The Magnificent Seven

by Scribe32oz

Summary

Alex Styles and Mary Travis have their work cut out for them when the Captain and the senior staff of the Maverick have been brainwashed into believing they are the characters they are playing in the Magnificent Seven holodeck simulation. While Alex tries to convince the Captain he is not in fact, a surly gunslinger with anger management issues trying to save a group of helpless villagers from a mad confederate, Mary faces an alien power using humans as pawns in their ancient war.
“Captain’s Log - Stardate 2378.213.

We have been redirected from our mission on the Frontier to Sector 15298, home of the Kreetassan people, on behalf of the Federation Council to offer an invitation to the Kree for membership. Kreetassa is one of the leading producers of plasma technology in the quadrant, and their addition to the Federation would be a valuable asset to our shipbuilding capabilities. Unfortunately, efforts to invite the Kree into the fold in previous years have been hindered by their extreme intolerance to anyone incapable of following their customs and protocols to the letter. Even minor infractions have resulted in the complete collapse of the diplomatic process.

Starfleet has directed me to allow nothing to derail the diplomatic process in this latest attempt. Lieutenant Mary Travis has spent the last week crafting a speech which must be delivered by me, in native Kreetassan without the use of the universal translator. The speech is to be given at the Hall of Diplomacy and must observe all the Kreetassan forms, even a ritualistic tree cutting ceremony which I am to perform before the Kree Chancellery. I am told further conditions must be observed during my oratory, which the Kree will reveal to us prior to our arrival at their homeworld in three days.”

“I won’t do it.”

Mary Travis flinched at the words, telling herself she could do this. She had negotiated with Gorn, Vulcans, Cardassians and even Ferengi without losing her temper. On those occasions, her ability to maintain her poise and temper was all that prevented the situation from disintegrating into a wild free for all. Reva, the great negotiator, often quoted the key to diplomacy was learning to listen and finding a common ground upon which to build on. Being married to a Vulcan exposed her to Surak’s disciplines which meant, never losing one’s focus no matter what emotions were in play. The marriage of both schools of thought allowed her to form a style that was effective and subtle in its application.
Right now all she wanted to do was grab the heaviest thing within reach and bash her Captain’s head in.

Captain Chris Larabee was one of the finest captains in Starfleet. In the eyes of his crew, he was the best. He was an able negotiator, one hell of a strategist and the only man capable of capturing her heart after being widowed in the battle of Sector 001 against the Borg. She loved and respected him, sometimes even felt awed by him. More than that, she couldn’t picture her life without him, even when he was behaving like a petulant child who needed taking out to the woodshed at this precise moment.

“Chris,” she cleared her throat, reminding herself he was not just her lover, but her Captain. “I know it’s unorthodox but you know as well as I do, the Federation wants the Kree to join us. They bring a lot of benefits with their membership, including technology and resources.”

“Yeah, all that plasma tech for the cost of one Starfleet Captain’s dignity.”

“It’s how it’s always been done with them,” she repeated herself wearily, as she had done for the last hour since she revealed what they wanted of him.. “All the way back to Admiral Archer.”

“Admiral Archer,” Chris launched himself off his chair because he needed more room than just the space behind his desk to throw a tantrum. “You mean the dumbass who brought his dog to an alien planet we barely had contact with and allowed the animal to take a piss on their sacred trees? That Archer?”

Mary winced remembering the awful faux pas that started the Federation’s difficult relationship with the Kree. “Yes, that Archer. Really if you think about it, this whole thing is to honour his memory, a way of ....”

The look he shot her silenced her immediately.

Mary got to her feet and tried a different tact, trying not to show just how finite her patience was becoming. The Kree had insisted during the greeting ceremony at the Hall of Diplomacy, the Captain perform a long, complicated speech in native Kreetassan, which could not be mispronounced in any way. One wrong inflection and the Kree would be incensed with the negotiations terminated immediately. She hated the rigidity of the culture herself, but it had to be done if any talk of membership could begin. 

She had spent almost a week in study. Writing and translating the speech he would have to give, only to receive the final component of the ceremony, a component the Captain was taking great exception to, just shy of arriving at the planet.

“Captain,” she tried again, using his rank to remind him that this wasn’t a matter of choice but duty. “Captain, they won’t accept membership any other way. We’ve tried six times in the last two hundred years and it always ends up the same, we insult them and they chase us off their planet with the plasma equivalent of pitchforks.”

“I know that,” Chris growled, hating the fact that she was right but not about to admit defeat. “But I’m still not doing it. I’ll recite their complicated speech and I’ll even play the role of some demented Paul Bunyan, but I’m drawing the line here. As a Starfleet Captain, I have that privilege. Find another way.”

He issued the last sentence as an order, which apparently became the straw that broke the camel’s back. Mary’s expression became serene, almost tranquil and he wondered perhaps he was being a little unreasonable. He was about to speak up when she preempted him.
“Captain, permission to speak freely.” Her expression giving away nothing.

Chris returned to his chair and sat down, eyeing her suspiciously, and deciding he better be seated for this. “Go ahead.”

“Christopher Larabee, you are Captain of this ship and as Captain, it is your duty to do everything possible to ensure these negotiations go through smoothly! Yes, the Kree are arrogant of bitches but apparently, they don’t have the monopoly on that right now. You know as well as I do, our recent wars have put us in a vulnerable position, we’re nowhere at full strength and with the collapse of the Romulan Empire, the area is overrun with opportunists and pirates, to say nothing of what’s going to happen if the Borg come calling. Now the Kree might be difficult, but what they can provide us outweighs any wound to your dignity.”

“Lieutenant,” Chris started to say, realising she had left behind her role as a diplomatic officer and was launching into the territory of a very pissed off woman.

“I’m not done talking! I have spent the last week putting together what has to be the most painful exercise in my twelve years as a diplomatic officer. I have read more books on Kreetassans phonetics, history and protocols to last me ten lifetimes and I’ve hardly seen Billy so you can deliver the Federation and the Maverick this win. Believe me when I say that I’m simply too mentally exhausted to nurse you through a tantrum!”

“Okay, okay!” Chris threw up his hands in surrender to calm her down because frankly, she was eyeing that heavy Klingon sculpture he’d received as a gift at the corner of his desk with way too much interest. “I hear you, I hear you. I’m sorry, I forgot how much time you’ve put into this.”

Mary fell silent at the apology, collecting herself and painfully aware their personal relationship was why she wasn’t facing a report on insubordination. Taking a deep breath, she brushed a strand of blond hair that came loose from behind her ear and collected herself again.

“So you’ll do it,” she met his gaze.

Chris cleared his throat because something in him was incapable of giving up so easily. “I’ll think about it.”

Mary decided she might have to kill him after all.

On the bridge of the Maverick, the entire senior was on duty, with Buck Wilmington occupying centre seat while the Captain was in ‘conference’ with their Protocol Officer. While the doors of the Ready Room was capable of masking much, sometimes sound made it through, especially when the two people within were shouting at each other in open warfare. Though the voices were muffled, there was no denying what was being heard was a spectacular display of the infamous Larabee temper followed by the even rarer outburst from their usually poised and composed protocol officer.

Buck tried to maintain a poker face, glancing on occasion at the door, trying to decide if he ought to go in there before blood was spilled. Having seen what Mary had gone through the last week and reading the pièce de résistance of Kree demands, Buck had suspected things were going to get ugly, even though he had not expected it to be quite as bad as it this.

“Buck,” Alex Styles, who was the third-ranking officer on board the Maverick, could see from her science station, JD Dunne and some of the other crewmen on the bridge flinching uncomfortably at the display and knew this could not go on. It was unseemly. “Maybe you ought to get in there.”

“I would not recommend that without a phaser,” Ezra Standish who was at his customary place at
tactical and incapable of allowing anything to pass without comment, quipped wearing his trademark smirk.

“I don’t think Mary’s gonna care,” Vin Tanner added, tossing Ezra a grin over his shoulder from the helm.

“Well, I can’t say I blame her,” Buck sighed, knowing the protocol officer did not often lose her temper. In fact, he had rarely seen her raise her voice, let alone achieve the decibels necessary to penetrate the Ready Room walls. “She’s been dealing directly with the Kreetassans through this whole mission and writing that damn speech. She’s run ragged.”

“I don’t understand,” JD finally risked adding his own voice to the discussion from his place at navigation. “What’s so bad about the Captain having to deliver a speech? He’s done it lots of times.”

“Well,” Buck exchanged a look with Alex, fully aware of the Kreetassans’ requirements for completing the ceremony. “It’s not just a speech. He also has to perform this weird tree cutting ceremony.”

“That’s it?”

“He has to perform it wearing very little, body paint, uttering a war chant with an accompanying native dance of apology while wearing coloured beads in his hair.” Ezra deadpanned.

Vin barely managed to stifle the snigger surfacing at that revelation.

“It’s not funny,” Alex pointed out. “It’s all or nothing with the Kree. If the Captain doesn’t perform one aspect of it, they’ll consider it a great insult and it will be another twenty years before we get a chance to try again.”

“Yeah,” Buck frowned sympathising with Mary but also understanding Chris’s outrage. “The Kree know how to hold a grudge.”

Suddenly, the hollering felt silent, with all eyes shifting to Ready Room door. As the seconds ticked by, Buck began to entertain thoughts of one or both resorting to homicide.

“I’m going in,” he glanced at Alex. “If I don’t come out in an hour, avenge me.”

A ripple of laughter moved through the bridge dispelling the tension and Alex raised her eyes to the heavens before remarking. “How on Earth do you outrank me?”

“I ask that question every day,” Ezra grinned.

“It’s my charm and animal magnetism.”

This time, Vin didn’t bother to hide his laughter.

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When the First Officer of the Maverick finally braved intruding the Ready Room to ensure Nathan Jackson was not required to conduct a post mortem, the doors slid open before he could activate the panel. Mary Travis almost ran into him on her way out of the room. The storm cloud following her told Buck it was best to withdraw to a minimum safe distance until she passed. Mary was shaking her head as she stomped past them, muttering in exasperation as she crossed the bridge, not making eye contact with anyone as she headed for the turbo lift.
No one tried to stop her.

When the Captain emerged he wore the look of a shell shocked soldier who had just come off the battlefield, scarred and emotionally wrought.

“I thought Vulcan wives were supposed to be quiet and docile.”

“Ha!” Alex snorted.

“Yeah good luck with that,” Vin gave Chris a look of sympathy as the Captain reclaimed his command chair.

“I take it you and Lt. Travis did not reach agreement on the ceremony?” Ezra inquired, careful not to mention the main point of contention, which was the ritual itself.

“No,” Chris gave Ezra a warning shot across the bow, not to bring up the subject again. It was bad enough he had gotten Mary plenty mad, and justifiably so but she was also absolutely correct, it was his duty as Captain to do what was necessary for the mission's successful completion. While he might rail against the idea of performing like some trained seal, the truth was, successfully facilitating the Kreetassans’ entry into the Federation would be a significant achievement for him personally, and also his ship.

If only it wasn’t so humiliating.

“Hey Chris,” Buck spoke up, sensing Chris’s annoyance was partly due to the fact he knew Mary was right, and that he would have to submit to the Kree’s demands when it was all said and done. “I managed to get my hands on a new scenario for the Magnificent Seven program.”

Grateful to discuss something other than the Kreetassans and their upcoming mission, Chris turned to Buck who had lowered himself into the First Officer’s seat. He tried not to notice the emptiness of Mary’s customary seat next to him and made a mental note to apologise for being such a jackass.

“An upgrade?” Chris looked at Buck.

“Yeah, you know the fiction from that time period is fragmentary after the war,” Buck explained. “Most of the scenarios we’ve been playing were pieced together from the stories that survived. The kid who programs them for me on Earth got his hands on some actual paper records, the one where the seven actually get together, after the translation from the original Kurosawa film to the American version.”

“Yeah the original was about samurais, wasn’t it?” JD inquired, having studied everything he could get his hands on after being invited to join the Captain and the senior officers in the program. “I never saw anything about how they get together though.”

”Ugh,” Alex groaned. “That program....”

She never understood the fascination with the program but then again, she decided at the heart of them, all men were still boys and what boy didn’t love to play cowboys and Indians?

“It will grow on you Alex,” Vin said not for the first time, eliciting a groan from the men present because of Vin’s insistence on Alex joining them. The time period simply did not suit a science officer who spent her free time battling holodeck monsters and considered cataloguing gaseous anomalies ‘a pretty good time’.

“Give it up Mr Tanner,” Ezra remarked giving Alex a look of amusement. While they had managed
to coax Mary, Julia, Casey and Rain into the program, Alex avoided it unless Vin had been particularly successful in his begging and even then, she usually spent most of it complaining about the poorly written female characters and the sexist nature of the time period.

“Anyway,” Buck spoke up over the top of everyone. “He managed to program the story of how the seven get together. It’s a longer scenario than all the others, involving an Indian village, a shootout at a cemetery and an attack with a renegade Confederate general.”

Chris had to admit, his interest was piqued and it sounded like just the distraction he needed before he had to face the Kreestassans. He wondered if Mary would consider it a conciliatory gesture if he invited her along and then decided against it, thinking she probably needed to spend her off-duty hours with her son after a week of neglect.

“Hey that sounds like fun,” Vin declared and then glanced at Alex, teasing her with an invitation even if he knew her answer. “How about it, Darling?”

“No thanks,” Alex stated firmly. “Someone needs to mind the ship while you’re revisiting your childhoods. Besides, it will be more fun for you guys without us wimminfolk around anyway.” She flashed them a good-natured smile to show them it was alright if they agreed with her.

“How about it?” Buck addressed the rest of the players and knew without having to ask Josiah and Nathan who were down in the Sick Bay level, they would enjoy participating too.

“I never turn down the opportunity to wear my favourite burgundy coat,” Ezra grinned.

“What about Adam?” Buck asked Chris, seeing the nods of approval from Vin and JD indicating they were eager to participate.

“Nah,” Chris shook his head, aware that his teenage son had plans this evening. “He and some of the kids are apparently having their own holodeck adventure. Something about finding the gems for the Infinity Gauntlet, whatever the hell that means.”

Once upon a time, they had been flesh.

The five senses were something to be relished, where the cornucopia of sight, smell and taste, was theirs to enjoy. Life was not simply a shadow of existence, trapped in the void where nothing could be affected unless it was through thought. They knew they had discarded these things for the greater good, though what that was, they no longer remembered. The events were so distant in time, the memories had vanished like their bodies and their civilisation.

All that remained was the war.

In the empty corridors of their necropolis, the hate that divided them and compelled the endless battles would not relinquish its hold of them. Even without flesh or bodies, they continued to fight, trapped in a wheel driven by rage and desperation. The war was the only purpose they knew, the only connection to their long forgotten past. Unfortunately, the Great Transitioning had robbed them of the ability to fight it themselves and without flesh, the battle had to be fought using pawns. The pawns had wars of their own and they adopted those battles for their own because without the fight, what were they?
If there was one thing Chris Larabee could do better than anyone alive, it was his ability to capture a room the instant he walked into it.

As Captain, he always commanded attention. Buck Wilmington often claimed Chris’s ability to do this predated his position as master of the Maverick. It was all in the eyes. The Larabee glare was what elevated Chris from just another handsome man to a truly compelling one. When he stepped onto the bridge of his ship, his bridge crew felt it immediately, as if just seeing him told them they would survive whatever dangers lay ahead and live to fight another day.

Yet none of it compared to the shadow he cast when he was the Man in Black.

The first time he donned the costume of the black-garbed gunslinger, with the dark duster and black hat, he captured the attention of everyone who saw him. In some way that was not at all explainable, it was as if his true self had been revealed beneath the polish and the acumen of the Starfleet Captain. When he was the Man in Black, Chris Larabee was the quintessential bad element, and everyone who saw him knew it.

As Alex stood outside Holodeck One watching the male members of the senior staff about to take themselves into the world of the Magnificent Seven, the Science Officer could admit to sharing the same thoughts as the crew. In fact, as she watched all seven of them readying themselves for the simulation, she was struck by a sentiment transcending everything logical, that their group was bound together by cosmic design and no matter what, they would always find each other.

In the program, her husband and soulmate, Vin Tanner was the trusted lieutenant of the Man in Black. Yet seeing them together in the hallway, with Vin wearing the buckskin jacket she suspected he’d wear all the time if he could get away with it, she was struck with the idea that even more than being with her, his place was at Chris’s side. It was a feeling that should have made a new bride jealous, but Alex never felt that way. It just seemed like the way things ought to be.

