided not to acknowledge us, it might not hurt quite as much." Paris explained quietly.

"Well, I acknowledge you." Tom said seriously.

"I know, Dad. I'll never be able to express how much that means to me." Paris said quietly.

"Now that Angel's got everything she needs for dinner, what can I get for the rest of you?" Chell asked as he approached the table with H'Ree following close behind.

"Aunt Kim? Is one of your donors coming to visit you?" Kel asked happily when he saw who was waiting in the transporter room.

"That is correct. I am awaiting the signal that Voyager is ready to transport." Kim said calmly, then looked at Dohn inquiringly.

"I'm Chief of Security. I thought I should be here." Dohn explained simply.

"Practically, I do not anticipate a need for your presence. But procedurally, I believe it to be well advised." Kim said formally.

Kel smiled at Dohn, feeling that Kim's words were as close to praise as anyone would ever get from her.

A beep from the transporter console alerted them to the transporter link being established.

"Are you ready?" Kel asked as he brought the transporter online.

"Proceed." Kim said as she reestablished her posture and turned her full attention toward the transporter pads.

Kel activated the transporter and slowly pulled the slides down to transfer the matter stream.

The room was silent except for the sound of the transporter.

Finally, a single form solidified into being on the transporter pad.

"Welcome to the starship Amalgam." Kim said formally.

"Hi. Are you my..."

"I am known as Kim Tuvok." Kim said seriously.

"I'm Harry Kim... but I guess you already knew that." the man said nervously.

"Harry?" Kel asked cautiously, then looked to Dohn with question.

It took a moment, but Dohn finally realized what was puzzling Kel and slightly shrugged.

"I do not know what questions you have for me, but you may proceed at your leisure." Kim said slowly, appearing to be calm.

"I... I don't know either. I guess I just wanted to meet you." Harry stammered.

"Aunt Kim, my fathers are having dinner in the mess hall right now. Maybe you could go there to talk." Kel suggested quickly.

"Would you care to dine with me?" Kim asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I just got off shift and I was too nervous to even think about eating anything." Harry hurried to explain.

"This way." Kim said, then turned and walked out of the transporter room without a backward glance.

It took a moment for Harry to grasp what was going on, but he soon followed her, with Kel and Dohn following close behind.

* * * * *

"Look who's here." Tom said when he saw Harry enter the mess hall.

"Hi, Tom. This is Kim, my, um..." Harry faltered.

Tom smiled sympathetically, then said, "Harry, I'd like for you to meet my son, Paris, and his husband, Bey. These are his kids, H'Ree and Angel, and I think you've already met his son, Kel and his son-in-law, Dohn."

"Har-ry." H'Ree said cautiously.

Harry looked at the boy curiously.

"Did you know my mother? Her name was Shalah." H'Ree asked carefully.

"Yes. Back on the Ocampan homeworld. That was your mother? She was very kind to me." Harry said with a smile.

"My name's H'Ree, she named me after you. She always told me that she wanted me to be like you, living in freedom in the outer world. That's why we left the safety of our underground home." H'Ree explained seriously.

"I'm glad that she was able to make her dreams come true." Harry said softly.

"She was killed by the Kazons. But since her dream was for me to live in freedom, I guess it did come true. And now I get to meet you... I think she'd be happy." H'Ree finished with a smile, although his eyes were damp with unformed tears.

"I think so, too." Harry said gently to the boy.

"Would you like to join us, Kim? There's room for two more." Paris offered quietly.

"Yes. If we would not be intruding." Kim said slowly.

"You're not intruding at all. Especially since H'Ree's godfather is here." Paris finished with a smile at his newest son.

"Godfather?" Bey asked curiously.

"It's an earth thing, I'll explain it later." Paris said dismissively.

"It just means that I'm like an extra parent, if you ever need me." Harry explained to his namesake.

"Before I came to this ship, I didn't have any parents at all, now I've got three... and a grandfather!" H'Ree said happily.

"I'm still getting used to that." Tom chuckled.

Harry turned and smiled at Tom's happiness.

"Are you going to be Kim's dad?" H'Ree asked seriously.

Harry was surprised by the question and didn't know how to answer.

When he turned to look at Kim, he found the impenetrable Vulcan facade that he should have expected, looking back at him.

It took a moment for him to sift through his conflicting emotions, but he finally came to a decision and said, "Yes. Although I feel like I'm too young to have a teenage daughter, I guess I do."

"It could be worse, you could be a grandfather." Tom said with a grin.

