STV: Encounters

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Summary

The threat of danger hangs over two Universes. Universe Alpha is dealing with fragile governments and the Dominion War. There is another hazard waiting in the wings. Universe Beta has threats guaranteed to come from both the Delta and the Gamma quadrant, but do they have time to prepare? Voyager and her crew have obligations in both Universes and choices to make. It's a balancing act that is going to get more interesting as it goes along...

Notes

General Disclaimers can be found in the first book of the series.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction based on Star Trek. The authors do not own Star Trek, but this is a work that would otherwise never be written by any of the company. It is non-profit and meant only in fun and as an AU of the imaginative sort.

Polyamory: This work includes polyamory as one of it's main divergences. Plan accordingly.

AU: This work is most definitely AU and it crosses the streams into other AUs of the Trek verses.

Mayhem: The Star Trek Universe is not a *safe* universe. It has violence and mayhem, though it is usually of the TV or PG-13 movie type. There are threats of harm and threats of other kinds of danger, which may be something of which to take account.
Chapter 1

There was a crowd gathering at one of the display bays of Terok Nor. Kira Nerys had the bay created because of the number of visitors that flocked to her station to see the Wormhole in Bajoran space open and close. It was, she admitted to herself, an awe-inspiring sight.

In the darkness, space would glow, then, like an aperture spinning, a hole would literally open in the wide expanse.

There were mysteries inside that wormhole. They knew that it was a gateway to another quadrant. But anyone who tried to pass would get spit out by the spatial event, usually the worse for wear.

According to her doppelganger, her other self from another Universe, the reason for this was that there were Prophets, living beings of light within the wormhole. In that Universe, the Prophets had spoken to the people of Bajor.

In this Universe, they had remained silent and unknown.

Intendant Kira sat regally upon her chair on the special dais reserved for her in the bay and watched with the crowd. She'd made no special speech or other announcement. She had slaves to do that. No, she just sometimes liked to watch and remember that there were things greater than her for a few seconds.

Despite what people thought, she was not a narcissist.

She was a hedonist. There was a difference.

Nerys knew she was attractive and enjoyed her body, but she wasn't so in love with herself that she could not see others. She did see them. It just made a difference to Nerys as to whether they would help her accomplish her goals or not. Her goals were simple, pleasure and power.

It irked her when people got in the way of her goals. That's when problems started... for them.

Not that she'd felt very hedonistic lately. There were troubles on her mind. It wasn't the fiscal issues. Truthfully, she had enough cash to last lifetimes. Nor was it that she'd had to sever most of her connections with the Orion Syndicate. The Syndicate had been getting a bit more demanding of late anyway, and not just for cuts in profits. They'd wanted favors from her about Bajor and that, frankly, she'd not been ready to give. She'd been about to do something about it, but had not arrived at a decision on how to send her message. Dealing with the Syndicate could be a tricky business and one had to use finesse.

Bajor, however, was her home. She did have some loyalties. So there was no question that she would have done something effective.

But that problem had been set aside for the moment, thanks to the relatives of the "Bane of her Existence," General Torres.

General Torres and she had been butting heads for months now. It wasn't that Nerys wasn't loyal to the Empire. She was. She might not be out there fighting battles with the Hive, but she did think she was doing a respectable job as Intendant. After all, things were thriving in her sector.

True, she'd had to use methods that were a little unsavory. But she couldn't name a single Intendant anywhere else that also did not have those contacts or methods. At least her people were not rioting
in the streets like they were in Cardassian.

And true, it did come back to the fact that Nerys liked power. But she didn't necessarily want to run an empire.

Frankly, she didn't know what Torres wanted from her. Maybe they thought she did want to do something more, but how would she accomplish it? Nerys didn't exactly have a fleet of ships. One or two pirates, yes, but nothing serious.

And yet, here she was, feeling suddenly precarious in her position.

She assumed that Miral of the House Presba was there to do something about the notorious Kira Nerys. Her spies had not yet worked out much of what that might be. She did know that Miral and her staff had been doing a staggering amount of research about her important self.

It was kind of flattering in a way. Frightening in another, since she did not know what the intentions were.

She wished that the wormhole held the answers. Or the Prophets or whatever.

But she doubted it.

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In that same crowd were several of Voyager's crew. While the crew anticipated returning to their Universe, it was still decided by the Captain that they could benefit from shore leave. The rotation followed its usual schedule, with the rules specifically laid out. It was a case of survival. They were to treat this Universe as a foreign culture, which meant following the Prime Directive while on Terok Nor and Bajor. They would respect the rules of the culture, whether they agreed with them or not. They would wear their uniforms or the mark of the House Presba while on the station or the planet. They were to travel in pairs at the very least and more if they did not mind the companionship.

There was a chance that there would also be impostors of the now famed crew, seeking to gain a bit of fortune. If so, they were to contact station security and let them handle the matter. Otherwise, the crew was to enjoy themselves and uphold the Honor of the ship and fleet.

For most crew that should be easy enough.

Tom, Harry and Steve were part of the crowd that watched the expansion of the wormhole. It was a beautiful sight and they gawked for a bit, though they'd all seen the event before. The difference lay in the display and the freedom of time to appreciate it and the company.

Tom leaned on one of the guard rail bars designed to keep the tourists from falling catastrophically onto the hard surfaces below. There were several decks to a station and some of them were open to view from this particular spot. "You know, the more I see, the more I appreciate some of the changes in Voyager," the navigator said. "They could use more plants around here."

"Well, I wouldn't call us spoiled, given all the stuff we've been through, but I have to say it is a nice change." Harry smiled back. He gripped the rails with his hands and looked up. "That's really quite the view."

They watched as sparks of lights suddenly flashed in front of the wormhole. "Well," said an anonymous companion, "there they go."

"Who?"
"Oh, the fools. They try and make the run through the wormhole and it never works."

"They do?"

"It's become somewhat of a competition. There's a substantial reward for the first person or people to succeed."

"Interesting," said Steve.

They watched as the tiny dots flashed into the spatial event.

"In a few minutes they'll be right back out." The Bajoran pointed at another faint glimmer in space, "Look, the tugboats are already out there, circling, like Yaka waiting for their meal to die."

"That's a lovely image."

"Well, it might be an exaggeration, but still..." The Bajoran shrugged and watched the wormhole with some intensity.

Steve said, "I take it you know someone out there?"

"My son. He and his friends decided to make a try for it this time. I could have said no, but they would have done it anyway. So I bought them a good ship, one I hope won't be too damaged when it comes back out."

"Understandable."

The Bajoran turned and looked at Steve, Harry and Tom. "You're those Voyager people."

"We are."

"You were at the Battle of Pharaoh System."

"Yes."

"Well, you've caused a lot of trouble you know."

Steve turned to look at the Bajoran. The woman was tall, buxom, sandy-haired, and handsome in a square-faced kind of way. "Really. What kind of trouble?"

"Interruption of supply lines. Manufacturing delays. That kind of thing."

Steve asked, "Are you telling me that the Syndicate is the only supplier of goods?"

"Well, of course not. But they were consistent. They had agreements, you see, with other races. Now our transports have to deal with nuisances and pirates."

"But you had to deal with them before."

"But the Syndicate provided protection..."

"That's interesting. So, you're having more piracy now?"

"No. It's the same amount, maybe a little less. But you're missing the point."

"You're saying you don't have security forces."
"Ah. You do understand. But, of course, that is not all."

"What about the Klingons?"

"What about them? The first sign of battle and they're off and blazing into the firefight. They don't watch over our goods. They could care less."

"You could still do better than the Orion Syndicate."

"I'd like to know how..." The Bajoran turned. "Oh, here they come."

There was a flash from the center of the wormhole and several objects, apparently on fire or shedding their plates, were popping out. The tugboats started moving forward.

The Bajoran squinted and paled. "Please excuse me. I have things I need to do."

"Of course. It was illuminating to speak with you."

The three men watched for awhile longer and Tom finally spoke. "You know, I wonder if Captain Janeway would let us try."

"You do see that they're gathering those ships up in bits and pieces don't you?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but none of those ships are Voyager," Tom replied with a confident smile.

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Dr. Pulaski stared open mouthed at the two women in front of her. Lwaxana Troi had just uttered something improbable and Seven of Nine was, apparently, waiting patiently for an answer.

The Chief Medical Officer gathered her wits and got immediately stubborn. Sometimes answers were best given simply. "No."

"Disappointing," said Seven of Nine so evenly that Kate double checked to make sure the woman's ears weren't pointed.

Lwaxana shook her head, "But not unexpected. Kate, you're going to wear yourself ragged with denial. Besides we haven't completed what we are here to say yet. Hear us out first, and then decide."

"I don't need to hear anything out. I am..."

"...delightfully stubborn. But surely you'd like to visit the station and scope out the differences, just a little bit. Seven and I were going to go down this evening and thought we might invite you along."

"But it's a date."

"There are many kinds of dates, Doctor. If you prefer to keep this a mere social experience, then by all means. But don't lock yourself away in this office like a monk. You of all people..."

"You're just asking me if I want to go to the station."

"Yes."

"No hanky panky."
"Unless you change your mind."

"Give me a half an hour to think about it."

Lwaxana smiled warmly. "Of course." Then she turned to the statuesque blonde. "Seven darling, you were going to show me ... what did you call it... Ah, Astrometrics."

Seven of Nine smiled in return, then turned to the shorter blonde and said, "I look forward to spending more time with you."

"I haven't said I'm going."

"On the other hand, it would be illogical not to go now that the opportunity presents itself to you."

Dr. Pulaski didn't really have anything useful to say to that. "Look, scram and let me think."

Lwaxana grasped Seven of Nine's arm. "Let's go before she becomes obstinate."

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General Belle Torres beamed over to Voyager at ten hundred hours. It was a deliberate choice of time, as it was a full two hours before lunch, and she had already been promised a good meal to go with the meeting. She was meeting Captain Kathryn Janeway and her 'sister', the Chief Engineer, and Epatai of House Presba, B'Elanna Torres to discuss some new information she'd received from the Chancellor. Plus, she had a few serious questions she needed to ask them.

They met in the conference room. Kathryn and B'Elanna were already there, standing and conversing. Kathryn had a mug of something aromatic in her hand and B'Elanna had a PADD, which they seemed to be reviewing. Belle had half expected them to be wildly kissing, but apparently, they did know how to separate professional life from personal. Even with the explanations Voyager had offered, she had been wondering.

They turned and smiled at her in welcome as she entered and offered her a seat. Then they sat down, with the Captain at the head of the table and B'Elanna across from her. There were some pleasantries spoken and then they got down to business.

"The reason I am here is that you made several claims during a certain broadcast," she paused long enough to see their reactions. Neither woman so much as twitched. They could have argued that they had not gone in with the expectations of being seen. But it didn't change facts. There were claims made. "... and my Universe must now deal with the consequences. Of course, the Orion Syndicate is up in arms. It would not surprise you to know that they have, through various means, tried to protest. They have no official standing; however, so all protests are based on whatever previous understandings might have been made. So the question I must ask you, Were you telling the truth?"

The captain spoke without hesitation. "It's worse than was said. For you anyway. In our Universe, we've already encountered the hazards we spoke of in one way or another, but not all at approximately the same time or strength. But here?" She shook her head grimly. "So, Yes. Everything we said was true, if shaded to cover certain facts."

The Klingon General nodded thoughtfully. "I thought as much. Now, please, tell me the specifics."

"We can do better. We can show you, since we have the data from the Lucky Dragon. But let me give you a bit of background first. You see we had three reasons for coming here, General. The first was personal. We wanted our family back. The second was to warn you. The third was to cripple the Syndicate enough to slow them down so they couldn't cause more damage in this Universe or in
ours. In Universe Alpha, if you'll forgive the designation..." The General nodded and waved for the
captain to continue, "... the Alpha and Beta Quadrants are already at war with the Dominion. The
Orion Syndicate, which usually takes no side, was suddenly gunning after fleet ships."

"You can say it, you know," gruffed the General. "The Federation is dead here, but it was also
different. Continue."

"Fine, yes, they were gunning after Federation Starfleet ships. Apparently the Syndicate was taken
over by the Cardassians, who had aligned themselves with the Dominion, a Gamma Quadrant
species, the Changelings. That species was, and is, so paranoid, that they conquered their quadrant so
they could guarantee there was only one supreme species. They are intent on doing the same with the
rest of the galaxy."

The General nodded. She had heard some of this before, from General Martok. But she smiled
grimly. "They've never encountered the Hive then."

"Neither have we. At this point, we feel some urgency to get back home, because we suspect that the
Hive does exist, it just..."

"...hasn't found your worlds yet." The Klingon grimaced in sympathy.

"Precisely. And our Universe needs warning too. I'd be interested in exchanging information, if
possible. But that said, given the types of beings that the Changelings are, I'm not sure the Hive - at
least based on the little we know about them at this point - would find them of interest."

"So, this Starfleet, it empowered you to act against the Orion Syndicate, specifically."

"Yes. Now, mind you, we really have been stuck in the Delta Quadrant. And we had no guarantee
that we would ever see the Syndicate again. I don't doubt that Starfleet would...hmm... appoint others
to the same task within the Alpha Quadrant, at least. Only, there is a personnel crisis."

"Due to the war."

"Which everyone is losing: The Federation, the Klingon Empire, and the Romulan Empire. The
Changelings, with their Jem'Hadar, which they genetically enhanced especially for conquering
worlds, are causing havoc.

"And the Orion Syndicate has aligned with the Cardassians of your Universe, which was aligned
with the Gamma Quadrant Changelings."

"Yes. And they are also here, in this Universe. How that happened isn't very clear, but the evidence
indicates that the two Syndicates somehow arrived at an agreement."

"I guess what I need to know is whether the whole of the Syndicate in this Universe is involved, or
whether... it's an issue of cartels."

"Well, the Pharaoh Cartel was definitely part of it. We have the data to prove it and they were also
the ones most involved in the capture of our mates and parents."

"Which you most admirably punished," the General smiled toothily.

Janeway didn't quite smile back, but she did tilt her head in acknowledgment. "We also have some
data implicating certain other cartels, but the Pharaoh Cartel in this Universe was key. And, given
how fast they all broke afterwards, it would be a bit of a chore to find the other cartels at this point.
Hopefully, they will have taken the warning for what it was."
"That was a warning?"

"Yes."

"I like the way you think, Captain Janeway."

"On the other hand, it'll be more work to figure out who was doing what in our Universe, but we believe that the parallels may be enough to lead us where we need to go. We also have names and places that need addressing in Universe Beta and Alpha, just to make sure the nail is well and truly in the coffin. On the other hand, we are only interested in those who specifically attacked our House and in those who are specifically contributing to the war. If there are other cartels that could prove their,...innocence, then we have no quarrel or interest with them. Though we would also highly suggest that it would be time for them to come out clearly on the side of the Empire, so to speak. We're not the police, after all."

The General chuckled. "Well, I will need to speak with certain persons about possibly making that known. Not too soon, mind. It's healthy for the Syndicate to be up in arms at the moment. They had forgotten who was the power in these Quadrants. They live by our sufferance, not the other way around. Which brings me to this." She leaned forward and gazed very seriously at the two other women, "Depending upon what I learn via the data you provide, I have been empowered to officially give you, and the Epatai, Warlord status. This will give you similar rights and responsibilities that your Starfleet has placed upon you, but allow you to function outside of the usual military parameters. Thus, say, if you need to return to the Delta Quadrant or disappear for mysterious reasons, you will be covered. Or, say, if you decide you need to go cartel crushing again, you may do so with the full backing of the Empire. In fact, with these powers, you may assemble your own fleet, as long as they swear allegiance to the House and the Empire. You will need to establish an official chain of command with trustworthy persons. I will be in that chain of command, of course, also as Warlord."

"You want us to leave some of our people here."

"I am only one person in this Universe. Yours is a much larger House. And you have people who are loyal to the House Presba - a very important trait in a House fleet. Yes. I want some of our people here."

"General, that's..." Kathryn tried to gather her thoughts quickly, given how they'd suddenly become scrambled. "How can the Chancellor even think of trusting us with this?"

"Are you saying you are untrustworthy?"

"No. But General, we're a foreign entity. We hail from a completely different Universe."

"You are House Presba and we know the House; My House. Do you plan on taking over the Empire?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then there is no conflict, since neither do I. It would be too much work. But I do want to protect the Empire. And now that I have a House, I want to make sure it stays and prospers. In this Universe and yours."

Janeway was just plain outright shocked and could not think of anything to say.
B'Elanna was now gaping at the General, who continued speaking as if she hadn't just dropped a bombshell on them. "Think on it anyway. The Chancellor is prepared to fully support your endeavors, as he has long felt that the Orion Syndicate has had too much power as a whole. He also agrees that failing to remain neutral and choosing an opponent who was against the Empire, even one in another Universe, is an act of War and a threat to his supreme authority to make such decisions. He is also very upset at the implications of the Borg and the Hirogen."

"And he should be," said B'Elanna. "The Hirogen are a predator species and the Borg are empire builders. It's a bad combination to have to face no matter how one slices it."

"Which brings us to this; I need to see the data."

"Would you mind very much if I brought Lieutenant Ro into this conversation?" Janeway asked. "She was a primary investigator during our information digging."

"Send for her."

A few minutes later the Bajoran joined them in the conference room. Again pleasantries were exchanged and then the Lieutenant was caught up on the discussion. She said, at one point, "Of course, the raw data will be made available to you. Also, the prisoners have not yet been turned over to the authorities. Nor have they been interrogated. Apparently certain persons don't want the trouble it might cause."

The General growled at that, but said nothing. Yet.

Then, with permission from the Captain, Laren ran the presentation that Seven of Nine had prepared.

In a few moments stored feed began playing of an encounter that sent a chill through Belle's soul. Then the information got worse. And worse. Until about an hour later, General Torres was in a frothing rage and had to be held back from going to Cargo Bay 2 where the miscreants were stored for trial.

"Your people must see this, General. They must see these people brought to justice, even if they receive the death penalty. If your people don't see the evidence and its results, they won't believe it." B'Elanna said as she held the raging, grieving woman tight. "But now you know why. Now you know why we had to come. And you know the truth."

Belle began to swear, cussing a long angry streak into the air like a baneful rainbow of profanity until she ran out. By then she had calmed down a bit and B'Elanna released her grip.

"We would have come anyway," B'Elanna said, clapping her sister's shoulder. "It just makes it easier that members of our family were here already to give us a reason."

"I know," Belle said gruffly. "You have Honor. I would have done the same."

There were solemn nods.

The General then said, very grimly. "I have people who need to see this. Keep the originals, since they are safer on this ship, but give me copies of everything. Make two. The Chancellor will need to see this. Also, make sure that Mother, Miral, is given access to all the data. She is still on the Empire's payroll and, as she has to judge other members of the Orion Syndicate, she might as well add this to her docket."

"Speaking of which, I've been dying to ask. How did that all start?" B'Elanna asked. "I mean, she's a judge in our Universe, yes, but why did they let her..."
"There was no way to prove that she wasn't. This is why we sent people to watch her. It very quickly became obvious she was telling the truth."

"That's... so Klingon."

"Yes."

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Miral took the PADD Effany was handing her and addressed T'Pel. "Now, as we have time on our hands T'Sai most graciously conducted independent research on one Kira Nerys via the inter-quadrant network. It makes for very interesting reading. As we already knew she is an effective Intendant. Bajor and this sector have been at rest longer under her reign than at any other time under other Intendants. They have had regular elections, free media and their transportation systems run on time.

"Also of note, piracy in neighboring sectors was rampant... until that little battle in Pharaoh System. Bajor was only rarely hit and often merely symbolically -- if you understand my meaning. This does point to unfortunate ties, for the Intendant. And we will need to find out from our House researchers how deeply the Orion Syndicate was involved with the Pharaoh portion of their Syndicate and how far that reaches into Bajoran pockets. Since T'Sai did the majority of the research, I felt it would be wise to hear her conclusions."

Effany began handing around the other PADDs. T'Sai bowed slightly in Miral's direction. "If you will look at file number one ...."
The Klingon ship Orantho arrived at Presba's surprisingly busy space port with little fanfare. On the other hand, the exit of Sirella of the House Martok from the ship had plenty of flourish, as her guards marched smartly before her and her servants marched smartly behind her. Fortunately for Asil, Worf had sent a quick warning about the approximate time to expect the Mistress of House Martok. House Presba was therefore ready.

Asil, Phoebe Janeway and Deanna Troi were there to personally greet the formidable Klingon woman. Sirella was tall and dignified. She had brown hair, dark eyes and proud ridges upon her forehead. She wore an ornately designed dress that emphasized her curves and her heritage. She was a woman of noble birth, Mistress of a Great House, and wanted everyone to know it just by looking at her.

Her method was effective.

Asil greeted the Klingon woman with the Vulcan salute, then said, "Greetings, Sirella of the House Martok. We welcome you to Presba."

"Greetings, Asil of the House Presba. I have heard many interesting things about Presba."

"All good," I hope, interjected Phoebe.

Sirella's attention turned to the Human. "It depends on who was doing the telling."

"Gossip does not matter. We will be successful."

Sirella's attention returned to Asil. "That is a very Klingon attitude."

"It is logical."

"Hmm. Well. I am not here to stand around. You have made arrangements for my stay, have you not?"

"Yes, Sirella of the House Martok. It will depend upon your preference. You may have the Ambassadorial suite at the Resort or, if you prefer, you may stay at our modest abode."

"I believe I will see what your Resort has to offer."

"As you wish."

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The suite was impressively well appointed for planet that was at the backend of the Empire. Sirella wondered how much money they were spilling into the place. Then, as she strolled through the busy concourse that wound its way through the Resort and passed by the active little stores and eateries, she wondered how much money they were actually raking in.

As if she read Sirella's mind, Asil explained, "There is a professional development convention. Several industries are represented in one of the pavilions. I am sure they wouldn't mind a member of the Great House visiting. I understand Arconaea Industries has a booth."
It was a subtle hint that Asil had studied their important guest. Sirella had some investment in the Andorian Company. "Why are they meeting here, rather than in the Alpha Quadrant?"

"The businesses attending this convention are all from the Beta Quadrant. The booths are being run by representatives of the companies that also happen to have ties in the Empire. They have been hit hard by the border closing, but not as hard as might be assumed. And there are other incentives."

"Incentives?"

"You would need to talk to our Ferengi representative to find out more."

"You have Ferengi ties?"

"You have perhaps heard of Quark?"

Sirella growled lightly in disapproval and then was surprised by receiving a growl in return.

Vulcans didn't growl.

Asil turned to look directly at the Klingon. "Do not make the mistake of thinking you know what we are, because we are not shaped like you, Sirella. We are House Presba."

Was that... was that a flash of danger in the Vulcan's eyes? Surely not.

Deanna Troi took up the thread and said, peaceably enough, "We have found Quark to be a very efficient manager of our finances while T'Pel is away. Of course, we check his work, but we also make sure that the payment is high enough to keep him honest."

"T'Pel. She is... one of the mates of the Epatai." There was that soft sound of disapproval in Sirella's voice again.

"They are bonded in the Zakeeri manner. Zakeeri are mated in multiple-partner units. The more partners, the more status. It was a necessary choice and there were circumstances that led to the bonding," Deanna confirmed

"I find that difficult to believe."

"You may believe or disbelieve as you wish," Asil commented evenly. "Never-the-less, it is a true. Moreover, it is a Blood-bond."

If Sirella were less of a noble she would have rolled her eyes. If anything her disapproval of the whole situation skyrocketed. Everyone knew that there could only be two in a mated bond. She personally discounted those who had concubines. They obviously did not have a true bond, like she did.

But she couldn't deny that this was a Vulcan making the statement. They were notorious for their honesty. If nothing else, Asil believed what she was saying.

Sirella decided to be politic. "I will see this for myself someday and then I will know." She looked around and realized that the scenery had changed. "Where are you taking me?"

Phoebe smiled, "We thought you might want to see the amphitheater. Vrald is still tweaking it, but we believe it will be ready for opening this week."

"Vrald? Vrald is here?"
"He's is one of the designers of the Colony."

'Well, didn't that just explain things,' thought the Klingon. She'd been fighting to hate the Resort and failing. Now she understood why she found it so appealing instead.

She narrowed her gaze at the Betazoid who had turned briefly to give her a speculative smile.

"And how did you procure his services? He is..."

"Oh, he stopped by one day and just stayed," Phoebe said as she waved her hand airily. "He's a design freak, you know and this place was a challenge he couldn't pass by. Especially since we've got a healthy artist population going."

Sirella was becoming intrigued in spite of herself. "You are Phoebe Janeway, correct?"

"That would be me."

"Your Painting of Kargas and the Trellian Python was... acceptable."

Phoebe's lips twitched, but she didn't turn around. "I'm glad you liked it," she said pleasantly. "Worf was in such a hurry to grab the paintings I didn't have as much time with it as the painting might have needed."

The corridor was starting to darken. It was now lit by holographic torches, which flickered shadows and light through the darkening passageway. There were rich velvet tapestries, emphasized by red, black and gold along the stonewall. The tapestries had heroic scenes, not just of Klingons, but of Humans, Vulcans, Bajorans... and Betazoids?

She stopped at that one. "What is this?"

Deanna looked at it, "Ah. That is my ancestor, Luas Troi. There is not much fighting that happens on Betazed, but back in the past, when it did, it was often to the death. Here she battles a member of another house who accused her of stealing one of the great treasures and would not stop, even after it was proved that the House Troi had come by it honestly. Ben Naya attacked Luas with a blade, only to have it turned back on himself in the end. Vrald liked the story. So he had the Tapestry made. Most of these tapestries represent historic battles of the ancestors. When Miral gets back he plans on quizzing her for more."

"Interesting."

"I admit, we surprised ourselves by looking back. I have not been in the habit of investigating my ancestors. It is something that I probably ought to do more often."

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The Amphitheater was spacious. A person could stand anywhere on the stage and be heard clearly, without a microphone, at the top of the stadium. A rehearsal was in progress and the women, as well as Sirella's assistant, stopped to watch.

The actors below were working out some sort of battle, choreographing swordplay and dialog.

Fortunately, sound did not travel down. Phoebe leaned over to Sirella, "I think it's going to work this time. They're going to be using holographic blood for the main part of the battle. They'd played around with a liquid substitute for authenticity yesterday, but everyone kept slipping."
"Who are the investors?"

"Right now it's us. House Presba, I mean. But we hope to get more as the theater's popularity grows. We've invited a lot of people for the opening, but, you know... we're a new house, so it might take awhile for it to catch. That's all right. One of the side benefits of having a lot of artists around is that we always have a willing audience."

"Hmm. How many plays do you have scheduled?"

"Well, right now we have four, but in between that we have several concerts and a few other theatrical events scheduled."

"Is it enough for a full season?"

"Uhm... perhaps. I suppose we could find a way to buffer it. But I would have to...

"Have your man talk to my assistant about broadcast rights on Qo'nos. You will of course be filming it, correct?"

Phoebe's expression said, 'we will be now.' Her mouth said, "Of course."

==^==

Dinner was well on its way to becoming an almost formal party by the time the women arrived at the Presba Estate. Sirella made no comment about the size or the look of the abode. She walked in as if she owned the place and was promptly greeted by someone she knew.

"Sirella! What a surprise to see you here!" The woman with the tallest hat in the hallway said with a big smile. "Let me look at you!"

"Guinan?" The Klingon blinked in surprise and her expression changed from one of superiority to wonder. "Is that you?"

"Oh my dear! You look gorgeous and I've missed you." The El-Aurian took one of Sirella's arms in her own and gently guided her further into the domicile. "Now tell me all about you. I haven't seen you since you were, what... fifteen? I understand you snagged Chancellor Martok. I tell you, I was so proud. I want to hear it all. It must be quite the story."

Asil, Deanna and Phoebe were left in the doorway looking at each other in astonishment.

Vrald, who had also watched this with some amusement, excused himself from the person he was talking with and approached Phoebe. "It would do me honor, if you would walk with me."

The woman looked up at him and tried to keep the want out of her gaze. Phoebe didn't quite succeed. But she managed courtesy and took his arm. "Of course. I need to talk to you about something anyway."

Deanna watched them both with concern and said to Asil in Presba tongue, "I give them a month before one of them breaks."

"You forget Janeway stubbornness. It will be at least three."

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In the Alpha Quadrant things were heating up on several fronts.
The Dominion started building up for another attack from the Cardassian sector. No one knew exactly how they were getting ships and people to Cardassia, but some suspected that they had begun locally cloning the Breen. The ships were being built somewhere just past the Badlands, but that location was cut off from their long distance sensors at the moment. It wasn't possible that they were getting through the wormhole, since that was guarded rather heavily.

The Romulans were plainly unhappy with the current rift between the Klingons and the Federation. There were rumbles in the Senate of a calling off of relations, since the whole reason for forming the alliance was to create a unified front.

What was really happening was that the Romulans were unhappy with Section 31, which had tried to infiltrate the Tal Shiar. They didn't exactly hold this against the Federation, since they too had an underground government, but it did point to political troubles because it seemed that the Federation did not control theirs very well. The Federation did not know this, however, since the Tal Shiar simply disappeared the offending parties. Section 31 on the other hand took a hard hit with the loss.

Federation Headquarters was also experiencing strife and not just due to the severing of ties. Some of the members were beginning to doubt whether the Federation could protect them. After all, they'd already lost several planets to the Dominion. Cooler heads were prevailing, but it was definitely tense. Plus, there were other concerns, the same economic and social ones that never went away simply because there was a war.

Starfleet was a veritable haven of serenity in comparison. This was probably because they had one sole mission at the moment. Protect. The only problem was, there were fewer and fewer of them to do the job. And the candidates were getting younger and younger.

It was the kind of thing that could give an Admiral nightmares.

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Inevitably, Lwaxana and Seven returned to sickbay. There they found Kate Pulaski waiting for them, leaning against her desk with her arms folded. She didn't even have to look at the chronometer to know that they were exactly one half hour in returning. Seven of Nine had an internal clock.

When they arrived she said, "I have a few rules."

Lwaxana said, with amusement,"Oh really?"

Seven of Nine cocked her ocular implant.

"Yes. First, only one or two of you at a time during any dating. I just...I can't wrap my head around what you all..."

"Darling, we don't intend to overwhelm you."

"But you do. She does. All of you do. And I reserve the right to say No, no matter how far into this we go."

"Of course."

"I also reserve the right to change my mind. I have often found that life is constantly challenging my assumptions about... people and things. I am willing to acknowledge that."

"Well, then." Lwaxana gave Kate an affectionate look. "Come and let me show you some of the sights." She walked over and took one of shorter blonde's hands in hers, causing the defensive
position to automatically unfold. "We'll have some company, of course. Our captain is a bit protective these days. Ensigns Booker and Simmons have been assigned to us."

Kate chuckled as she allowed herself to be gently led. "She's going for the intimidation factor, I take it."

"Of course. Kathryn watches out for all of us."

==^==

Terok Nor was busier than ever. All sorts of species walked its corridors, including species from the Delta quadrant. Surprisingly most were not gawkers. It was a case of once you've seen a space port...

But that didn't keep the experience from being interesting for the various members of Voyager's crew. Ylfians, Kazon and Kutwutchu walked along the corridors as if they'd always been there. They visited stores, bars, and other sites with the aplomb of galaxy travelers.

The owners and managers received the visitors gladly, if a little awkwardly sometimes. Certainly some of the accommodations were more exotic than others, but most adapted. More shocking to them than the foreigners of the Delta Quadrant, however, was the confident presence of Humans who didn't bow, and Orions who held themselves equal to all. But as soon as they spotted the uniforms or the markings, there was no question as to their rights.

Habits, however, are difficult to kick.

When Lwaxana Troi and company arrived at the Golden Post restaurant, so named because of a brightly glittering post in the middle of a large circular room, there were several reactions. First, there was the caution and fear typically engendered by Truth Seekers, which meant some eyes-averted, very deep bows (if viewers happened to be standing). Second, there was caution and confusion about Seven of Nine, but at the same time awe. That meant there were stares, which Seven was used to, given her Borgness. She just stood, while they waited their short wait, with that normal, neutral stance of hers, which to some reeked of superiority. Others, reacting more primordially, just bowed. The stares then slid away to encounter the sardonic glance of Dr. Pulaski. It was a question of whether the observers' gaze slid away because of habit or because she was so obviously amused by their little power games. But inevitably, the gaze would return because she was dressed as one of the Heroes of the Battle of Pharaoh System. Then gazes would flow around to the security team, which most just naturally skimmed over, because anyone who had any rank at all had security teams. Even with their natural muscular bulk, Ensigns Booker and Simmons blended into the background. But at the same time, they also discouraged any unnecessary bad behavior.

By the time the three women were settled into their plush seats around a large table, people had accommodated themselves to the new. Those that couldn't, made their exits.

"Well, that was interesting," said Dr. Pulaski as she watched certain Bajorans throw glances their way as they made their exit. "They can't decide whether they are too afraid of you, Lwaxana, to glower properly, or whether they are too bigoted to care."

Lwaxana took the proffered menu from the waiter with a dignified smile then said, as she opened it, "No one glowers like you, darling. They just know they can't compete."

Kate chortled in amusement. Then when she recovered she said, "So, how does this work? Are we going Dutch or..."

"Dear, you wouldn't be able to buy anything on this station anyway."
"Because I'm human?" the doctor asked with some asperity.

"No dear. Because you are famous. You were at Pharaoh System and everyone has seen your face on the news. Trust me, for all the people exiting, there are more dying to come over and talk to you."

"Seriously?"

Lwaxana nodded, "They're too afraid because I'm here." Seven of Nine reached over and took Lwaxana's hand and squeezed gently, then let her hand go. The Betazoid gave her a whimsical smile. "Of course you understand dear, you've been through it, haven't you."

"Okay, new rule. If you're going to hold a conversation I can't understand..."

"Sorry darling. I can't say it won't happen again, as I am a telepath. Now, what would you like to order?"

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The supply officers took advantage of the fact they were in a similar Universe to begin the process of acquiring certain materials that could be found only in the Alpha quadrant. They planned on making trades of "rare," goods from the Delta quadrant. Interestingly, while many things were similar, such as the very precious and no longer illegal Romulan Ale, there were certain things they couldn't find for trade. Either the items had never been discovered, made, or the inventor had never existed - or survived.

But, if it was vegetable or mineral and the raw item existed, they placed an order for it - even if it boggled the trader's mind that the Voyagers would be interested in such a thing. But they didn't ask for explanations. "Why you want bitter berries I don't know, but fine, I'll bring you 350 plants, whole, in trade for..."

There were also items that did not exist in Universe Alpha, but did exist in Beta. If an item looked like it might be useful, trade-worthy, or just interesting to someone on board, an order was placed.

It spoke volumes about the differences in the Universes. While one couldn't necessarily find correlation or cause, once the problem was reported, the scientist and anthropologists on board Voyager suddenly realized they'd found treasure. They began making requisitions for data and historical records. Archivists were assigned to interview Miral, Lwaxana, Gretchen and T'Pel. T'Pel did not allow an interview, but she did write her observations down for those who were interested.

The supply and procurement office found help via T'Pel and her assistant. T'Pel had made strong inroads into the economic side of things over the course several months. She even had minor businesses started, including a growing Farm in a Dunkarian system. Voyager's wealth and that of House Presba's expanded.

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There were academic tours for the children, first on Bajor and then on Terok Nor. The tours were to include sites of historical interests, museums and other fun places. Anyone under the age of 16 or its equivalent went. Of course, Naomi Wildman, and Mezoti, Azan and Rebi Hansen were part of the group. They had plenty of supervision; there were their Kutwutchu teachers, a security compliment and then a Marine Guard on top of that.

All of the children old enough, and trained enough, went out wearing weapons and armor too.

The miniaturized dk-tahg carried by some of the tinier Ylfians was enough to give certain Klingon
warriors hysterics when they weren't in view of the Ylfians. Not that they underestimated their tiny friends. After all, they'd seen the grown Ylfians in battle, and the younger Ylfians carried themselves with absolute warrior confidence.

So it was that other visitors to Bajor were treated to the unusual sight of a single, brave Bajoran Tour guide who was surrounded by a mob of armed, curious and surprisingly well behaved children and their equally impressive adult escorts. Not that the younglings didn't have fun. They most certainly did, especially once they reached the amusement parks, but they were also well trained and aware of the dangers around them. So they played, but alertly.

Tiny Ylfians hitched rides on the roller coasters by tucking themselves into their Kutwutchu friend's shirts. Kutwutchu scrunched up their knees in the bumping bender vehicles and chased after their Borg and Katarian friends. The Borg and Katarian were spun around and around in the whirl-O-ride, with Naomi staggering out a bit greenly, and Mezoti declaring loudly that she did not see the point. The ever-watchful adults observed all of this with amusement.

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Captain Al'xandr entered the Golden Post. There was a young Bajoran woman on his arm, Leeta. She was a Dabo girl at Quark's, brunette and charming. He had procured the smiling woman's services for the evening. He didn't desire much, just someone pretty to talk to while he ate and relaxed before heading out again.

As they were being escorted to their table he spotted Doctor Pulaski. "Excuse me, I must speak with someone. Please be seated."

The young Captain made his way towards the table with confidence. He did see the Truth Seeker. He recognized her from the videos. But he also knew that she was of House Presba and those Truth Seekers were different, in a good way. This, however, didn't stop him from bending in courtesy upon arrival at the women's table.

"Please forgive my intrusion, but I wished to extend my greetings to Doctor Pulaski."

There was surprising warmth in the Truth Seeker's expression, "It's no intrusion, is it Kate?"

"Of course not. How's the lung?"

Al'xandr grinned widely. "Good as new. I breathe with ease."

"Glad to hear it. They sending you back out yet?"

"Ah, that is part of why I stopped by. My crew and I leave tomorrow. There has been sign of the Hive at one of our borders."

By now Lwaxana was getting somewhat used to the surface visions that mention of the Hive produced. It still caused her to shiver. "You will be careful."

He looked at her with some confusion. "I am Klingon."

"That is not in question," Lwaxana said with a smile. "I know you are brave and true and capable. I just am hopeful of your return."

He was taken aback. He bent forward, and saw real concern in her dark gaze. "I will do my best."

She patted his hand, as if she had the right. "Good. I am glad. Quapla, Al'xandr. My prayers go with
you."

He said his farewells then and walked back, feeling strangely and oddly comforted.
"You really don't have to do this," commented Kate.

Seven evenly replied as they walked, "It is traditional. Besides, I enjoyed your company."

Doctor Pulaski couldn't help the smile that tugged at her own lips. "Well," she admitted, "I enjoyed yours too. You're pretty smart for a blonde."

Lwaxana laughed. These past days had been wonderful and she felt more relaxed than she had in ages. "That she is."

"I fail to see what the color of hair has to do with intelligence. Although," Seven said gamely, "I do find you quite intelligent yourself."

Doctor Pulaski tossed a glance back. They were almost to the door of her quarters and she stopped in amazement. "Are you telling me that no one has afflicted you with blonde jokes on this ship?"

"Blonde jokes?" Seven of Nine's brow wrinkled. "Ah. A genre of jokes based on..."

"Whoa. Stop. That's not how it works."

Seven paused. "I understand. But I do find definitions helpful. Your human culture has at times been obscure to me."

"You don't think of yourself as human?"

Seven cocked her head. "I am aware that many would prefer that I did. And I acknowledge my birth heritage as valuable. I seek a greater understanding of humanity, my own included. I am natively human, but ... I am Borg. I will always be Borg." She raised her cybernetic hand as an example, and then dropped it as the point was made. "I was not raised as human, so cultural references will sometimes elude me."

"You know, I knew an android once, who wanted only to be human."

"Commander Data."

"Yes."

"I am not an android," Seven pointed out evenly. "His flaws are not mine."

"I'll say," quipped Lwaxana affectionately. "Perhaps you ought to give Kate some definitive proof of your essential... humanity."

Doctor Pulaski stalled like a deer in bright lights. "I... uh..."

Seven of Nine reached out and gently touched Kate's shoulder. "There is no pressure. Lwaxana is teasing."

Kate looked at Seven and saw the soft expression of concern. That was evidence enough for her. She patted the Borg's hand. "I know."
Kate's expression turned to one of self-amusement. She was not normally so hesitant and she recognized that in herself. She almost deserved all the teasing that Lwaxana had been shooting her way. Kate, in certain circles, was not exactly known for timidity - in science or in sexuality. But... she felt conflicted. She looked more closely at the Borg. "I admit, I am... curious. Would you indulge me?"

"As you wish." Seven of Nine leaned in and pressed her lips fearlessly against Kate Pulaski's. Then she deepened the delicate touch.

The kiss was a tender surprise; soft, warm and wet. It was sweetly, slowly stimulating and neither too long nor too short. Kate was surprised at her reaction and when the kiss ended, she pulled back, partly unwillingly. "Oh my." She turned to look at Lwaxana. "Is it... is it always like that?"

Lwaxana chuckled gently. "Oh, it gets better." Then, still amused, she drew Kate in for an embrace and a kiss of an equally passionate, yet delicate nature.

By the time she was done, the good Doctor was feeling a bit wobbly at the knees. "Well, you've gotten better with time, Lwaxana."

"I don't know if I should be offended or not. But I admit..." The Betazoid grinned wickedly, "...I've had so much practice recently."

Kate groaned and then laughed. "All right. All right. Get out of here you two. I'm sorely tempted to invite you in, but really, I need a good night's sleep. And I need to think."

"Sleep well, Kate," Lwaxana said as she and Seven touched their fingertips together. "We enjoyed spending time with you. We must do this again sometime."

"Oh, I expect we will." Kate stepped through the door and made herself not look back.

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B'Elanna Torres kept busy. Vulcans might like to sit and ponder, but she liked to tinker and tweak as a meditation. She had a lot to think about and she thought better with tools in her hands. So, now she had a panel down and she was, with the delicate help of Voyager, making some fixes. Voyager had not gotten off scott-free in the battle, after all.

Things had been moving so quickly lately, one thing after the other, from the multiple changes to Voyager to the changes in herself. Not that they were bad changes. They simple were differences of note, with some notes being much bigger than others.

She hadn't really had a chance to talk with anyone, not even Kathryn, about the idea of being a Warlord. She didn't quite understand all of the implications and that nigged at her. Of course, she was still getting used to the idea of being Epatai and that had bothered her the same way for a while.

It still did, some days.

Warlord. Epatai. Chief Engineer. These were positions of authority that were thrust upon her. And somehow she had to measure up to the expectations. It all seemed a little much at the moment. Thus, she knew she had to simplify.

B'Elanna repaired another fine connection and then moved onto the next and then the next.

She had backed out of the console fully and had turned to grab the panel when she startled. "Seven!"
The blonde smiled. "BangwI, I see you have been concentrating very hard again."

B'Elanna sat back on her heels and was glad she hadn't yet picked up the plate. She took a moment to breathe, just breathe. "You could say that. Did you talk to Kathryn yet?"

"I have only recently returned from our date with Kate. I wanted to see you."

"How did it go?"

"Well, I believe. She is unready, but curious."

"Well, anyone would be curious."

"Not species 2038. They are a very --"

"Seven..."

B'Elanna's mate relented. "I can not at this time predict what Kate will choose to do. I can only note that she kisses well."

"Does she now? Did you learn something new?"

"No. Not really, but I'll be happy to show you, if you'd like."

B'Elanna grinned, knowing that Seven was quite capable of mimicking, due to her perfect memory. "Well, I think I'd like to save that for later. Why don't you demonstrate your method to me instead?"

"Ah, now this is what I was hoping for."

B'Elanna moved closer, and sat beside Seven. Then they leaned towards each other and indulged in a loving, passionate kiss.

The Klingon sighed as she sat back against the wall again. "That was what I needed."

"Tell me?"

"Belle came by today, you know, for a meeting."

"Laren did mention it."

"Yes, well, what Laren didn't know is that Belle made the Captain and me an offer we probably can't refuse. Do you, by any chance, know what it means to be a Warlord for a Klingon?"

Seven of Nine's head tilted in that way that let B'Elanna know that the Borg was checking her database. Then the blonde woman's eyebrow arched. "It will depend on whether Universe Alpha and Beta share similar definitions, but I do believe I have a general idea of what it means."

"What do you think?"

"I believe that you would make a good Warlord."

The confidence in the statement caused B'Elanna to pause. "You think so?"
"Yes." Seven's expression was warm and affectionate. "Consider, Bangwil, that it is really a matter of scale. You are already Epatai. Being Warlord merely gives you the authority to take on a larger group."

"We could build a fleet."

"We have been building a fleet anyway. Or rather, Kathryn has. I take it Kathryn was also made this offer."

"Yes. We could claim whole systems, just for House Presba."

"And this is different from colonizing Voyager's Rest in what manner?"

B'Elanna blinked. "It's the principle of the thing."

"I see. Then you are planning on saying, 'No.' Should Voyager prepare for conflict?"

"I... No. Of course not."

"Never the less, I would support you, should that be your decision." Seven gazed intently at her mate and then asked, "B'Elanna, are you worried that you might not be able to fulfill this duty?" The Borg took one of B'Elanna's hands in her own. Their fingers entwined.

The half-Klingon was feeling very human at the moment. "I think I might be. What if it goes to my head? What if I am terrible at it? I mean, it is one thing to go wielding a Bat'leth and look tough for one battle. It's another to carry on the charade --"

"B'Elanna," Seven gently interrupted. "It is unlikely you will dishonor yourself in this. You do not yet know what may come of this. I am almost sure that you will not have to wear leather all day, every day. Nor will you be constantly surrounded by Klingons who want fresh Targ meat. You are on Voyager. You will hire captains and managers for those kinds of duties. Or the Captain will. As it will, apparently, be a shared obligation."

That caused the half-Klingon to chuckle in amusement. "I guess I am getting a little ahead of myself."

"Perhaps." Seven nodded her head. There was a moment of friendly silence between them. "B'Elanna, it is late, and it appears you have finished with your task..."

B'Elanna glanced at the panel and the tools that were strewn about. "Yeah, I think I'm close to done. Do you want to do anything special?"

"I was thinking perhaps we might go to the Park? There is a grassy knoll that I think you might appreciate."

B'Elanna began to grin. "I'll hurry."

"I will help."

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It had taken Annika a goodly amount of time to get used to being on board the Tor'stag. It was perhaps the context of it. She was no longer a slave, but free. She was no longer captive, but she felt captivated. She was human, but now she was a woman of status - with the only question being
whether it was temporary or forever.

She secretly hoped for forever, but had not dared articulate that desire just yet. She did not wish it to be read the wrong way. After all, aside from the rare individuals, such as those on Voyager, Humans were seen as greedy, manipulative and dangerous.

She did not like to picture herself that way, but she could understand the stereotype. Her race had been cruel masters of a good portion of the galaxy for centuries. Now the power had transitioned and it had taken more centuries for it to become clear that they would never again ride the star ways in the same manner.

History moved on though, like it always did. And perhaps Leah was right. Perhaps a true change was in the air.

After all, she couldn't imagine another time when a General of the Klingon Empire would even consider for half a double-heartbeat the taking of a human mate in any sort of public or non-slave related way.

And with wooing, at that.

They had not even kissed, yet.

Annika strongly desired to, but she had not thought of a way to broach the topic yet. She was hindered, again, by humanity's past.

Dr. Brahms would have thought her silly for delaying, but that would be because she didn't understand. It was cultural and it was an ingrained attitude. Even now, Annika, without the presence of Dr. Brahms, could not help the bow that came naturally.

She only hoped that her submission was not a cause for disappointment. After all, what had sparked the General's interest had not been herself, but her beautiful 'cousin.' Annika knew she could never quite measure up. She was older, scarred in places seen and unseen. The other woman seemed so composed and serene, as if nothing had ever hurt her. Annika knew that could not be entirely true, because Seven did have cybernetic components, but it didn't change her feelings.

And she worried that Belle really wanted what B'Elanna had and the truth was, Annika would deal with consorts to her mate, but never be happy about it. Annika was a monogamist at heart. And she had no right to make any claim or limit whatsoever on Belle.

But she wanted to. She wanted to be able to say, "If I am to be your mate, I must be your one and only."

Belle, however, was a woman of status, in an Empire where slaves and concubines were accepted as a matter of course.

In some ways it was too much to consider. It was so much easier to build a new engine or to plot out better ways for the replicator to work than to worry about the what ifs and I wish it weres.

That was what she was doing at the moment, making alterations to the Tor'stag, with Belle's permission of course. It gave Annika a sense of purpose. She must look alright though. She'd seen the envious looks of the other Klingons. It was probably that she was blonde. Her complexion and hair coloring was rare in many of the races. Fortunately, General Torres' staff would never touch her. Not without having to take on the General, and Belle had made things perfectly clear regarding Annika’s status on board.
That had been more than Annika had hoped for. She knew what it was to be human and female in this Universe. Discovering a way out had been her original motivation for designing the engine. It had all been theoretical, a fantasy. She'd known she'd never have the opportunity to make such a thing. It was just her sorry luck that someone educated had seen her scribbles.

Well, she couldn't really call it the worst thing that ever happened any more, because it had led her here. Here, where her most dangerous decisions would be made.

As she made her calibration changes and those other small, but effective improvements - with her hands deep in the guts of the replicator - Annika realized that what she was feeling, aside from the ambivalence of worry, was longing.

She longed for Belle. She hungered for her.

She needed her.

That caused Annika to stop for a moment, with her hands holding the ends of clipped wires dangerously close together.

She needed Belle.

The question was how to get that across? Oh, it was the same damn dilemma.

She began working again, stewing over process and what she thought she knew. Then a thought struck her and it was amazing in its simplicity. She plugged in the newly capped blue wire and looked up at the ceiling as if she were in prayer. "I'll just tell her. That's what Seven would do. Yes. That's what I'll do. I'll tell Belle."

"You'll tell me what?"

"Gah!" Annika jerked forward, bumped her head, and dropped the red wire - which fortunately was now also capped - slapped her hand onto where she'd smacked herself and turned to face the General. "Don't do that!"

The General was both sorely amused and sorrowful that she'd caused Annika any pain. She stepped forward and, without quite embracing, pulled the other woman closer for an inspection of the wound. Of course, it was nothing, but these days Belle just enjoyed having Annika near. "It does not appear to be serious."

Annika had dropped her hand by then and it had drifted onto the arm that Belle was holding her with. "Well, it hurts. A little."

"Shall I kiss it and make it better?"

Annika's mouth went dry and she fought to keep her composure. Fortunately, her subconscious had heard her message. She blurted, before she could stop herself. "Yes."

Belle leaned in, smiling in whimsied surprise. She was met halfway.

The kiss lingered and sweetened as it aged. When they pulled back, both were breathless and their eyes sparkled with desire. Belle, who now held Annika more closely, said, "What did you want to tell me?"

It's always so easy to think it, but then the moment comes and nerves arrive. But Annika was considered a strong willed woman and bore the scars to prove it. She hesitated only briefly, long
enough to look and gaze into Belle's eyes. Then she committed. "I want you. I need you in ways I have never experienced before. I know you owe me nothing. You set me free. You have been honorable in every way. And I am afraid that I will somehow fail you, because I am only human. I know others would say this because it somehow led to power or security. But I don't care about that. Belle, you have no idea how much I want you."

Belle's hearts beat so loudly in her chest she could hardly bear it. Her expression turned very serious and there was a growl that seemed to come from deep within her chest. "You want me."

"With everything I am."

The half Klingon kissed the other woman fiercely, "I promised I would take it slow."

"I don't think I could take it going slower, Belle. I ... need you."

The General raised her hand and cupped Annika's face. "We must talk then, about what to do next."

"I would like that. I have... concerns and I want you to hear them, before choices are made." She paused and then said, "I want you to know, I am willing to go the full distance. Whatever you want. Whatever you need. I... want to be there for you."

Belle placed a fingertip against Annika's lips. "We will speak of it more at another time. First, you must finish what you started."

"I can do that." Annika leaned in again and they kissed once more.

Belle chuckled into the kiss, drew back and glanced meaningfully at the replicator. "I meant that you must finish fixing the replicator."

Annika looked back. "Oh! Right. Of course."

"I'll help."

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Kathryn probably should have left for the family quarters some time ago. But she lingered after Ensign Anderson left. She needed a few moments to herself. Of course, she could have gone to her personal quarters and had as much privacy, but she felt she needed the grounding of being near Voyager's Bridge.

She said, to no one in particular, "I am Kathryn Janeway of the House Presba, Captain of the Federation Starship Voyager, Warlord."

It reminded her that she had, somewhere in her personal past, a doctorate or two tucked away behind her name. Admiral Janeway. Doctor Janeway. Warlord Janeway....

It was ridiculous and sublime. Her lips quirked in amusement.

And she realized she'd been handed yet another curve ball in her reality.

"So much for doing better."

She was almost sure that she had made an utter hash of things, except... except they were alive and she had family and there were so many good things.

But how was she ever going to explain this?
She shook her head and went to the replicator. This one still made that horrendous coffee, just the way she needed it sometimes. Maybe it was the way she said the words. "Coffee, hot, black." As usual the drink and its container sparkled into being. As usual, save when she was in her quarters, it came out... the way that only Voyager could make it.

She grasped the cup by the handle, and cupped her palm around its circumference. The warmth of the cup had always been a comfort, even when the taste had been its most awful. She paced a little, letting her concerns play in her mind and wind their path.

Intuition said to say, yes - to accept General Torres' offer. Or rather, Chancellor Worf's.

Intuition was merely the self's way of getting to the main point. It didn't provide the justification or the reason. Only the answer.

And she, as Captain, needed the reasons. She needed to be able to say why she made the choice. Of course, Belle had provided some very good reasons, but the General had to know the impact of the position, historical and social. Which meant there were reasons unspoken.

That was when Captain Janeway understood. She paused and looked out the window at the stars and smaller ships that passed by. A Warlord had the authority to treat with others on behalf of the Empire. A Warlord could make bargains and make demands. A Warlord who was of a House in Both Universes would protect the interest of both Universes.

She was closing in on something she could use. As she thought more about it, looking at it from the angle of having been an Admiral and where she was now, she started to find those reasons, things that both she and Starfleet could accept.

"This could work," she said to her cup of coffee. She took a sip then. "I do think that this could work." She smiled at her reflection. "I am Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager. Warlord of the House Presba." She nodded to herself. "Yes. That sounds better. I think we can make this work." She tapped her combadge. "Janeway to Commander Tuvok."

"Commander Tuvok here."

"Do you have a moment? Could you come to the Ready Room please?"

"I will be there shortly."

"Excellent. Janeway out." Kathryn smiled and took another sip. Then she walked to her desk and set the cup down. It was time to see what insight her logical friend and mate might provide.
Sela and Tak arrived at Terok Nor a few days after Voyager.

There were big things afoot. News was that the trials would begin very soon. Preparations of the space, which apparently had to be renovated to Klingon specifications, were taking place on the station. It could take up to a week, depending on how much a certain Intendant delayed.

There were also rumors that The Truth Seeker planned on being there for the trials. That a ship had departed from Betazed had been verified. That it was headed towards Terok Nor had not.

There was also the possibility that other representatives of status would be attending. Indications were that Trill was sending one of their ambassadors. So was Cardassia, though how they'd managed to scrape one out of that mess that was their region, Sela didn't know. Sela's father was going to be the representative from Romulus. He was bringing her beloved mother with him.

It would be the first time her mother had left Romulan space since her capture and the first time that Tasha Yar would be publicly acknowledged. Sela was looking forward to seeing them both.

There were other reasons to be at Terok Nor. According to the news agency she'd been scooped by those who had caught the arrival of the House Presba. Her job had been threatened if she didn't get right back there. Not that she was worried. She had also noticed that no one else seemed to have scored interviews. She, on the other hand, had some inside sources now.

When they were a few light years out she'd forwarded a request to Neelix of the House Presba. He'd contacted her quickly and had promised that he'd see what he could do. She expected that she would be surprising her employers soon enough.

Belle, who had looked more grim than usual, had also contacted her. "As soon as you get here, I need to speak with you. We'll be meeting on Voyager."

That practically shouted, 'Meeting in a secure location,' to the Romulan. This, of course, meant that Belle had news that was going to affect the Romulan region somehow.

Sela was almost tempted to tell the Klingon to hold off with the news until her father arrived, since he probably was the one who needed to hear it. But Belle was her friend and they did have an understanding. So she would go, and while she was there, maybe she would have a chance to talk to that Truth Seeker again.

Counselor Nael had been on her mind lately, not in any obsessive way, but Sela found herself somewhat intrigued by the Betazoid. The redhead was not like any other Betazoid that Sela had ever met. Of course, Sela had avoided as much contact with Betazoids as possible, especially after the Hive incident. But still. There was something to be discovered there.

When they arrived Sela contacted Belle first. "We're here. I need to call Neelix and see if he scored those interviews for me."

"I can do better," said the General. "I'll introduce you to my kin. What is your schedule tonight?"

"I'm free. Can I bring Tak?"
"You can send for him after."

"Shit."

"It's important."

"I'm not going to like it, am I?" It wasn't really in question. But she needed to hear the truth anyway.

"No, Sela. You aren't."

"My father is coming to see the trials. Is this something that could wait for him?"

"How soon will he be here?"

"A few days. Not more than five."

"Well, you'll have something to show him then. But you still need to see it first."

Sela grimaced. "Fine. But I want some good interviews, the kind that will set the ratings skyrocketing."

"You'll get them. I've arranged time with Miral and Gretchen."

"Have I mentioned that I love you lately?"

The General chuckled. "Tell me that afterwards. Then I'll know you really mean it. By the way, remind me to introduce you to Annika."

"Ah, you did go after her then."

Belle's expression lightened. "Yes. We have been... negotiating, but the short of it is she is, and will be, mine."

Sela smiled warmly. It was about time. "I am truly happy for you, my friend. Let me know when you want me ready."

"I will. Torres out."

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At 1700 hours, Torres contacted Sela's ship from Voyager.

Soon, the Romulan was being greeted by the friendly Talaxian, Neelix. "Welcome aboard, Sela. I have a small itinerary. We will go straight to the conference room. After your meeting, the Captain will escort you to their family quarters for a meal, if you would like. When you're ready, contact me and then I'll pick you up and take you to see Judge Torres and Counselor Janeway. I've scheduled forty-five minutes for that and Counselor Nael has said she will be available afterwards, if you are still interested in meeting with her. After that, if you wish, I can arrange interviews with other crew or escort you back to the transporter.

The reporter smiled. "Thank you, Neelix. I appreciate it. I'd like to arrange times for Tak to get some footage or stills tomorrow if we can't manage it today."

"Sounds good." Neelix tapped the PADD in his hand and smiled up at the blonde. "If you'll follow me?
The conference room was filled with somewhat familiar faces. Captain Janeway greeted Sela cordially and introduced her to Lieutenant Ro, Seven of Nine and Tuvok. "B'Elanna is working in Engineering, but should be in time for dinner later. You know Belle already, of course."

"Sit down. Drink this. You'll need it," the General said as she handed Sela a large cup of Romulan Ale.

Sela's eyes opened wide and she hissed a little through her teeth. She sat down in the offered seat and watched as others took places around the long table. Then she drained the cup in one long drink and carefully set the cup down. "What is going on?"

"Show her what you showed me," Belle commanded.

Seven of Nine said, "Please observe." Moments later Sela was seeing the same presentation that Belle had witnessed.

An hour and a shattered cup later, a raging Sela had to be calmed down. "We just got done with the Hive! They ate me alive, Torres! And then these things..." Sela began cussing in Romulan and a variety of other languages.

It only got worse when, as she paused for breath, the General said, "Sela, the Empire calls you back into service. You are reinstated, with a new rank of Lieutenant General. This order supersedes any previous obligations. Your new orders are to join me on the Tor'stag to take on your duties as my first. You will receive a packet of information which you may deliver to your Father with instructions to deliver it to the High Command of Romulus. You will receive notification if there are changes."

"You can't do this!"

"I just did." The General reached out, but then rethought her natural action and did not touch her angry friend. She said, "I'm sorry, Sela. It must be done. I can not face this alone and I do not know how long..." she indicated the solemn people around her, "... my family will be able to stay here. We need them, but we cannot make them stay. They have promised, however, to help us as much as they can. You understand. I know."

The swearing began anew.

She wasn't exactly mollified at dinner, but did behave. She and Belle would have *the* conversation later. She did have to admit that the Captain and her family knew how to serve a meal. More, she had her chance to ask questions. The only problem was that Sela would not be able to share the answers. On the other hand, it might make the news that she had been called to duty. This would set the tone for what people should expect.

That thought had her narrowing her gaze at her friend. Belle was always thinking three or five levels ahead. Sela didn't say anything.

She spent a moment looking around. Annika and Seven of Nine were involved in a quiet conversation of their own. Seven was dandling her child, young Emina, on one knee, while Annika was apparently quizzing her about some integrity problem that had been encountered on the Tor'stag. B'Elanna was interjecting answers between mouthfuls. T'Pel and Tuvok were eating with stately
grace and, somehow, also guiding a conversation that was happening among the older children. Lwaxana and Kathryn were speaking with Laren about a request that had been made.

"Wait, did I hear that right?" Sela asked. "You are thinking of going into the wormhole?"

"We have not committed to it, but there are members of the crew who have made the suggestion," Laren said with a quirk of amusement.

Sela thought about it for a moment, "Well, all I can say is that others have tried."

Belle took a sip of Bajoran Spring Wine, "...and failed."

"True."

"Oh, we've been watching them fail all over the place. It's quite the business Terok Nor has going for it."

Lwaxana added, "With Kira Nerys raking in twenty percent each time, for every rescue and repair."

"Her right as Intendant."

"Of course."

"We wouldn't be going in to try and cross the wormhole anyway. If we were to go in, that is."

"Why would we be going in?"

"To meet the Prophets, of course."

"Ah."

"The beings you claim live within the wormhole."

"The beings we know live within the wormhole."

"I feel uncomfortable with the idea of this ship going in."

"Well, we do have other options."

"And we have now stepped far enough into ship's business at dinner. Time to change the discussion."

"So, what is for dessert?"

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As promised, when she was ready, Neelix arrived to take her to Miral and Gretchen's quarters. The vivacious Talaxian kept up a warm ramble while they journeyed. Sela listened, but her mind was on other things.

She had decided to go ahead and finish her task and get those last interviews. It would nail her position as a top reporter, which was something she'd come to value - even if it had been a cover for other duties.

The person who opened the door to Miral and Gretchen's quarters was Deian. She wore the crest as a brooch on her formal outfit. "Ah, Journalist Sela. We are expecting you. If you will please come
She was led to a central area with comfortable looking seats and wide spaces. Judge Torres and Counselor Janeway were standing, but looked as if they had just parted. Gretchen Janeway was looking a bit mussed. She was straightening her blouse out and flushed. Miral Torres was smiling down at Gretchen.

Sela urgently wished that Tak had been there. It would have made a great still.

She glanced to the side and the Deian nodded, then she introduced the journalist.

Miral smiled, "Welcome Journalist Sela. It is truly a pleasure to meet you. Because of you, we knew our family had arrived."

"So you really did not know they were back?"

"No. We knew nothing." Miral indicated a chair. "Please take a seat, make yourself comfortable."

Sela sat down and leaned forward a bit. She pulled out a recorder and held it loosely in her hand.

"Thank you. So, if you don't mind, I'm sure there are many who are dying to ask this question. What led you to bring a Truth Seeker to your trials and, more importantly, how did you get her to agree to it?"

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Sela left the interview feeling satisfied that she had made the scoop. It was so good to have contacts sometimes.

She winced a bit. Soon she would have to let go of that finely honed attitude and think in terms of the military again. Although, even there, it was good to have contacts.

She was surprised when Neelix led her, not to the Mess Hall, but to an office.

"Ah, Sela." Counselor Nael reached out and grasped Sela's hands in her own. "It is so good to see you again. Come in. Come in. I thought perhaps you'd like a quieter place to talk this time." The Betazoid turned and smiled. "Thank you, Neelix, for delivering her safely too me."

The Talaxian beamed. "Of course. It is my pleasure. Ladies, please call at your convenience."

The Betazoid let go of one hand, but not both. She led Sela in more fully and only when they were close enough to the chairs, and Neelix had finally left, did she let go. "So, what would you like to talk about today?"

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Sela left Priam feeling better than when she went in. It wasn't just the conversation, which had been illuminating, brightness in the dark that she had been carrying around. It was the person herself.

She liked the Betazoid.

And she'd been surprised to find that she liked Lwaxana as well, but... this was different.
She really liked Priam Nael. The woman was articulate, kind, and somewhat visionary. Sela admitted to herself that she'd liked Priam from the first interview. Now she was sure.

Sela had asked to see her again, outside of the scope of work and in the scope of socialization. Priam had not said no. She had said, "Let me think about it."

She had explained her hesitation and that too had been a fresh experience. The counselor, she knew, had been completely honest. And she had no worries about where or to what that honesty would lead. Priam wanted Sela to be strong and healthy. But then, she had realized that the Truth Seekers on this ship really did have other's, as well as their own, interests in mind.

So, maybe she was trying to compare nagak fruit to bezat. Voyager crew was different. They weren't trying to take over a Universe or grab power. They had come to rescue, not to conquer. But, oh, did they know how to kick ass.

On Romulus, they would be appreciated. Hers was a warrior culture, but not a domineering one. Their war with the humans had been purely to preserve what was theirs. Well, and to get a little of their own back at their snobbish cousins.

She wondered if the Vulcans of Voyager were also touch telepathic. Not that she had really been able to hear anything since... the hive. She could still hear the crackle of their thoughts, foreign, buzzing, and cruel. They'd enjoyed her living death. She couldn't bear to be touched by others...

Well, until the Betazoid. That had been the first time in...

She closed her eyes against the flood of horror and waited for it to pass. Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, it wasn't as intense as it had been in the past.

The memories still gave her nightmares, however, and woke her in the middle of the night so she could spend time like this in a futile effort not to think about being hung up, tubed and used like a living party snack.

Thank God, Belle had come.

But there were days and nights when Sela wished she'd been allowed to expire. She could face that more clearly now.

She still didn't know why the Klingon hadn't just shot her. After all, she'd been that mangled when they'd found her. And, before Belle, who called the loss of Sela a waste, it had been traditional. 'She should have let me go,' Sela thought.

But she knew that would not have been possible for her Klingon friend. They had gone through too much together to lose one another so soon. It was too bad Belle had this thing about seniority and fraternization. It could have been more.

Though...Sela's thoughts returned to the sensually built counselor. Now Sela's interests drifted in a new direction. There were possibilities there, if Priam Nael would allow it.

Sela truly hoped that she would.

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Not too far from Terok Nor, yet still days away, an ovoid ship warped through space. It was the ship of The Truth Seeker, the physical embodiment of all Truth Seekers, heir to the throne of Betazed. The title shift had been a recent thing. The last head of the Truth Seekers had died - of old age - a
rarity. They had been a person of ideals and someone that the new head Truth Seeker honored.

That wasn't to say that there weren't problems in the body of the Truth Seekers. There were accusations of dishonor and deliberate cruelty. It had been true in the past that there were those who took advantage of their position. That was the hazard of power, which Betazoids possessed in increasing amounts.

The Truth Seeker, however, wished to change those rumors and to possibly guide her people towards a better way - somehow without losing what power they had in the galaxy.

The key to that change lay at Terok Nor.

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The next day Captain Janeway called a staff meeting. There she told the crew of Belle's proposal to herself and B'Elanna. She explained that she was leaning towards accepting the proposal for three reasons. First, it would secure the safety of the ship in a foreign Universe. Second, it would be advantageous to Universe Alpha. Third, it might give leverage that would help them avoid more bloodshed as they dealt with the Orion Syndicate.

"All good points," commented Chakotay, "But you do realize that you're being given the authority to build a personal army. How do you feel about that?"

"I was hesitant, at first. I recognize the dangers inherent, based on our history. I am not, however, someone interested in creating my own empire."

"Neither was Caesar."

She grimaced and then grinned at Chakotay, "But then, Caesar wasn't dealing with Klingons either."

"Ah, well, there is that."

"I'm not trying to establish or recapture a republic, Chakotay. And Klingons have a different tradition when it comes to the building of personal armies. But that's not even the reason I finally accepted the potential. You see, I realized we were already doing it. True, it's under the Federation Banner, but essentially, in the Delta Quadrant we have to be able to fight on our own."

Commander Tucker began nodding her head. "We were building a military power. Small, but efficient."

"Exactly. More, in our Universe we are guided by certain principals, which have proved trustworthy. Those principals don't disappear just because we are in this Universe. In fact, they become more relevant and important."

"In this Universe, and in Universe Alpha, a Warlord is an auxiliary arm to the Empire's military force," commented Tuvok. "It is based on the number of people a House can rally to its cause, but House Honor is what keeps it in check. If the Chancellor is doing a good job, he or she has nothing to fear. In Universe Alpha the option has fallen into disuse, but it could easily be restarted in the Empire. The position does have its own checks and balances."

"Exactly, House Presba will not be the only one with that kind of military power in this Universe and possibly Alpha. And, actually, it is more than likely House Presba's will be a smaller army compared to say the House Martok or the House Worf..."

Lieutenant Ro added, "... which is part of the Chancellor's personal forces."
"It is a reasonable solution and provides a toe in the door, diplomatically speaking," Commander Tucker said.

"It does, but it also brings up a new topic. General Torres has formally requested that we ask for volunteers who are willing to stay in this Universe. She prefers members of the House Presba, but we negotiated and she is willing to take on those crew members that are willing to take the risk. I recognize that we have been treating most of our contact as a Prime Directive issue, but I think, it would be good to have more... positive... influence in this universe." There was a bit of a stir in the conference room. "Now, mind you, I would hate to lose anyone, but it is something to consider."

Commander Chakotay looked thoughtful. "I can think of a few Maquis who would be interested in staying. They do not have anything to go home to in our Universe, but here they might have better options."

Commander Veckma then said, "I would personally like to stay with Voyager, but my crew and I feel that you have successfully kept your promise to return us to our home, even if it is in a different Universe and time."

Captain Janeway smiled at that, and then raised her hand gently and said, "I am sure there will be plenty who are willing, if only for the adventure of it. I'd like to formalize the process. Department heads will ask for volunteers. Those names will be turned over to Chakotay. We will go through a selection process. Once the volunteers are selected, we will treat it as a procedural matter - as transfers - which will then allow the volunteers to return to Starfleet afterwards, if they wish."

"You plan on returning to this Universe."

"Voyager is capable of multiple transitions and I believe we will be asked to return by Starfleet, if only so that we can share information. We have information they need. They have information we need. Especially if we make it back to the Alpha Quadrant, which Dr. Brahms indicates is more than theoretically possible. Lieutenant Sayr agrees. In fact, of all the ships in two Universes, we may have the ability to transition to any location, as long as we have the correct coordinates. Dr. Brahms has indicated a desire to stay on, regardless of whether we make it to the Alpha Quadrant, in which case I'm strongly considering creating a new department for her.