“You’ll notify us if anything happens on the bridge?” Chris asked, snapping Alex out of her musing regarding cosmic mechanisms.

“At the first opportunity,” she replied and knew it was a lie. Short of a Borg attack, she was allowing nothing to interrupt them. The Captain needed this distraction to be put into a better frame of mind when he arrived at the Kreetassan homeworld. It was the only way he was going to get through the mission. His pride was going to take a battering as it was, at least he could be in a good mood when he went to face the music.

“You just want the chance to run the ship,” Buck grinned at her. “Bet when we come back, we’ll find you’ve changed all the settings on the command chair controls and locked us out of the main computer.”

“Please,” Alex snorted, her eyes resting on Vin. The Officer of the Conn gave her a playful wink, aware of how she felt about command. “I have no desire to be Captain. I like being a Science Officer so I can warn you men from wandering into a black hole or keeping you from sticking your finger into the open mouths of critters you mistake for being a flower.”

“That happened only once,” Buck grumbled, “and it looked like a daisy!”

“With teeth Buck,” Nathan interrupted, adjusting the hat on his head. “It had teeth and would have
“Put you into a coma for a week.”

“Seriously,” Chris gave Alex a look ignoring Buck’s misadventure with flora for the moment. “I want to know if anything out of the ordinary happens. This part of space isn’t that well known, and the Kreetassans haven’t been exactly forthcoming about the region.”

“Understood Sir,” Alex nodded once, able to tell when he was serious and responding in kind. “Lieutenant Richmond and I will be conducting a thorough survey of the region so we can update our charts for stellar cartography.”

“Pity,” Ezra grinned, straightening the cuffs of his ornate shirt. “You could join us as the damsel in distress.” There was a twinkle in the Security Chief’s eye because he was perfectly aware of how she felt about the program and the roles assigned to women in the world of the Magnificent Seven.

“Yeah Darlin,” Vin quickly added, still holding out hope she might warm to the simulation one day. “You could come with us.”

“Nah,” Alex shrugged, having no patience for waiting around and watching the men play out their childhood fantasies. “From the sounds of it, you don’t need any women for this scenario, and someone needs to keep the ship from crashing into a star while you’re gone. Although,” she eyed all of them as they prepared to wander into their holodeck fantasy, “one of these days, you really ought to try a different program.”

“Bite your tongue,” Ezra eyed her in distaste as if he had swallowed a bug. “This one is perfectly serviceable.”

“You’re a traditionalist,” Josiah rumbled, and Alex had to smile at how utterly different Josiah looked when he was in his Magnificent Seven persona. He was a world away from the comforting, serene counsellor who could have talked Oedipus into leaving home.

“I think he just likes playing the smooth-talking gambler all the time,” JD grinned, always happy to join the Captain and the senior staff on these adventures. He still felt it an honour to be invited at all.

“I think he just likes taking people’s money,” Alex eyed Ezra good-naturedly.

“Ah Alexandra,” Ezra smirked, “you do know me so well.”

“Actually you know Nathan,” Buck turned to the doctor as the group started moving towards the holodeck doors, “the healer actually has a love interest in this. Maybe we ought to invite Rain.”

“I asked her, but she said something about being too busy. She and Julia are investigating a defective system in Transporter Room 2, or something like that.” Nathan only remembered so much of her explanation before his eyes glazed over, which incidentally was the same look she had when he explained any medical matters to her.

“Come on,” Chris broke in, eager to get going because he was looking forward to an afternoon in Four Corners and frankly, he needed the distraction before the humiliating task awaiting him on the Kree homeworld. “Daylight’s wasting.”

Activating the panel, the holodeck doors slid open to reveal on the other side, the sharp intensity of a simulated New Mexico sun. Through the doors, the vista of Four Corners awaited, with its dry wind blowing grit and sand across the dusty town of weathered wooden buildings. Holographic townspeople strolled along the boardwalks, while Virgil Watson’s sign swayed in the breeze above his shopfront. In the distance, the clunky sound of a piano could be heard coming from one of the saloons while the faint whiff of horse manure wafted through the air, adding to the authenticity of the
“Have a good time,” Alex leaned over and planted a soft kiss on Vin’s cheek. “Kill a Confederate for me.”

Josiah rolled his eyes. “And they say romance is dead.”

An hour after the Captain turned the bridge over to her, Alex found herself seated in the Captain’s command chair, disliking how it felt.

Before her ordeal with the Cardassians, she entertained the thoughts of her own command and exploring the galaxy like Garth, Pike and Kirk. After her ordeal, it had been a struggle just remaining in Starfleet, let alone being in charge of a starship. The idea of having the responsibility for so many, especially when her decisions could lead to people dying, or worst yet captured alive, was something that made her break out in cold sweat just thinking about it. Ultimately, it was a responsibility she was unprepared to accept.

Coming on board the Maverick had shifted her view of things. While she still felt as strongly as ever against accepting any captaincy if it ever came her way, Alex had found her place in the world. Even though she was not one of the Magnificent Seven, the nickname given to the Maverick’s senior staff because of that silly holo-program, Chris Larabee was more than just her commanding officer, he was her friend. At the moment of her darkest despair, when she was ready to throw everything away, he convinced her to walk another path. That path led to Vin Tanner, and for that, Chris would always have her undying loyalty.

As long as Chris Larabee captained a starship, Alex would always be his science officer.

For this shift, the bridge had a decidedly feminine flavour with newly arrived Lt. Catherine Stokes filling in at tactical for Drew Katovit who was on two-week shore leave on Earth. Drew was finally taking his girlfriend Terry Greer to meet his parents and Ezra had started a pool that the assistant security chief of the Maverick would return engaged.

In any case, there hadn’t been much opportunity for Alex to get to know Catherine, or Kate as she preferred to be called, since her arrival on the Maverick. However, Ezra called her adequate, which in Ezra’s speak meant pretty damn good. The Security Chief had a penchant for making unusual selections in his security team and Alex had no doubt Kate’s background, whatever it was, would be unorthodox but in complete accordance with Ezra’s high standards.

Taking her place at the science station was Lt. Charlotte Richmond, whom Alex appointed her unofficial second in the Science Department not long ago. Despite their initially contentious relationship, Alex found the woman to be an able science officer who knew how to think quickly on her feet. During the assault on the Maverick by a Dominion task force, she and JD held off the Jem’Hadar warriors intent on taking Sick Bay. Now that she and Charlotte had worked out their difference, they had forged a good working relationship even if both women were realistic they would never really be friends.

Seated at Vin’s customary station at the helm was Ensign Nora Densham who was a junior officer who usually occupied the Conn during the night shift. She was fresh from the Academy and was even greener than JD, but the Captain saw promise and Alex knew never to question his decisions when selecting personnel. The man had good instincts about people and took risks. God only knew he had when he chose her as his science officer. Rounding off the last of the bridge crew at present, was Jewel Chun at navigation.
It occurred to Alex that if they were to encounter another ship, its Captain would probably think that
the Maverick was a ship of Amazons. *Now that was a holodeck simulation she could get into.*

The soft hiss of the doors prompted Alex to turn her head just in time to see Mary Travis stepping
onto the bridge. The always graceful Protocol Officer appeared to be in decidedly better spirits than a
few hours ago when she had stomped off the bridge, no doubt envisioning the many ways to
dismember a starship captain. She always looked as if she was gliding across the floor, displaying
nothing but poise and elegance that made everyone around her look awkward and ungainly in
comparison.

“Hello Alex,” she greeted, taking her customary place next to the Captain’s command chair.

“Hi Mary,” Alex smiled at her, glad to see her in a better mood and looking a little more refreshed. It
was a far cry from the overworked wreck she had been the past few days. “How are you feeling?”

“Better and a little embarrassed to tell the truth,” Mary admitted with a somewhat sheepish smile, a
bloom of colour flaring across her cheeks. “I feel foolish for getting so upset.”

“You’ve been run ragged for the last week,” Alex brushed her shoulder in sympathy. “You’re
allowed to display some annoyance when the captain is being contentious.”

Alex didn’t say *jackass*, but her look told Mary she was certainly thinking it.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Mary uttered a soft laugh before easing back into her chair. “The thing is, I
can’t blame him for his annoyance. He’s a starship captain who ought to be afforded some respect,
not be forced to perform an over exaggerated ritual entirely aimed at putting him in his place for the
slights no reasonable person would take offence. Unfortunately, Starfleet and the Federation Council
was clear on this point, they want these negotiations with the Kreetassans to go smoothly. It doesn’t
help what the Kree want from Chris is neither life-threatening or against Federation principles. It’s
just...”

“Humiliating?” Alex stared at her.

Mary’s shoulders slumped. “Yes.”

A loud chirped interrupted their conversation, and Alex turned her head immediately to Charlotte
because she knew from experience; it was a sound originating from her science station. Alex knew
every sound that station made, mainly because she customised most of it herself. The assistant
science officers hands were flying over the controls, her green eyes studying the readings before her
brow furrowed at what she was seeing.

“Is that an alert from the long-range sensor array?” Alex knew her station well enough to make an
educated guess.

“Yes Commander,” Charlotte nodded, her gaze still fixed on the dark screen. “I’m picking up
something at the extreme range of the array. It’s too small to be a planet or a moon...”

“Could it be a ship?” Alex rose to her feet from the command chair, uncertain how Chris managed to
remain seated when all she wanted to do was run to Charlotte’s side and see for herself.

“Commander, I’m picking it up too,” Kate added now that Charlotte had raised the alarm. Like Ezra,
Kate’s primary concern was that the mysterious whatever it was out there, was no danger to the ship.
Studying the readings at tactical, she was able to gain additional information regarding their new
discovery. “It can’t be a ship. It’s stationary.”
“Still could be a ship,” Charlotte said respectfully at Kate, not about the discount the possibility yet. “It could be a derelict or a ship malfunctioning with engine trouble.”

“I’m not detecting any hails,” Jewel spoke up from her station. “If they were in trouble, they’d hail us right?”

“One would presume so,” Mary replied but look to Alex because she was still a novice in all this. Mary had spent the greater part of her career in the diplomatic corps and had only experienced starship duty in the last eighteen months.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Alex finally spoke up. “Out here, the list of what the object could be is endless. Let’s take a look first to get firmer data. Ensign Densham, take us to Warp 8.”

“Aye Commander,” the petite blond woman answered, her fingers flying over the helm station with a hint of excitement at what might be out there for them to find.

“Should we notify the Captain?” Mary asked, aware Chris would want to know the instant something had changed on his ship.

“Not yet,” Alex said smoothly, thinking it was premature until they actually knew what they were dealing with. For all they knew, what was out there could be an old piece of space junk. Either way, Alex did not wish to intrude on the Captain’s fun until they knew for sure.

“At Warp 8, we should be in range within five minutes,” Kate estimated.

“Nora,” Alex spoke up, “when we are within 500 kilometres of the object, I want you to come to full stop. That’s as close as we’re getting until we have more data.”

Kate seemed to approve of this idea, knowing full well the Chief would prefer it this way if he were present at tactical.

“Commander,” Charlotte spoke up, “we’re in range of a visual.”

“On screen,” Alex ordered promptly, wanting to see what was out there so she could decide what to do next.

Within seconds, the view screen which a moment ago revealed the expanse of stars rushing past the hull of the Maverick as she travelled through high warp, slowed to a standstill. What appeared before them was neither space junk or an abandoned spaceship.

It was a space station.

Now, this was more like it.

Chris Larabee stood along the counter of the bar, sipping whiskey from the bottle of Red Eye he just paid for. Further along the wooden bench, scuffed and stained by its patrons over the years was the bartender polishing shot glasses using a rag that would have made Inez swoon, using his spit as lubricant. The man stared at Chris oddly when the Captain of the Maverick chose to clean the glass given to him with one of his own linens.

The kid whose name Chris was going to have to ask one day, responsible for programming this piece of holographic fiction had done a superb job of recreating an authentic western experience. While the saloon was nowhere as lively as that of the Standish Tavern they usually frequented in the other scenarios, there was something about it that felt more grounded in reality, as if this place could have
existed in the Territory more than three hundred years ago.

Everything seemed painted in shades of desert. From the fine layer of sand and grit carried through the swing doors to the dust coating most surfaces. The patrons were similarly dusty, dark fabrics were a patchwork of sand and dirt, with hats smeared with the stuff. Considering the wind blowing outside, he supposed it wasn’t unexpected to find half the desert within the walls of the building. Sweeping his gaze across the saloon with its patrons of ranch hands, drunks, farmers and saloon girls, he recognised no one and wondered where the others were.

Buck had told him to stay put in the saloon and trouble would find him.

Chris couldn’t wait.

Vin Tanner was somewhat stunned that the bounty hunter, sharpshooter, buffalo hunter and tracker he had played consistently over the last year and a half, with whom he shared an almost spiritual connection, could have made his start in the worst of places. Staring at his surroundings, the idea that anyone who loved the outdoors as much as the tracker could be reduced to such circumstances was shocking. Yet even as he felt the profound absence of the buckskin coat on his shoulders or the lack of the mare’s leg at his hip, he knew only something dire could drive the tracker to accept this terrible fate.

“Tanner!” The voice of Virgil Watson barked in his ear. “You gonna stand there lollygagging all day?”

Vin looked up at the face of Virgil Watson, the owner of Watson’s hardware and unfortunately for Vin, his present employer. The older man with the steel-rimmed glasses and dark suit was staring impatiently at him from behind the shop counter. Blinking once or twice to clear the rather violent thoughts that surfaced in his Vulcan brain at the man’s rebuke, Vin looked down at the broom he was holding in his hand and wondered if clubbing anyone to death could be considered a firing offence.

Still, this was where the program placed him, and as much as Vin hated it for the moment, Buck had assured them, something was going to happen soon. So until then...

“No Sir,” he sighed and continued to push the broom across the floor.

Ezra studied the inventory supplied to him, aside from the usual accoutrements carried by his character in the program and noted a steel box containing bullets for the Remington at his hip. At first, Ezra could not understand how these were different from the ammunition on his gun belt until he scrutinised them and realised these shells were light. There was just enough gunpowder for them to be fired from the weapon but nowhere enough to actually hit a target.

With a widening grin, he realised what these were intended were for and decided perhaps, poker would not be the instrument he used to fleece the locals. Instead, his marksmanship as a Starfleet security officer was going to come in extremely useful for the con he would soon be running. For now, however, he needed a drink. Getting to his feet, he ambled over to the bar counter at the saloon in the Gem Hotel. While it was nowhere as familiar as the Standish Saloon, Buck had told him to stay put at this locale until the action started, whatever that might be.

In the meantime, the saloon came complete with enough slack-jawed yokels for Ezra to amuse himself.
It still astonished Nathan Jackson how anyone in this day and age, recovered from serious injury.

While the medical instruments in front of him had their own charm from a historical point of view, the idea of using any of these instruments to fix broken flesh made the doctor cringe in horror. As he had done on numerous occasions when he came to this Infirmary to play the part of the healer in the Magnificent Seven program, he still flinched in distaste at the antiquated instruments in the less than hygienic surroundings.

Fortunately, the adventures as one of the Seven relied on his skills as a master knife-thrower or else he would have gotten convulsions at the thought of actually having to use any of these instruments to heal anybody. Before entering the program, Nathan had never considered himself a warrior in any shape or form. He was from the day his sister Rebecca had died of Andalusian Fever, on the road to becoming a doctor even though it took years to gain the credentials. Participating in this program, even if he played the part of the healer, allowed him to be more. Nathan had to admit, fighting it out in this fictional town in the Old West had tapped into the part of him that enjoyed taking part in the action, instead of sitting out at the sidelines.

As he waited for the scenario to unveil his part in the fun, he wondered what the town of Four Corners had in store for him today.

Josiah stared at the pile of rocks in dismay and realised this unruly mess was going to be the preacher’s church. The Counsellor had only ever seen the completed structure, so he felt a little upset seeing the state it was presently in. Worse yet, in the scenario that was played previously, he spent some time painting pews and plastering walls. However, seeing it right now, thinking that he might have to rebuild the thing from scratch, made Josiah hope that whatever adventure Chris Larabee intended to have him participate would happen sooner rather than later.

Because frankly, the last thing he had actually fixed in his home had resulted in Ayla his wife, banning him from ever touching tools again. It was a situation not improved since coming aboard the Maverick. When he had attempted to program the food replicator, he had ended up causing a short circuit that resulted in tomato soup pouring continuously out of the device until his quarters looked like a scene from a Kubrick film.

He had no idea the Chief Engineer of the Maverick, known to be the most wholesome woman in the galaxy, could swear like a Ferengi trader.

It had taken a week for Chris Larabee to get that damn smirk off his face.