"Do you not want to be my grandfather?" H'Ree asked Tom in a wounded tone.

"No, H'Ree. That's not what I meant at all. It's just that normally, when I think of a grandfather, I think of someone that is grey haired and keeps his false teeth in a glass at night. But I think that being your grandfather is a wonderful thing and I wouldn't ever want to do anything to change it." Tom said gently.

"Here comes the food. Let me have Angel, so you can eat." Bey said as he approached H'Ree.

"I don't mind holding her." H'Ree objected.

"I'm going to put her in her carrier and she'll probably go to sleep. Just sit back and enjoy your meal." Bey said as he carefully extracted Angel from H'Ree's lap.

"Here we go. I have everyone's food right here. Kim, and Mr. Kim, or I suppose it would be Ensign Kim, what can I get for you today?" Chell asked happily.

"I don't know what you have." Harry said uncertainly.

"We would like to have two standard dinners." Kim said simply.

"She always has the 'standard dinner', which is our daily special. She never asks what it's going to be." Chell told Harry conspiratorially, then added, "And today's special is Chicken Enchiladas with crispy taquitos on the side."

"That sounds wonderful." Harry said happily.

"I do my best." Chell said with satisfaction, then walked around the table to take Kel and Dohn's orders.

"What with replicator technology, I thought you guys would be eating like kings." Gerry said frankly.

Tom fought to swallow while he laughed at the comment, then said, "No. We have to conserve our replicator energy, so most of the time we're eating the things that Neelix can scrounge from the planets that we stop at. And, let me tell you, Leola Root never tasted this good."

"Leola Root? I don't think I've ever tasted that." Bey said cautiously.

"It tastes like a dog peed on a radish." Tom said with a wrinkled nose.

"I'll have to take your word on that." Paris chuckled.

"This is so good... where did you get chicken if you don't have replicators?" Tom asked curiously.

"When we first woke up, all we had to choose from is something that tasted like plain yogurt and these hard little cracker-cookie things. It became apparent very quickly that we wouldn't be able to sustain ourselves on that, so I set Chell to work on coming up with something better. He recruited a team to help him in the kitchen and they were able to manage some really good meals. Then, when we took possession of this ship, he had a whole new selection of ingredients to work with and we've had one fantastic meal after another, ever since." Paris said happily.

"So, what is this?" Tom asked cautiously.

"I have no idea. But there's a good chance that I'm going to ask for seconds." Paris said firmly.

Tom considered for a moment, then smiled and said, "Me, too."

* * * * *

Kim didn't say much through dinner, but kept her undivided attention on Harry the entire time. Once the meal was finished, everyone seemed perfectly content to remain in the mess hall, where there was adequate seating and everyone could be comfortable.

"This is really strange." Tom said as he looked around.

"How's that?" Harry asked curiously.

"I don't know. Whenever I'm in the mess hall, or any public place, back on Voyager, I get this certain feeling... and I don't feel that here." Tom said thoughtfully.

Paris sympathetically nodded his understanding of the feeling.

"Do you know what it is?" Tom asked curiously.

"Maybe. I don't know what you've been through the past year. But the last memory I have of yours was of being around a bunch of Starfleet people who considered you to be a coward and a traitor." Paris said frankly.

Tom winced at the words, then quietly said, "The Maquis don't have any love for me either, since I got caught while I was on my first mission with them. They think I sold them out to the Federation."

"So it's possible that what you're feeling on Voyager is leftover from all of that." Paris said simply.

After a moment to consider, Tom reluctantly said, "I guess so. People have pretty much stopped being openly hostile toward me, but that doesn't mean that they're over it."

"Well, I'm glad to see that Harry stuck by you. I remember when you two met." Paris said with a smile, hoping to change the subject.

"Yeah. Har's the best." Tom said with a smile at his friend.

"Grandfather, when you return to Voyager, do you think it would be possible for me to go with you?" Kel asked hopefully.

"Us." Dohn said seriously.

When Kel looked at him curiously, Dohn said, "If you're planning to deliver the bundle to Kes, then all three of us should go. We're no different than anyone else on the Amalgam in that we have someone on Voyager that we want to connect with."

Kel nodded, then turned back to Tom and said, "We have a bundle to give to Kes. It was given to us by one of the Ocampan elders, when they found out that we were going to try to catch up to Voyager."

"I'll need to talk to the captain about that. As far as I know, we're not allowed to bring anyone back with us. But I'll see what I can do."