"Also, should we not have volunteers or enough of them; we have the option of assignment. We believe that the Empire, which is the governing body here, is in need of serious preparation and training for dealing with the Borg. Failing volunteers, experienced personnel would be raised a rank and then transferred to a training station. We would stay in Universe Beta for six months, when our personnel would be returned to us. Then we would leave this Universe, without the expectation of return.... or welcome.

"General Torres was very clear that the Empire here takes its alliances very seriously. If we accept the position, Universe Alpha - both the Federation and the Klingon Empire - would be considered allies, regardless of their current political state in Universe Alpha. That would be their business and the Empire would remain neutral until one or the other wins or they resolve their differences. If we fail to take the position of Warlord, then - aside from our House relations, which currently may be thought of as good, - we would only have the status of diplomatic envoys. Those of us who were of the House would remain so, and Voyager's popular status would remain, but we would not be able to expect any favors in regard to Universe Alpha.

"Meaning, if we needed live bodies to help fight off the Hive, we would have to find them on our own," said Commander Tucker.

"Or," said Lieutenant Ro, "... they would feel no obligation to avoid empire grabbing. After all,
Annika Hansen is of this Universe. The capacity to make the engine is in their hands."

"Oh boy," muttered Lieutenant Kim.

"Tell me about it," whispered B'Elanna.

"Another topic we need to cover is that of exit strategies." Captain Janeway had their full attention again. "There have been several plans put on the table. Due to reports we have received from General Torres, we believe we successfully put a real crimp in the plans of the Orion Syndicate, at least in Universe Beta. General Torres believes that the Syndicate will be licking its wounds for a few months and that it would be impractical for us to try and scare up the other guilty cartels at this point.

"True it gives them recovery time, but she has also agreed to take on the task as a House obligation, should we agree to the proposal and take on the duties of Warlord. That would solve our obligations here and free us up to address the problem of Universe Alpha. The same cartels that caused the problems here are still active in Universe Alpha, as far as we know and we do have standing orders in Starfleet in regard to the Syndicate. We are also aware of other problems in the Alpha Quadrant, including a shadow government faction. If this Universe transitioning hardware should fall into their hands..."

"It would be bad."

"It would be deadly to Voyager, I think. And I believe we are all in agreement that Voyager, as herself, is an entity to be preserved." There were solemn nods. "I've been going over the last reports Starfleet sent us. I think politically things may be worse than we thought. I've shared with you the information that my sister passed on earlier. We don't know quite what we're going back to. Which brings me to the proposal that I've been leaning towards... the taxi home method."

"Taxi home?"

"We have crew that would simply like to be able to go home. The principal of the Taxi Home method is that we go to the Alpha Quadrant. We drop those who want to go off, pick up those who wish to go with us and then we go back to Voyager's Rest. We establish Voyager's Rest as home base and from there... we could continue in our duty to explore new worlds."

"And at the same time keep Voyager out of reach of the children?"

"Something similar to that. What I'd really like to do is go back to Voyager's Rest first, and have Commander Magnum and Neelix do some special negotiation first, which I have already spoken to them about. Then we would apply the Taxi Home method of delivery and take people where they need to go."

"Starfleet won't know what hit them," Commander Magnum promised.

"I'm sure," and for once, Janeway grinned back. "This brings us to the things we'd like to do before we leave Universe Beta. First there are the trials. I believe we should attend those, if only because Judge Torres resides on this ship and is the one who will be adjudicating. Second there is setting up the logistics with General Torres if we accept the proposition of the title Warlord and there are enough volunteers. Third there is the possibility of trying to go through the wormhole. I believe that this Universe needs to at least have contact with the entities in the wormhole, if only so the entities can be made aware of the hazards on the other side."

Lieutenant Paris' eyes lit up. "We're going to go for it?"
Captain Janeway shook her head and laughed. "Yes, Tom, we're going for it. But not necessarily in Voyager."

"Oh," Tom's shoulders slumped.

Captain Janeway looked over at Commander Sofuru, whose lips were tugging up in a grin. "Actually, we were thinking of the Three Sisters. Stinging Sparrow is very interested. War Flower and Striking Feather, as well as Voyager, would wait in the wings to grab us before Terok Nor could do the service of it. Commander Sofuru says they can accommodate six of us, besides her standard crew, now that the ship is roomier. It would be cramped, but it can be managed."

"I volunteer." Tom sat up.

"Thank you. I was planning on offering you one of the spots. Seven of Nine and Lieutenant Ro would also be going, as would Shaman Orsas. Lieutenant General Sela would join the group. We will be inviting Kira Nerys, as the representative of her people, to join us. If she doesn't say yes, there will be an alternative. I will also be going."

Chakotay began to object.

"This would not be our typical away mission, Chakotay. No one who has entered the wormhole has lost their lives. They may have come out mangled, but not dead. I am willing to chance it. Contact with the beings in the wormhole could make the difference for Bajor and the Empire in this reality - a positive difference. If we think in terms of stability, and its affect on Universe Alpha, you can see that the reward would be equal to the trouble. And the truth is, the Empire does not want the wormhole opened up just yet. But they are interested in starting healthy relations with the beings who live there. I think, since we are not attempting to actually travel the wormhole, we might have a better chance than most."

"I'm still not entirely sanguine about this Kathryn."

"Well, you have twenty four hours in which to convince me differently, Chakotay." She grabbed her coffee cup and sat back in her chair. "Well, now it's all on the table. What do you all think?"

That was when the conversation really began.

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Several hours later Captain Janeway contacted General Torres and Belle beamed over for lunch.

"I really don't know what I'm going to do when you go away. Do you mind if I clone Icheb?"

"I don't mind, but Icheb might."

The General chuckled, as she took a bite of deliciously scrumptious Italian. "Oh... this is wonderful stuff."

"It is, isn't it?" Kathryn took a healthy bite of her own. "I think he may actually have moved from application right into artistry."

Belle nodded and set the fork down. She dabbed her lips with a napkin. "So, I know you didn't just invite me over to lunch just to eat. Tell me what you need me to know."

Kathryn grinned. "Well, bottom line is this: We accept."
Belle grinned widely. "Excellent. This will make things much easier. I knew you were a wise woman, Kathryn Janeway."

"Well, it may be my staff is wiser. It was Tom who pointed out something that you might find particularly entertaining."

"What is that?"

"You do realize that Deanna Troi is now your niece. Or at least the Universe Alpha Deanna is. Apparently this Universe's Deanna Troi is still working out the implications." Belle was suddenly glad she hadn't reached for that drink yet. Her eyes went wide as Kathryn continued on with a cheeky grin. "She'll be arriving in a couple of days and Lwaxana is completely expecting to have a full on family dinner on Terok Nor. Apparently The Truth Seeker wants neutral territory..."

"Not so fast there..."
It was just one of those strange vagaries of fate, she decided. Prophets knew the Universe had a sense of humour, and she supposed that granting the idea that it would also have a sense of irony was not beyond the pale. In either case, Ro Laren of the House Presba allowed one of her rare smiles to show, gifting it to the woman standing somewhat expectantly in front of her.

Of course, Seven of Nine often looked expectant, as though she were waiting patiently for everyone else to catch up - or catch on - to what she had planned. Raking her eyes over the voluptuous form of her tall, blonde mate, Laren swiftly decided that no matter what the plan was, she was game. And then some.

Seven was standing just out of reach, and Laren wondered if the distance was deliberate, or merely an artifact of the space taken up by the roundish wicker picnic basket being held negligently in one hand. "I have missed you, Laren."

As she spoke, Seven held out her right hand and Laren took it, entwining their fingers. "I miss you too," she replied, surprised to realize how truly she meant the words.

They lived together, played together, loved together, but Laren realized they no longer really worked together - or at least not the way they had. Not since the intensive planning sessions that had led first to capturing and then eventually to winning the Zakeeri as allies, had she been privileged to be part of what had been a very productive and pleasant working relationship. And, it was, after all, that very synergy that had flowed unobtrusively through them that had led to such wonderful discoveries for both of them.

"Are we going to The Park?" Laren waved her free hand at the basket, her eyes locked on Seven's mouth as she contemplated kissing the blonde.

"No." Seven made her considerations moot, as she closed the distance between them and Ro felt her lips captured in a light, but thorough, exploration. The kiss tapered off and Seven whispered against her lips. "I wish to be alone with you."

Laren felt her cheeks flush with heat at the wanton promise held in the simple words. "That would be...acceptable." She tilted her head in silent request for another kiss, pleased beyond all reason when Seven immediately complied. Sweet Prophets, but the woman could kiss. Every nibble, and gentle swipe of tongue over flesh, sent erotic shocks firing through her nerves. Her name was breathed into her mouth: benediction and command both. Her body responded and she was amazed at the gentle orgasm that washed over her. She rested her forehead against Seven's, dimly aware that their pulses were synchronized, though their breathing was not.

It was Seven who somehow broke the embrace, yet left the peace that had settled over them undisturbed. "Come with me, my Laren. Today, you are mine."

Laren nodded, "Yours."

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They were walking along the edge of the lake, hand in hand, as they had been for most of the day, and Seven found she was enjoying the sensations playing inside and outside of her body. Her connection to Laren manifested as a heightening of sensitivity in the organic portions of her body,
which in turn increased her awareness of the way the light and air hit the exposed sections of her
skin.

Lunch had been an equally low-key affair, a selection of breads, fruits and cheeses consumed amid
exchanges of kisses, morsels of food and light conversation. Seven looked over at Laren and offered
her a smile, and was gratified with change of warmth she registered in the Bajoran’s eyes.

Laren stopped walking. Instead she stared out across the water. Seven let go of her hand to move
behind the woman and bring their bodies into contact. She wrapped her arms around Laren’s waist,
knowing it for the correct action as her hands were clasped warmly. They stood in companionable
silence for a long while, and she wasn’t sure what prompted her to uncharacteristically break it, but
she felt somehow that it was necessary. "Laren?"

"I was thinking that I never saw a reason to visit Bajor...after."

They fell silent again. Seven was content in the knowledge that Laren knew she was willing to listen,
so she let the other woman work through her thoughts - to share or not. She was never alone now,
not truly, not with the complex bond of her mates resting comfortably in
her mind, but she had come to appreciate the value of a judicious application of silence.

"When we get back to the Alpha Quadrant, I'm going to take you sailing on this lake." Laren rotated
in her arms, and kissed her lightly. "Just you and me, and a picnic basket."

"I accept." She pulled Laren closer, her enhanced arm reading a subtle change in the tension that
normally flowed through her mate. Something fundamental had changed for Laren and Seven could
read a kind of peace in the woman that was new.

"Right now though, I have an overwhelming urge to wander through concourse at Terok Nor. I
seem to have some credits burning a hole in my pocket and a wife who deserves at least one new
dress." Ro's words were light, teasing and full of humour.

"As long as I am that wife, and the dress is a...slinky one."

"Oh. You are definitely that wife. And the dress can be as slinky as you want." Laren started them
walking toward the waiting transportation. "Though, I'd also love to see you roaming barefoot
around our quarters in something a little more diaphanous than usual."

Seven let her eyes roam over the lithe, wiry body, then met Laren's eyes. "Perhaps, I should purchase
such a garment for you."

When Laren tilted her head back and laughed in response, Seven decided that her plan for the day
had been an unqualified success, the passionate lovemaking she had planned for later would be
merely a bonus. That wonderful, rare laugh was everything.

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Hand in hand once again, they meandered through the levels of the promenade. Occasionally, they
entered a shop and took a closer look at what was on offer. Even more rarely, they made a purchase.
It struck her at one such stop, just how much her life had changed. Laren could almost feel the lazy
ball of contentment that had to be curled at the base of her spine - there could be no other
explanation. She looked over at Seven, who was fingering a bolt of cloth, and knew her for the
wellspring.

The bond that fed them all was the root, but it was Seven who was the depth. Laren shook her head
slightly, as though she could clear her mind of the introspection she'd been indulging in for most of
the day. She was alive, she had a family, and she was loved more dearly than she had even thought possible. It was enough - more than enough - for any lifetime, and she felt another wound in her soul close. The memories would never leave her, but that was okay, they were a fundamental part of what made her who she was. Yet they seemed to blur, and even out. The intensity that had always lurked around some hidden corner of sudden recall had become dulled, smoothed away unexpectedly by a day in the sunshine and a promise of a sail on a lake.

Seven seemed to sense that she was being watched, and she turned her head to meet Laren's gaze, curiosity evident in the slight tilt of her chin, and the lift of an elegant brow. She closed the distance between them and ran her fingertips over the cloth Seven was examining. "Thank you for today, my love."

She had no doubt that Seven understood precisely what she meant, and so wasn't surprised when the only reply was a light kiss. Seven then turned and signaled one of shop clerks and gave him precise instructions with regard to how much cloth she wanted from each bolt. She wondered if Seven were planning on clothing a small army, then smiled wryly as she realized that their family was a small army.

Purchase completed, they left the shop and headed for the boutique level one floor up. She was determined to find a dress worthy of her mate. Laren had been gently guiding Seven in the direction she wished to go, and her hand on the small of the blonde's back transmitted the sudden tension in Seven at the same instant as she picked up a bright flare of confusion through the edges of their link. Coming even with Seven, she looked at the still features of her mate. Unless you knew the woman very well, there was little to distinguish the expression she currently wore from her normally composed one, but to Laren it was enough to signal that whatever the cause, it had rocked Seven to the core.

Worried, every nerve in her body alert to the possibility of danger, Laren looked ahead to see what it was, and froze. Oh dear Prophets, no. Not this woman, not here, not now. The gaze that was holding Seven mesmerized moved on, and she felt the blonde relax into her touch. "Seven?"

"That woman. She is from our Universe." Seven started walking again, her stride no longer relaxed.

"What?" That had not been what she was expecting to hear. She was both profoundly relieved and incredibly disturbed.

"She is exhibiting the same phase shift constant as the Alpha Universe."

Ro stopped. "How do you know that?"

"I added a subroutine to my optical processor to scan for any beings out of phase with this Universe." Seven was still staring at the corridor down which the woman had disappeared. "It occurred to me that if Dr. Brahms had been forcibly relocated, there might be others."

"And, knowing who they were sooner rather than later would give us an advantage." Ro looked at a point in space, working though the implications.

Seven nodded. "It might also help us determine what the individuals behind such events are intending."

"Hmm. We need to tell Kathryn about this."

The blonde shot her an apologetic look. "I am sorry, Laren. I had wanted this day to be yours."

"The day, Seven," she captured Seven's lips with her own, and concentrated on conveying her
immense gratitude and pleasure in a very primal way, "...is far from over."

"Indeed."

"Mm." Their kisses were gathering in intensity and Laren was having difficulty remembering that they were standing in the middle of a corridor in the shopping concourse. "Ah tiral aka."

"You shall have me." But at odds with her words, Seven stepped back, the only point of contact she left between them was their fingertips: two fingers to two fingers in the age old Vulcan manner. "But first, you must wine and dine me."

Laren allowed a small grin to float across her lips, subliming her frustration in the humour of Seven playing hard to get. "You have been spending too much time with Kate."

It was Seven who smiled this time. "There are merits to her approach."

"Kathryn sure as hell doesn't think so."

Seven gave her a considering look, as if deciding whether she should speak. "Kathryn is not unhappy with her role as pursuer in this matter."

Laren thought about that, and nodded. "But I bet she wishes Kate were not resisting, quite so much."

"On the contrary. I believe the dynamic is a finely calibrated one, even if Kate, without Kathryn's foreknowledge, is participating on a more instinctual level. There is much between them."

That was certainly true. "Ah, so it will be eight."

Seven quirked a small grin, the mischievous humour in it augmented by the slight rise of her ocular implant.

"Prophets, Seven. You are incorrigible." They had reached a small shop that looked to have a sufficient number and quality of garments that she thought they might find something suitable for her purposes. Relaxed again, Laren was able to find a certain level of humour in the whole thing. "You know, that was actually my first reaction earlier. I was, dear Prophets and Kahless himself, don't let Seven be thinking of doing what I think she is thinking of doing."

She held a dress of deep crimson up against Seven. "Try this one." Her words forestalled the question she saw in Seven's eyes, but she knew they would return to the subject later - most likely when she'd least expect it.

Unobtrusively they were directed to a private viewing area, and, as if the first choice had given the attendant enough information to work with, a small selection of other dresses seemed to materialize.

Laren watched, fascinated, as Seven, with that wonderful lack of self-consciousness, removed the clothing she was wearing, and slid the dress up her body, finally resting the thin straps over her shoulders, letting the delicate sheath wrap around her curves. It was, she decided, the very lack of deliberate prurience that made the vision so utterly erotic. The air between them felt charged, and Laren could feel every hair on her exposed forearms leaning toward Seven as though yearning for her touch.

Seven strode from the raised dais to her chair. Her posture was regal, but not cold. No, thought Laren, never cold, not to me. The blonde caught her eyes, and she marveled at the depth of passion she could read in them.
"I believe, that tonight, you may count me as easy." Seven held out her hand as she finished speaking. "Come with me, Laren."

"Anywhere."


"Seven?"

"Yes, Laren?"

"We broke the bed."

Seven considered the statement. The bed had broken sometime ago, but she had merely adapted, and found an alternative use for the divan they were currently curled up on. "I shall book this room for an additional day. So that the 'luck' may set."

Laren's answering light chuckle sent a whisper of air across her breast and nipple and she took a moment to appreciate the sensations, but didn't feel inclined to build on them. Yet. Her own left-hand was tracing a series of swirling paths through her mate's dark locks, and she delighted in the silky feel of the hair over the sensitive mesh of her cybernetic limb. The feelings were akin to the way the dress had felt against her bare skin. Liquid and air, and, yet, still solid.

Of course, without some serious repair, she would not be wearing that dress again soon. Her fingers traced a new line from Laren's temple, around the curve of her cheek and under her jaw, using the new placement to draw the other woman into kiss. She was put to mind of the line of Turing structures that had run down the same path on the woman she had observed earlier, and she drew back slightly. "Laren?"

"Mm?" The Bajoran had taking the freeing of her lips as an opportunity to nuzzle the exposed parts of Seven's torso.

"What was it that you thought I was thinking of doing that required an imprecation to the Prophets and to Kahless to prevent?"

"I thought, my beautiful little hedonist, you were going to hit on a very dangerous woman."

Seven was impressed. She hadn't realized that Laren was able to read her that clearly. Her Borg implants and systems made her reading of the physical responses of the people around her second nature, and she was often aware of what was going on with her mates before they were, but she hadn't expected to be read as easily. It had not been the information about the Trill's phase constant that had initially caught her attention. Indeed that had only been discovered when she studied the other woman more closely. Something far less tangible had brought her to the sudden halt in the instant when those blue eyes had locked on hers. Though, Laren was mistaken about one thing. She had promised fidelity, and could not, would not, break that promise.

Laren shifted her position, leaning up against the sloping back of the divan and Seven rolled slightly to better accommodate what she believed to be a desire for eye contact while they were conversing. "In this Universe, Ezri Tigan is...or was...very involved with the Intendant."

Seven calmly met Laren's eyes, no longer hiding her interest. "And in ours?" She saw the Bajoran swallow, and wondered at the cause. Laren's respiration had increased slightly and her skin had begun to warm. She made a hypothesis. "Which one did you know?"

The flush that spread across Laren's face and chest was most intriguing.
"Both of them."

"Tell me." She shifted again so that she was resting between Laren's legs, her head cradled against one hip, fingers entwined.

"Not a lot to tell. Not really. Resistance fighter on a secret mission to procure weapons. Alternate Universe mercenary on a secret mission to procure illicit technology. A moment of shared purpose, and a longer one of shared need and passion."

"And the other?" Seven gently breathed the prompting question, sensing that the brevity of the response meant that Laren might lapse into silence. For some reason, she needed to hear the rest.

"Weekend leave from advanced tactical training at Star Fleet Command, she had a furlough from the Academy. I learned a lot that weekend, not the least of which was to beware of hedonists in sheep's clothing." Laren smiled as she spoke, and Seven decided that the memories were pleasant ones, even if the shock of seeing the woman had not been. A kiss was placed on her forehead. "Though it seems I didn't really take that one to heart."

Seven reached up and pulled Laren down with her left hand, kissing her hungrily. Her need rose sharp within her, and wasted no time settling herself against one of Laren's legs even as she reached to fill the Bajoran with her right. Laren was ready for her, and she flexed against the silk walls of liquid fire, driving them both to release.

In the aftermath, she remained draped over Laren, letting the flutters of muscles still twitching in pleasure caressing her hand ground her back in the moment. It was Laren who lifted her head and broke the silence. "She calls to you."

"Yes." Gentle fingers gathered a stray lock of hair from her face and guided it back into place. Soft lips kissed hers in passion and communion.

"And to me."

Later, when they were back on Voyager, they spent a few moments in the Ready Room. Captain Janeway asked for more details regarding a certain report. "Do you think there are others?"

"It is probable. We know that the Orions have been operating for some time on their project. The question is, not did they capture members of the Federation from Universe Alpha, but rather how many. We have a general idea, based on the reports that Admiral Paris sent us, but Ezri Tigan might be able to help us assess the survivor situation in this Universe."

The Captain winced at that blunt statement. Then she leaned back in her chair, her hands clasped in front of her and looked thoughtfully into the air. Then she nodded her head. "We need to make contact." She smiled softly at her mate, "Your optical implant is much less intrusive than a tricorder. It was ingenious of you to think of it. I trust you'll be able to recognize Ms. Tigan again if you see her." Of course, she knew darn well that Seven had a perfect memory. It was just a small tease on her part.

Seven briefly flicked a glance at Lieutenant Ro, and then returned her attention to the Captain. She affirmed, "I will know her if I see her."

"Good. We will also need to alert security to the possibility. I know Odo has been bringing certain individuals to their attention as a check against our rosters. It may be that these individuals had legitimate reasons for attempting to get aboard Voyager. Lieutenant Ro, I would like you to
coordinate with Commander Tuvok. Seven, please calibrate some tricorders for the security team. We will also need to coordinate with the volunteers who stay behind. They will be given a secondary assignment of search and rescue. I will talk to General Torres about setting up a permanent contact point for individuals from our universe. That point is more likely to be contacted by non-Human officers." Her voice was clipped, cold. "Human survivors would have been assessed for their usefulness. We were lucky to find Leah Brahms. Anyone who was less of a genius..."

There was a moment of grim silence.

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The trial amphitheater was coming along nicely. Judge Torres, in her working robes, walked the length from stadium, through fighting circle, to the judge's dais. The counselor courts were stationed to the left and right, just outside of the circle. There was an area on the dais set aside for the Truth Seekers and enough room for Gretchen to sit beside her. They had not yet decided on a chair or pillows. Miral was leaving that up to Gretchen. Now that she was a free woman, technically the human shouldn't even be on the dais. But having Gretchen with her had become somewhat of a tradition.

The Judge was not there alone. She was being followed by several security officers from Voyager. They stayed out of her way though, as she familiarized herself with the territory.

There were other beings in the area, slaves mostly, who were applying the finishing touches. They displayed no interest at all in the Judges' presence. Miral obliged by not noticing them in return. People without power often did not want undue attention drawn to their persons.

Miral gathered her robes and sat down in the judgment seat. She looked around, scoping out the whole area and then she nodded. It would do.
Chapter 6
Chapter by bearblue

Intendant Kira Nerys was absolutely positive that she could not take it any more.

There was much excitement happening at Terok Nor. Voyager's crew had brought in the tourists and the soon-to-happen trial had brought in the journalists. But she was not, at present, on Terok Nor. She was on Bajor, attending yet another small town festival event, some sort of minor fair, where all she had to do was smile and wave.

She was bored nearly to tears. Not that she let it show. These were her people after all. She smiled and waved and the newscasters showed her numbers to have adjusted quite far upward.

She, was, however, beginning to rethink her grand strategy. Yes, she hadn't had to deal with Miral Torres or General Torres or that other mysterious Torres.

But she was wondering if it was worth it.

She was sitting on a dais provided by the fair for her comfort. Nerys flickered a false smile at the pastry-eating contestants and their audience while the competition judge blew a long, thin reed. Then she leaned her chin on the heel of her palm and twitched her leg in an incessant motion, indicative of the urge to be elsewhere. She watched as the contestants dug into their berry pies with abandon and Nerys suddenly felt a little queasy. She knew in that instant, like it was a revelation, that this wasn't how she wanted to spend her time.

Anything had to be better than this. Even dealing with the House Presba.

So, she stood up and walked out, leaving her assistants to make any excuses they cared to come up with.

Nerys made it to the station with a minimum of fuss. The teleporter worked just fine, after all. She stepped out into the central control area, saw her people operating smoothly and nodded her approval. Then she made her way to the more public spaces of the station.

The sleek Bajoran did not need to so much as flick her fingertips. The security guards in the area followed her without question and then formed a wedge in front of her that would automatically encourage people to step out of her way.

It was incredibly busy on the promenade. People of various shapes, sizes, races and modalities moved in and out of shops and entertainment zones in a constant flow. She was, despite herself, mightily impressed. Terok Nor hadn't been this busy since the discovery of the wormhole. There was no store empty, there was no place unoccupied. The shopkeepers looked very happy and practically bubbled with joy when they saw her. Somehow, by the mystical power of being in charge at the right time, they thought it was all her doing. She accepted the praise with an evenness that came off as humility, which again raised their esteem.

She was beginning to see how this was all working in her favor.

Feeling more confident, Nerys decided she would go ahead and see what the engineers had done to her station in relation to the judgment hall.

She entered the hall briskly, marking the radical changes that had been made since she'd found out
that Judge Torres wanted the design to be rather specifically reminiscent of a Klingon Judgment hall. She found herself nodding at the craftsmanship. She would have to reward the engineers and their slaves somehow. They had done an extraordinary job.

Her attention was occupied enough that it took a moment before she recognized the abrupt halt of her security. They had raised their weapons.

As had the security detail of the amused looking Klingon woman in the Judgment seat. Judge Torres ground out, "Put those things away. No one is attacking anyone today."

"Your Honor," Nerys said respectfully and she stepped bravely forward, past the bristling officers. "It seems our interest have coincided today."

"So it seems," said the judge as she smoothed out her robes. She didn't stand, but she also wasn't acting in any way hostile. Miral cast her glance around the hall. "They've done an extraordinary job, Intendant. It is beautiful. The Chancellor will be pleased."

"I am glad to hear it."

Miral smiled easily. "Good." She stood up then and went to one of the tables, the defendant's area and took a seat there. "Come, sit and talk with me. I think we need to clear the air." She addressed her attention to the security guards. "You boys, go fidget over there. The Intendant and I have things to discuss."

The security officers looked a bit doubtful, but they weren't going to tell the Judge no. They looked suspiciously at Nerys' security and the Intendant rolled her eyes. "You too. Do what she says. I find I am curious."

Nerys was soon seated at the table. She noted that the Judge had taken the counselor's seat. She had been left with the defendant's seat.

There was silence between them for a moment. They evaluated each other. Finally Judge Torres broke the relative quiet. "Kira Nerys, I believe you are under a misapprehension."

"Oh. Really."

"Yes. You believe I, and my assistants, are here to make your life more difficult, to judge you."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Naturally, since you did have, until recently, extensive contact with the Orion Syndicate. However, everyone in this Universe has had some dealing with the Syndicate - some more legitimate than others. Your's however, was becoming more and more... shall we say dangerously placed. It could have ended badly, Nerys." The Bajoran winced a little, but kept her peace. The Judge continued. "And there is some indication that you were seeking an enhancement of your powers, up to the possibility of a major change in your status in the empire. Perhaps it was the company you were keeping. I believe you spent time with a Klingon dissident for a time." Again Nerys said nothing. But there was a flicker behind her eyes, a bad memory, perhaps a broken heart. "You are not, no matter how we paint the discussion, an innocent. You would not be here if you did not know how to negotiate the steps of power, after all. Even with the troublesome connections and business choices, however, I believe that some problems have resolved themselves, due to the recent events at Pharaoh System. You are not the only one to benefit from the current chaos, of course. But that is not what I wish to talk to you about."

Nerys resisted the urge to justify. She wanted to hear the whole thing first.
"What I wish you to know is that my purpose, at this point, is not judge or to assign punishment. My purpose is to help you."

"Help me?" The Intendant outright laughed. Miral's expression didn't change.

"I realize it may be hard for you to absorb, but I believe that you have many good qualities. Compared to others, your sector thrives."

"Well, it's hardly a competition."

"True. But it does indicate that despite appearances, there is more to you than the sybarite."

That made Nerys blink. Did Miral actually understand her?

"I think," said Miral, "It would be good for you to join us for a meal. My granddaughter, well one of them, is going to be here in a few days." Nerys nodded numbly, wondering where this was going, "We'll be putting on a bit of a welcoming dinner. I am officially inviting you. Of course, you are welcome to pass it up. In which case, we might try something smaller, just myself and Gretchen and yourself and a guest. But I understand that my daughter-in-law, Kathryn Janeway, the Captain of Voyager, has a very interesting proposition for you. One that would, if successful, shore up your reputation as an individual of merit."

"Merit," Nerys responded.

"It is possible that you will find the experience illuminating, or perhaps even better, exhilarating."

Nerys hadn't quite caught up with conversation. "Are you saying I don't have any?"

"Kira Nerys, I am saying that I am trying to save you. The Empire needs you, but there are problems, which I believe you are aware of. I simply wish to help you out of them."

The Intendant narrowed her gaze. She hadn't expected Miral to be so forthright. She was so used to the prevarication and the subterfuge. "What is in it for you?"

"A more secure Empire."

"That's it?"

"Well, and an entertaining dinner. I'm truly curious to see your reaction to my family."

Nerys shifted uncomfortably, unwilling to meet the Judge's gaze at the moment. She had seen the footage of the family's reunion and it had not left her... unmoved. She was suddenly glad the Truth Seeker was not present. She had intended the theatrics to stall interactions. She had not anticipated her own moment of envy.

"Let me think about it."

"Of course. I don't even know the time of the event yet. On the other hand, I'm almost done here. Would you care to go to Quark's. My treat."

Nerys looked suddenly amused. "You do realize I never pay for anything on this station?"

"In which case, it's your treat then. I am curious about many things. And, as a mediator, I want to hear your side of the story. Belle tells me that you haven't been as supportive of her services as she would like."
"Me!" Nerys sounded outraged. "She's the one driving me crazy. She wanted bodies to fight the war; I gave her all of my slaves and the volunteers from Bajor. She wanted ore, I gave her ore. I can't help it if she doesn't approve of my lifestyle. And who among us isn't ambitious, I ask you? My great grandparents were slaves you know. My grandparents and my parents had to scrabble hard for every small increase. If I enjoy my wealth, who is she to judge?"

"Indeed. This definitely calls for wine and lunch. Do you mind if I call down Gretchen to join us?"

"That is your human mate?"

"I don't have any other."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Hmmph. Well, I would like to meet her."

"I believe you will find her a pleasant surprise."

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Quark's was filled to the brim, yet somehow a space was found for them. People moved instinctively out of the way. Gretchen would join them eventually, after getting Emina settled in for a nap. Neelix would be her babysitter for a while afterwards.

In the background there were the chimes and whirs of games, the laughter and shouts of participants. There was the heady aroma of good food and drink. The table that they were given gave them a good view of everything. Nerys noticed that there were quite a few of Voyager's crew mixed in with the other tourists and regular patrons. She found the antics of the Ylfiens amusing. They were tiny, but flung the dice with admirable power. "Your House and its people are very ... enthusiastic."

"Well, they were in the Delta Quadrant for a good amount of time. They take their opportunities to relax quite seriously. So far, according to Tuvok, they've behaved themselves. Mostly."

"Mostly. My Constable, Odo, has had good things to say - for once."

"Ah. That is interesting. I imagine Odo has been a busy person of late."

"Very. There may be no problems with your Voyager crew, but there are those who try to take advantage of tourists and the busy times. I may let many things slide, but nothing that interferes with business."

"A useful attitude to take, I am sure. So. Tell me, are you any good at Dabo?"

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Ro Laren was a strong person. She had been in revolutions and firefights. She had been to hell via prison camp. She had been to heaven via her mates.

She was more nervous than the famed Tika cat.

Laren stood outside the door to Kathryn Pulaski's quarters and wondered if she might be out of her mind. Of course, she was the logical choice. She did know Bajor.

In another Universe.
The door swished open and Laren's breath caught. There was a beat. "You look Gorgeous."

Dr. Pulaski was, in fact, looking quite lovely. She wore a blue knee-length, short-sleeved dress, with a v-cut, enough to reveal a pleasant amount of plumpness without overdoing it. She looked like springtime, with just a touch of gold.

Kate smiled. "Thank you. And thank you for being willing to escort me to the surface."

"It's my pleasure." Laren stood back to let Kate pass. The Bajoran was wearing black slacks and a plum shirt that set off the gold of the crest and federation sigil above her heart. The blonde unexpectedly looped her arm through the brunette's.

"Lead on," she said. There was mischief in her smile; the kind that said there were surprises afoot.

The Bajoran didn't quite smile back, but she wasn't unfriendly. She was normally a reserved woman and she knew that Kate was aware of that personality trait. The ex-admiral was not a foolish woman. She would have done her research. More they had encountered one another in the Mess Hall, where formality was often dropped. They knew each other "outside," of work. Still, Laren just walked her usual way and did her best to not completely flub conversational etiquette.

A few minutes later they were on Bajor's surface, touring the major city of Jalanda. They visited several tourist sites first, ancient places with poetic Bajoran names and museums with artworks from all over the quadrants, with Laren pointing out the things she did know versus the things she didn't. It made for amusing diversion, since there were quite a few differences. But perhaps the amazing thing was the similarities.

Aside from the occasional askance view, with people at first noticing Kate's humanness, and then her insignias, there was no overt reaction to their presence. Bajorans conducted business as normal, with a glaring difference of slaves that walked behind or before, depending upon their duties. That was hard to ignore, but it was Laren who pointed out the drawback. "The flaw in slavery is that you sacrifice brain power for brawn. And physical power can be made up with technology. So they may have similar advances, but they're too reliant on physical labor. It's not cost effective."

"An interesting observation."

Laren lifted her cup and sipped. "Well, it's an outside viewpoint."

They had found a nice little deli with a patio and were sitting in the dappled shade, enjoying the breeze. "So if you lived here, would you own a slave?"

"You forget, I've done the slave labor thing, back in prison camp. Which is why," she waved at the ongoing traffic outside the deli, "... this continually surprises me."

Kate began to chuckle, "You'd think they would have learned?"

"Yes."

"You're forgetting that it's also an issue of power. It can be heady stuff to 'own,' another person. It says something about status and wealth. Maybe not good things, but something. Of course, it says more when you can pay for it consistently and not miss the money."

This time it was Laren who chuckled. "There is that. This brings me to another point."

"T'Pel has been making some very interesting investments. She recently bought a planet."
Kate set her fork down, thinking on the implications - both in terms of her date's financial well being and in terms of what it meant for this particular Universe.

Laren continued. "Well, you know, Kathryn and B'Elanna have recently been upgraded to Warlord by Chancellor Worf."

There was an abrupt sound of coughing from behind them. Laren turned to see one Bajoran pounding another's back as that other coughed uncontrollably. She raised her eyebrow at them and somehow managed to convey humor without actually smiling. The Bajoran who was slapping the other's back looked sufficiently sheepish. Then the other Bajoran stopped coughing altogether and started to turn a startling color.

Kate shook her head, stood up, walked to where the drama was playing out and imperiously said, "Move."

It was purely instinct that caused the other Bajoran to stand out of the way.

Then, with surprising strength, the human wrapped her arms around the other Bajoran's torso, figured her fist's placement on his anatomy and proceeded to save the man's life.

A few moments later there was a gagging sound and then a piece of meat flew out of his mouth and onto the ground.

Then she stepped away from the startled being. Kate said, with a touch of her usual asperity, "Next time, try not to eat the whole beast." Then she settled the young man back in his chair and went back to her own as if she'd done nothing heroic that day.

Of course people stared. But as soon as they noticed the women's security guard glaring around, the audience soon turned their attention back to their own meals.

"And Dr. Pulaski saves the day."

"Well, at least that one fellow anyway. So, you were saying that T'Pel bought a planet."

"Yes, well, you're aware that the family has certain properties at home."

"Well, given Lwaxana's status among other things, I figured that might be the case."

"Ah, well, there is that. Back home, Asil, Deanna and Phoebe invested in a planet. T'Pel managed to purchase it recently."

"I see." Kate took a sip of her drink. "You're trying to tell me that you aren't dating me for my money, aren't you?"

"Well, I will point out that fiscally, this family does not lack. T'Pel is a bit of a genius when it comes to family finances."

"Now that is interesting."

"You know she's put a bid in on Risa."

This time Kate was drinking something and it took everything she had to just finish the drink. "One of these days I'm going to learn not to be surprised by you people. Why Risa?"

"Well, she believes it might make a great resort planet."
"Really?" Somehow Kate managed not to sound sarcastic. But her expression was all kinds of interesting.

"Yes. It seems that Risa has plenty of beaches, lots of sunshine. Also, there is a possible industry, somewhat languishing at the moment. But she intends to, uh, revive it."

"She's seriously going to try and buy Risa?"

Laren nodded, chuckling. "Of course, if we get called back to the Delta Quadrant, she'll put it in House Presba's name, along with some rather specific instructions, ..." There was more coughing behind them.

Kate leaned over and pointed. "You and You... come sit. Right here. Right now. I don't want to have to walk all the way over there to save his life again. Move it."

It was that tone of authority that came from years as an admiral and from just being Dr. Kate Pulaski. As if they'd forgotten years of cultural conditioning, they immediately stood up and started pulling their chairs over. The waiter who had been serving was suddenly right there, moving their plates and assisting.

Of course the two Bajorans looked thoroughly embarrassed and there was a rise in chatter around them. Laren was terribly amused and was outright grinning now. "Prophets above, you are wonderful."

Kate shook her head. "If you heard what my students said about me, you'd maybe withhold that opinion."

"Not likely." Laren linked her fingers through Kate's for a few seconds and gazed directly at the other woman as if the two other Bajoran's weren't just now successfully sitting down. "You're wonderful and it has been a real pleasure being in your company."

Kate blushed. Then she turned to the two others. "I don't eat with strangers. What are your names?"

The older of the two managed a gracious nod. "I am Winn Adami and this is my son, Winn Jerrod."

Neither Laren nor Kate revealed that they knew another version of the famed Winn Adami. They both chose, coming to that decision by divergent means, to simply treat this person as her own individual. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Ro Laren of the House Presba and this is Dr. Kate Pulaski."

"We had noticed that you seemed familiar. Forgive my son's reactions. He is not used to being in the presence of important people."

"Well, I don't know about important. But we've certainly been in the news enough," Kate grimaced.

Winn looked at both the women, evaluating them in one long glance. "On the contrary, I think you may be the most important people we've had come to Bajor in a long time. Regardless, I owe you. You saved my son's life."

"You don't owe me," Kate began to prevaricate. "I would have done it for anyone."

"It is custom."
Kate cast a glance at Laren. The Bajoran tilted her head into a nod, agreeing with the other Bajoran.

Winn continued. "I am only a mother..." Her son's expression flickered with something that mixed amusement and disbelief. "... but should you ever need my assistance, please feel free to call upon me." She dug into her pockets and pulled out a rectangular filament. "My card."

Kate took the card and scanned it. It was written in Bajoran. She handed it to Laren, who read part of it to the group. "Winn Aerotech. Winn Biosoft. Winn Unicorp."

"I do believe that Winn Adami has understated her own importance," commented Kate with some amusement.

"Modesty in one's accomplishments helps one to continue to strive. I am ambitious, because I want a good future for my son. I also wish to set a good example."

"Ah. Tell me about it," Laren smiled. "The more I am around my children, the more I understand."

Winn nodded her head and touched her son's shoulder affectionately. "Yet, without them, where would we be?"

"Well, I'd probably still be mucking out the ship."

"But, don't you have slaves for that?" Winn Jerrod asked in surprise.

Laren gave Jerrod a cheeky grin. "I thought you were listening to our conversation."

He blushed. She winked at Winn Adami. Then she answered him. "We don't have slaves on board Voyager. The House needs the kind of loyalty that is freely given to function best, especially at times of danger. Where we've been, there has only been us. We have trust our people and slaves, except for the rare few who have come to love those they serve, can not be trusted. Besides, they're too much work. To have slaves, you must have slave masters. That takes someone away from focusing on things that are important. Such as survival." She paused. "All you have to do is look to history and remember how the Federation fell."

Winn Adami was nodding her head in understanding. "This is what your captain meant, isn't it. I saw the transmission. Is there truly that much danger on the way?"

"Winn Adami, I truly wish I could tell you there wasn't."

"It is starting to become clear that there is preparation to be made."

"I think it would be wise, yes. We can't give you exact dates. But we do know they are coming."

"Yet, ... T'Pel, is it? She is the Vulcan mate of Lwaxana Troi and of the House Presba... she is currently investing, if I understand things correctly."

"Yes."

"And she is the family's financier?"

Laren suddenly clued. "If you wish, I can give your information to her. You may be contacted, however, by Neelix. T'Pel is more of a behind the scenes type."

"Ah. I understand. I do have another..." Winn Adami began digging around for another card.

Kate said, "Don't bother. Laren can hold onto that card. I'll know where to get it, if I need it. Besides,
I think we've all let our dinner get cold and I'm still hungry.

"Of course. We are sorry to have interrupted."

"Are you kidding? It's been fascinating. Now, do you live here?"

"We are residents, yes."

"Okay, then let me tell you where we've been and you tell us what we ought to see next."

Hours later Laren and Kate were back on the ship. A security guard behind them staggered with several stacked packages. "You know, Kate, I'd have never taken you for someone who shops."

"Shows what you get for assuming. But, I had to, once Adami pointed us to the Great Mall of Jalanda. Remind me to tell you about the marathon shopping sprees my sister and I used to go on when I was but a callow youth." The door to Kate's quarters swooshed open and Kate directed the security guard, "You can put them there. I'll go through them later."

Moment's later the packages were set on ground and table and the security officer was saying his farewells. Laren was seated on the couch while Kate puttered about getting drinks. "Besides, a body needs to have hobbies. And it's been a good... oh, four years at least, before I've been able to have a nice little spree. The Admiral must set the example after all. Fortunately, I am not an admiral in need of setting examples at the moment."

"I'm twice as surprised that you were even thinking about skipping shore leave."

"I may enjoy shopping, but I like being kidnapped, enslaved or dead even less."

"It is unlikely to happen now, but good point."

"I think so." Kate handed a drink to Laren and sipped her own. Then she sat down besides the Bajoran. "So, now that I have you alone and won't cause anyone who over hears us to choke, tell me, how did it start for you?"

Laren started at the point where Kathryn called her in to read the riot act.

It was a planned impulse. Kate had meant to do it, planned for it. But she hadn't planned the time, just the event. Somewhere in the middle of Laren's storytelling, perhaps inspired by hearing how Seven had guided Laren to her room, Kate Pulaski had leaned forward and captured Laren in a kiss. As the kiss deepened, she'd moved forward, pressing against the other woman with surprising firmness and speed.

Laren wrapped one arm around the other woman to provide stability and the other she used to start caressing her back and side. Their mouths danced in sultry timing, warm and sweet and tasting a bit like Bajoran Spring Wine.

Laren pulled away and drew her lips along Kate's chin and neck. She purred lightly, an unavoidable noise and suddenly Kate stilled in her arms. So Laren pulled back. "Does it disturb you?"
"It... reminds me. Reminds me how different you and they are."

"It's true. We are not what we used to be. But we are ourselves, none-the-less."

Kate said, "Do you believe her, Kathryn, I mean, when she says that she is from another time and place?"

"I don't just believe her Kate. I know."

There was a pause. "I hate to do this. I told myself I wouldn't. I ... thought I was ready. But ..."

Laren pulled back some more and took both of Kate's hands in her own. She kissed the palms. "There is no hurry, lovely one. There is no pressure. You are welcome and always will be. But it must be your choice. If you say no, that is the way of it. We will adjust. If you say yes, there will be celebration. But I am not here just because I am part of my family. You realize?"

"Yes. I knew it then too."

"Good. Good. Don't worry, Kate. Would you let me hold you, just for a moment?"

"I would like that. Yes. But I need to think."

"Of course."

Kate slid off of Laren's lap and settled in besides the Bajoran, who placed her arm around the human's shoulder and drew her in. "I'm sorry," Kate said.

"There's nothing to sorrow for. This is not a race and I am not easily frustrated."

"Well, that is definitely true." She sighed and found herself leaning into Laren. "Maybe next time."

"I look forward to it." There was a heartbeat, then two. "Seven was right though. You are a beautiful kisser."

Kate began to laugh.
Seated around a table, which was positioned in a room of power on an ovoid spaceship, were several figures. They all wore the robes of the Truth Seekers. At the moment, their heads were covered, as was appropriate in the temple of the ship, but they all knew each other anyway.

Despite the auditory silence, there was a great deal of telepathic communication flying back and forth between the counselors. The babble was ongoing even as The Truth Seeker arrived and took her place at the head of the table. It did not cease until she made the audible command. "Silence!"

It was as if, on a mental level, someone had placed a dampening field over the whole area.

That is better, The Truth Seeker, Deanna Troi, commented. I have brought you together, not so you can squabble and scramble for power, but because it is time for change.

Our ways have..., started Ghent Wasari.

'Silence!' If the word had been spoken it would have been like a deafening roar.

The Truth Seeker continued on as if she had not been interrupted. We go to Bajor for several reasons, first, to meet with these new kinds of Truth Seekers.

Outrageous! These -- Ghent started again.

The thought didn't get any further than that, as the individual suddenly became invested in survival. He clutched his throat and turned a vague shade of purple. It wasn't until he thought, I bow to The Truth Seeker, that he was set free.

The Truth Seeker's glare could be felt, if not seen, around the table and the Counselors shrunk in on themselves. It was a bad idea to test the patience of The Truth Seeker. She might indulge in warnings, but it always resulted in fire if it she had to give too many.

We will meet with these Truth Seekers and we will learn. We will conduct ourselves in a manner that is pleasing or we will face the consequences. Am I understood?

The acknowledgment was silent, but firm. She continued. It is time to bring back honor to the calling of the Truth Seekers. Do you think I do not know of the parlor tricks? Do you think I do not know of the political games? Yet, have those games achieved anything other than notoriety? Do you know why I am going to visit the Truth Seekers of the House Presba?

There was a hesitation and then one spoke, Rhianna Von. The House Presba is a Klingon House? And thus, the Truth Seekers are in positions of power?

There was a thoughtful background mental murmur. If Betazed is to remain a power in this galaxy, we must use the tools and means that we have been given. Our influence has suffered. The respect due to us, has suffered. Have you listened to the thoughts of the public on your wide journeys? What have they told you?

Jonas Hagen offered, There is awe and dread when they think of Lwaxana Troi.

Of the House Presba, Rhianna corrected.
Doine Cudan said, There is awe and wonder when they think of..., there was a pause as memory was searched, ... The Counselor. The individual, an older Betazed, wiggled her fingertips as if trying to reach for the name out of the air. ... Ah, yes. Counselor Nael of the House Presba.

But what of the outsiders?

The outsiders?

If you watched the video, you saw. They had Orions as Truth Seekers. And those strange feline creatures.

What makes a Truth Seeker, Owen? queried Deanna.

Again there was that background murmur.

But it is our power.

Are we the only telepaths then? Are we only telepaths? What of other abilities? Can an Orion cause Truth to be spoken? Has anyone asked them?

There was acknowledgment of the questions, if no answers. They knew of other species with similar talents. Even the Humans had some gifts. No one knew much about the Orions except that they were either slave or syndicate. Except on Voyager. On Voyager they were something else.

Deanna continued, Consider this. We have official status in the Empire. We have been the ones that companies have turned to. We have been the ones that, until this last century, others depended on, to bring truth out of darkness. But we grew indulgent and greedy, save for a few, and our influence waned because of it. Yet, here we have Voyager, this new ship that was on its own in the wilderness. They said, 'We need Truth Seekers and then they gave them a place and rank and a calling to their own House. Honor was retrieved.

But they also have Humans in their midst. A slave race.

No. A conquered race. They are not weaklings and one makes a mistake to believe it because their children have been trained to behave a certain way. Already the whispers of the slaves can be heard in the corridors of power. Have you not listened?

I have, muttered Torin. It is not yet revolution. It may be years. But it comes. It can also be avoided. That is, if the Empire makes the choice.

Do you think it is true? Do you believe that danger comes our way?

I do not know. That is our second purpose for going, to find out. There was a quiet pause, then Deanna continued somewhat bleakly. Betazed lost face during the battles with the Hive. We were seen as weak, because many of our Truth Seekers found elsewhere to be. We skated by in the Empire's eyes because it was believed that we would be useless in such scenarios. And then Voyager arrived....

She didn't need to say more. Individually they were all remembering the scenes from the broadcasts - scenes both of carnage and comfort.

The role that the Truth Seeker's played was more important than we may realize. I have been contacted by the Chancellor. He has said that if brave Betazoids can be found on one ship, surely there must be more on our planet. Chancellor Worf wants us to prove ourselves. I did point out that the Truth Seekers did not kill. He said, 'But they were there.' That was what was most important to
him. They were present and they made a difference in the battle.

And again, we return to, but not all of the Truth Seekers were Betazoid.

True. They were not, said Doine. Yet, it was a Betazoid who was their leader. This makes sense, does it not? They followed her command, and she had a rank in their ship. They were obviously trained by her. Perhaps we should consider that it might be useful to make sure that others seeking to become Truth Seekers should come through us?

It was as if a light bulb went off in their heads all at the same time. "Ah!"

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Ro looked up from her PADD and decided that now was as good a time as any since Kathryn had stopped actively working and was, instead, staring at the vase of flowers in the corner. She fetched two cups of coffee from the replicator and carried them over to the couch, knowing that her activity would catch the attention of her mate.

"Laren?"

Laren sat on the couch and stretched out her legs, resting her booted feet on the table in front. It was a carefully thought out pose - one designed to convey an offhandedness she didn't really feel. "Can you stand down for a bit?"

"Of course, darling." Kathryn made her way over to the less formal part of her Ready room. "Computer, seal the Captain's ready room, my authorization."

"Acknowledged."

She took a moment to settle herself and wondered if Ro planned to speak after all, or had merely wanted her company. Their bodies were touching lightly, and Janeway decided that she liked the pleasant interlude.

"Kathryn, what would you have done if one of us had objected to Kate?"

Kathryn blinked and sat up, an unconscious growl undercutting her words. "What?"

Laren felt Kathryn's shock through their link even as she felt the sudden explosion of movement. "Whoa. Hold on. We don't." She thought back to their date. "We definitely don't."

"Then what am I missing here?"

"Humour me. What would you have done? Would you have pursued her? Slept with her anyway?" Laren watched Kathryn's eyes, their colour always a far more reliable indicator of her moods than was her body language. Cold and grey, there was no hint of thoughtfulness in them, and Laren realized that she had picked a very bad example. "Shh, love. I'm sorry. I know. I feel the hole in you where she is when we're together. I know." She continued to mutter reassurance to Kathryn, taking time to reinforce her words with tender touches.

Kathryn burrowed against Laren, willing to accept the reassurances of her mate. What would she have done? There could be no secrets between them, not when the blood called and burned. In that space they were all open, loved, and accepted. She made a conscious choice to be as open with her thoughts now as she was called to be then. "I might have made a formal request to B'Elanna."

She had surprised Laren, and her lips quirked in a small grin. "I love you too much to lie to you."

"I love you too much to lie to you."
Laren nodded. Maybe she had picked the right topic. If Kathryn could understand her own pain and difficulty, maybe it would make it easier to explain what she thought Seven was going through. "And yet, fidelity is very important to you."

Kathryn kissed along her jaw, and then claimed her lips for a long, gentle exploration. "What, or who are we really talking about?"

"Seven." She let her dark eyes sweep up and meet Kathryn's, raising a brow in question to see if she needed to add anything.

"Seven? Has she..?"

Laren discarded most of what she had been going to say; this really wasn't about Ezri, not at the heart, it was about Seven's right to choose. They had taken that away from her, without even understanding what they had done. "I think the Borg were adding the distinctiveness of other individuals to themselves long before they began assimilating entire cultures. If nothing else, I think it's a fundamental part of her nature, one that maybe she doesn't even fully grasp yet, but it's there."

She carried her argument forward, "You value fidelity highly and yet you would have acted on your desire for Kate. Think how hard it must be for Seven. She would never break her promise to you, to us, no matter what she needs."

Kathryn exhaled. Laren was right. "Janeway to Torres."

"Torres here, Captain."

"Can you join Laren and me in my ready room, B'Elanna?"

"Sure, Kathryn. Be right up. Torres out."

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According to many experts, the first encounter between persons can often be the most important. On the other hand, Seven of Nine's and Ezri Tigan's brush with one another had occurred at a distance. From the Borg's point of view, this made the second point of contact equally important and thus it was time for research.

She started with the information in her own cortical node, with what the Borg knew about the Trill. Then she began with Voyager's database, seeking out specific information about the woman in question. There was plenty of extremely intriguing finds from both sources, not the least of which was a change in surname and rank. Ezri Tigan was actually Lieutenant Ezri Dax - listed as a Joined Trill and also as missing in action.

She forwarded the information from Voyager to Laren and Kathryn for their review and promptly received a reply back from the Captain. < Please place urgent attention on retrieving Ezri Dax.> A second message quickly followed. < Love you, dearest.>

Smiling at the warmth of the follow up message, Seven began her preparations.

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There were decisions to be made. Voyager's unexpected arrival had changed things considerably. No longer was Terok Nor a sedate, though prosperous way station. Now it had become the center of attention of an entire Empire.
She had seen the news feeds, but Ezri was no closer to understanding the situation. In her Universe, the Intrepid class starship was lost in the Delta quadrant. She had a theory. In frame after frame, the call numbers NCC-74656 could be seen stenciled across the impossibly clean, silver lines of the top saucer. Numbers that shouldn't exist in this Universe.

Not for the first time, Ezri felt overwhelmed. She should be on the Defiant, not skulking around an alternate reality, trying desperately to avoid her other self, even as she needed the camouflage. But Lenara Kahn had called. Had asked for her help, and that part of her that was Jadzia and Torias before her had no choice but to answer. So she'd slipped away from her billet, made her way to Bajor, and the Temple.

It occurred to her, and not for the first time, that she had done smarter things than linger on the powerbase of a woman that might very well kill her on sight. Of course, she had done stupider ones too.

Like now.

She knew who the tall blonde was. Everyone did. Seven Hansen of the House Presba. Die Valkyrie. The vids loved her - loved her grace. No, they worshiped the deadly grace that was fueling the fantasies of an Empire. Images had not prepared her for the reality, and so she had passed on her first chance at contact.

Today though, she would rectify that. Somehow. Assuming she didn't lose her nerve in those blue eyes. Again.

The first problem would be to get past what looked to be a sizable entourage. She let a light epithet cross her lips. Well, there was no help for it. Ezri settled back in her chair. She'd just watch for a while and see what broke loose.

Apparently finished with her meal, the blonde rose and made her way to one of the gaming tables. Ezri rotated slightly, glad that Hansen had chosen one of the tables closest to where she was sitting. Her view now unobstructed by a table, or passing wait staff, she took the time to admire the woman's poise. From somewhere deep inside, she felt the mental echoes of a growl and grinned wryly, acknowledging that there was more than mere poise to admire. A whole lot more.

"Nagus ears." Ezri quickly stood. Hansen may have been deadly with a blade, but if she kept playing tongo, she was the one who was going to get slaughtered. Black hole in one hand, and an ice water in the other, she crossed to where the blonde was sitting with three Ferengi, and a Romulan.

The order of play had yet to return to her quarry, so she took a moment to evaluate the amount of latinum on the table, as well as the relative wealth of the players. It was clear that the Ferengi were, overall, tolerating the presence of the female, happy to take her latinum strips, but were not according her any respect as an actual opponent. The Romulan was using her as cover for a trap.

Ezri leaned down slightly and whispered, "Evade." She then placed the ice water on the coaster in front of the blonde.

"Thank you."

Elegant fingers reached for the glass, and Ezri watched, mesmerized as the woman's lips touched the rim. Watched the delicate swallow and slight flutter of muscles under skin as the liquid completed its journey. "My pleasure."

Eyes gone violet in the light locked on hers, and it was Ezri's turn to swallow. "And if I choose to
Ezri let a full smile cross her features. "Then you'd lose this game."

"I retire." The blonde stood and had taken a step away from the table before Ezri had even realized she'd moved. "Perhaps, you'd care to recommend a more suitable diversion?"

It took everything Ezri could muster to keep the blush she felt beginning to burn along her back from reaching her face.

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Seven glanced at her companion. The Trill's body temperature was still elevated, but rather than the expected increase in respiration, her breaths were long and even, almost meditative in their timing. Most intriguing.

"May I ask you a question?" They were walking though the corridors on the way from transporter room four, to The Park.

"Sure."

Walking shoulder to shoulder, their bodies nearly touched, and Seven found that she was both amused and distracted by the way that the other woman would touch her back to guide her through traffic. "How did you escape?"

"Escape?"

Seven stopped at the entrance to the turbo-lift. "From the Orion syndicate." The lift arrived and they entered. "You do not need to dissemble. You are safe here."

The lift came to an unexpected halt, and they stumbled into each other. Ezri's hands were braced against her chest, and mere inches separated their faces. Indeed, Seven realized that it was only their respective differences in height that provided any distance at all.

"Why, do I suddenly believe that? And why, am I equally sure, that I am very much on unsafe ground?"

They were breathing the same air. It was warm, scented of them, and Seven took a deliberate breath then stepped back. "I desire you." Honesty was the best course. She would not let Ezri believe that she had read the situation incorrectly, but neither would she act. "But I cannot."

Ezri's eyes locked on hers, and Seven thought she read honest regret in them, and something else too that was gone before she could name it. Her hands dropped away, and Seven felt cold, as though she needed the woman's touch to regulate her temperature.

"I didn't escape from anyone. I came here on purpose. I'm looking for someone."

Seven nodded, glad that her body had begun to regulate itself again, and equally glad that the lift had resumed its course. She did think it was interesting that neither she, or Ezri had reacted to the event, nor had Voyager herself responded. "Perhaps if you told me who, I would be able to provide assistance."

"Leah Brahms. She's a human propulsion expert."

She felt, somehow, that she should have expected the name. But it was good. Ezri was mated, as she
was. "Dr. Brahms is aboard Voyager. I will take you to her."

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Leah Brahms looked up from the console as she heard the lab door hiss shut. She hadn't heard it open. "Hello, Seven." The tall Borg had stopped just inside the door, and was looking at her somewhat expectantly she thought, though why she thought that she wasn't sure. She just knew that if Annika had looked at her in that way, that's what it would have meant - well, sans the raised ocular implant.

"Dr. Brahms."

"What can I do for you, Seven?" Now she could have sworn that Seven looked confused, and was that relief beginning to ghost across the delicate cheekbones?

Seven looked from the scientist to her companion. Ezri had yet to speak, a reaction that left Seven somewhat at a loss. She raised her ocular implant and stared at Ezri pointedly.

Leah was amused to see the flush that spread across the Trill's face, and decided to take pity on the young woman. "I see Seven is keeping you to herself. Leah Brahms." She held out her hand, but barely noticed when it was taken; she was too intrigued by the light flush that had unaccountably dusted Seven's cheeks.

"Ezri Dax --"

"-- You do not know each other?"

Leah felt her eyebrows crawl into her forehead as she digested the responses. The two women had virtually spoken at the same time and it took her a second to parse out the implications: Dax. "Lenara," she whispered, the name almost a prayer.

Seven watched, fascinated at the sudden change in Brahms. This was the reaction she had expected to be directed at Ezri the moment they had stepped into the makeshift propulsion lab. As she watched the scene unfold, she realized that despite all the changes in her life recently, she hadn't yet reached her capacity to be surprised at human behavior.

"Lenara sends her love." Ezri stepped forward and suddenly, soundly kissed Leah, then, just as suddenly, grabbed her by both shoulders and shook her, before grabbing her again in a fierce hug. "She also says, and I quote: 'Don't you ever scare me like that again'."

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Laren didn't need to be able to see Seven's face to be aware of how unsettled her mate was. Even a corridor's length away she could feel the dark energy tinged with passion that roiled from the Borg in palpable waves. A dozen more strides and she had reached Seven's side, their fingers coming into immediate and unconscious contact.

"You should have called me sooner, sweetheart." She reached out one hand and rubbed Seven's lower back, knowing that more than the gentle contact of their fingers was needed.

"I did not anticipate that it would be this difficult."

Laren tightened her embrace and gently pulled Seven around so that they were facing. "She is a force of nature, isn't she?"
"Yes."

She tasted more than heard Seven's reply, as she used her free hand to pull her beloved into a kiss. Laren poured every ounce of understanding she could into the contact. Tried to let Seven know that it was okay to bleed off some of her passion into their connection. Then the door to the lab swished open and she found herself on the verge of greeting a woman she'd last spoken to from the edge of a well-mussed bed nearly a decade ago.

"Ro Laren."

While the greeting was formal, the tone was anything but, and Laren found herself unexpectedly discomfited, as she replied in kind. "Ezri...Dax." Looking at Seven and then at Ezri, Laren was struck by their matching blue irises, and pulled by the parity of old knowledge she read from them both.

"Is she...?" Ezri looked from Seven to Ro Laren, and back again, then fixed her eyes firmly on the Borg's.

"Yes." For the second time with Ezri, Seven chose not to shade the truth, or to pretend not to know what was being asked. But somehow this woman, these women, deserved even more from her. "We are chosen, of each other."

Ezri smiled, and raked her eyes up Laren's body, and Seven was positive that the Trill had chosen the provocative edge to her glance deliberately. "Good choice, Seven."

Laren smiled, remembering only too well the wicked sense of humour hidden under the innocence of the elfin features. She purred, and met Ezri's suggestive gaze head-on, then let her tongue flick out over the edge of her lips. Still connected to Seven by her arm around the Borg's waist, Laren felt the minute growl from her mate that her own had called forth, even as she watched the Trill draw an uneven breath.

Seven felt the fire kindle behind her eyes and she leaned into Laren's touch, her mouth seeking the Bajoran's.

Laren drew back first, her eyes still on the Trill. "Go home, beloved. I'll take Ezri to see the Captain, and then I'll join you."

"I will comply."

And then Laren understood just how off-kilter Seven was. Beneath the light weave of the white linen shirt, along the edge of one of her abdominal implants, Seven had begun to blink.

Side by side, they watched the blonde until she disappeared, without a backward glance, into the turbo-lift. When the doors had shut, Laren turned back to her charge, to find Ezri regarding her with a somewhat speculative look.

"You know something, Ro Laren. You're still a very dangerous woman."

She let a light grin show; as she raked Ezri up and down once more with what she hoped was feral intent. "I do believe that's true, Lieutenant. Shall we?"

Ezri laughed, very glad that she'd decided to interfere in Seven's tongo game.

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"Do you know who I am Lieutenant?"

"Yes."

Kathryn waited a beat for the Trill to add to her confirmation, and then realized that nothing more was forthcoming. "Yes...?" she prompted.

"Yes."

Her eyes flicked over to Laren, and she was nearly undone by the awed humour in her assistant's eyes. Or maybe it was her mate that was amused, and the Starfleet officer who was awed. Dark eyes met her own, and a finely drawn eyebrow was lifted questioningly.

Ezri continued to stand at attention, though not rigidly so, and waited to see what would happen next.

Kathryn discretely signaled Laren with her fingers. I suppose she thinks she's cute?

She'd be right.

Et tu, Darling? She continued aloud, "Indeed. Well, Lieutenant Dax, I certainly know who you are. AWOL, if I'm not mistaken."

"No, Captain."

"No?" This time she didn't dare look at Laren.

"Technically, I'm listed as MIA." Ezri heard the sharp cut-off laugh from Ro, and realized that the woman's advice to be herself was affording the Bajoran more enjoyment than it was making things easier with Janeway.

"So you were." Kathryn stepped into the junior officer's personal space, and let a low growl resonate in the air between them. "Are. You. Still. MIA?"

Ezri felt her eyes widen, even as she almost growled back in response to the implicit challenge. "No, Captain."

Just as quickly as she had moved forward Janeway stepped back, and it took a great deal of effort for Ezri not to say, "Good. Welcome aboard. Now, can I get you something to drink while we discuss your options?"

"Raktajino. And whiskey. Light on the Raktajino." Ezri requested, elated as she caught the first crack in Janeway's command mask. This was going to be fun.
Chapter 8

Chapter by bearblue

Their home was empty when Seven arrived. There were no adults. No children. There was only the hiss of air and odd blips of equipment for company. It was a boon.

Seven was not sure she could have faced either her children or her mates at the moment.

"Seven?" Voyager prodded gently, after she had noted the length of time the ex-drone had been standing. She usually tried to avoid being so obvious, preferring transparency in her interactions. But family was family.

It was a few moments, an eternity for a sentient ship, before the woman replied. "I am... just thinking, Voyager. I am alright."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

Seven, suddenly felt the need to do something, anything. She made her way to her bedroom and then into her refresher. She stripped roughly, ignoring the dropping cloth, which was unusual for her.

She stepped into the shower, choosing the sonic option. She found the massage of the pulsing waves around her soothing. She closed her eyes while the shower ran through its cycle. When it was done, she did another rare thing and chose water.

Now heated liquid slapped against her skin, bursting from several directions. It felt good, distracting. She wrapped her arms around herself, and tried to process the unexpectedly strong emotions and bare-fanged need that coursed through her. That she had not expected in her contact with Ezri. That need was reserved for her mates. Even Kate could, under the right circumstances, call that forth. But the Trill? How could it be?

She leaned her head against the wall of the shower and knew, rather helplessly, that she would not be able to just puzzle this out. She wouldn't be able to lock it away. That ability was no longer viable. She would have to bear with it, as she had borne with longing during those years in Cargo Bay 2.

Seven felt Laren before she even entered the room. The door to the shower slid open and the Bajoran slid in, naked. Seven had not turned, had not relaxed from the unconsciously protective position that she had taken.

Then, like a balm, Laren was there - as she had promised. The others would arrive as soon as they could.

Laren gently moved her mate around, until they were standing face to face, pressed tightly against one another. She kissed Seven, whispered against her lips. "We are here, beloved. You are not alone. You are loved and wanted. Your need, is our need."

It was the contact, skin upon skin, and the link of fire - the reflection of which bounced and rolled through all of them. Seven shivered in Laren's grasp and could not stop the sob that escaped her lips. They kissed again, solace in touch and want.
Laren’s hands smoothed along Seven’s wet skin, brushed against the sensitive implant along her back. The abdominal implant had not ceased its blinking. The Bajoran slid down along the Borg’s body. She kissed that spot, spent loving attention and intention along its soft sparkling line.

Seven gasped. The combination of the water and Laren's touch was highly erotic. Laren slowly stood up, laying a long line of kisses along the way until she was again where their lips could touch. She pulled Seven into a deeper embrace and suddenly the blonde was kissing her hard, finally surrendering to the heat that flared within her.

Laren pressed against her, pushing her against the wall. Seven’s hands began their own roaming, sliding along water-slick skin. Even there the touch intensified, as need translated into passion, which was suddenly directed. "Hold onto something Seven," the Bajoran commanded as she slid down her lover's body.

Seven recognized the tone and it sent spirals of desire through her. Lights flickered along her implants, responding to the stimulation and her state of mind. The Borg planted her fingertips against the wall and pressed in. There was a bending, grinding sound.

Laren slid between Seven’s legs, forcing them to spread. Her hands sifted through wet gold, parting curls and tender flesh. She dove in, extending her tongue through the moist salt and sweet and she tasted, probed, delved... loved. She poured everything into that touch, her touch, her love, her passion and receptivity. Seven cried out, pushed against her touch. She felt the ache along their line and deliberately exposed it, summoned it. Owned it.

Seven ground down and Laren rose up, tasting and filling, drawing her mate into the spiraling whirlwind.

"Please."

"Yes."

She cried out, ecstasy thrilled through her body, her mind. She felt her mates, from their various distances, rise to greet her, embrace her totality. Even there, in the haven of their love, blue eyes remained at the edge of her awareness.

Later, as she rested in Laren's arms afterwards, they were joined. Kathryn and B'Elanna each took a side of the bed. Kathryn took Seven's hand, smiled tenderly at her distressed mate. "Darling, I do believe we need to talk."

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There was a small bit of shifting around as Seven and Laren moved from a reclining position into a sitting one. The blonde Borg remained in the brunette Bajoran's arms, while their Human and half-Human mates settled in more closely beside them on the large bed. Kathryn seemed to be searching for words and Seven was not quite ready to speak.

She felt reassurance, love, and sincerity coming from all three of her mates. "Seven, do you recall when we first began the process of forming this family? Our first major conversation about creating the House Presba?"

Seven knew that her mates were aware of her abilities with memory, so she recognized that this was just the captain's method of introducing the topic. She kept her answer simple. "I do."

Kathryn's expression turned slightly pensive. "There were so many things going on those days, things which affect us still. We made quite a few decisions, based on the knowledge that we had at
that time, some of them quite unexpected. For instance, you and Laren plotted some very interesting experiences for me and B'Elanna."

B'Elanna and Laren shared a whimsical glance. Seven merely nodded and the Captain continued. "Your Nordic practicality is something that I have always appreciated." Now Seven's ocular implant rose. "... and you are one of the most unselfish people that I know."

Seven received a gentle squeeze from Laren, who was still cuddling her. Kathryn said, "You are also Borg and, as I have come to appreciate, that means that you have certain ingrained standards that others might find difficult to maintain. It is just who you are."

Seven resisted the urge to curl up into a ball. She was only able to do so, because her mates were completely non-threatening in their approach. But Seven dreaded what she thought Kathryn was trying to say. She felt B'Elanna take her other, cybernetic hand. Seven deliberately kept her grip light and loose.

Then the words came, "While we were planning the House, we talked about issues of fidelity." Seven flinched, even under their loving gazes. "You discussed possessiveness and adulthood and freedom. Then you made a rather ... shall we say... snap decision, one I am sure was planned to reassure us of your intentions. One that was, at the time, probably very necessary to our... functioning."

"Fidelity," whispered Seven. The wound was evident in her voice. "You are... most important to me."

"Yes," responded Kathryn. "And you to us, beloved. I sometimes forget that you do not come from our culture. I have to remind myself at times that you still need clarification on some ... human or even Federation cultural practices."

The Borg, who looked as if she wanted to bury herself in her mates and sink into the floor at the same time, and could do neither because it was not her nature to retreat, said, "I do not understand."