JD stared out the window, feeling the wind sweep across his face, the heat even though it was produced by the holodeck, felt delicious as he stared at the landscape beyond the stagecoach he was presently occupying, admiring it with awe. From the wide open spaces to the mesa running erratically across the horizon, JD felt a great deal of kinship to the character he played in the Magnificent Seven program. Like that young man fleeing the East to find a new life in the West, JD had found a home on the Maverick.

When he’d come on the Maverick, he’d been nursing the loss of his mother and was grateful to leave behind everything he knew for something new, because the hurt was still fresh. Almost two years later, the pain had dulled by the new faces in his life, and he liked to think he had come into his own, as an officer and as a man. Riding on this stagecoach, even in a holodeck setting, becoming the boy again, made him remember those early days fondly. He had to admit waiting for the stagecoach to reach Four Corners, JD felt almost as excited as his fictional counterpart at discovering a new frontier.
“Now wait a minute darlin’!” Buck Wilmington declared as he stood with his back pressed against the wall of the Virginia Hotel bedroom, trapped by a shapely blond woman with full lips, golden curls and sin on her mind. He’d been waiting for the holo-program to get to his part of the story when she invaded his room with every intention of a little bit of afternoon delight.

“It’s not that I’m not interested,” he stammered to explain. “I mean a couple of months ago, I’d be all into this but things have changed.”

“Not that much,” the lady smiled alluringly at him while continuing to undress even as he made his valiant attempts to resist her charms. “Come on Buck,” she smiled as one bare shoulder was revealed. “Billy’s in Yuma prison and I got needs.”

“Aw hell,” Buck cursed, deciding if there was indeed a God, the deity was undoubtedly laughing his ass off right now at the First Officer’s predicament. The woman, whose name he couldn’t even remember, continued to shed her clothes, her dress already creating a pool of green at her feet. “Look I’m spoken for!”

Okay, not precisely spoken for, but things between him and Inez were progressing along nicely. They had a good thing going which he was sure would become more in time. While he admitted to being a shameless horndog who loved women, the one thing he was not, was a cheater. If he pledged himself to someone he cared about and Inez Recillos indeed fell into that category, he intended for it to mean something.

That made her stop short and stare at him. “Spoken for? You?”

She burst out laughing.

Somewhat offended and a little hurt by her scepticism, Buck straightened up and replied indignantly. “Yeah, me!”

“Buck please,” she snorted not at all taking anything he said seriously. “They’d have to geld you before you could stay faithful to any woman. Come on,” she closed in on him again. “Let’s have some fun.”

Buck knew when to concede defeat. “Computer, erase character.”

The words were meaningless to her, and her face registered her confusion a second before she vanished entirely from the room. Buck let out a sigh of relief and then muttered to himself. “Inez, I hope you know what I’m going through for you.”
At least they thought it was a space station.

Its size implied nothing else, but it looked nothing like a station and reminded Alex of a four-tiered cake she had once seen at a wedding. The only thing missing was the figures perched at the very top, looking ready to take the plunge off the side into matrimony. The external hull was a pale amber colour, making Alex think it was constructed of copper, not the stronger stuff that was necessary for a prolonged existence in a vacuum. There was nothing to indicate how it managed to maintain its stationary orbit in space because it was nowhere near a spatial body of any kind to utilise its gravitational field. Nor were there any windows or hatches to reveal how one would enter the place.

It looked like a sculpture in space.

Recalling what happened the last time they encountered a mysterious object in space with similar properties, Alex had no intention of going anywhere near the thing until they knew more about it. Still, there was a timeless beauty about the structure, be it a station, ship or even city. It had been designed to be more than functional, and the aesthetic reminded Alex a little of Vulcan architecture, all curves in the colour of Seleya’s rich sand.

“Can the computer identify it?”

All eyes including her own were fixed on the image before them. In reality, the Maverick was still three minutes away from the station, but the glimpse afforded by their long-range sensors was undoubtedly striking. At her question, the brief silence that fell over all of them vanished, and the bridge was mobilised for action once more. Charlotte was the first to react because Alex’s question gave her the jump start to get going again. Her fingers ran over the console as she instructed the main computer to identify what they were seeing.

“No,” Charlotte answered after a moment, frowning at the lack of information appearing on the screen before her. “We have nothing like it on record.”

“We’re approaching the...” Jewel paused attempting to coin a term that fit before giving up and going for the obvious, “station now.”

“All stop,” Nora added, following Alex’s orders to bring the Maverick to a stop within 500 kilometres from the station.

The viewer now revealed the object, not as a distant scan, but rather its actual likeness took up the entire screen by its immense size. Even from Maverick’s current position, the station was enormous. Up close, the hull’s smooth finish was visible, with no signs of seams or joins where the hull plating was attached to the superstructure. It looked as if it was moulded out of a solid block of metal.

“I’m reading a neutronium-type alloy in the outer hull.”

“Neutronium?” Alex blinked. “Starship phasers won’t be enough to penetrate that. Nora, pull us back another 500 kilometres, I don’t want to be too close to that thing until we know what it is.”

“Is anyone alive on it?” Mary inquired.

Alex exchanged glanced with Charlotte and Kate at the question. “Scan for life signs.”

Charlotte nodded and obeyed immediately. A second later, she looked up shaking her head. “Not
that our sensors are able to detect but neutronium is extremely dense. It could be interfering with our ability to scan them accurately.”

“Damn,” Alex cursed, knowing she had no choice in her next course of action. “Okay, it’s time to get the Captain up here. This situation just went over my pay grade.”

Loathed as Alex was to do it, she could not avoid notifying the Captain any longer. Knowing how much he needed the relaxation before their diplomatic mission on Kreetassa, she wanted him to enjoy his sojourn on the holodeck playing his favourite program. Then Alex remembered the only thing Chris Larabee liked more than playing the Man in Black, was unravelling a mystery. The object, space station, whatever it was out there, certainly qualified.

Mary let out a sigh of relief and then felt immediately guilty for wishing to see Chris Larabee in his command chair instead of Alex. For reasons that needed no explanation, Chris’s presence as master of the Maverick, was comforting during times of crisis. She had no doubt Alex felt the same and knew the third-ranking officer’s hesitation in calling the Captain back to the bridge was due to her affection for him, and not any desire to remain in command.

Alex was about to reach for her combadge when suddenly, the ship in the process of withdrawing from the station, suddenly came to a jolting halt. Alex almost fell out of her chair as the ship registered the interference and yellow alert warning lights began flashing across the bridge. Mary instinctively dug her nails into the armrests of her chair to keep from falling out of it, while across the bridge the rest of the officers on deck braced themselves against any solid surface to avoid being unseated or knocked off their feet.

“What the hell was that?” Alex demanded. “Did we just get snagged by a tractor beam?”

Both Charlotte and Kate were checking their stations furiously, their eyes scanning the readings to determine what had just happened to them. Multiple alerts were screaming across the ship, the sensors registering the jolt even if it could not explain why. Meanwhile, the view screen ahead revealed their lack of motion. The station remained the same size and the stars around it was still as a picture. At the Con, Alex saw Nora wrestling with the controls, her hands moving deftly over the helm station trying to get them moving again.

“It’s not a tractor beam,” Kate answered first, her expression revealing her concern as well as her bewilderment. “There’s no evidence of anything like that coming from the station.”

“Well we’re not caught in flypaper, something’s got us,” Alex grumbled and tapped her badge. “Captain, please report to the bridge immediately.”

Displaying similar puzzlement was Charlotte whose green eyes were scanning the displays on her console and was being presented with data she did not like. “I’m not picking up anything to explain why we’re stuck like this. I...I don’t understand it.”

“Several tonnes of starship doesn’t just stop moving,” Alex returned promptly and thought quickly. “Try broadening your search patterns for any non-standard types of radiation, including spatial phenomena like cosmic strings or micro-singularities. Kate, raise our shields. If what’s got us in its grip is coming from there, this could be the beginning of the hostilities.”

“Aye Commander,” Kate nodded once, agreeing with that suggestion wholeheartedly and started raising the shields.

“Anything?” Alex returned her attention to Charlotte.

“Nothing yet,” Charlotte shook her head, frustration mounting on her face as the answer to their
predicament remained elusive.

“Alex,” Mary spoke up, but her voice was hushed. “Why isn’t the Captain answering?”

Alex tensed immediately.

She had been so busy issuing orders, trying to determine the cause of their situation; she had not noticed the Captain had yet to respond to her summons. Mary’s statement now struck her with the force of a locomotive because the protocol officer was absolutely correct. Chris Larabee should have responded to her call, if not already on his way to the bridge. Now that Alex thought about it, she realised he would have contacted the bridge immediately after feeling the jolt. The fact he had yet to do so, even with the ship on yellow alert, was not only completely out of character for him, but it was also unbelievable.

It wasn’t just the Captain. Alex’s mind quickly grasped the magnitude of the problem. Buck and Ezra would also be raising the bridge if Chris had not.

All eyes were fixed on Alex as she tapped her com badge once more.

“Captain Larabee, please respond immediately.”

There was no answer.

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TEN MINUTES EARLIER

When the neck of his bottle of Red Eye exploded, leaving the body intact and fragments of glass scattered across the stained bar counter, Chris decided this was the ‘something’ Buck Wilmington had indicated. Outside the walls of the saloon, there was a hell of a ruckus brewing as riders on horseback, shot up the town, their loud and drunken hollering rising above the random burst of gunfire, throwing the quiet community into pandemonium.

More bursts of gunfire exploded across the interior of the saloon, sending people scurrying for cover. Some took refuge behind the wooden columns, others dove under tables or just hit the ground. Never one to waste good whisky, Chris filled up an unbroken shot glass and threw back the drink before heading out to investigate. He never realised how unruly the town of Four Corners had been before the arrival of the Seven. In the latter scenarios played by them, the place seemed calmer. Even if this was a holodeck simulation, he did not like this chaos in a town for whom he had developed quite an affection.

Stepping out into the boardwalk, he took a puff of the cheroot the Man in Black always seemed to have, seeing the men riding through town, raising nine kinds of hell astride their horses. They were repeatedly firing into the crowd, riding on a liquor high intending to cause a stir, more than actual harm. Trouble was, drunken men were terrible shots.

“Town always this lively?” He asked of the old man nursing his bottle against the front facade of the saloon.

The old man jumped when a bullet struck the barrel next to where he was sitting before he answered. “Trail herd from Texas, all liquored up. Got in the mood for a lynching.”

As he made that statement, Chris shifted his gaze to a group of men who were coming down the steps from what he knew to be the healer’s infirmary. His gut clenched when he realised it was Nathan they had in their sights for their act of murder. Even though it was a simulation, Chris would always have a knee jerk reaction to seeing any of his staff in danger.
For now, however, his Chief Medical Officer was playing his part in the staged drama, struggling to break free as he was dragged down the steps with a rope around his neck in ominous preparation for the death they had in mind for him. When Nathan’s eyes met Chris’s from across the dusty street, the doctor flashed the Captain a grin and a thumbs up, showing Chris he was getting into the spirit of the game and expecting the Man in Black to come to his rescue.

“Where’s the law?” Chris asked, wondering why the town didn’t have a lawman. In the scenarios they played, JD Dunne always played the part of the Sherrif. There had been no mention of what happened to his predecessor. A community this large had to have one, right?

The old man gestured to two riders fleeing the town for the desert. “Marshall and his deputy,” the man said and then snorted. “That isn’t even his horse.”

Chris watched as Nathan was wrestled onto a wagon and driven away, no doubt to Boot Hill where these things often ended up. Following the buckboard via the boardwalk, he noted the townsfolk doing little to stop this injustice. If anything, they were doing their level best to avoid noticing it at all. The captain had to wonder if it was because they were programmed to ignore the situation, allowing the players in the holodeck drama to have their fun, or were they really that indifferent to such a crime taking place before them.

Suddenly, a woman stepped out onto the street and for a moment, Chris thought Mary had decided to join them in the game and remembered she was spending some quality time with her son, and away from his jackassery. Though she bore Mary’s likeness, no doubt according to Buck’s specifications, the plucky newswoman who intended on standing up to the lynch mob, was a hologram and not his protocol officer and lover.

She was carrying a double-barrel shotgun which was clearly too much for her to handle, but the character (like Mary) was incredibly brave and righteous. She held her ground against them, for all the good it would do and tried to reason with men in no mind to listen to anything but the mob mentality they were gripped in, determined to see it reach its bloody conclusion.

“Stop right there!”

The fear in her face was evident and unfortunately for her, the men she was facing down, knew it.

“Step aside lady,” the leader of this bunch of thugs warned.

Not to be daunted, the woman held her ground and Chris had to admire her for that, even though he had a rough idea how this was going to play out, especially if the situation required the Man in Black and the rest of the seven to intervene.

“We don’t hang men around here for no reason!”

Chris smiled at that, thinking her hologram counterpart was very much like the woman he loved and once again, felt a pang of guilt at behaving like such an ass over a situation she had no control over. He hadn’t had a chance to apologise to her before entering the holodeck, opting to give her a little space before he made his act of contrition.

“He killed a good man. Said he was a doctor, but he let him die!”

The Texan’s outraged explanation returned Chris to the moment, and he noted Vin standing on the boardwalk, watching the proceedings with dislike. Was that a fucking broom? Chris’s eyes widened in surprise at the tool in the helmsman’s grip. Had the tracker started out as a janitor in this story? Where was his hat? His buckskin coat? In later scenarios, the tracker was never without his favourite
jacket. Chris almost smiled at the man’s unfortunate circumstances when he heard Nathan shouting back.

“Hey, I didn’t say I was a doctor!”

Chris smirked. Try as he might, there was no concealing Nathan Jackson was anything but a highly educated, and skilled doctor and surgeon even in his speech, which was not period specific. Still, Nathan was clearly enjoying playing the part of the helpless victim (for now) and would take great satisfaction giving these men their comeuppance when Chris got things rolling.

“Nathan didn’t kill your boss, gangrene did,” the newswoman raised the barrel of the shotgun higher, an indication she was not going to let them pass.

“You ought to be grateful we’re getting rid of this quack. Ain’t no darkie doctors, and there never will be.”

The captain’s jaw tightened at those words. Even four hundred years from when such ugliness had its day, hearing such comments engendered a visceral hatred in a man was raised with the principles of ‘Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination’. IDIC, as it was known, was the cornerstone of Federation ideology and being reminded of the time in humanity’s history, when distinctions of one’s worth came down to such petty differences, made Chris’s stomach heave in disgust.

“You’re not hanging that man!” She refused to give up, even though everyone could see she was really not able to stop them. Her eyes showed she did not have the strength to pull the trigger and if she did, she was still outnumbered.

“I said get out of my way!”

The leader kicked out his foot and knocked her to the ground as the shotgun discharged impotently. Another one of the Texans rushed in to disarm her. Seeing even a holographic version of Mary treated this way was enough for Chris to mark the man for a good bullet later on. As it was, she was still struggling to get to her feet when the wagon continued towards Boot Hill, brushing off the temporary delay to get back on track.

“Are you people just going to let this happen?”

The backs turned on her was answer enough.

Chris was about to make his move when he heard an angry voice hollering across the street, and stifled a little smile when he saw Vin stepping out of the hardware store carrying a rifle, one not too different from the mare’s leg the character would eventually carry. The only difference between the two being the length of the barrel which had yet to be sawn off.

“You walk off with that rifle, you’re fired!”

Vin who already had a Texan accent because of his upbringing, gave the man a little look before responding with his usual laconic drawl. “Hell, I’m probably gonna get myself killed, ain’t gotta worry about a new job too.”

This did make Chris chuckled and as Vin’s eyes lifted, caught the Captain’s gaze. Both men nodded at each other, ready to begin the program and stepped out onto the street. The two of them met up in the middle, walking purposefully through the town of Four Corners, oblivious to the thunder of hoofbeats behind them. This time, not coming from the hooligans roaming town but the stagecoach making its arrival in Four Corners.
“What the hell were you doing in there?” Chris had to ask as they got their guns ready for the ensuing gunfight.

“I had a job apparently,” Vin shrugged as he slung the rifle over his shoulder.

“Pushing a broom?” The Captain’s brow arched in amusement. “You?”

Vin bristle and shot him a glare. “What’s that supposed to mean?

“It means, weren’t you the one who almost got thrown out of your quarters by your wife for leaving clothes all over the floor?”

“Shaddap Larabee,” Vin snorted. When they were in this place, in these clothes, their Starfleet rank was non-existent. Here they were the gunslinger and the tracker, as well as the best friends that they were.