"I think she's being an ungrateful bitch, after all we did, coming to her rescue." Gerry said frankly.

"Gerry!" Dalby said harshly as she slapped his arm.

"Well, it's true." Gerry said in his defense.

"No. He's right." Tom said seriously.

Everyone, including Harry, looked at him with surprise.

Tom noticed, and turned to Harry as he said, "Imagine if it had been anyone

else who had come to our rescue. It doesn't matter who. Even if it was a group of clones or hybrids that wasn't related to anyone on Voyager, she wouldn't have reacted like this."

"I guess she's just being cautious." Harry said halfheartedly.

"Come on, Har. These guys pulled our fat out of the fire, and the captain has basically quarantined their ship." Tom said seriously.

"She let *us* come over here." Harry was quick to point out.

"Yeah. Her primary pain in the ass and his best friend." Tom said firmly.

"Do you think that she sent you over here to get rid of you?" Bey asked curiously.

"No. I think she allowed us to come over here because she knew it wouldn't make a difference. No one's going to listen if we tell them that you guys are alright." Tom said frankly.

"Then, what do you think she's up to?" Paris asked cautiously.

"I don't know that she's up to anything. What I think is happening is that she's got this idea about you, that you're clones or medical experiments or something, and that makes you less than 'real' people." Tom said thoughtfully.

"So you think that she's keeping us isolated from her 'real' people to prevent us from forming relationships and becoming important to them?" Paris asked curiously.

"Partly. Also, because of her attitude toward you, I think the people who suck up to her and try to always be on her good side will adopt that same attitude, whether or not they ever stop to take the time to think it through." Tom said speculatively.

"I guess there's one way to find out." Harry said honestly.

"How's that, Har?" Tom asked curiously.

"We'll see what happens when we get back. If Captain Janeway or Chakotay or Tuvok question us, then we'll know that they're interested in the Amalgam crew's motives and intentions. If they don't, then they're not interested in facts. They're going to base their judgements on what they already believe." Harry said frankly.

"Logical." Kim said with surprise.

Harry smiled at her and said, "I can do it when I have to."

Tom smiled at the exchange, then drifted into thought.

"Can we continue on with Voyager if they're going to behave like this?" Bey

finally asked.

"We could, but why would we want to?" Dalby asked in return.

"It's too early to be talking like this. We only just caught up with Voyager today. Let's give this a little more time and see how it plays out." Paris said slowly.

"If it's going where it looks like it's going, I don't think I want to see it play out." Gerry said frankly.

Chapter 20

"*Janeway to Paris, Lieutenant Paris has been recalled to Voyager. Please escort him to the transporter room immediately.*" Janeway's voice said over his badge.

Before he could tap his badge to respond, Kim's badge went off, "*Janeway to Kim, Ensign Kim has been recalled to Voyager. Please escort him to the transporter room immediately.*"

Everyone around the table was stunned into a moment of silence. Finally, Kim quietly said, "Come, Father. I will escort you."

"It was nice to meet all of you." Harry said quietly, sounding to be regretful as he stood.

"I'm glad I got to meet you, Harry." H'Ree said as he ran to Harry and hugged him.

"You can call me Uncle Harry. And if you ever need me, you'll be able to find me on Voyager." Harry said as he returned the hug.

"Come on, Dad. I'm betting that when Captain Janeway gives an order, she means 'now'." Paris said as he walked to his father's side.

"She usually means 'five minutes ago'." Tom responded with a half hearted grin, then pulled Paris into a hug.

"Will you be able to come back and visit with us, Grandfather?" Kel asked in a small voice.

"I don't know, Kel. But I promise that if I can visit again, I will." Tom said as he opened his arm to include Kel into his hug with Paris.

Slowly and regretfully, Tom eventually released Paris and Kel from the hug and they started walking toward the door.

"You'll always be welcomed here, on the Amalgam." Bey said seriously as he followed, then hurried to add, "Both of you."

"Thanks, Bey. I think I already knew that." Tom said with a smile at Bey.

"Do you think that there is some trouble? Is that why she is recalling you?" Dohn asked cautiously.

Tom chuckled, then replied, "No. I think it's just because she's the captain and she said so."

"That being the case. If there is a way to do so, would you please arrange it so that the Ocampanans from the Amalgam can deliver a package to Kes." Dohn said seriously.

"I will talk to the captain about it. She's really fond of Kes, I'm pretty sure that she'll allow it." Tom said assuringly.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Paris." Dohn said quietly.