"I know. Let me try to explain." Kathryn looked at B'Elanna who nodded. "It is not easy to plan for the future. We do not always have the benefit of pure insight into what will come. At the time of our discussion, we only knew that we desired each other and that a dangerous enemy needed persuading, in whatever way we could manage it, and, using whatever method it took, to change their perspective. Our family, being who we are, came up with a unique solution."

[58x802]"I recall thinking, as we were talking, that we could not account for everything. Which is why, when we were discussing that particular topic, I suggested that we let time provide us with the details." Seven tilted her head and gazed at Kathryn in curiosity.

"I...do not understand."

"I know. That is why we are having this discussion, love. You see, in human contracts, in ... many contracts... which involve... oh... unknown future circumstances, options are sometimes written in - caveats, which allow one, if they have made certain commitments and find out that the - commitment is stretched, to make alterations to that contract."

Seven was looking very closely at Kathryn. Then her gaze shifted and she looked at B'Elanna and Laren. Their expressions were caring, warm. Kathryn continued. "There was a reason I made that caveat. First, as you yourself said, we are free adults. Second, we did not know how the House would truly arrange itself. For instance, we had no way of knowing how deeply our connection would form." She squeezed Seven's hand gently. "So, Seven, I must ask you a few questions."
The ex-drone nodded her acceptance of Kathryn's questions.

"Do you know we love you?"

It was, from Seven's perspective a very illogical question. But she answered anyway. She was surprised that it came out as a whisper. "Yes."

Kathryn leaned in, placed a delicate kiss on that lovely mouth. It warmed instantly, sweetened quickly. "Good," she whispered back and into the kiss. Then she pulled back. "Do you know we trust you?"

It was not quite hesitation, merely caution. Her mates knew it. "I do."

"Do you love us?"

There was no hesitation at all. "With all that I am."

"And we, you, my darling Seven. We adore you, need you, love you and trust you." Kathryn smiled at her mate, and then she said, "Do you remember your response to me, when you all realized that there was another?"

There was a tiny pause. "I do."

"So do I. I remember how warmly you took me in; you became my haven and my solace. This was before we even knew Kate would find herself on this ship. You accepted who she was to me."

"I promised that I would not..."

"Because I knew that my memory was not as good as yours, I took the opportunity to look at what was actually said, so we could... address this issue. What you said, my darling Borg, was that you would not plan on bringing anyone else into the family." Kathryn raised her hand to forestall the rising argument. Sometimes people fought against themselves, unconsciously. "I know... I know your intent. We all knew it then. And it definitely helped us brave through our own hang ups about what we were about to do. But darling... we are different people now and plans do change."

"I..."

Laren said, "What Kathryn is telling you, beloved, is that we trust you to make good decisions and we trust our connection to each other. We are your mates and our connection runs so deeply, that nothing could break it. Not even separation by Universes."

Tears began to gather at Seven's natural eye. B'Elanna leaned forward and brushed them away. "Ezri calls you. We feel it. And we acknowledge its depth. But even if it was just... a moment's desire, we would accept your need and make space for it. As you would for us. Our love is not a cage, BangwI. You are much too important for us to let you suffer."

"I would not..." B'Elanna's fingertips covered the denial.

"Mate. You were already suffering. Unnecessarily so. The contract, such as it is, is changed. Allow us to set this...rule...for you. We trust you absolutely to do what is best for yourself and the family. As you trust us. And, if someone is meant for you or us, allow us the opportunity, at least, to discover it." This time it was B'Elanna who leaned in. She purred into the kiss, stirring her mate's heat.

When she pulled back, Seven's eyes were closed. Her ocular implant strobed little lights along the
ridge. The mates shared a smile between one another.

When Seven opened her eyes, there was clarity and peace in them again.

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The Mess Hall was its usual scene of controlled chaos - especially at lunch. The diversity of the crew lent itself to the tilt-o-whirl atmosphere, particularly around the long table. Commander Magnum sat casually at one corner of the long table, completely undisturbed by the things going on around him, reading work PADDs. Every now and then he would reach over and grab something from one of the great bowls filled with finger-friendly foods. He ignored the conversations of others, the various games and intricate discussions, and the constant flow of movement of the tinier fellow crewmen over head as they leapt from their shelf to the ground or vice versa.

Despite appearances, the surface of the table and the mess hall was clean. The hall was just busy. Even though they were where Voyager could get its replicator contents easily restocked, the habit of having real live cooks remained. Their efforts were part of the ship's culture and cuisine now. One of the side benefits, however, of having a stop over in a companion Universe was new recipes and they seemed to be trying them all - just not all at the same time. Menus were listed at the door and on Voyager's Ship's Channel for the sake of simplicity.

Voyager's crew was taking advantage of their time, saving their replicator rations, which were still accumulating, for a later day. Having been without, they appreciated the time of green and reveled in it.

Commander Magnum, meanwhile was feeling pleased with the general accrual for the ship. They were double stocked in several important areas. The Garden, aka Hydroponics, was in particularly good shape and they had back up plants in the replicator memory. They even bought back ups of the back ups. Essential components had also been acquired and stored. Voyager was ready for years of deep space travel again.

With that happy thought in mind, he closed out his PADDs and stacked them in preparation for gathering. Thus, he had an armful of the units when he turned around and nearly collided with Neelix.

"Ah. I do beg your pardon. This is our supply officer, Commander Steve Magnum." he began the process of introduction. "Have you met Lieutenant Ezri Dax? She's from Universe A, and recently arrived on Voyager."

"I can't say that I have. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant. Welcome on board. Glad we found you. Or did you find us?"

"A little of both." She did look a bit dazed, as if she could hardly believe her luck, yet she was challenged in the assumption that it was a good thing.

With the PADDs in his arms, he somehow still managed to convey the idea of a general wave. "Oh, don't mind this. You get used to it. Did they stick you into a job yet?"

"Uh. Not yet. I'm supposed to take a few days and get acclimated, go to Sick Bay and get cleared, that kind of thing. Neelix is showing me around." She glanced at the yellow and orange spotted being beside her. Then she turned her attention to the Commander again. "As for things jobs, I was in command, but I've also have a science background. In fact, I was a counselor. So nothing has really been decided."
"Oh-ho! Counselor Nael will be glad to hear that. This ship has gone from desert to bounty. Just beware, once we get back to Universe A, you may find you're stuck with us. That's what Admiral Paris did to my crew; it was the best thing that happened to us." He looked up and spotted someone in the distance. His expression changed from amiable camaraderie to absolute sunshine. "There's my Harry! I wonder if he's heard from our Tom." He nodded pleasantly to the Trill. "Contact me if you have a supply idea. We've managed to obtain pretty much everything asked for so far. And I'd hate to hit the Delta Quadrant and have forgotten something. Good journeys." He started walking away, then turned, "Oh, hey, Neelix, T'Pel wanted to see you when you had some free time."

"Steve, I shall make myself available." The genial Talaxian waved farewell to the Commander. Then he turned to Ezri. "Now. Where were we? Ah, yes. Lunch. If you'll follow me, I will introduce you to some wonderful people, who happen to know how to cook."

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Ezri had been on several starships in her time, and Dax most certainly had been. She was fairly sure that she had never seen such a diverse, yet well adjusted crew. Oh, they had seen their trials. The evidence was literally on the bulkheads of Voyager. It appeared, however, that this crew had embraced those events as part of a larger experience.

There were also more than just hints at mysteries. There were things unspoken that just everyone knew. And, of course, there was an Honest to Kahless Klingon House, of which the Captain was a member, aboard this ship.

House Presba. She ought to, at some point, introduce herself to the Epatai, as a matter of formality. She knew who the Epatai was in theory, but finding her would be an entirely different matter. She made a mental note to request it of Neelix during their tour.

She ate with pleasure and without haste, enjoying the first relaxed bite she'd been able to achieve since arriving in this alternate Universe.

She also came to the conclusion that these were the most polite people she had ever run across, at least in the dining experience. Whenever she needed a napkin, it was there. Whenever she needed a spice, it was there. It was a nice experience. Normally one had to ingratiate oneself with the crew a bit more before such instant amenities began happening.

Speaking of contacting, she noted a striking redhead Betazoid. She appeared to talking, or rather listening mostly, to a tow-headed engineer. They seemed quite relaxed and she wondered if she could join them now that she was finished with her meal.

But then, Neelix was right there. "Are you ready? I was thinking we might try for Sick Bay next."

Ezri smiled at the exuberant Talaxian. "That sounds like a plan. Lead on McDuff."

"McDuff? No dear, I'm Neelix."

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Content to allow the genial Talaxian to introduce her to Voyager in his own way, Ezri let him guide her through the ship. A most interesting ship, she thought. For example, she was positive she'd been on at least two decks already that just shouldn't be there. Voyager was an Intrepid class ship - really more of a scout ship than a generational vessel - and just shouldn't be this big.

"Here we are, Ezri. I believe this is your next stop."
His good cheer was unrelenting, and she found herself liking him. Or maybe it was a spotted solidarity thing. Either way, she knew this couldn't have been how he'd planned to spend his day. "Thanks, Neelix."

"You are most welcome, Ezri."

She followed him through the quietly whooshing doors, and if the giant cadecus on them hadn't told her she was in sickbay, then the familiar layout would have. There was a time when she had been part of Starfleet Medical, and had spent more than her fair share of time in them for less noble reasons.

"Ensign Hansen, do you have a minute?"

"Yes, Uncle Neelix, how may I be of assistance?"

Hansen. Younger brother, perhaps? She shrugged it off, sure she'd find out eventually. Thoughts of Seven would not help her get through the rest of the tour.

"May I present Lieutenant Ezri Dax. Captain Janeway sent her down for a mustering-in physical, may I leave you to get her set up?"

"Yes, you may."

"Dax!" A beat and then a second startled exclamation. "Ezri?"

For the third time in her joined life, she was swamped by a conglomerate of images and feelings that made it almost impossible to think, her own memories magnified and complemented. "Kate." The name carried a gruff affection, and she decided it didn't matter whether it came from Curzon or entirely from herself; it was an accurate reflection of how she felt.

It was, Ezri realized, the most delicious of ironies, the most bizarre of unknowing triangles.

"It's been a long time."

"Too long." There was a soft burr in her voice, and Ezri knew it for her own sentiment. "You look wonderful." She cast a long evaluative stare at Kate. She knew that look. It had once been directed at Curzon, in the same way that she had spun it at Kate.

She was rewarded with a blush. Then eyes as knowing as hers, turned their gaze her way, and Ezri found she couldn't hold the look, couldn't bear the intensity of what she saw, found she was afraid that too little of Curzon and too much of herself would bleed through, so she found a distant place beyond Pulaski's shoulders on which to focus.

Kate felt like she was spinning out of control. She wasn't used to being caught flat-footed. But then again, Ezri Tigan had always been able to do that, right from the first impertinent question, in the first lecture on the first day of classes. She side stepped the compliment. "A little rejuvenation goes a long way."

Ezri gave her that half-smile, the one that had been nearly been her undoing, and then lifted her brow in a way that carried all the incredulity of one of Curzon's looks. "It's more than that." Vibrantly blue eyes, once more bold, swept over her again as if to verify some conclusion already reached. "Love becomes you."

An immediate reply was forestalled by her comm badge chirping into the charge air between them, and Kate realized that somehow they'd come to be standing much closer than necessary. She tapped
her chest, barely missing Dax's as her hand swept through the required path. "Pulaski here, Captain."

"Kate, if Lieutenant Dax makes it your way this afternoon, can you send her Counselor Nael's way?"

"She's here now...Kathryn."

"Glad to hear it. Janeway out."

Those eyes had never left hers, and she saw them widen in understanding and not a little surprise. Saw the ghost of an old rejection, and the dawning recognition of the cost of an even older one.

"Ezri..." But she couldn't form the apology. It had all been said before. Between all of them. The absurdity of it nearly crushed her.

A wry smile replaced the slightly wistful hurt. "In one life, the wrong December, in another the wrong May."

"It was never that."

"I know. Pour me a drink, Dr. Kate. It's been that kind of day."

And because it had been, she did.

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The Park on the ship remained a favorite place to visit. Invariably it was one of the first places a visitor or new crewman found on their own - usually when they wanted to see what a Mess Hall 2 was - and it remained a pleasant surprise. No one expected a paradise on a vessel like Voyager. Yet it fit, somehow, with the personality of the ship - a little eccentricity to go with the beauty. Because not only was it green, it was filled with life. The grass was real. The flora was real. The creatures that buzzed, hummed, chirped and bounded about - all without excess -, yet definitely present.

At the moment the Park was not at its full or even quarter occupancy. Most of the crew who had time on their hands were taking advantage of the generous shore leave while they could.

To keep things interesting, the designers of the Park had developed weather and a day/night schedule for the green area. Today's weather reflected a warm spring day. The light was reminiscent of afternoon and so well integrated into the scene that it was easy to forget that they were not, in fact, on a planet.

It was perfect weather for swimming.

Azan, Rebi, Mezoti and Naomi were in the lake, close enough to shore to please the watching adults, but far enough to feel independent. Their play ranged from simple swimming to splashing and competition. They were having a genuinely good time. It had been awhile since they had been able to socialize just with each other. The advent of other young people on the ship meant more playmates, which was fun. But there was a special link between the young Presbans and the adults were inclined to nurture that.

Seven of Nine and Lwaxana Troi lounged on a nearby grassy point - conversing quietly even as they watched their young charges. Emina played with toys on a blanket in front of them. There were several colorful puzzles and objects to keep her attention and build her skill.

"There is a trick," the Betazoid was telling her mate, "to having an affair that one's mates know
about, but the rest of the public may not understand."

"Discretion."

"Oh, something like that. Though truthfully, I wouldn't care if you shouted it from the rooftops. It wouldn't change that I adore you." She smiled. "Of course, I'm Betazoid. Where I come from, this kind of thing is never hidden. At least not very well."

"On Voyager, it is often a matter of..." Seven searched for the right term, "...open secrets. But Kathryn, Laren, B'Elanna and I did discuss a set of... ground rules. We are in agreement that it is family first."

"Gossip." Lwaxana shook her head, "It's always like that on Starships. It doesn't matter how large the ship is, the gossip will happen. Which brings us back to the trick. On earth they call it the purloined letter."

Emina toddled towards them, a completed block in her hands. She looked very pleased with herself. Her fingers were starting to become more nimble.

"Darling, what a delightful accomplishment," Lwaxana praised as she drew their daughter in for a hug. Emina finger talked back, asking for help in resetting the puzzle box to something new. "Of course, my dear." She turned her attention to Seven briefly, even as she took the box in her hand. "Are you aware, beloved, that our darling Emina has been accessing the network lately?"

"Indeed."

Lwaxana began resetting the puzzle. "She has taken an interest in mathematics and three dimensional designs."

Seven reached and gently caressed Emina. "Our daughter is very intelligent."

"Yes." She handed the puzzle back to the toddler. "There you go dear."

With a happy squeal their youngest grasped the box. Before she could escape back to the blanket, she was drawn in for a quick hug and kiss from her mothers. "Now you may go play." Seven said with affection. Emina laughed and toddled away.

Quiet settled sweetly between them, but a few moments later Lwaxana said. "Seven, why don't to you take a walk."

Seven arched her brow.

"Someone you are very interested in is nearby. But before you go, kiss me first."
"Ezri."

"Seven." She returned the greeting.

The blonde had her head tilted slightly to the right, and Ezri wondered what she was thinking. She took a moment to study the other woman, trying to pin down what was drawing her so inexorably toward disaster. While Trill hosts did not live in a constant awareness of the memories and feelings of previous hosts, they were there, never far from recall, and way too much Curzon Dax lived on in her, for her to be unaware of how dangerous bedding married women was for one's health.

Ezri realized her gaze had stopped along the line where Seven's breasts rose above the place she had seen glowing and blinking yesterday. Worse, she could see that Seven realized it too, and Ezri felt her skin and spots splash heat over her face and chest. Of course, she had too much Curzon in her not to pursue Seven. In desperation, she pointed at Seven's bare feet. "Off-duty?"

"Yes. I am on leave."

Ezri grinned, then reached down and grabbed her left boot, removing it and her sock. She repeated the sequence with the right one, then stuffed both socks into her boots. She shucked her jacket; glad she had worn a full tank top under it, rather than the usual al fresco, nothing.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm on leave too. Sort of."

Seven knew that if she looked in the mirror, her implant would be as arched as it had ever been. "I see," she replied, more because the situation seemed to demand a response, than because she actually understood.

"What did you think I was doing?"

"Disrobing. In preparation for copulation."

Ezri blinked.

"I had a misunderstanding with Lt. Kim shortly after I arrived on Voyager. I informed him that I had an insufficient amount of time for flirting, and if he wished to copulate, then he should disrobe. He did not." Something for which she was truly grateful, though she would never hurt Harry's feelings by telling him directly. In fact, though Tom had often joked about donating genetic material, it was Harry's intelligence and demeanor that had her considering what a child of Harry and B'Elanna would be like.

"If I had been. Disrobing for the purposes of copulation, I mean. Then what?"

"I am not Lieutenant Kim."

"What changed your mind?" She stood and stepped closer to Seven.

Seven looked down. "I have not changed my mind. Only my intentions."
"Then perhaps, just so there are no...misunderstandings...you should state your intentions." Ezri closed the remaining gap between them. Between the soft breaths gliding over her temple, and the intoxicating heat along the line where their bodies were now touching, she thought that she just might pass out.

Inexplicably, Seven couldn't make her mouth form words. Her nanoprobes refused to deal efficiently with the flood of hormones. Finally, her brain regained control of her body, but she still felt at a loss for adequate words. Instead, she acted. "Voyager, two to beam to my personal quarters, on Lieutenant Dax's mark." She wanted no misunderstandings either.

"Mark."

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Ezri had learned long ago to run with the pleasant surprises. She had come to appreciate the philosophical approach - especially at times like the present. It was almost as if they had been delivered into the quarters, with herself facing a certain direction, on purpose.

She and Seven were still physically close to one another, which was distracting enough on its own, but that quick glimpse into the future, had done all sorts of things to Ezri's thinking. That bed - she had never seen a bed like that - anywhere. The sight of it left her somewhat dumbstruck and all sorts of curious. But she held back any questions. The opportunity, she was sure, would come later.

She looked up and spotted the amusement in Seven's gaze. The Borg leaned in slowly. Her lips hovered over Ezri's. "I made it. The frame started off as my alcove."

"Alcove?"

Seven's cybernetic hand drifted up and along Ezri's jaw. "I am Borg."

Ezri thought of the beautiful bed behind them and then of the beautiful woman before her. "I'm not resisting."

Their lips finally, finally touched.

Sometime later, she wasn't sure how long, Ezri drifted up from the pleasant haze mixed from the lassitude of sleep and the warm cocoon of climax induced endorphins. They had made love, but it was what had come afterwards that had her laying contentedly wrapped around Seven of Nine. The talking. The knowing of one another.

The unfettered carnality she had expected given how charged their previous interactions had been, but the understanding and utter acceptance had rocked her to her core. It hadn't come just from Seven. There had been the barest second, when she felt the echoing wash of love that had poured through Seven, scoring them both with its fierceness.

Seeing that her new lover was also awake, Ezri followed a mental impulse she'd stayed earlier, in favour of less direct information gathering. "What's been the hardest part?"

"My designation." She'd answered without consciously thinking about it, and she took a moment to explore the unexpected truth. "Annika Hansen is gone, subsumed by the Collective, most of the being she was discarded as irrelevant. The Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix Zero One no longer exists. They wait for me to reverse the course, to again become Annika Hansen, to be Human. But I cannot. I am Borg. I am Seven of Nine." Ezri's fingers
were tracing the broad expanse of skin that had once been criss-crossed with scars, occasionally
detouring to the edges of the metal bands. It was soothing.

Ezri nodded. "I was born Ezri Tigan, and for most of my life, I was just Ezri. Now, I'm Ezri Dax. I
always feel odd, like somehow I'm lying or hiding something when people just call me Ezri. And
when they call me Dax...I feel..." How did she feel? "...insignificant."

"You are not insignificant."

"Thanks." Ezri smiled.

In lieu of the conversational norm, Seven dipped her head and brought her mouth down on Ezri's.
The fire she felt was different this time, its hungry need slaked, at least for now. No matter where her
tongue danced, or her lips touched, she was met, embraced and sent spiraling away only to be
reclaimed by the next set of nibbles and timely licks.

A short time later, and for the second time, Ezri drifted up from a muzzy lassitude, but this time she
was being watched, held in the warm regard of eyes that now seemed an impossible shade of violet.
"Seven of Nine," she said, solemnly.

"Yes, Ezri Dax."

"You looked like you wanted to ask me something this morning, in The Park, what was it?"

"I wished to ask you on a date."

They had been laying side-by-side, on their backs, heads tilted together, but Ezri rolled onto her side
and raised an eyebrow of her own as she glanced meaningfully at them, and then the rumpled bed.
"A date?"

Seven smiled. "Yes. A date."

"I see." She didn't, but she was enjoying the light teasing that was threading their pillow talk. The
silver of metal that traced one eyebrow ridge had raised as she had noted it was wont do, especially if
the Borg were teasing, or about to make an attempt at humour, and she decided to prompt Seven.
"But, Seven," she paused to trace a line of skin she found appealing, and then dropped a soft kiss
onto the ruby-tipped nipple closest to reach. "I'm easy."

"Indeed, I had not noticed." Seven let her right arm drift across her body and find a convenient place
on Ezri from which to begin exploring one of the whorls of Turing structures.

"Ah. Well, in that case, I'm waiting."

"You do not appear to be waiting." Ezri's fingers were lazily tracing circles in the curls above her
mons, and Seven resisted the impulse to arch upwards.

"Oh. I'm waiting. This is most definitely a holding pattern." She tugged lightly at one of the twists
she'd made in the soft, golden nest, and then leaned over so that their lips were nearly touching. "If I
wasn't waiting, I would be sliding my fingers into you."

"Cease waiting."

"All." She kissed the corner of Seven's mouth, but moved away before her lips could be captured.
"You need to do." Ezri tasted the soft flesh just under the junction of jawline and delicate ear. "Is
ask."
Seven found that she was having trouble forming words, her intent to speak becoming consumed by the sudden fire beginning to course through her body. Every place where Ezri's body touched hers burned, every inch of skin touched by the whisper of Ezri's breath danced with flame.

She was Borg. "Ezri Dax. Please accompany me...out." That was not what she wanted to say, nor how she had planned to say it. The thought that resistance was futile, snaked across her thoughts, as Ezri's deft touch decimated her precisely phrased invitation.

Blue eyes gone indigo with passion fearlessly met her own, and Seven knew that whatever was forming between them, it was more than a moment's passion. "Comply," she commanded.

"Yes." The other request she answered non-verbally, and let her fingers flex into Seven, dragging her thumb down through the slick channel.

She kept their eyes locked, wanting, needing to see the instant that the normally pale blue shaded almost to cobalt.

A low growl reverberated through her chest, transmitted bone to bone by their pressure connected bodies, and Ezri answered with a deep moan of her own. She ignored the splashes of colour that had begun to burnish Seven's implants - it would be too easy to lose herself in the responsive display - and continued to focus on the play of lean muscles and slick skin under her.

Every flutter against her palms carried its mate to her own depths, and Ezri had no doubt that when at last Seven's eyes signaled her tumble into release, hers would too. Seven's right eye had dilated, the pupil wide and almost lost in the shrinking pool of darkening colour. Fascinated she saw, the left slowly match the right, the contrast of black iris to deepening azure perfect in its mimicry. One hand she let tangle in the wonderfully long tresses, tips of her fingers drawing through the fine strands and touching down against the underlying skin in the same circular patterns she was using to coax more of the rumbling growls from Seven.

She scissored her fingers in opposite directions now, and concentrated on maintaining the evenness of the rhythm. She was close. They were both close. "Come with me, Seven of Nine." Her thumb strummed in counterpoint to her hands. "Come for me, my lovely Valkyrie. Please."

Seven felt the plea, the husky tones of the Trill cut right to her core. "All you need to do is ask."

It was a bare ghost of breath exhaled into the air between them, but Ezri heard the intent as much as the words, and her body responded as they both rode the current connecting them.

A little later, she had not managed to find either the energy or desire to shift away from how they had come to rest, still tangled in one another, the sheet no longer covering a nakedness that she knew was no longer just physical.

"Seven of Nine." Her eyes were twinkling, and she knew that if Seven turned her head to look at her, she would burst into a fit of giggles.

"Yes, Ezri Dax."

"Why were you going to ask me on a date?"

Seven smiled, but drained the humour from her voice, using her Borg-tinged inflection instead to achieve the dead-pan tone she wanted. "I have five wives, a husband, a prospective mate, and now a lover. I have had three dates. I was trying to correct the imbalance. I have not succeeded."

"I don't know, that's just pretty damned efficient, if you ask me."
A sharp breath forced itself from her chest, and Seven sat up.

Ezri watched Seven's eyes widen and saw a tiny furrow form between her brows. "Seven? Are you okay?"

"I do not know. That...sound..."

She reached up and cupped Seven's jaw gently in her hand. "I think when that sound grows up, it's gonna to be a wonderful laugh." Ezri decided, right then and there, that no matter how this new relationship played out, that she wanted to be there when it did.

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At some point, one must come up for air, food and water.

Seven led her lover out of her room. They were both dressed in the minimum for modesty. Seven was in one of her above the knee-length robes. Ezri wore one of Seven's white shirts.

They took the lift down and during the small ride, Seven pulled Ezri in for another steamy, toe-curling kiss. They pulled apart in perfect synchronicity to the lift's landing.

It was at that point that Ezri realized that a wonderful odor filled the quarters. She blinked. "What is that?"

The reply came from lower to the ground than she was standing. "That is Icheb. It's his night to cook. Hello Mother."

Seven briefly let go of Ezri to embrace her child. "Hello, Mezoti. Are you functioning well?"

"Yes." Mezoti's attention immediately returned to the woman her mother had been embracing. "You are a Trill. Species 5713." She looked Ezri up and down. "You have a symbiont." It was a sentence framed as a query.

It took a moment for Ezri to understand why the young girl was addressing her in such a Borg-like...manner. She looked at her lover with a new respect. Then she answered the child. "Yes. I do. Dax."

"Dax?"

"Dax is the name of my symbiont."

"I see. May ask you questions about your symbiont?"

"Mezoti, please belay the questions for today. You may ask them at another time."

"Yes, Mother."

"Thank you." Seven turned to Ezri and grasped her hand. "If you will come with me."

Mezoti followed them into the kitchen where her Brunali brother was in full chef mode. His back was to them. He had a butcher knife in his hand and it swung down as he said, "Hello, Mother." The knife edge landed with a solid thunk through whatever he was chopping.

"I see you are working with a traditional menu, Icheb."

"Bajoran field beast, natural grains, some vegetables and various sauces."
"And fudge brownies," Mezoti added helpfully.

"It sounds lovely. Do you mind if Ezri Dax and I acquire a snack from the replicator?"

Icheb turned and actually looked at them a moment, the butcher's knife still in his hand. "Of course not. But perhaps you would prefer to have some of the lunch still under the heat seal?"

Seven smiled warmly at her son. "That would be perfect. Thank you."

He smiled back. "You are very welcome." Then he turned to the Trill. "Welcome to our home, Ezri Dax." He turned back around and the butcher knife went chopping down one more time.

Laren entered the kitchen. "Hello Ezri. Hello Seven." Fingertips touched in an unconscious, but evident gesture. Laren leaned in for a warm kiss from her mate. She then turned her attention to Ezri. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"Just grabbing a snack."

Laren's expression quirked a bit, then she nodded. She grabbed a vegetable stalk and popped it into her mouth. "Did you break anything?"

Seven gave her mate an amused glance. "Nothing serious is broken."

"Oh good. Well, enjoy yourselves. I'll be back in time for dinner."

Kathryn stepped into the kitchen, "What's this about dinner?"

"I'm on my way to an errand, love." Laren and Kathryn met halfway, kissed warmly and then passed one another.

The transposition brought Kathryn nearer to Seven's position. Once again there was that moment of touch between fingertips and then the warm kiss, long and sweet. "Hello, darling." The Captain's voice was purr, deep and rich like velvet cake.

Then Kathryn turned and looked at the Trill. "Hello, Ezri." There was a sound of the knife connecting with the chopping board and her attention was diverted. "Ooh, is that a chuka?" Kathryn reached for a chopped piece of red, chunked vegetable.

Icheb turned and swatted her hand lightly. "That has been carefully measured, Mom. Please put it back." He then pointed to a jar that was filled with water and green, cut stalks. "Have some of those instead. They won't ruin your dinner."

Kathryn made a small murmur of disappointment, but grabbed the stalk anyway.

Ezri blinked, and tried to process what she was seeing, attempting to reconcile it with what she'd been told earlier. She couldn't help blurting out, "The Captain? You're married to the Captain?"

"And the Chief Engineer, the Chief Tactical Officer, and quite possibly engaged to the Chief Medical Officer. Our Seven doesn't do things by halves."

There was a beat. "May I have a drink, please?"

With a twinkle in her eye, Kathryn went straight to the replicator and made a quiet order. A few seconds later, she handed a tall, fat, cool glass of amber liquid to Ezri.
The Trill looked at the drink in her hand, then at the Captain, and then lifted the cup to her lips and took a long, burning gulp.

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B'Elanna Torres stopped walking. The adult's entry to her quarters had just slid closed behind a slim brunette. A slim brunette, who was holding her boots in one hand and her jacket in the other. A slim brunette who was wearing one of Seven's long, white button-down shirts.

It was one thing to agree with the theory. It was quite another to awaken to the reality. Which meant there were still things that she needed to address with Seven - things that possibly required some subtlety - a subtlety that Klingons and half-Klingons weren't always known for.

Her mates would help of course. But maybe she just needed to think it through a little more. Something about this woman had grabbed Seven in a very real and visceral way. The least she could do was explore what it was.

Ezri dropped everything that she had been holding, and came instantly to respectful attention. She knew who this was. Her House held the higher rank, but she was in the home of the House Presba, and would, for the sake of the fledgling relationship she had with this woman's Be'nal, yield. She bared her teeth, and smiled. Yield yes, but she would not cower. "qaqlthneS, Epatai Torres. I am Lt. Ezri Dax, of the House Martok."

"Honoured to meet me, hunh?" B'Elanna's eyes locked unerringly on the dappled bruising along the swath of the Trill's neck that hid the fragile jugular. "Or have you just decided that today is not a good day to die."

"Heghlu'meH QaQ jajvam!" Ezri boldly met the other woman's eyes, and grinned unrepentantly. "But today is a better day to die than most."

B'Elanna smiled back, in spite of herself. Oh, she knew what it was that had attracted Seven, alright. This woman was all manner of trouble.

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Hours Later, B'Elanna once again entered the Quarters. She was tired, as it had been a long day. Voyager was in very good condition, but that did not stop the need for maintenance and research. Today she had been with the Transwarp team. They were currently in the process of designing an engine that would bridge the gap between the Universal translator and the Warp Drive.

The Trans Universal Engine was a very efficient tool for what it could do - which was move the ship between the invisible membranes of the Universes. They could arrive at any point, if they set the coordinates correctly. But once there, travel was limited to what their warp drive could do.

That had been the only thing, probably, that kept the Syndicate from succeeding completely in their goals; that and their propensity to waste their resources, their scientists and engineers. Plus, of course, they did not have Voyager to help them.

Things to be grateful for...

She felt and sensed Seven before she actually saw her. Then, the visual input caught up with the rest of her senses. Seven looked beautiful, well loved and dangerous. Her long golden tresses spilled over the white of her robe. Her blue eyes remained dark and deep. Her arms were open.
"Seven," whispered B'Elanna and she found herself flowing into her Be'nal's arms. If there had been even a moment's doubt, the emotions flowing between them dispelled them quickly. She was drawn in to her mate's embrace and warmed.

"It is good that you are home."

B'Elanna allowed herself to sink more into the embrace for a few seconds more. Then she pulled back. "It feels good. I didn't expect to get so caught up."

"Dr. Brahms is a very ... insightful woman."

"You, my darling, have said a mouthful. She's keeping us on our toes down there. But I can't help but think it will make Voyager better and stronger."

"Always a good thing."

"Yes."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Seven was not talking about engines.

"Is there anything left of dinner?"

"I was going down to find out."

Their fingers twined in a comfortable grasp and they walked to the lift.
Some days later, Lwaxana, T'Pel and Laren, plus the assistants Nelav and Effany who insisted on being present for status' sake, and the four armed security guards assigned to watch over all of them, experienced moments that parents of many generations knew well. They awaited the arrival of a certain Betazoid at the gateway of a station. The other mates also looked forward to meeting Deanna Troi, but in order to keep the madhouse effect to a minimum - given the expected number of journalists - had opted to remain on Voyager until the dinner.

The original plan had been to meet at a restaurant. It was a good neutral choice, given that there was no way to predict reactions. But things were a bit more crowded on Terok Nor than usual. Nelav had contacted Deanna's assistant and informed them of the problem and while a reservation had been made, there were still issues of long waits, even for Truth Seekers. Lwaxana had broken in on the conversation and finally said that she just wanted to see Deanna.

The Truth Seeker's assistant had looked very disapproving at that particular message, but apparently had passed it on. Deanna agreed to be met at the gateway like someone's offspring.

Lwaxana had debated whether to wear the Truth Seeker robes or to go to something more informal. She'd turned to her mates for advice. In the end, those who were there to greet The Truth Seeker had dressed informally for the occasion so as to avoid confusion about their purpose. Deanna might be a person of office, and might board the station in full regalia, but they were there as parents and loved ones, not as officials. Others would greet Deanna as a representative of Betazed. They would greet her as beloved family.

On the other hand, their assistants dressed like they meant business and the guards wore their uniforms. More, Lwaxana, T'Pel, and Laren did not need uniforms to be known. Their faces were famous. People knew who they were and many bowed formally out of the way, no matter how they dressed. And, as predicted, there were several Bajoran officials there, including Kira Nerys, who needed to be there because this was an official and rare visit from The Truth Seeker, head of all Truth Seekers.

So now three Prime of House Presba stood, appearing to be serene, waiting for the airlock to finish its rotation and the gate to expel the travelers. Habit had Lwaxana and T'Pel touching their fingertips in that gentle Vulcan contact. Laren stood at ease, with her hands clasped behind her back like a cadet. Even though she wasn't wearing the uniform, she did wear weaponry. One just never knew, after all, and she always liked to be prepared.

Lwaxana smiled with some amusement at the first sound of a bell in the distance. Then there was the sound of flutes and she really had to hold back the chuckle. She commented, "That used to be me, my darlings."

T'Pel arched her brow in amusement at her mate. Laren, who had been on the USS Enterprise during a few visits from Lwaxana in her ambassadorial role said, "I remember."

Lwaxana shot the Bajoran a grin. "If only I had realized how wonderful you are then, so many days of loneliness could have been spared."

"Ah, but then I was young and foolish. Plus I would have missed you teasing Captain Picard and there is no way a certain Betazoid was ready to have me as a mother-in-law. No, it was the Prophets
watching over all of us." She reached and they touched their fingertips together briefly. The connection between them all was warm and loving. "More, it was worth the wait."

The Betazoid laughed lightly. "Beloved, you are right about that." As the theatrical noise gained in auditory level, she added, "They made a holo-recording of an entrance of mine at one diplomatic event. It was purposefully extravagant, because I had someone who needed serious impressing. I have it somewhere in our other home. Remind me to show it to you."

She returned her attention to the gateway corridor and was glad that she'd had the forethought to leave plenty of room between themselves and the entrance. Others had been less wise and were now hastily being driven away by the forefront security. Light began flashing again. This time the mates had taken time to allow the journalists to capture their images and had smiled and waved for the imagers earlier in order to avoid foolishness later. So now all the action was targeted where it belonged, on the arrival of the head of the mysterious and powerful Betazed caste.

Down the hallway Lwaxana spotted several servants of differing races walking towards them, each carrying something, either a musical instrument or item of power. She also saw several Betazoids, wearing official black and silver robes of the Truth Seekers. In addition they wore amulets of authority on their chests and she realized that these were members of the Betazed Council.

Lwaxana and T'Pel felt the hum of the council's mental presence. It was controlled and dangerous. Laren was aware of the energy change, via her well honed instincts, though she did not sense it in the same way. She always watched the world with wariness, except in the Nest and even then, some part of her mind was always on the watch. None of them were truly worried, however. This council had nothing to do with them.

Behind the Truth Seekers were tall humanoids, pale of skin and deliberately mute. They reminded Lwaxana of her Mr. Homn and she briefly wondered how her manservant was doing on the war-torn Betazed at home. Then, Lwaxana felt the ever-recognizable presence, the vibrancy of someone that she knew well, or did in another Universe. Lwaxana could not help the warmth that glowed in her soul in anticipation. She could control her thoughts. She could control her actions. But that burst of emotion would not be stilled.

She realized then that her love for Deanna was, as it had always been, unconditional. She loved her daughter, good or bad, crankily arguing or happily giddy, in this Universe or the other. She found a peace in that, and let it carry her for the moment.

She felt T'Pel's and Laren's serene, unconditional support and love like a warm blanket on a cold day. It was total acceptance, which had been there since the Bonding for all of them.

The servants flowed into the waiting area and separated into two rows. Bells chimed and the Truth Seekers took up position, also splitting into two rows. Then the larger servants, who had blocked their view up until the last moment, also parted ways.

Deanna Troi, sanctified leader of the Truth Seekers, was revealed. She strode with confidence and wore silver, blue and white robes of power. Lwaxana barely noticed that others around them began bowing deeply. She probably ought to have bowed herself, but she only had eyes for her daughter. The woman before them raised her hands and slowly pulled back the cowl, to reveal a beautifully coifed dark crown of hair, gorgeous skin, classically featured face and wonderfully familiar black eyes. She was unsmiling, but that was not unusual for Deanna in a state of formality.

Lwaxana put her hand to her chest and she bit her lip. 'Beautiful. She's Beautiful,' she mentally whispered to her mates.
T'Pel replied, 'She is your daughter, beloved. Of course, she is beautiful.'

They didn't hide the conversation, but neither did they shout it out. It was a purely parental moment.

An individual of some station stepped around and in front of Deanna Troi, hiding her from her mother's view since he was both taller and wider. He began to intone the announcement, naming the young woman and her status, while another hit the chimes with each additional title. The listing of titles was impressive to those who rarely heard them. Lwaxana, on the other hand, had heard some of those same words about herself until very recently. Until the Dominion.

It was a skip of a thought, a moment of anger at the loss of the Rings and the Ruin of their home in her and a gladness that at least here they were preserved, which was there and then gone. But it startled the Betazoid Council enough that their attention was momentarily turned upon Lwaxana with a surprisingly fierce questioning urgency and an unconscious effort at intimidation. They had gleaned one word, 'Dominion,' and felt the rest. 'Then it is true?! You must tell us.'

A lesser telepath would have quailed under the assault, but Lwaxana had T'Pel, and each had years of experience that was well supported by the strength Laren had crafted in a Cardassian death camp. None of them could be intimidated. They had been through the worst with the separation from their mates. Anything else was mere hazard. Laren, who was on the other side of Lwaxana, sensed the danger to her mates and soon her fingertips were touching with Lwaxana's, like T'Pel's already were. Lwaxana, meanwhile, had blocked the concentrated push, like shredding through wet tissue paper. It wasn't that she was the strongest or the best telepath. It was that her family had been chosen and they had gifts.

But the apparent effortlessness and the combined power of resistance had shocked the members of the Betazoid council enough that it caused some to press even harder, to test their authority. They expanded the pressure to touch upon T'Pel and Laren, seeking a weakness to get at Lwaxana. They might as well have been pushing into granite walls.

Of course, the only apparent effort was the sweat that started rolling down certain council member's temples. The expressions of the mates, save for that of Laren, who glared grimly at the council, remained serene.

Deanna allowed the council to try, because it was better to find out now and stop any foolishness later. Not that they wouldn't try again, since the council was not used to being blocked by anyone. But apparently they had not, as she had ordered, paid attention to the newscasts. She could have told them the futile results of their effort, just from those alone. But they had also failed to pay attention as they had arrived, whereas she had been paying attention as she had entered Terok Nor. She had deliberately sought the mental signal of Lwaxana Troi, because she wanted to be sure. She wanted to know if this Lwaxana was the person whom she'd remembered rather specifically. She would be a doppelganger, yes, but the Chancellor had warned her and had confirmed her choice to learn it on her own, because he was curious too. So through that sense she had tested and at that moment she'd felt the echo of the mated Bond and had known there was a deep well of power, dormant at the moment, but very strong. It had been an intriguing glimpse and she had kept her touch as light as possible, for there were other emotions, other feelings at play. She had respected Lwaxana's privacy, as Lwaxana had respected hers, but she had felt the maternal rush, like a loving caress and joyful touch and it had nearly deconstructed Deanna's carefully built defenses.

Fortunately, for everyone on Terok Nor, she had kept her senses. There were certain gifts given to one who had risen to the level she had and control was a must. Which was why, in some ways, she was disappointed with her council at the moment. Since they too had certain gifts associated with their position, passed on to them by their predecessor as hers had been given by The Truth Seeker.
before.

She waited, briefly, for the council to recognize their error and let them have their moment of struggle, since some people only believed by experiencing. Then, when she felt the one-sided battle had gone on long enough she issued a command that shocked through the telepaths. 'Stop this at once!' The Truth Seekers immediately ordered themselves back into ruffled, dismayed, grumpy composure.

Not that an outsider would have noticed, much. During the whole thing, the announcer had continued talking, speaking of Deanna's purpose in visiting Bajor, and announcing that those who had plans to meet with her, might speak with certain assistants. The people around them remained oblivious to the drama. The lights from the imagers had flashed continually.

The Intendant of Bajor's sector had stepped forward briefly to accept a scroll from the assistant in a moment of formality and to express welcome to The Truth Seeker and her council. And to all appearances, she meant every word and was completely comfortable. She said a few more words, which rolled over the audience pleasantly, and waved at the cameras, which were still in love with the popular Kira Nerys.

All of this was fine with Lwaxana, who had not attended in order to make a scene. She was there to see her daughter, not necessarily to be seen by her daughter. They would have that opportunity later. Besides it was indeed a beautifully crafted and impressive entrance event that her daughter in this Universe had created. Lwaxana approved.

Now the assistants stepped forward into view and made their bows. There were several, and Lwaxana recognized the one who had contacted them. Apparently that person was the coordinator. Once again he looked at Lwaxana and briefly displayed disapproval before schooling his expression, if not the hostility in his emotions.

If the Klingons in their security unit could have felt his hostility, they would have shot him on the spot. That thought was oddly soothing to Lwaxana and she merely offered the gentle being a pleasant, mysterious smile. That only sent his emotions roiling.

Once the announcements were done, the assistants began moving towards the people who were in the waiting room and making those business or other connections.

The coordinator started towards Lwaxana, looking pleased. And she could feel the bad news in him. The smile he directed their way was not friendly. "Lwaxana Troi of House Presba, if that's really who you are, you are called to stand before ..."

"Step aside, Rynb." The voice came from right behind him.

The coordinator straightened in shock. "But you said..."

"Step aside." There was warning in the tone, one not to be ignored.

Rynb shot Lwaxana a poison arrow glare. If he could have argued, he would have. But instead, he bowed to his mistress and stepped out of her way.

Deanna stepped forward, her expression stern and impenetrable. She looked Lwaxana up and down. Mentally, she said, The holographic services do not do you justice and your work has been visibly impressive. There are those whose worlds have been shaken because of you.

'Then, I suppose it can be accurately stated that I must have been doing something right. Lwaxana responded gently.
Deanna's expression, up to that point, had been mildly grim. It lightened at that statement and she chuckled a little harshly. I suppose it could. The Betazoid cocked her head and gazed a moment at T'Pel and then at Laren. I suppose it could indeed. She returned her attention to Lwaxana. "Are you really of the House Presba?"

Lwaxana kept her answer simple. "Yes. I am."

Deanna's expression turned introspective. Then the memory I caught. It was true.

It was.

"We must talk. But it cannot be here. And, though I wish it now, it cannot be at present. My schedule is packed and, unfortunately, each issue is actually important. Rynb will contact you with a time and we can negotiate place."

"I had hoped that arrangements had already been settled." Lwaxana glanced at Nelav, who nodded grimly and then shot her own glower at Rynb, "But it shall be so." Mentally she shared, We are very much looking forward to spending time with you, lovely one.' The confirmation was in the bonded connection.

Again Deanna had to fight that dizzying moment of being a wanted child. She kept her tone distant, I look forward to it. I would also like to spend time alone with you, if possible.

Of course, darling. Do you want it to be at a neutral place? Perhaps Belle might let us borrow her ship for a bit.

Belle... There was wonder in her tone. That would be acceptable. Perhaps before the dinner arrangements, if possible?

I will have Nelav remain available.

Good. This is good. Out loud Deanna Troi said, "Rynb will contact you soon. Today. We will clear the schedule."

"We will make ourselves available."

"Thank you." The Truth Seeker nodded. "Now, if you will excuse me."

"Of course."

Lwaxana watched as Deanna regally walked away and took her position again. The servants and the Truth Seekers formed back into double columns. The Betazoid turned to Rynb before he could march away, "You, sir, may contact my assistant." She indicated Nelav. "She is of the House Presba, and," Lwaxana smiled whimsically, "runs my schedule for me these days. Good day to you." Then, rather than watch her daughter leave, she, T'Pel and Laren made their own quieter and less important exit.

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Lwaxana and T'Pel returned to the ship, while Laren had duties to attend to on the station. There was a procedure to follow when it came to gaining participation rights to enter the wormhole. She was off to fill out the paperwork for Voyager on behalf of the captain.

So, Lwaxana and T'Pel went to visit with Miral and Gretchen about the experience.
"I wish I had been there," the Klingon growled. "You would have been shown proper respect then."

"I'm sure it was a test mother, to see how I would react. The Truth Seekers frankly do not know what to do with me. I am gratified, however, to see that my daughter has great status as a Truth Seeker.

"It speaks well of her."

"It may only speak to her ability to control and the advancement of her powers. I am hoping that it does reflect a higher calling. I admit, I was worried, given what we first thought of this. But now, I believe the assumptions of opposite in nature is not so cut and dried."

"For which we have much to be grateful."

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Rynb's attitude appeared to have a remarkable change the next time he contacted them. Or maybe it was just that Lwaxana now refused to deal with him at all. Lwaxana conceded that Nelav had been correct and now the Deian handled all contact with the man. For Nelav, it was a piece of cake to intimidate Rynb. She was a free woman of the House Presba. She outranked him.

And she gleefully and not subtly at all verbally chastised him for his rudeness to her Prime. "I am doing you a favor. I, too, was like you at one time. Do you have any idea who you were speaking to? That was a Prime of the House Presba. Her mate is the Epatai of the House Presba. You've seen them. You know what they can do. She doesn't have to use her mind. She can tear you limb from limb. With her hands. Lucky for you she was rejoicing in seeing her daughter more than caring how you addressed her. Gods help you if her Epatai or her mother-in-law had seen you behaving that badly towards her. Don't make the mistake of thinking you are equal to her, even if her Daughter has rank as Truth Seeker. She does not outrank her in House."

Rynb protested, "Daughter! My mistress..."

She railroaded right over the start of his diatribe, "... is lucky. You have no idea. Stay out of this Rynb." Nelav's expression turned grim. "Or I guarantee you'll wish you had." Then Nelav handed Rynb something else to think about. "Besides, consider what an alliance with House Presba might mean for the House of Troi? Perhaps this is something your mistress has already considered. You ruminate on that and get back to me." She smiled coolly at him. "Now. I believe you were calling to give us a time of availability. Your mistress, of course, will be coming aboard the Tor'stag. General Torres has made a space available."

Rynb paled. "Gen... General Torres..." He pulled at his shirt collar a bit and then cleared his throat. "My mistress is pleased to be able to meet with Lwaxana Troi. She will be available at 16:00. Will that be convenient?"

"It will. Also, please inform your mistress that while she may bring anyone she wishes, they will remain outside of the room during the meeting."

"Of course."

"Also, given the issues of timing and availability, I've taken the liberty of scheduling a reservation for dinner at 18:00. Grand Judge Miral Torres of the House Presba invites your Mistress to spend time with her family. It will, of course, be quite extended, but we hope enjoyable."

Now Rynb was gaping.
Just before 16:00 Deanna Troi, one of her Truth Seekers, and two of her guards beamed aboard the Tor'stag. Once more Deanna Troi was dressed in profound elegance, though this time she was not in her professional robes. She had decided to treat this as a family event.

A single Klingon guard, who observed the Truth Seekers with great caution, greeted them. He led the group to the door of General Torres' dining area and kept his attention forward at all times, save when he stepped away from the entrance. Deanna nodded to those who accompanied her, then stepped towards the door. It whooshed open and she stepped in.

This time there was only Lwaxana, who greeted Deanna warmly. "Welcome, my dear. I'm so glad you could come."

The Truth Seeker stared at the other woman for a moment. Then she reached out. Her mental voice was soft, pained and the line between them intimate. 'You died years ago. I remember. You grieved for my sister and my father and refused to live for me. Yet, here you are. Here you are. You loved me as soon as you felt me. You loved me like you loved her. My other self. You lived for her." And here was the question of devastation. 'Why couldn't she live for me?"

There was a thousand years of grief in that unanswerable question. Lwaxana did the only thing she could. Something that only she would have ever been allowed to do in this Universe. She gathered her child to her bosom and held her.
Chapter 11

Chapter by bearblue

The restaurant had been crowded, but as soon as the guest list was given, space was cleared out, partly with the help of several security services. There had been a bit of competition at first, until Tuvok, who had been supervising Voyager's team for the moment, merely backed up the station's constable. "Captain Janeway was very clear. We will obey the station's rules, regardless of what others do."

That simplified things for Odo and once again the changeling had found something to admire. Of course, he also knew their great secret. As a changeling, there were very few places he could not get into. However, he was not a spy. He was simply doing his research to determine what level of security he would need to apply.

Well, based on what General Torres had said when he had brought certain things to her attention, since Kira Nerys had been phenomenally unavailable lately, he did not need to apply security against the Voyager's crew - other than to watch out for pranksters and the usual shenanigans of a crew on shore leave. So far that had proved true. He had more trouble from everyone else than from the crew of Voyager - even the children. That said, he'd also had other headaches associated with them, since apparently they were relatives to everyone these days. He sighed because of it, though he really didn't breathe the way humanoids did, but sighing was a profoundly useful emote and he applied it correctly in this case.

So now he was coordinating the security in the restaurant because the Intendant would be there, the Head of the Truth Seekers would be there, and General Torres would there and who knew who else had been invited. It was a nightmare. He had a slave tasting every bit of food. He had forced the restaurant to close down for the rest of the evening. Only people he could trust would be acting as waiters. Security would be guarding the doors, lining the perimeter inside and out, and walking the promenade.

True, it was probable that nothing would happen, but he was determined that would be true during his watch. He glanced at the stern Vulcan besides him. Tuvok watched his people with equal vigilance.

Something lightened within Odo at that moment, a fret that had been niggling at him dissolved. It wasn't that he immediately felt all was well. But he knew he wasn't alone in that firm desire to make sure that all went well this evening.

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The Hansens of House Presba arrived first. Emina was bundled on the side of a casually dressed Seven of Nine. Mezoti, Azan, Rebi and Icheb followed behind their mother and, after greeting Tuvok, they began arranging the tables and chairs into an efficient shape for co-mingling. Seven stood by Tuvok for a moment, their fingertips touching. There was a sense of conversation happening, though an observer could not have said how they arrived at that conclusion. Then, with a nod between them, she handed their youngest to the serene Vulcan and went to assist the older children.

They had things arranged quickly, much to the amazement of management. As soon as the tables were ready, the staff of the restaurant blazed into action. Soon, things were looking ornate and pleasantly majestic. Seven handed out small placards and Mezoti, Azan and Rebi started placing
them. Normally they would not need to delineate placement. On Voyager, there was enough of a routine that everyone had their own favorite spaces to sit or worked around it if things needed to be arranged. Here though, there would be guests as well as family.

Not long after the arrangements were settled, the other members of the family began arriving. First there was B'Elanna who looked slightly mussed. She had obviously been working and Seven took a moment to wipe B'Elanna's cheek clean of a smudge. B'Elanna was followed by T'Pel, who was in the company of Kate Pulaski, who looked a bit surprised to be there, as if she wasn't quite sure how she'd been convinced to join them by the Vulcan. Laren and Kathryn arrived next, in the company of Belle, Annika and Lwaxana. They were followed by a security officer, an almost expressionless Klingon Marine, who was holding a sizable package.

"Deanna is on her way," commented the Betazoid. "She has some appearances to make before she'll get here."

"That's okay, we're still waiting on Mom and Miral and their guest." Kathryn said.

"Having Kira Nerys here ought to be amusing."

"Well, that isn't the word I would have chosen, but yes, I suppose it fits." Kathryn's lips twisted in that quirky grin of hers. "But since it is Lwaxana's party, I think we'll do what she wants." She grinned at her mate, who blew her a kiss.

"Ah, and here I thought it was a simple gathering."

Laren dryly input, "No, you're thinking of another Universe."

"Hah!" Belle settled Annika into her seat before taking her own. "Sela sends her regrets. She has another appointment. I should warn you she's made me promise to tell her everything."

B'Elanna grinned. "Well, we'll make sure there are some juicy moments then. Just for Sela."

"I'm sure she will appreciate it." Belle said as she made herself comfortable and grabbed the Tankard, which was already full of Bloodwine. Behind her the Klingon Guard stood and waited with an impenetrable stare into space. She ignored him.

After a few moments Miral, Gretchen and Nerys entered. Nerys' hands were clasped behind her back and she was listening to Gretchen, who was illustrating her point with her hands, with a bemused expression on her face. Miral greeted her family in Klingon and the kids, who had been somewhat demure for a little while, had jumped out of their seats to rush to their SosnI.

While Miral and Gretchen greeted their grandchildren with massive hugs, Laren stepped forward and greeted Nerys. "They'll be a few moments. May I guide you to your seat?"

"You... I know your face."

Laren tilted her head. "No doubt you saw me in the newscasts."

"Well, there too. But, I know you from somewhere."

"Perhaps." Laren wasn't sure how much the Intendant knew or how much General Torres intended for her to know, so wisely remained noncommittal. "But I could not tell you from where."

Nerys nodded a bit, taking that in, but her gaze remained ruminative, as if she were trying to pick a name out from thin air.
A few moments later almost everyone was seated. Food and drink began to be delivered. As promised the event was to be casual, but they waited for B'Elanna to start first. After all, she was Epatai. "Oh. Sorry. Dig in!"

And, with a communal laugh, they did.

Later there was the sound of musical instruments in the distance. Lwaxana looked up and smiled. "She's coming."

"Who is coming?" asked Kathryn who was sitting across from her.

"Deanna."

The musical noises ceased and a minute or so passed. Then there was a whoosh of the door. Deanna stepped through, wearing the robes of her duties, but the servants and other truth seekers were left behind. The adults stood up, with Lwaxana making her way to embrace her daughter. After the hug, Deanna addressed the Epatai, "I apologize for being tardy. We are mediating a dispute between Arconaea Industries and its Service Union."

B'Elanna gave her a toothy grin. "I take it you kept them honest."

"It's like wading through a snake pit. You have no idea. Neither side wants to give in. They're both exaggerating. But we have borrowed a pattern from my mother, now we fit our adjustments to their social protocol. You see, Arconaea Industries is a Andorian company run on Bajor and the Service Union is a Bajoran contract company."

B'Elanna began to chuckle. "Are you going to make them fight in a blue-fire lava pit?"

Deanna grimaced as she was seated by a very nervous waiter. "If it comes to it. I admit to seriously considering it more than once."

"Maybe if you gave them the wisdom of the Ferengi. A business must run if there is to be any profit to it."

"If only it were that simple,"

"Don't worry dear, we'll order you some chocolate to soothe your nerves."

"What's chocolate?"

The dinner conversation fell immediately into two camps: Those who were flabbergasted and amazed that Deanna did not know what chocolate was and those who were confused and boggled by the amazement. Deanna, it turned out, was not the only one who did not know what chocolate was.

When the members of House Presba from Voyager queried those who were from Universe B, there was an unmistakable difference in experience. Coffee was a known quantity, as were several other kinds of foods, but chocolate had never been heard of.

Of course, by then Kira Nerys was experiencing a moment of revelation. "Wait a minute. This... this explains things. You're..."

"Don't say it," cautioned General Torres. "Not here. If you want to talk about that particular topic, we'll take it to my ship or better yet, Voyager."
"Oh my," Nerys sat back, feeling suddenly both better and overwhelmed. And she did intend to take this matter up again.

"Indeed, Intendant," Seven of Nine said with her usual calm, "We intended to offer you a tour of Voyager, where we will be happy to discuss the cultural differences of the Delta Quadrant further."

"Of course," Nerys said pleasantly.

"Oh, but can we cannot let this go on," said Lwaxana. "Really it would be good for..."

Darling, interjected Kathryn, in Presban fingertalk, We must consider the Prime Directive.

But it is chocolate. responded Lwaxana, also in fingertalk. It is of a higher order.

Then Tuvok added, continuing in the family kinetic language, I do not believe that the Prime Directive would apply. They are of comparative technology and ability. By now, no doubt, Deanna is aware that there are universal differences.

Kathryn glanced at her logical mate with amused asperity. "Fine. But let's at least have the meal that has been so carefully prepared for us. We can send for something for dessert."

Agreed.

The conversation had been quick and non-vocal, but now Deanna was staring at them in fascination. She said nothing verbal herself, but she did cast a glance in her mother's direction. What just happened?

Darling, we merely discussed chocolate.

In a foreign language?

Yes. And it will likely happen again dear. You've given us quite a puzzle to work through.

"After dinner," said Seven of Nine, "If you care to join us, we can send for dessert, then retire to Voyager where we can explain more."

Nerys meanwhile was grinning ear to ear, like she'd already eaten the best dessert. "I can hardly wait."

General Torres shook her head, and glanced at Annika who shrugged. The blonde had been listening, but she had been enjoying the meal before her too. One had to have priorities.

"Well," said Kathryn, "It would give us a chance to discuss that other thing, too."

"Other thing?"

"We have an invitation to extend to the Intendant."

Nerys said, "I'm almost tempted to just say yes and see where it leads me."

The captain chuckled. "Well, it probably wouldn't be where you expected. We have a theory about the wormhole that we would like to investigate."

"Interesting. Are you assuming I've never been to the wormhole?"

"On the contrary, we are aware of the attempts that have been made. We simply have an alternative
"Well, now I am intrigued." Nerys lazily speared a finger sized vegetable slice and popped it into her mouth. When she was done with it she said, with a glimmer of mischief in her eyes, "Is this something that can be talked about here?"

"Well, certainly the nuts and bolts of it, yes. We don't intend to make a full passage through the wormhole. Instead we intend to simply go in and see if we can meet the beings who have been throwing everyone out."

"Beings. So your theory is that there are beings, sentient I take it, which are deliberately preventing passage into the wormhole."

"Yes. Would you be willing to be in on the experiment? I've picked a small handful of people to go - myself included."

"You? Hmm. You show confidence. What would be your advantage?"

"We'll be taking Stinging Sparrow."

"Stinging Sparrow?"

"One of the Zakeeri ships."

"Ah! Yes." Nerys pointed the fork at Captain Janeway. "From the broadcast, the living ships. You have those guarded like latinum, of course. There are those who would spare no means to get one..."

"Well, they certainly could try. But my people and the ships would object with the strongest measures." Kathryn did not mention how they managed to acquire the ships themselves. It had been partly luck and partly long term planning. It would be better not to put ideas into anyone's heads. She made a mental note, however, to beef up security and go over safety procedures with the Zakeeri. There was no sense in taking an unnecessary risk.

Nerys laughed and set the fork down and sat back. Her attention turned inward. "It has possibilities. Why would you want me along?"

"As a representative of your people and as the Intendant. You would have authority to speak on behalf of the Chancellor, who wishes it known that he does not desire the wormhole to be opened just yet."

Nerys looked to Miral, "Because of those Dominionists."

"Yes, because of the Dominion. We have reason to believe that some contact may have been made with them by enemies of the empire already."

"Enemies of the Empire..." She began to nod. "I begin to see the path now." Now her attention turned to General Torres, who returned her gaze evenly. For once it wasn't an outright glare. "And if I go and the journey is... successful, it would prove my loyalty?"

"More than you realize."

Deanna was watching all of this with rapt fascination. She felt the sincerity behind the Captain's
words, and was surprised at the sensation of hope springing from the Intendant.

Nerys turned to Miral in surprise. "You were telling me the truth."

Miral shrugged as if it should be no surprise. "Of course. I am a judge. That is what I do."

"I need a few moments to think about this."

Kathryn nodded easily. "Of course. There is no pressure, Intendant. If you are unable to join us, we do have other options."

"Oh I am sure you do. But the question is, do I?"

There was some silence after that, but then Azan and Rebi piped up, "Intendant, do you mind if we ask you a question?"

The Bajoran looked at the twins. "As long as it does not require me to stop eating, please ask."

"Did you always want to be an Intendant?"

On the plus side, she'd answered this type of question before on her tours of schools on Bajor. On the minus side, there weren't normally Truth Seekers to hear her answer. She picked her way carefully. "The short answer is no. But as I grew older and opportunities arose, I found myself appreciating the position more and more."

The two boys looked at each other briefly, then looked back at her and nodded. "Thank you, Intendant."

Nerys gave them a pleasant smile and was relieved as the conversation began to split up and turn in other directions. As time went on, she realized she had been included in what was essentially a power gathering. She thanked the luck that was with her as she listened in on conversations. Nerys took it to mean that she was meant to hear this and that it was yet another modest test of her loyalties.

"If you don't mind me bringing up the topic, Lwaxana," Deanna started. "I am curious to know what structures the House has made in regard to Truth Seekers and whether it is something that can be adapted for the Truth Seekers as a whole. For instance, Counselor Priam Nael, Truth Seeker. Shaman Orsas, Truth Seeker."

"Well, it started out as a need in the House." Lwaxana answered carefully. She looked at the Captain briefly and then at the Epatai. Then she turned her attention to her daughter. "It was a logical extension. While a generalist approach is useful in most ways, it also was apparent that specific duties could be acted on more freely by assigning them as such. Of course, this is just in the House Presba. We have been--"

"--Well established in the House." That hadn't been what Lwaxana was going to say. She was going to say 'making it up as we go along.' Deanna continued, "I bring this up because the option has been presented to my people via media. Now they know that such things are possible. More, we are intrigued by the idea of service to a Klingon House or even a Romulan House. It would be good for the Empire and for Betazed if this could be developed more. It would set aside some worries our people have had. But I also believe it would be a hard sell to these other Houses."

Miral joined the conversation. "Well, your people would have to make adjustments. And you must remember, these Truth Seekers, they are literally members of our House. They have taken oaths of loyalty to our House specifically, which puts our House first, above all others. I know, or rather can guess, that the Epatai has set rules for our Truth Seekers. I couldn't tell you what they were, but
talking to her would probably be a good place to start."

"The mandate that Counselor Nael spoke of. The main point of which was, uphold the House Honor."

"Yes. In the Empire, if you serve a Klingon House, that will always be the mandate. Unless you find yourself working for a bad House. In which case, the mandate still holds. Only then it changes to doing what is right to restore Honor to the House, even if it means slaying those in that House."

Lwaxana glanced at the judge and Miral sent her a bit of fingertalk. The Betazoid nodded, understanding.

She said, "One of the reasons I became a Truth Seeker, was that it gave us an opportunity to do good in this Universe. We chose, as a family, to focus on doing that which would enhance the honor of the House.

"And you did it in such a memorable way too. You are legendary on Betazed."

Belle snorted. "She's legendary everywhere in the Empire."

Nerys tilted her head in agreement. "True."

Deanna was nodding thoughtfully. "I believe this would be good." She flashed a glance at Nerys and then Belle. She too recognized the risk she took with such openness. But these kinds of conversations must take place sometimes. "We know of the rumors. The questions about our honor that have gained speed of late. One benefit of the trials and The Battle is that some of the respect to our position in society has returned. And some of the trust, which was our whole purpose for being in the first place." She smiled slightly. "It would be helpful if I could have time with the other Truth Seekers of the House."

She looked at the Captain, who happened to catch the tail end of the conversation. "Of course. I'll speak with Counselor Nael tomorrow. I'm sure she will be happy to speak with you."

The conversation drifted to less serious topics again, including a description of the adventure that led Belle's missing eye. Some might have thought the topic too gruesome for a dinner, but everyone at the table had seen gruesome up close and personal on many occasions. For them, it was just a fantastic story.

And given the way Belle told the story, they even laughed at some of the parts. Naturally Azan, Rebi and Mezoti began quizzing her through the story, fishing for the juicy details and commenting the way only they could. Seven, who was seated to the right side of B'Elanna, would interject a comment herself now and then, unconsciously falling into the now familiar role of conversational guide. It did keep the topic flowing, which meant that Belle was able to finish her tale with a bit of flair.

During that conversation there was a secondary topic being discussed and held completely in the Presba Tongue about chocolate. Gretchen informed them, via fingertalk, that now that it was mentioned, she'd never found the delicacy in the replicators or even in the recipes. She mentioned doing a brief search and it hadn't been in the database. She'd merely assumed that it was a Klingon thing and hadn't thought much about it until now.

Seven proposed that they might avail themselves to one of the library systems on Terok Nor to do further investigating. B'Elanna asked for a menu, since every restaurant she had ever been to in the Alpha Quadrant had at least one item that contained the substance. She'd read through it with
disbelief. There was not so much as a syrup indicated.

Deanna was watching the whole thing in mystified fascination. First she sensed that slow, deep, constant burn of desire that swelled between the mates. Of course, they acted as if this was only a mild attraction they felt for one another. Yet she felt the effort they were putting into behaving normally, socially, when what they really wanted to do was use that table in ways against its design specs. Yet there they were, smiling, talking, laughing and eating as if they weren't about to catch fire and burn up like the legendary Yngdrang Forest in 2295.

She had to switch her focus away or get caught up in it. So she recognized it and blocked as much as she could. It wasn't helped by the times she caught certain glances passed between the mates. She thought the energy alone might set the unlit candles in the room alight. Of course, one would have to be blind or a child to miss that energy. She knew that Belle was just as aware that there was a blaze waiting on the horizon. The very youthful looking grandparents were also aware, but they were mostly amused and feeling indulgent about the whole thing.

So to keep her mind off of that undercurrent of passion, Deanna focused on the odd experience of trying to follow the mysterious double conversation. She knew two conversations were going on. She knew that the adults and the children of the House Presba on Voyager were listening with full attention to both conversations. She knew it had to do with her question about the mysterious food, based on the emotions of disbelief behind the one conversation. And she knew that they were also experiencing sympathy and amazement at Belle's tale.

She had no idea how they were doing it. It was as if they had two minds, and in the case of the Borg, perhaps three. It was... amazing and strange and a bit frightening, since she realized she could not translate what was being said in that second mind at all. Only the emotions provided a clue. And, at least there, she knew that this was a conversation of concern for her.

One level up and it was plain that they wanted her to have experience something that would give her joy. They were amazed that she hadn't yet. They were becoming even more amazed as the topic advanced. Finally, whatever they were discussing was dropped for the moment, but Deanna got the definite sense it would be taken up again. Moments later she was distracted by a question about Betazed from Mezoti and she found herself answering the child with some amusement.

Kate had not exactly remained silent during the whole dinner. She had been brought into the lighter conversations, but she had also been paying attention to the undercurrents. Like Nerys she recognized that this had turned from a mere family dinner into something a bit more politically important. Her intuition, built on years in the admiralty and the higher levels of the medical profession, practically shouted that important things would result.

Still, she found the company stimulating and the topics of interest. Kate found it humorous that T'Pel, of all of them, had found the workaround to her demand that it only be one or two of them at a time on a date. Since, technically, T'Pel was her date and the rest of the family just happened to be here at the dinner. It was so sneaky and so Vulcan that Kate just had to admire the strategy of it.

T'Pel, as per usual, did not say much. Though usually what she did say was often profound or directly impacted a conversation in a new direction. Her company was soothing to Kate and the Doctor suspected she was not the only one affected that way. Certainly Emina, who was nestled against T'Pel's shoulder and sound asleep, was completely comfortable in her Vulcan mother's presence.

Kate wondered if T'Pel purred.

It was one of those stray thoughts that, had Lwaxana not been involved in other conversations, might
have gotten Kate teased but good. As it was, she felt somewhat safe in the mental ribaldry. When she looked in the Betazoid's direction, however, she got a wink and an obvious nod. What was more comical was the surprised look on Deanna's face and the angelic expression on Lwaxana's afterwards.

Kate had difficulty keeping her own expression straight after that and had to take a drink.

A little further into the dinner, General Torres thumped her mug on the table and called for attention. "It is time, I think. We've had the main course and I want to do this before dessert."

She stood up and stepped away from the table. "Captain Kathryn Janeway and Epatai B'Elanna Torres, please come, stand in front of me."

The two women in question looked at each other and then each made their way towards Belle.

Belle turned to that stoic Klingon who held the package, which was a rectangular box shape, out and away from himself towards the General. Belle lifted the top up, so that it fell back on its hinges. She reached into the box and then lifted up something that appeared to be gold and silver. "The Chancellor would normally do this himself, but his other duties call him elsewhere. Kathryn Janeway step forward."

The captain did so, feeling a bit of trepidation. General Torres carefully laid the chain over Kathryn's neck. It was an amulet - a gold star with a silver Bat'leth impressed in the middle.

Then Belle called B'Elanna forward and she too was given an amulet of the same type. Then she said to B'Elanna. "Now me."

B'Elanna stepped and retrieved the final and third amulet from box. She then placed it over General Torres head.

Belle nodded and then said, "These can be worn on the House Baldric or as medals as you need. As your people seem to use smaller symbols on the collars of your uniforms, you may adapt the sigil there also. Now it's official. Hail Warlords!" She then clasped B'Elanna's arm and then Kathryn's.

"Hail Warlord!" they returned.

The Klingons who had been on guard around the dinner, including those from Voyager slapped their hand to their chest in salute and shouted, "Hail Warlords!" If there had been rafters on Terok Nor they would have been ringing.

Another place or time and there might have been an unruly celebration. But they were almost finished with the meal and dessert had been promised.

A few minutes later, Captain Janeway, with the permission of Kira Nerys, had certain desserts teleported in from Voyager.

"Oh don't sweat it, Odo," said Nerys when the faithful constable had started to protest. "I am very sure that they are not going to poison me. At least, not yet."

"Not with chocolate, no. That would be just plain wrong."

"So chocolate is a sacred food?"