Chris laughed a little harder and then faced front again. Up ahead, the short fence surrounding the cemetery where the healer was about to meet his untimely end approached. Nathan was still looking as he was enjoying this whole thing, even though four hundred years ago, he might not have taken the situation as lightly. Standing on top of a wagon, the noose around his neck, Nathan knew he would soon be delivered and the holodeck safeties would never let any harm come to him.

“What the hell was that?” Vin spoke first, familiar enough with his ship to know something had just struck the Maverick.

“Computer, halt program!” Chris barked, ignoring Vin’s question because all he could think about right now, was the danger his ship might potentially be facing. Why hadn’t Alex called? The woman knew better than to delay notifying him if there was any threat to the Maverick.

His demand for the computer to halt the program went unheard. It continued to run, with the annoying laugh of the Texans’ leader reaching across the cemetery. Chris and Vin exchanged alarmed glances when they realised nothing was freezing as it was supposed to do when the captain had given the holodeck computer the command to stop.

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“Computer, halt program,” Chris repeated, his alarm rising another notch. The last time this
happened, they were trapped by Q and all the safeties had been disabled. If this was a repeat of that situation, they were in a hell of a lot of trouble. However, Chris knew for a fact this was not Q. Billy still played with Quinn, Q’s son. This much Chris knew and that meant the Maverick had been free from Q’s shenanigans.

When that second demand went unanswered, Vin gave it a try. “Computer, arch.”

If the simulation wasn’t functioning properly they had to get out of here. If the Maverick was under attack, they needed to be on the bridge, although like Chris, Vin wondered why Alex had not raised the alarm before a possible threat became a very real one.

Nothing happened.

“Aw hell.”

Suddenly Chris and Vin realised, as they watched Nathan about to be strung up, they had a bigger problem then not just being able to get out of the holodeck.
Holodeck One

After failing to contact any of the senior staff in Holodeck One and confirming all seven men were still on board the Maverick, Alex finally reached the unpleasant conclusion Chris Larabee hadn’t checked in with the bridge because he simply couldn’t. The could be no other explanation for his continued silence. It was a running joke among the senior staff on the Maverick, Chris went into the shower with his combadge and would have had it surgically grafted to his person if Nathan allowed it. The very idea he would ignore a summons to the bridge following an alert was not only preposterous but rather ominous in light of their present difficulties.

With the mysterious space station having no interest in them beyond holding them in position like a fly trapped in amber, Alex concluded their out of touch crew members was the only reason for it. The last time anyone had taken the Captain or any staff off the ship, it was due to the handiwork of the Q, but the Q entity had promised to avoid bedevilling the crew of the Maverick since his son Quinn considered Billy Travis a playmate. Of course, it could be the C’Kaia who had a personal grudge against the Captain but they had the firepower to obliterate the ship and simply take Chris, not waste their time with snares.

No, this was not the work of either Q or the C’Kaia. The culprit was the station before them, the one they could not escape.

“Charlotte, you have the Con,” Alex said, gratefully vacating Chris Larabee’s chair, feeling it much too big for her all of a sudden. Gesturing at Mary to follow her, she headed towards the turbo lift, knowing the woman would be as worried about the Captain as she would be about Vin if left behind on the bridge. “Kate, continue to monitor that thing,” she glanced at the station on the viewer. “I want to know the minute anything changes. We’re going to the holodeck.”

“Aye Commander,” Kate nodded.

Mary offered Alex a look of gratitude, hating nothing more than having to stay behind when the others faced danger. On previous occasions, she would be next to Chris offering him her support, but now it was he who might be in danger and Mary couldn’t stand sitting on the sidelines. As Alex led the way to the turbo lift, Mary saw her tapping her combadge. She guessed whatever was going on down in Holodeck One, they needed expert help.

“Julia, this is Alex, I need you to meet me down at Holodeck One.”

The doors parted when Julia’s voice responded. “What’s happening? Where’s the Captain?”

The Chief Engineer of the Maverick was herself trying to determine the nature of the trap her ship was presently ensnared and had expected the Captain to either demand for answers or solutions to their predicament. Upon hearing Alex’s request for her to report to the Holodeck, Julia realised the Captain’s silence might have darker reasons because she remembered where Ezra had been intending to spend the afternoon.

“I think he and the rest of the senior staff are trapped in the holodeck,” Alex explained as the doors to the turbo lift slid close sealing them inside and ferrying them to their destination. Yet even as she answered Julia, Alex knew the problem was much larger than they knew because short of death, nothing would prevent Chris Larabee from responding to a summons from the bridge. Nothing.

“How?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Alex answered, exchanging a glance with Mary. “But I’m going to
say it’s got to do with the reason we’re snagged in place.”

There was a brief pause before Julia’s voice returned. “I’m on my way.”

The minute Mary Travis stepped onto the level of the Maverick where the holodecks were located, she felt it.

It immediately enveloped her like the coils of a python and made Mary feel as if she were trapped in a crowded room, with bodies pressed against her. Except this was in her mind. She could feel them in her head, the presence of an alien consciousness pushing hard against her defences. As she stepped out of the turbo lift, she was affected immediately but saw the science officer next to her, oblivious to the mental invasion Mary could feel clawing at her like invisible wraiths.

Being married to a Vulcan had forced Mary to develop her own psi ability during the meld between husband and wife. While her telepathic powers wouldn’t even match that of a Vulcan child, exposure to the meld made her sensitive to telepathic interference as well as feeling a mental connection to the people she had a deep emotional connection.

During the battle of Sector 001, Mary had known instantly when Syan had died fighting the Borg. She felt the final moment of pain and shock, before everything he was, even his katra, went black and was lost to the solar winds. After meeting Chris Larabee, her growing affection for the Captain of the Maverick had allowed her to find him on the vast C’Kai ship when the alien insects had abducted him. Right now, she could sense nothing of him and it filled her with dread.

“Alex,” she said when she managed to compose herself. “We’re not alone.”

The science officer stopped in mid-step and turned to her sharply. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Mary’s eyes darted around the hallway emptied by their status at yellow alert and repeated herself. “We’re not alone.”

Alex followed suit, glancing up and down the hallways before facing Mary again, needing more clarity on the woman’s statement. If there was an intruder alert, she needed to know immediately to raise the alarm. “Mary, what do you mean?”

“I mean I can feel an alien presence on board,” Mary explained and tried to focus her thoughts so she could give Alex a better answer. Her eyes rested on the door to the holodeck. “In there.”

Alex’s chest tightened because that would mean the Captain was not just trapped in the holodeck, he and the others, Vin her mind thought immediately, might be captured.

“Are you sure?”

However, even as she asked the question, Alex knew Mary wouldn’t mention it unless she was anything but convinced of this fact. On previous occasions, Mary’s psi ability had proved useful in being able to detect telepathic influences. As one who was married to a Vulcan, she knew the bonding process could awaken the ability in humans, albeit in a limited fashion. It was Mary who helped Vin gain some discipline with his own abilities because his upbringing had kept him from learning what was taught to every Vulcan from childhood.

“Nevermind,” Alex said quickly. “Of course you are. You’re sensing them in the holodeck?”
“Sensing what?” Julia Pemberton announced her arrival with Rain walking alongside her, having just emerged from the turbo lift. Alex was about to question why Rain was present when she remembered Julia and Rain had intended on making modifications to improve transporter functions when the trouble had begun.

“I’ll explain later,” Alex replied, feeling the need to get into the holodeck more urgent than ever in light of Mary’s revelation. Pressing the panel, she waited for the doors to slide open.

Nothing happened.

“Try it again,” Mary urged, growing more anxious by the door’s lack of cooperation.

Like Alex, Julia and Rain tensed at the door’s refusal to part. When Alex leaned forward and tapped the panel and once again, there was no response. Alex swept her gaze over her comrade’s faces and then spoke once more. “Computer, open the door to Holodeck One, authorisation Commander, Styles Alexandra.”

The door refused to move.

“That can’t happen,” Julia declared bewildered. “Let me try.”

The engineer immediately stepped forward and pressed the button once more before receiving the same result. However, unlike Alex, she was not satisfied by that an immediately retrieved a tool she called a ‘sonic’ for some unknown reason, and began working on the panel next to the door controls.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Rain demanded while Julia worked. The Trill transporter chief had been compelled to come down after learning there was trouble with the holodeck where Nathan was presently engaged in the Magnificent Seven program with his friends.

“The Captain isn’t answering his hails,” Alex explained. “None of them are.”

“That’s not good,” Rain frowned. “You think they’re hurt?”

Rain who was a delightfully wicked prankster with an inappropriate sense of humour was all serious now and Alex could see just how worried she was about Nathan.

“Mary thinks we have guests on board,” Alex revealed. “They might have something to do with why the Captain and the others are on silent running.”

“How is that possible?” Rain gasped. “The only way it could be done is through transportation and no one, I mean no one can get through my security protocols. I’ve programmed any pattern attempting to get through our measures to be diverted into a secured buffer. It’s where I store the collective works of Kenny G and Justin Bieber.”

“Oh my God,” Mary made a face. “That’s against the Khitomer Accord.”

Alex shook her head, ignoring the two for the moment because she was more interested in Julia’s progress with the door, although Rain’s method of torture was certainly cruel by her reckoning.

“Julia? How are you doing?”

“Almost there.”

By now the panel was a tangle of wire and exposed chips, brightly illuminated with a luminescent glow. Her fingers moved deftly as she wielded the tool over the circuitry and no more than a second
after uttering those words, the door slid open suddenly, startling all three of the officers at its abruptness.

“Good job,” Alex complimented and then added. “Can you keep it open. I don’t want it sealing us in if they’re in trouble in there. I want the exit open indefinitely.”

“No problem,” Julia said tinkering a little more to comply with the order. After a second, she looked up at the science officer and temporary commander of the Maverick. “It’s done.”

“Oh, Alex nodded as she looked ahead to the world awaiting her on the other side of the doorway. “Let’s go.”

Judging by the position of the sun in the simulated sky, it was noon in the town of Four Corners.

All four women had visited the place at one time or another, with Mary and Julia participating more frequently than Alex and Rain. Rain found her tolerance of the program marginal, mostly because the Old West to an advanced society like the Trill thought the time period a notch above primitive and Alex disliked any setting where the conventions of the day gave men a great deal of power over women. Considering her history, Alex could never find such a situation nostalgic or acceptable. Of course, she did not voice it to Vin because she knew he loved being here with the Captain and his friends, and would never dampen his enthusiasm with that revelation.

Nothing appeared out of place with the simulation revealing just another day in Four Corners, except the town did appear a little rougher than they remembered. The community they had seen was bustling and vibrant, but then Alex recalled this particular scenario was based on the town at the onset of the Seven’s arrival, so it might be wilder than before. A dusty wind swept across the wooden buildings, clattering the window shutters and assailing sign posts hanging from awnings. The sand carried on the wind had scoured the paint of most structures, turning the colours from contrasting to watery. As always, the air carried the scent of animal manure, cheap liquor and dry hay.

“Everything seems fine,” Julia remarked, giving the place a once over before making sure the arch was still in place, allowing them their escape if needed. The townsfolk seemed to take no notice of it as they passed by, even though their movements were directed strategically around it. “Maybe their combadges are malfunctioning in here.”

“I swear, if I find out if they’ve taken off their combadges so they can carouse with saloon girls or worse, their shower preferences are going to be set for icy cold, all month.” Rain grumbled.

Alex stifled a little smile, remembering Ezra’s experience after being foolish enough to tamper with the customised settings Rain had put on her transporter system. The Security Chief had learned his lesson well.

“It’s nothing like that,” Mary said firmly, her expression devoid of any amusement. She could sense the alien presence in here as if Four Corners was the epicentre of their concentration. “The alien presence I’m feeling, its in here, all around us.”

“Alright,” Alex said to her companions. “We’re not going to make any threatening moves until we learn more about the situation. Right now, our primary goal is to find the Captain and the others and get them out of here. We’ll deal with the intruders once we’ve appraised the Captain of what’s going on.”
“Works for me,” Julia nodded in agreement.

Rain did not answer, because she was too concerned with the looks they were getting from the townsfolk. Some had paused to stare, others were whispering softly to themselves, shooting reproachful stares at the four new arrivals. It took Rain a minute to understand why. Looking down at herself and the other officers present, she realised they were four women dressed in what was essentially men’s clothing.

“Hey we’re sticking out like sore thumbs without dresses,” Rain pointed out. “We need to look demure and helpless. Somebody, pretend to get the vapours.”

“That’s not funny,” Alex growled and once again cursed this program and its antiquated ideas of gender equality. “Let’s just find the Captain and get out of here.”

“Good idea,” Mary agreed, searching the landscape before her and ignoring the looks of reproach and amusement being sent in their direction. “Where could Chris and the others be?”

Alex, Julia and Rain stared at each other before answering in perfect unison. “Saloon.”

In the saloon they would later recognise as the Standish Tavern when the gambler of the group bought the place, they found the Captain, Vin and Nathan. Once again, the premises seemed rougher, with several windows recently broken, if the glass on the floor was any indication. There seemed to be dust everywhere and Alex realised this was so because it wasn’t Inez behind the bar. Buck had programmed Inez’s likeness as the bartender to this establishment and like her real-life counterpart, the holographic Inez was just as fastidious and kept the place as hygienic as possible in this day and age.

“Where is this friend of yours?” Vin was asking Chris Larabee while they stood at the bar.

“I think he’s holed up with some woman at the hotel across the street,” the Captain replied.

“Chris!” Mary didn’t stand on ceremony upon seeing the Captain in his Man in Black persona. “Are you alright?”

All three men turned around and stared at the women who were standing in front of them.

Chris Larabee regarded the woman in front of him, raked his eyes over her from top to bottom before answering. “We said, we weren’t interested in talking ma’am. Now I suggest you go put on some decent clothes. This ain’t the place to be dressed the way you are.”

Mary stared. “What?”

“Captain,” Alex ignored the Captain’s attempt at a joke, “we have a situation. You need to get to the bridge immediately.”

“You know these ladies Chris?” Nathan asked.

“Never seen them before,” Chris replied, shaking his head bewildered.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Rain exploded. “Nathan if this is your idea of a joke, you will be sleeping on a couch tonight.”

“Rain,” Alex slapped a hand on her shoulder. “Captain Larabee, you are needed on the bridge.” She said those word slowly, meeting his intense gaze and realising she liked it even less now. The man
could cut a person to the bone with that glare and this was no exception. She had resisted the urge to look at Vin because if she did, the truth was going to be damming. An ugly suspicion had started to dawn on her and she needed Chris’s next answer to be sure.

“How do you know my name?” Nathan stared at Rain. “And what’s a couch?”

“Ain’t been a soldier in years,” Chris Larabee drawled. “And last I looked, there isn’t a bridge for miles.”

“Oh God,” Mary groaned and started to rub the bridge of her nose. “They don’t remember...”

“You mean these men actually think they’re apart of the program?” Julia burst out.

“Are you ladies alright?” Nathan asked concerned since everything these women were saying was gibberish. “You sound like you might have got a bit of heatstroke. Maybe we need to get you someplace away from the sun. Come on up to my Infirmary and I’ll give...”

“You finish that sentence and I will knock you on your ass!” Rain snapped and then saw a gasp ripple through the crowd, undoubtedly because it was not proper for a lady to speak that way, especially when they were in a saloon where no decent woman ought to be.

“Ladies, I think we’re done,” Chris stood up from his stool and this time, he looked positively menacing as the Man in Black, where before he had just seemed imposing. “I don’t know or care what this is about, but we’d appreciate it if you left us to our drinking. Now.”

He was intimidating enough for Rain to take a step back although she saw the confusion on Nathan’s face by her hostility. Rain retreated behind Mary as if the Protocol Officer was a magic ward against the power of Chris Larabee’s fearsome persona.

“Okay,” she whispered quietly. “You talk to him.”

Mary knew it was pointless. He was staring at them with the cold eyes of a killer, who had no idea who they were or what they meant to him. He didn’t even know himself and Mary knew the alien entities having taken control of their holodeck was the reason for it. However, for her own sake, she had to try.

“Chris,” she said in a calmer tone. “We’re not your enemies. We’re trying to help you.”

“Then be a help. Leave.”

“Vin,” Alex said finally, turning to the tracker who was trying not to look at her, as if doing so was difficult to do. “Do you know who I am?”

Vin Tanner looked at the woman before him, with her golden skin and her lovely brown eyes and wanted to say she was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen but he suspected that was not the answer she was looking for. “Can’t say that I do. We know each other ma’am?”