"You can call me Grandfather, Dohn." Tom said gently.

"I will, but not now. I am the Amalgam's Chief of Security and I am making an official request on behalf of the Amalgam and on behalf of the Ocampan people." Dohn said seriously.

"I understand. And if I don't get back with you within a day, I suggest that you contact Captain Janeway directly and tell her what you just told me." Tom said as he stopped at the transporter room door.

"I will. Thank you, Lieutenant Paris." Dohn said respectfully.

The transporter room was small to begin with, but it was claustrophobic when everyone filed in to say goodbye to Tom and Harry.

"We are linked to Voyager's transporter, ready to transport on your command." Kel said, trying to sound professional past his welling emotions.

"I suppose there's no putting this off. I hope to see all of you again very soon." Tom said as he took his place on the transporter pad.

"Bye." H'Ree choked out before moving to Dohn and sobbing into his chest.

"Energize." Paris said regretfully, then watched as Tom and Harry dissolved in a shower of bluish green sparkles.

* * * * *

The next day, tensions were running high as everyone waited for Voyager to make any contact with them.

The hopes of the crew were falling as time passed and there was no word.

"Okay, tell me again, who thought this was a good idea?" Paris finally erupted in an explosion of frustration from his station on the bridge.

"What's that?" Janeway asked wearily.

"Finding Voyager! This sucks!" Paris exclaimed.

"I regret to say that I must agree with your assessment." Kim said from her station.

Janeway was surprised by the almost emotional response.

"This won't work for the long term..." Janeway said, mostly to herself.

Everyone on the bridge waited anxiously to see what she had in mind.

There was a long moment of silence, except for the almost imperceptible

sounds of the bridge stations.

Finally, Janeway took a long, slow breath to brace herself, then said, "We can't do anything too drastic, right now. If we're going to achieve our objectives, we need a plan."

"What do you see as being our objectives?" Kim asked curiously.

"Let's decide that now. Let's outline what our goals are, then make plans to achieve those goals." Janeway said firmly.

"We want to have contact with our donors." Paris said immediately.

After a moment to consider, Janeway slowly shook her head, then said, "We don't have any control over Voyager or her crew. If they had any interest in making contact, they would have made strides to do so. If there is a way to allow open contact to all those who wish it, of course we'll do that. But, realistically, Tom Paris and Harry Kim are the only ones that we know of who have made the effort."

"So, what are you saying?" Bey asked cautiously.

"I'm saying that once our objectives are achieved, we should part company with Voyager." Janeway said regretfully.

"Will we still be going to the Alpha Quadrant?" Paris asked hesitantly.

"We will probably still be going 'toward' the Alpha Quadrant, mostly because we have to go *some* direction, and that seems to be as good as any." Janeway said thoughtfully.

"So, if we're not going back to the Federation, what is our objective?" Kim asked curiously.

"To find a place that we can call home. From the reception that we've received from Voyager, I feel safe in saying that the Alpha Quadrant isn't necessarily it." Janeway said frankly.

"So, we're going to find an M-Class planet and... settle?" Paris asked incredulously.

"I don't want to spend the remainder of my life on a ship, working toward a goal that was never realistic to begin with. I want my child to have a home where he or she can know that they are safe and loved and just as good as any other sentient being that they encounter." Janeway said distantly.

"Are you..." Paris started to ask before thinking.

"Pregnant. Yes. Carey and I are going to have a child, and I don't want them to ever be looked down upon by some p'tahk just because of who their parents are." Janeway said seriously.

After a long silent moment for that to be absorbed, Paris finally said, "Then we'd better do this right and make sure that we get everything we want before we go our own way."

"Don't you think we should have a group meeting?" Bey asked suddenly.

"No. There are too many emotions associated with this decision. This is an instance when we must trust in our leader." Kim said firmly.

"She's right. Too many of us might make the wrong choice, hanging on to a hope that is absolutely futile." Paris said regretfully.

"I don't know if I agree with you, but since I didn't particularly want to go back to the Federation anyway, it's a moot point for me." Bey said calmly.

"If that's settled, what are our objectives?" Janeway asked seriously.

"The Ocampan's from the Amalgam would like to meet with the Ocampan, Kes, on Voyager to deliver a package from one of the Ocampan elders." Dohn said from his place at his security station.

"Yes. I'll make every effort to arrange that." Janeway said calmly.

"Realistically, one thing that Voyager has that we could really use is replicators. Although we know the specifications, we have no method of recreating the technology." Kim said firmly.