"No. But it is a sacrament somewhere, I'm sure."
There was laughter around the table. Seven of Nine and Icheb did the honors of passing around the deluxe double chocolate iced, double fudge brownie and nuts with a cherry on top ice cream concoctions. Deanna, ironically was served last, with the injunction from Lwaxana to wait until everyone was seated.

The Betazoid held her spoon at the ready and looked at Lwaxana with a touch of caution and amusement. "I don't know why you think this will be so special. I assure you, I've had many culinary delights."

"I believe you." Lwaxana said with a smile.

"Yet you are really looking forward to seeing my reaction."

"Oh yes." Lwaxana grinned at this 's Deanna. "You are in for a treat. This, my darling, is called a Sundae."
Chapter 12
Chapter by bearblue

It was a waterfall of ecstasy on her tongue. She couldn't help closing her eyes and moaning. It was more than sweetness. There was an afterglow, an actual afterglow of pleasure. Before opening her eyes, Deanna was uttering prayers to the Deities of Betazed.

And that was with one spoonful of the Sundae.

When she opened her eyes she observed several things. First, she felt better. She felt, as her mother had said, soothed. She suspected that the more she ate, the more wonderful she would feel. Second, she noticed the amused pleasure her family were experiencing at her enjoyment. She couldn't help smiling back. Finally, she noticed, but pretended not to notice, the very intense look that Kira Nerys was sending her way.

It was probably just a reflection of the other energy in the room anyway.

With that, she surrendered and took another bite, and that whole wonderful process happened again. When she opened her eyes, they were shining, almost tearful with joy. She couldn't find the words, but her smile said enough.

Lwaxana smiled back warmly. "I knew you would like it."

At that, Kira Nerys dug her own spoon into the sumptuous treat. She knew pleasure when she heard it. When she had an adequate portion she took a bite.

It was a shock of cold, agreeable and startling. There was flavor, sweet and new. She found herself making a noise of pleasure. Yes. It was good. She opened her eyes when she was finished with that first bite and couldn't help but look back at Deanna with amused understanding. She raised her spoon in salute. "This is remarkable." She took another exquisite bite and savored it. "Yes. I do believe that this is something I would have remembered. When we get back to Voyager, we must discuss it more."

"I believe that can be arranged too," said Laren. "Perhaps you would like to talk with Neelix about a cultural exchange."

"No perhaps about it," Nerys quipped. "We'll make a fortune."

"Speaking of fortune," said Kate, "Laren, did you have a chance to speak with T'Pel about Winn Adami?"

Both Deanna and Nerys looked up at that. "Winn Adami? How do you..."

They looked at each other. The Intendant waved Deanna forward in the conversation. "How do you know Winn Adami."

"We had occasion to meet her the other day. She's a formidable, but pleasant woman."

"Formidable. Yes. That would be the word to describe her. It's her contract services that the Andorians are haggling with."

"Winn Unicorp?"
"Yes."

"Well, maybe it's something I can help with. She says she owes me a favor."

"Owes you..."

Nerys's eyes went wide and she said, "No! Don't waste a favor on that." She sent an apologetic glance at Deanna. "Dr. Pulaski, it is rare that Winn Adami makes such a concession. You may need that favor later. I am sure that The Truth Seeker will find a reasonable compromise for all parties, if that is what she is required to do." Again she looked at Deanna, who tilted her head in acknowledgment. Nerys continued, "This is another thing we should talk about on Voyager. But let's finish this dessert first and then we should go talk more."

The captain appeared fascinated and a little perturbed. "I agree." She fingerspoke to Laren, Why didn't I hear about this?

I didn't know it would be important. Laren replied. And, yes, I spoke briefly with T'Pel about it. She has her card, if you need it.

I might, but let's see what happens next.

Deanna looked surprisingly unconcerned, once the agreement was made to set it aside for the moment, and went back to finishing her Sundae. Some things simply took priority.

Kate shrugged. It looked like it was going to be a late night.

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Dr. Leah Brahms had no plans to step onto the station, ever. She had no interest in space stations, as they did not hurtle themselves through space towards new destinations with any regularity. Starships, on the other hand, were very interesting to her, and Voyager was the most interesting Starship she'd ever been on.

At the moment she was gleefully examining a live-feed hologram of Voyager, talking with the vessel and with her companion vessels about how Voyager's original gel-packs had contributed to the advent of sentience. Of course, the current system had little resemblance to the original. In her hand was a PADD filled with information about the past and the current system. What she noted, however, was that the system logged as current had already changed. Voyager was evolving.

"You realize you're changing at an incredible rate."

"I try not to think about it. It sometimes scares me, as I have no idea where this will lead."

"I expect that is what the other crew members think too. B'Elanna must be having a heck of a time keeping up."

"B'Elanna is quite capable. Without her, I would not be here at all."

"I am not criticizing our Chief Engineer, Voyager. I'm saying that the changes are rapid. How is she tracking them all?"

"She created an algorithm and has had a secondary program running a system-wide monitor."

"Ah. Yes, that would work. Does it have an up to the minute update?"

"It updates every thirty seconds. Though when we first escaped the anomaly she had it set to every
ten seconds. She used to check it every quarter hour. Now she checks every other day."

Leah chuckled. "I see. Do you think she would mind if you shared that data with me?"

"I believe she would be honored."

"In that case, would you please create a visual of the data as a holographic chart and map? Hover it above this hologram please. And show me the last two weeks, four weeks and six weeks."

"As you wish."

As the charts began popping up as a visual, Leah walked around the hologram of Voyager, poking at it with a highlight stick with apparent randomness. That was an illusion. The points were very specific and it was forming a very interesting picture for Leah.

She brought up another live-feed schematic hologram of Stinging Sparrow. "On the plus side, it does seem that all of the ships which experienced the energetic exchange in the Maze of Mines are also growing at a similar rate.

Stinging Sparrow piped up, using Voyager's vocal synthesizers. "Oh. That's normal. Zakeeri vessels change as we age. The growth is not exactly exponential, but we do have a natural lifecycle."

"Indeed. I have a rather important question to ask you." Dr. Brahms rotated the holographic image of Voyager until it was belly up. Then she enlarged the view. "How do Zakeeri Ships come into being? Are you built? Or are you born?"

"Well," hedged the Zakeeri ship. "It's a little of both."

"Explain."

Then, sounding as if she only knew it by rote, like someone who had had it explained to her once, Stinging Sparrow began. "Once a Zakeeri ship hits a certain point of maturity, their family group will arrange a meeting with another family group to discuss the purchasing of raw materials..."

"What happens if the raw materials are already available?"

"Oh, well, the materials are combined with protocol instructions from the group, for the type of ship it will be. Then nannites and composites from both ships are blended, insuring positive genetics, with one ship donating a greater part, while the other ship acts as the bearer of the new symbiont."

"I see. And this process, does it ever happen by accident?"

"Accident? Why would anyone have a child by accident?" squeaked the smaller vessel. Then there was thoughtful pause. "Please hold while I access historical records." There was another pause, and during that time Dr. Brahms was really trying to keep perspective, but she knew... she just knew, she was seeing what she was seeing.

"There is evidence that unique ships have been born, some more successfully than others, by accident. It is very rare, less than one percent of the time by far. Results of such matches vary in suitability. Some are extraordinarily gifted, some quite normal and others," There was a slight hitch in Stinging Sparrow's voice, "...must be reconditioned." There was a pause and then the ship continued, "But there is evidence that it is possible."

"Of course it is possible," said Dr. Brahms. "It's a natural process to any living entity. Life will find a way." Leah tapped her chin and pondered what to do next. Then she tapped her combadge. "This is
Dr. Brahms to Dr. Zimmerman. Could you please come down to Lab Fourteen please?"

"Dr. Brahms, I am currently with a patient. Is this an emergency?"

"No. But I'd like it to stay that way. Could you please come down at your convenience then?"

"It will be an hour."

"Great, that will give me time to really pull together the data. Dr. Brahms out."

"Leah, is there a problem?"

"Voyager, I'll put it this way. There is no way that Starfleet will be able to say that you are not a living being after this."

"I don't understand."

"Have you ever heard of the birds and the bees?"

There was a moment of silence while Voyager accessed multiple databases. "But Doctor, that's impossible."

"Never say impossible."

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"Impossible," said the holographic doctor.

"But look at the evidence," Leah replied.

"I'm looking at it. Are you sure it's not some sort of..." Dr. Zimmerman waved his hand in the air "...extended feature on Voyager. That has been happening a lot lately, you know."

"I'm sure. It's tiny and at this point merely composite parts, but that," Leah circled a tiny point on Voyager's underside, "...is where a tiny new ship is being gestated. You might call it a new feature, but give that enough time and there will be a baby Voyager romping around in the docking bay."

"Romping around? Ridiculous. Gestating? Impossible!" he said again. But this time he leaned in and looked closer. He mumbled to himself and connected with reams of information on board the ship. "Well, maybe not impossible. But improbable, definitely. At the very least it does pose a question," he said as he straightened up. "Who is the father?"

Leah grinned. "I don't think there's much question about it. Stinging Sparrow is the donor. I've tracked rather specific indicators, here and here." She showed him several charts.

Dr. Zimmerman examined the charts. "Are these... actual genetics?"

"There are definite similarities, yes. Based on discussions with Stinging Sparrow she comes from a rather healthy line. But this is why I felt you probably ought to be in on the discussion."

Dr. Zimmerman grimaced. "This isn't exactly something I can wave a medical tricorder at. And I am not the one you should be telling."

"Oh, I know. I've put in a request to see Captain Janeway at her earliest convenience. She'll be stopping by on her way to another meeting."
"Good. Good." The hologram grimaced. "I think we're going to have to get in close to see what is going on there. Physically close, I mean. We probably should contact one of our Zakeeri crewmembers, Commander Sofuru, I think. We'll need their expert advice."

"Agreed.

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"She's what!" The normally unflappable Captain staggered back, clasping her hand to her chest. Her eyes were wide and her color high. "That's impossible."

"That's what I said," said Voyager.

Dr. Zimmerman said, "Perhaps you had better sit down." He guided the captain to a seat and settled her there. Kathryn was shaking her head in denial.

"But... how?"

"Well, it's not that complicated really," said Leah. "You see, when two ships love each other..."

"Dr. Brahms!"

"I'm sorry, I couldn't resist." Leah raised both her hands in surrender. Then continued, "But the premise holds true. Apparently it's a matter of material, ship's genetics, opportunity and specialized programming of certain nannites. We've contacted Commander Sofuru and he will be here shortly to explain how it works for the Zakeeri. You should be aware that Stinging Sparrow is the genetic donor."

"I... see." The scientist in the Captain was intrigued. The Captain in Kathryn was worried. "And how does this affect ship's performance."

"Well, currently Voyager is undergoing some rapid evolution, which I believe is a design fix for this very scenario. I don't believe that ship's performance will be unusually affected. Zakeeri ships are very hardy and apparently have gone out on coup runs in states of pregnancy."

"I can still kick ass if I need to, Kathryn," input the ship.

There were so many questions running through the Captain's head. Not the least of which was, "Will we be able to return to Universe Alpha?"

"That should not be a problem Captain. Nor do I think, at this time, we will need to worry about martial encounters. However, we might need to take into consideration that we do not know how long gestation occurs. It might be that the longer we wait to return, the longer we will have to wait to return, if you understand my meaning."

Kathryn was nodding her head and looking a bit dazed. "I hesitate to ask this and seem insensitive, but are we sure it is or will be viable."

"It's a good question and we don't know yet. It may be weeks before there is any indication one way or the other."

"What happens if..."

This time it was Stinging Sparrow who answered, "The materials will be absorbed and reassigned in
Voyager's physical systems."

"I see." The captain nodded. "We are going to need to talk more about this. We'll need to form a specialized medical and engineering team, I think. I do want more information, but that is going to have to wait. I have a prior engagement, unfortunately."

"You're taking this much better than I expected," commented Dr. Brahms.

Kathryn laughed. "Considering everything that has happened to us... Well, I can think of worse things to be told. Besides," and this time the captain was grinning, "We are a generational ship."

She laughed again and stood up. "Do you mind if I share the news, Voyager?"

"Mind? Of course not."

"Thank you. I probably won't broadcast it to everyone, but there are some people who will need to know." She turned to the Doctors. "Thank you for keeping me informed."

"You're welcome, Kathryn," said Dr. Zimmerman.

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At Quark's the lights were bright, the games loud, and the enthusiasm of the players catchy. The Ferengi owner was raking in the latinum, so much so, that it almost didn't bother him when people won at his gambling tables. This was good, since people were also winning hand over fist, or so it seemed. It was even better though, when latinum wasn't involved in the betting at all. Then he didn't really lose anything when someone won.

At the moment there was a heated bout of dice rolling between one of those Ylfians and a Bajoran mayor of a small town. The mayor had slowly been losing to the Ylfian and kept upping the stakes on the theory that he had to win sometime. The tiny being that was competing against the Bajoran was a great risk taker though and had no personal stake in the outcome, aside from the first small amount of latinum he had started with. So for him, it was all in fun.

The mayor was starting to sweat, but he had run out of funds. So he offered substance, in this case two slaves. The Ylfian, surrounded by his friends, two Klingons and a Human from Voyager, remained cool and collected. He accepted the bet.

The dice were rolled and one side shouted in glory, while the other groaned.

A few minutes later, the slaves had the unusual privilege of being led to Voyager by a Ylfian traveling on the shoulder of a slightly sloshed Klingon.

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Just a few moments after Kathryn entered the conference room, Chakotay followed. "We have a problem," he said in an urgent whisper.

"Is this something that needs to be addressed now?" Kathryn replied.

He glanced apologetically at the gathered people. "I'm sorry, yes. I think it's something that needs to be addressed as quickly as possible. The Ylfians have been winning slaves and setting them free."

Kathryn blinked. Intendant Kira Nerys laughed outright. General Torres said, "Typical."

B'Elanna responded, "You have no idea. Remind me to introduce you to Steve."
"Steve?"

"He's the guy in charge of procurement for the ship. The Ylfians are simply following his example."

"He procured slaves for the ship?"

"No. He won some slaves on a bet, then freed them, then procured their services. That's how the Kutwutchu came to join us."

"Those very tall..." Belle raised her hand far above her head in example.

"Yep."

"Interesting."

Kathryn meanwhile was having an intense conversation with Chakotay, "So tell me how this is a problem again?"

"They're bringing them on board the ship and setting them free here. But the problem is, the ex-slaves are refusing to leave. And, as you know, the rule is that our people aren't supposed to be interfering in the local ways."

"Well, I hate to tell you this, Chakotay, but what they're doing is completely legal. So, they're still obeying the rules we've set for them. Besides, I thought we already had a system up for handling new recruits."

"New recruits?"

Again Nerys laughed. "You all just can't help it can you? You have to change the world to suit you."

"It's not us... it's the..." Chakotay began to protest.

"Chakotay, look, if the new recruits want to join us, let them. But make sure they run through the whole program, as per usual. Let them know what they're getting into. If they turn out to be a problem, then we will deal with it, as per usual." She gave him a stern look. Then she said, "Also, are all of the Ylfians doing this or just some and are they deliberately seeking to win... people or is this incidental."

"Uh, I think it is incidental, but still..."

"Look if it's all of the Ylfians doing this, then talk to Natok and make it clear that this must stop. They're just very much about defending those that cannot defend themselves. You know that. It's a matter of honor with them. On the other hand, if winning is merely a hazard of their shore leave; I'm not going to interfere with their choices. The bottom line of this is... deal with it, Chakotay. Understood?"

He grimaced. "Understood."

"Good. Dismissed."

He grimaced again and then nodded stiffly and left. Kathryn sighed and wondered what bee was in his bonnet this time. Then she shook her head and turned to her guests and those family members who had decided to join in the conversation. She smiled pleasantly at them.
"So, what shall we talk about first?"

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Two hours later, the discussion had moved to the Captain's family quarters. Tuvok was on duty. Miral and Gretchen had bid everyone goodnight so they could spend quality time with each other. The children were all in bed and now the women were taking the discussion in new directions. They sat around the family room on the couches, chairs and pillows on the floor.

Nerys was telling them about her contact with herself. "...And so, yes, I tried to seduce her. I mean, come on! Who wouldn't? I'm gorgeous." The laughter from the adults was genuine. She grinned at them. "Nerys, my counterpart, thought I was coming on to her because of vanity, but honestly I wanted to see what her limits were. I had heard, through the rumor mill mind you, that there were parallel selves and one always wonders what that might mean. Her reactions were priceless. She was daring, like me, because she took it to the brink. But I knew she would hold out."

"And if she hadn't?" asked Kate, who was on one of the love seats and leaning against the warm T'Pel. She was sipping her drink slowly. T'Pel was reclining, with her arm around Kate's shoulder. The Doctor probably should have gone to bed a long time ago, but honestly she didn't want to miss a moment of the fascinating conversations.

"Well, I still don't know. I like to think I would go for it, but I'm not entirely sure I would have. I might have been too disappointed, you know?"

"It's probably for the best, Nerys. Some things are better left as fantasy," said Deanna who was most carefully not drinking anything with synthenol or alcohol. She felt high enough already. She was sitting across from Nerys on one of the overstuffed chairs. Her feet were tucked up under her and there was tall, empty fluted glass with a spoon in it besides her on a small table.

"And some things are more wonderful than your greatest fantasy ever could be," added Lwaxana. She was snuggled up against Laren. The Bajoran grinned and snatched a quick, but steamy kiss from her mate.

"There is that," agreed B'Elanna. She and Seven were on the floor on the pillows. Seven was acting as the 'chair', so B'Elanna was leaning back against her. The blonde's arms were wrapped comfortably around her mate. They both appeared completely relaxed and engaged in the conversation.

B'Elanna looked at Belle, who returned her gaze and then both grimaced and shook their head in a moment of honest-to-Kahless squeamishness. "I think both Nerys may be made of sterner or... kinkier stuff than I." Belle and Annika were on the couch, relaxed against each other. The blonde had remained mostly silent through the discussion. But she did not appear to feel out of place. She simply had not had a lot to personally contribute to the conversation yet.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Kathryn said and waggled her eyebrows. She was on one of the overstuffed chairs and sat as if she were cozying up with a book, towards the light. She had long ago shucked off her boots. Now she lifted the hem over one of her legs to reveal red marks around her ankles.

That invoked another bout of laughter.

"You are much different than your counterparts. I had come to the conclusion that your people must really think the very absolute worst of us in Universe A, as you call it." Nerys swirled the blue Romulan ale in her glass and looked at it. "I didn't see any reason to disabuse her of the notion. It's
not like she would have believed I was a ... a... prophet of light. And the truth is, as Intendant, I have always had to use whatever means necessary to maintain order. She might not have approved the methodology, but then, as I gather from being aboard this ship, the standards of behavior are more... forgiving, than they have been here. In your universe, she can afford to merely send people to the brig. In mine, that is not always the case."

"Well," said Kathryn. "We knew there would be a huge cultural difference, so we planned for it. The problem may be that the encounters before always happened by surprise. But it's also only natural. In our universe, the Federation was never an empire. Survival of the fittest did not mean having to live by the sword, until we got to the Delta Quadrant. And even then, our ethics were still completely different from the 'Federation' here. In fact, I'm amazed they lasted as long as they did, given the amount of chicanery, assassination, and constant shuffling of power they engaged in."

"It helps to be brutal. And by that, I mean more brutal than I have ever been even accused of being."

"Still, it seems like it would have resulted more in chaos than order."

Belle interjected, "I believe you are correct. Our history tells us that the Humans were too busy fighting amongst themselves to pay attention to the slaves any more."

"Stupid."

"Just." said Annika with a grimace. "We were fools."

"It was wasteful of resources," sniffed Seven disapprovingly. "They deserved to be overthrown. But it has been centuries now; the bad habits of the parents should be long gone. It is time to bring them back into civilization."

Belle grinned at Annika's counterpart. "The question is: have they learned from their mistakes?"

"One can hope." Kathryn replied. "But you may need to think about how to bring them into the Empire as real citizens. As you mentioned, they need an anchor. One that doesn't require the overthrow of this Empire, as it does seem to be the better of the two values."

Belle waggled her finger at the Captain. "I never, not in a million years, thought I would hear that out of the mouth of a being from Universe A."

The Captain lifted her cup. "Well, that doesn't mean you can't improve."

Nerys laughed until she cried.

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By the time they left, Nerys had given an unequivocal answer of "Yes," to the Captain. She would be joining them on their adventure to the wormhole. A time had also been specifically slated for the Trials during their earlier meeting. They would happen after the visit to the wormhole, and they would go to the wormhole within the next few days.

Deanna had made arrangements for Counselor Nael and the other Truth Seekers of the ship to come over to her ship and discuss their methods with the council. She had also made arrangements to visit with her family again, while they were still in this universe. She was happy to find out that Belle had arranged for some of the crew from Voyager to remain. She would see if she could convince some of the Truth Seekers to stay and perhaps join them on Betazed for their assigned time.

She joined Nerys briefly before returning to her own ship. "I know you have much to consider
already. It would be tempting to think of the possibilities of betraying them, but I would advise
against it."

"And why do you say that?" Nerys knew, at least by now, better than to assume that Deanna
believed that the Bajoran would seriously consider such a thing. Deanna, she realized, was just
sharing her a bit of her thought process.

"These people have won the favor of the Empire. That is rare and it is valuable. It would be better to
shore up that value than to detract from it, yes?"

"Perhaps. But their ways are different. And you can already see the influence they have had on us."

"True, but ask yourself, are you in more or less danger now?"

Nerys grinned and she leaned towards the Betazoid. "Oh, I think I'm in more danger now," she
nearly purred and Deanna blushed. Mission accomplished, the Bajoran said, "But not from the
empire. I agree. This must be nurtured."

"Will you speak with Winn Adami, then?"

"Definitely." She smiled again. "On a different topic, Deanna, I would be honored to be in your
company again sometime soon."

"My book is full tomorrow," Deanna closed her eyes so she didn't see the way Nerys' face fell. But
she felt it. "But it will be open the next day, if that is soon enough."

Nerys conjured up a new smile. "Well, it will have to do. Until then," she took a chance and grabbed
Deanna's hand in her own. Then she kissed the other woman's knuckles, "I shall just have to
fantasize."

Deanna's laugh was beautiful.
Chapter 13

Chapter by bearblue

The assassin, an Orion male of appreciable size, could not believe his luck. He had been successfully "sold," onto Terok Nor and had managed, through no effort of his own, to be won by one of the smallest sentient creatures he had ever seen. The creature, along with its taller friends, had then led him aboard the famed and soon to be his Voyager. He would have done a jig except that would have been obvious.

What he had not expected was the almost immediate ceremony of freedom that he had been given. He had been invited to stay or to go. If he stayed, he would have to go through a series of tests and training sessions. He would no doubt do well. He would also be given quarters and later would be able to choose his calling, since this was a working ship. Of course, he'd said yes.

Another thing he hadn't anticipated was that his quarters would be among other Orions. Nor had he considered that he would be so immediately introduced in a full clan open forum.

The best-laid plans could not have anticipated that.

The syndicate had thought them slaves. Oh, they'd seen the broadcasts and heard the claims about freedom. But Orions had been forced to fight before. It never occurred to them that it might be the truth.

As soon as he had stepped into the open room he knew things were different on board Voyager.

He was pushed to the middle of the floor, to stand alone, surrounded by a circle of grim, arms-crossed, fiercely intimidating Orions. It was then that he started paying closer attention to his surroundings and he noted that the clan marks were more than mere make up.

A tall green woman stepped forth and he knew. He knew that he would either bend to her will or die. "I am Inan," she said, "Matriarch of the Orions of the House Presba."

The Orion Assassin felt chills roll up his spine as a new scent drifted on the horizon of his senses. He tried to resist. He had been trained, after all. He was immune to several series of truth drugs. Torture could not have broken him. The clear, cleansing scent of a true Matriarch? His knees bent and he crumpled to the ground.

He couldn't stop his mouth. "I am Yakash. I am not worthy."

"Yakash, I bind you to honor. You will tell me all."

It wasn't like they tried to hide it. Four large men carried the Orion Syndicate Assassin on their shoulders. He didn't begin coming to until they were much more than halfway to the airlock. They held tight though and carried him with rough, hurried determination.

There were witnesses. "Ensign Jackson to Security. I think there is a problem with the Orions. They... uh... headed towards Airlock 35. They've got a guy and they don't look too friendly about it."

The Orions had Yakash shoved into an airlock and the door locked by the time Tuvok arrived. They
had not yet started the cycle that would evacuate the air.

"Gentlemen, would you mind explaining to me what you are doing?"

Ensign Torath spit out, "We are getting rid of the trash, Commander Tuvok."

The Vulcan's expression made no apparent change. "I see. I must inform you that this is not our normal way of handling the disposal of trash."

"Well, he doesn't deserve the simplicity of incineration."

"I see. So he has engaged in criminal activity on the ship."

The men looked at each other. 'Well, no. But he is an assassin. He would have killed the captain on sight.'

"You mean he would have attempted to kill the captain." The Vulcan continued to pull information out of the Orions until he had the full details and then he said, "This is matter for security. Please inform the Matriarch that, should another assassin find their way to her and be found wanting, she should turn him over to ship's security. It is a matter of protocol."

They looked at each other, shrugged and then nodded. "Okay, Commander."

Tuvok then said in politic concession. Goodwill remained important with the newer crew. "I am glad we were able to speak to one another on this topic."

Yakash had heard every word, including the damning revelation of what he was there to do. He watched with trepidation as the Security Chief and the Orions discussed his fate. The Vulcan turned towards him and said, "Yakesh of the Orion Syndicate, you are under arrest. You will surrender."

It had been long enough that the control of the Matriarch had worn off. "I don't think so," Yakash snarled.

He gnashed his teeth, biting down on the hidden device in his mouth, even as Tuvok was cycling the door open. The broken tooth did its job, flooding Yakash's system with a quick, deadly poison. By the time Tuvok reached him, the Orion was dead.

The Vulcan was normally a cautious being and since arriving in Universe Beta he had become more so. Tuvok ran his tricorder and grimaced. He waved the other security officers back and stepped back out of the airlock.

Then he cycled the lock shut and ran the decompression. A smoky substance began rising from Yukash's body. Despite the fact that the decompression wasn't finished, Tuvok slapped his hand down on the button that opened the airlock to space.

The Orion assassin's body was whisked out. Tuvok, his security team and the Orions who had carried Yakash watched as the body continued to smolder even in the depth of space. The smoke became ice, twisting into weird spirals as the body whirled away. Just before the door to space completely closed, the body began to expand. Fortunately for the whole crew of Voyager, the door shut before the body exploded. The virus, which had been activated upon the Orion's death and carried deep within, did not make it on board and died in the cold of space.

There was a moment of somber silence. Then Tuvok tapped his combadge. "Tuvok to Sickbay. Airlock thirty five is now quarantined and will require decontamination. I, my security team, and four others will need to be quarantined and will require examination. Site to site transport will occur in
thirty seconds."

He found a security control box and set up force fields to keep the airlock and the surrounding area locked away from the stray passerby. Then he tapped his combadge and made a few arrangements. Moments later, he and the others were in the isolation lab of sickbay.

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Dr. Zimmerman spoke quietly with Captain Janeway. "All I can say is, thanks to Inan's and Tuvok's quick thinking, we still have a living crew on board this ship. I've run a full diagnostic on those who had contact with Yakash. They all check out fine, but to be on the safe side we're going to keep them here for twenty four hours."

Her hand was to her chin. She nodded and then dropped her hand to her side. "Thank you Doctor. May I speak with Tuvok?"

"Of course." He led her to the isolation bay, where a force field kept the inhabitants apart from the rest of the ship.

"Well, Tuvok," she said with a quirky smile, "You sure know how to keep things interesting."

His eyebrow cocked, "I believe it was Yakash who was attempting something interesting."

She grimaced and placed her palm on the force field. Unlike the Brig's repeller, the isolation bay's field did not sting. It was odd, the fact that she couldn't touch him made her long to be able to. No doubt it was one of her human contradictions that Tuvok found illogical. "How do you feel?"

"I am fine. I do not believe the Virus had time to activate completely."

"For which your mates are truly grateful."

He nodded in acknowledgment. "I will send you a report in the morning. You should go rest."

"I will." She started to leave and then turned back, "What are the chances of this happening again?"

"I believe the longer we are here, the more attempts will be made."

Kathryn nodded. "From now on, whenever someone brings someone unknown on board, I want a Truth Seeker and a member of Security there."

"I believe that would be a good idea."

"Coordinate with Counselor Nael when you get out of here, would you Tuvok?"

"I will."

"Thank you, Tuvok. Come home soon."

Tuvok did not point out the illogic of the comment. He merely acknowledged the thought behind it. "I will."

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Most of the lights were out in the Isolation Bay. Tuvok would have turned out the small light by his bio-bed, except that the Ensign beside him asked that he refrain. So, the light remained on, diffused by distance.
The Vulcan sat, cross-legged on the bio-bed, arms and hands positioned in a traditional meditation pose. His eyes were closed, but his mind was not. He was in tandem with T'Pel and Lwaxana, who had taken to joining her mates in meditation when she could. They rested in each other's presence.

When Kate entered the space just outside of the Isolation Bay, Tuvok opened his eyes. He unfurled from his position and stood up. His lanky form was a silhouette.

He made his way towards the force field and stood at rest. "Dr. Pulaski. May I be of assistance?"

"Your bio-signs showed you were awake. I thought you might like company."

"I assure you, Dr. Pulaski, I am quite comfortable."

"Well, you may be, but I'm not. Mind if I pull up a chair? Why don't you pull up one too?"

"Shall I take that as an order, Commander?"

"Don't be a smart-ass. Just pull up the damn chair, Tuvok. I have some questions for you."

"As you wish."

They sat together, with the force field between them. Dr. Pulaski somehow managed to create a prop for her feet and ankles, so she was lounging more than sitting. "So, you're a logical guy. How is it that you managed to score six mates and why would you be looking for a seventh?"

Tuvok's brow arched. "Dr. Pulaski, I believe you have just asked me a loaded question."

"Oh. I surely did. So. Talk. What makes me so special?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Tuvok's body shifted. It wasn't that he slouched. No Vulcan ever slouched, but there was an easing of tension in his body, as if he had decided to simply relax into the discussion, come what may. So he began to answer her question. "Dr. Pulaski, may I call you Kate?"

The sturdy blonde absorbed the intimacy of the question. From anyone but a Vulcan, that would have been a casual request. From Tuvok, it was practically a proposal. She braved it. "Yes."

"Kate, I will begin first by stating that to a Vulcan, Logic has many parameters and permutations. We arrive at a decision through examination of facts and a gathering of data and then we make our decisions. When I, and my mates, first joined, we shared a vast amount of information and data with each other and about one another. This included memories..."

Sometime later, Kate had settled in to an even more comfortable position. The plate and the glass were empty. Her hands were clasped over her belly and her expression was contemplative.

"Have you found our discussion helpful?"

Kate looked up and smiled somewhat whimsically. "It's been helpful. My mind isn't settled about things yet. I find the idea of a group mind somewhat frightening."

"It is not a group mind. It is a group experience - a connection. We are our own individuals. As Seven of Nine might say, we function more effectively that way."

"How do you deal with the emotions?"

"I respect my mate's emotions, and they respect my logical needs."
Kate nodded thoughtfully. "I was looking at your records, Tuvok, during your examination. You had a rather frightening illness."

"I did."

"It's gone now."

"I am aware."

"How did it happen?"

"I was loved."

"Not very logical. Most Vulcans would never say such a thing. They would have attributed it to the anomaly."

"I am not most Vulcans and not everything is about logic."

"And that, Tuvok, is the heart of the matter and why I am driving myself to distraction." Kate slapped her thighs and stood up. "I've got to get to bed. Are you going to be all right tonight?"

The Vulcan examined the space around him. "I believe that I will be, Kate."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Assuredly."

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Captain Janeway's conversation with Inan was brief and cordial. First she thanked the other woman for looking out for the welfare of the ship. Then they talked briefly about the need to contact the captain when it came to certain decisions. "Though I appreciate your status as Matriarch of the Orions, the decision to space someone falls under my authority as Captain. We try to use such methods as a last resort."

"I understand captain," said Inan evenly. "I admit I should have thought of that, but I did not know how long my influence would last, and when he told me about the poison and what he intended to do as soon as he recovered, I knew I had to do something immediately."

"I understand. Good work. Have I mentioned lately how much I appreciate having you and your people on board?"

A smile burst onto Inan's face, like a beautiful sunrise. "Thank you captain. It is our honor to be here."

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Kathryn was still wound tight, even though it had been a long day and evening. The counter-active agent to the alcohol had her alert, even in her weariness. She went to quarters, anticipating that she would be awake for a while.

She realized that her personal space was not empty as soon as she walked in. Of course, it was kind of hard to miss Lwaxana wearing a smile and only that. The Betazoid lifted her arms in invitation and Kathryn walked right into the hug. She basked in the comfort of the other woman's skin and love.
She lifted her head and received a languid, purring kiss, the kind that sent tingles everywhere. When the tender contact ended she said, "Remind me again how I thought I could ever live without this?"

"You were the Captain."

"Ah, yes. That. I've noticed that I'm still Captain, even with all of this love around me."

Lwaxana grinned. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

"Oh yes. Kiss me again, beloved?"

"With deepest pleasure. Would it be all right if I invited T'Pel? She does better when there are others with her, though she would never say it. She missed Tuvok terribly."

"Shall we go to the Nest then?"

"If you would like."

"I think I would, just for comfort's sake."

They kissed again warmly, and then separated long enough for Lwaxana to help Kathryn out of her clothes. Then together they walked into the Nest where T'Pel waited for them.

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Asil was not comfortable. She had not been comfortable for days. The Mistress of the House Martok was coming very close to finding out whether Vulcans could be emotional or not.

Still, somehow, the young woman persevered though the rudeness and kept her cool facade, except for that minor slip up earlier.

It was as if Sirella was looking for things to snipe at.

Perhaps she was. Flowers had arrived at the House Presba, dedicated to Asil from Alexander. Asil had seen no reason to hide them, since the flowers were aesthetically pleasing. Vulcans did appreciate beauty, after all. And it was obvious that the Klingon had put some thought into the arrangement, which mixed flowers from both Vulcan and Qo'nos in vivid pattern of colors.

The card she had set besides the arrangement for Deanna's benefit, more than hers. But ever since the flowers had arrived, Sirella had been just terrible to be around. The more they demonstrated the House Presba to be successful and growing, the more vicious and snippy the sly side-swipes against Asil's family and heritage had become. It was as if the woman wanted to be struck.

Also a possibility.

Asil had finally concluded that she needed to do some research and perhaps speak with Guinan. Logic dictated that there would be a solution. The question remained what that might be.

==^==

"You are going to have to challenge her," said Guinan.

Asil's fist clenched in only the minutest way. Someone less observant than the El-Aurian might not have noticed. But she did and she hastened to add, "It doesn't have to be with weapons. It's just, in case you haven't noticed, Klingons like having challenges, things to ... bump up against and try the soul."
"I have looked at Klingon ceremonies. There is nothing official that I can use."

Guinan was wearing a tall hat, but a short bathing suit, enjoying the shade of the palm tree, sitting on a lounge chair and sipping a tall, cool glass of sweetness. She looked out at the blue water. Asil was sitting on the side of a companion chair, facing towards the El-Aurian. She was in a shimmering purple jumpsuit. Her hands were settled in her lap, slightly clenched. Her expression, while nominally neutral, was also a bit more intense than usual.

"May I suggest, then, doing something less formal. There are two ways you can approach this. The direct way, which would mean calling Sirella on her rudeness. Or you can address what may be motivating the rudeness to begin with. What kind of adventures has Sirella had while here?"

"Adventure? We have had plays and ..."

"Boring. To a Klingon."

"It was a popular Klingon opera."

"Still, she's probably seen it before. Has she met a firedog?"

Asil looked into the distance. "I do not believe that she has."

"Then, maybe it's time you introduced her to the local fauna."

"Vulcans do not hunt."

"Well then, I know a certain Vulcan who is going to be bumping heads with a certain Klingon for a lot longer then."

A soft growl emanated from nearby.

The El-Aurian tilted her cap up so that she could look more closely at the Vulcan.

Asil grimaced. "I apologize. I do not know what is wrong with me. I..."

"Asil, I hate to say this, but I need to make a call." Guinan sat up and scooted to the side of the lounge chair. "Why don't you meditate on our discussion? Oh, before I go, I wanted to ask: How is that temple-space looking?"

"My brothers have made good progress. They have been working with Vrald."

Indeed the Klingon Architect seemed invincible and not at all overwhelmed with all the projects he had taken on. Of course, it might be because he had taken to delegating quite a bit. But his expertise was invaluable and it was illogical to deny him access when he could be of such help.

"Vrald. Have he and Phoebe..."

"Not yet. We expect them to, any day. But Deanna is thinking we may simply have to lock them in a room and not let them out for a week."

Guinan laughed. "That might work."

"We will use it as a last resort."

"Of course. If you'll excuse me?"
Asil sat there thinking for about an hour, which was much longer than Guinan had thought it would take. But perhaps it was necessary. When the young woman stood up, there was cool purpose in her gaze and she left with a confident stride. The El-Aurian watched her young friend leave and shook her head. She wondered what Asil had decided to do and then realized that she would no doubt find out.

Meanwhile, her message had been sent. It was a short one, since Guinan was a listener, not a talker, but she knew it would be effective. After all, her target audience was Klingon and they were all about action.

Phoebe stared at Asil in consternation. "Hunting? Us?"

"I believe it is the logical course at this point."

"Logical!" The redhead's voice rose. "Do you know how long it has been since I've been hunting?"

"I did not know you had ever been hunting, Phoebe. I was assuming that all of us would be Neophytes. That is why I invited Vrald. He has agreed to teach us the essentials."

"Vrald?" Phoebe hated that tone of voice when others reached it and strove to pull herself together. "Asil, this is crazy. It's one thing to go hunting bears on earth. That, I know how to do, and they're dangerous enough. But we're talking about completely different creatures here. It's very dangerous, Asil."

"Which is why I have also invited Sirella."

"Oh my God." Phoebe grimaced. "We are going to die."

"It is a possibility, but not a foregone conclusion. I believe, however, if we are to have any hope of acceptance from Sirella we must demonstrate our ability to face danger head on."

"She won't come."

"On the contrary, I was informed by Ktald, her guard, that she accepted. She will be meeting with us in two days. Tomorrow Vrald will instruct us and we will gather camping supplies."

Phoebe grimaced and looked at Deanna. "What about you?"

"I am thinking about it. Betazoid's do not normally hunt the way others do." She hesitated to say why, but felt that her family deserved to know one of the Betazoid secrets. "We have the ability to silence the mind of our kill. Hunting is rare on Betazed, now that replicators are common. It is unnecessary. No Betazoid hunts for sport."

"We will not be hunting for sport. We will be hunting to produce change. Anything we catch, we will use. It will be treated as survival."

"Asil, are you sure about this?"

"No, Deanna, I am not. But I do feel it is the right thing to do. My only other option is to challenge Sirella to a duel. I am not ready to go in that direction. I would rather win her over, than win by
fighting her." There was absolute confidence that she would win, should a fight occur. "You do not have to come, Deanna, if you do not wish. But this is something I must do."

The Betazoid blinked at the Vulcan, at the bald practicality of what she could feel to be Asil's self knowledge. She looked at Phoebe and said, "Hunting it is."
Chapter 14

Chapter by bearblue

It was very early morning. The dawn's light had not even penetrated the dark of night yet. The three women assembled in the courtyard where there was moderate illumination. Vrald had insisted that they would need to begin early in the day, but he had not yet appeared. The women talked amongst themselves, while waiting. Guinan had taken on the task of watching Barin and Auloh for the week.

Eventually Vrald arrived, towing behind him a sled, which was hovering a few feet above the ground and held several objects. He stopped before them and looked over the women, who were wearing uniforms and weapons based on the schematics that Seven of Nine had sent them. He nodded his approval. "This is good. I should have realized you would be prepared. And it almost tells me what I need to know." He sat on the edge of the sled, which dipped under his weight, then adjusted. "What kind of hunters do you wish to be?"

"Good ones?" guessed Phoebe.

Deanna shook her head, "I'd settle for adequate, myself. I am not sure how sanguine I feel about hunting anything, anyway."

"It is not about the Hunt," Asil responded. "It is about House Honor."

Vrald slapped his hands on his thighs. "Ah! Perfect. Honor. Tell me what that means and why you think a Hunt will make the difference to your House Honor."

At that moment Phoebe wanted to say screw the hunt, grab Vrald by those wonderful thick hands and drag him to her bed. What she did instead, was answer. "I think it may mean we don't know what the hell we're doing. The truth is, we're starting out for the wrong reasons. We want... wanted to impress Sirella. I don't know if that's a good enough motivation though."

He turned to look at her with dark eyes, one of his bushy eyebrows arched. "Oh. Tell me more."

"The Hunt must mean something or it's just a ...," she wasn't sure what she was trying to describe. She tried anyway. "...it's just a game. And that's not worthy of the House. And, I don't mean this badly, but Sirella hasn't earned the right to criticize us, but we haven't proved that we're worthy of her esteem yet either. The Hunt, we thought, might be a way towards that."

"And yet, there is worthiness in a game, is there not? The competition on Forcas III is very prestigious. Still," he pointed at her, and waggled his finger at her. "You are getting close. Tell me more."

This time it was Deanna who spoke. "All of us come from the Federation. Hunting is not necessarily encouraged there. It is seen as barbaric."

"Ah. That is interesting. I have been called a barbarian before. Usually by some young upstart who recently graduated from university. They think I will take offense." Vrald laughed at that and then stopped abruptly. "As an architect, I have read more history, studied more psychology, and pondered more about the nature of being than many. Yet I am called barbarian for my works, because sometimes they have spires. Or sometimes they go against someone's mores. I have come to the conclusion that there is as much honor in being a barbarian as there is in being a man of the stars. I can tell you this; you will make terrible hunters if you think it is unworthy of you."
The women looked at one another. Asil spoke, "I do not see that we have much choice. You see..." she hesitated, but Phoebe nodded at her to continue. "I do not wish to challenge Sirella unless I must. This seems to be the only way to prevent that from happening."

Vrald, who had spent months with these women, had come to understand them in ways most Klingons did not. "Yet, if it is meant to happen, it will. And you will still have to decide whether you will meet your fate with honor or whether you will not."

"This is why we asked you to help us. We don't have any philosophical grounding for this. We are not Klingon, but we are of a Klingon House. We have been," she borrowed a word from Deanna, "...feeling our way, with some success. Yet, we have the Mistress of the House of Martok looking very seriously at us. We are not doing well in her eyes. And we must.

"Must you?" Vrald asked softly. "Are you sure it is her expectations that you are striving against?"

Silence was his answer.

"We must try, Vrald." Asil said. "We must give our best effort at least." The Klingon fingered his beard thoughtfully. Asil continued. "Except for Phoebe, we do not have experience with what is involved in hunting. I believe that I have been around long enough to have some understanding of Klingon ways, but I am Vulcan. I This is not what we do." She didn't want to say that when they did do something like this, it usually involved the mating drive. It was something that niggled at her, awareness that this impulse might not just be a result of adaptation to the mutation that the experience of the light might have created.

"Hmmm." Vrald nodded. He hopped off the sled and grasped a short spear and a hoop. "You mentioned a game, Phoebe. I think that is what we will play with this for awhile."

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Frankly he was amazed, but he didn't say so. Throwing a spear accurately through a moving hoop was a challenge, especially for novices. He expected it would take them awhile to get the hang of it. He didn't expect them to take to it like fish to water.

They had fun with it, which was good. It kept their throws relaxed and powerful. He upped the ante, changing the speed and the direction of the hoop. He had them get involved with the process and throw the hoop for each other.

He didn't tell them that they were better than he expected. He didn't say that he should have realized that they would be. He was, after all, an observant man. He had seen Phoebe lift things that he knew no human ought to be able to. No, he encouraged them to try more, to be better. That was the real point of the game anyway.

After a short time, when he knew that they had gained what they would through the experience, he had them stop.

Next he introduced them to the notion of tracking, following the trail of their prey by observing the details. Since they were on a new world, they didn't have the advantage of years of accumulated wisdom and knowledge about their prey, but they did have tricorders. The trick would be to only use the bare minimum of technology.

But in a way, he wanted to challenge them more, to make them do without the props that he was almost sure they did not need. So he made them play an even older game, one that was cross-cultural. It could be found on any planet with a sentient species. Hide and seek. Predator and Prey.
Hunter and Hunted. It was an instinctual tool, a child's game that taught one survival skills from both ends of the spectrum.

Now he required it of the women. "You must use all your senses, even you, Deanna." He bent down and touched the ground. "You must see, hear, feel, taste, scent and listen." He tapped the side of head and then his heart. "Here and here." He pointed at Asil. "Even you. Intuition and skill."

They couldn't hide in the house or any house. They would have to use the landscape and keep within one mile of the colony. It was a sufficient distance that it would take them outside of the protective field, if they wanted to go that way. It would teach them caution. "Have you figured out why Klingons hunt yet?"

"Some hunt for glory."

"There are some that do. Yes. But is that why a True Klingon hunts?"

"You've changed the definition then."

"Yes I have. Have you figured it out yet?"

"Challenge."

"Some, yes."

"Asil, Deanna, you are prey. Phoebe. You are Hunter." He growled. "Prey, Go!"

Asil and Deanna barely glanced at each other, and then took off, splitting away from each other. He blinked at their speed. Then grinned. Sirella had no idea what she was in for and it made him realize just how honorable Asil was being.

He turned to the woman who made his blood boil and the one he could not have. "Now. You humans have hunting traditions. I know. I researched it. Why do your people hunt?"

Phoebe experienced a flash of memory, a moment in time when her father was alive. They were sitting around the campfire, herself, Katie, Mom and Dad. He was explaining why they were out there and what he wanted them to gain. He talked about tradition and about feeding one's family. "Well, I don't know about everyone else, but in my family it was about reconnecting with the world and with...," she pressed against her chest and ignored the unexpected wetness at her eyes. She cleared her throat. "It was about our common being-ness, man and beast. It was also about our responsibilities in the face of that. It was spiritual."

He leaned in. "I will tell you a secret. That is why True Klingons hunt. Any fool can hunt for glory."

She nodded, feeling it, understanding the part that could not be put into words and remembering the lesson her father wanted her to know.

He risked it, though he knew he shouldn't. Touching her was always a shock, but he wanted to capture that moment in his memory. He wiped the tears at her eyes. Another Klingon might have thought them evidence of weakness. He knew better. He was amazed at their heat, like blood, but thinner and it went straight to parts of him. He spoke gently, gruffly. "Now, huntress. You have prey to catch. No tricorder. Just your senses." He so desperately wanted her. His next word came out as barely a whisper. "Go."

It was a heartbeat or two before she could pull away, but she did. Her expression turned brave, determined. She slowly whirled away from him, scanning and remembering. She had a choice to
make.

She nodded to herself. Asil first. If Deanna was using "everything," then she would be hell to find.

Phoebe felt a toothy grin take over. Hell, maybe. But not impossible. She lifted her head and took a deep whiff of the air. Then she began jogging towards where she saw Asil and Deanna split off.

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It was odd. She forgot herself for a while, but she was completely filled with sensation. Asil, she knew, had moved several times in their chase. It was okay, because each time Phoebe got closer, it seemed that understood Asil better. If they'd had longer, she might have even started anticipating what Asil would choose to do.

Although... Why couldn't she do that now? Phoebe paused a moment and thought. They had not yet left the confines of the colony, which meant Asil was avoiding territory she did not know. Asil had not gone into the buildings, but that didn't mean she hadn't used them. There were places, like the garden, where she'd thought she'd gotten a whiff of Deanna, but then that had been gone. Phoebe planned on going back there when she started looking for the Betazoid. No. Focus. The feed-stalks were getting taller, tall enough that if a person stood still...

She realized suddenly why she'd felt like all she had been doing was running around in circles. Phoebe backtracked, headed towards one of the farms she had bypassed because the scent had been older.

When she hit the outside of the field she began moving cautiously. It reminded her of her mother's home on earth. She remembered some of the games she used to play with Katie, back when. One of their favorite tricks just before harvest was to try and find one another. She grinned. Hide and seek.

She moved carefully, as noiselessly, yet quickly as possible. It wasn't easy. She paused a moment when she thought she caught Deanna's scent again, like a stray ribbon floating across her senses. Then it was gone. Drat. Now she was going to have to look here too.

Focus.

It took a good hour longer. But the moment arrived. She spotted Asil, who was standing very still, when the wind moved the stalks around just so. She'd leapt then, but Asil was no deer to get startled. She stayed still, playing fair, at last. "You know," said Phoebe, plopping her hands on her hips. She had no idea how much she looked like her sister at that moment, "You can be very hard to find when you want to be."

Asil cocked her eyebrow in the closest approximation to a smile that Phoebe had seen. "Now that you have caught me, what will you do with me?"

"Cook you and eat you," teased Phoebe.

"I do not believe you would find me edible."

"I don't know Asil. You seem pretty scrumptious to me."

A human would have blushed. Asil shook her head at the silliness of her human relative. "I shall go back to the courtyard. Will you be accompanying me?"

"I still have to find Deanna. If you see her before I do, tell her to go easy on this mere mortal."
"I shall."

Phoebe touched Asil's shoulder, "I'll see you soon."

Then they parted ways.

An hour and a half later, Phoebe was about ready to call it quits. It wasn't that she couldn't track Deanna. It was every time she thought she had her, all the evidence would just disappear. And she would forget what she was doing for a few moments.

It made it practically impossible.

But it was kind of cool to know that Deanna could do that. But it was getting close to lunchtime and Phoebe was getting hungry.

She decided that she would take advantage of the fact that Deanna was an empath - with a weakness. Phoebe started thinking chocolate thoughts, chocolate fudge, chocolate ice cream, and chocolate drizzle over vanilla, chocolate and cherries. She imagined the scent and the taste. She lingered over those thoughts. She also kept moving, seeking the scent and the path. Of course, she was only making herself hungrier, but in between she would think, 'It's getting close to lunchtime and we skipped breakfast...'

This time, as she drew closer, a laughing Deanna stepped out from the shadows. "All right. All right! I give. Oh Sweet Mother of us All. Have mercy."

Phoebe laughed. "Well, I'm just hoping Asil has something cooked up for us by the time we get home. I'm starving."

Deanna hooked her arm through Phoebe's. Their bellies rumbled at the same time, "Let us go see, shall we?"

There was food and drink waiting for them on a picnic table under a shady tree when they returned. Vrald looked very relaxed, as if he and Asil had been having a good conversation. Asil looked a bit more sanguine, if you knew how to read her body language.

Deanna and Phoebe took up spaces at the table and Vrald quizzed them about the adventure and was soon chuckling at Phoebe's tactics. He said, "I wish we had a few more days. I believe you would all benefit from a turn as the Hunter, but we do not have time. You have preparations to make and I have a few more weapons to train you in. But first, let's eat. You will need your strength."
Chapter 15

Chapter by bearblue

The next day, again well before dawn, Asil, Deanna, Phoebe and Vrald gathered. This time they were on board a skimmer, which was a sleek form of a planetary shuttle, waiting for the arrival of Sirella and her guard. The skimmer was filled with supplies and gear, but not overstuffed. They left room, just in case.

It was a good call on Asil's part. Sirella arrived. She wore a hunting dress of leather and chain. Her guard wore their usual uniforms and they carried Sirella's supplies and gears. "We're taking this?" She sniffed.

"This planet does not have riding animals or service creatures. Besides, this skimmer will allow us to remain in contact with the satellite system, which will provide a modicum of safety."

Sirella rolled her eyes and waved her people forward. "Fine it will do. The Klingons boarded with grimaces that displayed their teeth, rather than smiles. They were attempting to intimidate, but they were actually causing Asil to experience another bout of annoyance.

She reminded herself that she was Vulcan and forced her expression to remain calm.

Deanna, who lived with a Klingon for a while, just ignored the aggressive display and showed Sirella to her seat. Phoebe, fortunately, had been up at the front, so she missed most of the testing behavior. What she caught was at the tail end and she attributed it to them being grumpy at this time of the morning. Vrald, of course, did the Klingon thing and just grimaced right on back. The guard backed off in subconscious reaction to the dominant male in the group. "Well," said Phoebe, when everyone seemed settled and after the door snapped shut. "Let's get this show on the road."

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Presba was, technically, still being explored. They did not know even a fourth of the things that made up the wildlife on the planet. They only had records of what had been encountered so far, plus whatever the bio-sign readings indicated in general. This wasn't to say that technology was backwards, but rather that a living world always had more going on with it than might be easily apparent in the first, third or even the fiftieth scan through.

They landed several miles away from the colony and the resort and set up camp. Shelters were instantly created via technological marvel; lay the package down and press a button, then watch as the shelter expanded into something durable and practical. A simple force field was set up around the perimeter. Predators and other small creatures would not be able to come into camp in search of an easy snack. A space was set aside for the communal fire. The skimmer's facilities would be used for personal needs and it would act as the first aid station and "kitchen," of the camp. It was still early morning and the sound of birds and other creatures making their morning calls could be heard clearly. The water source was close enough to be heard, but not seen.

All in all it was a nice place to camp and still the sun had not yet risen.

People began prepping for the hunt, lining up their spears and checking their gear for optimal grab and run. Phasers were bonded. They could be pulled in an emergency, but it would be a last resort move. This would be a mostly traditional hunt. Tricorders and communicators would be allowed and they would follow the recommendation of the biologists of the colony as to minimum size and sex of
the creature to be pursued.

Sirella was actually anxious to get started. For one thing, she knew this wasn't about the hunt. It was about face. That thought produced a slight smirk. She expected to see muddy faces before long. Everyone knew that the Federation types did not hunt.

It would be interesting to see them try to catch up once the scent of the beast was caught. Sirella stripped off the long robe that covered her hunting outfit. Now she was in practical boots, a short skirt and bosom-revealing top. Fur and studs lined her vest and collar. She hefted her chosen spear, checked her other weapons and nodded at her crew. They were ready.

She turned to tell the House Presba to hurry up and had to hold back a curse.

Asil, Deanna, Phoebe and Vrald were gathered in a loose semicircle, weapons ready. They were speaking quietly. The women's hands were moving in quick, tiny flashes. Sirella couldn't help but think those movements meant something, but she couldn't interpret them.

Vrald looked up and caught Sirella's gaze. She respected Vrald, but she didn't understand his current obsession with this House. Or rather, she did understand it and she didn't approve of it. She glanced briefly at Phoebe and her gaze flickered back to him. His expression firmed.

She had no quibble with the architect and the truth was, he could dabble with whom he wanted to. She turned back to her people and got their acknowledgment. They were ready.

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They split up into different directions, and began their first search by spreading out into a wide semicircle. Asil was point for the House Presba. She had three short spears attached to a special unit on her back. She held the Tricorders and was glancing down at it. She had marked the location of the camp early on and had determined the radius of their search from there. The first group to spot their target would communicate with the other. They had all agreed that their first target would be firedogs.

Firedogs were middle sized, six legged creatures with dispositions reminiscent of angry badgers. They were called firedogs because of their reddish fur color and their propensity to spit sparks at whatever set their ire off. The amazing thing was that surrounding flora rarely caught fire. That might be because most creatures that would consider firedogs prey actually left the fierce creatures alone. The sparks were painful and not easily put out. As part of their plan to use what was gathered, the House Presba had already agreed to bring what they caught to their biologists for examination. Something useful might be in the creature's make up that could be useful.

Vrald accompanied the House Presba, even though he knew they would be holding back for him. It was part of a greater plan on his part, however. He did not believe that Sirella needed to know the truth too early.

He liked that the women were already communicating via that silent language of theirs. He subtly encouraged its continuation. He also encouraged them, whenever they were ready, to put away the Tricorders. "Use your senses. Remember what you learned yesterday."

Phoebe snorted. "Yeah, I learned that dermal regenerators are a good thing." The black eye she'd acquired later that afternoon had been its own learning experience.

He grinned at her.

Asil said, "I have a signal. It is currently not moving."
Vrald indicated that they should squat down. "Now you must think in terms of what it is like to be an animal. You do not know yet what its state of being is. Is it well? Is it unwell? Does it have pups to protect? Is it in hiding? Out in the open?"

Asil lifted the Tricorders, watching the signal. "It is moving now, away from us."

"Was it close by?"

"No. I do not believe that it knew of our presence."

"Let us go to that point then and examine the area. There may be sign that can be used at a later time."

The women agreed, thinking it was a good idea.

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Vrald’s tutorials continued to come in handy. He was correct about finding and identifying sign. They found fairly clear paw prints and some tufts of reddish fur. There was also a carcass of some sort of deer-like creature, which had obviously eaten. "We should contact Sirella's group. They will want to see this."

"It would be the right thing to do," commented Deanna. Phoebe agreed.

Vrald kept his opinion about that to himself. But he was pleased to note that the women compared notes on the input of their senses with each other and the Tricorders. It was possible, if the Tricorders should become 'lost,' they would be able to find a firedog without it now.

Not that he planned on making their lives that interesting. Sirella was going to be revelation enough.

And, of course, she was.

"Well, why didn't you go after it?"

"We thought you would like to be informed first. It is not, after all a competition."

"Not a competition? Of course it is. This is a hunt." Her people were moving around, crouching and learning the signs. "And you're letting the prey get away." Sirella then turned and gave orders to her people. Asil decided the better part of valor was to say nothing.

Moments later one of the Klingons raised their weapon, "I have it!" He then took off and was followed by other enthusiastic hunters. Sirella watched as Asil lifted the Tricorders and shook her head in disgust. Then she also took off at a run.

Vrald waited, wondering what the House Presba would do.

Asil tucked the Tricorders in her belt. "If we follow the Klingons we will lose the trail. The Tricorders indicates that the firedog turned near the river. If we cut across we can be there in half of the time."

"Agreed." Deanna said.

Phoebe looked at Vrald. "It's not cheating if we get there first is it?"

"I don't think so."
"Then let's go."

They then scrambled through the forest at a diagonal to the direction that others took.

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The interesting thing about firedogs, Phoebe thought later, was that they managed to blend with their surroundings so effectively. If it hadn't been for scent and a quick double check on the tricorders, they would have thought that the creature had disappeared.

They were on a hill and had dispersed to make covering the area a bit easier. In the distance, Phoebe thought she could hear Sirella and her group making their way through the forest.

The firedog had apparently dug in. It was possible that it had sensed them somehow. Now they just had to find it.

Phoebe had a short spear in one hand and she used the other to move foliage out of the way as she needed to. Vrald was somewhere close and, with all her senses already set on high, she was as highly aware of him as she was of her own heart beating.

They moved forward cautiously, trying not to startle the firedog before the right time. One of Sirella's guards burst forward in front of Phoebe, sweating and grinning. The human instinctively stilled, as if it were she who were the prey. She thought perhaps he could sense her presence, but if he did, he was ignoring it. Instead he loped into brush. Another member of Sirella's guard followed him.

Phoebe remained still; waiting to see whom else would go running forward. She thought about racing towards the firedog, but the family had already chosen their method. She stuck with the plan, even though she knew it was about to get skewered.

There was a shout in the distance, not too far and she made her way forward, just a little more quickly. Then there was a different noise, a fiery, bursting kind of noise and then a howl of pain. Someone had found the firedog.

Phoebe raced forward now. She wasn't quite sure what she would do, but she felt the need to be active. She entered a small clearing. One of Sirella's people was rolling on the ground. Smoke and fire was coming off of him. The other had a long bowed sword raised and it was coming down.

There was another sizzling pop kind of yelping sound and then the other Klingon was howling in pain. Several people showed up at once, including Sirella and Asil. The firedog had its snout low to the ground, but its haunches were up and it was growling ferociously. Sirella threw her spear. The firedog darted past the Klingon who was yelling and furiously slapping at the flames on his chest. Sirella's spear landed sharply in the ground. Only it didn't just land, it plunged and sunk deep.

Then the ground moved under their feet.

The ground shook and it lifted. And then it roared. By simple luck Sirella had found one of a very few sensitive spots.

Phoebe found herself backpedaling and then falling. She landed against something... no ... someone solid. Vrald was standing, holding tight to a trembling tree with one hand and Phoebe with the other. He was grinning ear to ear with the excitement of it all.

"It seems, Sirella, that you have discovered a new life form," he shouted.

The Klingon woman growled and grabbed the nearest trunk.
"We need to get off of this thing!" Deanna shouted. "It's going to move!"

It was a fair warning, but the hill was already moving. There was creaking, tearing noise and as Phoebe looked down, she saw that the land and all the stuff on it, was parting ways. The firedog had already leapt off and was streaking away. "I suggest we go down," said Phoebe. "Quickly."

"Oh, I agree."

Vrald let go of the tree and of Phoebe. They started running down the 'hill.' They weren't the only one's who thought of it. Other creatures of a variety of sizes and types were bounding away and past them. Deanna, Asil and Sirella were also making their escape.

Apparently the creature wasn't very fast, which was something to be grateful for, but that didn't mean they didn't have to make the leap from a great height. The jump carried them into the air and down.

Phoebe landed on her feet and rolled. When she turned to look, she saw massive legs above her and what looked like a tortoiseshell bottom, a really large one, over her head. There was a gigantic hole in the ground where the creature had been resting. It began lumbering to the north, slowly lifting and dropping its humongous trunk-sized legs. The ground shook while it walked. There was a blast of sound that had Phoebe covering her ears in self-defense.

"Holy Moly," Phoebe whispered in awe. She managed to get to a standing position.

Vrald was suddenly there. He was scratched, bruised. Leaves littered his hair and beard. He smelled heavenly to Phoebe. All she wanted to do at that moment was lick him. What she did instead was lean against him.

The hunters, now a bit discombobulated, gathered together to watch and be jostled as the creature strode away, trumpeting its annoyance.

They all looked a bit worse for wear, some more so than others. "I will take the injured back to the camp," offered Vrald. "The sun is still high in the sky and you may catch the firedog yet."

Phoebe made a snap decision. "I'll go with you. You can't take both of them yourself."

Sirella, Asil and Deanna looked at each other. "Agreed," said Sirella.

A still smoky and definitely burned Klingon handed Sirella his spear. "The firedog is worthy prey. Quapla!"

She turned to the other women. "Let's go."

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They let Sirella lead and set the speed. She started off at a jog, believing it would be quick enough to set some distance between her and the other two. But they paced her.

The more she noticed that they kept up, the more she pushed. Soon they were racing through the foliage, not necessarily incautiously so, but still greenery was still catching them in the face and other exposed places. Deanna was sure she had run through a sticky web or two, a most uncomfortable feeling. Asil appeared not to be discomfited at all, but then it was apparent that the Klingon had forgotten that Vulcans had superior strength and stamina.
They probably would have kept it up, going faster and faster until someone got hurt, except that Deanna called out. "Wait. We've lost the trail!"

The halting was staggered, as the others realized the truth. Sirella said some awful Klingon cuss words. Asil merely started back to where Deanna was standing, waiting. The uniform was keeping them comfortable, because Seven designed it that way. The Betazoid pointed. "I lost the scent sometime ago."

"You, a Betazoid, lost the scent?" Sirella queried in disbelief.

"Yes, Sirella." Deanna said with maybe a touch of pride. "About a quarter of a kilometer back there." She most carefully did not reply "You, a Klingon, forgot to keep track of the scent?!" That would have been bad manners.

"A quarter!" Not quite as outraged as she sounded the Klingon groused and said a few more words of a spicy nature. Then she inhaled deeply, grimaced, and stalked back the way they'd come. Deanna tossed Asil a look and shrugged. Then they followed the caustic woman as they backtracked.

Sure enough, they found that the firedog had taken a divergent path. They followed, this time a bit more slowly, until they found their bearings. They paused at what looked like a moss strewn ground. Sirella started forward and Deanna grabbed her arm.

The Klingon turned and growled, but Deanna was looking out at the ground. She said, "Wait a minute. This doesn't feel right."

She walked forward, just a little, and realized what seemed odd. In a forest there is always detritus. There are leaves and twigs and small grasses and bugs and in general, it's a bit like walking on a crunchy rug. But this space, which they had passed, (and now Deanna was thinking it were probably fortunate), that debris just cut off and there was what appeared to be only dirt and moss. She crouched, and brushed her hand over the odd demarcation. "Look at this."

"So? It's obviously safe. The firedog chose this route."

"Did it?" Deanna pulled her Tricorder, which led Asil to pull hers.

Sirella spouted off some Klingonese and started jogging forward, still making sounds of imprecation. She was about a third of a way towards the other side when Deanna shouted another warning. Then, a giant, tubular, organically pink, not-quite-a-spike burst out of the ground in front of her. It was mobile, twisting above Sirella like a hypnotized snake. The Klingon began backtracking as fast as she could. More spikes erupted around her.

Asil and Deanna sprinted forward, not avoiding the sod that was being flung, but definitely doing their best to avoid those towering worm-like things. The spikes began twisting, bending to the side, like gruesome tongues.

"I will have our biologist run another scan of the planet."

"Well, I'm sure they'll be thrilled. Two new species. We won't be able to keep them away."

Deanna and Asil reached Sirella at the same time. They each grabbed one of the Klingon woman's arms and lifted her bodily off the ground, and then they turned right around and ran back, carrying Sirella like a protesting sack of grain.

It wasn't until her feet were planted back on the ground that she realized just how fast and how far she had been carried. Sirella felt the first glimmer of respect.
They watched the worm-tongue-snake things snap out, bend over and whirl along the ground from a safer distance. "Well," said Deanna, "That explains that."

"Do you think the firedog survived?"

"There is no way to know. It's lived here longer than we have. I can say that we didn't pick it up on the Tricorders. If it did live, it was moving fast and it was gone out of the Tricorders' range by the time we got here."

"Speaking of moving fast, is it me, or are they... is ...it... moving in this direction."

"Sirella," said Deanna, "I don't mean to sound cowardly, but I feel a sudden urge to be elsewhere."

"Deanna," said Sirella, "I believe that may be a very good idea." Then she turned and grinned at the Betazoid. "On the other hand, just think what a great hunt that will make." She hefted the spear, which would have done nothing against that predator. "Not today mind you. And I still want a firedog. But make sure the biologists find out what kind of creature it is. It may be one creature or many. Either way, it will make for an interesting fight. We should go back to the camp. Just... not the way we came."

"Wise," said Asil. "We do not know if it can follow us yet. We will need to hurry to buy time. And we'll need to move camp."

"Absolutely. Oh, and we should post a warning about camping in suspiciously ... clean... areas."

They all had a moment of respect for the predator, which definitely and quickly moving in their direction.

"Let's go."

This time when they ran, Sirella didn't bother holding back.

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It chased them for a good while. There was a wide, long path that followed persistently behind them. There would be things for the biologists to discover, such as why it ate some trees and avoided others, but still, there was practically a road behind them. Deanna said, when they were finally able to stop and catch their breaths, that the reason it stopped finally, was that it was full and tired.

They had no idea how long that would last, so they didn't rest long, but they did take a chance and started heading back towards the camp.

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It was slow going for Vrald, Phoebe, and the two Klingons who had been injured. They eventually arrived at camp. By that time, the Klingons were in great pain and were more than cooperative with Phoebe when she applied the first analgesic. The part that made her squeamish was the removal of their hunting outfits. They had to cut them free and then pick out the pieces.

Fortunately, the Klingons didn't feel a thing. Between the bloodwine that Vrald administered and the painkiller that Phoebe gave them, they were quite comfortable. They even let the dermal regenerators get used. Vrald had Phoebe leave a symbolic scar, one that proved their encounter had been both fiery and painful.

He said it would keep them humble.
Phoebe had some doubts about that.

One troublesome side effect of all this was that, given the not quite conscious state of the other two, Phoebe and Vrald were essentially now alone. Together. In a camp. With beds. Very empty, calling beds.

Phoebe, who was usually the talkative one, found that she couldn't think of anything to say. She had things she wanted to say, but all of them were highly inappropriate to a man of his station. So, since she had nothing to say, she busied herself and made them a meal. She made something appropriately wiggly and alive for him and something definitely cooked for her.

They sat on some logs that had been moved to act as seats around the fire. They ate in silence, neither daring to say a word. The food, at least, was good enough to justify the quiet.

The natural sounds around them filled in the space between them.

Phoebe finally said, "Do you think we ought to start a fire?"

"It's early, but a fire can be useful. We can gather wood."

"That sounds like a good idea." She didn't say it was because it would keep her hands busy.

"I'll get the ax."

"I'll carry."

"Good."

With the agreement made, they set about the taking care of the chore. They found another log of good proportions and a usefully flat space. Vrald took off his shirt and tied it around his waist. He was as handsomely fit as the Human woman had suspected.

That was the nearest Phoebe had ever come to swooning in her life.

She bit a part of her cheek to keep from saying anything. Vrald made that first lift and swing and she bit harder, hard enough to draw blood. The ax came down and split that log. It was about that time that Phoebe thought, You know, we could have used Phasers.

And something clicked in her brain, just something strange and wonderful. She bent down, picked up a quarter-sized pebble, a rock. Then she pegged him with it, smack on the shoulder. Because she knew he had done that on purpose.

Fortunately, the ax hadn't been raised again. He reared back, and turned to give Phoebe a startled look. She glared at him. "I can't believe you did that!"

"Did what?" he asked in genuine confusion.

"You know exactly what you did. Taking off your shirt like that. Then swinging that ax like... like a man! You knew how it would affect me and you did it on purpose!"

"What!"

She bent down again, and - even though she knew she was acting completely irrationally -- she picked up another stone and she pegged him again. This time on the chest. "You son of a -"

"Phoebe," he growled warningly. "Do not start this."
"Don't start this! Me? You already broke our... our... unspoken agreement!" Another rock went skittering past him. It only missed his forehead only because he was smart enough to duck. "I was doing just fine with it until you took off your damn shirt."

He turned more fully towards her and saw that she was, as far as he could tell, well and truly angry. And her scent told him, completely turned on. He thought, though he knew he had to be mistaken, that he smelled blood. He tried one more time with rationality. "Phoebe...I am an old man."

"Old man my foot! You're the most handsome thing around here and you know it!" She stepped back, actively looking at the ground for something else to throw. "I know there has to be a larger one around here somewhere."

"Phoebe," he growled, and there was something different in his intonation. She heard it, but it didn't register.

She spotted a palm-sized rock, one that was smooth all the way around. She bent and then picked it. Then she righted herself and popped the stone up once, so it bounced back into her hand. Oh yes. It would do.

She glared at him and he was looking at her so strangely. "Phoebe," he said, wagging his finger at her. "If you throw that, I will not be held responsible."

She literally snarled at him when she pulled back her arm and then let loose a throw worthy of one of the greats in the old earth sport of baseball.