Alex felt herself running a finger over the wedding band on her hand and was almost tempted to give him the truth, but realise if the situation was as bad as it appeared, then that complication would not serve them right now.

“No,” she said quietly. “Not at all.”
Briefing

Chapter Notes

OOC: Boys take a back seat for this chapter because of plot.

It felt positively surreal to be in this room and be sitting in the Captain’s chair.

Alex was certain a retributory bolt of lightning was going to come out of nowhere and strike her
dead for daring to invade Chris Larabee’s undisputed domain. In fact, she wondered how many of
her fellow officers seated around the table of the conference room felt the same way. Following their
rather disastrous attempt to remove the Captain and the senior officers from the Holodeck, Alex had
immediately convened a meeting to discuss what was to be done next.

Seated in the room was Mary and Julia, representing what remained of the senior staff. Rain,
Charlotte and Kate were also present. After their failure to convince Chris, Vin or Nathan to leave
the holodeck, Alex knew the situation was far more serious than they had first envisioned. With the
unseen alien presence trapping the minds of the Captain and the men of the senior staff in the
personas of the Magnificent Seven characters, getting them off the holodeck was no longer a simple
matter of extraction.

“I can’t believe we had to leave them in there,” Julia shook her head in frustration. They had not
encountered Ezra during their time in Four Corners, but she imagined if they did find him, he would
be in the same condition as the Captain. It was bad enough Chris Larabee had turned into an
extremely hostile gunslinger with a fast draw and an even shorter temper. Ezra if he reverted to the
persona of the Gambler, would be an unscrupulous operator whose only love was money and scams.

“We didn’t have a choice,” Mary sighed, empathising with her emotions. It had been difficult to look
at Chris and know she was nothing to him. Worse yet, the menace he’d always exuded as the
Gunslinger had evolved into downright scary and she still winced at how fearful she had been in his
presence. “I don’t think it was a coincidence we had trouble trying to access the holodeck. If we try
to remove them by force, there’s no telling what could happen.”

“We could get Doctor Li Pong to tranquilise them,” Charlotte suggested. “Keep them under until we
figure out what’s going on.”

“No,” Alex shook her head, having considered that option. “Right now, they’re only confining their
influence to the men in the holodeck, if we start taking provocative action before we understand what
they’re after, there’s no reason to assume they won’t try to take the rest of the ship as well.”

After their experiences with the Undaia some month ago, where all of the women on board the
Maverick had been controlled by an ancient alien race, none of the women present, wanted a repeat
of that outcome.

“Exactly,” Rain agreed with Alex’s assessment of the situation as much as she loathed to admit it.
She wanted to get Nathan out of there but he was trapped in the mindset of the Healer and dragging
him out of the holodeck and its Old West setting to the 24th century, would be traumatic to say the
least. “If they can trap a galaxy class starship, I’d hate to see what they would do if we really ticked
them off.”
“Then we go over there.”

All eyes turned to Kate, who until now had remained silent.

“There, as in the space station, or whatever that is?” Mary stared at her.

“That’s correct,” Kate nodded. The set of her jaw indicated she was absolutely serious.

“We have no idea what that thing is. Right now, we’re assuming its a space station, what if it’s something worse?” Charlotte countered.

“How much worse could it be?” Kate met Alex’s eyes because at the moment the Science Officer was the master of the Maverick and ultimately any decision to go would rest with her. “We’re caught. We know it and they know it. Even if we can get the Captain and the others back, we still have to break free of this tractor beam or force field they’ve got us snagged in. So no matter how it goes, we have to get over there to find out what they’ve done to us.”

“She’s right,” Alex agreed with her succinct assessment of the situation. “This all started when we got near that object. Whatever is happening to our people, it started there. The solution to both our problems is on that whatever it is.”

Alex wished more than anything Buck Wilmington was here. The First Officer knew how to offer alternatives so they could find the best solution and right now, Alex needed that counsel badly. Unfortunately, Buck was caught in the same trap as the Captain and all the others. As much as she worried for Vin, she also worried for the shameless womaniser who somehow managed to become the big brother she never had but always needed.

“In that case,” Mary spoke up. “I volunteer to go.”

“You?” Julia stared at her in surprise. Mary almost never went on missions unless there was a diplomatic component involved. As a Protocol Officer, there was no need. “Why?”

“Because Mary’s the only one who can sense these aliens,” Alex answered before the Protocol Officer could. “If she goes over there, she might be able to find them. We won’t.”

Mary offered Alex a little smile of gratitude and offered a further explanation beyond her very personal one. “Whoever they are, they’re powerful enough to slice through Vin’s mental shields to take control of his mind. I’ve got some sensitivity but little more than that so, they may not consider me a threat.”

“We don’t even know how to get you on board,” Charlotte countered. “We can’t even scan it.”

Even before Charlotte mentioned the obstacle of the neutronium hull they were unable to scan, Alex was silent considering the question. While she might be out of her depth in command, Alex’s strength was in providing answers to Chris Larabee when he needed it. He often claimed she was the best science officer in the fleet. For his sake, she hoped he wasn’t wrong. Focussing her thoughts amidst the chatter of voices around her, she searched for an idea until finally, inspiration struck.

“Julia, can you rig a torpedo to discharge chronoton particles?”

“Chronoton particles?” Julia stared at her at the unusual request. Chronoton particles were a quirk of sub-atomic fields, known to cause erratic behaviour in warp reactors but good for little else. “What good would that do? Oh!” Her green eyes widened as it dawned on her what Alex was suggesting.

“What?” Mary threw quick glances at both women for an explanation.
“That’s good commander,” Charlotte remarked with a little smile once she unravelled the request. “That’s very good.”

“What’s very good?” Mary demanded impatiently.

“If we hit that thing with a beam of chronoton particles, it would cause a localised shift in the hull’s atomic frequency. “Rain explained, revealing the result of such a torpedo hit.

“You see,” Charlotte took up the narration, “all matter in this universe operates on a specific atomic frequency. If that frequency changes even in the slightest, matter would be out of phase with the rest of the universe and lose its molecular cohesion, and when that happens...”

“We can scan it.” Kate declared with a grin.

“We can do more than that,” Rain added excitedly. “It also means we can get a transporter beam through.”

Mary felt a surge of relief and knew if Chris was here, he would be the first to compliment the Science Officer on her idea. It was often said Alex was the smartest human on board the Maverick,. At moments like this, Mary was pleased to see her prove it. “How long will this take to do?”

“An hour or two,” Julia gave her answer to both Mary and Alex. “I’ll get my team working on it right away.”

“Good,” Alex nodded. “Charlotte, in the meantime, continue trying to isolate what they’re using to keep us trapped like this.”

“Aye Commander,” Charlotte nodded.

Alex swept her gaze across the faces around the table before addressing her officers collectively.

“Depending on what our scans reveal after we deploy the chronoton torpedo, I want a small team to beam over to that station. Mary, you are to make contact with the aliens if you can. Julia, you need to go with her, find out what kind of technology they are using to keep us trapped. Kate, you and another member of the security team will go with them. The second you feel the situation warrants it, you are to beam back here immediately. Is that clear?”

“Aye Commander,” Kate answered and her expression showed her determination to ensure none of those under her watch was harmed in any way.

“Charlotte, I’ll need you to take the Conn.”

“Me?” Charlotte stared at Alex mystified. “Where are you going to be?”

“On Holodeck One,” she sighed, not relishing the idea of seeing Vin when he had no idea what they were to each other. “I’m going back in there. Those aliens have our Captain and the senior staff, I want to know why.”

This time when Alex entered Holodeck One, she was alone.

Before she stepped through the arch leaving the Maverick behind, Alex studied the scenario of this particular adventure of the Seven’s and had a rough idea of what to expect. The initial tale involved the Magnificent Seven saving a community formed by runaway slaves and displaced indigenous
tribes, being terrorised by a mad Confederate general. While this provided the framework for the story, the true substance of it was the formation of the Seven into a brotherhood.

When Alex and the rest of the Maverick’s female officers encountered the Captain, Vin and Nathan at the saloon, the first scene which had the Gunslinger and the Tracker rescuing the Healer from a lynching. The next scene to be played ought to be the Seven being approached by the community leader’s needing help but with the program running continuously, the whole plot was being played out in real-time, which meant when Alex stepped into Four Corners, it was night.

Rain would be joining her later, since the Transporter Chief’s rather incendiary first meeting with Nathan complicated matters if she reappeared now. Instead, the Healer was intended to have a token love interest in this narrative, which gave Rain the perfect opportunity to insert herself later with an explanation that would hopefully quash any questions about her earlier presence.

This time, Alex entered the Holodeck dressed more appropriately for the time period, although there was no way in hell she was wearing corsets or a skirt, not when she was dealing with men who were under an alien influence. While the Gunslinger would eventually display some heroic tendencies, the truth of it was, at this stage in the Magnificent Seven’s timeline, he was a dangerous shootist with a hair-trigger temper who had difficulty tolerating anyone getting into his business.

Considering she had to convince the man he was the Captain of a starship, four hundred years in the future, that was about as getting into his business as one could get.

Instead, Alex wore black jeans, a white open-necked shirt, with a leather vest and a bolero hat. Forgoing ladies shoes, she settled on a comfortable pair of workman’s boots, the kind favoured by farm hands and concealed herself in a long suede coat of burgundy leather. Since it covered most of her, it kept the rest of her clothing from offending the delicate sensibilities of the folk in this era. More importantly, it concealed the Smith and Wesson No.3 on her hip even though it was the phaser she had secreted in the saddle bag slung over her shoulder, along with a tricorder, that was going to be her weapon of choice. Particularly, the stun setting.

Looking over her shoulder, she was comforted by the arch, locked into remaining open just in case the aliens decided to trap her in here with the rest of the men. She had no idea why only the senior staff had been taken over but she wanted a quick exit if needed. Meanwhile, The townsfolk of this simulated reality seemed oblivious to the doorway, that revealed the empty corridor beyond. In light of the crisis, Alex had ordered the deck and more importantly, the other holodecks off limits until the crisis was over.

Facing front, she brushed her fingertips against her wedding ring now hanging from her neck with a length of gold chain, to remind her what was at stake here.

Her appearance did raise a few eyebrows as she made her way through town, as a woman in pants always did, but this was mostly curiosity than outright reproach or suspicion. She headed towards the nearest hotel to rent a room to leave her saddle bag for the night. The narrative revealed the Seven would not be making their fateful ride to the Seminole Village until morning. While Alex had no intention of staying that long, she had to play within the limits of the storyline.

Sweeping her gaze across the town, she noted how different it looked. When she had come here with Vin on the few occasions he managed to convince her to join him for one of the Seven’s adventures, the town had been thriving. It was typical of any frontier town but there was a sense of kinetic progress. Right now, the town appeared rather dismal, especially with so many windows broken and bullet holes riddling walls and in signs hanging from awnings. To her surprise, Alex found she was rather angered by this. Holographic or not, Four Corners deserved better.
Recognising one of the locals, a man called Virgil Watson, who owned the hardware store, Alex strolled over to him as he was sweeping the dust off his porch although, in this community, it would be like trying to sweep the sand off the beach.

“Good evening,” she greeted politely.

Virgil straightened up and eyed her curiously, but made no mention at her less than lady-like appearance. The Territory was filled with all kinds of strange folk. Why should she be any different? Besides, her accent indicated she wasn’t from around here.

“Good evening.”

“What happened here?” Alex indicated the damage across town with a quick glance at his broken window.

“Oh that,” the man frowned unhappily as if he was suddenly reminded of the unpleasantness earlier in the day. “Bunch of drunk Texans blew into town earlier this morning and shot up the place,” he shook his head in disgust. “Almost lynched our local healer. Nothing good came out of that except the damn fools got themselves killed, God rest their souls.”

Drunk Texans? She thought and then remembered the scenario of the Healer’s lynching included about a band of ruffians giving the town trouble at the onset of the program.

“At least no one else got hurt,” she sympathised.

“Yeah,” the man nodded. “Young man I had working for me, worst store clerk I ever hired, and a gunslinger named Larabee put a stop to it.”

Store clerk? Oh, Vin would have just loved that.

“Good to hear,” she commented and then asked further. “I don’t suppose you know where I could find Buck Wilmington? He’s pretty tall, wears a heavy brown coat and a moustache you can’t miss, and...” Alex groaned inwardly at being forced to say this, “he’s really popular with women.”

“Oh him!” Virgil’s face lit up in recognition and Alex rolled her eyes in annoyance at that description actually working.

“Yeah, I think I saw him headed towards Digger Dave’s Saloon over there.” He gestured to one of the bars on the main street. Clunky piano music could be heard behind its swing doors, and the light from inside the place was a strobe against the darkened boardwalk. “Now you seem like a nice young lady, even if you are dressed a little peculiar. I wouldn’t waste my time with a tomcat like that.”

“Believe me, I know,” Alex laughed at the advice which she thought was kind of sweet. Even if Mr Watson was just a hologram, Alex decided she liked him. “Don’t worry, I just have some business with him. Besides,” she felt the ring against her collarbone, “I’m spoken for.”

Damn it, she swore inwardly, she was starting to like this program. If they ever got out of this, Vin was never going to let her forget it.

As it turned out, she didn’t have to look very far to find Buck Wilmington.

Alex had long considered Buck to be one of the finest first officers in the fleet. Aside from having a command style that was instantaneously approachable, Buck was sharper than most people gave him
credit because he disarmed them with his affable charm. When the Captain was being his acerbic best, Buck was there to blunt the edge of the man’s temper. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind, the success of the Maverick in the field had as much to do with Buck Wilmington as it did Chris Larabee.

However, when it came to finding female company, with the exception of James T Kirk, Buck Wilmington had no equal.

Stepping out of the Gem Hotel where she had just acquired lodgings, she was about to cross the street when suddenly, someone came up alongside her, exuding animal magnetism (so he thought) with a typically smarmy greeting.

“Now what’s a pretty thing like you walking the streets at night, all by your lonesome?”

Alex broke into a smile, hating to admit that even if the big, dumb jerk had no idea who she was or for that matter, who he was, it was good to see him. Alex turned to him and broke into a smile. “Boy, am I glad to see you. Come on, we’ve gotta talk.”

“Well I’m all for that,” Buck grinned and immediately slid an arm around her waist.

“Just take it easy!” She shoved him in the ribs. “Put it back in your pants! I’ve got something serious to say. Come on,” she looked around for someplace they could have a conversation in private. “Is there someplace we can talk privately?”

Before he opened his mouth, Alex cut him off. “If you say your bedroom, I will slap you.”

Buck straightened up and stared at the strange woman with her pretty skin and full lips and raised a brow. “Gotta say, you’re kind of blowing hot and cold here.”

Alex shook her head in exasperation when it suddenly occurred to her he might actually follow her to the arch if she led him there. Among the seven, even in their current personas, Alex knew Buck was the one she would most likely succeed in reaching because the man was always open to listening. He was never judgemental and had the unerring ability to give people the benefit of the doubt. If she could get him on side, or convince him this was a simulated reality, at best, she’d get the First Officer of the Maverick back, at worst, an ally in all this.

Even though it went against her own rule about not taking provocative action, Alex knew this was a risk she had to take, not just for the benefits but also to see what would happen.

“Nevermind,” she took him by the arm, “I got a place.”

“Now you’re talking,” he grinned at her and Alex resisted the urge to poke him in the ribs again. “So what’s your name honey? You seem to know mine.”

“Alex.”

“That’s a boy’s name.”

“Alexandra,” Alex frowned, towing him down the main street towards the arch he could see. “But I prefer Alex.”

“So Alex, what’s a nice girl like you doing in town? Four Corners ain’t the place for a lady.”

He didn’t seem to care where he was being led, Alex realised, as long as he was being led somewhere by her. No doubt, he was entertaining ideas of hot sex or God knows what else. Then
again, his persona in this program was not unlike Buck Wilmington the Starfleet officer, which was why he probably liked this program so much. So far, he seemed to be suffering no ill effects of her attempting to lead him there.

“I was looking for you.”

“Now I’m flattered,” he said curiously, “but I’m pretty sure we ain’t never met. “

“Oh we’ve met,” Alex stated. “We’re friends.”

“I think you’re mistaking me for someone else,” Buck returned smoothly, never one to be fazed by anything. “Although I don’t mind making new friends,” Once again, he tried putting an arm around her.

Alex rolled her eyes and didn’t bother to remove it, mostly because she could see the arch directly ahead of them. Besides, once she got him through the doorway, back to the Maverick, she was certain the last thing on his mind would be sex. Okay, maybe the second last thing. This was after all Buck Wilmington.