"I can't imagine any scenario where Voyager would willingly give us a replicator." Janeway said honestly.

"What about unwillingly?" Bey asked cautiously.

"Although we have more armaments, they have superior technology. I don't believe the benefit is worth the potential cost." Janeway said seriously.

"I bet your inner Klingon choked on saying that." Paris chuckled.

"Not just my Klingon, but we've got to be realistic, we've got an advantage fighting a swarm. But on a level playing field, Voyager can beat us." Janeway said simply.

No one on the bridge could find any grounds to argue the point.

"So, what does that leave us? The Ocampan crewmembers want to deliver a package and... that's it? That's the only reason we're not leaving right now?" Bey finally asked.

Before Janeway could answer, Dohn quietly asked, "If that's the case, may I be allowed to talk to Voyager's captain so we may dispense with this matter?"

"Permission, granted." Janeway said with an approving smile at Dohn.

After clearing his security display and calling up the communication controls, Dohn initiated a hail and said, "Starship Voyager, I am Dohn, Chief of Security for the Starship Amalgam. I am also the most senior of the Ocampan aboard this ship. I would like to request permission for myself and two others to meet with the Ocampan member of your crew to deliver a package and well wishes from the Ocampan elders." Dohn said formally.

There was a long silence as everyone waited for the response. Finally, Captain Janeway's voice could be heard as she grudgingly said, "*Permission granted.*"

"Bey to Kel and H'Ree... Please meet Dohn in the transporter room so you three can go to Voyager." Bey said at his station.

"*What about Angel?*" H'Ree's voice responded over the intercom.

Bey muted his comm and asked, "May I go down to the transporter to watch after my daughter and to operate the transporter?"

"Yes." Janeway said with a smile.

Bey unmuted the comm, then said, "I'll meet you in the transporter room."

As he stood from his station, Bey realized that Dohn was waiting in the doorway for him.

* * * * *

When the transporter beam cleared, Dohn, Kel and H'Ree were happy to find that Tom Paris was waiting for them.

"Hi, Grandfather, I'm glad you're here." H'Ree said as he hurried forward and hugged Tom tightly.

Dohn and Kel stepped out of the transporter chamber more slowly, but had matching warm smiles.

"Hi, boys. I'm glad you could finally come over to make your delivery." Tom said happily.

Dohn seemed to be about to say something, but glanced at the transporter operator for an instant and said nothing.

Tom noticed and said, "Well, you're here to see Kes. She said that she would meet you in the observation lounge, just down the hall."

As Tom led the way, with H'Ree keeping an arm around him, the others followed.

Once they were out of the transporter room, Dohn quietly said, "It has been decided that the Amalgam will be leaving. Unless something more is decided in my absence, this is the last remaining task to be carried out

before we part company."

Tom stopped and seemed to be lost in thought for a moment. Finally he said, "I suppose I should have seen this coming. I guess I just didn't want to see it."

"None of us are pleased by this development, but it appears to be necessary." Dohn said regretfully.

"Just because I regret the decision doesn't mean that I disagree with it. Please, tell Paris that I completely understand and that in his place, I would do the same thing." Tom said imploringly.

"I will tell him." Dohn said in the tone of a vow.

"Kes is in there." Tom said as he motioned to the door to the lounge. "I'll wait out here until you're done."

"Thank you, Grandfather." Kel said respectfully.

* * * * *

"When Captain Janeway told me about you, I could hardly believe that there were other Ocampans here... and you're so young!" Kes said in wonder.

"We found a wormhole that allowed us to do a year's worth of travel in a matter of minutes." Dohn said seriously.

"Elder Daggin asked us to deliver this to you, along with his best wishes and hopes for your well being." Kel said as he reverently presented the cloth bundle to her.

Kes held the bundle for a moment, then slowly began to open it.

The three boys watched, but weren't sure what they were seeing.

"It's my mother's ceremonial wedding robe!" Kes said delightedly.

"This means that you have received the blessings of the elders, should you decide to marry." Dohn explained in case Kel or especially H'Ree didn't know the significance.

"Thank you for bringing this to me. I never expected it. This is so wonderful." Kes said joyfully.

"We must return to our ship. It is good to know that you are well." Dohn said quietly.

"Wait, you can't leave, yet. You haven't even introduced yourselves. And I want to know what's been going on the past year, back on the homeworld." Kes hurried to say.

"I am Dohn, Chief of Security of the Starship Amalgam, to my right is Kel, our Chief Transporter Operator, and to my left is H'Ree, our Chief Care Provider." Dohn said formally.