It missed him, but only because he rushed at her. Her eyes widened and then she began to back pedal and then she turned around to run, but he was moving fast - because he knew she could outrun him and he didn't want her to.

He grappled her, lifting her kicking and roaring off the ground. "Put me down!"

"No. You will listen." He held her wriggling form tight, fearlessly. The he said the words he hadn't said. "I want you Phoebe Janeway. I have wanted you, needed you, since the first day we met. I love you, but I am..."

"Noooo. Don't say it!"

"... But I am an old man. True, I have many years ahead of me, but Phoebe, you could have anyone."

Phoebe was weeping. "I don't want anyone else. I want you. I want you. Please...."

She stopped struggling and he set her down on her feet, without letting her go. He couldn't yet.

She turned in his arms. "Please. Vrald. It's you. I know it's you." She pressed against him, breathing him in.

"Phoebe."

"Look, even if you... don't want me forever. I need you... Like my own breath." Her fingernails pressed into his chest, as if she were gripping onto him for dear life. He hissed, both in pleasure and pain. "Let me have you. Even if it's just for today, tonight. I don't think I can go another day without you."

He couldn't argue with that. He felt the same way and her need was so strong that it vibrated within
him.

He lifted her up and kissed her as hard and long as he’d ever wanted to kiss her. She pressed just as urgently against him. Their hunger burned and their hands began to do what came naturally in such need.

"Oh, shit! Damn it! Sorry, Phoebe, Vrald we have to pack up. We have to move. We can not stay here."

They kissed a bit more, hearing the words on the outside, but not quite aware.

"Phoebe, Vrald. Back to Presba!" There was a clapping sound, or maybe it was just in their heads.

They pulled away from each other and turned to look at those who had interrupted them.

A mud covered, weary looking Deanna said to them, "I am truly sorry to tell you this, but we must move. And we must move quickly. It has started after us again."

"It?" Vrald asked, trying to catch up.

"Sirella found another giant. Only this one has..." Deanna waved her hands high in the air in wriggly movements, "enormous tentacles or tongues or... something. And it's eating its way to us. We have to go." She now waved her hands in shooing motions towards them and the ship.

Asil had grabbed the ax and Sirella grabbed the wood that had been chopped. They walked rapidly past them. "No time to waste," Asil said, "You may kiss in the shuttle."

That forced blood to their heads. Phoebe pulled her shirt down and Vrald also set to ordering himself.

Deanna also sailed past them, which emphasized the urge to hurry. So they followed quickly.

Fortunately, aside from moving the still recuperating Klingons, taking down the camp was almost as easy as putting it up. They made a snap decision to leave the logs alone, gathered up all the gear and were in the shuttle in mere minutes.

As the shuttle lifted, the sound of trees cracking and breaking could be heard in the distance.

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It was agreed by all parties that perhaps camping was something that could wait. They made their way quickly back to the resort. Phoebe clung to Vrald's hand and wouldn't let go. He wasn't getting away any time soon.

For once, Sirella was complimentary. "This was good. We *will* do it again. We must get together and plan. Tell me when your biologists have more information."

"We will be sure to do that, Sirella. Would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow?"

"Yes. We will speak more then."

"Excellent."

With that, Sirella and the two Klingons hopped out of the shuttle and made their way to their rooms.

Deanna turned towards Vrald and Phoebe. "Your house or ours?"
"Mine," said the Klingon firmly. Phoebe only nodded, looking somewhere between shocked and extraordinarily needful.

"Asil, you heard the man."

A few moments later, Vrald and Phoebe were delivered and Asil and Deanna were on their way home.

"Well, that went well. Within reason." Deanna said conversationally. She turned to look at her cousin. Asil was grimacing. "Asil, are you okay?"

The Vulcan did not answer for a moment. She was focusing on landing the shuttle. But once they were on the ground, she turned to Deanna. Her expression was tense. "I will be fine," she said. "I just need to meditate."

Deanna felt a shimmer of something up her spine. "I ... see."

There was a moment of quiet between them and they stood up, as if in agreement. Deanna most carefully did not touch Asil. But she did say, "Asil... if you need...."

"I will be fine. I ... am not hungry. I will not be at dinner tonight."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow."

Deanna hung back and gave Asil room to leave first. The woman walked of the vessel without looking back. Deanna took a deep breath and wavered.

Then she turned towards the communication panel on the shuttle.
Desperate messages flew towards Alexander at speeds faster than could be truly comprehended. Tight beams of urgent sound threw themselves into space in hopes of being captured at the right time and right place. Those beams were routed and rerouted through complex technological objects to aid the process.

The honorable young Klingon and his crew, however, were fighting for their lives.

They had been patrolling as normal when a Cardassian ship, much larger than the scout, appeared before them. There were no words of warning. It simply fired on them. Their small ship rocked on impact, but was still functioning. Patrol meant that shields remained on, just as a basic safety measure. It saved their lives. They fought back, moving with agile quickness and firing everything they had. They also sent their own desperate messages, hoping that those missives would push past the other ship's communication blockade.

They didn't have many choices. A scout's duty is different than others. They must live to run and get the message to those who needed to know. While they still had engines they fled, heading towards an active nebula that might provide refuge.

The Cardassian ship followed them. It was the skill of Alexander's navigator that kept them from being destroyed by the phasers fired in their direction. Their path twisted and rolled in space, as they took advantage of their size and the total area that was available. They dipped below and then behind the other ship, forcing it to turn around if the other captain wanted to fire at them. Sometimes ship design did matter. Then the smaller scout ship blazed forward and around, firing at the Cardassians along the way and streaking towards the dangerous safety of that large gaseous field.

The vicious dance continued deep into the nebula. Alexander successfully lost the other ship, but by that time, he, his ship, and his people were deeply wounded. It would take days before the communication systems would be repaired enough to receive the messages and weeks before the ship would be repaired enough to get out of the nebula.

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The night was restless for Deanna. She did sleep, but it was disturbed by heated dreams. She would awaken, breathing hard and knowing that what was difficult for her must be beyond challenging for Asil. She was only picking up on the emotional residue, but it was much more potent than she remembered such events being while on the Enterprise.

It was probably the proximity. The UFS Enterprise was a very big starship. There had been true distance between herself and any Vulcans on board.

After working out that theory for the umpteenth time, she would turn around and try for sleep again.

It was a very long night.

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Asil did not sleep. She meditated.

It should have been easy. She had long ago mastered the techniques. But her mind would not rest.
part of her lingered on the thought that she knew it wasn't time. She went through the basic calculations. If she was correct about what she was experiencing, then it should have been months, perhaps up to a year away.

Asil brought herself to heel, reminded herself that even if it was the mating drive, it was still early in the phase. She would expect herself to behave normally and she would think her way through it. There was a logical path in the madness.

There had to be.

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Guinan was already up by the time Deanna finally gave in. The Betazoid entered the family room. The El-Aurian was there. She handed a warm steaming cup of cocoa to the Betazoid without Deanna even having to ask. "You are a miracle, Guinan. What did we ever do to deserve you?"

The El-Aurian smiled in amusement and didn't answer that question. Instead she said, "Tell me about it." She led Deanna to a comfortable seat.

"I'm worried, Guinan. There hasn't been a reply from Alexander, yet." Deanna sipped her cocoa and drew in a breath.

"How long has it been?"

"Ten hours."

"That's not unusual."

"Under normal circumstances no."

"I take it your message was important."

"I realize that I could be wrong, but Asil..." It wasn't that she couldn't trust Guinan. It was that Vulcans were so private. "Asil, I think, will need him soon."

Guinan settled more comfortably and considered. Then she said slowly, "Deanna, there is a war on. There may be a reason that we haven't heard back."

"We?"

Guinan nodded. "I sent a message to him before you went on the hunt."

Deanna stared at the El-Aurian for a moment. Her expression tightened. "Guinan..."

"Deanna, I think you may need to consider that Alexander may not be able come."

"But Asil..."

"Is a Vulcan. There are other things that play in their thinking. Keep in mind that Asil and Alexander weren't committed yet."

"But..."

"Deanna, you have some choices to make. Life and death choices. Asil is still very young and has never mated."
The Betazoid soberly contemplated the implications of that as the El-Aurian stood up. "I considered, for a moment, myself. I haven't counted myself out but, like you, there are other things for me to consider. But I won't hesitate if it is meant to be." She started to walk away, then turned and said, "Think about it... logically. The answer is there."

Asil joined them later.

Deanna and Guinan were preparing for Sirella's visit.

The illusion was that Asil appeared completely relaxed and calm. Deanna could sense the difference, however. She did not speak of it. Instead she said, "Phoebe and Vrald will not be joining us tonight."

The Vulcan nodded easily in response, but didn't say much.

"We thought we might try a few traditional Klingon dishes to go with our usual fare. Something to make Sirella comfortable."

"A logical choice," replied Asil. Then she set about to do her part.

Sirella arrived at their doorstep with only one guard. They invited her in graciously and the guard then took a stance of attention outside of the abode. It was an unspoken compliment.

Nothing snarky was said about the décor. There were no words about how small the building was. She was unusually courteous and oddly relaxed, compared to all their previous contact. The hunting experience had been a revelation for Sirella. She was beginning to see what her husband saw in these people.

Deanna was more than grateful for the change. She led the Klingon woman into the dining area, which had been transformed by drapery and tall candles into a more Klingon friendly space. The table was filled with loaded plates of food and large pitchers of drink to be poured.

Sirella was actually somewhat complimentary.

The four adults and the two children sat down to eat and then the real conversations, beyond the pleasantries of greeting, began. Barin, who was now four and old enough to stay up just a little longer was very proud of that fact. He talked with Sirella about his age change for several minutes, which was quite lengthy for the normally quiet child. He was developing some very interesting perspectives about life, some of them influenced by his cousin Auloh, and he was fearless about eating what was available. He liked Gagh.

Deanna wondered what her mother would say about that when she returned. The Betazoid purposely avoided thoughts that reflected the idea that Lwaxana might not return. She chose to believe.

She gazed affectionately at her brother, even while he happily grasped a good amount of the wriggly snack in his hand and then put it in his mouth. Then chewed.

Deanna shuddered delicately and smiled ruefully. Some tastes were simply acquired.

Sirella was surprisingly kind to the youngster. She listened to him talk about his current enthusiasms. She found that talking to the children actually provided a better picture of what the House Presba was trying to accomplish. She was gratified to see that they included themselves in the process of
education.

She was beginning to realize that perhaps she had been a bit quick to judge. Of course, she wasn't entirely enamored, but she was one step closer to appreciation.

On the other hand, once he was done speaking, conversation came to a skidding halt. It amused Sirella quite a bit. It was so similar to what a Klingon child might do.

Guinan, being who she was, took up the slack. "So, Sirella, Deanna tells me you found giants. I'd love to hear about it from your perspective."

Now the Klingon grinned. She began to tell her tale.

As Deanna listened she experienced an epiphany. The whole reason that Klingons liked to live dangerously, aside from being adrenaline junkies, was that they liked to tell the story afterwards. It was fascinating the way Sirella practically lit up and there was genuine warmth in her body language. It was the first time that Deanna thought of Sirella as charming.

Asil also listened. She was not charmed. She was restless and uncomfortable. She tried to still her mind and simply be present, but it simply was not to be. She had no opinion on what Sirella said or even how she said it. But it was affecting Asil never the less.

It was the memory, which budded a theory about the progression of her current symptoms. She was coming to the conclusion that the sheer physicality of the run during the hunt had both escalated the Ponn Farr and provided personal focus. She longed for that focus at the moment. She felt as if her mind and her urges were wandering everywhere.

She wanted. And it was so intense.

She recognized the feeling from before. It was completely undirected, a consequence of the loss of her original attachment. It burned. And it was desperately frustrating.

The stare she was maintaining in order to remain neutral turned more and more into a glare. She couldn't help it. She wasn't even aware that it was happening.

It was simply unfortunate that the glare happened to have a direction. Sirella finally turned and stared back at Asil and growled, "What!"

It was the growl. It set off the Vulcan. She stood, slapped the table, and growled right back, "I warned you."

Barin grasped one of Auloh's hands and stood up, then pulled her away from the table. He had one live worm still in his hand, so quickly popped it in his mouth and ate it. The Klingon girl was watching everything avidly. She was still eating a hamburger, a sandwich made with a raw patty, pickles, mayo and cheese that she had come to adore.

"Warned me?"

"I warned you not to underestimate us at the very beginning." She slapped the cup in front of her. It went flying away. The liquid flew out in a beautiful red arc.


Asil turned her attention to the Betazoid. She snapped at the counselor. "She is always challenging
me! Every time we see her, she has something to say." She turned and growled at the other woman.

The Klingon's pulse was racing. She stood up. She placed her hand on her dk-tahg. "Do not do anything you will regret, Asil. I will defend myself."

The table lifted and went flying towards a wall. The table was not a small object and it crashed hard enough to crack the wall it connected with. Fortunately it had flown away from Guinan, who remained seated. Her eyes were a little wide, however, and the fork she was holding towards her mouth trembled. Her eyes were not the only wide ones.

Asil's howl was still reverberating through room when she suddenly rushed at the Klingon.

Sirella was immediately crouching in a defensive position. She didn't even have time to draw her knife when she was pushed away. She landed with a respectable thud on the ground at Guinan's feet.

Now the El-Aurian was looking down, so she missed the vision of seeing Deanna grab Asil by the shoulders only to be pushed back by the force of their impact. The Betazoid shouted "Asil! Asil! Pull it together."

Their bodies were pressed against one another, their legs threaded. The Vulcan snarled. "Asil," Deanna tried again. "She was *not* challenging you."

Asil hissed, "Then what was she doing?" Her fingertips were pressed into the wall. The indentations went up to the first knuckle.

Deanna's hands were pressed against Asil. There was no room to move, but she was feeling all sorts of sensations, mental and physical. She felt the edge of the burn in Asil.

It tasted... Hot.

She sent soothing thoughts, forcing herself to stay focused for the both of them. "She was just talking about our adventure. We were all having a good time. She was telling us how much she enjoyed herself."

There was a sound as the wall began to compress under the pressure. Asil was squeezing her hands together. The wall was losing the battle.

Sirella, who by that time managed to turn around, paled at the sight, and felt a moment of instant respect.

"I think," said Deanna slowly, carefully, "that it would be a good idea for you to go meditate for a moment."

"Meditate." Asil was leaning in and breathing in deeply. Deanna shivered against her.

"Yes. You need to go meditate. Just for a moment." Deanna swallowed tightly.

"What is this?" Sirella asked no one in particular. She was standing protectively in front of Guinan. The dk-tahg was now firmly in her grip. Guinan was leaning over behind her to get a better look. Barin and Auloh were watching things with just as much fascination. They were behind Guinan now.

"I can't explain it at the moment, Sirella," Deanna said. Her expression was intense, as she concentrated fiercely. "Asil. Go meditate. You can do this."
Asil pulled away, slowly, and reluctantly. The plascrete left in her hand crumbled in her grip. White crumbs fell to the ground, now drifting dust. She spoke carefully, barely looking at Deanna - or for that matter, anyone. "I apologize. I... will go ... meditate... now." Her expression was pained. It was, Deanna knew, a perfect reflection of the feeling flowing through Asil at the moment. She was literally in pain, literally mad with it.

The Vulcan turned away and stalked out of the dining room that was now in shambles. They were silent during her exit. No one wanted to say anything that would change her direction.

The Mistress of the House Martok did not get that way by being dumb. She waited until the Vulcan was safely out of the room before saying, "Well. You women of House Presba know how to keep things interesting."

Deanna uttered a weak, helpless laugh. She was still against the wall, pressing against it for support until her legs could do the job adequately. Her voice was a little shaky. There were lots of reasons for that. "You'll have to forgive her. She is... not herself."

Sirella was nodding. She turned to examine Guinan and the children. They were, of course, fine. Then she grinned as pieces fell together for her. "I know what this is. I've heard of it. I knew she was behaving strangely for a Vulcan."

Deanna was going to prevaricate, but she changed her mind. She turned her attention to the Klingon. Her expression was apologetic. She still couldn't move from the wall. She wasn't ready. She said, "Sirella, Asil is experiencing a mating drive. We thought that it would be Alexander..."

"Alexander?" Sirella interrupted. "What does he have to do with this?"

"My son was wooing Asil." There was grief in Deanna's voice. "But I don't think that match was meant to be."

"Your son?" More pieces were falling into place. It had not been as she had feared. It wasn't about Martok. Of course, she would have opposed Alexander, at least in form. She would have had to test them for worthiness anyway. But it wasn't Martok who had been interested. That knowledge changed everything for her.

"Yes," Deanna was saying. "Talk with Worf, if you need a clarification." Deanna's mind was racing. "But it doesn't matter now. We don't have the time to wait. I don't think she will last the night if we don't do something."

"Deanna, have you decided?" Guinan asked.

The Betazoid turned to the El-Aurian. Her black eyes were very dark. "Yes."

"Then you know what you must do."

Deanna nodded. "Guinan..."

"I'll take care of them. Go."

"You'll excuse me, Sirella."

The Klingon hesitated, and then said, kindly. "I will speak to you after. There is still much to discuss."

"Please," The Betazoid looked around the demolished room, but she felt the offer must be made.
"Please make yourself at home. Our house is yours."

The Klingon nodded. "Go."

"Yes," whispered Deanna as she pushed away from the wall with both determination and trepidation.

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Asil was not sure how she'd made it to her room. She leaned her head against the wall, feeling both cold and hot. Tendrils of shock thrilled through her body. She could still smell Deanna, hear the beat of her heart, and feel the heat of her body. More, she felt the delicate touch of the Betazoid's mind. The Betazoid reached, even now, through the tumultuous whirlwind of fire that was Asil's mind.

She resisted. She had to resist, for it would change everything between them - the comfortable understandings that they had reached over their time knowing one another would alter. Asil wasn't ready.

She wasn't ready. It was too early.

She snarled at the wall she leaned against and threw her fist into it.

The plascrete buckled, crunched and dissolved under her assault. But her fist didn't make it through the wall, which was designed to resist all sorts of impacts. A part of her mind ruminated over the idea that they were going to have to remodel. The company who installed this building had obviously used lesser quality materials.

The pain cleared her thoughts for a few moments. She stepped back and forced herself to where her meditation supplies remained. She'd left them out. It was an unusual action for Asil.

She carefully set a new incense bar in the ornate golden burner. Then lifted the lighter, noting the green that covered her knuckles and discarding that awareness. The lighter trembled in her hand, but one click and it lit. She dipped the fire onto the aromatic substance. Smoke soon curled into the air.

She inhaled deeply, drawing on the kinetic memory of her body to remind herself of the method. Asil's lanky form sank to the ground, her legs crossing with familiar ease. She brought her hands together in the ancient form. She would succeed.

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"Go away!" Asil responded to the door chime with uncharacteristic inhospitality. The entrance the Vulcan's room, however, was not locked. It opened anyway.

Deanna slid into the room quietly. It was even warmer than the Vulcan normally kept it. Deanna was hardly aware of it. Incense provided a heady punctuation to the normal scents in the air. Or maybe it was the pheromones and the blood. Deanna looked around and spotted the compressed point on the wall. "Asil."

"Go. Away."

"I can not."

There was a low growl from a shadowy corner. The light was dim, but Deanna could see Asil crouched and holding her hands clasped, index fingers touching, in front of her. "You must go Deanna Troi. This is not for you to see."
The curvaceous Betazoid moved slowly, cautiously. "I have seen it before Asil."

The Vulcan's head jerked up and she snarled as irrational jealousy flooded her mind.

Deanna raised her hands. "Not like that. Not like that. I am a counselor, remember? I was on the Enterprise."

Asil was not mollified, but she also didn't rush the other woman. Instead backed away from the slowly approaching brunette. "Deanna, it is not, cannot be, now." The Vulcan shuddered violently enough that it was visible to Deanna.

"In counseling we call that denial."

Asil continued to back away, leaning against the wall for support. "I have been meditating. It will be successful. It is unnecessary for you to be here."

Deanna continued to speak gently as she stalked Asil, "Meditation is a wonderful tool. But it is not the solution here. It can only be an aid along the way. It can not substitute for what you need."

"What do you know of what I need?"

They had now made their way around half of the main room. Deanna could see into the bedroom. She realized she needed to give Asil a different perspective.

She tugged at the hem of her blouse, freeing it from her slacks. Then she drew the blouse over her head quickly. She let it drop to the floor and then began on the clasp of her bra.

"What are you doing?"

"I am undressing."

There was a groan, a sound of weariness and need. "I will be..." Asil couldn't do it. She couldn't lie. She was not fine.

The bra came off with little fan fare. Asil, on the other hand was immediately placed on the alert. Her body knew, even as she resisted.

"Do you think you are the only one who needs, Asil?" Deanna tried reason as she undid the clasp of her trousers. She stepped out of her shoes, and then her socks.

"Do you know what you are committing to, Deanna?" The Vulcan responded. She had stopped moving, so Deanna stopped walking towards her - for just a moment. Asil continued, "This is not something that is entered into lightly. It is my life... and yours. Forever, Deanna."

The trousers slid off, revealing shapely hips and legs. Deanna kicked them off. "I know, Asil. I know what this means."

"You cannot want it."

"You cannot know what I want, Asil. Until you touch me. Or I let you know. And, if you are paying attention, I am letting you know." The panties came off. Deanna walked purposefully towards the other woman.

"And what of Alexander?"

"He is young. He will recover."
"And Worf?"

"He had his chance. He chose Jadzia."

"Will Riker?"

"You can't be serious. He has made his choices. And now, I am making mine."

Asil was running out of arguments and Deanna was standing perilously close. "What if I don't want you?"

Deanna laughed. She took a deep breath through her nose. Then she grinned wolfishly. "I can smell you, Asil. Try another."

"What will your mother think?"

Deanna was close enough that Asil could feel her heat. "Mother will love it. She will be thrilled. You forget Asil. She knows you. She likes you a good deal better than she ever liked Will."

Asil closed her eyes. "It is not a logical choice."

"I disagree. I think it's one of the most logical choices I have ever made." She leaned in. Her expression softened, as did her tone. "Asil, I know it hurts. I feel it." Another few centimeters and their bodies would be connected again. "Touch me. I am here. I am for you. It just took me awhile to realize it."

There was a sense of things hanging in the balance, of the arrival of the cusp. Deanna waited, knowing that it was important not to force Asil. It had to be the other woman's true decision, or it would always linger as a hurt between them.

Asil lifted her hand and for a minute Deanna didn't know what the statuesque woman intended. Then Asil's fingers spread. The Betazoid made a soft noise of relief as the Vulcan's fingertips pressed against her temple and jaw. She didn't really hear the words. She felt them.

It was a sweet, rough invasion. Asil did not have what it took to be gentle, yet her every effort bent in that direction. What she wasn't prepared for, though probably should have been, was that the Betazoid met her halfway. Their minds blended, melded, warmed to each other as they were revealed in total to one another. Privacy dropped away, erotically stripped for them, and discarded its covers to reveal cool and warm, indescribable passion and need. What started as a gentle spark and awareness between them, something that had always been there, but subtle and un-encouraged, blazed like fire with each new touch. It was as if a new warp-core had been brought to life.

Deanna's arms reached around. This time it was her capturing Asil against the wall and she finished the distance between them. She pressed urgently against Asil, who leaned from her greater height to meet her. Their mouths slammed together, and then softened once the urgent connection was established. Asil's hand ceased its amazingly powerful grip and drifted down Deanna's face, as the hold of the telepathic mating bond took on a new direction.

There were unexpected sounds, non-words and purrs of pleasure. Asil and Deanna pulled away as they realized and for a moment there was wonder shared between them. They looked at each other and marveled how they could have not seen this. Then Deanna grasped the front of Asil's top in her fists and it shredded away. She needed, they needed, more skin.

Asil couldn't help her there. Her own need demanded that she touch Deanna. Her hands were gliding along sleek pearl and pink skin, delighting in the smooth heat and physicality of the motion. She felt
her clothes parting ways with her body, from top to bottom, and non-verbally praised Deanna's efficiency.

The Betazoid didn't bother with a reply. Her kisses drew a wet, hot trail from Asil's lips to collarbone and then back again. Her hands seemed to be so many places at once, yet somehow they ended up supporting Asil's hips. Then Deanna lifted.

It was a startlement, delightful and supremely profound.

Asil laughed.

The noise was so sweet, was so rare, so awesome, that Deanna couldn't stop the smile, the overflow of light that exploded from her heart. Asil grasped Deanna's face and they kissed, while the Betazoid carried them to their bed.

It was a haven, soft and giving. Once they no longer had to focus on remaining upright, their attention made the full circle. The urgency they barely managed to stall claimed them and need guided need.

Their thoughts blended even more. Deanna lost track of who was who. She only knew what she needed to do, wanted to do. She wanted to fill Asil, feel Asil, and be felt by Asil. The taste of Asil's marvelous dark cocoa skin was almost enough. The wetness that her fingers glided through, were almost enough. There were places to be discovered. Deanna used Asil's self-knowledge as her erotic guide. She found points of stimulation that very few non-Vulcans were informed about. She lingered there, seeking, finding and delighting. Asil cried out in need. Deanna's mouth glided along the side of the Vulcan's face, neck, breasts, belly, thighs, between the thighs... everywhere.

Almost.

Almost.

There was something under that skin that called. She scented it, had smelled it since she entered the room.

Asil's hands were gripped tightly on her shoulders as she made her way up again. Deanna's fingers drew through the down of the Vulcan's sex. They came from two different worlds' oceans, yet there was that familiar slick feel. She wanted in, wanted to combine more deeply. She was wanted. Asil opened for her and Deanna connected. She was thrilled by the moist, intimate connection to her mate.

Her mate.

Her mate.

The growl of desire started low in her throat, erupted even as she pressed and pushed. Asil's fingernails were piercing Deanna's skin. Or was it Deanna's fingernails. She didn't know. But she felt an urge upon her tongue, a need for something else. A binding, a drive.

She laved her tongue around stirred, erect nipples, suckled. That wasn't quite it. But it tasted wonderful. Asil was rocking against her hand, desperately needing and wanting to be filled. Her head was thrown back against the pillow, her eyes closed tight. Her neck exposed. Deanna scented her way along that long line. No. Not there. It was as if she could see in different colors, here or here or even there. So many possible places, but where was the one?

She found herself back by Asil's sensitive breast. She teased them, brushed her teeth and tongue
against them. The Vulcan heart was lower on the body, she knew. But there was a point near here, a pulse point. She'd licked it before and caused her mate to arc.

Her mate.

Her mate.

Asil knew it as Deanna knew it. The shoulder, to the left, on the thick and powerful muscle. Here.

The bite was intense, deep. Asil howled, erupted into Eros' flame. Deanna tasted it all. Experienced the rolling orgasm with her mate. They both came, they both tasted.

It was salty, not coppery, something else, but all Asil. Her Asil. Her mate. There was a chemical genetic reaction, a fusion of something that had already been perfect made even more so. If Deanna had been male, Asil would have been pregnant on the spot. Even with that, they knew there were impossibilities made possible.

Somehow, someday, they would conceive. Not today. Not this moment. Another time. With help perhaps, but also without the usual problems that the blending of such parentages produced. But that was something for later. They would have their whole lives.

This time the mating was about the bonding.

Asil didn't hesitate - instinct threw her at Deanna. The Betazoid cried out with the pain, then the pleasure of it. Again there was that jolting song, this time through Asil's body, reflected. She arched again in erotic ecstasy, because Deanna had not stopped what she was doing and again it thrilled through them.

It was not a drinking. They didn't linger and pull. It was not that kind of hunger. They moved on and away, back to kissing, where the mixture of saliva and blood only solidified the bond further. And then it was forgotten, only slightly painful, because their bites were clean. The wounds closed quickly, would heal quickly. Bites in the future, if there were any, would only confirm what fact was already. The bond was true.

After that there were other things to learn about one another, wonderful things. They fell into each other, surrendered in ways that could never be verbally articulated.

It was awakening.

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They had no sense of time, though they knew it had passed. The room had moved from light to dark and then light again. It was base biology that separated them and that not for long.

The bed, gentle in itself, was not used gently. They forgot their own strength. There was a creak and a groan and then a metallic shearing noise. It was felled, its legs sliding under it to the side like a being too tired to move any further.

Asil laughed for the second time in her life and Deanna joined her.

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Days passed.

When they finally stepped out of Asil's rooms, it was as if they entered a new world. Both
Asil commented, as she took in the new decor, "I believe that Sirella took you at your word."

They could not yet bear not to touch. Their fingertips rested against one another and Deanna pressed gently into that contact, expressing her awareness of Asil's amusement. "It is a good thing that I meant it at the time."

"Yes."

"The others await."

They walked with serenity.

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They closer the came to the great room of the house, the more they heard. The noise of the guests carried. The sounds were jovial, loud. There was a full blown celebration going on.

They finally entered the bright, broad room. A shout rose up spontaneously to greet them. They found themselves pulled into the room, by eager hands. They were drawn to the center, where fire-red fur of immense size covered the floor and was positioned in the middle of it. To one side they saw Phoebe and Vrald gazing warmly at them. Phoebe was leaning into Vrald's embrace, as if she never wanted to leave. Deanna didn't have to see to know that they too shared a mark between them.

Guinan had paused in her circulation of the room. She had two large mugs in her hands. She raised them towards the new mates with a grin.

Then Sirella appeared in front of them, as if by magic. Though probably she had already been on the way. They had been effectively distracted. "So. It is done."

The two women looked at each other and then at the Mistress of House Martok. They nodded.

"And what proof do you have to offer us?"

It was an unexpected question. But it held an easy answer. Without speaking, they used their free hands to pull back clothing and exposed the oval bite marks.

The howls and applause that erupted from Klingons and other humanoids were amazing to here and behold. But it was nothing compared to the pandemonium that happened when Deanna said, "Oh, and we broke the bed."

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Afterward things calmed down a bit and the celebration took on a different direction, Sirella caught them up on the news and events.

Alexander had finally made contact and regretted, probably in ways more profound than he had been able to utter, that he would not be able to be there. But he was also alive after a serious Cardassian attack. His efforts had prevented a sneak attack, so he was a hero to the Empire. Worf had also contacted them to let them know that a Captain Will Riker had been allowed through the border and would be coming to visit soon. He had not said what news the Federation Captain carried.

The Presban Biology team had indeed gone into happy conniptions at the discovery of new species. They'd also made a few other discoveries about the creature that had chased Sirella, Deanna and
Asil. It was a tunneler as well as a ground grater. It explained certain anomalies that they had noted about Presba. Special security measures were enacted, including underground force fields and early warning systems. They had dubbed the creatures Presban Chasers. The other creature turned out to be a gentle giant, an herbivore that was so big that it was probably the Chaser's main prey. They dubbed it the Presban Megatortoise.

The new carpet and the decorations were a gift from Sirella. She and a team of Klingons had gone hunting again, now that they had more of an appreciation of the risks, and they'd found a bigger, better Firedog. They'd had a great adventure. They'd also encountered a pack of Hissing Fits -- which explained the furs on the walls in the hallway--, a new species of flying mammal - which they called Stingers - and an insect species as large as Ktald's fist. They named it Ktald's Biting Beetle, since it took out a good hunk of his thigh before they managed to get it off of him. The beetle was now pinned to a biologist's wall. Ktald was happy about that.

Sirella explained that she planned on visiting often, as she also planned on investing in Presba. "Yours is a worthy House. We will secure our alliance through bloodline. We will talk more about methods and donors later, after the celebration."

Deanna and Asil glanced at each other, and then nodded easily at the Klingon Matriarch.

Sirella grinned at them. "Good. Let's go eat." She slapped Asil on the back. "I am sure you're starving."
Captain Janeway, Shaman Orsas, Seven of Nine, Lieutenant Ro, and Lieutenant Paris gathered in the Docking Bay. Stinging Sparrow burbled a greeting as her portal opened. Commander Sofuru stepped out and onto the solid platform. "Thank you for coming," he greeted them. "In this session we will go over Stinging Sparrow's safety features. We will also demonstrate her operational systems including navigation. Only those of you who clear the examination afterwards will be allowed access to the system panels. Now, if you will follow me..."

Hours later the team felt confident that they would be able to do their part during their attempt in the wormhole. They would continue to research and study independently and meet again the next day for review. The day following, they would make the journey.

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The contact signal happened early in the morning. "Warlord Torres, would you have a moment to spare for your sister?"

B'Elanna, who was not on duty for the day, said, "I suppose so. Want me to have Voyager beam you over?"

"If you would, please. This is a family matter. More, it is a matter for the Epatai."

B'Elanna was starting to worry about the formality and the odd tone in Belle's voice. But she said, "Okay. Family quarters it is. Give me a few minutes."

"Make it the guest room and meet me there."

Belle arrived in a sparkle of blue light. She was standing proud and relaxed with her hand on her belt. Her black leather uniform glistened with recent care.

"Wow. You look good."

Belle didn't respond to that. What she said, which threw B'Elanna off for a moment, was, "If you aren't going to take care of Seven of Nine, give her to me."

"What?"

"You have one of the smartest, most intelligent women in the galaxy as your mate. You take her for granted. And yet, if you lost her, it would be catastrophic, both to yourself, your House and your ship. Yet, she remains unacknowledged in her House Status. Is this because you are ashamed of her?"

"No! What the hell are you talking about, General?" B'Elanna put a little growl behind that question.

"I see how you treat her, as if she is some convenience to you. You come. You go. She sees that you are fed, clothed and that you have a clean home to come to. Yet, she does not carry so much as an amulet to acknowledge her station... Epatai." The last word was fairly spat out.

"Well, excuse me for living. But I don't see how this is any of your business."

"Oh really? I could figure it out, because I know you. But who will the Emperor think is the Mistress
of the House? Or what if you come in contact with the Great Houses? How will they know her? You have five other mates. Do you think that it won't be confusing to strangers? How will they know to whom to pay the honors?"

"Look, Seven and I have some agreements and I've just been trying to keep some of the pressure off of her shoulders."

"Yet, there are issues of Household politics, which you must address and have not. There is more to being Epatai than playing with your children, B'Elanna. You represent our family and its interests. As does your Mistress, the Queen of your Household." The glare Belle handed her double would have cut into a diamond. "Seven is someone to be proud of. Do not put her into a corner."

"I was not..."

Belle raised her hand to stop the incipient argument, "It doesn't matter what you meant to do! It is what you have been doing! And you must choose now, what you are going to do about it. Or I will relieve you of the problem."

"There is no way Seven of Nine would go with you."

Belle rolled her eyes in disbelief at her sibling's obtuseness. "There are other ways, B'Elanna Torres, for Klingons to solve a problem." Belle fingered her dk-tahg meaningfully.

B'Elanna wasn't intimidated, but only because she knew Belle knew that she could beat her. But she felt the impact of the statement anyway and the accusation. Klingon pride said not to give, but she, fortunately was partly human.

"You're right. I'll handle it."

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B'Elanna was waiting for her mates as they exited the docking bay. The greeted each other warmly, then she said, "Seven, do you have a moment?"

"Of course, BangwI." The Astrometrics chief turned and bade affectionate farewell to Laren and Kathryn.

They went their separate ways in relatively good moods. Seven walked with B'Elanna towards a Turbolift. B'Elanna appeared pensive and not quite ready to express what was bothering her. The blonde allowed her Klingon the time to gather her thoughts. The door to the lift swished open and they stepped into it, in tandem.

B'Elanna didn't notice, which amused Seven. She did, however, seem to track when the doors closed. She gave the order and Seven realized that they were heading towards the deck with Sick Bay.

"Is there a problem, beloved?"

"What? Uh." B'Elanna grimaced. Then she told the lift to halt. "Seven, you know I love you right?"

"BangwI, I know." Seven reached over and touched the Klingon's face gently. "What is on your mind?"

There was a slight growl, but B'Elanna couldn't help leaning into Seven's touch. Then she sighed. "I have screwed up. Again."
Seven's ocular implant rose dangerously high. "I don't recall seeing any errors in my diagnostics this morning."

B'Elanna chuckled. "I don't mean that kind, Seven. I mean personally. I mean in regards to you."

"Again, I fail to see a problem."

"Seven, do you remember when I established that you were the Mistress of the House?"

"I do."

"Well, you know, I want you to know that your position in the family is important to me."

"BangwI, if you recall, we talked about that too. I do not understand your distress."

"Belle contacted me."

Seven felt for a moment like she used to feel around humans in general. Their conversations often left incomprehensible points that she had to try and interpret. She waited, hoping that her mate would clarify. Now B'Elanna was pacing. A warning light was beginning to blink on the console of the Turbolift.

"It seems that I am doing okay in general, but I am failing in one duty. One very important duty. Supporting you." She turned towards Seven and looked a bit aggrieved. "You know she actually chewed me out. I couldn't believe it. But I did deserve it. But ..." She shook her head. "I should get to the point. Look, Seven. You are Mistress of the House." From Seven's perspective B'Elanna randomly began disrobing. Just when she thought she understood her mate...

Once B'Elanna had her jacket off, she unbuttoned her shirt and shrugged out of it. Seven took a moment to admire her mate's fitness. She was beginning to understand, however, that B'Elanna had been somewhat discombobulated by her discussion with Belle, whatever that had entailed.

B'Elanna turned, until her tattoos were faced towards Seven. "Look. You need one of these and you need... a personal symbol; a rank mark for being the Mistress of the House. And it probably should happen today. So I did something that I probably should have asked about first. I made an appointment for you with Kate."

Seven cocked her head and then shook her head. Sometimes the complicated route arrived at interesting places. "B'Elanna Torres, I adore you. But you could have told me this without taking your shirt off."

The Klingon looked relieved. She grinned sheepishly, "But what fun would that have been? Besides, I figured I owed you something for not thinking of it sooner."

"Indeed." Seven extended her hand towards B'Elanna, who grasped it firmly in return. She drew B'Elanna towards her. Her hands drifted down the ridges of her mate's back. B'Elanna shivered at the erotic touch. "May I ask you a question?" They kissed warmly, languidly. The warning light gave up and quit flashing. B'Elanna's lockdown held.

"Yes."

"Why Turbolifts?"

"I spend so much time in them; it's nice to have memories to think about."
"Ah."

"Besides, you started it. I was fine until you seduced me. Now I just can't get you out of my mind when I'm in here." Seven chuckled into their kiss.

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Seven of Nine already had distinctive marks all over her body and so she did not quite see the point of acquiring more as ornamentation. However, she did understand the motivation was that of security, as well as prestige. So as an indulgence, and after they had stopped to shower, she allowed B'Elanna to lead her into Sick Bay. There, they were greeted by Dr. Pulaski.

"Well, B'Elanna told me your problem. Do you have a design in mind?"

Seven handed Kate a PADD. The Doctor looked down at the image and nodded. The blonde had chosen a calligraphic black M that somehow shaped into a dk-tahg. "Okay, where do you want it?"

"I believe the shoulder would be appropriate, same side as Kathryn and B'Elanna. That will provide some consistency. However, you should be aware that I do have implants which might affect the outcome of the procedure..."

Dr. Pulaski nodded. "Okay, well, then I'll need to see your shoulder and why don't you take a seat here." She patted the bio-bed casually then turned away to look at her equipment.

Seven glanced at the bed, then undid her jacket and slid it off. Then she undid the buttons on her shirt and slid that off. With efficient moves, she removed another impediment, and settled that on her clothes at the end of the bed. Then she hopped onto the bed.

B'Elanna, who had recently encountered certain features of Seven's anatomy, experienced a moment of primal awareness. Again. She was sure that Seven had done that on purpose.

Dr. Pulaski turned around. Her gaze flicked along Seven of Nine's torso, past her chest and up to the Borg's eyes. Neither woman's expression changed appreciably. "If you'll turn around, so I can take a look at that arm, Seven?"

"Oh come on!" B'Elanna said, disbelieving. "If it had been me, you would have been telling me to put my shirt back on."

Kate Pulaski was drawing her hand gently along the upper portion of Seven's arm. She didn't touch the delicate star implant that was centered on the side of her shoulder. Rather, her fingers trace around it. "Well, B'Elanna, you will have to trust that I have my reasons. I certainly trust that Seven has hers. You, on the other hand, would have stripped down to see what my reaction would be, which you appear to already know. Thus that imaginary, yet correct outcome." Kate, squinted her eyes, and then nodded to herself again. "Okay, Seven, here's what I think. We'll do the crest here, above the implant, and then drop the M under the implant here. We can do a decorative line, with a few details, which will connect the crest to the implant and then the implant to the mark. Will that work?"

"Acceptable."

B'Elanna, meanwhile was still somewhat caught in her personal gripe. She had turned away for a moment to calm down. But she still had something to say. So she turned back around, and ended up gaping in amazement.
Kate was snuggled up against Seven in a powerful one armed embrace. They were kissing softly, yet deeply. With a sigh Dr. Pulaski withdrew from the embrace. She looked slightly dazed, but not unhappy about it. Then she winked at B’Elanna and picked up a tool that reminded the Klingon of the stylus she used with her PADD. "Now, hold very still, Seven."

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B’Elanna's head was still spinning. She had nothing to complain about. Just the opposite. But she wasn't quite sure how she'd arrived at the Jeffries Tube afterwards. On the other hand, she did remember she'd asked Kate for a date.

She'd just blurted it right out, as the Doctor had made the next mark. "Go out with me, Kate."

And Kate said, "yes", without even looking up. Her attentive work on the healthy Borg spoke of competence and care, and the ability to multi-task. Equally off-handed, she'd set the time. "17:00?"

"Okay."

B’Elanna had wandered out of the Sick Bay feeling a little high and distracted. B’Elanna had felt the attraction before. But now it was a call. She hadn't expected her own reaction to be so potent.

There were also the epiphanies upon epiphanies.

She drew in deep breaths, tried the Vulcan trick even as she was operating her wrench. It settled her mind, but not necessarily her need. But it did help.

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At 16:57, B’Elanna Torres, Epatai and Warlord of the House Presba, was at Kate Pulaski’s door. She didn't feel very Warlordish and only moderately Epatai-ish. On the other hand, she felt very beautiful and loved. She wore a slinky and shimmery above-the-knee black dress, which hugged her curves, with just the right amount of cling and give. She wore high heels, a tiny purse, and droplet earrings. The crests and sigils of her position had been miniaturized into pip decorations and they lined her v-neck collar, in gold and silver. Of course, she also wore her communicator. As a concession to Klingon sensibilities, layered on her thigh in a sheath in the dress was a small, slim, unobtrusive dagger. It moved as the dress moved, since it was made of a material that would not harden until it was taken out of the dress, so it was essentially invisible.

When Seven invented and introduced the dagger to some of her mates, Laren had been adamant that B’Elanna wear it. For some reason that made the Klingon feel all sorts of warm and saucy towards her beloved Bajoran.

It was so well hidden that it was unlikely that even a trained eye would perceive it. Certainly, unless B’Elanna thought of it, she really did not feel it when she walked.

At 17:00, after a few more deep breaths to calm the butterflies in her belly, B’Elanna rang the chime. The door swished open to reveal Dr. Pulaski, who was also dressed - in greens with a golden edge - in similar fashion. There was an infinite pause as they drank in the sight of one another.

It took everything B’Elanna had to only offer her arm. Her impulse was to grab the other woman and take her against the bulkhead. Fortunately, she had much better self control these days. All those weeks and months of dealing with the mating fire, which still impacted herself and her mates on a regular basis, had driven in the ability hold back until the right time.

Kate looped her arm through B’Elanna’s and they began walking. No words were exchanged, neither dared to speak. It wasn't until they reached the docking station to Terok Nor that the silence was
broken. Their security detail introduced themselves and checked on the planned itinerary. Then they were off to one of the station's finest dining establishments.

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It started innocuously enough. They were talking and conversing normally, laughing warmly at each other's jokes. Their fingers brushed while reaching for a spice.

It was electric.

Dinner was over.

"Kate?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready to go home?"

"Yes."

Moments later they were walking, somewhat rapidly along one of the concourses of the station. They were not touching. Both of them knew what would happen if they did.

They were passing on the opposite side of the recently completed Judgment Hall. There was that wide open space in between, so they could see the other side clearly. But their attention was forward, not outward.

B'Elanna wasn't sure what twigged her, but something was off. She turned her attention towards the other side only to see someone running out of the hall. For whatever reason, that was enough for her. She shouted, "Down!" and pushed Kate. Not even a second after, there was a sound, loud and explosive. It rocked the station, shattered plascrete out and over the partition and all over the open parts of the Promenade. By that time B'Elanna had Kate covered with her own body, and the security team was covering both of them with theirs.

This didn't stop the hard rain that fell.

They slowly and painfully ungrouped. All of them, except for Kate, had been struck in one way or another. B'Elanna had her hand slapped to the back of her head, but she was conscious. Kate was saying, "We need to find out who else is hurt." She was on her way to standing when the blue light of the transporter kicked in.

"Send me back," demanded Kate.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Pulaski, but the injured will either be transported here or to the medical station of Terok Nor. When I registered the explosive activity on the station, I was required to enact the security protocols. I note that there are several injured with you. Do you wish me to transport you directly to Sick Bay?"

"Yes," snapped the doctor.

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"What?" Ro snarled, or at least, it would have been a snarl if she hadn't needed to whisper. But Dax had stopped searching the brush line in front of them and was now staring at her.

"I was just thinking how glad I am that I was more than a weekend experiment."
She should have known better. Really, she should have. Jaw open to reply, Laren took in the saucy expression on Ezri's face and simply closed her mouth. Never a phaser blast when you need one.

Ezri chuckled and resumed scanning for their assailants. One, they'd killed in the initial exchange of fire, but she wasn't sure how many were left, or even who they were. It had happened so suddenly. One second they were watching the sun drop over Bajor's horizon, the next they were scrambling for cover. Twilight had nearly departed, and soon they'd have enough darkness and shadow to try moving to a more defensible position.

A minute or so later, she realized that Ro was casting sidelong looks in her direction. Ezri quirked both eyebrows in silent question. She only wanted, after all, to rattle the normally composed Bajoran, not get them killed.

Eyes back on the ground to their front, Laren ground out the question. "In what way are you glad?"

"I just meant that you're happy now, with them. You weren't...before."

Laren met Ezri's steady gaze and accepted the words at face value. "No, I don't suppose I was." A point of light screamed past her shoulder and she twisted instinctively, even though the round had passed her by before she'd reacted. Burnt foliage and the smell of the disturbed loam mixed with something else filled her nostrils, and she expelled a quick nasal breath to clear her senses. "C'mon, they could be guessing, but I have the feeling they know we're here - we gotta move," she whispered preparing to slink out to their right. There was no reply. "Dax?"

Ezri heard her name, but knew that if she removed the end of her sleeve from her mouth she'd scream instead of whisper. She lifted her eyes to meet the shocked ones of the Bajoran. She watched, amused despite the gravity of the situation, as Laren's eyes tracked down the length of her body, and then came to rest on the bloody junction of her torso and right arm. Or at least she thought she still had a right arm, it was getting hard to tell.

She chanced removing her makeshift gag, swallowing the moan as the movement jarred her side. "Shoulda ducked." Ezri smiled at the exasperated look Laren shot her way. The smile turned to a grimace as she tried to lift her phaser, and she fought to keep consciousness.

Another couple of shots penetrated the thicket, but farther over. They both flinched.

Laren decided that they were trying to flush them out, and didn't actually know how close they were. By her count there were only three people tracking them. First she had to get Ezri out of the line of fire, then she would kill anyone who stood between her and getting the Trill to Voyager.

Left arm hooked under Ezri's, right hand grabbing the material of her jacket, Ro began to drag the other woman behind deeper cover, knowing even as she did so that she was making too much noise, and it wouldn't be long before they were discovered. She pulled her dk-tahg from her boot, glad she hadn't installed the two smaller duQwI'Hommey spikes. It would be more efficient for what she had in mind. The blade effortlessly cut through the material of her shirt and she wadded up the separated length and pressed it against the ragged hole in Ezri's side. "Hold this tight."

Ezri shook her head. "Go. Get the Orb back to the... to Kathryn." Her entire right side had become numb, and it was hard to form the words.

"Not leaving you." Laren smiled wanly down at the Trill. "Seven's not finished with you." She let a warmer smile show, and brushed her thumb across the line of spots under Ezri's jawline. "And neither am I," she whispered.

"Don't."

Losing consciousness left her no choice but to obey.
Seven of Nine, Mistress of the House Presba hit the ground running, blonde hair streaming behind her, 'aqleH in one hand, disruptor in the other. To her left ran T'Pel. The leather wrapped, wooden shaft of the 'aqleH had warmed to her grip, and through the sensitive metal she could feel the slight indentations of the hands of those who had once wielded the axe-like blade.

She never paused in her motion as she swung the weapon in an underhanded, forward arc. Didn't change her stride as she stepped over the headless body and let her ocular implant acquire the next target, swiftly changing course as she registered that T'Pel had already neutralized him. Instead she moved to where she knew Laren was. Her own hot rage swept out of her, washed away in the torrent of cold fear that spun outward from her mate.

Laren rose from where she had been crouched, turning instinctively in the direction of her mates. In the space between the instant when hot blood had poured over her hands and the silenced corpse fell at her feet, primal vengeance had materialized, safety made manifest by the miracle of their bond.

Seven took in the blood, the dk-tahg, the empty space behind the Bajoran, and felt the first tendrils of her own fear rise to match Laren's. "Ezri Dax?"

"She is here." T'Pel's calm tones were put to lie by the shading of her mind.

Ezri fought for the edge of awareness, and tried to widen it enough to open her eyes. She couldn't quite manage it. Everything felt numb, and she knew her body was shunting its resources to the Dax symbiont. She was the Host. Replaceable. Strong arms picked her up, and she knew by scent and touch who held her. "My Valkyrie," she thought the words, hoping that her tongue would obey and make manifest the sounds, but the blackness claimed her again.

Two hands hit identical comm badges at the same time. Two voices mixed in plea reached for the only member of the House Presba who could hear them.

Voyager reached beyond herself and answered.

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Icheb froze in mid-step, but his mind continued to process the incoming data. "Doctor Zimmerman!" His voice mingled with that of Voyager's, who was also alerting the EMH. A bio-bed appeared within reach of his fingertips and he grabbed it, his training overcoming the sharp terror conjured by the sudden arrival of the blood spattered forms of three of his parents.

"Here, Mother." He held the bed steady with one hand and grabbed a large bio-pad with the other, pressing it firmly against the blood caked cloth that was already holding the wound partially closed. Nimbly, he half twisted his body, to make room for the doctor, while still maintaining pressure on the cloth.

Zimmerman took one look at the pale body on the bed, and knew they had very little time. "Theatre 2." He spared a glance at the three women, as Icheb wheeled the Trill away. "Any of that blood yours?" He didn't think he, or anyone else in the sickbay, would forget the shock at the sudden arrival of the tall, pale blonde and her bloody burden, flanked as she was by her darker mates. But the image that would haunt him was the one he saw now: the blood painted silhouette where Ezri Dax had lain pressed against the once white evening gown.
Molten blue eyes bored into his, Seven's expression clearly conveying that she felt the question to be irrelevant. "No. You are wasting time."

He didn't waste more on acknowledging her response.

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The Sick Bay was filled with people, as was Holodeck 3 - which had become the default Sick Bay 2 in such emergencies. All the Doctors and their assistants were working, frantically operating on the critically wounded, with Voyager's now invaluable assistance - the living ship feeding her information and patient updates - something that she had come to find very helpful. Dr. Zimmerman was stationed in Sick Bay 2, while Dr. Dezhe and Dr. Pulaski handled Sick Bay.

Dr. Pulaski was finishing up with someone who had been crushed beneath some large chunks of plascrete and by rights should be dead. Bone and muscle tissue had to be taken out and regenerated; the injury had been that severe. Fortunately, their head had been spared anything but a minor concussion.

That was the last of the critical cases on her charts, and Kate took a deep breath, more to recharge her mental batteries than from a need for oxygen.

"Next!" shouted Dr. Pulaski, indicating that she was ready for their next victim. Further action on her part was forestalled by a hail.

"Zimmerman to Pulaski."

"Go ahead, Doctor."

"Medical Emergency, Theatre 2, Sickbay 2. I've got a Joined Trill. Blaster impact to the right side. It took out most of her ribcage, and a good portion of the shoulder joint. Her circulatory system is shifting blood to the Symbiont. Vitals are crashing."

There was only one Trill on board with a symbiont. "Dax? Damn it!"

Kate did mental triage on the situation in sickbay. "I'm on my way." She closed the channel to the Hologram.

"Alright then, Voyager, float this one to recovery. Tell Dr. Dezhe she's going to have to handle the incoming for the foreseeable future and she'll need to move the walking wounded down here from Sick Bay 2 as soon as possible to replace Dr. Zimmerman. Have Icheb assist her."

The bio-bed with her previous patient began moving away. Kate took that time to dredge up everything she knew about Trills and symbionts from her memory. There was no way she was going to lose her old friend if she could help it. "Initiate site to site transport, my location to sickbay 2."

No way was she going to lose her new friend either.

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Kathryn stood in the entrance to Holodeck 3 and tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Her eyes were drawn to the preternaturally still forms of her mates, who, backs toward her, were standing outside of one of the operating rooms. No where else in the room was as still as that small corner and she couldn't help but think that their very calm presaged a storm about to break over them all.

It was like watching the eye of a hurricane. Slowly, more details came into focus, and she registered
Laren's torn shirt and Seven's hair hanging loose about her shoulders, the blood stained ends a stark counterpoint to the cream and silver of implant and skin. Her eyes tracked T'Pel's arm snaked around Seven's waist from one side, while Laren supported the blonde from the other.

But it wasn't until she saw the blood coated axe propped negligently against the wall that she knew she couldn't be Kathryn for this. Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation Starship Voyager, Warlord of the House Presba crossed the room. "Report."

Laren turned, switching her grip on Seven automatically, knowing it would fall to her to speak. Her eyes flicked over Kathryn's, and she answered the tone of the command, and not the fear that flickered briefly through eyes gone grey. "As instructed, Ezri and I went to recover the Orb. No sooner did we have it, then we were attacked. Communications to the ship were jammed, so we took cover, but Ezri was hit by some kind of energy blast to the side." Involuntarily, she looked behind her, even though they couldn't see what was happening through the darkened glass.

Exchanging a quick glance with T'Pel, Seven picked up the thread. "T'Pel and I were on board the Tor'stag, visiting with Annika..." she paused, uncertain how to explain what had happened next. She had just known that something was wrong. Annika had looked at her for a long minute then ripped a weapon from Belle's wall and thrust it into her hands, saying, 'go.'

The Captain was gone suddenly, and it was just Kathryn standing there. "You felt it." For her it had been a diffuse awareness that something was wrong, but before she could pin it down, she had gotten word of the explosion and had rushed to main sickbay.

"Yes. T'Pel instructed Voyager to transport us to Laren's last known coordinates." Seven straightened her posture, and brought her hands behind her back, clapping them together. She would not apologize for her actions. "I terminated one, and T'Pel neutralized the other. Lieutenant Ro had already dealt with the remaining assailant." She looked directly at Kathryn, willing her to understand.

T'Pel, still in physical contact with Seven, read the turmoil immediately. Her actions had been logical, and efficient, but the ex-drone was still trying to integrate her actions with the perceived expectations of her Captain and the demands of her Humanity. She sent a tendril of reassurance along their bond, and then moved slightly to draw the Captain's attention. "It was necessary."

Ro let out a sharp bark of tense laughter. "It was beautiful." Defiantly, she met Kathryn's eyes, and was surprised at what she found there; once more amazed to be understood on a level she hadn't expected to be. Violence had been a necessary part of her life as long as she had been alive, and while she didn't crave it like some of her Maquis compatriots had, she did appreciate that it could be beautiful. Or at least, that in that clearing, on that night, Seven had evoked something primal and beautiful.

By unspoken consent, they let the topic pass, saved for later and the safety of home.

"How is she?" Kathryn moved to the darkened glass separating them from the operation.

"We don't know. Pulaski went in an hour ago, and Zimmerman hasn't come out." Ro answered, then reached out and touched Janeway's shoulder, guiding the Captain back around to face her. "Captain, they were Bajoran. And I think, I think they wanted the Orb."

Janeway considered that for a minute, and then tapped her chest. "Janeway to Chakotay."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"I want the ship on lockdown. Get everyone back on board, and no one, I mean no one, gets off
without clearing it through me first."

There was a brief pause, but apparently Chakotay thought better of whatever he had been about to say. "Understood. Chakotay out."

Then Janeway completely discarded her command mask, and her rank, letting the friend, lover and mate take over, wrapping her arms around Seven, even as Laren and T'Pel moved to do the same.

When Kathryn felt they were all grounded, she pulled back and raised a hand to brush back a lock of blonde hair. "You and Laren go get changed. You'll terrify Ezri when she sees you if you still look like that." She brushed her lips across Seven's and then Laren's, before reaching for T'Pel, fingers extended. "T'Pel, you're with me."

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Nelav relayed the information. "Intendant Kira is trying to contact you, Your Honor. She says that it is urgent."

"It probably is, given the situation. Pass the communication on. I'll be in my office."

"Yes, Your Honor. Shall I have T'Sai prepare your equipment?"

"Do you think it's going to be that soon?" She was getting used to the Deian's premonitions, but had not quite arrived at trusting them yet.

"Yes, Your Honor. I do."

"Then yes, just in case."

"Thank you, Your Honor." Nelav excused herself and Miral made her way towards her office. She gazed at the flashing yellow alert above their suite's door and knew that Nerys' communication must have something to do with that.

Once in her office and on a secure channel she accepted the communication. "Yes, Nerys. How may assist you?"

"Get down here as soon as you can. And bring your judicial staff with you. We have the bomber and I want him tried now."

"Bomber?"

"You remember the Judgment Hall?"

"Yes."

"It's gone now. Also, I hear members of your family were near the blast. More specifically one of your daughters, Epatai Torres."

Miral growled unpleasantly. "I have been to check on her. But she was unconscious. Also, you will have to clear my leaving the ship with the Captain. We are currently on lockdown."

"Of course, Judge Torres. Mind if I place that call now?"

"Please do."
"Kira, out."

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Captain Janeway approved the expedition, but emphasized the need for security. She also planned on attending. This led to Tuvok also making the commitment.

"Keep the ship locked down tight until we get back. Make sure that we have security stationed at both port entrances. If something even smells suspicious, undock immediately. Voyager comes first."

Chakotay nodded his agreement and understanding. She continued, "I want a transporter lock on the full Judicial Staff, in case anything goes wrong. It's imperative that they be secured."

"I understand."

"Good. Make it so, Commander."

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The Promenade had only been loosely cleaned up. A wide circle had been cleared out of the middle, with the debris creating its edge. Seats for the Judge and the Truth Seekers were positioned generally at the south, there was no counsel space. The accused would simply have to stand in the middle.

There was a crowd gathering, restrained from becoming an angry mob by the grim presence of security and the sight of the Judge, in her robes, who was already seated. The Bat'leth was at its familiar place besides her. Anyone who had been paying attention over the last months knew who the players were and their roles. An added bonus was the presence of the Intendant to the West of the circle on a raised Dais. Beside her sat The Truth Seeker, head of all Truth Seekers.

Because of that, no one could honestly doubt the seriousness or the legitimacy of the trial.

It was pretty much standing room only after that. Captain Janeway and Tuvok and the security staff secured a place near the judge because of their role as protectors. They stood somewhat to the side, yet in front of the Judge, the Truth Seekers, and the Council for the Defense. Their weapons were in their hands in prominent display.

It didn't take long. General Torres arrived, followed by two burly Klingons who dragged a struggling man between them. The man appeared to be Bajoran. There was an ugly murmur in the crowd when that was recognized.

The man was brown haired, brown eyed, with a firm jaw that had been bruised mightily. He was bleeding from several places, not the least of which was his mouth. Two teeth had been forcibly removed before he could utilize the poison in them. General Torres had simply ripped them right out.

They placed him in the center of the circle and then abruptly let go of him. He stumbled and shook without the support, but somehow managed to remain upright.

"Ma Lealt, I am Judge Miral Torres. I have been brought here to try you. You are accused of treason, mayhem and murder. I offer you, at this time counsel." She indicated her mate. "Do you wish to have counsel?"

The Bajoran spat. "Human scum. She should be shackled and beaten for even thinking she is worthy to be in my presence. And you, a Klingon," He made the word a slur, "claiming to even want to touch that --" The cruel words choked off into a gurgle and then bizarre silence and he tried to finish what he was saying.
Miral was up out of her seat, Bat'leth in her hands. Rage colored her cheeks and put the growl in her voice. "You are done, Ma Lealt. You have denied counsel, and so will receive the benefit of none. I will now call the witness. Constable Odo."

The Changeling Constable strode into the circle and stepped around the prisoner, who would have lunged, but found that not only could he not speak, he could not move. There were three Truth Seekers controlling Ma now.

"I am Odo, Your Honor."

"Say your piece."

"We have security footage of this man planting the bombs and leaving the scene of the crime. He was apparently not aware that the security system was already active and in place. He entered the Judicial Hall, established several bomb locations, set the timer and then ran from the Hall. It is incontrovertible. We also have his confession, as gathered by General Torres and her helpful crew." He held up a device and the judge nodded. The footage began to play, displaying a three-dimensional holograph of the accused. It was apparent that he had been cleaned up for trial, as he was definitely looking the worse for wear during his confession, in which he admitted that he was a member of the Atheldu Cartel, which was allied to the now defunct Pharaoh Cartel. At the end of the piece, the Constable said, "That is all I have to present, your Honor."

"Thank you, Constable Odo. You are excused." The Changling bowed and then left, confident that he had done his job.

Now Miral Torres turned to her Truth Seekers. "Well, you've heard the evidence and you have the accused before you. Did he do it?"

Lwaxana and T'Pel both nodded.

"Fine. I'm going to say my piece, then let him speak." Again the Truth Seekers nodded.

Miral turned to the Bajoran. "You have shamed your people on their own ground. You have killed innocents who had nothing to do with your vendetta. Your efforts wounded members of the House Presba, which puts the Atheldu Cartel and House Presba at war. Pharaoh Cartel made the same mistake. You have one opportunity to clear your name. You may take the trial or you may simply choose execution. Choose now."

Suddenly the Bajoran was cut loose from the grip of those forces that held him. He staggered forward, and as he did, he let forth a stream of wrathful obscenity aimed at the Judge, Voyager's crew, Truth Seekers and even the Klingon ruler.

Miral didn't waste time after that. Five steps and she was upon the bomber. The Bat'leth went up, through, and then whipped around and down. Ma Lealt's head rolled on the floor. Even there his eyes glared hate, until they dimmed in death.

Intendant Kira, who looked grimmer than anyone had ever seen before, strode to the center of the circle. She kicked the body in passing. Then she turned and faced the audience. "Let's be perfectly clear here. In case there is any doubt, this station is in full support of the Klingon Empire and Chancellor Worf. We, the Bajorans, are the Empire's citizens and this trash does not speak for us. As for the Syndicate, they can rot in Grethor. Nobody fucks with my station. Anyone who even thinks they might be part of the Syndicate on this station had better get off in the next hour, or your eyes will be used for dice in Quarks. Trust me, we know who you are. Odo has directions to kill on sight once the time limit is over. The trials will be held in this circle on the dates we had set. Believe it."
There was a cheer and huzzah for the words, but she wasn't finished yet. "Those of you, who were inconvenienced by this, check with my tourism department. There will be some compensation. We want you to know that we appreciate your business and trust in us. Thank you for your time."

Again there was a cheer. The Intendant nodded at the Judge. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"It was my pleasure. We will speak again later."

"Yes." The Intendant raised her hand and waved over some of the maintenance crew. "Get rid of this and stick its head on a pole right there." She pointed at the north entrance of the circle. "But put a force field over it. We don't want it to stink in here."

"Yes, Intendant. Right away."

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The first clue she had that she wasn't dead was the pain. And as far as pain went, it was a pretty big clue. Her entire side felt like it was on fire, and there was a heaviness to her chest that bordered on suffocating. Of course, if she had died, it was possible she was in Grethor, and then being in pain might just be part of the penance.

Ezri decided to open her eyes. Part of her hedged, though, and she only managed to open one. So far, so good. No obvious flames. Not that she had much of a field of view. She opened the other eye.

"Ezri Dax."

Definitely not Grethor. "Seven of Nine." She tried to get her tongue out to moisten her lips to say more, but it felt thick and heavy.

Seven moved closer to the head of the bio-bed. "Voyager, please inform Dr. Pulaski that Lieutenant Dax is awake." She looked down at the swaddled form, then met the woman's blue eyes, taking relief from the edge of humour still lurking in them. "You will cease functioning within unacceptable parameters."

Ezri managed a small nod, and tried for a smile that ended up as barely a twitch of her lips. It was worth the effort, as she felt Seven twine her fingers with the one limb that seemed to be undamaged and mobile.

Kate stopped just short of entering the demi-private recovery area, surprised to see Seven. At one point, she'd seen the Borg watching over B'Elanna, but had assumed she'd gone home to take care of the children when she hadn't seen her after B'Elanna had awoken. She signaled Hughes, "Bring some water for the Lieutenant."

The readings on the bio-monitor hadn't changed appreciably, even though the Trill was now awake, but the wakefulness spoke for itself. She flashed a light over Dax's eyes, pleased by their immediate responsiveness. The Trill's skin no longer looked transparent, and the few spots that were visible had regained more of their roan shading. "You're a hardy young woman, Ezri. Looks like you'll live."

Hughes arrived with the water and she waved him to hand it to Seven. "Give it to her in slow sips."

Seven took the water, and as gently as if she were feeding Emina, slid the straw between Ezri's slightly parted lips. "Slowly." She pulled the straw away for a second before reinserting it. "Comply." She commanded, lips quirked in a small smile. Seven was aware in her peripheral vision of the puzzled look Kate shot at her, but did not harden her expression. Discretion was no longer relevant.
Ah. Kate reached out and straightened the edge of Ezri's blanket. That would certainly make her own reactions to the young Trill easier to explain to Kathryn when the time came. "Don't stay too long, she needs lots of rest." She looked down, "Rest, Dax. That means you don't try to get up, you don't try to get anyone to bring you anything other than water, and you don't try and entice anyone in there with you." At that last one she looked directly at Seven.

She was inordinately pleased with herself when both Dax and Seven blushed.

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Hours later, after the seriously injured and the not so seriously injured of Voyager's crew had been patched up or healed, Kate was ready to rest. Because B'Elanna's had been a head injury, she had remained in Sick Bay for observation. She was still in that slinky dress, though her heels were off. She rested on an available bio-bed. Her eyes were closed, but she wasn't asleep.

She opened her eyes when she sensed one of her mates besides her. "Hi, Kathryn." Their fingers twined.

"I understand you've been showing Kate an exciting time."

B'Elanna laughed. "Well it wouldn't be a date with a Klingon if there weren't a little blood."

"I'll keep that in mind next time we go out." Kathryn gave her mate a wry grin. "How's your head?"

"Patched up. Not sore at all. But Kate wouldn't let me go."

"I can understand why."

"Do you know what happened?"

"Syndicate, of course. They were after the Orb. The Judgment Hall was the distraction. They captured the bomber, who happened to be Bajoran, apparently stripped out any implants, and had an immediate trial right in the middle of the Promenade. He was looking pretty bloody when they started."

"Miral judged?"

"And executed."

"Oh my."

"I know." Kathryn shook her head. "It's one thing to see it on video. It's quite another to see it play out. They all were there, Lwaxana, T'Pel and my mom. And this time Deanna joined them. Mom even stood for the defense. You know, because that's what she does here. But Miral moved it right along. He was guilty, had caused several deaths and a lot of injuries and this was definitely a Klingon trial."

"Wow."

"After the trial, Intendant Kira said the remaining trials that had been scheduled would continue and would still be held on Terok Nor. Security has been beefed up. But she hasn't thrown any of the tourists out yet."

"Smart of her."

"She's an intelligent woman."
"How is Kate?"

"Tired, but holding up. I'll check in on you two again a little later."

"Please do. This is boring."

The captain laughed and then kissed her mate. "I'll have someone bring you some entertainment."

"And a change of clothes."

"Oh, that is too bad. I was enjoying having something beautiful to look at while I worked." said Kate who somehow appeared at B'Elanna's other side, without either of the mates knowing how she got there. The Klingon's hearts flip flopped.

Kate, who had changed her attire into the medical uniform, briefly ran a tricorder over B'Elanna. She nodded. "It's looking good, but a few more hours of observation wouldn't hurt."

"Depends on your definition of pain, I suppose."

"Well, there is an ancient medical cure that I can offer for that kind of pain."

"Really?" B'Elanna was intrigued.

"Really." Kate looked over at Kathryn, and then she leaned towards B'Elanna and kissed her in an unforgettably intense way.

B'Elanna's fingers tightened on Kathryn's. Her eyes closed and a sultry, pleasurable noise rose from her. She was suddenly glad she had been sitting down.

The kiss ended on a warm, sweet note, with several small ones, which, in other circumstances, would have led to greater, longer ones. But B'Elanna had to admit; she was feeling no pain at the moment. "Thank you, Doctor. Remind me to pay you back."

Kate stepped back, almost the professional again. "Oh, I definitely will." She smiled a bit crookedly. "Captain, when you're ready, I have a report."

Kathryn was still trying to get her brain to fire on all its pistons. Somehow she managed to croak out an appropriate response. But her eyes were wide and her skin flushed.

Kate’s expression was one of deep satisfaction at the result. She smiled cheerfully as she excused herself.
Chapter 19
Chapter by bearblue

It had been a tough day all in all, but that moment watching B'Elanna and Kate kiss had been a whole lot of wonderful and extraordinarily stimulating. Fortunately for Kathryn, her Klingon mate had been equally aware of the impact of that stunning kiss.

"Kathryn," said B'Elanna, "I think she's ready. Go get her."

The red-head gave her mate an amused glare and then leaned in. There was fire in their kiss, an after-effect of the moment. "My mate," said Kathryn, "You are a woman of surprising wisdom."

"Oh, if only you'd known that when I first boarded this ship."

The chuckles they shared helped soothe the burn, somewhat.

Kathryn drew back and composed herself. She brushed her hair down and straightened her jacket. "How do I look?"

"Very official. I am almost somewhat sure Kate won't throw you for a loop by ravishing you when you enter."

"You are so helpful." Their fingertips touched and they spent a moment more in the erotic mirth. Then Kathryn drew back. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck, Kathryn."

Kathryn entered the office of the Chief Medical Officer once she was sure that she had managed to regain her official persona. She walked in confidently and started off with, "Dr. Pulaski, I'm ready for that report." The words drifted into the quiet office, and she was glad she'd managed to cut any harsh edges off of them. Kate was sitting behind her desk, her eyes covered by her palms. She drew her hands back down slowly and turned to face the Captain.