Buck for his part, didn’t notice the strange portal in the middle of the street, aware only that he was being directed somewhere by an exotic looking woman he wouldn’t mind spending the evening with. She smelled nice and had pretty hair. True, he wasn’t exactly sure what race she was, because even though she was coloured, she didn’t look like a negro and she wasn’t an Indian either. Then again, her accent sounded like she was from England or someplace like that. It had a definite Eastern quality about it. Either way, he liked how it sounded in his ears.

“What the hell...”

All thoughts about bedding the woman before him vanished when he saw the door in front of him. As he peered into the portal in the middle of the street, his eyes widened in shock and something that felt like light pouring through a freshly made bullet hole in a darkened room, penetrated his mind. It was also the last thought he had before everything went black.

“BUCK!” Alex uttered a fearful cry when the big man next to her went down like a heavy sack. His long legs collapsed beneath him and he hit the dirt. Alex had barely time to grab him by the arm before he fell flat on his face. Managing to hold him up, she faced front and saw the arch beckoning her with an almost siren song until she realised if she took him through there, if she took any of the seven through there, the same thing would happen to them.

Using all the strength she could muster, Alex hauled Buck away from the arch, hoping the proximity would restore him. It didn’t. He was almost a dead weight and only her Starfleet trained endurance allowed her to get him as far as she did. Finally lowering him to the ground, she cursed loudly, guessing what was needed to help him. It was an action she loathed to take but she had no choice. She cared about this big, dumb idiot as much as her husband and she wasn’t going to let anything happen to him.

“Computer, deactivate arch.”

The computer complied immediately. The arch vanished, with no one except her the wiser. Beneath her, she heard a groan and dropped her gaze back to Buck’s face. He was half-lying against her body when his eyelids fluttered open and he looked up at her.

“Now that’s a pretty sight to wake up to,” he managed a weak smile. “What the hell just happened to me?”
Alex swore inwardly at the aliens who had just told her most pointedly, what would happen if she attempted to interfere with their plans. “Nothing you need to worry about right now.”

Except she may now be trapped in here with them.
Greenhorn

“Ma’am? Do you need some help?”

It did not surprise Alex in the least when she looked over her shoulder to see the offer for help had come from none other than JD Dunne. He was wearing the usual costume of the Eastern greenhorn who had come West to be taken under the wing of the remaining six gunmen making up the Magnificent Seven. Although Alex would never say it to his face, JD always seemed to her like a little boy playing cowboys and Indians, but never did that feel more apparent than right this minute. Perhaps because this was the first outing of the seven, or because on this occasion, JD really believed he was the novice gunfighter he was.

Reminding herself, this was not the junior lieutenant and navigator of the Maverick, but a young man fresh from the city chasing dreams, Alex was about to respond when Buck who was now sitting up, shook off his disoriented state and beat her to it.

“Goddamnit boy, that is one ugly hat.”

Alex almost smacked him in exasperation.

JD however, took great exception to the disparagement of his headwear, especially after he had been trying to lend his assistance. Spine stiffening in need to defend himself, he reacted in the typical fashion of any young man trying to prove himself to someone older and far more seasoned than he.

“Bat Masterson wore this hat,” he said defensively.

“Who?” Alex blurted out before she could stop herself and guessed by the horror on his face; this was not the best statement to make. It was the same face displayed by the Captain every time she referred to his Man in Black character as a ‘cowboy’.

“You don’t know who Bat Masterson is?” The boy stared at her as if she had no idea who Jesus was. “Bat Masterson is famous! He’s on newspapers everywhere! He’s a famous writer, a buffalo hunter, Indian fighter, gunfighter and, and he was a sheriff in Dodge City!”

“All that?” Alex glanced at Buck sceptically because it seemed rather far fetched that one individual was capable of accomplishing so much. It reeked of self-promotion.

“So he says,” Buck snorted, perfectly aware of men who had become legends because of tall tales. Being a lawman himself in Kansas, Buck knew how easy it was for a story to become embellished, particularly for the benefit of Eastern newspapers and young boys like this kid had been. No doubt, the tales of Bat’s exploits had sent him to the Territory, chasing the dream of being a gunfighter, when it was most likely going to land him an early grave.

“Let me guess,” Buck stood up, almost entirely recovered from that bizarre spell a moment ago to eye the young man down. At his full height, Buck stood almost a head taller than JD and felt as imposing as he looked. “You learned to ride in Prep School? Then you read some dime store novel about Kit Carson. Got you all fired up and made you come out West to try your hand as a gunfighter. Is that about right?”

“Buck,” Alex interjected reproachfully, disliking how harsh Buck was in his assessment, especially when the hurt she saw reflected in JD’s eyes implied the first officer was more accurate than he knew. Right or wrong, there was no reason to humiliate JD, even if he was playing a character on the holodeck. “Don’t be mean.”
“Best be mean than letting him get killed because he don’t know any better,” Buck returned, and Alex realised Buck was not trying to hurt the young man but to save him from himself. “This here is the Territory. You think a set of irons and Bat Masterson’s hat is gonna make you a gunslinger? It ain’t. Boot Hill is full of boys like you who came here thinking the same thing. Go home before you become one of them.”

As much as Alex wanted to agree with him and if this were reality, she would have supported his desire to save JD from himself but this simulated world was a fiction and Buck’s turn for the worse also drove home to her, the holodeck safeties were disabled. If anyone of them got hurt in here, they could die. She also knew in the lore of the Magnificent Seven, the Scoundrel and the Kid would come to mean a great deal to each other, even with this unceremonious beginning. Besides, it was a safer proposition if JD remained with them for now.

“Buck,” she tugged at his arm. “Maybe what they didn’t have was you.”

“What?” The ladies’ man stared at her blankly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean,” Alex met his blue eyes. “Those boys didn’t have someone like you looking out for them. Maybe if he did...”

“I don’t need looking...

“Quiet kid,” Buck snapped JD into silence before facing her. “The adults are talking.”

“Buck, you’re riding off tomorrow with your friend Larabee right?”

Buck’s eyes widened in surprise. “How do you know that?”

“Let’s just say I have a special insight into the troubles the Seminoles are having,” she explained as best she could without angering any alien consciousness who might punish him for her revelations. “He’s going to follow you all down there, probably get himself killed in the process. Now, you can let that happen, or you can keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“Why should I care?” Buck countered, casting a glance at the young man who looked like an accident waiting to happen, or at least get killed defending that dumb hat.

“Because that’s who you are,” she said with a little smile. “You care. That’s the best thing about you. Doesn’t matter who it is, you always seem to know what people need and how to help them. Right now, he needs you.”

Buck stared at her strangely. “You’re crazy. You know that? You’re positively insane.”

“But am I wrong?”

Buck opened his mouth to argue, but before he could deny it, he realised she was right. He’d been young once, alone, with no one to help him find his way in the world. Buck stumbled into the army, and that taught him life lessons that remained on his psyche and blooded him in more ways than one. He was already wise to the ways of the world, being born in a whorehouse made him no other way, but he had not realised how cruel it could be.

Buck shot JD a look and let out a snort of exasperation. “First of all,” Buck said striding over to the kid. “Get rid of that damn, stupid hat!”

A short time later, they arrived at the saloon where Chris and Vin were presently drinking. Nathan...
was nowhere to be seen, and Alex guessed he was probably at his Infirmary. Memorising the narrative before entering the holodeck, Alex knew Josiah would be at the site of what would end up being his church. Ezra was hiding out until it was safe to emerge after his latest con had put him in the sights of some rather angry cattlemen.

Her arrival caused a mild stir, mainly because women did not come to the saloon and those who did were either saloon girls or whores. What she was wearing made her neither of those, and they stared at her trying to make out what she was. Self-conscious as hell, she took a step closer to Buck and found he did the same, warning the others off with a threatening glare to mind their manners. Whatever the reality, Alex decided Buck Wilmington had no patience with men who would attempt to harm a lady.

“What’s going on Buck?” Chris asked suspiciously as he studied the boy and the woman flanking his old friend. He recognised both from earlier encounters during the day, and the impression they had made was not a good one. The fact that they were here with Buck did not bode well at all.

“I figured we needed all the help we can get,” Buck glanced at JD. “Kid’s raw, but he’s good with a gun. Best he come with us and learn how to fight proper, instead of getting shot to pieces by the first varmint who sees his hat.”

JD flashed Buck a scowl before facing Chris. “I promise Mr Larabee, I can ride, and I can shoot. I know how to fight. If I get killed it will be no one’s fault but my own but let me try.”

“No,” Chris’s answer was almost reflex. “Go home.”

JDs deflated expression made Alex fume and decided she didn’t much care for the Man in Black. Perhaps she was too accustomed to the Captain who would never shoot down a junior officer in any way, for of a lack of experience. Reminding herself this was not his fault. He was playing the caricature of a western gunslinger in the mould of Clint Eastwood or even Gary Cooper, she waited for Buck to speak.

“Come on Chris,” Buck said with a look of infinite patience. “We both know he ain’t gonna do that and the next time we see him will be in Boot Hill.”

“That ain’t my problem,” Chris spoke, avoiding making eye contact with JD.

Deciding to brave the Larabee glare and at this moment, she was more accustomed to it than any of the men present, save Buck, Alex made herself heard. “Mr Larabee, you need him.”

She did not look at Vin as she addressed Chris.

“The Seminoles don’t know everything. You’re not facing twenty men; you’re facing a good deal more. This isn’t the only village he’s terrorised.” Before coming here, she had manufactured a plausible story to give them as to why she knew the things she did. “He’s been doing this all over the Territory, and he rarely leaves anyone to tell the tale. You’ve got what? Six guns at the moment? You don’t have enough men to fight them, let alone protect a village full of women and children. Anderson’s soldiers are all seasoned men. You need all the help you can get.”

“This boy isn’t up for it,” Chris stated, not liking the fact the woman had a point.

“I am...” JD started to protest.

Chris silenced him with a look before facing Alex again. “And how do you know about Anderson?”

“Let’s just say I’ve been present at the aftermath of one of his raids and I know what he plans to do.
The man’s half-mad from being a renegade for so long which makes him unpredictable. He has more men than you do and he’ll sacrifice as many of them as necessary to get what he wants.”

Vin Tanner had been keeping counsel to himself ever since she walked into the saloon and just like the morning; he hadn’t been able to stop looking at her. Now she was back; he was trying to think straight, trying to figure her out. He wasn’t the kind to trust easily but every instinct he had told him she was no danger to them. He just couldn’t explain why.

“Didn’t you think Chris was someone else this morning?” Vin asked her.

Alex met his gaze briefly and then looked away, not wishing to make eye contact for too long or else her emotions would be naked on her face, and she couldn’t afford that right now. Buck’s near death earlier told her that the holodeck safeties were off, which meant any of them could die in here.

“I did, and that was my mistake. Your friend looks a lot like someone I know, a Captain James Curran with the Navy. What I’m telling you about Anderson isn’t. You need him and me.”

Chris’s eyes flashed in understanding. “Not a chance in hell.”

“I’m going,” Alex stated. “I can go with you or I can follow you. Take your pick.”

“There’s going to be enough women and children needing protecting,” Chris glared at this strange woman who might be providing accurate intelligence but not the source. The whole thing felt wrong. “We don’t need another one getting underfoot.”

Alex controlled her temper, reminding herself this misogynistic nonsense was a sign of the times. “I don’t get underfoot of anyone, and I shoot and fight just as well as any man present. I’m not carrying a gun as a fashion accessory; I know how to use it.”

“Use it someplace else,” Chris stood up from his bar stool. “You’re not coming with us.”

“Pard,” Vin spoke up. “She knows a lot about Anderson. It could be handy if things get rough.”

“For all we know, she could be his piece of tail.” Chris bit back, and Alex had to keep herself from flattening the arrogant son of a bitch right there.

Buck groaned inwardly, seeing just how much offence the lady had taken at the comment and quickly interjected before that balled fist he saw at her side flew in Chris’s direction. Not that he worried about his old friend, but rather how the ornery gunslinger would react to that.

“I’ll take responsibility for her,” Buck said before things escalated.

Alex fumed at the notion of anyone having to take responsibility for her, but knew it was best she remained silent and let these cavemen hash it out.

“That’s not the point,” Chris countered, glaring at Buck for putting him in this position. If he turned Buck down, he risked losing one of his guns, and if he didn’t, they’d have to deal with a woman, not to mention a greenhorn kid who would get himself killed at the first sign of trouble. Buck was too good in a fight to risk losing. Damn it.

“They’re both your responsibility,” Chris growled.

“Thank you, Mr Larabee!” JD exploded. “You won’t regret it!”

“Just make sure you’re ready to ride in the morning.” Chris ignored JD’s jubilation, his eyes still
The surgery on the torpedo took a record amount of time, thanks to Julia and Chanu working on the thing themselves, modifying the torpedo’s firing mechanism to deliver the yield of chronoton particles Alex needed to create a flux in the alien hull’s atomic frequency. By now, the entire ship knew they were facing a crisis, with the Captain and the senior officers trapped on the holodeck with alien entities with exceptional mental abilities.

“Engineering to Bridge,” Julia contacted Mary, eager to begin because she had so far tried not to think about Ezra or what might be happening to him in the program. She had wanted to go with Alex into the holodeck but knew she would be of more use accompanying Mary on the Away Mission. If they were to free Ezra from the grip of these aliens, they needed to know what they were up against.

“Bridge,” Mary who for the moment was the only Senior Officer left, answered from her customary seat, noticing the empty captain’s chair more acutely than ever. “What’s your status?”

“We’ve completed the modifications to the torpedo, we’ll be ready to deploy at your mark.”

“Alright, standby. We’re notifying Alex now.”

“Standing by,” Julia answered and Mary noted the lack of singsong quality to her voice that spoke much about her mood for the day.

Glancing at Jewel at comm, Mary nodded her permission to recall the Maverick’s second officer, aware Alex would want to be present when the torpedo was launched. The young ensign made contact long enough with the elegant Protocol Officer to acknowledge the order before tapping the display in front of her.

“Commander Styles, please come in.”
As Alex was engaging with their mind-controlled captain and bridge officers, the combadge would emit a soft, discreet chirp to notify her she was needed. A few seconds ticked by without an answer from their science officer and Mary exchanged quick glances with both Charlotte and Kate, not at all liking the delay.

“Jewel, try her again.” Mary’s voice was now taut.

Jewel nodded quickly and repeated herself. “Commander Styles, please come in.”

With the holodeck doors open, they should have been able to remain in contact. However, the continued silence made it clear this was not the case.

“I’ll get down there,” Kate offered.

“No,” Mary shook her head and felt her stomach clenching in anguish. It wasn’t fair, these weren’t her decisions to make and understood now why Alex had so disliked being in charge. How on Earth did Chris do this every day? “If she’s under the influence like the rest of the bridge staff, there’s no point. The problem is not in the holodeck. It’s there.” She faced the mysterious object on the view screen before them, looming large off their starboard bow and had them trapped in place like a bug on flypaper. “We need to go ahead as planned. Get ready to launch that torpedo so we can find a way on board that station.”

“We can’t just leave her down there,” Kate exclaimed, feeling torn by the need to follow orders and her duty to her commanding officers. In the absence of the Captain and Buck Wilmington, Alex was the next in the chain of command.

“We’re not,” Charlotte shot her a look, because she could see how difficult it was for Mary to make the logical choice. “We’ll carry out Commander Styles’s plan to board that station. In the meantime, I’ll tell Rain what’s happened. She was going to enter the holodeck to join the Commander. If we have to surgically implant a transponder on her, we’ll do it so we don’t lose her like we’ve lost everyone else.”

Kate swallowed thickly. She knew what the Chief would insist upon if he were here. Ezra Standish would demand they storm the holodeck and pull everyone out, alien influence or not but Mary and Charlotte was right, there were too many unknowns to act rashly. Extracting them all could result in the situation worsening. As much as she hated to admit it, they were going to have to play this one by ear.

It seemed for now at least, Commander Styles was on her own.
The knock on her door woke Alex immediately.

She sat up abruptly forgetting for a moment where she was. Even as the annoying rapping continued, she sat staring bewildered by her strange surroundings until she remembered with a sudden start she was currently occupying a room at the Gem Hotel. Outside, the waking light of dawn was pouring through the pale curtains, bringing enough breeze into the room to take the edge off the New Mexico heat. Not at all a morning person, she fought the urge to fling a pillow at the door when the awareness of her situation sharpened into focus and her shoulders slumped. 

Oh right, she sighed. I'm in that goddamn program.