Before he could say more, Kel added, "All of us left the Ocampan underground, just like you did. So we don't know what's going on there. We only stopped long enough to deliver others of our people that we rescued from the Kazons."

"You rescued our people?" Kes asked in wonder.

"That is one of many reasons why I choose to stay with the Amalgam." Kel confirmed.

"Then I won't keep you. It sounds like you're doing a lot of good in the universe." Kes said quietly.

"I think we are." Kel said with a smile.

"Thank you again for this." Kes said as she hugged her wedding robe to her chest.

"Be well." Dohn said warmly before turning to leave.

Kel and H'Ree both smiled at her happiness as they followed Dohn out of the room.

* * * * *

"Did it go well?" Paris asked curiously as the boys emerged from the Observation Lounge.

"Yes. We have completed our task." Dohn said regretfully.

"Don't give up hope. Things have a way of working out." Paris said as he led the way back to the transporter room.

"I don't see how they can." Kel said sadly.

"I know. But like I said, don't give up hope." Tom reassured him.

* * * * *

"Welcome back. How did it go?" Bey asked happily when the boys appeared.

"Mission complete." Kel said as he walked to Bey and hugged him.

H'Ree joined their hug a moment later, and finally Dohn joined in as well.

"Dohn and I need to get back to the bridge." Bey finally said as he released the hug.

"I will take Angel, so you can go." H'Ree said confidently.

"Thank you, H'Ree." Bey said warmly.

"I will stay and run my diagnostics, then I will be free to help H'Ree." Kel told his father assuringly.

"Thank you, Kel." Bey said as he took off the child carrier and handed it to H'Ree.

"Hello, Angel. I missed you." H'Ree said as he looked at his sister.

Angel cooed and seemed to share the sentiment.

Bey put a hand on Dohn's shoulder and gently guided him out of the room.

* * * * *

When Bey and Dohn returned to their stations, Janeway looked around and asked, "Can anyone think of any reason for us to continue this?"

"Not a logical one." Kim said quietly.

Paris sadly smiled at her and nodded his agreement.

After a moment to collect her emotions, Janeway opened the communications controls on her console and said, "Starship Voyager, this is Captain Winger of the Starship Amalgam. As it turns out, our objectives have changed and we will not be accompanying you any further. Please know that you will take with you our best wishes for your well being."

A moment later, Captain Janeway's voice could be heard over the intercom, "*Acknowledged.*"

"Bitch!" Paris growled.

Janeway smiled and said, "Paris, your Klingon is showing through."

"I'm sorry, Janeway." Paris said as he fought to contain a chuckle.

"Paris, drop out of warp and stop all forward momentum. Bey, look over the charts and see if you can spot any promising planetary systems. Kim, monitor communications, just in case Voyager has second thoughts." Janeway said decisively.

"Do you have any preference as to a direction?" Bey asked curiously.

"No. Not at the moment, feel free to indulge yourself." Janeway said with a smile.

"Aye, Captain." Bey said happily.

"There's a binary pulsar system at three oh six mark seven. It might be fun to check that out." Paris said as he looked at the charts over Bey's shoulder.

"Do you expect there to be any habitable planets?" Janeway asked

curiously.

"Probably not, but it'd just be cool to explore binary *pulsars*." Paris said frankly.

Janeway thought about it for a moment, then reluctantly admitted, "That *would* be cool."

"Should I plot a course?" Bey asked hesitantly.

Before Janeway could answer, Kim quickly said, "We're being hailed."

"On screen." Janeway said quickly.

Tom Paris' image resolved to show that he was in a shuttlecraft.

"*Starship Amalgam, this is the Federation shuttle Sacajawea, requesting sanctuary.*" Tom said anxiously.

"Granted. Our hangar doors will be open and waiting for your arrival." Janeway said happily.

"*Um, we didn't exactly leave with permission. You might want to be ready to... um, move.*" Tom suggested nervously.

"Acknowledged." Janeway said, then muted the comm.

"I think now would be an excellent time to investigate that binary pulsar system." Janeway said firmly.

"Plotting course." Bey said immediately.

"All systems good to go." Paris said confidently.

"Bey to Gerry... Do we have any of those chaff mines left?" Bey asked into his comm.

"*We have four, do you need me to load'em?*" Gerry asked cautiously.

"Reconfigure them to a different frequency and set them to emit false sensor images of the Amalgam, then program them to go in different directions." Bey said firmly.