"Right. Take a seat. Have a drink." She indicated one of the glasses with the amber liquid on her desk. Kathryn took one, and then she took the other. She began by saying, "The short version is kind of long. I'll send you the long version via the system."

Kathryn sat down and assumed an attentive position. She held the drink casually in her hand. Kate took a sip, and then began to talk. "I know you've been waiting on hearing about Lieutenant Dax, but I want to hold that one for last. Let me start with Ensign Alberts. We managed to save the leg, but had to replace the hip ...

Twenty minutes later, Kate was ready to address the topic of Ezri. "... in the end we had to replace her ribs. We opted for the same medical grade Duranium that Zimmerman used on Seven, mostly for strength, but it'll provide additional protection for Dax, and she'll adapt better to it. If we're lucky, she'll be with us a lot longer because of it. However, she won't be going anywhere soon. I understand you were going to take her with you on that little jaunt of yours to the wormhole. If you need to have her with you, you're going to have to reschedule."

The Captain nodded, "I expected that might be the case. Given events on the Station, Intendant Kira
has also asked that we change times. I'm hoping to avoid staying past our welcome, but I believe it would serve our best interest in the long term if we waited."

Kate was nodding her head. The day had been catching up with her quickly.

"What is your schedule like tomorrow?"

"Excuse me?"

"Would you happen to be available for quality time tomorrow at noon?"

"You're inviting me to lunch?"

"Yes."

"If I say no?"

"It won't prevent me from coming around your desk and kissing you senseless in a few moments."

"Senseless?"

"Well, you put a swerve in my day. I figured it was only fair play."

Kate chuckled. "I'm free. Barring another catastrophic event. I would appreciate it if you and your mates and... and that Damn Trill... quit throwing yourselves into dangerous situations."

"An impossible thing for me to promise, Kate."

"I know, damn it. But let me say it."

Kathryn stood up; set the glass, still full, on Kate's desk. Then she walked around it. She held out her hand.

Kate looked at it pensively, then grasped it and let Kathryn pull her into a standing position. Then in a move she wouldn't have expected from any other Federation Captain, she was embraced and simply held.

After a few moments she leaned into Kathryn. Then she felt a kiss on her cheek. "Scared you, did she?"

Somehow Kate knew Kathryn wasn't talking about B'Elanna. "I've known Dax since my academy days, when he was a professor."

Kathryn hummed her understanding. "And Ezri?"

"Seven was with her when I left."

Kathryn drew back and smiled slightly. She gently caressed Kate's face. "Ezri calls to Seven."

Kate nodded thoughtfully. "I thought so." She leaned her head against Kathryn's shoulder. "Like I call to you?"

There was a deeper inhalation. "Yes, my love. Like you call to me."
They stood for a little longer. Then Kate said, "You better kiss me quick, or you're going to have to wait until tomorrow."

"Well, we can't have that."

The kiss started slowly and tenderly. Then, it sped up. Desire flowed between them, hungry and hot. The long bridge of denial began to crack. They lost track and it probably would have gone further, but they were interrupted.

"Chakotay to Captain Janeway."

It was hard to pull apart, but both women were people familiar with duty. Janeway's expression conveyed her apologies. Then she tapped her comm badge and received the communication.

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Instead of heading back to the Family Quarters, B'Elanna made her way to Holodeck 3. Stepping through the doors to what had become their secondary Sickbay, she was astonished to find that it had an identical smell as main Sickbay. That shouldn't have been possible, but her finely developed olfactory senses had no difficulty discerning the myriad odors that were present: blood, anti-septic, sweat and the more primal pheromones of fear and pain.

She met Icheb's smile with a wide one of her own. The Doctor and Kate had both been effusive in their praise for the young man's efforts during the evening's multiple crises. "You did well tonight, Icheb. I'm glad you were here." In truth, she would have spared him the exposure to the potential of death the night had wrought.

His dark eyes met hers, and she read the pride in them, but there was something else too, and she waited to see if he would speak of it.

"Thank you, Sos."

She nodded, and squeezed his shoulder. "Is your Mother still here?"

"Yes. She is in recovery three, with Lt. Dax."

"Thanks." She moved in the direction he'd indicated, but stopped when she spotted the 'aqleH in the corner. The steel half-bat'leth mounted on the four and a half foot long wooden shaft was still encrusted with blood. B'Elanna felt a shiver travel up her spine, and then back to settle in the pits of both stomachs. She could have lost them. Seven, Ro, T'Pel. She knew how it would have felt, had lived through that awful time when T'Pel and Lwaxana had been ripped away from them.

Reverently, she began to use her dress to clean the blade.

"Bang'wI?"

She looked up. Seven was standing there watching her, her expression soft and concerned. She watched mesmerized, as Seven crossed the small distance, from where she had been standing with Icheb. With a strange detachment she saw Seven's mesh-covered hand take the 'aqleH and hand it to their son.

The detachment crumbled when Seven enfolded her in an embrace so strong it would have cracked ribs on anyone else. B'Elanna grabbed hold of her mate with fierce intent, and let go of the crushing weight, trusting Seven would keep her safe.
A short eternity of safety later, she loosen her hold a little and tilted her head up to look at Seven, who was obligingly looking down. "I'm sorry. I came here to see how you were holding up. I don't know what came over me, Be'nal."

"Perhaps your day just caught up with you."

They stood wrapped together a little longer, and B'Elanna felt the energy they drew from one another begin to restore her. "Thanks."

Seven's lips brushed over her forehead ridges. "You need never thank me for loving you, Bang'wI."

"I feel I ought to thank someone, 'cause I don't think I'd survive losing you." The words were out, the tone half jest and bare faced truth, before she even realized it.

"You will not lose me." Intense blue eyes met hers unflinchingly. Then a small smile tugged at the full lips. "I am Borg."

B'Elanna buried her head in Seven's chest again and laughed until her tears had run their course.

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Ro stepped into the darkened recovery cubicle, her eyes taking in the blinking lights and flowing text of the bio-monitor. None of it meant anything, but she's spent too much time on the bridges of Starships not to automatically look at information displays - whether they were meant for her or not. She supposed that since none of the lights were accompanied by strident alarms that everything was okay.

Looking into the bed, she was surprised to find Ezri alertly watching her. She had thought the Trill still sleeping. "You look terrible." She smiled.

Ezri put every ounce of carnal intent she could muster into her gaze, and did her best to let a light leer curl at the edges of her mouth. "You look good..." But it was too many words and before she could finish, the sounds were choked off in a paroxysm of coughing.

"Easy, love." Laren snickered softly, as Ezri's brows shot into her shaggy bangs. "Here." She took some of the ice chips from the glass on the bedstand and slipped them between Ezri's parched lips. Lips that took that opportunity to try and capture her finger tips. "Behave."

"No fun there." The cough was smaller this time.

"Ah, but it will be. You just need to get out of here first." Laren settled into the chair that Seven had left behind when she'd taken B'Elanna home, and tried not to laugh out loud at the exaggerated falling asleep performance being put on for her benefit.

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Lwaxana entered the small recovery room, her senses telling her that both occupants of the room were held in tortured thrall by images and thoughts that disturbed them, though only one was sleeping.

"Laren?" she softly called, not wanting to startle her mate. She didn't await a response, though. Instead, she passed by the foot of bed, where her charge for the next few hours slumbered on with fitful intent, and settled herself on Laren's available lap.

"Ja'lat."
Their kiss was everything Laren needed just then: sweet and claiming. She indulged her need for the contact and for the simple ecstatic pleasure of the feel of Lwaxana's mouth for long moments that could never be, would never be enough, and sighed when her mate pulled back.

"T'Pel showed me."

"Ah." Then Laren did something she would never have expected of herself less than a year ago - she guided Lwaxana's right hand to the line of her jaw. "Look."

Lwaxana laughed. "You have me confused with T'Pel. I don't need touch, just permission and your will." But she didn't move her hand and, in fact, brought their foreheads together, resting on each other. "Ready?"

"Yes." She tried to frame the images in some concrete way, but she became aware that Lwaxana needed none of that, and so she surrendered her desire to remember to her need to feel and see.

Burnished Fire. That was the phrase that echoed over the thoughts of Seven that floated over all of Laren's memories of the night. And fear. Fear that Ezri would die without ever knowing what Ro did. Fear that Ro herself would die. The elation and hope when Seven and T'Pel appeared from nowhere: Burnished Fire and Deadly Night. She couldn't help it, she laughed along the mental bond, and felt Laren's shy amusement in return. Felt the molten arousal, and the immediate guilt over the arousal at Seven's lethal grace. And threading through it wonder. Wonder that they had come for her, wonder that she was loved. Wonder that she loved.

"You are loved." Lwaxana chose to speak aloud, what she could have said with her mind, but she wanted it to be solid. So much of what they had between them all was simply there, felt and understood, and so she verbalized how she felt. How they all felt.

"I know."

"You're very fond of her."

"For a long time. She was the first woman I ever went to bed with." Laren smiled in the near dark, knowing that Lwaxana would know she was smiling, and be able to see what she saw in her mind's eye. She nearly burst out laughing as Lwaxana's head suddenly swiveled around and knew that her mate was looking at the Trill speculatively.

"Kate was mine."

"Prophets." Laren's eyes widened at the hint of pale skin and a delicate neck thrown back in release that curled around the edges of awareness. "We are all tangled up with each other, even without This." She waved her hand in a circle meant to include them, and their mates.

"Yes, I do believe we are." Lwaxana decided that they had talked quite enough, and brought her mouth back down onto Laren's. She shifted her position so that she was straddling the Bajoran, instead of being cradled by her, and rose up onto her knees, glad for the flared wings on the chair's back, and the support they offered her hand.

Laren let her hands travel along Lwaxana's sides, seeking the places where the materials folds draped over one another. She found one and slid her hand inside, running her thumb along the line of the delicate rib cage until her palms found the deliciously heavy breasts. The Betazoid growled and she felt it in her hands, so she leaned in to lay a path of kisses over the flat stomach. Lwaxana's knee pressed against her core and a growl of her own resonated through her body, and the air exploded from her mouth in a matching moan, as skilled fingers pulled at the edges
of the ridges surrounding her breast.

Muted whispers haunted the edges of her awareness, but she couldn't find away to tune them out or to resolve the sound waves into words. Then a series of sharp growls and moans cut the darkness for her. Ezri opened her eyes and then blinked. She shut them and then opened them again, just to check. The lights were on low, but they were still on, and she had no problem picking out the cream flesh crossed with swatches of colour where someone's chest wrappings - Lwaxana's she guessed - had come undone under the onslaught of Ro Laren, whose heavy lidded expression of passion and need pulled Ezri firmly out of any lingering effects of sedatives or sleep.

"Ja'lat. We can't."

Lwaxana didn't stop, deciding that if Laren had meant what she was saying, she wouldn't have spoken even as she was licking a trail of wet heat in the space between her breasts, on the way from one to the other.

"Gods and Goddesses. No! Don't stop on my account." Ezri heard her voice, and cursed. It hadn't been working properly all night. But now, now it worked just fine, and the lovely scene she'd been enjoying stopped as a result. Maybe Ben was right. Think first, talk later.

Aroused and full of need, Lwaxana took a second to evaluate Laren and smiled when she caught the edge of mischievous intent from the Bajoran. Suddenly she shot one foot out, and pushed against the floor, turning the chair slightly, and denting the wall in the process. "We won't." Then with deliberate intent, she grabbed the edges of Laren's shirt and pulled it wide open. "We won't, will we?"

"No. We won't"

Ezri thought she would be immolated by what she saw in the twinned pair of dark eyes that fixed on hers, unaware of the matching fire that danced in the ice of her own.

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The next time it was much easier to regain consciousness. And Ezri immediately turned to look for Laren and Lwaxana, still not completely sure of whether or not what she'd seen had been a dream. The chair was empty, though still canted toward the wall at an odd angle.

She closed her eyes against the light, unsettled to find that she was disappointed to be alone.

"Mmm. Good morning."

Ezri opened her eyes. She knew that voice, and was pretty sure that the Captain wasn't addressing her, so she turned her head to the other side, wincing as the motion put strain on her side, to see who it was Janeway was talking to.

"How is she?" The red-head was standing comfortably between two of the most beautiful Vulcans that Ezri had ever seen, and it took her an instant to mentally swap out the casual clothes the man was wearing for a uniform: Tuvok, and T'Pel.

"She is in pain." T'Pel suddenly glanced her way. "Though she is trying not to show it. She is also awake."

Ezri got the sense that the Vulcan woman approved of her, or at least of her attempt not to scream when she moved.
"Ah, so you're awake." Janeway leaned over the edge of the bed, and shocked Ezri by adjusting an unruly hank of hair that was partially obscuring vision.

"Not dead?"

Janeway laughed, and Ezri smiled, deciding she like the sound. "No. Not dead. But you gave us quite a scare."

"I bet."

"Indeed." Tuvok had moved to join the Captain, and T'Pel. "If I could recommend that in the future you observe the away mission protocols and return undamaged, I would be most pleased."

Was he joking with her? Ezri blinked. "I'll try."

"See that you do. Are you thirsty?"

Ezri nodded, and then, because she could, she put on her best puppy dog look. "A chocolate milkshake. Hard." Janeway shook her head, and both Vulcans rewarded her with lifted brows. "Not hard then."

"Oh no. Seven left very precise instructions, or rather Kate left them with Seven, and I'm not nearly brave enough to gainsay either of those two."

"Yeah. Dr. Pulaski is a force of nature."

Janeway shot her an odd look. "Funny, that's what she says about you. Actually, that's what everyone says about you."

The edges of the bed dipped slightly as she was lifted lightly, and cradled in the arms of the two Vulcans, so that she could swallow more easily.

"Here." Janeway sat on the side of the bed nearest T'Pel and held the glass with its straw where Ezri could reach it. "Oxygen dihydride."

"Water." She said, flatly.

Janeway responded to her disappointment with the husky laugh again. "Yeah. But it's on the rocks."
As they could not go off ship at the moment, the Captain made other arrangements. At the appointed time she entered the Sick Bay. There she was greeted by Dr. Dezhe and Dr. Pulaski. The Klingon doctor greeted the captain warmly, while Dr. Pulaski merely nodded at Kathryn. They would have time to speak later.

"Dezhe, make sure he eats within the next half hour. If he's still refusing food we may need to take a good look inside. We might have missed something in the rush."

"I will do so, Kate. Have a good lunch."

The blonde shot Kathryn a look. "I intend to. But I'll be back in an hour at the latest. Call me sooner if you need me."

"We shall."

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They walked down the corridor, side by side. Kathryn tisked. "An hour..."

"I didn't want to tempt you too far this afternoon. After all, we're both on duty."

"I can clear the duty roster with a snap of my fingers."

Kate chuckled, "But you won't."

"Well, no."

"So, where are we going?"

Kathryn slid her arm through Kate's, "Someplace I hope you will enjoy."

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Kate knew exactly where she was as soon as they entered the Holodeck. They were greeted by a friendly, familiar face.

"Ah, Kate, it so good to see you again! Welcome. Welcome!"

The doctor couldn't help but smile. There was wistfulness there, a memory. "Rodney. It's good to see you too." There was a hitch to her voice. She didn't dare look at Kathryn. "What have you got for us Rod?"

"Ah, today we have Bass, fresh from the Lake. Or, if you hate the idea of fish, we've got ravioli in a nice tomato and artichoke sauce."

"I believe that Bass sounds lovely for lunch."

Rodney, or rather the holographic representation, clapped his hands together. "Excellent. If you will follow me?"
He led them to a table; not just any one. Kate felt the world begin to shake under her feet as she walked. She felt Kate's touch at her back and unconsciously leaned into it as she needed the support.

The table had a clear view of the lake outside.

It looked as it always had, clear and blue, surrounded by the tall green of a familiar forest.

Rodney held out the chair and she took it, accepting the courtesy. He then did the same for Kathryn, who sat across from her, as if she always had. Rodney left them alone then. Their gazes met. And she knew. She just knew.

"Kathryn..." Kate began.

Kathryn reached across the table and took Kate's hand. "Just enjoy the meal, love. We can talk about it later."

"He looks older."

"Well, I admit, I didn't know what he looks like now."

"No. You wouldn't."

The Bass was perfect and the rest of the meal that went with it. Conversation ebbed for awhile, as they ate. The silence was thoughtful, not oppressive. It had to end eventually, since they were both women who enjoyed conversation.

It was as if they'd always had this kind of conversation. "Dezhe says she's staying. I thought you would like to know."

"Veckma said that we'd probably keep half and then half would go with General Torres. They all want to stay, but they want to support the House."

"You've got to explain that to me. I keep hearing bits and pieces, so I have kind of an idea how it started, but what got you into it?"

"Laren kissed me."

They walked on the beach's edge afterwards, Kate's arm linked through Kathryn's. It wasn't anything in particular that stopped them, only a sense of it being time.

With a tender growl, Kathryn drew Kate in and kissed her like she meant it. Kathryn held nothing back, pouring her passion and longing into that extraordinary kiss. Every part of which was returned. What Kathryn hadn't expected was to be crying during.

She had to stop, because the sobs grew too intense.

Kate pulled her closer, "It's alright, Kathryn. We've got time now. We'll have lots of time."

Intendant Kira contacted the Captain personally to let her know that any lingering members of the Syndicate were all cleared from Terok Nor. Ironically, despite the explosion, people were still
streaming to the station and Bajor. Or maybe they were coming because of it. Some were there to rubberneck. Others were there in preparation to attend the trial.

The circle in the Promenade had been more completely cleared out and seating was starting to be arranged. Closed stores were open again, if wall-less in some points. But that didn't stop the shop owners that had been near the hall, from doing their business.

The wormhole spiraled open and closed as scheduled without Nerys going through it.

It was perhaps for the best, if the trip had not been successful or if Nerys had been injured they might have had to delay the trials. Now, however, Nerys was set on making sure those trials happened, quickly and efficiently. She could be stubborn that way, especially when it came to someone messing with her own.

If the expedition had gone on as planned, she also might not have been able to spend time with Deanna Troi, The Truth Seeker.

Now, if anyone, anywhere had told her that she would find things in common with a Truth Seeker, Nerys would have laughed in their faces and possibly had them spaced. But, aside from the Truth Seeker Council, which Nerys did find intimidating, Deanna Troi - herself - was a lovely, personable woman.

Their main issue had to do with schedules, finding time for one another. Despite their enjoyment of pleasure, both women had a propensity towards filling their time with business and as it was rare for one Truth Seeker, let alone a whole council of them, to come to Bajor, the schedules had been filled.

Somehow they managed.

Oddly, they found more time to be together when aboard Voyager.

Once the security situation changed on Terok Nor, the Captain allowed them to come aboard regularly. But anyone, aside from a chosen few, who were not already a part of the crew were simply no longer allowed on board.

Deanna Troi to continue her evaluation and investigation - one could consider it a full recreation - of what Truth Seekers could be. She had some strong goals in mind of where she wanted to go with these new ideas. She and her council spent long sessions with Lwaxana Troi, T'Pel, Counselor Nael and her whole department, working on concepts and roles that would support these goals. In a way, it proved the theory - shared knowledge was power.

Not to say that there weren't moments of difficulty. It was difficult for the Betazoids of this Universe to truly consider sharing the perks and the duties that came with the title. But they all kept their heads during the discussions and no one was seriously hurt. Threatened maybe...

But not hurt.

As she hoped, some of Truth Seekers of Voyager were open to the idea of possibly staying. If they stayed, however, it would be in their position as House Presba's Truth Seekers - with those rules and options that had been agreed to. This suited Deanna's purposes just fine. It would strengthen the Truth Seeker's position in the long run and provide a template for others to follow.

There was one loss that she was not looking forward to. Lwaxana Troi would be going home with her mates. Deanna and her mother's relationship was budding, but also forming well and it would have been nice to take it further than the time would allow. On the other hand, Lwaxana expected to be able to return and that provided some comfort.
"Eight life-times and you still haven't learned to duck."

Ezri shrugged, or at least that was the impression Kate had, the younger woman hadn't actually moved, but still conveyed a shrug. "Politicians, scientists, explorers, a gymnast and a veritable Klingon warrior; I ended up with a flair for tongo, a mean line-drive, an ability to speak Klingon, and a love of opera. I'd have preferred the lethal combat skills too."

"That dry caustic wit is new."

"Came with the duranium chest. Pretty soon I won't even recognize myself."

"Feeling a little sorry for ourselves are we. Maybe this will cheer you up." Kate held up a data PADD. She paused to acknowledge the re-entry of Seven into the room. "Hello." Considering the purpose of the visit, she felt perfectly justified in availing herself of the opportunity to claim one of Seven's sweet kisses.

The kiss came to an end, but the blonde didn't step back. Instead Seven nuzzled along the line of her neck and jaw and sampled the skin under her ear. Kate felt the low growl through the bones of her ears, knew that Seven's enhanced senses had discerned lingering traces of Kathryn's touch, and knew too that the sound was one of approval and desire.

"Now you guys are just being cruel."

Kate laughed and stepped away from Seven's loose embrace. She leaned in over Ezri and slowly moved her mouth until she was even with the Trill's ear. "But I thought you liked to watch." She let a gentle breath waft over the spots she knew would be sensitized, then stood and tucked the PADD in Ezri's hand, delighting in the low moan that followed her retreat.

She stopped just before exiting the room and looked back over her shoulder. Ezri was beet red, and Seven was regarding her with a most intriguing look. Kate couldn't resist a last parting shot. "And Seven, you might want to let your mates know that sickbay is monitored."

Lt. General Sela adjusted her uniform one more time. She then asked the Betazoid beside her, "Do I look all right?"

Counselor Priam Nael, who wasn't quite sure why she had agreed to come, looked at the Romulan and said, "Yes. You do. You look great. But you know they're not going to be looking at your uniform."

"My father will. He always does."

"But your mother?"

Sela quirked a grin at Priam. "You're not here as my counselor, Priam."

"Sorry. Habit." Priam smiled back and then tugged her own uniform down. She wore the blue and black of Starfleet, with the Voyager kick to it, and her House crest. "You'll be happy to know that Captain has already approved them to come on board. If you want, that is."

"I think Mother would like to visit. It will remind her of home."
"Well, hopefully. Voyager is somewhat unique. I know I found it a bit of a surprise when I first arrived there."

"Would you want it any different?"

"Nope."

Retired General Kasala and his wife Natasha Yar, formally a Lieutenant in a Federation from another Universe, stepped into the station arm in arm. They were both dressed in mutedly colorful robes and walked with a stately grace that came from long years of walking together. The casualness of their approach was belied by the six armed guards who accompanied them and the two assistants behind them.

Sela stepped forward, feeling suddenly anxious and needful. "Mother. Father." There was genuine warmth and pleasure in her voice.

The joy was returned, when her parents smiled back. Her father released her mother so that she could embrace her child. "Oh Sela, it is so good to see you!" Tasha stepped back, still holding to her daughter, but lightly. She examined her, noting the tired edges around her daughter's features.

"And you," Sela replied. She turned and bowed to her father. Their embrace would happen in a less public place. As she had anticipated, his gaze also examined her and when she returned to her upright position, she stood proudly.

Sela stepped back, "May I present my companion. Counselor Priam Nael, Truth Seeker of House Presba, Lieutenant Commander on Voyager."

The Counselor was aware of the sudden shift in the stance of the guards and the General. But what most intrigued her was the attention of Sela's mother. A mental question was shot to her, like an arrow from a bow. Are you Starfleet?

Of course, she couldn't answer it directly here. Instead she smiled and extended her hand in an earth traditional greeting. "It is truly a pleasure to meet you."

Kasala managed not to express shock at the open handed gesture. He took it and bowed, allowing the telepathic contact. The Counselor sent over warm thoughts and greetings and a slight hint of warning of things to come. Sela has things she must discuss with you in a secure location. We offer you access to Voyager, as needed.

Kasala released her hand without reply and the Betazoid turned towards Tasha, with that same extended hand. It was taken in a firm, gentle grip. This time the Counselor sent only a small message. We are.

An expression of something flickered over Sela's face, too quickly to be adequately registered, but somehow meaningful anyway. Hope. "The pleasure is ours," Tasha said.

They visited the new Judgment site first. Plascrete created a one foot barrier around the perimeter of the circle. The Judgment dais had been refined to the South. The Intendant's and VIP remained to the West. The entry to the circle was to the North. The head remained on the post, gruesomely well
preserved by the forcefield around it. The observers' seating wrapped around the whole space with auditorium seating.

Security guards, from the station, the Tor'stag and Voyager, were stationed around the area.

"It seems to be well in hand," Kasala noted.

"Intendant Kira, took the attack on Terok Nor quite personally." Sela said. "It has been a... transforming experience."

"Interesting. Shall we expect great things?" queried her mother. Despite her race, Tasha was a woman of position on Romulus and was knowledgeable about the politics of the Beta and the Alpha quadrants.

"I expect so. It is rumored that she and The Truth Seeker have been consulting."

"That is an unexpected turn of events."

"It gets better," Sela said. She walked in an unconscious mirror to her parent's stride, with Counselor Nael's arm looped through hers.

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They entered Voyager via the port entrance, passing the massive security guard at the door. They were greeted by yellow and orange spotted fuzzy male. "Welcome to Voyager. I am Neelix, the Morale Officer for the ship and your designated greeter. The Captain has asked that you join her in the Conference Room. Unless, of course, you have other plans?"

"Thank you, Neelix. We're ready."

"Good. Good. If you'll follow me then."

By the time they were brought into the Conference Room the retired General and his mate had experienced a small, but potent tour of the vessel. Sela had enough time on board to appreciate the carefully chosen route and approved. Tasha Yar had been impressed.

The people already in the room stood up, which included General Torres. The Captain of Voyager greeted the newcomers warmly. "Thank you for coming. It is an honor to meet you."

"Captain Janeway, it is our honor to be here," Kasala said evenly. "I know that my wife has appreciated the opportunity to visit this ship. It reminds her of home."

Kathryn's eyebrows rose a bit and she said, with a touch of awe, "Then you are..."

"I am Lieutenant Tasha Yar, from the Enterprise C. Now mate to Kasala." There was a brief flutter of amazement.

"Well," said Janeway. "This is a remarkable turn of events. Lieutenant Yar, welcome on board. I would love to talk with you and your mate further on this topic, but I'm afraid that we do have several other things that need to be covered first." Kathryn's propped her hands on her hips in that charge manner of hers. "Let's be seated. General Torres will be doing the presenting."

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The small conference wound its way to a close. Kasala's and Yar's expressions were both grim and alarmed. "Romulus must be informed at once," said the retired General firmly.
"We are agreed on that point. However, Chancellor Worf also has other imperatives." General Torres glanced at Captain Janeway and received a nod. "It has been agreed that there will be an exchange of... ambassadors. Chancellor Worf has requested that you, your mate and a select staff join Captain Janeway on their journey, as a representative of the Empire's interests."

There was a long moment of silence as that was absorbed. Kasala sat rigid for a moment. Then his wife looked at him and touched the top portion of his hand. His shoulders dropped minutely and he exhaled. "General Torres," Kasala stated slowly, "We are honored to serve the Empire."

The meeting broke up not too long after that. General Torres promised Kasala that any message he would send would arrive at Romulus unhampered. She had reliable couriers. She would, however, leave the decision up to him about whether he would make a trip back to Romulus before joining with the crew of Voyager. She did point out, however, that Captain Janeway was scheduled to leave sometime after the trials.

"We do have one very important errand to run before we go, however," interjected the Captain.

"Will you not be addressing a matter of House Honor?" inquired the new Ambassador.

General Torres and Janeway shared a glance. The Belle said, "I have agreed to take on that task. If Kathryn happens to be around, then she will back me up."

"Correct," confirmed the Captain.

"I see," said the Romulan. "Good Hunting, then, General Torres."

The Klingon woman grinned wolfishly at the Romulan. "Oh, it will be." She then turned to her sister-in-law. "Did a certain person happen to cook anything today?"

"Unfortunately, he's been a busy young man. Mom, on the other hand decided to treat us to dinner the other night and there were leftovers."

"Oh Kahless. Send something over, will you? And see if she'd be willing to make something for the men. They'll kill for her cookies. I can use them as a reward." Then she growled. "And damn it, next time, invite me!"

Kathryn laughed and held up her hands in mock surrender. "She surprised us all late that night. You know how it is when our moms get something in their heads. It was so late I didn't want to disturb you. But I'll see what I can do. I am fairly sure there was plenty left."

Laren interjected, "There is. I'll have someone deliver it so it's on the Tor'stag before you leave."

"Excellent."

The Romulan's eyebrows were practically off of his forehead. Tasha Yar was taking it all in with a composed and slightly speculative expression. Sela merely looked as if she'd heard it before.

General Torres turned to her First. "I've got a few things that we need to cover before we leave Voyager. Why don't you come with me and your parents can join you again later."

Sela looked at her father, who nodded.

Soon there were only four people in the Conference Room.
"I hardly know where to begin," said the Captain. "We've had so many surprises lately."

"I do have one question before we start," said Lieutenant Yar. She turned to look at the Bajoran. "Do I know you?"

Laren let only the slightest smile quirk at her lips. "We've met. You know me from the Academy."

"The Academy? But... how is that possible?"

"I am not as young as I look. I am Ro Laren."

Tasha sat back and looked at the other woman in wonder and after a moment nodded her head.
"Rejuvenation?"

"Anomaly. It literally changed us."

"Which would explain why a majority of the crew on this ship look like cadets, yet walk like old-hands?"

"Yes."

The Captain watched the interchange with some amusement. "We do tend to forget what it must look like to others."

"You have had...quite the impact," stated Kasala carefully. "My wife and I thank you. It is the first time she and I have been able to be together on one of my missions."

The Captain winced. "Admittedly, slavery is something we consider to be one of the ... Great Flaws."

"That is a courteous way to put your belief. Yet, you predict its end will come quickly."

"It will have to, Ambassador. The Empire will need willing allies, not terrified slaves, if it is to win."

"Humans are ... resourceful. It is an aspect of your character that I admire greatly." He looked at his wife with amused respect. There was a memory there, unspoken, but definitely between them. "But, this is something that we may speak of at another time. I believe that what you really wish to do is... debrief my mate?"

"Well, I suspect it has been a long time since the Lieutenant has had to give a report. Are you willing and up to it, Lieutenant Yar?"

The blonde ex-security officer, now Ambassador, nodded sharply. "More than you know." She took the hand of her mate in her own and gripped it tightly. Then she began to speak.

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It was a courageous tale of survival, adaptation and overcoming the odds. The Captain and the Lieutenant listened attentively, with sympathy and not a little amazement. By the time Tasha was done, they were in awe of the other woman's perseverance and strength.

Through the whole things, she held Kasala's hand, as both a comfort and a dare. As if they would even think of parting them at this point.
"It is a remarkable story, Lieutenant. Or should I say, Ambassador?" The Captain looked thoughtful for a moment, and then nodded her head. "Yes, I think we'll go with Ambassador at this point. Your commission, from a timeline point of view, would have expired years ago. But it will be good to have your report on record. Do you concur, Lieutenant Ro?"

The Captain extended her hand, with two fingers extended. The Bajoran covered Kathryn's fingertips with her own. Then they both gazed at the Tasha and Kasala with supreme understanding. "I do."

Tasha let go of a breath that she did not even know she was holding.

Captain Janeway smiled gently and she and Laren released their touch, reluctantly. "It will take us at least twenty four hours to create a suite suitable for your status. Forty eight, if you have certain specifications which must be met. You should be aware that there are no slaves allowed on this ship, so any persons you pick as your assistants must be contract-based. They will also have their own quarters, so it would help if you let us know the number of people to be included in your party as soon as possible."

Ambassador Kasala nodded evenly, though he was filled with a touch of wonder at what he believed he had just witnessed. "Understood."

"Excellent." Then Captain Janeway said, "We look forward to having you on board. If you find that you wish to take on other duties while with us, please do let me know. We have positions that could be filled."

"That is a very interesting offer, Captain."

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"Chakotay, would you please come with me to my Ready Room?"

"Of course, Captain. Harry, you've got the conn."

The Lieutenant nodded and immediately took his place in the command chair while the other two officers exited the Bridge.

"Have a seat, Chakotay." Janeway indicated one of the seats in the more informal area of the room. Then she went to the replicator and ordered two drinks; coffee for herself, tea for her friend.

"It must be serious," he said as she handed him the cup.

She waggled her hand at him. "It could be." She took a sip and then settled down herself and crossed her legs. "I have a proposal for you, Chakotay, and I would like you to consider it very carefully."

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Once the judgment area was set up the way that the Intendant wanted, her people began working on the wreckage that was the Hall. They cleared it out quickly, getting rid of the blackened destruction until only the open shell was left. Then Intendant Kira enacted her plan.

She contacted Voyager and asked for the prisoners.

It was an unexpected request, but one that the Captain was inclined to accept. Voyager's engineers, maintenance crew, and security began moving the prisoners from Cargo Bay 2 to the empty Judgment Hall.
They stacked the black and silver life support receptacles along the wall and up one level, where they created steps and a walkway in front of them. The faces of the prisoners could be seen clearly through the forcefields that kept the units operational. Beside a unit, a notification was placed - a larger version of the PADD, with the name of the occupant and a description of the accusations. Soon the units nearly completely wrapped around the wall and security was stationed within and without the decimated Hall.

Anyone, however, could come and look. And they did.

Captain Janeway spoke to Epatai Torres, the Chief Engineer who managed the team. She gazed with awe at the area. It was a dangerous mix of refinement and devastation. Before each receptacle was a post, with a small forcefield generator. "Remind me not to piss Nerys off."

"You got that right."

Ambassadors Kasala and Yar officially joined the rosters of Voyager soon after that discussion between B'Elanna and Kathryn.

Their new quarters, which were quite expansive and luxurious, were put on the Officer's Deck. Part of the reason for the opulence was Starfleet Protocol and the other was Lwaxana's insistence that it always made things much easier for her. "When one is an Ambassador, presentation is everything."

They were also assigned offices near The Park, as per request. Once Kasala had discovered Mess Hall 2 was the fine dining area of Voyager, he had insisted it would be invaluable at times of negotiation. "They do not know what they have here, my Tasha."

"We'll have to educate them, I guess."

"Indeed."

Like his daughter, he was impressed with the security of the ship and knew he would come to rely on it. He couldn't place a single microphone or spy gadget anywhere that worked. But he knew that the ship must somehow be able to monitor conversations. It was decided that they must cooperate with Voyager's protocols and so contact was made with Tuvok and the Captain.

"We can arrange something for you, if you need it," assured Captain Janeway. She understood that Ambassadors had special requirements. "Also, we'll provide access to private channels for your communication purposes."

"This will be most useful. Thank you."

"We'll have to keep an eye on them, of course. But I'm reassured that there will be a good balance, since Ambassador Yar is part of the team." Kathryn commented to Tuvok later, in the Ready Room. "However, let's make sure that there are no surprises." She glanced up, a habit that she had gradually come to acknowledge as her way of looking for Voyager's face. "Voyager, I'd like you to work with Tuvok on this please."

"Of course, Kathryn. Do you wish me to downplay my presence at this time?"
"No. Continue the way you have been. It takes awhile for most people to figure it out anyway. But, you've become too much of a presence for our crew to start faking it without warning. We'll just operate with standard procedure."
One thing that forced bed-rest afforded was time to think. Curiously, it had provided her with very little actual rest. A body could only sleep so much. This was why Ezri found herself wide awake, and deep into a recurring bout of self-pity, at an hour where even the gamma shift had trouble keeping from falling asleep. It was day two of her somewhat Pyrrhic victory over Kate. She'd gotten out of sickbay alright, but as far as she could tell it hadn't improved her lot one iota. In fact, she'd lost the few diversions she'd had.

It had taken her the better part of the first day in sickbay to figure it out, but the constant presence of some member of the Prime of the House Presba hadn't been a coincidence, and over the following three days, she'd gotten to know a lot more about that varied and amazing group. Now though, ensconced in the guest room of the Presba Family Quarters, she'd been alone since, but for some very entertaining time spent with Emina, and then Mezoti.

As though longing for it had made it so, the door to the room slid open to reveal the person she most wanted to see. Seven of Nine was dressed in a robe that left very little to the imagination and Ezri felt her heart begin to pound. It felt different. Then Seven moved, and she lost the thought, distracted by the length of thigh exposed and then hidden in the motion.

"Ezri Dax."

"Seven of Nine."

"I have been instructed to have you cease tutoring Mezoti in the ways of chaos." Her eyes were twinkling and there was a slight smile playing on the edges of her full lips.

"Dressed like that?" Ezri maneuvered onto her left arm so that she could better appreciate the view.

"No." Seven let the robe drop.

"I will comply."

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"You are uneasy."

Ezri nudged her way around so that Seven was holding her from behind and there wasn’t as much pressure on her right side. They hadn’t technically made love, but it very much felt that way, the tender touches and kisses going a long way towards restoring her equilibrium. But Seven was right. "I am."

"You told Kate that you were afraid."

When did she...? Ah, Seven must have heard more of her conversation with Pulaski than she had thought. "Just how good is your hearing anyway?"

Seven decided to take the question literally. There was something important here, and she was determined to discover what had the normally ebullient Trill in knots, but she felt it had to be teased out of her lover. She canted her head slightly, unconsciously assuming her listening pose. "Tuvok and T'Pel are meditating; they have reached the third incantation. Kathryn and Laren are attempting
to divert B'Elanna's attention from Mezoti's enhancement of her toolkit." She paused, untangling the sounds. "Lwaxana is not helping matters." She had deliberately chosen only to listen to those people in her household who she was already certain would not object, or that were in public portions of the quarters.

Ezri laughed. "She went for the toolkit, hunh?"

"Indeed. B'Elanna is very displeased"

"But at me right? Not Mezoti. It was my fault. I just, I don't know, she was so serious in here this afternoon, so intense. She lost a lot."

There it was. "As have you."

Ezri forcibly exhaled, and Seven felt the explosion of heat across her arms, but she remained silent. Waiting. But the sentiment spoken by the blast of denial was not followed by an explanation and Seven tried to frame how to proceed. Directly, she thought. There could be no other way between them.

She rolled so that they were facing, careful not to cause any further injury to Ezri's healing arm and chest. "You have lost yourself."

Ezri met Seven's eyes, stunned by the words, but knew them for truth. And if the truth had been stunning, then what she found in Seven's gaze was a warp-core breech. Seven of Nine understood explicitly what it was to be lost to something beyond her control.

"I knew," she said, tears beginning to run down her face. "I saw you that day. Saw your eyes. And I knew. Knew that you could see me."

Like one of Emina's spatial relation puzzles, the form of it fell into being, and Seven too knew what she had seen that day. She had seen someone looking back at her with the knowledge of many, but the will of one. Had seen someone who knew the voices.

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Ezri felt a slight tug against her arms and opened her arms to let Seven move. At some point in her rambling, she must have fallen asleep on the Borg.

"Be'nal. Come on love."

She opened her eyes to find a face framed in curly brown hair leaning over the bed, and their owner trying to gently extract her bed-mate. "B'Elanna?"

"Its okay, Dax. Go back to sleep. She needs to regenerate. It's been almost 140 hours since her last cycle."

"Will she be okay?" She realized that Seven hadn't spoken or stirred beyond a brief movement as she settled into her spouse.

"She'll be fine. She just needs to spend some time in her alcove."

B'Elanna straightened, and Ezri was impressed at how effortlessly she lifted the larger woman. "I didn't mean to--"

"I know. Things have just been hectic, and since they are about to get more so with the trials, I just
wanted to make sure..." B'Elanna sounded almost gruff.

Ezri watched the play of muscles across the strong shoulders, wondering at the shape of her back. She grinned. "You're really hot when you're being all Knight-like."

B'Elanna glared, and Ezri knew that only the Klingon's desire not to wake Seven kept her from reacting more forcefully. Then a grin broke across the engineer's face. "I'll be back in a bit. I think we have some things to discuss." An electric and very feral energy suddenly washed from B'Elanna in waves. "Like how unbelievably stupid it is to bait a Klingon, or mess with an engineer's toolkit."

She met B'Elanna's frank gaze with one of her own. "I've done stupider things."

B'Elanna raised her eyebrows in unknowing imitation of both her be'nal and the good doctor. "I doubt that."

"Yeah well, I've gone and fallen in love with your wife." Ezri dared to meet the Klingon's eyes, and was surprised to find humour and a wry kind of sympathy on the noble features.

"Have you told her?"

"No."

"They would welcome you to us."

"But not you."

"I would welcome you for her."

"You can't."

"I would."

Ezri laughed, and then held up her hands in mock surrender before B'Elanna could work up a really indignant rant, over her perceived rejection. She became serious. "But I can't, and it's not that I don't want to. I could marry anyone on this ship who was not a Klingon, or a member of House Presba, without even blinking. But in this Epatai, I am of the House Martok, and Klingon."

B'Elanna was stunned. They hadn't even considered what it meant that the Mistress of the House Presba was, for all intents and purposes, courting a woman who in their Universe was a member of the Chancellor's House. "Fuck." She couldn't think of a Klingon word strong enough.

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To her surprise, it wasn't B'Elanna who knocked on her door a short-time later. Tuvok and T'Pel, both dressed alike in thick cream coloured robes that set off their skin beautifully -- though Ezri doubted that the ensembles had been chosen with an eye to how attractive she would find them -- stood waiting for admittance.

"Hello, Tuvok. Hello T'Pel." She grabbed one of the now discarded sheets and wrapped it around her torso out of respect.

"Ezri Dax." The return greetings were spoken by Tuvok, but she had no trouble reading the acknowledgment of her salutation from T'Pel.

She bowed slightly to the quiet Vulcan. "T'Pel, I owe you my life. Thank you."
T'Pel nodded. "You are most welcome."

"What can I do for you?"

Tuvok and T'Pel exchanged a quick look, and then T'Pel stepped closer to bed, and held out her hand. "We would know you."

A soft whisper caressed her mind as their hands met. "We would have you know yourself."

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"Kathryn?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Can I come in?"

"Of course." Kathryn put her book aside, not bothering to hide what she'd been reading.

B'Elanna tucked herself next to Kathryn on the bed, and drew her knees up to her chest. "We have a small problem."

"How small?"

"Did you know that Ezri is part of a Klingon House?"

Kathryn pinched the bridge of her nose. "No. But I can't say it surprises me in the least."

B'Elanna laughed. "Want to know which House?"

"No." She leaned over and kissed her mate, taking a very enjoyable reprieve from the situation.

"Martok's. I mean I knew it, she introduced herself very formally, but I didn't really pay attention. She was just --" her words were swallowed in an understanding kiss.

"A fling." Kathryn finished, after breaking the kiss. "I was a little jealous too, B'Elanna. And then --" it was her turn to be cut off by a searing kiss.

"You saw her in Seven's shirt."

"Mmm. Something like that. The skin along B'Elanna's shoulder beckoned invitingly and Kathryn answered by trailing a line of kisses along the exposed flesh.

"Hold that thought Kathryn." B'Elanna sat up a little, reluctant to stop what they'd started, but needing to share what she knew. "Martok could challenge me as Head of House for what is happening."

"What?"

"That the Mistress of a very minor House is sleeping with a member of the Chancellor's personal Household is one thing." She held up her hand to keep Kathryn from interrupting. "But to make her a ninth wife? That can't happen without Lady Sirella's direct approval. The insult from just asking could cripple the House."

Kathryn slumped against the bed frame. "You have got to be kidding me."
B’Elanna leaned into her, drawing comfort from the contact. The absurdity of it struck her. They had
one mate playing hard to get, prolonging the inevitable, and one who would join them without
reservation who couldn't. "How are those wooing skills coming, Kathryn?"

"Captain, Do you have a moment?"

"Of course, Chakotay." She indicated the seat in front of her desk and nodded to her assistant to go
ahead and give them a moment of privacy. "What may I do for you?"

"I've been thinking about our discussion a few days ago. I've decided to accept."

Kathryn smiled warmly at her friend. "I am so glad to hear it. Your duties will begin after we explore
the wormhole. I'll contact General Torres."

"Thank you, Kathryn."

"Thank *you*, Ambassador."

He ran his hand through his short hair and gave her a rueful look. "It's going to take weeks to get
used to that."

She grinned. "Go pick your staff from the list of volunteers, and get back to me. Oh, and expect
someone to begin apprenticing soon. They're going to have big shoes to fill."

He grinned back.

The Rogue Star, which had been enroute from Trill for several weeks, finally docked at Terok Nor.
The ship, which usually ran merchandise of various types, was crammed full of passengers. This
included several diplomats, who felt it was necessary to show solidarity with the Empire by attending
the Trials to come.

Jadzia Dax had no personal interest in the trials. Her interest was in successful enterprise - mercenary
or otherwise. If it happened to mean that she took passenger loads, then that is what she did. On the
other hand, it did seem that Terok Nor was a place of interests and one never knew what the next
opportunity might be. She decided to stay.

Captain Janeway did have someone in mind for the position of first officer, but she happened to be in
recovery mode at the moment. Conveniently, Ezri Dax happened to also be quartered in the guest
room. It made finding the Trill easier. More, the inability to run away might come in handy.

She rang the chime and entered on the summons. "You're looking somewhat better," she commented
upon entering.

The elfin-faced Trill gave Kathryn a bit of an old fashioned look. "Well, I've been getting plenty of
rest," she said.

"Bored, I take it." Though Kathryn had it from reliable sources that certain members of the family
had ensured the Trill hadn't been too bored.

Ezri let eyes drift across the line of pips affixed to Kathryn's collar, and decided that it was just her
imagination that they were a dark purple, instead of black. "Please, do sit down."

"Thank you." Kathryn settled into a soft chair beside the bed, crossed her legs and settled her palms on her knees, signaling that she was here as the Captain and not as Kathryn. "Ezri Dax, you have been somewhat of a puzzle to me. I've been contemplating where you might fit in, in the larger scheme of things."

"I take it you've arrived at a conclusion." Surreptitiously, she glanced over at the small work table, looking for the results of the project that she and the twins had been working on the day before.

"A possibility, if you will. You've tried on many hats in your career. Some have fit better than others, but you have always managed to do well. Also, B'Elanna informs me that there are certain things that might influence decisions in personal relations, which I take to lean in the ship's favor at this time."

"I don't understand."

"Illumination will come," the Captain chided gently. She paused a moment, as if assessing the young woman before her, then nodded her head slightly. "I believe you will do."

"I'll do what?" Ezri found herself having difficulty remaining focused. Her attention kept drifting from the Captain's face to her pips.

"Ezri Dax, I have a proposal to make."

"I thought you had a conversation with the Epatai."

"Lieutenant," there was a soft burr of warning in Kathryn's tone.

"Sorry." Her grin, though, was unrepentant.

"Commander Chakotay has accepted a position that will require that he stay in this Universe."

Ezri felt a slight buzz begin in her forehead and roll over her scalp and down.

"Because of this, I will be sans a First Officer. The proposal I have for you, should you choose to accept it, is that you take that position, Chakotay will conduct your apprenticeship, but it's a position you've held, albeit on a smaller ship, and you shouldn't have any trouble picking up the reins. I've spoken with Kate and we have agreed that the duties that you will encounter should be light enough for someone who is..."

"You mean I'll get out of here? I accept."

Kathryn grinned at the hastiness. "Don't you want to at least think about it for a few minutes at least?"

"I've already said yes. I am a woman of my word."

"Well, that is good to know." Kathryn shook her head lightly. "I do have one question. Do you want this now, or more formally?" She held up a small wooden box, and then opened it to reveal an extra pip gold pip.

"If I take that pip right now, then I'm a Commander and First Officer of Voyager?"

Kathryn paused a beat, and then decided to answer. "Yes."

"And discipline of the ship's compliment falls to the First Officer, correct?"
Dax was staring at her in a most unsettling manner, but she’d started the process, and she too was a woman of her word. "Correct."

Ezri leaned forward and took the pip. "As my first official act as your First Officer, I’d like to suggest that you replicate some new pips."

"My pips?"

"They're blue, Captain."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, they were green. But now they're blue."

There was a comical moment as Kathryn tried to twist her focus to see the pips and then realized that effort would not work. She pulled one of the small round objects off her collar. It was now red. "What in the world?"

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"My Gods. Look at this place." Jadzia exclaimed in wonder. Quark’s was as packed as she had ever seen it. The sounds of money being won and lost were a trilling electronic symphony. People were laughing, drinking, merry making.

"I know. It's beautiful isn't it," said the Ferengi standing next to her.

"I think you've managed to outdo yourself." Jadzia was impressed.

"I've been making latinum hand over fist, and that's even with people winning. All thanks to the Trials."

"Maybe I should have come earlier."

"Maybe," agreed the Ferengi. "But then, knowing you, you would have left early anyway. This way you get to stay to see the excitement."

The Trill sniffed a bit disdainfully, but didn't outright disagree.

"Speaking of excitement, where is Bashir?"

"Oh. Him. He's was on another snit. I left him on Mars on our last run to Sol System. He was completely disagreeable."

"Human rights campaigning?"

"No. Just an unhappy man in general. Life is too short, you know?"

"Ah." The Ferengi reached behind the bar and there was a sound of liquid being poured into a glass. He handed the glass, full of purple bubbly substance, to the Trill. "Try this. Tell me what you think."

She took it, "An Empire Killer?"

"With a twist. Try it."

The Trill lifted the drink to her lips and took a healthy sip. Then she held the glass away from her lips and gasped audibly. "Oh good Gods and Goddesses." She breathed out hard, and then she brought
the drink back to her lips and took another sip. This time her eyes began to water and her lips burned, yet felt good. "That's..." Again she had to hold the drink away from herself. She could feel the effects of the drink from her spots on in. "Oh, that is remarkable, Quark." She didn't know what the spice was in the drink, but it added enough kick to fell a Targ. Klingons would love it. "What did you do to this?"

"It's a secret spice. I paid a fortune for it to one of the Voyager crew. It's very rare, from the Delta quadrant. I've got enough to last a year. Hopefully by that time, my science contacts will have broken down the components enough to recreate it. Think others will like it?"

The Trill nodded, trying to catch her breath. "If they survive it, they will." She knew that the first one was free, for the sake of their friendship, but the second one... "So. How much for another."

The Bartender started to grin quite widely.

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Seven carried the 'aqleH with great care. The haft and grip had been cleaned and refurbished. The blade of the axe glistened shiny silver. It had been oiled cleaned, and honed to a Borg approved slicing edge. She had been somewhat tempted, under the belief that objects ought to be returned to an owner improved, to apply a diamond tipped sharp edge to the blade, but she had resisted. The axe had served its purpose admirably without such an edge when she needed it. She had, for the sake of safety, covered that sharpness with a casing, which she hoped would find approval with her sister and sister-in-law.

She was on board the Tor'stag. She now had a standing invitation from the General and her mate and she had taken other opportunities to visit Annika as she was able. It had allowed them to explore their unique connection and to become friends.

Seven valued her friends. And, more importantly, she valued her family.

Thus she did feel some disquiet about the condition of the blade. She hoped it would be enough; though she had also brought a small gift of appreciation for the timeliness of her sister's actions. Courtesy, she had come to learn, was a very valuable tool in relating to others - when applied correctly.

She cradled the axe in her arm and strode with her usual confidence down the corridors of the Tor'stag towards her sister's quarters. Klingons who happened to be walking in the same space seemed to have the same reaction of standing out of her way as she passed. There was always the sense of a bow, but she was unsure why they reacted in such a way. Still, she accepted their action at face value and was simply grateful that they did not interfere with her efficiency.

Upon her arrival she rang the chime and waited. She had called first, so she knew that she was expected, but that did not mean that others shared her sense of time. Certainly Annika seemed to ... what did Lwaxana call it? She walked to the beat of her own drum.

The door opened swiftly and there was her sister, smiling brightly. It always took Seven aback and she wondered if her own smile could be equally dazzling. She somehow doubted.

"Welcome Seven! We've been looking forward to seeing you." Annika stepped back to allow Seven in.

The ex-drone stepped with care into the quarters. "It is good to see you too," she said politely. "I am sorry that it has been so long."
"Oh, Seven. Don't worry about that. I'm just glad to see that you're okay." Annika caught Seven up in a quick, startling embrace. Then let go.

By that time Belle had entered the room and Seven's attention was diverted. "General Torres, I wish to return something that belongs to you," she said formally. The axe was suddenly positioned in both hands. "Your mate was kind enough to lend this to me during a moment of crisis."

The Klingon stepped closer and accepted the axe from Seven. Her expression was full of awe. "I wouldn't have recognized this if I hadn't known the shape. Kahless, but this is beautiful."

"I did not wish to return your axe uncared for. It was a worthy weapon and served me well."

There was a speculative look in the Klingon's gaze. "Did it now? There must be quite the story to it."

"There is."

The Klingon's gaze didn't waver. But her stance softened. "But you're not ready to tell it." She hummed a bit then took a deep breath. "This blade has been lonely for action since it has been here on the Tor'stag. I think it is yours. Someday, when you are ready, you will tell me this story. Yes?"

She extended the axe to Seven, who took it and cradled it again, like a child.

Seven simply answered, "Yes."

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Though the Captain had loosened the restrictions on the ship, there were still strong security protocols enacted. The major shore leave was over. This meant that once again Voyager's interior was busy with activity, as people returned to their duty shifts. The corridors bloomed with life as people of various sizes, shapes and races passed by one another.

This included those who were moving quickly and those who were moving more sedately, such as Lwaxana and Kate - who were walking arm in arm in companionable silence. Kate had recently visited the Presba Family Quarters to lay down the rules of recuperation for the newly minted first officer. This included establishing a schedule for sick bay visitations and a dialog about knowing when to quit, which she wasn't sure was actually listened to.

But there were side benefits to the developing relationship with the Prime of House Presba. Thus her little stroll with Lwaxana, which at first had started as a discussion about to what to watch for with Ezri and had ended up just being a very nice little walk between people with pleasant memories.

They found themselves, once more, at the Quarters of the family, this time at the adult's entrance. There was an open invitation in Lwaxana's gaze as the door opened and she extended her hand to Kate.

"I shouldn't," said the Doctor.

"I disagree. Of all the things that should be done, this is it. Come inside, Kate. Let me love you and be loved by you tonight. Your duty shift is over."

Kate stalled for a few more seconds, and then realized it was simply the habit of resisting, which had her hanging out in the hallway when she knew where she really wanted to be. She reached back.

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Lwaxana's rooms looked as if they had been designed with the Betazoid in mind. The décor was
open and flowing, and much different than the ambassadorial suite that Kate recalled. They could have been on Betazed, from all appearances. There were even holographic "windows," which had images of the outdoors to look upon. It was an odd combination with the Port windows, yet somehow it worked. Even the furniture and setting somehow managed to convey comfort, tradition and modern tastes. "It looks like you," commented the Doctor.

Lwaxana smiled. "Thank you. I have no idea how they did it. But have loved it since I arrived. Care for something to stiffen your resolve?"

Kate laughed warmly, "I think that would be a good thing. Something short, though. I don't want my resolve to stiffen then flow away."

Chuckling, Lwaxana went to the replicator and placed two orders. She returned with small wine glasses filled with a ruby liquid. She handed hers to Kate. "To long term relationships."

Kate's eyes widened, but she clinked her glass with Lwaxana's and they both drank.

The warm heat that flowed all the way down was nothing compared to the fire that started when they threw the glasses into a small fireplace, where a low flame burned - and kissed. The glass sparkled away in a haze of blue, as the disguised replicator absorbed the shards. There were some wonderful traditions out there, thought Kate with amusement. The chuckle was shared between both of them as Lwaxana drew the blonde closer.

They undressed each other without haste, delighting in gentle exploration. "You know, it's actually been awhile for me," said Kate softly. The kisses had not stopped, merely changed path and territory.

Lwaxana said, somewhat facetiously, "Then I shall be gentle." Her hands covered Kate's breasts and she palmed the nipples gently, deliciously, as her mouth made warm trails along Kate's neck.

The blonde sighed into the touch and felt the soft growl of desire from Lwaxana roll straight to her belly. The Betazoid was working on the clasp of Kate's pants, gently undoing them. The tug felt wonderful, sensuous.

There was a chirrup. "Dr. Dezhe to Dr. Pulaski"

Both woman stopped, pulled back, and looked at each other. Then they looked at the ground, where Dr. Pulaski's clothes were piling up. There was another chirrup. "Dr. Dezhe to Dr. Pulaski."

There was a mutual groan, and then Kate bent down and liberated her jacket. She tapped her comm. Badge. "Pulaski here."

"Thank Kahless. There's been an accident in Holodeck 2. Safeties were off. We've got six Klingons, three Ylfians and two humans in bad condition coming in."

"I'll be right there. Pulaski out."

There was no need for explanation. The clothes were put back on with haste, and a kiss. "There will be time."

"Soon. I hope. This is getting tougher to deal with than I anticipated."

Lwaxana grinned, slightly evilly. "Good." Then she swatted Kate's buttocks gently, in a get-moving gesture. "Go love. Before I keep you here."

The blonde shot her a mixed surly, yet amused look and then took off, only cussing a little bit.
Janeway sat in her desk chair, and surveyed the ready room. So many changes. Inevitable changes - once she'd fully embraced the situation. Ro Laren looked up and met her glance. Awesome changes.

And now there would be another one. "Laren, bring them in."

Laren nodded. "Commander Dax, to the ready room." The request was acknowledged. She stepped through the ready room doors and onto the bridge to complete her task.

Chakotay's gaze found hers immediately, and Laren was disturbed by what she saw flash in his eyes, but the bridge was not the place to deal with it. "The Captain would like see you, Commander." She didn't wait for him to join her, but instead turned back to join the Captain.

She had already taken the chair at the small desk she used when not in her own office when Chakotay entered.

"Kathryn." He passed over a PADD even as he completed his greeting. "I have a list of names for candidates to replace me, and the recommendations for how to fill the holes as they shuffle."

Janeway took the PADD. "Have a seat, Chakotay." She scanned the PADD, then raised her eyebrows as she looked at her First Officer, then flicked her glance at Laren.

What, I'm not on it? Laren signed.

You're on it. Just not at the top. And in truth she had very much wanted to promote Laren. In fact, in almost every way Laren was the perfect choice. But that one disadvantage was enough. "Thank you for your recommendations, but I made the appointment last night.

The chime rang, and Laren hit the admittance button. She couldn't help it. Her eyes widened in shock. Ezri had chosen a very Klingon version of the uniform, a version that hadn't looked quite so edgy on a PADD. The most interesting part was that the Trill was only wearing the outer layer and the combination of skin, leather and metal wiped away the impression of gamine innocence, and left no doubt that she was dangerous. Then she smiled.

"Commander Dax. Have a seat." Kathryn shot a look at Laren and was pleased to see that Dax had taken her mate equally by surprise.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Dax? You promoted Dax?" Chakotay stood.

"Sit down, Ambassador."

Chakotay ignored the command, and turned to the still unseated Trill. "It's not just a rumour. You're the new bedmate."

"That's enough!"

"Captain, permit me." Ezri stepped closer to Chakotay.

"Do you know who I am?"
Laren watched Chakotay weigh the question. Then looked at Kathryn. I take it her name wasn't on the list?

Kathryn replied, wishing that the finger speak could convey the amusement she felt, then saw a quirk of Laren's lips and realized that their bond transmitted that even as her face retained the command mask. I'd say that on a list of everyone on Voyager, she'd come last for some reason.

"Why don't you tell me who you think you are."

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"I'm the Host of the Trill that stood with Fleet Captain Pike, of the Trill who defied a planet and brought first contact to our Homeworld. I am the Host of the Trill who stood between an Empire and the Federation and came out of it with the Khitomer Accord, and of the Trill that dared to be the first sentient being to use a transporter." Ezri opened herself up to who she was, and stepped even closer to Chakotay. "I am the Host of the Trill who brutally killed three people, and I am the Host of the Trill who retrieved the sword of Kahless." And without any warning in her posture, she moved, not as lightening quick as some, but with a deadly grace that resulted in Chakotay being forced to his knees, wind cut off.

Ezri leaned slightly in until their eyes were level. "But what's important for you to know, right here, right now is that I am the First Officer of this ship, and if I even once more hear something out of your mouth that so much as breathes the tiniest taint on my honour, or that of the Captain, or her House, I will end you." She leveraged the larger man to his feet and released the block. "Dismissed."

He turned to look at the Captain as she knew he would. But this time, something must have been different, because he immediately turned back to face her. "My apologies, Commander." He left without a backward glance, and Ezri knew she wouldn't be serving much of an apprenticeship with the man.

Kathryn leaned back in her chair and, after the door shut behind her former first officer, turned back to Dax, who was calmly standing with both hands clasped behind her back. "I am Ezri Dax, and I am Legion?"

Ezri dipped her head, treading carefully, aware that she'd crossed a line.

Laren shook her head. This was not how she expected the meeting to go, and she certainly hadn't expected Kathryn to let Ezri get away with threatening to kill Chakotay. But maybe she'd had enough of the constant juvenile dance. And Ezri hadn't just threatened Chakotay, she'd dropped him to his knees like he was nothing. "I thought you didn't get the lethal combat skills?"

To her surprise, Ezri didn't offer up that maddeningly cheeky grin of hers. Instead she met the Captain's eyes. "I got over it."

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"There are three things to remember about your Mom. She loves you unconditionally. She is the Captain of the ship, and you must never, ever do anything to embarrass her as Captain - as Mom she's fair game, but not as Captain. And finally, never mess with her coffee."

Twin heads bobbed in acknowledgment.

"Dismissed."
A pair of perfect pirouettes were enacted, and her room vacated.

Her last duty of the day handled, Ezri removed her uniform and tossed it over the end of the bed. Somehow her stuff had just appeared in the guest room, and a scrolling electronic sign complete with the Trill symbol and her name had appeared on the door, announcing to anyone who cared that the room was occupied, albeit temporarily.

In a couple of weeks, she'd move down the hall, and into the First Officer's quarters.

She put aside thinking about how she'd feel leaving what had rapidly become a comfortable living arrangement and thought instead about how to kill the next few hours. It was her first official day of freedom, and, no matter how much she was enjoying the children and her roommates, she was chaffing under the confinement.

Her eyes came to rest on a stack of latinum she'd been using to teach the twins how to play tongo. Quark's.

In either Universe, there was no place like Quark's to liven your day.

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Jadzia surveyed the room again, unsure what she was looking for but feeling a vague sense of danger and a powerful need to figure out what was causing it. Nothing obvious jumped out at her, and she decided she was just imagining things.

Another sweep of the room turned up something a little more interesting. She watched as a female Trill had made her way to one of the tongo tables, and took one of the seats reserved for players. The woman was young, or at least younger than Jadzia, and seemed somewhat out of her depth. She was also wearing the most amazing combination of leather and metal.

Jadzia got up from her chair by the bar, and ordered two drinks. Tongo was, after all, a game two could play.

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Ezri blinked. "Thank you ...?"

"Jadzia Dax, and you're welcome. You looked a little...dry."

She couldn't help it; she blinked again, but was glad her initial shock had been mistaken for a request for an introduction - one she didn't need. The brunette settled herself into the player chair next to Ezri and placed a fairly impressive collection of latinum strips in the stake division.

Ezri decided to avail herself of the gift she'd been given by Tuvok and T'Pel. She decided to do on purpose, what she had done previously only by accident: allow the part of her that was Jadzia full reign. "Tongo does whet my appetite."

The table attendant rang the gong to signal the start of the game. "Begin."

Ezri watched as Jadzia gathered her cards and turned a raptor like eye on the other occupants. She grinned, recognizing effortlessly the sly look that crossed the other woman's face. She knew exactly what would be said.

"Opening bid is two bars."
Jadzia smiled at her. "I'll meet the bid, and attack. Give 4 at 8 bars."

"Evade." Ezri grinned back. This was going to be too easy. "Never spend more for an acquisition than you have to."

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Kira Nerys, Intendant of Bajor stood rooted to the floor at the entrance of Quark's.

Heat flared through her body and she felt the tell-tale muscle flutters of arousal streak through her core. All of the energy Deanna had been pulling from her suddenly found a familiar target. Ezri Tigan had been stupid enough to return to Terok Nor.

She'd heard rumours to that effect, but since she was quite sure the Trill was dead, she'd discounted them.

A feral grin edged her lips as she headed for the tongo table.

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There was a flash of colour and a hint of perfume, but before Ezri could react, she was pinned against the wall. Her mouth was covered with searing heat, and she could feel the need, primal and raw, that coursed through the kiss. It was savage, and brutal, but not violent and Ezri felt her own need rise. Then, it was over, and she was once more thrust back hard against the wall.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Eight times over, but I think you have me confused with someone else." The brunette took a half step back, but her both of her hands still pinned Ezri's arms. She could feel the weight of the evaluative stare, and then saw the flash of understanding and then the mute apology that would never be uttered aloud. An Intendant never apologies, and Ezri had heard enough about this one to believe it true of her as well.

"You're not Ezri Tigan are you?"

"No." Then she half turned and faced Jadzia, who was standing watching the two of them with interest. "No. I'm Commander Ezri Dax of the House Martok."

"You're not on Voyager's roster." The Intendant said.

"Dax?" This from Jadzia, who looked back at the pile of latinum Ezri had accumulated, then back at her.

She found that she was staring at Jadzia, even though she was answering the Intendant. "I'm a new... transfer."

Then the Intendant laughed, and Ezri felt the sound skitter down her spine. Her lips were captured again, more gently, and in fun, not passion, then released.

"I'm Kira Nerys, the Bajoran Intendant." She turned toward the tongo table. "Hello, Jadzia."

"Nerys."

Ezri took the moment to gather up her winnings, and retrieve the package she had bought for Seven from under the table. All manner of hell could break loose at any moment and no way was she leaving money on the table. She stopped as she picked up the package. Money was just money, but
the package was from the heart. She couldn't leave her heart behind, because she'd already given it.

"Commander Dax."

She looked over at the Intendant. "Yes, Intendant."

"I suggest you go home. Now."

Ezri looked between the two women and then noticed a security team had entered Quark's. Knowing she had only seconds to act, she moved next to Jadzia, and willed the other woman to be as smart as she knew her Jadzia was. "You're right, Intendant, and I'm sure my sister, wishes to return to her quarters as well."

"I see, and your sister is aware of the classified nature of your arrival?"

Ezri saw Jadzia weigh the arrival of the security team with the implicit request for silence and cooperation. "I am."

"Very well, see that you govern yourself accordingly. I should hate to need to intercede." She turned again to Ezri, and the Trill felt herself flush under the intense scrutiny. "Its a shame you aren't Ezri Tigan." Her invitation was clear.

Ezri clamped her hands behind her back, and rocked forward on her heels. "I think, despite the supposed to be dead part of that particular arrangement, that I'll take that as a compliment."

"That's a no, then?"

"Don't think of it as no, think of it as an opportunity." She grinned and hit her comm badge, triggering the delayed transport. "For both of you."

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Pouch full of latinum, and blood full of wine, Ezri sauntered along the corridor of deck three. It had been an excellent night.

Entering the family quarters, her saunter fled in favor of frozen motion. Unfortunately, her feet and brain weren't communicating as well as they could have, largely due to the bloodwine, and partially due to the sight of Kate Pulaski, arms crossed and scowl the size of Bajor's moon, leaning against her door, and she stumbled.

"God dammit, Dax."

"Dr. Kate." She decided not to stop, and made for the door to her room. After shucking her shirt, and finding the one she'd appropriated from Seven, she looked up. Everything was strangely quiet. The she saw why. Instead of yelling, Kate was staring at her.

The fantasies of two Hosts hit hard, and Ezri felt her nipples harden.

"Put your shirt on Ezri."

"No." She threw the shirt onto the chair, and fully faced Kate. "You're not my instructor anymore, and I'm not yours."

She had no idea who moved first, but she was very aware of the feel of Kate pressed against her, and the soft give of the mattress as she was forced backward onto the bed. The kiss when it came was teasing and light, and she let herself explore the sweet sensation until she couldn't put off her need for
air any longer.

Her arms were forced back over her head, holding her firmly in place as Kate kissed her again, then trailed her lips downward, bringing herself to a sitting position, one knee to each side of Ezri, careful not to put any weight on the newly reconstructed ribcage. "No. But I am your physician."

Kate let a finger trail across her mouth, and Ezri realized that her arms were no longer being held by the doctor, and instead were restrained by a pair of straps. "If you had listened, I wouldn't have had to do it this way."

The blonde got off the bed and walked to the door. "And I most certainly wouldn't have had to do this." And she left.

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Jadzia Dax was not the nervous type. As a mercenary, she had seen many things which would pale the normal Trill's spots. Yet at the moment she felt gawky and odd, like a teen.

It was the way the Intendant was looking at her, as if they'd never met before. The speculation in her eyes was intense, deliberate. She smiled, and Jadzia wasn't sure what was behind it. "Why don't you come with me, Jadzia."

What could she do? She followed the Intendant, acting much more casually than she was truly inclined. The security officers' gaze passed over her as if she didn't exist now. She was accounted for.

A part of her smiled at Ezri's narrow escape. Jadzia was beginning to process the information she had recently garnered and understanding was dawning on how she had lost. Clever Dax.

The bond of symbiont and Trill was a complicated one. It was neurological, physical and mental. Their minds blended, yet she retained the majority control, if that was what one could call it. Being bonded was a privilege and a benefit. But that didn't mean it was always easy. One had to be physically, mentally and emotionally fit. Ezri was a bit short for a bond. But height wasn't necessarily an indicator. Jadzia was pleased that Dax, which ever one that was, had found someone capable of beating her at Tongo.

She was distracted enough that she almost missed Nerys stopping. Somehow she managed not to collide with the Intendant. "I should have you shot, you know? Stealing my last batch of that Spring Wine." Nerys tisked.

"I didn't steal it. I purchased it."

"Really. Hmm. I wonder if the person who sold it to you is still alive."

Jadzia didn't answer that. Loyalty among contacts was a must. What she did say was, "You're a dangerous woman Nerys."

"Ah, so you noticed."

Nerys grabbed the taller brunette by the collar and dragged her into her quarters and then into an embrace. Their lips met with delicate heat.

Jadzia pulled back. "Nerys, I've known you for..."

"Shut up and kiss me again."
The Trill obliged.

This time it was Nerys who pulled back. Her expression was somewhat glazed, distracted. "Do you know what it is like to want a Truth Seeker?"

"No."

"Kahless, she is beautiful." Nerys' gaze trailed up and down Jadzia. "So are you."

The offhand manner of the compliment was amusing and Jadzia found herself laughing anyway. "Nerys. Will I find myself in thrall to a Truth Seeker if we continue this?"

Nerys waved her hand. "No. I don't think so. You should meet her relatives..." Then she grinned. "Besides, this will give her something to think about." She dragged Jadzia closer and they kissed again. Then she shoved her back and glared. There were times when power was it's own aphrodisiac. "Jadzia, I'm an Intendant. Your life is in my hands. Strip."

The Trill's eyebrows rose in amusement. "My gods that never gets old."