Rolling across the mattress on the steel framed bed, her feet touched the creaky wooden floorboards before she stomped towards the door. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep for so long and was tempted to retrieve the communicator stashed in her coat when the pounding on the door strained her patience by its insistent knocking. Running her fingers through her unruly dark hair, she twisted the doorknob and pulled it open with more force than she intended, uttering a growl in the process.

“What?”

Vin Tanner stared at the woman for a moment, his normally laconic expression shaken briefly by what she was wearing. It was utterly indecent of course, but also entirely tantalising. She was clad in some kind of a vest that barely covered her body, displaying tawny limbs while wearing pants that looked like something worn by Chinese workers on the railroad. It hung off her hips, allowing him to see her belly button. For a second, Vin wanted nothing more than to chart that glorious golden skin with his fingertips.

Christ, he wanted her and he couldn’t understand why. He was usually more restrained when it came to women but the pull towards her had been so strong, he had risked his new friend’s wrath by volunteering to let her ride with him. Remembering his manners, he averted his eyes but not before catching a glimpse of the gold ring hanging from her neck with a chain. A wedding ring? For a second, Vin could not help but fixate on it, thinking it didn’t feel right for her to be wearing it that way. It should have been on her finger.

For some reason, it bothered him that it wasn’t.

Her surprise at seeing him waned when she saw the strange look in his eyes and wondered what the hell was wrong with him until she realised she was dressed in nothing but a t-shirt and a pair of drawstring pyjama pants. Her tolerance for this program had its limits and Alex was certainly not wearing what passed for nightwear or for that matter underthings in this day and age. However, she did realise in his current persona, Vin was sporting 19th-century sensibilities and this much exposure might be more than he could take.

“Ma’am,” he greeted once he collected himself.

Alex looked around for a robe and the closest thing she could manage was her coat. Covering her shoulders, she faced him again, remembering she couldn’t think of herself as his wife but his commanding officer. She needed to be focused if she was to extricate him and the others from this mental trap they found themselves. Not that this was at all easy to do when she had to ride with him
today, to say nothing about how uncomfortable sleeping without him had been. After spending almost every night of their married life in the same bed, she had felt his absence acutely.

“What are you doing here?” She stared at him in puzzlement.

“Chris wants to get going first thing,” he stood his ground by the doorway, not expecting an invitation. It wasn’t proper. “Thought we’d better get a move on early.”

“What makes you think I need a ride? I could have gotten a horse last night.”

_Could have, but didn’t,_ Alex thought guiltily. Despite their efforts, Yosemite didn’t have an animal to spare and Alex had been somewhat grateful for this because she couldn’t ride to save her life and certainly not enough to keep up with experienced riders. The Man in Black was already disgruntled enough at having to take her with them. His patience would not survive the knowledge she couldn’t ride on top of that.

“Cause you can’t ride.”

Vin said this with such utter confidence Alex almost slugged him.

The feeling quickly faded when she considered whether the mental control the aliens exerted over him had its limits. During the consummation of their relationship, Vin established a meld with her, further strengthened by their mating bond. It allowed them to communicate on a very basic level when in close proximity. He could feel her thoughts and emotions just as she was able to project them. Was the alien influence able to disconnect that link between them? What would be the result if he remembered her? Would they harm him as they tried to harm Buck?

For now, however, that smug look had to be addressed for womankind everywhere.

“I _can_ ride.”

“Sure you can,” he replied with complete disbelief.

Vin knew panic when he saw it and what registered on her face last evening _was_ panic. He suspected she couldn’t ride, not even a little bit. However, she was willing to risk it to keep up with them. Everything in his gut continued to tell him she could be trusted but Vin had to wonder what was so important she would resort to lying to be kept from being left behind.

Alex bristled in annoyance because he knew she was lying and was taking great amusement from it.

“Just wait downstairs!”

“Yes ma’am,” he tipped his hat and was grinning when he heard her slam the door behind him.

Chris Larabee was not having a good morning.

Aside from waking up with a hangover that would raise the dead, he realised he had a day’s ride with men he barely knew, save Buck and the buffalo hunter he met the day before, that included a greenhorn kid and a woman. A woman! How the fuck had he allowed this to happen when all he had been interested in when he rode into this dusty town, was a drink and a comfortable bed for the night? He hadn’t intended to stay in...what was it called...Four Corners?

He’d been on his way to Lincoln County, chasing work as a hired gun when he chose to pause at
this town, barely visible on the flat horizon through the dusty winds scarifying the landscape. Now he was about to ride into a fight that would most likely get him killed, which he didn’t mind really. Chris had been looking for ways to die that didn’t involve him eating a bullet which he had since decided was the coward’s way out. Still, if the woman was right and there were large numbers waiting for them, Chris didn’t intend to take the others with him.

The buffalo hunter was someone he took an instant liking to, which in his case was a rarity and even though he didn’t like to mention it, he owed Buck a great deal. While he didn’t know Nathan, the healer seemed a good sort, someone Chris could respect. He hadn’t counted on the kid joining them but Buck’s need to play protector had kicked in and Chris knew just how determined the man could be when he was going to save someone from themselves. JD Dunne didn’t know it, but once Buck Wilmington took you under his wing, it was permanent.

That left the woman.

Watching her ride double with Vin as they approached the small group gathered at Yosemite’s livery, Chris’s eyes narrowed in dislike at her presence among them. He didn’t like the way she had pushed in on this job. Worse yet, he couldn’t get a read on her, which always made him ornery as hell. He was at his most acerbic when he was suspicious and this woman, this Alexandra Styles screamed alarm bells in his head he usually silenced with a gun.

Of course, he couldn’t do that now.

Not when Buck had vouched for her. Buck seldom put a woman in danger by foolishness, even if he was attracted to her. Chris supposed he could have refused but Buck and then Vin, seemed to think allowing her to come along might help them and he didn’t want to strain old friendships and new bonds by being obstinate. Still, something about her felt wrong and it was stoking his simmering annoyance into white-hot anger not being able to guess what that was.

“Couldn’t find a horse?” Chris shot Buck an accusing glare, recalling how the big man had promised he’d find the woman a ride when they were discussing the subject the night before.

“Yosemite didn’t have one.” Buck shrugged as he looked up at Chris from where he was saddling Beavis.

Buck could see Chris was pissier than all hell and had answered quickly before he was subjected to another argument about Alex joining them. Normally he was the first to concede to Chris’s demands, but on this occasion, his gut told him to risk Chris’s wrath and trust Alex Styles. If nothing else, he wanted to solve the mystery that was she.

“Besides, what does it matter? Seems like your buffalo hunter is happy to give the lady a lift.”

Chris soured even more because he too had noticed the way Vin regarded the lady. “Maybe a little bit more than that.”

He didn’t know Vin Tanner for very long. Twenty-four hours in fact, but Chris felt the bond with the younger man almost immediately. It was almost as if Vin could read his thoughts as easily as he could guess what was on Vi

n’s mind. Right now, Chris had the impression Vin wasn’t used to being around people and even less around women. He didn’t like the idea of this Alex taking advantage of Vin’s naivete. After all, she was a beautiful woman and Vin could just be inexperienced enough to fall under her sway.

“I wouldn’t worry,” Buck shrugged, seeing the suspicion in Chris’s eyes and knew perfectly well
where his mind had gone. Chris saw enemies everywhere. Before Sarah and Adam’s death it had been the natural caution of a man accustomed to violence, but since then, it had become almost paranoia. “She’s married.”

That did surprise Chris. “She is?”

Chris’s annoyance flared again, this time directed at Buck. Why would a married woman join them unless she had a personal stake in getting rid of Anderson? He was missing something, something important and it was driving him crazy not being able to figure out what it was. Once again, he wondered how she knew so much about Anderson and questioned whether her allegiance would shift when the shooting started. Chris made a silent promise if she turned on them, he’d put a bullet in her himself.

Woman or not.

“Yeah,” Buck nodded. “Didn’t say much about him, except he ain’t in the picture no more.”

“That why you helping her?” When it came to the opposite sex, Chris knew Buck didn’t let a little thing like a husband get in the way.

Buck’s shoulders pulled back and covered the expression of hurt crossing his face at his judgement being questioned. Sure he could get distracted, but he knew better than to let a fox into the hen house. Then again, the deep friendship he and Chris shared was no more, it was lying in the ashes of a fire, for a sin he would never be able to atone for even if he lived a thousand years.

“Not for me,” Buck spoke after a moment. “I got the distinct feeling whomever he was, she ain’t done mourning for him. You know what that’s like don’t you?”

Chris opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. Hell, he supposed he deserved that, having not missed the hurt in Buck’s eyes earlier. He should have known better than to question Buck’s motives for letting her ride with them. Chances are, he was just as duped as Vin obviously was by this woman.

“Mr Larabee, thank you for letting me ride with you. I promise you won’t regret it!” JD Dunne interrupted Chris’s thoughts with his arrival and his excited greeting. “I know I seem green but I’m here and ready to listen and to fight.”

Behind him, also on horseback, Chris saw Nathan smiling. The boy’s enthusiasm made Chris wonder if he was that eager when he was a kid and then realised he probably was. Hell, they all were. Being young was all about being dumb in getting into some older man’s face, unaware that enthusiasm only served as a reminder of how much time had passed and how close the end was coming.

“Just keep your mouth shut and listen,” Chris said coldly. “Stay close to Buck and try not to get him killed.”

JD nodded quickly, his smile a little diminished by that cold response. “Yes, Sir.”

When he rode to the hitching post to water his horse, Nathan’s own mount drifted by Chris’s. “Boy’s mighty excited to be here. Don’t pay him no mind.”

“I don’t want his excitement to get him killed,” Chris snipped. The young Easterner looked too soft in Chris’s opinion, but Buck’s insistence JD come along meant he was going to learn the hard way whether or not he was cut out for life in the Territory. “Or anyone else for that matter.”
“He’ll be fine,” Buck said staring at JD, wondering if he wasn’t getting caught up in Miss Alex’s words about their relationship. The smarter thing would be to keep him here, not go riding out to face unspoken numbers. “He’s just a dumb kid we can save from Boot Hill. If all goes well and he doesn’t get his head blown off, he’ll see what a real fight is like. Way I see it, it’s worth the inconvenience if the first bit of lead going his way scares him shitless enough to send him running home to momma and his fancy eastern life.”

“Buck, that’s a life lesson he may not survive.” Nathan pointed out, not liking that one bit at all. He was taking to JD who talked to him with respect and stared at him in admiration. It was something in short supply for a black man in this day and age.

“Without us, he’s going to get killed anyway,” Buck shrugged. “At least this way he’s got a fighting chance.” Although there was no way in hell Buck was going to let that happen. Not while there was breath in his body.

“We ready to go?” Vin asked when he and his riding companion reached Chris.

“Yeah,” Chris nodded, his eyes meeting Alex’s and telling her in no uncertain terms, she was treading on thin ice. He didn’t like the idea of her being here and he wasn’t about to hide it.

She was a commander in Starfleet who had faced down Klingons and the Jem’Hadar in battle, but she still flinched like just about everyone on the receiving end of the Larabee glare. The only person on board and Alex was starting to think in existence, who was immune to that hard stare was the Vulcan she felt the need to cling too a little closer after Chris’s merciless eyes fixed on her.

Before any comment could be made, the clip-clop of approaching hoofs made them all turn. Alex let out a sigh of relief at the sight of another familiar face. Ezra Standish was riding up on his horse, wearing the complete regalia of the Gambler, with burgundy coat and frilled shirt. The man appeared to be clutching a newspaper in his hand as he rode to meet them.

“Well at least he’s in one piece,” Vin said to Chris, studying the gambler as he approached them.

“His kind always land on his feet,” Chris drawled. “Probably at the expense of someone else.”

“Then why let him come?” Nathan asked still disliking the man’s initial reaction to him. He’d put up with that kind of contempt all his life, he was doing it no more now that he was a free man. Besides, not only was this gambler representative of ideas that should have died in the war, he was dishonest, which made him no good in the healer’s experience.

“Because,” Chris threw Nathan a glance. “He’s good with the gun and he’s desperate enough to need five dollars.”

Considering the friendships formed in the later scenarios of the Magnificent Seven program, Alex was rather baffled by Nathan’s attitude towards Ezra. The doctor was one of the most compassionate people she knew. He’d crawl over glass in the middle of a firefight just to get to someone who needed help. She couldn’t imagine him possessing such vitriol for anyone without cause. What on Earth had Ezra done to earn Nathan’s displeasure?

On the Maverick, Alex and Ezra often found themselves on the same side of an argument whenever it came to the safety of the ship and its crew. They were both pessimists who always considered the worst case scenario because that was the best way to guard against it. Seeing Ezra made her question whether or not it was worth the risk trying to reach him because beneath the alien’s influence was one of the sharpest minds she knew.
“You made it,” Chris said to Ezra.

Ezra flashed his trademark grin, the one that could be shit-eating as well as charming at the same time. Buck always claimed that smirk usually meant you were about to lose your money and he was always right. Alex called it his ‘crocodile smile’. Whatever it was, there was nothing but smugness in it as he looked at Chris.

“Well I couldn't stay away now,” he remarked, making a show of raising the paper to read it. “Once I found I would be riding with a genuine celebrity.”

Chris was about to ask Ezra what the hell he meant by that when the words the man was beginning to read registered.

“...the streets ran red with the blood of twenty men yesterday as new resident and notorious gunslinger, Chris Larabee, turned our quiet town into a shooting gallery.”

Alex winced at the description and was really glad Mary was nowhere near this simulation. It was hard enough to tolerate Vin looking at her like a stranger, she couldn’t imagine how Mary would feel seeing the cold fury sparking in Chris’s eyes aimed at her. As the storm broke out on Chris’s face, he snatched the paper from Ezra’s hands and rode off, wearing an expression that would scare the living daylights out of Romulans and Dominion foes.

“Was it something I said?” Ezra asked sweetly, perfectly aware of what he had done before his attention fixed on Alex. “I was not aware we were allowed to travel with recreation. Alas, I only brought a deck of cards.”

“Recreation?” JD had to ask even though the rest of the men caught Ezra’s meaning immediately.

“The lady is travelling with us,” Buck said coldly, not at all liking the inference. “We need her.”

“Clearly,” Ezra replied, eyeing Alex with a look that made her spine stiffen and her fists ball up. “I suppose if one has non-discriminating taste, she might serve as ample comfort for our journey through the wilderness.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Alex demanded, staring at him hard because if he was implying what she thought he was, not even being under an alien influence was going to save him from a fat lip.

“He didn’t mean anything by it,” Vin shushed Alex into silence although he got Ezra’s meaning and was not happy about it either. To his surprise, instead of fussing, she took him at his word and fell silent.

“He meant that you ain’t white Miss,” Nathan stated bluntly, his contempt for Ezra showing clearly.

“Wh....” Alex started to say and then winced. Of course. If this simulation made Ezra think he really was a 19th-century gambler from the American south, post the Civil War, he would reflect the bigotry of the time. “Oh.”

“I said nothing of the sort,” Ezra cut in quickly as Alex’s expression hardened at Nathan’s revelation. “I merely meant she’s not the usual calibre of courtesans one is accustomed to seeing out here in the Territory.”

“She is going to knock you on your ass if you don’t stop talking to her like she isn’t here.” Alex bit back sharply.
A ripple of amusement moved through the men present and Vin looked over his shoulder, giving
Alex a glance that sat somewhere between admiration and annoyance before facing the rest of his
comrades. “That’s enough. We ain’t gotta like each other, but we got a job to do. Miss Alex here
knows Colonel Anderson, that’s the only reason she’s here.”

Alex fell silent, reminding herself she needed to play this out to see what the aliens were intending to
do. Clearly, they wanted the program to continue its narrative but she was at a loss at why Ezra’s
personality had been altered. During the few times, she joined Vin on the holodeck in this program,
there had never been any mention of the gambler’s unsavoury ideas. Why now? Why refer to it once
and then never speak of it again? It made no sense. It never even emerged as a plot point in the later
simulations.

“Of course,” Ezra said once again flashing that charming facade, but this time Alex knew it was just
that, a facade. “I meant no offence.”

As always Buck played the mediator and spoke up to push everyone past the momentary tension.
God knew there would be enough of that when Chris came back. “So is this all of us?”

“All except Josiah,” Nathan spoke up, shooting Ezra a final look of contempt before putting the
matter aside for now.

“Who’s he?” JD asked, eager to get riding on this adventure he’d embarked upon. Already the group
assembled seemed pretty interesting, even the lady with the strange clothing. Besides, he got what
Buck was trying to do and had spoken up to help dissipate the tension swirling around them like dark
currents.