"*All four?*" Gerry asked hesitantly.

"Yes. This trick will only work once, so we'd better make the most of it." Bey said firmly.

"We have the shuttlecraft on sensors." Kim announced.

"All hands... we're going to yellow alert. Secure your stations." Janeway called out seriously, then closed the intercom.

"Are we ready to receive them?" Janeway asked quickly.

"The hangar is depressurized and the doors are opening." Bey said quickly.

"Is the course laid in?" Janeway asked anxiously.

"Ready on your command." Paris said seriously.

"As soon as they're secure, go to maximum warp." Janeway said firmly.

"Aye, Captain." Paris said seriously and waited, with his finger poised over the button.

"Gerry to Bey... Chaff mines, ready to deploy."

"Chaff mines, away." Bey said as he launched them.

"The shuttlecraft Sacajawea is secure." Kim said professionally.

"Get us the hell out of here!" Janeway commanded.

Paris went into action, launching them into their top speed in a matter of seconds.

"I can remember when she used to say, 'Engage'." Bey said playfully.

"Those were more carefree times." Janeway said absently as she watched their progress.

"Voyager is hailing us." Kim said seriously.

"Too bad for them." Paris responded before Janeway could.

"Do NOT respond." Janeway said firmly.

"Bey, that course you plotted, it takes us right between the binary stars." Paris said anxiously.

"What good is it to have the best pilot in the Delta Quadrant if you don't make use of him?" Bey asked with a smile at his husband.

"Oh! This is gonna be *fun*." Paris said as he leaned forward in his seat.

There was a long silence that was finally interrupted by the doors opening.

"Captain, we request permission to come onto the bridge." Tom Paris said formally.

Janeway looked over and was surprised to see not only Tom Paris and Harry Kim, but also a woman with a baby in her arms.

"Permission granted." Janeway said seriously, then turned her attention back toward the viewscreen.

"Is there any way we can help?" Tom Paris asked as they remained standing just inside the door.

"No. But stand ready. The situation could change at any moment." Janeway

said firmly, then hit the comm and said, "H'Ree... come to the bridge."

A moment later, H'Ree's voice could be heard over the intercom saying, "*Bridge... I'm on my way.*"

"We should be out of Voyager's sensor range. Perhaps now might be a good time to be discreet." Kim said cautiously.

"I think the time for being discreet is over. Right now is the time to haul ass." Janeway said as her Klingon growl presented itself.

"I'm on it." Paris said anxiously.

Without thought, Tom Paris drifted closer to watch what Paris was doing.

"Did you need me for something, Aunt Janeway?" H'Ree asked as he walked onto the bridge with the child carrier holding Angel on his back.

"Yes, would you please take Samantha and her child somewhere a little more comfortable until we have time to sit and talk?" Janeway asked hopefully.

"Are you hungry? Chell always has something ready and he has babyfood in the stasis unit in the sickbay..." H'Ree said as he led the woman with the baby off of the bridge.

"Thank you, Captain." Tom said gratefully.

"One of the chaff mines just detonated." Bey said suddenly.

"I never received the specs on the chaff mines. How much damage would you expect it to cause?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"None. In it's current mode, it emitted a false sensor image to make anyone outside visual range think that it was us. As soon as they entered visual range, it would detonate, exploding out thousands of tiny transmitters designed to scramble sensors and subspace communications." Bey said seriously.

"Of course, in it's other mode, it can jam sensors and act more like a traditional mine, like how we used them in the battle with the Videans." Paris interjected.

"That sounds like an impressive piece of equipment." Tom said seriously.

"We do our best." Bey said with a smile at his father-in-law.

"Father, would you care to assist me?" Kim asked without looking up from her console.

"Sure, what can I do?" Harry asked as he rushed to her side.

"Would you monitor the status of the ship while I maintain focus on the

sensor data?" Kim asked impassively.

"Of course. I'll be happy to help, however I can." Harry said as he watched the status board carefully.

"You're insane!" Tom said suddenly, drawing everyone's attention.

"I guess you figured out our course." Paris said with a grin.

"You're planning to go between binary *pulsars*? That's completely nuts!" Tom implored him to understand.

"Yeah. And how many times in a lifetime do you have a chance to do something like this?" Bey asked with a smile at Tom's reaction.

"You're all completely nuts!" Tom said as he looked around the bridge.

"Janeway, may I allow my father to take my place at the helm for just a minute, I need to make him understand." Paris asked seriously.

"Do what you need to do." Janeway said as she watched curiously.