Nerys' serious expression cracked. "Yes. I should have shot you on sight. You are way too much trouble."

Jadzia laughed and lifted her hands to her collar. "Nerys, what do you want from me?"

"At this very moment?"

"Well, it would be a start."

"I want you."

"You'll tell me about her, after?"

"Oh. Yes. Then I'll take you and introduce you. Trust me. She knows exactly what she is doing to me."

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"Care to tell me what happened, Commander Tucker?" Kathryn's gaze was filled with ice.

The Commander, who was already rigid at attention, managed to stand even straighter. "My people were conducting an exercise in Holodeck 2."

"Without the safeties on."

Sarah winced and couldn't think of a way around the blunt statement. "Yes."

"Was the decision to turn the safety off yours?"

"No, Captain. It was not. We might take it to the max of the security risk protocols, but safeties are usually always on during an exercise."

"Can you account for why the decision was made?"
"I... no. Captain, I can not. I don't even know that it was my people who turned off the safeties."

Captain Janeway considered that answer. "You will provide details to Security and work it out with them. If it was an individual in your team, they will be brought up on charges. If it was the whole team, they will experience disciplinary action. If it was someone outside of your team, we need to know it and we need to know now."

"Yes, Captain."

"Dismissed."

After Commander Tucker left, Janeway turned in her seat and stared at nothing for a few moments.

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Much to the relief of the Captain and consternation of the Commander, it just turned out that it was a matter of group pride in a competition gone wrong that had caused the Holodeck catastrophe. Captain Janeway assigned the disciplinary action to the First Officers. It would be good training.

Then she had a long talk with Commander Tucker about prevention and safety re-training. By the time that conversation was done Commander Tucker had a wicked-grim gleam in her eye. Her people were not going to be happy over the next few weeks.

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The day before the Trials, the judicial team spent quality time together planning out the strategy for the event. They went over all their notes and files and the evidence as they had it. It was Miral's intent that the trials should be done as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Security was tightened everywhere, but especially near the prisoners. No one was going to be awakened early.

Voyager returned to Yellow Alert for the duration.
The crowd was incredible. Every seat that could be filled was filled. There were those who intended to stand through the whole thing. Enterprising individuals, including Quark, had carts crammed with food and drink in strategic locations. Security guards walked through and around the area, as well as were placed in stations points for maximum effectiveness. Klingon guards would be the ones to haul in the prisoners and they stood in pairs inside and out of the bombed out Judgment Hall.

There were weapons placed on the east side of the circle, just outside of it - traditional arms for a traditional battle. A guard stood by it, with a blaster rifle prominently displayed. Speculators argued over whether Miral would take on all of the prisoners, or just some. Logic dictated that she would need some assistance, but there were some who believed her capable of taking on all of the prisoners at once if she set her mind to it.

It seemed the volume of noise increased the closer the time came to start the trials. Word came down that Judge Torres and her team was on their way. People who had been wandering began rushing to their seats. No one wanted to miss a thing.

It was just like the videos. Well, almost. Security arrived first, including Commander Tuvok, and then Miral Torres followed, wearing her robes of authority, the weapons she usually carried, and carrying her famed Bat'leth. Gretchen wore the family armor, which started a rolling murmur through the crowd. Then Lwaxana and T'Pel followed, both wearing the Robes of the Truth Seekers. They were followed by a quartet of very large, burly Klingons who wore only black trousers, boots, and carried axes.

Suddenly the answer to the question of assistance became obvious.

Because this was a more formal occasion several individuals from Voyager, wearing their formal uniforms, were seated in the VIP section. This included Captain Janeway, Commander Tuvok and Lieutenant Ro Laren. They were also counted as witnesses, which was another reason they were not located nearer the Judge.

As before, Intendant Kira Nerys and Truth Seeker Deanna Troi shared a dais. They also shared it with several other diplomats who had come to pay their respects. Once the trials were over these people would disperse and go home. Deanna would be included among that number, which Nerys regretted. Deanna's council had already split off and returned for home. A working plan had been established and it would be their job to begin implementing it. There would be changes among the Betazoids soon.

When Miral Torres reached her podium, the noise level dropped down. She began speaking, starting off with her traditional opening statements and the positioning of her Bat'leth. The Trials were officially started.

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It started with the Captain of the Lucky Dragon. As promised, he was the first and as the first he had plenty to say. "What are you accusing me of? So I am a slave trader. That's not illegal!"

Miral had merely smiled and said, "Ah, you are experiencing a misunderstanding. You are not being tried for slave trade. You are being tried for treason, Captain; for attempting to contact an enemy of
the Empire on behalf of your Cartel."

The green man paled. "I plead not guilty. I was just doing my job."

"How interesting. I offer you counsel for the defense. This is Gretchen Janeway. She is versed in the law and has my approval."

The Captain of the Lucky Dragon took one look at Gretchen and hardly even paused. "I accept."

Miral smiled toothily. "Good choice. I will give you three minutes to consult. Will anyone stand for the Empire?"

There was a sparkle of red and a group of well armed and armored Klingon males were abruptly in the circle. Miral Torres rose from her seat, grabbing the Bat'leth so quickly that some would swear that they saw the blade leap into her hand like a faithful pet. "Who dares!"

"I am Chancellor Worf, Ruler of the Empire. I dare!" The darkly handsome Klingon growled. He turned his gaze to the defendant. "And my Counselor will stand for the Empire."

"Welcome to the Court, Chancellor Worf." Miral said and bowed. "I invite you to take the Judgment Seat."

"No, Judge Torres, you are my chosen for that duty. This day I will only observe. Do what you are required to do."

"As you wish, Chancellor."

As that short discussion went on, on the VIP spectator dais, people were scrambling. Some found that their seats were suddenly needed by persons of a higher status. Others were simply moved by the Chancellor's guard as unworthy. Deanna and Nerys were allowed to stay, as were a few others of enough status. But they did move to different seats. The Chancellor was given the prime location.

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General Martok, it seemed, was surprisingly well versed in whom to call for witnesses. "I call Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Starship Voyager."

The Orion flashed a look at Gretchen. She did not look back at him. Instead she was watching the opponent with an eagle-eyed expression, as if she were taking his measure. The Captain of the Lucky Dragon looked as if he suddenly felt better.

That expression didn't last long as Martok interviewed the Captain. She drew answers from records that were on his ship, including the actual orders that he had received from his employers. Martok finished up his questions and then it was Gretchen's turn.

She began by picking apart the evidence that had been presented so far, ending with, "Trying to get to the Gamma Quadrant is an endeavor that many attempted. All without censure. What makes the defendant's effort so different?"

Captain Janeway responded, "He was trying to contact the Dominion." She then went on to explain exactly what that meant.

"What evidence do you have that he knew what these beings were or their intent?"

Kathryn Janeway actually smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile at all. "I'm glad you asked." She then
began bringing forth the really important information that needed to be conveyed. Again she drew from the Captain's own records and they were quite damning.

The stir in the audience was palpable as they responded to what they learned. It was a mix of discomfort and growl.

Gretchen did her best, but in the end she leaned over and said quietly, "The Judge is going to give you the opportunity to fight to clear your name. I suggest you take it. It's your only way out."

He nodded somewhat chopply, and surprised himself by whispering back, "Thank you."

Then the Judge stood up and began to address the Captain, who suddenly wished that his ship had been named anything else but Lucky.

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To the delight of the Klingons and some of the audience, the battle was not short. The Orion Captain made a good attempt and very nearly won against the Klingon Axeman he fought. But in the end it took one hit and he was down. From the Klingon perspective, he died with honor.

The clean up crew took care of the body, while the axeman carried away the head and put it where it was logically going to go.

It gave the next prisoner something terrible to think about on his way in.

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"Sister, hunh?"

Ezri grinned. "Kept you out of jail."

"True."

"Then come buy your sister a drink." She had an hour or so before the next Justice session, and she was curious to learn more about Jadzia.

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"Dax didn't have a Host named Ezri. Not in this Universe."

Ezri waited, knowing full well where Jadzia's line of reasoning was headed, but she was unwilling to speed it along.

"The Host before you...I'm dead in your Universe."

"...was Jadzia, yes."

There wasn't much to say at that, and they sat in silence, taking the occasional drink from their glasses - a potent wine for Jadzia and a prudent juice for herself.

Jadzia suddenly let out a string of curses that Ezri found truly impressive - they spanned at least six languages and a dozen sexual positions. "I literally beat myself." To Ezri, she looked both outraged and incredibly impressed. "You knew exactly who I was."

"Well, I'd be a pretty damn poor Host to not recognize that last one. And Curzon would have never forgiven me for not taking advantage. Kahless, Jadzia would never have forgiven me." She paused,
sobering a little. "On the other hand, I'm dead here."

"Actually, you're not." Jadzia shrugged. "I called a couple of people. Figured if I'm going to be sleeping with someone who kills ex-lovers, I needed to know the full deal."

"And?"

"And you're not dead."

"But?"

"But you're likely to be, or rather she is, if she does set foot on Terok Nor again."

"The Intendant seemed pretty ready to forgive her."

"Maybe. But she ran off and married Quark's best dabo girl - and when he figures that out..."

They looked at each other, and burst out laughing, then spoke together. "...when he figures it out, he won't let it stand in the way of profit."

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It was not all blood and gore. Judge Torres judged each case individually, assigned options, punishments and consequences based on the evidence, skill of counseling, guilt or lack thereof, and so on. Some went to Rura Penthe. Some battled successfully for their lives and honor. Gretchen even won a few. It seemed that mercenaries were not so xenophobic as others.

The cabin boy of the Lucky Dragon went free because he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. The cook, experienced a similar luck of the draw. The interrogator of the ship, however, refused counsel, called everyone bad names and proudly declared her guilt. Her execution was swift.

By the time the day was done, more than half of the prisoner's heads had found a new location and they had worked through all of the crew from the Lucky Dragon. Now there were only six prisoners who remained. The three from Pharaoh Cartel and the three who were originally scheduled for trial.

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Later, Kathryn was able to spend a moment with her mother. "I've wanted to ask how you could do this, but now I think I understand."

"Who else would stand up for them?"

"Did they have advocates before you?"

"It's been years, Kathryn. The trials in this universe have been...only in appearance. They have been fraught with dishonor. There may have been a few honorable judges, but their lives were short or their honor subverted. People forgot what it could be. We," she nodded at Miral who was reclining on a soft chair in their quarters, eyes closed and blood wine in hand, "... wanted to make a real difference here."

Kathryn laid a gentle hand on her mother's shoulder. "And you have." She thought of the last trial of the day, the look of relief on the innocent crewman's face. "You have."

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Ezri was lounging on the couch, Emina splayed across her chest, sound asleep. The toddler had one hand wrapped around the Trill's ear and the other firmly twisted in the buttons of her shirt. Rather than disturb her happily slumbering charge, she opted to stay put, and was instead availing herself of the opportunity to watch a Klingon opera.

She wondered if Emina could hear Dax, and thought it was more than likely. It warmed her in a way she hadn't expected. Nine children had passed through Dax's life: four times as father, five as mother. Had Jadzia lived it would have been more. Two lives were lost that day.

She had been fractured, that she knew. In a lot of ways she still was -- the zhian'tara unavailable to her. Ezri drew lazy circles across Emina's back, index and middle fingers tracing a path that kept the child soothed and sleeping. That it also soothed her didn't escape her notice. The memories from that night were still disjointed, but she was slowly integrating what she'd learned about herself and her hosts. T'Pel had seemed to appear when Ezri needed most to see more, and Tuvok had taken on the task of teaching her to see for herself, and she loved them for it.

Ezri sighed. And that was the crux. Somehow she'd crept into a family that wasn't hers, couldn't be hers. She placed a light kiss on the top of the toddler's head. Except it could have been. All she would have had to do was remain silent, and with Kate, she would have been theirs, and they hers.

"Damn honour." Her honour. Not Curzon's, not Jadzia's, hers. Oh, the deep love and vast understanding of all things Klingons was their gift to her, but the strength to do what was right, that was hers.

"Síbhean."

The soft tones of Seven's voice as she drew out the syllables, shee-van, cut deep into her core, grabbing her as intensely now as they had the first time they'd been whispered to send her tumbling over the edge and into ecstasy. "Yes, my Valkyrie?"

Seven didn't respond for a long moment, she was staring at the opera. "What is that?"

"Its an opera. Das Rheingold, in the original Klingon." Ezri's eyes were twinkling and Seven knew that she was being put on or teased by the Trill.

It took only a few moments to search through the information she'd acquired during the Doctor's operetta phase. "Wagner was not a Klingon composer." She smiled. "Your designation for me is from another of Wagner's works."

"Das Valkyrie."

Seven settled onto the couch, tucking herself behind Ezri and resting her chin on the smaller woman's shoulder. She placed a kiss on the small hand that was now trapped between them, and found an accessible place to plant a small circle of kisses on Ezri's neck.

"What is troubling you?"

"Nothing. Not really."

But she could feel the tension in the wiry frame, and the hitch of breathing that was normally steady and measured. And she knew the cause. "I love you." Actions were one thing, but it was time for words.

Ezri shifted, careful not to disturb Emina. She knew that Seven of Nine did not lie, but she couldn't quite believe the truth either. "You do?"
"Of course she does you idiot." B'Elanna was standing against the wall, arms folded over her chest.

"You, Ezri Dax, are an incorrigible scofflaw, a terrible reprobate, and chaos in motion. But you're ours and we love you." Kathryn had joined them, and was standing next to B'Elanna.

Ezri turned a skeptical eye towards the Klingon.

B'Elanna laughed. "What can I say? You grew on me."

"Seven?" Ezri felt that there was something going on outside of the edge of her awareness.

"The Epatai has something to say. Will you listen?"

"I will."

B'Elanna crossed over to where they were sitting, and exchanged a brief kiss with her mate. One hand she trailed through her daughter's hair, marveling that the child was still sleeping, and then stepped back to face the Trill. "We, the Prime of the House Presba, swear to make an honest woman out of you. Whaddya say?"

Ezri blinked, as she processed the unexpectedly blunt proposal. Then grinned, "A smart person plans ahead, but lives for the moment." She pulled B'Elanna closer and before the Klingon could protest, did something she'd wanted to do for weeks. The kiss was firm and strong, the restrained passions hinting at a depth beyond measure and Ezri let herself drown in it.

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The next day they began with the Cardassian, the lean and dangerous, Yun Capel. He sneered his way into the trial and sneered his way during. It was here that Lieutenant Ro was called in as witness. She presented the evidence from both the Lucky Dragon and from the Pharaoh System. In that presentation were the details about their contact with the Borg and the Hirogen. By the time she was done the mood of the audience was very ugly. The Cardassian's sneer had transformed into something a mite less confident.

Judge Torres gave the Cardassian the opportunity to speak for himself, since he had denied counsel. He did not cuss and swear. He actually tried to argue himself out of the trouble. "We are honest business people. Those records have been concocted by... by... them..." He pointed out at Captain Janeway and some of her crew, "...for purposes known only to them. Have you asked yourself where they come from? Why they are here when..."

He was starting to make a case, when Captain Janeway received hail that buzzed her comm badge. "Janeway here," she whispered.

It was Voyager. The sound was low, directed to the Captain's ears only. "Captain, multiple ships have uncloaked around the station. They are Orion Syndicate."

Kathryn closed her eyes for a heartbeat, then fingerspoke to her mates besides her and flung a mental warning at Lwaxana. They were standing and pulling their weapons even as the sparkle of green lights began. The station rocked with weapons impact. "Voyager," Kathryn commanded, "Plan Thirteen."

"Aye, Captain."

That was all the communication they had time for. The invaders were firing.
Those few seconds, however, made all the difference. Voyager began by un-docking, without ceremony, from the station. It meant that part of the dock went away with her, but they were designed for such emergencies. That's why there were two docking port doors. By that time the command staff was catching up to the active status of Plan Thirteen. Voyager was pulling away from the station and disengaging the now useless dock corridor, as the Orion ships began firing.

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Inside the station, chaos reigned as people scrambled to escape or to do their duty. Security guards from various factions fell under the first round of fire. Then it was somewhat of a directed free for all.

"Protect the Chancellor!" the Captain commanded. Commander Tuvok and Lieutenant Ro didn't hesitate at all. They moved quickly, grabbing the surprised Klingon and leaping off of the dais even as his security detail were falling under the fire.

Kathryn covered Intendant Kira and Deanna by returning fire. "Get down and off of here, move it!"

She heard her mother in the distance, shouting in Presban. "House Presba! Hold Nothing Back!" It was a war cry of sorts and it was as if a switch was thrown. They were reminded who and what they were by that call.

Kathryn maneuvered her daughter and the Intendant into a more defensible position behind and under the dais. She ignored Deanna's startled look at the sudden awareness of how the Captain was thinking of her and pressed a phaser into the Truth Seeker's hands with the briefest explanation of how it worked. "Try to get to safety. We will fight here."

Then Kathryn was off, moving towards the table with the prepared weapons. She wasn't the only one who thought of it. She noticed in passing that her mother had a Bat'leth in one hand and a blaster in another and was using them both to high effectiveness.

The Orion's found they had not chosen an easy target in their invasion. Terok Nor had been a battle station and its people knew what it was to fight. Even Quark found profit in the battle. Defense of the home made economic sense. Thus he pulled a blaster from his cart and began firing away, using the cart, with its duranium plating, as a shield. It was always wise to make sure a belonging worked a double purpose.

Intendant Kira grabbed Deanna's hand and they began making the run to bridge. Deanna, who had been observing on more levels than could be comprehended, began applying the techniques Lwaxana was using, only with more... authority and permanence.

Invaders along their path began falling to the wayside, without having been able to fire a shot. They simply ceased to exist in their heads. Without existence, there was no life. The bodies died soon after.

It would have terrified Intendant Kira if she had the time to think about it. But she was busy making her own impact during the crisis.

Off station, Voyager was not the only ship that had been set on high alert. The Tor'stag joined the heated battle, as did some cloaked Klingon Vessels. The Zakeeri ships also engaged the enemy and the Orions soon had other things to worry about than shooting the station.
Light and energy were explosively expelling into space in rapid bursts. Shields went through various shades of effectiveness. Bits and pieces of vessels and people flew out into the dark cold.

The fight on station, meanwhile, continued fraught with danger and opportunity.

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Intendant Kira, with the help of Deanna, made it to the Bridge and secured it. "We need help to man the stations." Nerys said as she saw the carnage. A part of her warmed that her people had fought to the death. Another part vowed revenge. And another part was doing quick assessment of their troubles. "At least four more people."

Deanna, who never in her life would have thought she'd utter the thought, sent a mental shout to the one person she knew could help. Mom! We need help on the Bridge. Everyone is dead.

There was an answer. She didn't understand the words, but she grasped the intention behind them. Kathryn Janeway would come through.

"They're on their way," she said to the Intendant, who was scrambling to divert power to the shields.

After a few moments, blue lights flashed around them, a welcome sight. Seven of Nine greeted her daughter and the Intendant and several of Voyager's crew appeared soon after. Assessment happened quickly, efficiently and soon they were at the empty stations, saving Terok Nor.

Intendant Kira couldn't resist. She grinned at Deanna and, in Bajoran, said, "You have the best Marnahs!"

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According to Plan Thirteen, Commander Tucker and Magnum became instant Bridge Staff. They had trained with the other staff for this day and had been ready. As soon as the plan had been announced, they'd rushed to the Bridge and joined Chakotay, Tom Paris and Harry Kim in defending and guiding the ship. During their absence Voyager had taken the fight to the Orions, firing as she went. By the time the staff caught up, they were already well engaged in the fighting with defense and offense maneuvers. Then Voyager trusted the reigns to them and focused on general assistance and survival.

Children were shunted to the safety zones within the ship. Oddly, these were not the life rafts. It had been decided by the parents to reserve that option for last. They chose to focus on building survivable zones within the ship, areas that were double plated, had their own life support and emergency packages. The Family Quarters were such a zone. Close members of family made their way there, while others went to other zones. A pair of Kutwutchu adults would act as the guardians, armed and ready to take on any boarders and prepared to monitor and protect the children.

Not that a complete failure on Voyager was likely. Armored hull improvements kept much of the damage to the minimum. But part of why they had been doing so well was that they had prepared.

B'Elanna had no time to worry about whether she was missing the fun or not. Voyager's shields were compromised a couple of times early during the battle, since they hadn't been able to activate them until after they had freed themselves from the station - even with its more advanced systems. Advanced did not mean perfect. The armor, however, did its job and much of the damage was localized to the more vulnerable interior, when the blasts caught them by surprise. Voyager and crew carried on and the Klingon was throwing everything into making sure that the secondary systems were doing what they were supposed to do, while at the same time restoring the primary systems.
The shields were now holding, but who knew how long that would last? During a battle one had to be prepared for anything.

Commander Sofuru and his team were out there in the great dark, mocking and terrorizing those in the bigger ships. Their small intelligent vessels whipped through space and stung the enemy ships with fiery light. They were joined by Commander Veckma's scouts and the Orions had to deal with fast, light ships with brutal biting weapons. Their efforts allowed the larger ships to focus on Orion battle cruisers.

Meanwhile, Voyager's Marines were split. Some stayed on the ship, in case of boarding and others were beamed onto the station to join the battle.

On station and off station they slowly whittled them away. The Orions kept appearing and those who fought kept fighting. But eventually the invaders stopped coming and then those defending Terok Nor began to make real progress.

Captain Janeway became, during that battle, Kathryn Janeway, Warlord of House Presba. Journalists filmed it all, as they had been filming the Trials. It was Captain Janeway's orders that the crew and those who were fighting followed. She was their compass. She got the forces of Terok Nor organized and fighting smart. Somehow she wound up with a three pronged long blade and a blaster rifle and she used them with brutal, growling, bloody precision.

Captain Kathryn Janeway had gained fame in the Pharaoh system. On Terok Nor she and her family sealed it tight. House Presba was a name to be respected. Voyager and her crew were to be remembered and honored.

Miral Torres and Gretchen fought together. They would be there before the individual was truly completely materialized and somehow timed it so that those individuals didn't even have a chance to press a trigger. That saved many lives.

T'Pel and Lwaxana, armed with the weapons they had naturally, weapons they'd brought, and then the weapons that fell, ended up fighting together, blistering minds and decimating the invader's ability to defend themselves. When the enemy fired around them, they always missed. Always. Or they walked into someone's blade. Or they simply sat on the deck and cried like a lost four year old - those were usually the younger ones, the ones that T'Pel and Lwaxana had determined were still innocent.

Commander Tuvok and Lieutenant Ro were smart enough to know they wouldn't be keeping Worf out of the Battle. They didn't even try. His security was gone. Tuvok and Laren were joined by Ezri and another Trill companion that she introduced as Jadzia... Dax. Laren shook her head briefly in amazement. Then she passed weapons to them and told them the duty that they had been given. "Defend the Chancellor."

This was not a straight forward task. Worf waded right into the middle of the battle. It was actually a practical move, since much of the battle seemed to try and center on him. Tuvok and Laren flowed around him like deadly wasps. Glimpses of them would be seen, but it was the aftermath of what they left behind that gave one pause. Ezri and Jadzia formed the solid hub around the Chancellor, firing their weapons till dry, dropping them and then picking up the ones no longer being used by their original owners. Worf stuck with the Bat'leth in his hands.

Despite the desperation of the situation, Chancellor Worf had time to be impressed by Captain Janeway's people. They made sure he got a weapon in his hand. They took on the oncoming enemy with superior strength, speed and capability. Yet there was plenty of fight for him to partake in. It made for a blood rousing battle, which made even coming to the Trials worth it. It had been a long
time since he had been in the thick of things. He enjoyed himself completely.

The battle continued for a little while longer, but the invaders eventually were thoroughly defeated. However, no one escaped unscathed. There were many who were dead, wounded or out of commission. This included Chancellor Worf, who was delivered to Voyager's Sick Bay, unconscious and bleeding, severely injured but alive.

He wasn't the only one.

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Sick Bay was once again swamped and extended into Holodeck 3. The doctors were scrambling and Dr. Pulaski groused, "Again with the body count. We're doctors not miracle workers. What in the hell did they do before she had us?"

Icheb, in passing, said coolly, "They died."

That sobered the asperity out of Kate for a few moments. She was suddenly grateful that Dr. Zimmerman was in Sick Bay 2 and had missed that little rant. He really had been a miracle worker.

"Well kids," she said, in a somewhat different tone. "Let's see if we can pull the Captain's fat out of the fire."

"Again," added Dr. Dezhe in passing, with some amusement.

"Indeed," Icheb concurred evenly.

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It would be awhile before things would get to normal at the station, but from the perspective of the Klingons the Orion Syndicate had let it be known what side they were on. A line had been drawn by that attack, especially considering the Chancellor himself was on board. There were some Syndicate Cartels which immediately threw their hat in with the empire, as soon as news of the attack made it out of the Bajoran System. Other's split up and hunkered down in hopes that they would be overlooked.

Other's prepared for war, which they thought had been a long time coming. Not everyone was enamored of Klingon rule. And there were those who thought they could do it better.

It was either an unintended consequence or a deliberate act, and it would be hard to prove either way. The last five stasis units were found opened and empty. The bodies of those who were to be tried were nearby.

Yun Capel, however, was definitely missing.

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The tugs that usually cleaned up after catastrophes from the wormhole began the arduous process of clearing space around Terok Nor. Voyager reconnected with the station at a different, less damaged port. Her crew flowed in and out, adding their efforts to the repair.

This included the mates, though they hungered. There were too many things to do, places that they needed to be. Duty called.

They followed the after emergency protocols. Captain Janeway had already been in Sick Bay 2 for
repair herself, but she was off and running as soon as the damage was healed. "Don't put it off," warned Dr. Zimmerman as he scanned her, noting the rise in certain chemicals. She knew what he was talking about. But there was so much to do.

She visited Sick Bay when she could, after she'd had a chance to clean up some. She wanted to see how Chancellor Worf was doing and grab a report before she succumbed to the blood rush. There were two guards stationed at the foot of his bed. She cast a quick glance at the status chart. Then turned to see Kate.

The growl was completely unconscious, absolutely sexual and it had more than one being on high alert.

Kate did damage control. "Captain," she said very loudly. "It's so good to see you! You must be here for the report."

Kathryn pulled herself together, but found that deep conversation had escaped her. "Yes." Now that growl was a purr.

The attention of the guards and the conscious, but mostly immobile Chancellor was now on Kate, the object of Kathryn's attention. Dr. Pulaski did her best not to blush. "Why don't you come with me to my office?" Her mind was concluding with, and I'll read you the riot act. But she didn't say that. She just hoped she was maintaining a neutral demeanor. She then said, "Dr. Dezhe, you have the floor."

"Aye, Commander," said the Klingon Doctor. "I have it."

Then Kathryn and Kate walked into the office. Dr. Dezhe turned to guards and shrugged. "Blood lust. The Captain and her mates..."

"Say no more," said the Chancellor with a grin. "I should be so lucky."

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Kathryn did manage to grasp at control, once in the office. But the tension drew a long line of desire between them. "Kate, you're going to need to be quick. I thought... I had things under control, but seeing you..." Another noise of desire prowled dangerously into their conversation.

Kate felt that all the way through and it scattered her thoughts. She had to look away from the captain for a moment and was saved by the PADD in her hand. Her voice cracked during the first sentence, and then she got a hold of herself. She started with the obvious. "Chancellor Worf is well on his way to recovery. He's going to have to stay stable and prone for another forty eight hours and then he can move back to his own ship. General Torres provided the guard around him...."

Kathryn's expression was somewhat predatory throughout the whole report, but she maintained her silence. She was nodding towards the end of the report. "Thank you Doctor. Please pass on my thanks to the rest of the staff." She stood up, pleased that her voice somehow managed to regulate itself. Then she looked at Kate and gave her a wry grin. "I desperately want to kiss you, but, frankly, I wouldn't stop. You will, however, see me again soon. I love you, Kate."

Doctor Pulaski stood up too. She found her voice. "I understand." Kathryn nodded at her, then paced back out to the Medical area. When she stepped out of the door, Kate finished what she was going to say in a whisper. "I love you too."

Kathryn, whose hearing was much better than it used to be, smiled. Then she went to talk to
They gathered together in the nest, needful on so many levels. But, as if they'd discussed it beforehand, they waited and did not touch one another.

Seven spoke in Presban, "It is time to bring one of our beloveds in. Kate. I do not think we should wait any longer."

"I agree," said T'Pel. "Though we must bleed off that which compels us so that we may be present for her totally. It would be... redundant... for us to continue if our intent is to embrace Kate to us. There are ways to do this, which will allow us to suspend our desire for the moment."

The consensus carried in their emotions. They were all agreed. Tuvok then spoke. "We will begin with the first incantation."

As one they settled into a meditative position.
It started with an ice cream sundae. A chocolate ice cream sundae.

Deanna had curled into a chair set next to a window that afforded her an expansive view of the Northern part of the estate surrounding the house. In the distance, mountains topped with the white blue of unmelted ice rose to great a sky that was truly breath taking. Or maybe it was just coloured by the newness of love.

The large library had become her favourite spot to sit and think, and despite being in the public part of the house no one else ever went in while she was there. It was a kindness she appreciated. She took another mouthful of the cold, sweet confection. The tang of dark chocolate melded with the gentle sweetness of the heavy cream and she swirled it around her tongue before swallowing it. There was, and always would be, an undercurrent of eroticism to the sensation, and Deanna embraced it fully, letting her body react.

Curious, she touched the bond she had with Asil. Her mate was a touch telepath, while she was an empath, but their mating bond had created something unknown to both of them, and they had yet to discover its limits. Deanna laughed as she slowly licked another mouthful from the spoon; she was also learning to be a dedicated hedonist.

She was sure that Asil wouldn't have thought of testing their bond this way.

Sai aduna...

Asil's voice echoed in her mind, but so too did a pull that spun from her mind through her body. Promising, Deanna thought, and tried directing her own message instead of sensations. Come to me beloved.

And then she was there, in the doorway, and Deanna felt the heat wrap her mind, even as her skin registered Asil's nearness.

Smiling, she used her spoon to wave her mate to join her, and made room for the larger woman on the chair, fitting her smaller form into the available space. Deanna brought their faces closer, but did not bring them into contact. Instead, she took another scoop of the sundae and placed it on her tongue. With deliberate intent, she let the first melting rush of chocolate wash over her and through the physical connection they now shared, as well as letting the back wash flow through her mind.

She was rewarded as the heat of Asil's skin increased, and a light purr rumbled from the shapely chest. Could she do this? Another mouthful and she sent the enjoyment of the tingling burn that had started to swell her vulva to follow the baser thoughts of touching Asil in the same places. Her nipples began to ache, and she let their need join the other sensations.

Asil had less control, the emotions and raw physicality too new to be dampened and too precious to be suppressed, but she tried not to swamp Deanna in the maelstrom of need that suddenly grabbed her. And then she knew, that was exactly what Deanna wanted, needed, from her. She intercepted the next mouthful of sundae before Deanna could. With one hand she tore open the front of her mate's shirt, and used the other to support Deanna's back as she captured a dark nub in her mouth. The mix of heat and cold, crashed over her and she fed it back to Deanna, even as she received the same sharp reactions back along both sides of their link.
She was instigator and receiver, taker and taken, and she let go. They let go. Neither noticed when the remnants of the dessert crashed to the floor. Mouths locked together, they folded into each other and she could feel Deanna's heat sear a path over her abdomen as clothes were shed, and they took their release in each other.

Unfortunately, locked in their private world, neither heard the door open.

Deanna felt the wash of anger, and pulled back to look at Asil in confusion, before she registered the source. She felt as, in that split second, Asil caught the backlash of the unguarded emotions and surged to her feet. Understanding what could happen, she grabbed the half shucked front of Asil's shirt, and screamed into their connection. Wait!

Then, with an appearance of calm she tried desperately to project to her chosen mate, Deanna turned and faced her soon to be ex-husband.

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Ambassador Worf reclined in his chair, impatient to be on Presba, but aware that if he simply took command it would take longer to deal with the objections to breaking protocol than it would had he simply let everyone do their jobs.

He had gotten word the Titan had made orbit and that Riker was already planet bound. Even with tense relations between the Federation and the Klingon Empire he was looking forward to seeing his friend, and optimistic that they could forge some kind of accord. He also hoped that Riker might have some information regarding reports he had received that Ezri Dax was MIA.

"Ambassador, we are within hailing distance now."

Worf nodded. "Open a channel, on screen."

Instead of the expected nameless communications officer, he was greeted by a familiar face. "Hello, Worf, it's nice to see you again."

"Guinan." He dipped his head respectfully. He was Worf Rozhenko, of the House Martok, an Ambassador of Klingon Empire, but she was Guinan.

"Would you care to join us for dinner this evening?"

"Very much." He appreciated that she had simplified matters by not forcing his ship, or himself to request formal permission to land. "Is the Lady Sirella still in attendance?" The word encamped had come to mind and he had no doubt that Guinan would have appreciated the term.

"She is." The El-Aurian turned her head slightly, obviously listening to something in the background and her composed features grew even more still, then she turned back to the screen. "Worf, things with Deanna are not as they were. And Riker is here."

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Despite the angle of the sun over the horizon, Phoebe had no mental inclination to rise from her bed, or to stop twisting her fingers through the swatch of dark curls on Vrald's chest. Physically, she felt as though she was on a ship, and she found herself praying that her husband would remain still. All that fantastic biology and still not immune to a flu.

She raked along the edge of his navel, and found herself staring at the patch of wiry dark hair. Hair that had previously been salt and pepper at best.
"Vrald? Are you awake?" She consciously spoke in Presban, and concentrated on his reply.

"Yes, Be'nal. I am awake." He surged under her and moved so that they were side by side.

Sidetracked by his greeting kiss, Phoebe let herself sink into the pleasure of being loved, and of loving in return.

Barin jerked his head up, and listened to the sounds of the House. He was not supposed to listen to The People, but something was wrong. He left his puzzle behind and ran for the library, then stopped. Guinan. He would get Guinan.

Like a bad holo-novel, the three of them stood silent, events poised on the cusp of an explosive confrontation. And then the dance began. Will Riker stepped into the room. Deanna moved a step forward, but directly in front of Asil. Asil herself also took a step forward, but trusted in the contact that remained between them: their fingertips were still touching.

In that moment, Asil knew that she was truly Deanna's by choice, and not circumstance.

In that moment, Deanna knew that she had chosen wisely, and from a true heart.

Will Riker knew none of this. He knew that where once Deanna had echoed faintly in his thoughts, there was now silence. Had been silence for some days. He knew that his wife...his wife...was standing half-naked in front of another half-naked woman, a Romulan at that, who had to be half her age. His own infidelity, he left unrecognized.

In that moment, Will wanted to kill Deanna.

He saw her eyes widen, and knew that while he could no longer feel her curled around his thoughts, she could still sense his.

"Will, stop! Don't do this."

"Don't do what Deanna?" He moved further into the room. Closer to them now, he spotted their linked fingers, and knew this was so much worse than Deanna fucking a Romulan. His mind, trained by Picard, knew the gesture immediately for what it was: Vulcan, and only between a mated pair. "Don't kill you and your whore?"

"Captain Riker." Guinan never raised her voice, her tone as even as ever, but threat threaded through the syllables and he turned to face her.

One look at her face was enough. "You knew. You goddamn knew."

"If you'll come this way." Her words were polite, but filled with steel, and the arrival of six heavily armed Klingons made it a command.

He turned back to face his wife, surprised to see her wrapped in a strong, one armed embrace by the Vulcan, whose other hand suddenly held a vicious dagger. He could see that he'd lost, but his ego wouldn't let him leave it be. It hurt. "This isn't over Deanna. You have no idea what you've done."

Deanna squared her shoulders and let her weight rest against Asil. "I know exactly what I've done. And it is over."
Dinner began as a subdued affair. The fallout had already started. The Federation had charged
Captain Riker with securing a base of operations on Presba and the removal of news of their missing
loved ones was the first price paid. Riker had reported that the Presbans were unwilling to negotiate.

Deanna personally paid the next price. She was AWOL during hostilities. Riker refused to extend
her leave.

Worf paid the third. He stood before his friend on the Titan, and listened to Will spew self-righteous
vitriol and honour had demanded he act. The scent of a woman who was not Deanna permeated
everything, and hung over the room, hung over Riker himself. He left Riker, unconscious, on the
floor of his quarters. The blow had been delivered with a warning.

The other costs were only beginning to be tallied, their currencies as yet undetermined.

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By dessert, a not unexpected plethora of chocolate infused dishes, the mood had lightened
considerably, the company of good friends and family soothing the tension of the afternoon.

For Phoebe, though, dessert proved to be the tough part of the meal. The smell of the chocolate was
cloying, its heavy sweetness made it almost impossible to concentrate on the light conversation that
had sprung up around her.

"Be'nal?" Vrald could see his wife was in discomfort. He had thought she'd been scratched or
poisoned during the hunt, but except for the lingering trace of his bite, her skin was unmarred,
perfect.

"I'm fine."

Deanna, concerned, cast an inquiring look at her sister, but only caught a vague sense of nausea and...
She darted a looked at Asil, who had caught her surprise and was in turn watching her.

One elegant eyebrow lifted over a luxurious brown eye, and the Vulcan stood and crossed to where
Phoebe sat. "If I would be permitted?" She held up her hand, and then placed it over the red-head's
abdomen when permission was given. Asil didn't say anything verbally to Deanna, but she knew her
confirmation had been received.

"Phoebe..." Deanna began.

The woman in question looked between Deanna and Asil, and put it all together. "Pregnant? You
got me pregnant?" Phoebe turned and pounded on Vrald's chest. "Pregnant?"

"Is she not pleased?" Asil, having returned to her mate, asked Deanna.

Deanna took in the physical interaction even as she read the surface emotions and grinned. "I think
that's foreplay."

"Indeed." Asil took a second to assess her mate's posture and affect, and then deliberately tapped her
fingers against the Betazoid's chest.
Seven of Nine entered the corridors of Voyager with a purpose in mind. She was dressed casually, but her walk was so focused that anyone who was in the same corridor as she simply stepped out of her way. Her expression was completely cool and unreadable.

The distance she traveled was not far. She was on the officers' deck. If one wanted to know her destination all they had to do was count the doors and maybe have a little prescience. She soon arrived at her destination.

Arrangements were made behind the scenes with Dr. Zimmerman and General Torres, the care of the children was left to Ezri Dax, as was command of the ship. They should expect forty eight hours, but they would be notified if it would be sooner or later. Things would be covered.

Seven rang the chime. She waited patiently in her usual neutral posture. She suspected that Kate Pulaski needed a little time to wake up.

The door finally opened. Kate was at the door, blinking blearily. She wore a simple robe for modesty's sake. She wiped under her eyes and yawned. "Seven. What brings you here?"

Seven extended one hand. "Come with me Kate Pulaski." It wasn't just an invitation. It was a command.

The other woman, however, could still say no.

Kate blinked at the inscrutable Borg and felt a shiver of a premonition run through her. Then, slowly, as if she thought she might be dreaming, she took Seven's proffered hand. She was afraid to ask the question of why, so she didn't.

No words were spoken between them.

Seven gently guided her out of her domicile and led her down the common hallway. It did not take long to reach their destination. The door opened and Seven led Kate in, then through.

Soon they were at Seven of Nine's room and they walked in. But even here, they did not stop. That premonition rose in Kate again and she was gently led to that other door.

Seven stopped, only briefly, to look at Kate. Her expression was probing and Kate held her breath, unsure. Then Seven pressed the entry pad and the door to that sacred room opened.

It was surprisingly bright. Kate had not expected that. She wasn't sure what she had expected. But for some odd reason, to be able to see wasn't on her mental list of possibilities.

On the other hand, it made sense.

How else would she be able to see that they all awaited her.

Unlike Seven, who was dressed for the public, if barefoot, they were covered in robes. Seven lead her along the pathway and then down the steps towards the others. The surface was firm, yet soft under her feet.
What surprised her was the calm in their expressions. And it made her wonder what had happened between the time she'd last seen Kathryn and the present moment.

"Kate Pulaski," said Seven of Nine, "I present to you, your family. We await your consent to join us, be one with us, be loved by us. All you need do is say, Yes." There was a pause, "Or No, as you will it."

Kate cast a glance at the taller woman besides her and then gazed at the gathered adults. Their expressions remained calm, waiting. Even Lwaxana's. Whatever she decided now, she realized, would have a deep impact upon her life and its direction. And they were honestly giving her the chance to make that choice without pressure. She could reject the offer. And her life would go on the same as it always had.

She inhaled and her shoulders dropped a bit of their tension. Then she said, "Yes."

Like sun coming up over the mountains, Kathryn smiled and stepped forward. "Beloved." She extended her hand and Kate took it.

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They kissed her gently, warmly and with tender welcome - one at a time. It was as if she were someone who had been gone so long they wanted to reassure themselves that she was real. Kate had expected it to be odd, but it wasn't. It was just kind and sweet and loving.

Then, as she was delivered into the arms of Seven once more, the kisses warmed and deepened. But by then, she was ready, more awake and, honestly, had been the one who pressed for it. Again, they were moving at her speed.

And it made her wonder.

She tallied things in her mind, though she was losing track of that tally with each kiss. Finally she had to pull back, though she felt desire racing through her. She walked around them, touching, examining and looking at them, deeply. They let her, with some amusement. She finally stepped back and propped her hands on her hips. The off kilter robe made the blonde's stern gaze incredibly sexy. "You all should be knee-deep into... what it is you do." She wagged her finger at them. "How did you do this?"

Lwaxana grinned. Then she, Tuvok and T'Pel touched fingertips to fingertips, "Darling, we have two Vulcan mates."

"And we wanted to wait for you," purred Laren, whose fingertips now touched B'Elanna's and Seven's.

Kathryn, who was now closest to Kate, once again held out her hand. She drew the other woman into an embrace and pressed her close. Then she carried Laren's purr further. "We needed you." She kissed her way down Kate's cheek, until she finally captured the other woman's lips. "Save the science for later, love. We'll make ourselves available if you're..." there was a sexual growl, "really interested."

"Oh my..." Kate didn't finish that thought. Her knees felt liquid with erotic heat. She felt them close in on her, not like predators, but like a support system. It was as if she drifted on a cloud and multiple hands delivered her to the soft, silky ground.

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Kate had been to Risa. She knew pleasure. But this! This was more than pleasure. It was love. The desire was there, oh that was definite. But they went at her speed. Time passed in delicious, sultry motion. She was touched everywhere, kissed everywhere.

And then, as if a silent decision had been made, they drifted away, until there was one. Kathryn, whose smile of desire and wonder continued to thrill through Kate. Her lips covered rosy, stiff nipples. Her hands drew fire along Kate's delightfully freckled skin. The blonde vaguely knew the mates were touching each other, as they had touched her, but her attention was captured and focused by Kathryn.

It was as if... Kathryn knew her. The way she moved was new to Kate, but there was a sense of loving practice, of knowing exactly where Kate's hot points were; that secret space that walked the line between tickle and caress behind her knees, the tingling line along her hips that had her lifting and arching. Then there were the noises; the loving talk that took a raunchy lusty swerve, the purrs, the delicious growls and moans of desire. Kathryn had her gasping in need far before she even touched places that were wet and warm and definitely receptive.

It was a relief when she was entered. She pulsed against those stroking, playing fingertips, thrust to the red-head's rhythm and cried out against the sensual touch along that tiny mountain of sensation. The pleasure climbed and built, until Kate knew she was near. She clung to Kathryn's shoulders like she was going to fall off. The growl in her ear deepened, became a word.

"Mate!"

The heat of Kathryn's breath was suddenly on the hill of her shoulder. Afterwards she thought she should have expected it. She'd known back when her fingertip had been cut by that sharp tooth that it would come. But the bite was a complete surprise, quick and intense.

It could have startled her out of the pleasure, but what happened was the exact opposite. It tossed her over the edge and warmth spread from her shoulder through her whole body so quickly she hardly knew how to process it. The kiss that naturally flowed afterwards was succulent, overwhelming and tasted of blood. Kate cried out at the intensity as ecstasy rolled over and over in seemingly unstoppable waves through her.

It was improbable, it was unexpected. They had figured in time, seven years and then maybe, if things worked out right, if they'd guessed correctly...

But she was there. She was with them.

Kate knew she was. They had no idea how it was possible. Their surprise was echoed. They toppled in her pleasure and the transforming, powerful fire that roared through them.

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It was instinct, more than anything. She wouldn't have done it otherwise, but Kate felt the urge to complete the bond in a mere set of minutes - even in the lassitude of pleasure. It was so strong, overwhelming and frightening that she didn't quite know what to do with the sensation.

Then she began, for the first time, to feel the side benefit of her... mates. They soothed and reassured her, blessed her and encouraged. Instinct knew and they trusted her.

Kathryn's blue gaze met her own and there was a daring smile there. Kate laughed and then shook her head. "It won't be clean."

"We have dermal regenerators." Kathryn kissed her then, strongly leading her up into desire again
with surprising speed.

She hissed with the need. Kathryn teased her, goaded her on. Now her touch, which had been
wonderfully erotic, sang through Kate and was reflected. She felt them, knew they were loving her,
loving each other. It was golden, blazing.

She made the choice and trusted.

There was pain, immediately soothed between them. There was blood which... tasted differently than
she remembered and at the same time it identified Kathryn to her exactly. She would always know
what Kathryn tasted like, smelled like, felt like. And there were so many surprises there, knowledge
shared between them all.

Kate knew it had to be a chemical reaction, some sort of genetic information passed on and
transformed, but she had no idea how it worked. A part of her mind noodled on it, but not for long.
Because the bond intensified again, spread through them like a warm tsunami. She understood now.
"Mate, mates" she whispered in awe. And was received.

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It made sense that it would be Seven of Nine and B'Elanna next. The Mistress and her Epatai
welcomed Kate into their arms, drew her in with kisses made of fire and honey.

Kate was urgently curious. She wanted to try what she knew, explore what she did not know. She
touched B'Elanna just so and felt the reaction all the way through both of them. Those precious
ridges on the lower back, the ones that required a firmer touch, responded as they ought.

Seven whispered in her ear, words, which at first she didn't understand, yet they abruptly clarified for
her. "There is more."

"More?" queried Kate, wonderingly. And they all looked at her, startled. Then they moved their
fingers in quick, short, almost transparent gestures. A stranger wouldn't know them as words. They
might not even notice them. But she... was no longer stranger.

She looked at them in wonder. "I understand."

Seven grasped her face in both hands. A blue light strobed along her eye piece. It wasn't distracting,
just there. Then she kissed Kate, and repeated in Presban, "There is more. Let me show you."

The purr went straight through the transforming woman and Seven began to whisper her tutorial to a
strongly aroused blonde.

Soon, Kate found places of delight on B'Elanna, small secrets that made the other woman respond so
hotly that she knew the mere thought of them would make her wet later. Kate was already pouring.
And Seven, oh gods, Seven knew what she was doing. Kate didn't know how she managed it, but
somehow it was as if Seven of Nine was touching her everywhere at once. It was a complete
impossibility. Yet, she rocked back into the firm touch, knew the fire that the buxom woman was
calling forth would soon crest over her. But she wanted, so much to arrive with B'Elanna that she
tried to hold back.

Then, the Mistress of House Presba made her command and waiting was done, for both of them.
Erotic ecstasy flooded through them, entered their uncommon bond and threw the rest into the
waves.

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"Hello," she said. There was a shared memory between them already. The red-headed Betazoid, pulled her in for a tight hug. Their cheeks touched and there was a whisper in her mind. A reflection of that memory from another's gaze.

Hello.

They grinned at each other, basked in the warmth of their long friendship and affection, now turned to something so much deeper. They couldn't help the chuckles between them, even as they kissed, searched with their mouths and hands. They would sober up enough to lave long, delicious strokes along delicious skin, then look at one another in wonder and then amusement. "My gods, how did I live without you?"

You were very bored and you told yourself you weren't. Lwaxana's fingers dipped and swirled along the shallow groove. Kate lifted her hips, needing suddenly.

"I was busy. I'm a doctor. I didn't have ...oh gods... time..."

A terrible excuse. You won't get away with it now.

They ended up laughing again until Kate gasped against Lwaxana's touch and started pushing. "I need you."

Lwaxana smiled and captured Kate in another kiss, then pressed in, claiming her mate. Her gaze was both feral and amused. Yes. You do.

Kate clutched at her shoulders as Lwaxana began to make the long climb. "No. I mean, I need to taste you."

"Ah, is that what you mean? Then, by all means, my darling. Let me accommodate you."

Lwaxana turned, opened herself in that intimate way that comes from such a movement. Kate could feel her need through their connection. It echoed and reflected hers. She felt Lwaxana make a summons, and then she saw a beautiful brown female form rise and walk towards them with great purpose.

T'Pel's touch rang through her like fruit juice on a summer's day.

Kate could hardly concentrate, but she knew that this was just Lwaxana and T'Pel teasing her. She also knew what she wanted. She drew Lwaxana closer and then tasted what she had been seeking. Again there was that moment, like wave of both pleasure and change that rocked through her. Connection and bond.

She drank as deeply from the cup as providence would let her, drank so deep that she and they sang out together in bliss.

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She rested against Lwaxana's shoulder. The Betazoid grinned down at her as she playfully fed Kate with finger food and a sweet, restoring drink. T'Pel reclined near them, her hand rested easily on Kate's thigh, very near the point that she had been visiting most recently.

They were all taking a moment to rest and recuperate, though now she understood how deeply the fire burned within them. All the time.

"I don't even know how you function."
"One adapts, gains strength and control." T'Pel said.

Kate flashed her mate a look. "And you..." The Vulcan deliberately lifted her hand and their fingertips met.

"We've all said it," Laren said as she slid down besides them. Her hair was still wet and slick from a shower. "All that passion and love and..." she winked at Kate, "...emotion. Hidden dynamos our Vulcan's are." She leaned over Kate and kissed T'Pel warmly. "Tempered by logic, of course." Then pulled back and snatched a bite of food from Lwaxana's fingers.

Kate grinned and basked in the glow of affection that surrounded, filled her. "The more I live, the more I learn."

"Indeed," confirmed T'Pel.

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She had lost all sense of time. She had no idea what shift it was, or how many hours had actually passed. Not that it mattered. She was exactly where she needed and wanted to be. She now could not recall why she had delayed so long.

Seven of Nine settled beside them. Kate was leaning against Tuvok, front to front - sweat dribbled down her back and front, her cheeks were flushed with color. The Vulcan had proved to be a most energetic and powerful lover. He had been gentle, but she had pressed and he had accommodated her need.

Seven leaned in and kissed them both. She said, "It has been twenty six hours, thirty one minutes and seventeen seconds." Then she smiled, "We have plenty of time."

Kate couldn't help it. She laughed.

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She realized that they were always in motion with each other, touching, being touched, even at rest there was something that flowed between them. A part of her grew more aware that they had loved each other throughout. No one was left out, everyone was received and delivered. But they had kept her so focused that those moments happened as flashes of awareness when she rested.

Now she was, technically by herself. She recalled that she had fallen asleep. It had been a long day before and it had all finally caught up with her. Awareness crept back to her and it felt like sunrise back home, when on vacation - a little lazy and hazy. Her body felt good. It practically hummed with serenity.

Someone settled besides her and she didn't even have to look, but she did anyway. She liked how the woman looked. Kate always had. She turned on her side and made her greeting. "Laren."

The Bajoran slid closer and reclined, also on her side. She propped her head on her hand and gazed thoughtfully at her new mate. She touched the other woman's cheek softly with her other, free hand. "Kate."

Kate captured that hand, drew it forward so that her lips could caress the palm. Laren's gasp was music. Want thrilled through Kate, amazed her with its intensity.

Laren smiled. "It's the bond. It's going to be like that."
There was no tag end, no "... for awhile." Laren was just stating the fact. They would want.

They would be looking at one another and in an instant, the desire would sparkle through them - but it wouldn't be incapacitating. Most of the time. It was just a constant, natural reassurance that they were mates, bonded, wanted and loved.

"Laren..."

The Bajoran pulled her close, threading her legs with Kate's in such a way that left no doubt. The wetness along the blonde's thigh communicated what was not said. They kissed, hungrily. This time Kate did not draw away as she had that very first time. This time the growling purrs that painted themselves along her body, only added to her singing need.

Kate reached, and drew her fingertips through sensitive folds. She felt the multiple points of pleasure, which she'd always found fascinating and caressed them until Laren rocked against her hand.

"Please," the Bajoran whispered.

"Yes, love." Kate pressed up and in, then she felt Laren's hand move between her legs. She opened for her. The Bajoran played with Kate's breasts with her mouth and somehow the blonde managed not to lose focus.

She wanted to feel Laren arrive, but found that Laren wanted the same for herself. There was a touch and a summons, a drawing forth of each other - energy given and returned. Then like a gift, Laren let go. It was the whirlwind, and Kate lost herself in it, cried out with Laren because of it.

It was glorious.

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Kate, who had over these last hours, had made so many discoveries that she'd ceased even mentally cataloging them, walked over to where Kathryn stood in front of Seven, who was also standing, but with one arm above her head. The tall blonde clasped a duranium rod that extended from the wall. Her legs were spread, feet planted firmly on the ground.

"That wasn't there before," Kate commented casually.

"The Nest is versatile," Seven explained.

Kate gazed at Seven, at the lights that moved in colorful patterns along her body. "That is the most amazing thing..."

Kathryn grinned at her, but did not stop what she was doing with Seven. The blonde's eyes closed in pleasure.

"May I?" Seven's eyes opened and sought Kathryn's then Kate's. She nodded.

Kate grinned. Then she knelt.

Seven gasped at the first touch of Kate's tongue. The doctor hummed into the succulent contact, enjoying the sweet taste of her mate.

Her mate.

That thought alone was an aphrodisiac.

Her efforts doubled. She looped her arms around Seven's legs as support, but pressed up towards
her, tasting deeply. Wanting more.

She knew, somehow, that she was not alone. She felt Kathryn near, knew that she was also touching Seven in ways wonderful and distracting.

There was a sound, something Kate had never heard before and she nearly pulled back, except for the cry of "Don't stop!"

So she didn't and lost herself in the savor.

Then she felt the spiral, a glow and a motion within. She knew Seven's arrival because it thrilled through her, through them.

It was beautiful.

When she pulled back, she grinned. She couldn't help it. "That never gets old. Does it?"

Kathryn grinned back at her, and then directed her attention to the bent metal rod, still in Seven's hands. Seven's eyes were still closed. Her chest was heaving. "No. It doesn't."

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"Once upon a time, there was a Princess."

Icheb looked at her and raised his eyebrow, looking so very much like his mother that Ezri had to stifle her grin lest she hurt his feelings. She took a sip of her bloodwine, and let it roll over her palate before swallowing and then continuing. "She was a very special Princess. She had friends, a career, and grand adventures. One day a Klingon with a bad-attitude walked into her life."

"Did she try to kill him with her Bat'leth?" Rebi asked.

"No." She chuckled at his look of disappointment. "No, she married him. Eventually."

"Did she have an evil step-mother who locked her in a tower?" Mezoti inquired. "That is typical fairy tale protocol."

"No. In this fairy-tale, it's the Prince who has the wicked step-mother."

"Acceptable." Azan spoke, and she smiled fondly at him. Secretly, he was her favourite, reminding her more than a little of her brother.

"Well, the time for the wedding was set. But the Mistress of the House refused to allow the Prince to marry the Princess unless she passed a series of difficult trials. The first of the trials was The Ordeal of the Braziers." She took another drink from her glass, amused when, on noticing it was now empty, Icheb promptly brought her another. "But you see, the Trials were impossible because the Lady did not wish to allow one who was not Klingon by birth into her House."

The twins and Mezoti responded immediately, and Emina ducked her head into Ezri's chest in response to the noise. "But that's not Honourable."

"Be that as it may, the Lady wished it so. She could not see what the Prince saw. And the Princess was herself a proud warrior, and did not easily bend her will to another, pride making what would have been merely difficult nearly Herculean. Twice the braziers fell, the task undone. The Lady dismissed the Princess as unworthy and unable, doomed to always be considered weak and an outsider. The third time, the braziers rose, and stayed."
"That was a physical trial. But Klingons hold that more than might is worthy of honour. There is the honour of lineage. And though history is written by those who take the day, those who came before are met on the Barge and the demands they place on your honour must be known, and paid. The Princess was required to name all of the women who had preceded the Lady in her the House."

She took another long drink from her glass, five sets of eyes raptly on her as she paused. "The Princess was long-lived and had seen much, and so this task was easy, but for the sin of pride. The Lady's pride and the Princess' pride both. You have to be careful when you re-write history. Someone, somewhere lived it. And so it was that the Princess saw a chance to humble the Lady. She won the trial but yielded ground on the battlefield."

"Next, came the Bre'Nan." She leaned into her audience, arm securely around the toddler. "But the Princess was indeed strong willed, and rather than complete the final trial at a time of the Mistress of the House's choosing, she wanted to spend her last night before her bonding in the company of her friends, and with those who were not blood but closer than family. It was an insult not to be borne by the Lady, and so she threatened the Princess with a blade." Four sets of eyes grew even wider, and four bodies shifted closer to Ezri. The fifth had been lulled to sleep by the cadence of the words.

"Now the Princess was not Klingon by birth, but she knew much of their ways, and had trained with their weapons. The Lady was defeated, and the party was continued into the night. But unknown to the Princess the wedding was canceled. The Prince would not gainsay the Mistress of the House. And the Princess would not beg. She did not understand, not truly, the form of the thing. She, like the Lady, saw only what she wanted, and had not taken the need for the trials seriously."

"But the Princess was fortunate. She had a great friend. One who was Emissary to beings beyond knowing. The Emissary showed her what she had lost in her hubris. He showed her that what she had considered weakness - leading with her heart - was that which made her strongest, and if she listened to it now, it would guide her where she needed to go."

"The Prince too had a great friend in his Lord, and was reminded that honor gives little comfort to a man alone in his home... and in his heart. And so the Prince sought out the Princess and told her they would marry regardless. And the Princess smiled, for she had already bent her knee to the Mistress of the House. So that day the drums sounded, and the Prince and Princess swore to join with each other against all that opposed them, and so were married." Ezri finished her story.

"Did they live happily ever after?"

Ezri became aware that her audience had grown larger, and she looked up to see Laren standing with her arm around Seven of Nine, listening. "No. Not that time."

"What happened?" Icheb spoke up for the first time.

"The Princess died." Seven's eyes were locked on hers and she read the bold promise in them. "Alright, my little sochlings, to your alcoves."

The youngest filed out obediently, while Icheb reached for his youngest sister. He could tell that his parents wished to speak to Ezri, and so he would put Emina to bed before engaging in his own pursuits. At the doorway, he passed to receive the hugs and murmurs of affection and love that he had once never hoped to regain. He turned back to face Ezri. "The Princess. Did she go to Sto-vo-kor?"

Ezri thought about it. "Yes. I believe she did."

"Then her happily ever after is merely delayed." Icheb's eyes were shining, and Ezri knew that no
matter what transpired between his House and hers, that this young man, this son of Seven of Nine, was a son of her heart.

"I suppose it is."

Somehow they were in Seven's room, falling onto that wonderful bed. Ezri reached out hungrily, seeking solace and reassurance from their touches. The last two days had been spent split between a fierce joy that those she loved were being loved, and were happy, and the desolation of having been left behind.

She broke away. "Is she okay?"

Seven heard the question under the words. "She is well. She and Kathryn are sleeping. As are the others."

"And --"

Laren's fingers stilled her words. "We are here for you."

"For your need." Seven whispered against her jaw, drawing them back together. "We are here because we love you, and would not have you be alone."

Ezri sank back into Seven's warm embrace. "I'm sorry."

"There's no need. We know. We miss you." Laren brushed her fingers along Ezri's side and watched the spots darken in response. "We are yours and you will be ours. It is but time between us."

The moment was sharp and poignant, but it yielded to the next one: one of fire and want. It was not lovemaking, the what of it was too frantic and urgent, but by the why of it, it was nothing less.

She was nuzzled between them, completely dwarfed by the blonde and brunette. Laren was wrapped around her from behind, while Seven faced her, legs tangled with hers. Her attention had been on the slick, gray band of metal that wrapped around Seven, but her hand had wandered, of its own accord, to find the first of the reactive starbursts nestled in the small of the leonine back.

"Ezri Dax." Seven breathed, even as she arched into Ezri, the chain reaction of their contact causing Laren to moan in turn.

"Seven of Nine." Ezri laughed, the sound pure and light, and then nipped her teeth along the edges of Seven's neck, careful not to break the surface. "I need you in me."

"I will comply." A section of the head of the bed opened, seemingly at random, and she saw Seven withdrew a pair of devices. One, she pushed toward the Bajoran, the other she maneuvered into place, one-handed.

Laren watched them fondly, seeing the unique woman in her mate that Ezri alone drew forth. They had started a new round of kisses between them, and she eased away from the Trill, taking advantage of the large space, and to allow Seven to guide Ezri onto her back.

The base of Seven's spine had begun to pulse a pattern of blues and greens, as the blonde positioned herself, and Laren wondered if the lights were in anyway a match for the rhythm of her mate's heart.
She lost the thought as she watched Seven sink into Ezri, her mind taken by the unadulterated look of lust and abandon that swept across the Trill's face.

She growled, a long and low sound that set new lights off along Seven's shoulders and side, and that rumbled through the device she had donned. Oh clever Seven. Laren growled again, testing her theory that the toy had been wired to react to sound frequency as well as touch.

"Laren?" Ezri looked over at her, eyes dark purple, brow damp with passion. The eye contact was held even as the Trill lifted to meet Seven part way.

"I'm content to watch. For now." She dropped her hand to wrap around the toy, and moved along the shaft. She knew what Ezri wanted to hear, and she surprised herself by being able to say it. "And then, I'm going to fuck you." Impossibly, her words seemed to send Ezri over an edge. Then Seven arced back and she knew that she'd taken them both, and then she too, pulled by Seven followed.
Kate stared at the quarters in amazement. "Mine?" she repeated.

"Unless you prefer differently." There was openness in their feelings for her. Lwaxana and T'Pel stood with her in the personal quarters. The room was one of the originals. Each of the Prime had a room that had been theirs, designated from the beginning. T'Pel, however, had not needed a room. She had joined Tuvok immediately on arrival.

Kate started to walk around the space, mentally taking its measurements and placing herself in them. It was easier than she would have expected. She smiled. "Oh no. I want that." She pointed to the door to the Nest. "And my other quarters, do not have it."

Lwaxana chuckled and Kate walked to both of her mates and drew them in for kisses. "Nor do they have you." She stepped back and made another analysis. "Besides, I'm an old hand at moving. I've got packing down to a science."

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There was one more step to take. Kate was fully a member of the family, but there was a need to have her become one of the House. It was a practical necessity, which would provide protection and authority at a later time.

Invitations were extended to a select group of people.

Neelix grinned as he opened the silver envelope and pulled out the small digital card. He read through the content then grinned at the deliverer. "Rebi, Tell your parents that I will be honored to attend."

He wasn't the only one. Dr. Zimmerman's smile was equally genuine. He started off with, "Of course, I was expecting it any day...." and finished with, "Do you think a tuxedo would be appropriate? I've been studying twenty first century fashion in preparation for a holonovel. It is really quite formal and I believe it would be..."

Mezoti delivered the invitation to Samantha and Naomi. Samantha looked at the girl curiously and then grinned when she read the invitation. "Of course we'll be there." She then hugged Mezoti, pointed at Naomi's playroom and said, "There's a buzzberry blast waiting for you with your names on it." The girls grinned at each other and were away.

Seven of Nine personally delivered the invitation to Belle and Annika. They were thrilled to be asked and Belle said, "I am glad to see you adding to the House."

Both the Captain and the Epatai delivered the invitation to the still recovering Chancellor Worf. "We would be honored if you were able to attend."

He read the invitation and narrowed his gaze slightly at them. There was something in his eyes. "Make sure Ezri Dax is there."

Kathryn and B'Elanna looked at each other and then nodded. "Absolutely," said B'Elanna. "We will see to it."
The Chancellor nodded firmly. "Good."

Then those who were family were simply invited.

And still, it seemed there was yet one more thing to be done.

Icheb stood at the foot of the table; his siblings arrayed behind him, tallest to shortest, Rebi held a wriggling Emina. "Epatai and Mistress of the House Presba, I, Icheb Hansen of the House Presba, have a matter of Honour I wish to address." Mezoti kicked him, and he added to his greeting. "On behalf of myself, Mezoti, Azan, Rebi and Emina Hansen."

The full Prime was gathered, Epatai and Mistress side by side at the head: Lwaxana, T'Pel and Tuvok to Seven's left, Laren, Kathryn and Kate to B'Elanna's right. His SoS regarded him intently, then deepened her gaze and he met it resolutely; in this she was not his parent.

"I see." B'Elanna looked to each of her mates, and listened along their bond, all were curious, and slightly amused, but equally unsure of what this was about.

Icheb waited, wishing for an instant that he had chosen an uniform with a more open collar, until the Epatai gave him nodding permission to continue. "We wish to know if your intentions toward Ezri Dax are honourable."

Only the months of controlling the fire that burned within them, kept B'Elanna from letting her jaw drop and a bark of laughter escape. "Are you asking us if we plan to marry Dax?"

"Affirmative."

"I see." B'Elanna, donning the physical cloak of her position, growled lightly and leaned forward. It was hard to say who was the most surprised when Icheb growled back. He blinked, startled, but got the next words out evenly. "We require your answer."

"And if I said no?"

"Then I would be forced to challenge you. Our conduct would not be becoming of our House."

"You know you would lose, and still you would challenge?" This was no longer about Ezri, and the others knew it too, and let B'Elanna have full reign.

"Yes. Honour comes not from winning, but from having tried." He stood as tall as he could, shoulders back. "Today is a good day to die."

"It is." B'Elanna stood, and guided Seven to stand as well. And then she smiled, but made her words as formal as she could. "Icheb, my son. I was going to tell you that these are matters for adults and do not concern you. But I see I cannot, for you are no longer a child, and a man's honour is his own. You lead your siblings well. So instead, I tell you that our intentions are indeed honourable. Now go finish getting ready. It simply won't do for the entire House to be late."

When the children and Icheb had left, B'Elanna let herself collapse in helpless laughter.

It was Lwaxana who sobered her up, but caused the others to grin as the colour drained from the Klingon's face. "You do know he'll be the one dating soon?"
If they had had the time they might have actually made the trek. But the beauty of a holo-program was its availability.

At the appointed time those invited began arriving. Stepping through the door into the holodeck was literally like stepping into another world. The Prime of House Presba chose the snowy mountains of Boreth again and that same space where they had originally gathered.

The Klingon Temple was a massive series of buildings that were built right into the mountain. Its impressive spires rose to meet the sky, while its snow white, barrel-like heavy walls dropped into the hard stone. Monks walked the hallways of the Temple, chanting. Incense scented the air. The ornate courtyard they were guided to seemed welcoming and familiar to those who had been there before and foreign to those who were newly experiencing this particular scenario.

Kira Nerys arrived with Deanna Troi. The Truth Seeker had invited Nerys as her guest. Despite Deanna's plans to leave after the Trials, she had stayed a bit longer because of the battle. Their early arrival gave them a little time to look around and investigate the program. Somehow a guide was always available to lead them back.

Miral and Gretchen with their three assistants, Nelav, Effany and T'Sai arrived soon after and they began a pleasant conversation with Deanna and Nerys. Nerys, who had never been to one of these ceremonies asked, "How long will it take?"

"A few speeches, and then the Oath and then the bond of blood and its over. The real fun begins with the party."

"Delightful."

The Chancellor Worf arrived. He was accompanied by Jadzia Dax. There were also four personal guards. They took positions around the perimeter of the courtyard, but no one expected any surprises. Ezri Dax soon arrived, escorted by a smiling Azan who then exited quickly. She was followed by Samantha Wildman and Naomi. They were followed by Neelix and Dr. Zimmerman, Dr. Dezhe, Commander Veckma, and Commander Sofuru and his clan.

Soon everyone who had been invited was there and the only missing persons were the Prime family. But the guests waited in a convivial mood, since they were not yet late, and softly spoken discussions occurred - except, perhaps, with Chancellor Worf, who looked intimidating, but patient.

Ezri watched, amused, as Jadzia kept shooting baffled glances at Chancellor Worf. "Problem?"

"I'm not sure why I'm here, but I really can't fathom why he's here. He just stands there being all big bad attitude."

Half choking, half swallowing, Ezri had no choice but to let her mouthful of wine spew back into the cup.

"What? Oh come on, you can't tell me you like him?"

"Me? I only slept with him. You married him." Ezri timed her rejoinder perfectly, and it was Jadzia's turn to have bloodwine drip from her nose.

Eventually the Primes arrived. They were decked out in their formal uniforms and outfits. B'Elanna and Seven walked together, with the blonde's hand on B'Elanna's forearm. They were followed by their children, with Icheb holding Emina, and then by the other Primes. Kathryn walked with Laren.
Lwaxana walked with T'Pel and Tuvok. They were followed by Kate, who managed to look confident, amused and surprisingly relaxed for the person who was soon to be the center of focus.

They took position in the center of the courtyard, with the Primes and their children facing Kate and the audience facing all of them.

B'Elanna looked briefly at Seven who nodded, then stepped forward. "Welcome. Thank you for coming." Her gaze took in all the guests and provided them a moment of unique attention. Then she continued. "The Primes of House Presba have been joined. We present our Mate - Commander Kate Pulaski, MD."

There was a susurrus of amazement, but not surprise. Those who had been watching these things unfold for months had known it was coming. The Zakeeri in the audience looked particularly pleased to hear the announcement.

Kate, being who she was, only gave the slightest of bows - which meant it was pretty much just an inclination of the head. It was enough though, for the family at least. Seven of Nine continued her introduction, which was appreciably brief. Then she stepped aside and it was her Epatai's turn.

B'Elanna spent a brief time explaining what it meant to join a Klingon House and explained the responsibilities and rights. Then she offered Kate an out, to which the doctor replied. "Oh Hell, No. You wanted me. Now you're stuck with me. Let's get on with it."

There was some amusement in the crowd. When the laughter subsided, B'Elanna lifted her knife while Seven of Nine held the bowl. Then she drew the knife down her palm, said the Oath, and blood spilled into the bowl. Then Kate stepped forward and did the same. They clasped hands - blood to blood - and B'Elanna drew Kate in, rather forcefully and growled out. "Now you're stuck with us." Then she kissed her mate with abiding passion.

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When the hurrahs died down, Chancellor Worf started forward to where the family was standing. "I have words to say."

He found a center point that somehow managed to face everyone. "I am pleased to see a good House grow. Your worth you have proved to the Empire. Your valor inspires us. I have spoken with Miral Torres. She tells me that she and her mate will be... available. I have asked Miral to continue to be my Judge and to sit on my council from time to time."

It caught the primes somewhat flatfooted. Kathryn sent her mother an amazed glance, but her mother's expression remained serene. The Chancellor continued.

"I have seen amazing things from this House. I expect to see more. Continue in Honor, House Presba."

Then he said, "I now call forward two that I wish to recognize. Ezri Dax. Jadzia Dax. Step forward." He made a summoning motion and two guards showed up at his sides. They each held a Bat'leth. One held a knife and one held a Bowl.

Ezri and Jadzia had only a few moments to commune in surprise, but neither was prepared to stall or step back. They both moved forward to where the Chancellor stood. "You have proved yourself in battle, defending me and the honor of the Empire." He turned to focus on the smaller Trill. "Ezri Dax. You wear the emblem of House Martok and have proved worthy of Our House." He then took a rolled cloth object from his cloak. "You will place this on the wall of your Home, so that all who
enter will know your House in this Universe."

He then turned to Jadzia, who was somehow managing not to sweat. "You have heard the words of Epatai Torres. You now know what that means to be a member of a House in the Klingon Empire. I offer you now, entrance into my own - House Martok. Do you, Jadzia Dax accept?"

There were so many things that Jadzia wanted to say right that moment. She kept her features composed by sheer will. She managed to make a credible answer. "Yes."

It was over in moments. They both took Oath; Jadzia to join a Klingon House for the first time and Ezri, even though she knew that it would complicate things, to affirm her status in this Universe. Honor simply demanded it. Blood was spilled and then joined. Then the Chancellor took the Bat'leths from the guards and delivered them into the Trills' hands. "House Martok, Fight with Honor."

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After that, B'Elanna declared the celebration and more food and drink sparkled onto the tables. Music began playing in the background, nothing too loud or overpowering, but a merry accompaniment. People gathered around to congratulate Kate, Ezri and Jadzia. Then conversations fell into natural pockets of interest.

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Kathryn approached her mother quietly. She held a cup of bloodwine in her hand, but had not been drinking very much of it. It was just a trick she'd learned at other functions, to help others relax around her.

Her mother, who had been speaking with Ambassador Yar, turned to smile at her daughter. "Kathryn," she said and extended her arm for a brief hug, which she received.

"Mom."

Tasha, who had learned to be very observant in her time on Romulus said, "I think I need a refill. If you will excuse me."

There were smiles and pleasant responses and then it was just Kathryn and her mother and a short silence. "So," Kathryn exhaled. "You're staying."

Gretchen sipped her drink and turned so that Kathryn had to turn with her and they were suddenly facing the gathering. She was silent a moment longer. "We are."

"Are you sure."

Gretchen turned and smiled at her daughter. "We are sure. This Universe has become our home. And, truthfully, they need us more here."

Kathryn nodded. "You'll be missed."

Gretchen nodded. "And we will miss you." She faced Kathryn. "But this is worth doing and it calls to Miral. She is my Mate. I must stay."

The Captain ignored the wetness at her eyes. She just made her best smile. She understood. She truly did.
B’Elanna approached Miral and then Belle. "Do you have a moment?"

They excused themselves from their conversation and followed Belle away from the main group, until they found a relatively silent, unobserved point. "What is concerning you, B’Elanna?" Miral asked.

"Well," she wasn't quite sure where to start, but felt it was important. "Today's announcement by Worf, is it true?"

Miral glanced at Belle and then nodded. "It is true. Gretchen and I will be staying."

B’Elanna looked down for a moment, and then nodded to herself.

"Then, I have a request for you. But I want to preface it. I know you are both going to be busy in the coming days and there are some things we haven't discussed yet, but we would have eventually anyway. You are both capable of doing what needs to be done, but I base my decision on what I believe will be the availability of time and help." She looked at her mother. "With the upcoming battles, both of you will be quite busy. Also, both of your mates are quite capable, but ..." They nodded their understanding. Time would make the change, but it was not quite yet. B’Elanna continued. "Miral, on the other hand has very capable assistants who are trustworthy. I believe you will have more opportunity to do what must be done. I am asking you, Miral, as I asked my daughter Asil, to look after our interests in this Universe. T'Pel..."

She looked at her mother and sister, "... you have no idea how wealthy T'Pel has made us in a very short time - in this Universe. That said, I will also give you the authority to make those choices that need making for our House while I am away. Miral, my mother, will you accept this responsibility? And where Miral is not able, will you, Belle?"

Miral and Belle shared a glance. "We will."

The festivities were in full swing. Lwaxana was experiencing a rare moment of semi-solitude by the tapped Keg of Bloodwine and punch bowls of colorful liquid. The party would at some time be opened up to the ship as a whole, but at the moment it was still enfamilia.

She could not have said what it was that turned her attention to Deanna at the moment. Both of her daughters had been in her thoughts lately. She found herself gazing at the lovely brunette with great affection and then Deanna turned and briefly smiled warmly back.

Kate walked up to the "watering hole," as she liked to call it and smiled at her mate. Their fingertips touched, without either having thought about it. Kate felt a moment of amused gratification to finally understand why that seemed to continually happen with the mates.

"So much information... and all because of a bite," she said somewhat offhandedly. She was still processing exactly how the genetic transfer might have been encoded. It had to be in the blood exchange, but the question was would it happen with everyone, just anyone or specific individuals. Kathryn had said that she was drawn like moth to the fire to Kate. So... there had to be some form of compatibility. It was merely a matter of fitting theory to what was already fact. Kate's surface thoughts were so transparent that the Betazoid could not help overhear.

Lwaxana said, "I'm sorry. What did you say?"
Of course, she had heard it clearly, had understood the implications immediately. But she had not, until Kate commented, pieced it together for herself.

Kate gave her a surprised glance. "I thought you knew. I recall..." There was a moment from their original blending. "There was a memory about Tuvok and T'Pel's son. Sek and his mate. Of course, it was all somewhat vague for me at the time. But when she bit me..." There Kate's memory was perfectly clear and she relived the moment for Lwaxana, including Kathryn's drive to mate.

"Sweet Mother." Lwaxana said. "Sweet, glorious Mother." They both looked at Deanna at that moment.

Kate, for the first time, spoke as a Prime. "You must."

Lwaxana nodded. Then, in an urgent mind send, she spoke to her Epatai.

Moments later Lwaxana was inserting herself into Deanna's group. "My dear, do you have a moment?"

"Of course." They both nodded their temporary farewells. They were met by Seven of Nine, who handed Lwaxana two simple tools. Deanna's eyes widened. Then Lwaxana gripped Deanna's hand and quickly led her away and through the hallways of the Temple until she found a quiet space.

"Mother. What is it?"

Lwaxana scrutinized her daughter closely. Then she said, "Do you, Deanna Troi, acknowledge that I am your true mother?"

The Truth Seeker could feel the question brimming with importance. She had no idea why. But she knew her own answer. "I do."

"Do you understand that if you are my daughter, you are already of my House?"

Deanna Troi had been pondering the implications for some time. She decided to take the plunge. "I do."

"Do you trust me, Deanna Troi - Truth Seeker, Heir to the Throne of Betazed?"

Deanna was mystified, but knew the answer. "I do."

"I am going to give you the gift, my daughter. You must use it wisely. You may share it with your Mate or Mates and no one else - unless given permission by your Epatai. Your children will inherit this gift and with it comes responsibility as well as privilege. It is equal to the gifts of the mind that you already have. You will know what it is to be Presban. But to have this gift, you must take the Oath and honor it. Do you understand?"

Deanna nodded a basic agreement, though she was still mystified.

"Deanna Troi, will you take the Oath to join the House?"

"I will."

"Hold the bowl." Deanna took the bowl in both of her hands and held it carefully. And Lwaxana sliced open her palm and let the blood fall into the bowl. She said the first words of the Oath.
Then, she took the bowl from Deanna and traded to her the knife. Deanna grimaced, but slid the blade along her palm. Her blood spilled into the bowl and she took the Oath.

Then, both of them still holding those tools, Lwaxana grasped Deanna's bloody palm with her own and pressed it close to her heart. She spoke in Betazoid, uttered the words that only a mother could utter to her daughter. Words that had Deanna would never have had a chance to hear, because it was only passed on from mother to daughter. "Thou art my daughter, blood of my blood. I give to you your lineage. I give to you the truth of our line." Then, like a net, her thoughts dropped over her daughter's and captured her.

It hurt in a way the Betazoid could not have been prepared for. The vast mental weight of eons bent her to her knees and Lwaxana bent with her, held to her. Yet even in that pressure, Deanna did not cry out. She would not. Because she needed what she was receiving. She just had not realized how much.

Deanna had been bereft of that coming of age ceremony and had known its sting for a very long time. She had succeeded without it, determined that she would start her own line, since she had none except in the books. That had been sufficient, she had thought. But now she knew there was more. Lwaxana imparted in that heady instant, the whole of her line, and then retreated. Deanna would have time to study it out, learn more as she wished or didn't. But she would always have it and she would be able to pass it on.

And there was more.

There was an incredible blaze of warmth that extended from Deanna's palm to her whole body. It was a feeling of unshakable, enduring love, which washed over Deanna, bathing away all those old, deep and lingering hurts. She knew then, how much her mother loved her. She knew then, how valued she was and wanted. She knew then that her life had been altered in an unutterable ways. She would never be the same and she wept for the joy of it.

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They sat in that quiet space on one of the large benches. Lwaxana held Deanna to her. The wound was already healing. They spoke quietly with each other and gradually their conversation turned from the common language to Presban.
Ezri found herself standing to one side of the reception area, content to watch the pattern of interactions. It had been an eventful few days, and she was taking a minute to absorb all of the changes.

She noticed the approach of Chancellor Worf, and raised her glass by way of greeting. In the distance she could see Jadzia talking to Kira, but still casting odd looks at the Klingon. Looks that, Ezri noted with amusement, had become tinged with speculation.

"Tell me, Commander Ezri Dax of the House Martok in two Universes, are you content to be the concubine of the House Presba?" He gazed down at her intently.

Ezri laughed. Then gestured toward where the Prime had gathered around Deanna. "Supposing you were accurate in your description - and you're not - look at them. Wouldn't you?"

Worf looked, and then laughed. "Most definitely."

They stood side by side for long minute, studying the group. Then Worf spoke again. "The tall blonde."

Ezri nodded. "The tall blonde."

There was another small lull as they both stood contemplating the array of women in front of them.

"And the tall red-head."

There was something bizarrely comforting, thought Ezri, about the fact that Worf was a breast man in either universe. "The mother and not the daughter?"

Worf shot a narrowed gaze at her, and she just grinned and raised an eyebrow. He turned back to face the Prime, but Ezri noticed he was looking at Deanna and not Lwaxana. "The red-head." He said firmly, if a trifle untruthfully.

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Kira was bored. Or not bored exactly, but not with the person she wanted to be with either, and it aggravated her to no end. And it wasn't that Deanna was with someone else that was the cause of it, but rather the awareness that she wanted to be with the woman so much. It was ridiculous.

Looking for a diversion, it was inevitable that she found one -- in the person of Ezri Dax, who appeared to be slipping away from the party and onto the temple grounds. She noted the direction the Trill had gone, and went to refill her glass.

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The younger children of House Presba were playing hide and seek, but since they were not able to easily hide from one another, Ezri had allowed herself to be drafted into searching for them. Under the guise of providing Naomi, Mezoti, the twins and a couple of others the time to hide, she had shared another tankard or two of heavy something with Worf, who had, by then, been joined by
Martok.

Feeling vaguely unsteady, she wound her way to the outer portion of the abbey to begin her search, making sure to yell the finding protocol as established by Mezoti as loudly as she was willing, though she didn't think warning them was strictly necessary. With care, she descended a convenient set of stairs, emerging into small, torch-lit, stone chamber. Finding it empty she turned around, intending to leave.

"Intendant."

The Bajoran closed the distance between them. "I think you can call me Nerys, don't you?"

There was no time to accede or demur, as once more Kira brought their bodies into contact and kissed her, arms around her shoulders, locking them together with a strength that surprised Ezri. She was able to pull out of the kiss, but she was aware that she was breathing as heavily as Nerys. "Wrong Dax, wrong universe."

Nerys purred in her ear. "Are you sure about that? I met your Nerys, remember?"

The kiss when it came was more intense, tailored to draw her in, but she fought the wine-addled responses of her body, and pulled back, only to be stymied as a hand slipped through the leather of her jerkin and fingers crossed bare nipples. Her groan was involuntary. "Nerys." She meant it to be a request to be released, but it came out as a plea. The "I can't." was swallowed in another of the fiery, foreigly familiar kisses, and she tried to find her way up out of the sensations.

Nerys drank in the sound of her name. Drank in the energy that was beginning to build in the room. "You can. You want this, want me. I know where to touch you. Know where to hurt, where to sooth, and where to thrust into you." She gentled her voice to a throaty whisper. "I know where to kiss you. I know this body."

Through the complex miasma of confusion and arousal, Ezri grabbed the sudden life-line, and thrust herself back, breaking their contact. "But you don't know me." She swallowed, and inhaled as much air as she could, trying to steady her heartbeat. "I really am sorry Nerys. I told you. Wrong Dax. Even in my universe."

The held that tableau for an eon of heartbeats, and then, the instant after Nerys dipped her head in an acknowledgement that they both knew would never quite, and didn't need to, be an apology, Ezri felt herself embraced from behind, and felt the reassuring touch of a mind against hers. She knew them instantly: Kate and Lwaxana.

Others too appeared. Jadzia and Deanna each took hold of one of Kira's arms, but Kate turned her away before she could see what would happen. "What in the hell am I going to do with you Dax?"

For once, where Kate was concerned, Ezri held back the smart-assed remark, and just said, "Thanks."

Arm in arm, Ezri between them, the three women walked back up the stairs and toward the party. She stopped for a second, remembering to enact the final protocol of the game. "Olley, olley, oxen free!" She'd lost the game, but would gladly take the teasing.

Kate gaped at her, while Lwaxana just looked bemused. Still connected, they returned to the party. Her eyes met Seven's as soon as she stepped into room and she stiffened, expecting disappointment, but finding only love and relief. She sought out Laren and Kathryn, and while she found touches of anger in their gazes, she knew it wasn't directed at her. She saw the fingers, and knew that much was
being said, but also saw the tension leave the speakers. They understood. Maybe even better than she did.

Her normal disposition returning, she turned to Kate. "And, as for what you can do with me. You can dance with me." Then, because she needed it in the worst way, she leaned in against Lwaxana, drinking in the physical contact, even as she spoke words that others would hear as jest. "And you're next."

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"I'm going to kill her."

"Kira or Dax?" Kathryn asked B'Elanna, sharing some of her mate's desire.

"Yes."

T'Pel, with Tuvok in her wake, seemed to glide into place next to them, taking their fingers in her own.

B'Elanna turned and stared at the Vulcan, astonished. "You think this is funny."

"Vulcans do not possess a sense of humour."

Kathryn laughed. "Vulcans might not, but you sure as hell do."

"There is no need to be insulting."

"Oh my god. Did Tuvok teach you that?"

"Kathryn, do not tease the Vulcans." Seven had joined them, wrapping her arms around the smaller woman just because she knew they would both enjoy the contact.

"Alright, I surrender." Besides, it was much more fun to lean her head back and nuzzle along Seven's neck.

"And you may not damage Kira or Ezri Dax." Seven turned and kissed B'Elanna, a not entirely coincidental effect of which was that more of her skin was accessible to Kathryn.

"Who wants to damage Kira and Ezri?" Laren made her presence known, and a wave of welcoming touches rippled through the group.

"B'Elanna, though I believe I may have provided sufficient incentive for her to remain where she is, at least for the time being."

"Oh yeah, I'm incentivized." The Klingon went back to exploring the skin surrounding the implant nestled along Seven's jaw, her lips periodically finding Kathryn's as their territory overlapped.

Lwaxana and Kate melded into the group, and it was Pulaski who spoke. "Seven, do you think you can get the Bride of Chaos over there to take a week off?"

Seven smiled. "She will not comply."

They all looked over at the table where the Trill had taken a seat, a laughing group quickly forming around her. Lwaxana smiled. "And that is as it should be."

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Anger roiled through her mind, tinged with fear and hunger and weary hurt, not all of it physical, and Deanna struggled to sort out what was hers, and what was pouring out of Nerys. Jadzia was a block of calm, and Deanna anchored to that, and used it as her foundation.

Then she felt her mother's touch wrap around her thoughts and help her separate the threads. See her, Deanna. Look deeply, and do not judge her for her hurts. She is as she needed to be.

"Deanna?"

"Yes, my love. I am here." She brought the hand that had been holding Nerys' arm up to cup the Bajoran's cheek, and saw Jadzia do the same. "We are here."

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Point of Update | Bookmarks

Belle was surrounded - by two people. At one point she had been taking a moment, the next she had entered into the Temple scenario again and her Mother and her sister were right there. Miral gazed at Belle so intently that the General suddenly wondered if she'd sprouted an unfortunate marking somewhere on her face. Then her mother had grasped her hand and dragged her away from the facilities, through winding hallways until they were at a private courtyard. B'Elanna followed. The pace was truly brisk, very close to running and Belle wondered what the hurry could possibly be.

Out of her one eye's peripheral vision, she spotted golden hair at a familiar height at one of the portals. That brief glimpse provided only enough detail for her to know it was either Annika or Seven of Nine. Then whoever it might have been was gone.

There was a table and on that table were two objects. Belle felt the hair rise on her neck.

Miral grasped the knife, while B'Elanna picked up the bowl. "Belle Torres," growled the Klingon lightly. "Do you recognize me as your true Mother?"

It was probably the last question Belle would have expected. Oddly, though, she had an answer. "Yes."

Miral continued. "Do you recognize B'Elanna Torres as your true Sister?"

Belle glanced at the other Klingon-Human hybrid in the room. B'Elanna gazed back at her with confidence and quiet expectation. Belle made her decision. "I do."

Miral immediately spoke the Oath of the House, and struck her palm with the knife. Her blood poured into the bowl. Then she and B'Elanna exchanged the tools. B'Elanna also struck the knife through her palm and said the Oath. More blood was captured in the bowl.

Then they handed the knife to Belle. Miral continued to hold the bowl. The Klingon General stared at both of them, then as abruptly as they had, she too struck her palm. She clenched her fist over the bowl, spoke the Oath, and added her essence to the mix.

Her mother reached and clasped her hand, dragged it to her breast. "You will know what it is to be Presban. You will know what it is to be called of Kahless himself. You will treat the gift you receive with respect. Only your Mate and your children and your children's children and those the Epatai approves, may have this gift. It is in the blood. We give to you our blood."

Belle felt a thrill rush through her whole body, then a flood of warmth spread from her palm to her chest and she felt the intensity of her mother's love for her, the intensity of her mother's desire for her
success and joy. Her mother pressed the bowl into B'Elanna's almost free hand, then grabbed the one still bleeding and moved her palm to replace it with B'Elanna's - until Belle's and B'Elanna's blood blended palm to palm.

This time they both felt it, as a heady rush and bond. It was, B'Elanna knew, a different one than the mating bond, but it was true and sang through her. Miral covered their hands with hers and said, "You are true sisters now. Born of my body and my blood. Honor to the House Presba."

The sisters repeated the pledge. "Honor to the House Presba."

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Worf was in Grethor. That damned Trill had him looking at things he shouldn't be looking at all night, and now he was standing next to an oblivious General Torres and her mate; a mate who also happened to be tall and blonde, while they pushed the boundaries of public decency. The couple had shifted so that he would have to ask them to move, or rearrange the furniture next to them. His attempt at quietly leaving was foiled by a chair with a missing leg.

Belle looked up at the noise and slight impact on the wall that she'd been using to support their weight and found an embarrassed Worf trying to recover his decorum. He was the Chancellor, after all, so she let him and didn't make any of the sharp comments she might have otherwise.

"So, how is that increase the size of the House plan coming?" Worf knew he had spoken, he heard the words. He just couldn't believe he'd said them. This was not the way to disengage from the situation.

Belle experienced a moment of mental pause and cast a glance at Annika.

Worf, social equilibrium returned by the suddenly sheepish and shy look on Belle's face, looked at the Warlord expectantly as if to say, 'you can do this as often as you want, but it won't help'.

Belle carefully controlled her tongue; it would not do to slur her speech. "Fine. We were just discussing it. First compatible species male that walks through those doors and who is not of House Martok or one of your guards or already in this room."

She watched, in mounting horror as Lieutenants Paris and Kim, followed by Commander Magnum strolled through the open stone doorway.

Apparently equally aghast, Annika shot a pleading look her way.

Worf frowned as he saw what walked through the door and now was studiously not looking at either of them. "The House Martok would be happy to serve House Presba in this."

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"So, you want to explain to me how you ended up in House Martok in the first place?"

"Would you believe I was the woman behind the man behind the throne?" Ezri was indolently reclining in a chair to one side of the room, determined not to take anymore attention away from Kate and her mates than she already had. At the moment she was watching what seemed to be a rather interesting interaction between Worf, Annika and Belle. And truly, there was no need for her mingle, her table had become an intergalactic hub, everyone seemed to pass though, so she was surprised to find herself alone with B'Elanna.

"Can you be serious, for even a god-damned minute, Dax?"
"So, I should walk around like everything is life and death? I know how fragile it all is, and better than most, so no, I won't, not unless I have to be. Life is too damn short." Ezri shifted in her seat, but didn't take another drink. She'd had enough, and knew it. "As for how I became a member of House Martok, is your wedding day really the time to hear that I succeeded Jadzia in the House after she was brutally murdered while giving thanks to the prophets for helping her conceive a child? Is it a day to know that I can feel that murder when I close my eyes? Is it a day to know that to be deemed a worthy successor - I had to survive torture at the hands of Cardassians? To kill?" She gentled her voice. "Today is not a good day to die, B'Elanna. Go to your new mate and live.

Then she got up and left the table.

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"I have been doing some more research. I was in error with your affectionate designation; you are not a harmless sprite. You are, as Kathryn insists, chaos incarnate."

Ezri looked up to see Seven of Nine, backlit from the hall, standing in the doorway, and her heart nearly stopped. Gone was the formal outfit, replaced by a looser dress that managed to highlight the blonde's beauty, despite its flowing, less restrictive lines.

"Does it help that I'm your personal incarnation of chaos?" The evening had wound down, and she was lounging on her bed, Laren having deposited her there a little while previous with the stern admonition to, "Stay." and a promise to return.

"Marginally." Seven took the sting out of the words by kissing her warmly and with divine skill.

"And what else did your research tell you?"

"That telling you to cease the introduction of chaos to order would be futile.

"Ah. But if there were no chaos, how would you find the perfection?"

Seven leaned in again, and kissed her deeply, setting off trails of passion along Ezri's skin where they were in contact. "I would find it."

"You are Borg."

"I am Borg." Seven agreed, and smiled.

Ezri placed a gentle kiss on Seven's lips, and whispered. "You are perfection."

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Kathryn returned to her quarters quite late. When she left the Holodeck, the party was beginning to wind down, though the scenario would be left open for another twelve hours so all shifts might have a chance to participate. It was good for morale.

She paced through the decks of Voyager, taking time to commune with her ship. It was something she needed to do.

Though she was not in uniform at the moment, her people still reacted to her as captain - if perhaps a mite less formally than usual. It was an ingrained habit, and useful when emergencies set upon them. So she smiled easily at those who immediately pulled themselves to attention and at those who merely nodded their head and greeted her, "Captain."
Chakotay had not come. She couldn't honestly say that she was surprised, but she had hoped, on some level, that friendship would have helped him overcome what was apparently a massive and unnecessary case of jealousy. And, she hoped that she had made the right choice in him as ambassador. She realized she was going to have to talk to him and hope that, whatever was going on in his head, he listened.

Kathryn visited her smaller ships, enjoyed the chirruped and beeped greetings that she had become so familiar with and spoke words of kindness to them. As usual, she found that such dialogs uplifted her. It was similar in sensation to when she used to groom her horse, long ago. Certainly they welcomed her as Captain as much as her crew did.

She started to leave and was surprised to meet Commander Sofuru.

He smiled warmly at her. "Captain. It is good to see you."

She laughed lightly, "As if you hadn't just seen me an hour ago."

He inclined his head. "Well, still. It is always a pleasure. And, may I say, my people are truly gratified to see the Prime increase."

She replied warmly, "Thank you, Sofuru."

"You will have your other mate soon, do you think?"

Kathryn's eyebrows rose, but she was not hasty in answering. She opted for honesty with the Zakeeri commander, because she knew it was important to him. She said, "We are working on it, but there are complications having to do with House business."

Sofuru pursed his lips, and scratched his chin a bit. "If House business needs help moving along, please feel free to call upon my clan. It will be more felicitous for us all when Voyager's Primes are complete."

Kathryn could not help the smile. "I will tell our Epatai of your generous offer."

Now Sofuru grinned outright. "Good."

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Bed was a comforting thought, but even upon entering the family quarters, Kathryn wasn't quite ready to sleep. She worried about her mother, worried about the crew that would be left behind, worried about the choices that had to be made. The wonder of it all was that, so far, their plan had worked and surpassed all their expectations. It still amazed her.

She wasn't exactly hungry either, but there was always something in the kitchen to enjoy these days. It was another side benefit ... of family.

That she had family still took her breath away.

She made a selection from one of the sealed containers - a brownie of small, but luscious proportions. It was enough for a bite or three, but nothing that would cramp her style. She opted for a small glass of milk, something to wash down the brownie and made her way slowly to the lift. A little snack, some light reading and then...

The lift hummed softly on the way up. She could see the pathway to the adults' rooms. The light was low, as it was, technically ship's night. There was enough to avoid a stumble.
She knew, as the lift drew nearer to its destination, that two of her mates had also entered the Family Quarters. They had taken the other entrance. She smiled, anticipating a warm greeting.

The lift stopped, and she stepped out. "Seven, B'Elanna." She couldn't quite help the purr that entered her voice.

Seven of Nine grasped her elbow and drew her in for a tender kiss. "Kathryn." Then, B'Elanna reflected that movement and the kiss and the sultry greeting.

It was a moment of whimsy. "Care for a bite?" She was holding the brownie between her fingers and her thumb.

She felt B'Elanna's grin, saw the sharp white of her teeth in the darkness. "Yes." The Klingon grasped Kathryn's hand and led her, until she had snapped a bit of the brownie. She hummed appreciatively. Then, without letting go of her hand, she acted as guide again. This time to Seven, who delicately participated in the unintended ritual.

"Gretchen." The single word held a great deal of applause.

"Really," said B'Elanna. "I thought it was Icheb's."

"No."

"Hmm."

B'Elanna still hadn't let go of Kathryn's hand and there was some left. Nimble fingers retrieved the tiny amount that was left. Kathryn opened her mouth to receive the moist treat. Seven's fingers lingered in her mouth and drew out slowly.

Kathryn closed her eyes, enjoying the taste, and the erotic thrill that had pulsed through her at that moment.

"Do not go to bed alone tonight, Kathryn." Seven said. It wasn't quite a command, nor was it a request.

Kathryn gazed at her mates and shook her head. "Can't hide anything any more."

B'Elanna's wrapped an arm around her waist. "Is that a bad thing?"

Kathryn chuckled and said, "No. But... let's at least finish the milk first."

B'Elanna said, kissing her, "You first."

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There had been times when Kathryn wished there was a command code she could utter that would whisk her mate's clothes off. Seven's rather forthright manner of clothing deletion - breathtaking as it was - was equally efficient. Upon entering Seven's room, the Mates found themselves quickly divested of any inhibiting factor to skin upon skin contact.

Not that Kathryn had much time to honestly contemplate the humor of the situation. She was occupied. She loved touching her mates and loved being touched by them. They stood together, like the three graces, drinking in the taste of one another and reveling that they could.

It was not a conscious decision to move, but desire had its own pace. Seven pulled back from that communal embrace, and holding her mate's hands she led them to the bed. There she sat down,
pulling them down beside her. There was a constant burr of sensuous noise, pleasure reflected between them.

Seven nuzzled Kathryn's neck, scented the line of her pulse. For weeks she had experienced an impulse, which she had studiously ignored. But now memory of Kate's aroused transformation sang within and blurred the line for her. A part of her mind said it would be redundant. They were mates already. Claimed of one another already.

She held back, making the choice to deepen her touch instead. She poured desire into her fingertips, her love and want. That inspired delicate, responsive sounds from her mates, which stirred her further. It was, she had decided sometime ago, an art more than a science, but one well worth pursuing.

They lay upon the bed, organizing themselves with deliberate motions that placed Kathryn in the middle and Seven and B'Elanna to opposite sides. Again kisses flowed between them, and then touches and they lost themselves to the mutual sensation as they stroked and pulled erotic fire into being.

Kathryn, being where she was, opened for them. It wasn't a race, but Seven was there first, and this time she did follow impulse and rather than merely pleasure her mate, she plunged fingertips into the already receptive space. Kathryn gasped and raised her hips. And B'Elanna placed her mouth on her, exactly knowing where and how. So they were both there and Kathryn had to hold to them or fall.

Seven purred into the kisses she delivered to her mate, while Kathryn bucked softly against her hand and B'Elanna's sensual ministration. Kathryn purred back, growled back softly - unable to help the hungry noises that accompanied her usual delightfully lewd responses.

Seven whispered against her mate, "Do you want more, Kathryn?"

"Yes," Kathryn hissed in need.

Seven dared. She sent her hidden desire along their line - that hungry urge that had been with her so long. She felt Kathryn's body respond, from fingernails that pressed deeply into her skin to the deeper answer within that slid through them hotly. B'Elanna was there also, agreeing, needing. Kathryn's other hand was pressed between B'Elanna's legs, stirring that liquid fire.

Seven's breath and kisses buzzed desire down Kathryn's neck and shoulder as she searched for that place that sang to her most. She continued to press in, knew that both Kathryn and B'Elanna were close.

Then she felt it, scented it, there. Under Kathryn's skin, like it always was. The purr in Seven deepened. She licked the spot first. And Kathryn lifted towards her. Then, teasingly, Seven brushed her teeth against her mate. It was a warning and a signal. Kathryn knew what was to come.

Kathryn made her invitation, "Do it!"

The color of Seven's eye deepened, closed in on midnight and violet. The lights strobing around her body pulsed, revealing that desire in infinite pattern. Seven growled, and then she bit, quickly, and deeply.

Kathryn cried out, arched up into, rather than back from the bite. Pleasure and pain, quickly dissolved into one another. She came, suddenly and provocatively.

Seven drew in the heated liquid of her mate and felt knowledge stir along her tongue and through her own body. Warm and hot... and transforming. She knew immediately, that this was what she had
been seeking. The bond increased, confirmed itself in her. It flew through her like warm fire and she kissed her mate immediately after, hungry for the taste. Even as the waves of orgasm crashed through them all. More, she knew her other mates, ones not even involved in the moment, had felt it. Had understood the implications immediately, had arrived with them in whatever state of consciousness they had been in. "Mate."

"Yes." Kathryn was still in a state of the cascade and yet knew to whom she was speaking.

"You must conclude the ritual." It was a growled command. A knowing flowed through them, carried on their line. It was understood.

Kathryn lifted to where Seven offered herself and searched, but only just long enough. She gripped Seven's shoulders, while B'Elanna moved, placed her hand in that most intimate space, traced her tongue along those sensitive nodes and implanted lines on Seven's skin. Thus they were all connected at that moment, with Seven still inside Kathryn and B'Elanna inside Seven.

The red-head found her spot, the one that pulled her, and summoned. She buzzed desire against that spot. Then, quick as lightning she bit. Seven's blood washed over her tongue, and she knew that hot warmth. Like her mate, knowledge of their truth spiraled through her. And Seven sang out in pleasure, thrusting them all through that expanding golden pathway.

As they were released from the tower of pleasure, they kissed in lusty abandon.

It was Borg discipline that allowed her to pull back. "We must test the theory." She reached, drew B'Elanna in. "If it is true, then we are already blended, you and I. We will know."

"Yes," agreed her mates. All of them.

They looked at each other in feral wonder, and then kissed deeply. They knelt upon the bed, pressed against one another, while Kathryn made passage between them, licking and pressing into sensitive folds. It made it wonderfully hard to concentrate.

Then, as if they'd consciously agreed on the timing, they bit into one another. The rush of blood swelled into their tongues. It was pleasurable, but different. It was its own rush, but different than that first golden rush. It was... confirmation - a solid Yes. This is your mate. Pleasure rolled through all of them - acknowledgment pulsed through them in delightful waves, taking them higher until they fell completely into one another.
Chapter 29

Chapter by bearblue

She knew she looked good in leather. She just hated wearing it. But unfortunately, what she had to do couldn't be done in a white, silk slip-dress or any of the other outfits she'd acquired, or been gifted with, since boarding Voyager.

Couldn't even be done in a comfortable, anonymous Starfleet uniform. Those were no longer worn on this ship.

The replicator finished its task and spit out the last of the heavy quilted leather pieces she'd requested, and she put it on, carefully fastening the toggles and lacing the sleeves shut. From her nightstand, she picked up her darq’targ and secured it to her hip, hilt markings outward, displaying her House.

From the back of the chair next to the bed, she took the voluminous cloak and deftly settled it over her shoulders.

A kid playing dress-up.

They all were. And now it was time to end the fantasy.

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Chakotay entered the Ready Room. He had taken to wearing civilian clothes, perhaps a bit earlier than he had to. But he was trying to be as graceful as he could, given the circumstances. Kathryn glanced up from the PADD as soon as he entered and she smiled warmly at him, as if nothing was different.

He smiled back. Maybe not as warmly as he used to, but still gamely.

"Thank you for coming Ambassador. I do appreciate it." Kathryn's attention turned from him for a moment. He watched as even her professional mask took on extra warmth. "Lieutenant Ro, you're excused. Please come back in an hour."

There was a polite reply and then, in moments, it was just the two of them.

Kathryn leaned back in her chair, her gaze softened by the relaxed attitude she took. "We missed you," she said.

It was just like her to cut to the heart of the matter. He had hoped that perhaps they had been so involved with each other they hadn't noticed. At the same time, he knew the thought was unworthy of him and of them. Which was his whole reason for not attending.

He lied. "Unfortunately, I was needed elsewhere." It was not his best obfuscation. But she merely nodded her head, accepting what he said.

Perhaps not believing it.

"I see." She gave him a long look and then said, "I need to know Chakotay, will... you be able to fulfill your function as our Universe's ambassador?"

He knew what she was really asking. Was he going to let his emotions get in the way of their survival? Of keeping their Universe safe by keeping the good will flowing?
His jaw firmed and his gaze steadied. Whatever he was, he was still her friend. "I will."

Her shoulders dropped a little as again, she accepted what he said. And he felt a lightening in his own chest. As per usual, she got right onto business. Friendly chit chat would happen after, and wherever it led, it led. "Well, I have a few assignments for you then. First, will be your transfer. Miral had a ship, which will now become yours..."

"How does that feel?"

There was a pause and a flash of light. "Much better. Thank you, B'Elanna."

B'Elanna felt her forehead ridges lift in shock. "Are you speaking in Klingon?"

"Yes." A soft burr sounded in the air, as though the ship were thinking. Then Voyager spoke again. B'Elanna didn't understand a word of it. Mostly. She caught the only word that mattered. Dax.

B'Elanna threw her Bat'leth, but took no satisfaction from the way it embedded itself into the wall.

"Is that how a warrior cares for their weapon?"

She started. Deep into her anger, she hadn't heard the Holodeck doors open. All of her practiced words deserted her as a fresh wash of rage hit as Ezri Dax strode to the wall and wrenched the weapon out. "What the hell do you think you are doing barging in here? And what the hell do you think you are playing at locking me out the controls of my own ship?"

"You wanted serious, Epatai Torres. Here it is."

It was then that B'Elanna registered that Dax wasn't wearing one of the Voyager uniforms. She was in full Klingon regalia, House and rank prominently displayed. But she didn't take the hint that she should be cautious, she was still too tied up in knots of anger. "You plan to challenge me with that?"

"No." Ezri's eyes had lightened, and become so pale, that she suddenly looked like the alien she was. "But someone soon will, either from deliberate insult or your ignorance."

B'Elanna clenched both hands to her sides. "If it were not for Seven and Ich--"

Ezri cut her off. "If it were not for Seven. For all of you. I would not be here. Do you want to yell at me some more or are you going to listen?"

"Why should I listen to you?"

Really, she should have known that it would go this way. She knew the engineer was volatile, and had, in point of fact, provoked that anger by altering the language protocols. Ezri just hadn't expected that the Klingon would stay quite so angry, quite so long. So, she sighed, marshaled her arguments and explained. In High Klingon. And then again in the vernacular of Qo'Nos.

Her blood thundered through her ears, and she realized it was a very good thing that Ezri had the Bat'leth. "In. Standard." She wondered if you could break your own jaw by grinding your teeth.

Ezri chose to drop the level of confrontation she'd been projecting. "B'Elanna, you've done a great job so far. You all have. But you are at the limit of what you can accomplish without some help. I'm
offering that help."

"I don't need help from a --"

Ezri stepped forward and barked her next words out at the same time. "Do not finish that sentence." She knew that B'Elanna could rip her limb from limb if she chose. All the Presbans could. "You are not my Epatai, and my House is that of the Chancellor." Ezri kept their ranks out of it, even though she held the leverage there too. "Too serious for you Klingon?"

B'Elanna only growled. Granted it sent shivers up her spine, and seemed to rumble through the duranium of her ribs, making her heartbeat spike, but it was a more measured response than the blow she'd been half expecting.

"You run a Klingon house and you don't speak Klingon, you have no idea what the politics of the Empire are, and you look vaguely down your nose at all of it."

She could see B'Elanna weighing her words, and she waited calmly.

"I'm listening."

"No one in your house other than Seven speaks Klingon, and even she only knows what the Collective kept. There are places you will be and things that you will need to do where you will have to speak it. Sirella will not speak to you in Federation Standard." Ezri paused to see how her words were being received. "You need to learn."

"Fine. Now turn the goddamn translator back on."

"No. While you are fixing our engines and keeping us from blowing up, you will have access to normal communications. If it is just you and Voyager, and the matter is routine, the first communication will be in Klingon, and then you may request a translation. Voyager will help you." She paused again. "I will help you."

"Goddamn it, Dax!"

Ezri ignored the outburst. "Knowledge is power B'Elanna. Take your power. Or not." She turned and left.

For the second time in as many days, B'Elanna was left flat-footed and the Trill was gone before she realized that she'd let her have the last word again.

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Nerys stood at the dock and watched through the Port window as the Betazoid ship disengaged and took off. She leaned against Jadzia, needing the haven of her arms and suddenly glad that this Dax, was here. They had loved her well and she found refuge in loving them in return, but there was a sense of things unfinished between them. Perhaps because they had known this time would come.

There were obligations that each of them had to fulfill, before they could even begin to think about anything deeper.

They loved her.

The confirmation had been in Deanna's mental touch, which had soothed - if not completely
removed - the wounds in Nerys for a time. They loved her - as herself. Not as Intendant. Not as a Power.

Just as Nerys.

It was a nice change.

But what was she going to do with it?

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This time it was Kasala and Tasha who were at the dock. The hugs and farewells were still being said and Tasha unabashedly wept as she hugged her beloved daughter to her. "We will see you again."

It was, perhaps, not a promise that could be kept, but it was a hopeful expectation. Certainly the crew on Voyager believed enough, trusted enough in their Captain that a substantial amount had volunteered to stay in this new Universe. Some of that could be attributed to House honor, but much of it was just the valiant nature of the crew. They were a different people, these Voyagers. They would fit in well at Romulus. Some, in fact, would be going with Sela to the Home planet, to act as witnesses to her message and then as valuable resources in the preparation to come.

Sela hugged her mother, unembarrassed by the tears and actually gratified. "I know, Mother."

Her father said, without parting them, "You bring Honor to our House, my daughter. You have my blessing, should you need it." It was an oblique promise, based on a short amount of observation.

Sela pulled away from her mother, a slight blush on her cheek. She didn't say it all depended on whether a certain person stayed or not. She merely said, "Thank you, Father. I will see to it that what is ours, stays ours."

They clasped hands, then let go and saluted one another. Their hug, again, had happened in private.

Tasha, who was much more stoic in normal circumstances, wiped her tears away quickly and gave her daughter a watery smile. "Be well, Sela. I love you."

"And I, you, my parents. Fare well."

She turned from them, waved to those who would be accompanying her. They picked up their belongings, and soon, they were up the ramp and gone.

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It was quite the sight, Ylfians, Kazon, Klingons, Humans, Orions and other humanoids from Voyager gathered at the docking station where the Tor'stag was stationed. They awaited their Warlord with their banner unfurled. Their equipment had already been transferred to the vessel. The non-marines would come later, after a special away mission had been attempted. It was a Kazon, now Commander Vah, who made the announcement, "Marines! Attenhut!"

The strike force stiffened to attention as General Torres appeared. They stayed in position as she began to pass, and then stopped to look the group up and down. She nodded her head. "You'll do. Follow me."

They would to death and beyond.
It already felt thinner in the corridors, as the crew began shaking down for their new missions. Some had already shipped off and some were prepping for their turn. Commander Nael would soon be among them. She had finally, after much careful thought arrived at a decision. She carried in her hand a PADD filled with her recommendations for her department.

Orsas, she felt would be a competent leader, but it would depend on if she decided to take a commission. If not, then the next possible best choice would be Inan, which, if she refused would then lead to Ensign Tald, another Betazoid who had joined the department after it had been formed. At least this time the Captain had some valid choices.

The Betazoid would miss the friends she had made on the ship, but she was confident that she was leaving it in better condition. They would carry on, and if they made it back to the Alpha Quadrant as planned, they would get their counselor. It would work out.

And she had reasons, aside from a romantic interest, to stay. She was needed here. The new ideas for Truth Seekers were still fledgling. Deanna Troi would need someone reliable, someone she could trust and of the House, to see to it that the new rules were input and followed. And they needed a counseling school here. Desperately. This universe was literally filled with the walking wounded. And she could not abandon it.

So.

She made her way to the Captain’s Ready Room determined to make that difference.

The Primes agreed to set aside any more experiments in bonding until after the trek to the wormhole. Their reasons were practical. First, they wanted to spend decent time in the exploration. Second, they did not wish to be distracted by the mating fire this close to the event horizon. Finally, it gave Kate a chance to develop some real tests that could be run during the process. They believed that it was probable that such knowledge would be valuable in the future.

Kate moved into her quarters, and with the help of Borg and engineering expertise it was soon set up and personalized. It was, perhaps, not as sumptuous as Lwaxana's or Seven's, but it suited the practical woman quite well. And, her one frivolous addition, gave her quiet chuckles. The fountain she had installed, had a series of strobing lights that could be turned on and off at will. It was a small, private joke - which, no doubt, her mates would get when they observed it. But for now, it was hers. She knew she would be happy in her quarters, with or without company.

Not that, lately, she had much opportunity to sleep alone. The long drought of solitude was over and her well was running over - for which she was truly grateful. Nor, did she find that her mates were overly intrusive.

It was perhaps a side benefit of the bond, they knew where to find each other if they needed one another. Thus privacy could be and was respected.

On the other hand, she loved that her mates were explorers in more ways than one. When Seven had introduced her to that wondrous box of toys, she knew that she had met her match. When Kathryn had applied one of those toys, she knew that she must have died and gone to heaven. Or wherever it is that hedonists go.

Whatever the cause, she was happier than she had been in a long, long time.
There was only one thing, or rather... one person... missing. But that, Seven of Nine assured her, would be resolved. Eventually.

As she had learned upon becoming a Prime, her mates had learned the art of patience and endurance - at least in the important things.

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Laren laughed, then seeing Kathryn's arched brow and a considerable fraction of a force ten glare directed her way, stopped.

"You're laughing. You think it's funny?"

"You don't? Come on Kathryn, it is funny, and you know it."

"It won't be funny when B'Elanna pitches her out an airlock."

She couldn't help it, the laugh burst back out and she went with it. "And that's why it's so funny. Deja vu, all over again." Laren shifted to let more air into her aching lungs. "If you don't get that damned Borg out of my engine room, I swear to Kahless, I'll space her."

Even as Laren was speaking, a dozen more examples flitted across her memory, and it was funny. She and Laren ended up slumped against one another. Just as she thought the last spate was ending, another would grip them.

"You realize that to space Ezri, she'd have to learn to do it in Klingon."

Janeway took a breath to even her tone. "Would Ezri count that as a victory or a loss?"

"Victory."

"She baffles me, Laren." Kathryn gave her wry half-smile that she used when acknowledging a truth she wasn't happy about. "Fascinates me too."

"I get the fascination part. Totally get the fascination part, but what baffles you?"

"She's just so...random."

Laren smiled, and then asked, "Do you know what Seven calls Ezri's Trill spots?"

Kathryn stared into space trying to recall if she had ever heard Seven mention them. "No. I don't, actually."

"She calls them Turing Structures."

"Like tiger stripes?"

Laren was reminded just how formidable an intellect Kathryn had. She had had to ask Seven to define the term for her, twice. "Basically." She altered her tack. "You take a bunch of inhomogeneities, a variety of diffusion rates, and some initial conditions, and presto: Turing Structures. Chaos in, order out."

Kathryn laughed, and Laren flashed her teeth in a small grin. She loved the low husky laugh that meant her mate was truly relaxed, and wondered if Kathryn would actually say what Laren knew she was thinking. She was not disappointed. "You're saying our Trill can't change her spots."
"Umm, and that we wouldn't want her too." Laren had been growing increasingly aware of the way the length of their bodies was pressed together, and decided to make a bad joke of her own. By way of aid, she leaned in slightly and kissed a line of freckles that dusted the red-head's skin. "Speaking of Turing Structures..."

Kathryn didn't hesitate. "Computer, seal ready room, authorization Janeway rho."

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A plate of banana pancakes appeared on the desk in front of her. B'Elanna looked up, realizing that she must have been preoccupied indeed not to have been aware of her approaching mate.

"I hear it's been a tough day."

"You could say that." She dug into food. The replicators had stopped responding to anything other than Klingon, and she'd given up; one could only drink so much Raktajino, and she hated Gagh. She could have asked Voyager for help, but she wasn't on speaking terms with the ship. "Mmm. These are good."

"Thank you." Lwaxana dipped her finger in some of the surplus syrup, and then slowly licked it off. "I used to make chocolate ones for Deanna. Then she graduated to ice cream. If I thought things were serious enough, I'd put chocolate ice cream on the pancakes."

Caught in lascivious thoughts of Lwaxana's fingers it took a second to actually get the meaning of what had been said. "So I rate the medium serious?"

Lwaxana swirled her finger through the syrup, but this time she offered her finger to B'Elanna, who raised an eyebrow, but intently and thoroughly removed every trace of the confection. "I think you rate a reminder." Another trip through the syrup, and another offering.

"Of what?" B'Elanna ran her index and middle fingers through the syrup, and brushed them across Lwaxana's lips.

"That you are not alone." Lwaxana's eyes were onyx points of fire, and she growled lightly as she ran her tongue along the space between her mate's fingers. "jIH dok."

"maj dok."

"Tlinghan jIH." Maybe, thought B'Elanna as they spoke the final words together, learning Klingon wouldn't be so bad after all. Now if she could just remember enough of it to seal her office doors.

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Fed and loved and feeling the warm reassurance that she could, in fact, go on, B'Elanna went back to work in better spirits. The rest of her shift passed - perhaps complicated by the occasional language choice - but it did pass. She finally went home to the Family Quarters.

It was fortunate, she thought, that they did not have to identify themselves at the door, or she would have been locked out of her own home. She was halfway afraid that someone changed the protocols. But, as she stepped forwards, the doors slid open.

B'Elanna stepped through. What surprised her was the sense that she had been battling all day. True, her muscles weren't aching, but she had - again - a headache. It had dissipated with Lwaxana's tender and exciting ministrations. But now it was back and the crankiness that came with the small pains was with her.
She was greeted immediately by Mezoti, "Sos!" Her daughter then took her hand and proceeded to take her further into the family abode. Greetings flew at her from various locations in the room - in Klingon.

She was given a reprieve. Of a sort. Kate walked up to her, and without speaking, kissed her. Then she stepped back. "I've been given leave to warn you. Your kids are going to speak to you in Klingon. Your mates are going to speak to you in whatever fashion they feel like, but it's likely to be Klingon, if they can manage it. Your furniture is going to speak to you in Klingon. The only way that will stop is if you can persuade the boys that you've learned the names. This PADD that I'm about to hand you is the only one that will have standard text and audio, but it will only act as a Klingon to Standard dictionary. Good luck."

There was a hiss of a hypospray against B'Elanna's neck. The tension headache faded away into nothing. Kate leaned forward and whispered. "Love you."

"Love you too." The kiss that came with medication was a soothing balm of its own and she rested in it. Then one of the voices she'd most longed to hear all day, echoed gently in her mind. B'Elanna. Bangwi. She looked around.

Kate spoke again, softly. "She's waiting for you upstairs."

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The flickering of light through the open bedroom door gave visual truth to her need. She was expected. She imagined the length of Seven spread over the sheets, skin made molten gold under the candlelight she knew to be filling the room. Her heartbeats were in tandem, both hearts pounding in anticipation.

As aroused as she was, it spiked still further as she crossed the threshold. Seven stood, white silk dress falling over her body, the sheerness of the fabric offering tantalizing glimpses of the perfection held within. B'Elanna ached, every nerve and inch of her wanted to touch Seven.

"Come to me, B'Elanna." Seven whispered, but the words retained the hypnotic force of command, and B'Elanna obeyed. "Come to me. To us."

Ezri took a half step forward, appearing from behind Seven, and B'Elanna's breath caught in her throat. The crimson silk flowed over the Trill, curlicues of spots danced in and out of sight. Her eyes had gone purple in the light, and for the first time B'Elanna saw desire in them, desire for her. She tried to drink it all in, what she saw, what she felt, what she could smell weaving around them.

They were Ice and Fire. Powerful, primitive and primal. They were hers and she theirs.

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Panting, trying to recover her breath, B'Elanna was struck by how bizarre a day it had been. One that she would never have predicted to have this particular ending.

"Bangwi?"

She kissed Seven's shoulder; the blonde was nestled against her side leaving her shoulders and neck exposed to further caress. "Just thinking." Wrapped around her from behind, was the object of her musings, and she was enjoying the lazy way Ezri was digging a thumb into her hip, rotating it just enough to not be arousing. This morning, and for most of the day, she had wanted nothing more than to tackle the Trill and pound her into submission. "Ezri." She growled the name out, not in anger this time, but in genuine affection.
"Yes, B'Elanna?"

B'Elanna turned slightly, bringing Seven with her, until they could both see the faintly grinning Trill. "You've been picking fights with me on purpose." The sudden jump to bright blue in Ezri's eyes, confirmed her suspicions.

"It seemed...efficient."

Seven smiled, and kissed B'Elanna, then Ezri.

"I was ready to actually kill you today. Not sure how efficient that would have been then."

Ezri laughed and leaned down, kissing her forehead ridges, one by one, before diving lower to capture her bottom lip between even, white teeth, then releasing it. "So I just should have thrown plates?"
They gathered at Stinging Sparrow's wing. Commander Sofuru gave the run down one more time, just to be sure that the emergency processes were understood. Then they entered the living ship and took their positions. It was obvious, to those who knew, that Stinging Sparrow had gone through some mighty alterations to make room for everyone and still have space for her passengers to comfortably move around and transport objects as necessary.

Commander Sofuru naturally took Navigation, while Seven of Nine inhabited the science station. Lieutenant Ro manned the weapons and shields station and Lieutenant Paris was stationed near the small medical bay. Lieutenant General Sela and Intendant Kira took observation stations on one side of the ship. Shaman Orsas and Commander Dax took the observation stations on the other side. Dax held a sacred object, on which hinged their hope for peaceful contact with the inhabitants of the wormhole. Captain Janeway was stationed besides Commander Sofuru, which meant she had a great view if they had a successful trip or a terrible one if things went wrong.

On the Captain's nod, Stinging Sparrow began her brave journey and they left the safe harbor of Voyager.

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The competition to see who could get through the wormhole had been canceled due to the problem of the Dominion. Tourist would still visit in droves, because Terok Nor and Bajor had become a politically important and popular site. But it would not quite be the same. Quark, however, had already set up small signs and monuments at locations he thought would be touristy enough to attract business. The signs claimed things like, "Seven of Nine sat here," on them. Usually over a small, but near to the gambling, table.

Despite the cancellation of the competition, there were still ships that had some interest in trying to traverse the wormhole besides the Stinging Sparrow. They waited in a choppy line for the event to begin.

It started like it always did; an empty place that suddenly, inexplicably, opened. The ships around Stinging Sparrow shot forward. Commander Sofuru waited. Intendant Kira had provided some records of the average time it took before a ship was returned, somewhat jumbled, to Bajoran Space. Seven tracked the current crop of ships and tallied their time.

Exactly five minutes after leaving, the first ship was tossed out of the wormhole. It was quickly followed by the other ships in succession. Seven of Nine marked the time for each of them, then announced it. Save for her words, the interior of the Stinging Sparrow had been remarkably quiet.

Captain Janeway looked back at her crew and their guests. "Are you ready?" There were spoken acknowledgments through the cabin. She turned to Commander Sofuru. "Alright Commander, let's go see what's on the inside."

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It was a much brighter corridor than might have been expected on the outside. Blue and white and all kinds of light marked the path that they followed. There was a sensation of flowing and the ship somehow seemed faster and at the same time longer. It was, in its own way, quite exhilarating.
At a preplanned point, Stinging Sparrow slid to a floating stop. Essentially, she was able to keep moving, but she did not go further into the event. Commander Sofuru turned and looked at the Captain. "We are here."

Kathryn quirked a grin at him. "So it seems." She swiveled her seat so that she was facing the others. "It's time. Commander Dax, I think this may be your game now. Remember, everyone, do not look into the Orb. Or you may not be coming back with us."

Ezri blinked lightly and nodded. The just-in-case conversations had happened earlier, so she felt somewhat comfortable being the one to do this. She most carefully kept her eyes above the box that held the Orb and then realized that she was looking at Seven, who gazed back evenly, lovingly. The Trill sighed and then opened the sacred vessel.

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The strange thing about the Orb, given that its purpose was to transfer persons from one Universe to another, was that it had exactly zero chronotrons. But it did shine brightly. That same white blue that streamed outside of the ship, now streamed within and no one looked at it. They looked at each other; they looked at their work panel. They looked outside. Or they closed their eyes, but they most carefully avoided glancing at it.

Ezri counted ten, then twenty, thirty and then forty. At sixty, she closed the box. They all looked around and were gratified to see that no one had arbitrarily disappeared. Seven of Nine, however, counted out the time that they had been within the wormhole. "Ten Minutes."

Kathryn quirked another grin. "Well, we've beat the average. The question is -- is it a good sign?"

No one hastened to fill in the silence that followed her question. Suddenly there was a chirrup and a surprised burble from Stinging Sparrow that echoed through the cabin. Then there was light.

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It brightened considerably, until it seemed that all around them was white. It was an impressively bright haze, but no one actually felt blinded though their vision of each other faded or changed. The Prime in Stinging Sparrow still felt each other along their line and even outside of the wormhole. They were together and that was what mattered to them.

There was a sense of timelessness... and a sense of surprise. An echo, which sounded through the ship, somehow combined of Stinging Sparrows normal noises, "Who visits us?"

It had been agreed that should the question be asked, there was only one who would answer it first. Nerys kept her silent, briefly, but she forced air through her lungs somehow. "I am ... Intendant Kira Nerys of Bajor."

"Bajor, Bajor, Bajor..." echoed in the cabin of the ship. Then the being or beings said, "We.... Are of Bajor."

Nerys really wished she could see the others. She also hoped that they could hear her. "I come on behalf of the Chancellor of the Klingon Empire, of which Bajor is a member. We have.... Have a need." The words came out of her mouth changed. That had not been what she was going to say. But it did not change that it was true.

"What does Bajor need?" The word need seemed to extend into eternity. And Kira suddenly found herself speechless with longing. Bajor needed so many things...
But she had to focus. "The crew of this ship is composed of beings from two Universes. Captain Janeway has informed us that there is danger on the other side of this Wormhole that we are not yet ready to face. The Dominion, a race of Changelings, seeks domination of the whole galaxy. In their Universe and in ours..."

"Two Universes?" Again there was that sense of infinity in the question.

Kira knew that if she answered that question, she would be distracted, but these were beings capable of crushing ships. She answered. "Yes. We call them Universe Alpha and Beta. That is ... That is why we brought the Orb. Because it has been used by some to make the journey."

"Captain Janeway?"

Kira wasn't sure how to answer that.

But Kathryn heard the question, interpreted it the best she could for herself and tried to answer. "I and my mates and my crew are from Universe Alpha. We came to this Universe in our Starship, Voyager - a living ship like this one - via a Trans Universal Engine. In our Universe, Bajor is an independent system, but has had regular contact with the Prophets. In this Universe, they had never heard of you, until Nerys visited Nerys, via the Orb."

The cabin filled abruptly with the sparkle of blue lights. They danced around the cabin of Stinging Sparrow, and suddenly everyone could see each other again. There was somewhat of a communal sigh of relief.

"Temporal Beings."

"Yes, we are."

"Yet you travel the dimensions. Like the Sisko."

Kathryn Janeway had no way of knowing if Benjamin Sisko existed in this Universe or not. But he did in hers. "Like Captain Sisko yes. In our Universe he was the Emissary."

"Emissary... Emissary... Emissary...."

The blue lights danced right back out of the cabin of the ship, leaving them in the brightness of the white light. Only now, it seemed their eyes were used to it.

Then, there was a shimmer in the middle of the cabin and a figure began to appear. He was tall, dark-skinned, with a smooth scalp and convincing black goatee. He was wearing an old Starfleet Uniform and he smiled when he saw Ezri. "Greetings, Old Man."

A thousands thoughts chased a million words, but she could put none of it to speech. He knew Dax, Curzon, and Jadzia. He knew her for herself, and for all the parts that made her. And then she knew, the Truth of it suddenly in her mind.

"Hello, Ben. Its time to come home."

For an instant she thought he might refuse, or that she had misunderstood what the Truth had meant. He looked at her intently, and then nodded. "It is."

And then she reacted in a way that she knew was purely hers - she wrapped her arms around Ben
and hugged him as tightly as she could. "Yes, yes, it is."

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The brightness began to fade until their place in the wormhole was once more visible to them. Stinging Sparrow made a questioning chirrup. Commander Sofuru turned to the Captain. "Stinging Sparrow reports that the entities have dispersed. Are the negotiations complete?"

Captain Janeway, glanced at the Commander and then at Benjamin Sisko. "I don't know."

The tall man turned. He looked slightly dazed, but present. "My people...The Prophets... desire further contact with Universe Beta. The Wormhole will remain open, but they will not allow the Dominion access to Bajor at this time." He looked at the Intendant as she sighed in relief. Then he continued. "However, Bajor ... and the Klingon Empire... must grow. To do that, they will eventually have to face the threat."

Nerys grimaced. She reached out and grasped his sleeve. "But we'll have time, right? Time to prepare."

He gazed at the familiar face, remembered a time when he had met this Universe's Kira. The woman had changed, though she might not have known it. He smiled at her, his expression gentle. "There will be time," he reassured the Bajoran. Then he turned to Captain Janeway. "And there will be help. But first, we must make a journey. Captain Janeway, we need to go to the Gamma Quadrant."

The Captain contemplated the statement and decided to take it at face value. "In this ship or in Voyager."

The Emissary smiled. "Stinging Sparrow will be fine. But it will be a little crowded when we come back."

"The more the merrier."

Sisko smiled pleasantly at the Captain, but cast a glance at Ezri and tilted his head a touch. "So it seems."

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The trip through the wormhole was without further incident. They slid through the path as if it had always been open to travelers. Stinging Sparrow had to resist the urge to play with the lights that followed in her wake. She did sing to them though, these bright blue strangers that spoke so kindly to her. They found the little ship fascinating and reluctantly said farewell as she passed into the other Quadrant.

Nerys was a little disappointed by the fact that there weren't War ships immediately on the other side, but of course there wouldn't have been. The Dominion might have been in contact with the Orion Syndicate, but the Syndicate would not have known about these plans. Nor, she suspected, would Sisko have had them travel out into danger.

Sisko led them to a small moon at a minor planet that was not very far away. It held atmosphere and was completely devoid, at least according to the sensors, of intelligent humanoid life. Stinging Sparrow landed at a point that Sisko designated. Then he turned to Ezri. "Old Man, I need the Orb."

Of course, they were all mystified at what he was trying to accomplish, but no one gainsaid him.

He then said, "I'll need to exit the ship. But you must all stay in it. Don't come out, no matter what
you see. You are going to have to trust me."

Seven of Nine said, "If we did not trust you, we would not be here."

The ex-captain of DS9 couldn't help the grin. "That is good to know." Then he went to Stinging Sparrow's exit - automatically finding it, without having to have it explained. "Captain, if you would?"

Moments later he was out of the ship and Stinging Sparrow was secured.

Seven of Nine took that moment, while they were among friends to say to Ezri, "Old man? You seem to have a collection of inaccurate affectionate designations."

The Trill grinned at the comment, but did not reply. But she did move. "I hope you don't mind if I crowd you." Ezri said, as she crouched over by Nerys. "But I just gotta see this."

"You and me both." There was something in the way Nerys replied that was both familiar and reassuring. Whatever it was between them, they would work it out.

Lieutenant General Sela scooted over, allowing the interested Shaman a chance to look. Orsas peered out the window and watched as Sisko set the boxed Orb on the ground. She commented, "That is a spiritually powerful man."

He left the box alone for the moment and then walked around it, as if plotting direction and coordinates, until he had made a full circle. Then he stepped towards the box, taking position in back of it. He stood there and, without him touching the sacred object, the doors to the box opened.

Bright light spilled out and flowed and seemed to fill the space of the circle he had walked and go no further. It was as if the light was liquid and it filled a canister. It grew brighter and brighter within that circle.

Outside of that space, wind suddenly kicked up. The dirt and debris blew around. Sparks lit off randomly and grew in size and proportion, until it seemed like bolts of lightning swarmed around the space.

Stinging Sparrow rocked, but the bolts did not strike her. It was the force of the kinetic energy that pushed her. She, however, had planted herself steady, so she was not moved otherwise.

The event went on for several minutes, and then - as abruptly as it had started - the wind died down and the lightening departed. The ground around the circle was scorched and blackened.

The light within the circle seemed to brighten even more, until those watching had to cover their eyes. Stinging Sparrow brought up the shields, protecting her interior and her guests. When her sensors indicated the light level was low enough she dropped the visual shields so that they too could observe what she saw.

It was now only the moon's daylight, what there was of it, inside and outside of the circle. A woman in robes stood in front of Sisko, her hands folded together in front of her. Shaman Orsas was nodding her head, though she did not know who the person was.

"Who is that?"

"Help," said the Shaman.
Laren was more specific and possibly even more awed. Her voice was reverent. "Kai Opaka."

No one noticed that the Orb and its shield were gone.

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Kai Opaka was a short woman with light brown skin and dark, knowing eyes. At one time her robes had been maroon and gold, but life on the moon where she lived had been challenging. Now they were composed of shades of brown. The moon's providence was only just now being discovered and dyes were low on the list of things to be pursued. The war had stopped and the people were on their way to true healing. There were other spiritual guides besides herself there now. She had arrived at a point where she wondered how she might continue to serve them.

Minutes ago, she had been meditating and light had flooded her room. Then Benjamin Sisko had been there, shining through the light. "Opaka. It is time to come home." He had reached forth his hand and she had taken it.

She had been a little surprised to find herself still on the moon, if in a different location. Then she saw a ship unlike any she had ever seen before and she had known it had been true.

"If you will come with me," the Prophet had said to her and he had extended his hand towards the ship.

She smiled warmly and nodded. "I will."

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It was not a long trip back to Bajoran space. But it was an interesting one. The Kai was welcomed into the ship warmly by Captain Janeway and introduced to a woman that she thought she had known, but realized that she did not. It was explained that she was now in an alternate Universe, one where she was desperately needed. The Kai wasn't sure how she would help. But she knew that she was there for a reason and she felt a new peace in her heart.

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"Intendant." Ezri stopped Kira just as she stepped off the Stinging Sparrow.

Kira looked at the Trill. "Nerys, remember?"

"Do you have a moment?"

"Now?"

Ezri sort of shook her head yes, and then dragged the Bajoran out of the way of the others and a little behind the ship.

Nerys followed, curious and not a little trepidatious. She'd seen the Captain, Ro Laren and the formidable Seven of Nine, watch them walk away.

Now that they were secluded, Ezri seemed to have trouble figuring out what to say. "Umm..."

"You're not about to tell me that I had the right Dax, after all, are you?"

"What?" Ezri blinked. Just how had she lost control of the conversation?

Nerys smiled, "Cause I think you have more than enough to handle already."
Ezri laughed, and their relationship righted itself in the sound. "No. Still the wrong Dax." She cast a mischievous look to where she knew Jadzia was likely waiting. "And I suspect, you've figured that out for yourself. What I wanted to do was talk to you about the Kai. There's something you need to know."

"Oh?"

"Look, this woman, there are people who would die for her in the other Universe. You saw Laren's reaction, that's the..." she made a wide circle with her arm, "...the whole of Bajor in Universe Alpha."

"Are you trying to tell me to watch over her?"

"Yes."

"You dragged me all the way over here to tell me that? I just saw her appear out of an Orb. I know she's special."

"Nerys, she's more than special. She's Kai Opaka."

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It was amazing how fast things fell together after their visit to the wormhole.

General Torres had been waiting for their report. She commented to Kathryn afterwards, with a certain amount of awe. "Only you would come back with more people from your Universe."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, Sisko will be coming with us. Kai Opaka will be staying on Bajor."

"Better is not the exact word for it."

"We'll miss you too. But it is time for us to go."

"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly, eh?" Belle grinned.

Kathryn shook her head in fond amusement. "So you're the source of B'Elanna's copy of MacBeth in the original Klingon, remind me to send Annika a suitable thank-you."

Belle's reply was confined to a look that was a cross between sheepish and concerned.

"And to answer your question, yes, I think so. The rest of the transfers are debarking and have their orders. And we're just waiting for the last minute things to get done."

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The dock was crowded with people saying farewell. This included the Prime of Presba who met with Miral and Gretchen, Belle and Annika. Hugs and good words and tears and gifts were exchanged. It was with real reluctance that they parted, but it was time.

Miral and Gretchen kissed their grandchildren and their daughters one last time. Annika and Seven hugged one last time. Belle and B'Elanna exchanged a warrior's grip and wished each other success, in Klingon.

And then, they went their separate ways.
On Presba farewells were also being said.

If someone had told Deanna that she would honestly be telling the Mistress of House Martok that she would be missed, she would have laughed in their faces. But their time with each other had literally been a transforming experience - for themselves and their abode and Sirella too. The Klingon Woman was going home with more than she had brought, including a live firedog pup, which was small enough for her to carry with one hand.

At the last hunt, the den of a firedog Mother had been disturbed. They had no choice but to defend themselves, but then, the responsibility for the small lives they found afterwards, had fallen to them. So they split the difference. Sirella received a female. Asil and Deanna received the other female and Phoebe and Vrald received the male.

Fortunately, the firedog pups were not yet possessed of their flaming ways, which explained why the Mother had fought so ferociously. The Biologists said that they wouldn't start spitting fire until they were more physically mature and by that time, they might have a chemical resolution to keep that particular defense inhibited - if they decided to use that method. The firedogs would keep their claws and teeth and their normal biological functions, however, which meant training.

The arrival of the pups was still so new that they remained unnamed. Deanna was of the opinion that they ought to wait to see what their personalities were like first. Sirella was of a similar opinion. They had agreed to share the names. If another male somehow fell into their hands, they would start a breeding program.

Asiland Sirella had made their peace. Of course, Sirella now understood what had been driving the Vulcan and she recognized that the women of House Presba had been under the blood drive. They just had not known it at the time.

Asil had felt the need, however, to make amends. She had crafted, for the Klingon, a rare Vulcan blade, which was 50 centimeters long. It had a sturdy grip made with material that would resist slipping in a sweaty hand and a sheath for belt or strap.

Sirella had loved it. She'd hefted the streamlined blade in her hand and admired the gleam of the metal. Then she'd struck it over her palm quickly. As she cleaned the razor sharp blade, she'd explained, "Now the blade will not be thirsty and it will serve me well."

Asil had merely nodded and was gratified at the Klingon's obvious pleasure.

Sirella had been immensely pleased at the news of Vrald and Phoebe's pregnancy. She had gifted them with a PADD of Klingon baby names and a traditional recipe book for the cravings which she knew Phoebe would experience. She had teased the human that she would want chocolate Gagh before too long.

They gifted her with a framed painting - of herself taking on the Mother firedog. She had loved it.

Guinan and Sirella also said their farewells. The El-Aurian planned on being on Presba for some time, though she did not have a specific number of years in mind. But the fact that she was thinking in years, caused a secret glee in the Klingon. This alone made Presba a place of importance in Sirella's mind.

As a group, they discussed future events and the direction of Presba. Sirella would expect to see them at prominent house events. She would also, once they were more established, expect them to
hold events. But now she felt they were heading in the right direction - in a truly Klingon compatible
direction. She would have good things to report to Martok.

All in all, they parted in good will and genuinely happy to have spent time together. It was a good
day to say fare well.

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Voyager exited Bajoran space and made its way to the designated exit point. She was feeling excited
about the journey to come. She would miss the members of her family that had been left behind, but
she was glad to have the entire Prime safely where they belonged, with her.

She ran quick status checks on everything and everyone. The Captain was seated in her place and
her new first officer, Commander Ezri Dax, beside her. Lieutenant Tom Paris was at the helm and
his expression was anxious. Lieutenant Harry Kim manned the Operations station. Commander
Tuvok manned the weapons and defense station. Lieutenant Ro Laren was at the station that had
been created for Chakotay. It was decided that it would provide a good secondary ops posted and
had been adapted as such. Lieutenant Sayr was at his station, near the controls for the Trans
Universal Engine. Seven of Nine, Mistress of House Presba, was at her station in Astrometrics and
Lieutenant Commander B’Elanna Torres, Warlord and Epatai of House Presba, was at her station in
Engineering. Dr. Kate Pulaski monitored the crew, with the able help of Voyager herself, from main
Sickbay. The Children were where they were supposed to be. Everyone was at their station and
place. All was ready.

Information was transmitted to the Captain's and the First Officer's stations. Lieutenants Paris and
Sayr spoke at the same time. "We're ready."

Commander Dax looked at the Captain, and grinned. "All systems go, Captain."

Captain Kathryn Janeway, Warlord of House Presba nodded in acknowledgment. Then she gave the
command. "Engage."

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