Paris stood and motioned for Tom to take his place.

"Now, look at that course and put your hands on the controls. Tell me if you think that you can do that, or not." Paris said seriously.

Tom glanced at Paris for an instant, then did as he was told.

Something about actually being there, with his hands on the controls not only awakened the pilot within him, but also the daredevil. Between one second and the next, he could see exactly how he would navigate his way between the pulsars with only fractions of a second between them and total annihilation.

"That's enough, Dad. This one's mine. But I'll let you pilot us through the next one... I promise." Paris said as he put his hand on Tom's shoulder.

Reluctantly, Tom finally got up out of the chair.

"Are we nuts? Yes. Without a doubt. But we're also living." Paris said as he took his seat again.

"Another of the chaff mines just detonated." Bey said quietly.

"It sounds like Voyager is having a very bad day." Paris said with a barely restrained grin.

"Considering how much chaff they're dealing with, I don't think there's any possible way that they're going to be able to pick up our trail." Bey said seriously.

"And there's still two more chaff mines out there for them to discover." Paris chuckled.

"There's that, too." Bey said with a grin.

"I think that, considering that Voyager is off our tail, we really don't have any reason to endanger the ship with this 'once in a lifetime' maneuver of yours." Janeway said regretfully.

"Excuse me, Captain, but I know how Captain Janeway operates. She's relentless. Even if she ends up detonating all four of those chaff mines of yours, she won't give up. It's not *if* she will pick up your trail. It's a matter of *when*." Tom said seriously.

"Just a minute ago you were saying that we were insane for even considering taking this course, now you're saying that we should?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"It's insane. There's no doubt about that. But it's also an effective way of stopping Captain Janeway's pursuit. She's lost the only person that she had that might have been capable of piloting that big assed ship of hers between two pulsars." Paris said firmly.

"Paris, you may proceed." Janeway said simply.

"I've just received the signal, the third chaff mine has just detonated." Bey said into the silence that followed.

* * * * *

"We're at full impulse." Paris announced.

"All hands... Brace for... acrobatic maneuvers." Janeway called hesitantly.

"This is gonna be tight." Paris said past clenched teeth.

"You've got it, son. You're doing fine." Tom said as he carefully watched Paris' every move.

Bey began to furiously work his console, trying to balance the shields and negate the effects of the phenomenal gravitational forces pulling on them.

"*Bey... when we get past this, are we going to be playing dead?*" Kel asked seriously over the comm.

Bey smiled at the question, then quickly said, "I'll get back to you. Thanks, Kel. I love you."

While maintaining a watch on the shields, Bey said, "If we can get a decent breakaway velocity, we can shut down the engines and drop to minimal power and let the inertia carry us for quite a while. Without energy signatures to draw attention to us, Voyager won't have any way of detecting our presence, even if she does decide to take the long way around to pick up our trail..."

"...because there won't be one to pick up." Janeway said with a nod.

"All hands... continue to brace for acrobatics, they'll be coming any second now. Also, once we're past the pulsars, we're going to drop to minimal power until further notice. Make any preparations that you need to." Janeway called out firmly.

"Dohn to Kel... Are you someplace safe?" Dohn asked anxiously.

"I'm with H'Ree and Samantha in the new daycare room. Dad said that it's the most secure place on the ship. Don't worry about us. We're safe." Kel said assuringly.

"I love you, Kel." Dohn said quietly.

"I love you, too. So do H'Ree and Angel." Kel said tenderly.

"Hang on!" Paris said as he threw them into a quick spiral to avoid a pulse from one of the stars.

"Kim, switch the main screen to the tactical view. If I have to watch that, I'm going to throw up." Janeway said queasily.

"I've got it." Harry said as he switched the screen view.

"Shields are balanced. I've got you covered, Paris." Bey said quickly.

"Up!" Paris said suddenly, then the ship groaned at the stress of the sudden maneuver.

"It's okay. You got this." Tom said over Paris' shoulder.

"Thrusters Z minus three thousand... then... almost... and we're back to full impulse." Paris muttered as sweat started flowing in rivulets down his face.

"You're doing fine." Tom whispered intensely.

"We'll be out of this in five..." Bey called out.

"All hands... prepare for minimal power use." Janeway announced.

"Four."

"You might want to grab onto something, Dad. This could get bumpy." Paris warned.

"Three."

"Father, please secure yourself." Kim said seriously.

"Two."

"Prepare to shut down all non-essential systems."

"One."

The End