“A preacher I know,” Nathan explained. “He said he might come or not.”

“A preacher and a gunfighter” JD burst out. “That sounds cool.”

“Boy,” Buck swatted JD across the back of his head, sending the bowler flying to the ground. “Stop
talking like that or you’re gonna end up being the first one shot.”
If there was one place Mary Travis never wished to find herself, it was in Chris Larabee’s place on the bridge.

Other than Julia, she was the most senior command officer left on the Maverick, and the idea her decisions might ultimately affect a thousand people was terrifying. She could well understand why Alex had been so reluctant to take command when the Captain and the rest of the senior staff were compromised by whatever forces were controlling the holodeck. So far, their efforts to reach Alex had failed, and with the only option storming the place to retrieve her, Mary knew the way forward was to go ahead with Alex’s plan of getting on board that mysterious station.

Even now, it hung in the space before the Maverick, its vise-like grip still keeping the galaxy class starship in place, while it continued to reveal nothing of its intentions. Jewel’s repeated attempts at hailing and Charlotte’s efforts to penetrate the hull with conventional scans had been fruitless. Kate’s suggestion had been to fire phasers, but even Mary knew that was a bad idea. Until they knew what was happening to Chris and the others, or for that matter, why it was happening, caution was needed.

“Mary,” Julia’s voice spoke over the comms, “the torpedo is ready.”

“Thank you,” Mary nodded. She was already prepared to head to the transporter room at a moment’s notice, as no doubt Julia was down in Engineering. Kate had chosen Lt. Opa Loka, a former Bajoran resistance fighter who had joined Starfleet, to accompany them and the lady was now waiting in Transporter Room One the instant their Away mission was given leave to proceed. “Monitor the situation and standby for orders.”

“Standing by,” Julia’s usually chipper voice was lacking its spark and Mary knew it was because she was worried for Ezra. As the Chief of Security, he was often in the front line of all danger and the most likely to be killed in any engagement. While it was a reality all security officers accepted, most of all Ezra, Mary had a feeling it was not something Julia was reconciled entirely with.

Mary turned to Kate and Charlotte, trying to project the confidence she did not feel. She was a diplomatic officer for God’s sake! She was so far over her head, she was practically in another quadrant. “Kate, ready the torpedo to fire. Charlotte, start scanning as soon as it’s deployed.”

“Aye Sir,” Charlotte answered promptly, remembering what Alex’s instructions had been without needing to hear Mary say them. She could tell the protocol officer felt just as overwhelmed as she was about being in charge of the Maverick and did not wish to burden the lady any more than she had to.

“Lieutenant, the torpedo is ready on your mark.”

Mary nodded and faced front, swallowing thickly as she uttered the words she never thought she’d ever have to say. “Fire.”

“Firing torpedo,” Kate announced and a low whine echoed through the Maverick, signaling the launch.

On the viewscreen, the torpedo which Mary often thought resembled an amber star hurtling through space, struck the hull of the mysterious alien object along the broadest face of its shell. Instead of causing destruction and plasma fire, its effect was a spread of green energy that rippled across the alien hull, the way a pond might appear after someone tossed a pebble into it. As the wave of green
energy expanded outwards, the hull suddenly shimmered with translucence as the chronoton particles did exactly what Alex had predicted.

“It’s working!” Nora exclaimed excitedly from her station at the helm. “The hull’s phasing!”

“Charlotte,” Mary turned sharply to the woman. “How long will it last?”

“Indefinitely or until they figure out flooding the space with high-intensity radiation will dissipate the particles. In any case, we better hurry. I’m scanning it now.”

“Kate, make sure our phasers are on standby and Nora, prepare for evasive action if they react to what we just did.”

“Aye Sir,” the young officer replied, and Mary tried not to be startled when she realized Nora called her Sir.

“I’m reading an oxygen atmosphere, but life signs are inconclusive.”

“Inconclusive?” Kate asked because if that station was filled with people, she had to know to adjust her security precautions accordingly.

“It’s difficult to say, they’re diverse. Too diverse to be of any one species.”

“Then why haven’t they returned any of our hails?” Jewel wondered.

“Doesn’t matter,” Mary stood up. “Is it safe to transport?”

“I’m reading structural features that indicate there are at least 23 decks that would be suitable for transport, but I can’t give you any more information than that.”

Mary frowned at the information, but it was better than nothing. They would have to take the risk. For Chris and the others, she simply had no choice. “Transporter Room One, are you monitoring the situation?”

“Yes, I am,” Rain answered, “I can transport the Away Team through. There’s a central hub which I think would be the safest bet.”

“Alright then,” Mary rose to her feet and looked at Kate. “Let’s do this.”

There were moments in life that transcended perfection. It was as if in one singular instance there were no questions, no doubts, and everything one ever wished for was revealed in a perfect second of enlightenment. When Vin Tanner looked across the street at the Man in Black, he knew without understanding how, his place would always be at this man’s side, shoulder to shoulder, standing against whatever life attempted to throw at them.

And behind him, with her heart pressed against his back, would be her.

When she climbed on the back of Peso and wrapped her arms around his waist, Vin was struck with another moment of clarity, that this was where she would always be. Riding double with him on his horse, with the future ahead. Even though she tried hard not to show how much she was affected by their closeness, Vin could see it in her eyes because she held him not as an unwilling passenger, but like a lover. He couldn’t understand how this connection between them had come to be, but it was there, and he couldn’t deny it any more than she could hide it.
After Chris returned to the group, pissy as all hell after his encounter with the newspaper editor, Vin immediately reached the conclusion it was best to head out quickly and keep the man from stewing. He was getting used to Chris’s short fuse, getting a sense of what was off limits and what he was open to discussing. Alex had kept quiet, guessing accurately she aggravated Chris Larabee to no end by her presence and the only way he’d tolerate her was by making herself invisible.

Not that this was entirely easy to do. She was awfully pretty, and a woman like that on the trail with a group of men was bound to cause trouble. Vin wondered if that was why Chris was so against her coming along, to avoid splintering their somewhat fragile group before they could reach the village. In any case, Vin made a promise to keep her out of trouble, and he suspected, Buck was doing the same thing, although to Vin’s surprise, it wasn’t out of any interest in bedding the woman but something a little more chivalrous.

Leaving Four Corners, Alex puzzled at just where they were going to get Josiah. While she had studied the basic structure of the story, the seven coming together to protect the town of Four Corners against the renegade Colonel Anderson, there was little covering how those meetings actually unfolded. As far as she knew, Josiah was always found in his small church at the edge of town, since his character was based on being a defrocked priest with difficulty turning the other cheek.

“Where are we going?” Alex finally broke down and asked Vin as they left the town behind them and headed into the flat, desert plain that seemed to surround parts of Four Corners, depending on what the storyline needed the terrain to be.

“Going to see if Nathan’s friend is coming with us,” Vin answered good-naturedly, liking how she leaned in close and asked her question. He could smell her perfume in his lungs and her soft breath against the back of his neck.

“Out here?” She asked looking around. It was nothing but dry, flat land for miles ahead, interspersed with shrubs at suitable gaps and what was left of an old building, more or less collapsed in the nearby distance.

“Guess so,” Vin shrugged. “You okay back there?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, still scanning the area with distaste. “I’m good.”

“How come you don’t know how to ride?”

“Because you do it....” she caught herself and realized what he was asking her. “I just never learned.” She answered dismissively.

At first, Vin thought she was being sarcastic before she caught herself, but he saw no traces of it on her face, just chagrin at having to come up with a different answer. Maybe this was what Chris sensed and felt so uncomfortable about, the fact she was hiding things, though Vin sensed no danger from her, just mystery. What was it she couldn’t say? Knowing better than to press, Vin let it go, and they continued riding.

To Alex’s surprise, they arrived at the ruin that used to be a building with four walls, now reduced to barely one and a pile of rocks. Emerging from it was Josiah Sanchez, looking nothing like the big-hearted, wise Counsellor she knew and more like the preacher turned grizzled lawman of the program. He was wearing a Mexican serape and covered the bandanna across his forehead with a large, battered open-crown cowboy hat. He appeared ready to ride.

“Why did you change your mind?” Nathan who oddly enough had spent most of the journey riding alongside Ezra trading hostile glares was first to address the counselor turned preacher.
"Crows."

Alex blinked? Crows?

“What crows?” Nathan and the rest of the group instinctively scanned the sky for any signs of the creatures. Other than a few buzzards circling the sky with disappointment, there was no sign of any winged members of the Corvidae family in attendance.

“Sign,” Josiah said quietly as if that would explain everything.

It didn’t.

“What does that mean?” Nathan questioned as Josiah mounted his horse.

“Death.”

Alex was starting to wonder if Josiah had heatstroke.

“Whose?” By now the healer was humoring him, guessing no answers of any kind was forthcoming but was compelled to ask as if it was necessary to complete this circle of confusion.

“Probably mine.”

At this point, Ezra (it was always Ezra), could no longer hold back his amusement by this odd and somewhat baffling conversation. “Well, well, a sense of humor. I look forward to many lively conversations.”

That was one way to put it. It appeared Josiah could be just as infuriating as a defrocked preacher as he was as a Counsellor as he was steering you to a conclusion you needed to reach. She wondered about the crows and knew in many cultures crows were considered psychopomps, capable of ferrying souls from one destination to another. In Native American culture, the crow was not the harbinger of death as many believed but of fire.

“What about all this?” Nathan continued asking.

Josiah cast a glance at the collection of bricks and rubble that had once been the foundation and walls of this ruined Spanish church, in the middle of nowhere before facing front. “These stones will still be here,” he paused and added, “if I get back.”

As he rode ahead, he neared Vin. The tracker extended a hand and Josiah took it.

“We could always use another good man,” Vin said with a little smile, liking Josiah immediately. He didn’t feel the need to blather on incessantly which in Vin’s world spoke to a man who knew how to listen and watch, instead of reacting.

“Not so good,” Josiah shrugged, “but I can fight.”

As the two men sat astride their mounts and rode forward, Josiah seemed to notice Alex for the first time. The preacher regarded her with curiosity, which was not surprising. This entire scenario was not crafted for an eighth wheel, let alone a woman.

“Ma’am,” he tipped his hat at her. “This your girl?”

Alex felt Vin stiffen at the question while she resisted the urge to blush. Blush for fuck’s sake! She hated this program.
“Nah,” Vin recovered quickly and noted the spread of color over her cheeks. “This here is Alex. She seems to know the men we’re gonna be facing.”

“Miss Alex,” Josiah greeted. “Dangerous place for a woman to be.”

“I can take care of myself,” Alex answered good-naturedly, incapable of ever being terse with Josiah. This man’s big heart was the reason the Maverick’s crew functioned as well as it did. He was a kind, compassionate soul who only did the best for those under his charge, herself included.

“Just can’t ride worth a damn,” Vin couldn’t resist commenting.

Alex almost shoved him off the horse.

They rode for several hours across a dry, flat terrain that soon became grassland and woodlands with juniper trees, true mountain mahogany, sage bush, and yarrow. Alex had to compliment the kid who designed this program because the detail was extraordinary. Overhead, the sky shone a brilliant blue and the sun though hot, and the wind, arid and coarse was not uncomfortable. If it wasn’t for the present situation, she could have been forgiven for thinking she and Vin were taking one of their holodeck rides.

Eventually, they paused by the river to water their horses and to gain some respite from the aches that came with an extended ride. The Man in Black stood apart as always, staring into the distance. Alex knew that part of the reason Chris Larabee identified so heavily with the character was because he too had lost a family, in this case to a fire. Getting to her feet, she knew she was going to have to deal with him. Underneath all that control, was her Captain and Alex simply refused to believe, there wasn’t some part of him who didn’t still remember that.

Chris drew in the smoke from his cheroot taking a moment to savor it as he studied the slight gorge the river ran through. Riparian shrubs skirted the edge, giving enemies good cover for an ambush. Not that he believed they were out there. The buffalo hunter seemed to know what to look for, as did himself and Buck. No one was out there, no one that mattered anyway.

He heard her approach and shifted his gaze just enough to acknowledge her arrival before facing front again, his shoulders stiffening at the intrusion. He didn’t like her, didn’t want her presence here, and he certainly did not like the influence she was wielding over Buck and Vin. Especially Vin.

“You should stretch your legs,” he said shortly. “We’ve got a few more hours to ride if we’re going to make it there by nightfall. We ain’t slowing down on account of you.”

“You won’t have to,” Alex said simply, standing next to him and staring into the landscape beyond as he was doing. “I know you’re not happy I’m here but you need to understand, I have to be here with you. If you left me behind, I would have followed you, one way or another.”

Chris straightened up and shot her a look. “Why?”

Alex let out a heavy breath, “I can’t tell you that and believe me I would like to, but I saw what happened when I tried to explain, and that’s a risk I’m not taking with any life, especially yours.”

She made no sense, but then she was a woman. It was rare to find one that didn’t prattle on about nonsense. He’d married one but Sarah had been far and few between. “You expect me to accept that when you could turn on me at any time.”

Alex swore under her breath. “Jesus and I thought you were difficult when you ....”

“What does that mean?” Chris eyed her sharply.
Alex sucked in her breath, “I can’t explain, I simply can’t because it has to do with more than just your life, it has to do with the lives of a thousand people who count on you being safe. Now I know nothing I’m saying makes any sense to you, I get that, but somewhere beneath all that black, you’ve got the best instincts of any person I have ever met. You can size up a situation and come up with an answer just in time to save all our asses just based on your gut. I need you to use that and trust me. I am not here to harm anyone of you, and I’m ready to die before I let that happen.”

It was insane. She was insane.

Yet, that instinct which she claimed he possessed felt the sincerity of her words.

“Where’s your husband?”

Alex stiffened, not expecting the question. “He’s in trouble, and I’m here because I have to help him.” It was the best answer she could give him without instinctively glancing at Vin. “Helping you with Anderson will allow me to help him.”

“Then you better tell Vin that,” Chris said crisply, “because he’s awful sweet on you and I don’t want to see him getting hurt.”

“Believe me, it’s not my first choice to ride with him,” Alex admitted and then realized, Chris Larabee was the one person she could make this admission to. “I can’t ride.”

“Well, that ain’t much of a surprise.” Chris gave her a smile that looked more like a sneer. “How come?”

“Look you want me to fight and shoot, I can do that,” Alex grumbled. “Riding was just not one thing I ever had to learn.”

“Alright,” Chris said with a nod. “Then you’re riding with me, and you stay away from Vin because if you hurt him,” his eyes gleamed with menace. “I don’t care what my gut says, I’ll shoot you myself.”
Arrival

None of them was sure of what to expect when they transported to the innards of the mysterious station. They only knew they were leaving the safety of the Maverick for the very domain of those keeping the Captain and the senior staff under some form of mental influence. When the familiar shimmer of transported gold faded from the eyes of the Away Team, they expected to see bulkheads and hard surfaces, but what they were faced with was nothing of the sort.

An amber sky.

They were standing, not on the deck of a space station, but on the grassy plain of an alien landscape, complete with amber sky and weirdly gnarled trees. The trunks were twisted like old men hunched over walking sticks, with lavender bark and bright yellow leaves. The tableau was wild and colourful, reminding Mary Travis of one of Van Gogh’s more vibrant works. If it weren’t for the situation Chris and the others were in, she would have been fascinated by what she was seeing except the situation did exist and they needed to solve it.

“It’s beautiful,” Julia admired the scene before them with awe. Wild shrubs with bright blue flowers lay scattered across the carpet of lush wild grass beneath their feet. She even spied small insects, bouncing from bud to bud, proving once and for all no matter what planet you were on, the industrious creatures still found a way to get the job done.

“Everything’s beautiful until something leaps out of the bushes and eats your face off,” Lt. Opa commented, her brown eyes scanning the area cautiously. As idyllic as this place was, they were still on board a space station, one whose masters had imprisoned their Captain and the senior staff in a mental cage.

“I admire your ability to get to the heart of the situation,” Mary toss the woman a look and supposed being Bajoran, she could be no other way. Ninety years of subjugation by the Cardassians had made the race indifferent to aesthetics when survival was so crucial. Tapping her combadge, Mary decided they better check in with the bridge. It was what Chris always expected from his Away teams, she told herself.

“Away Team to Maverick,” Mary addressed Charlotte who was no doubt waiting anxiously to hear from them. “We’re here and we’re safe.”

The response was not immediate and the two-second pause it took for Charlotte’s voice to break through the static had all the members of the Away Team exchanging a momentary look of concern until the silence was broken.

“This is the Maverick,” Charlotte’s voice filled the air but it was spoken through static and though audible, crackled with interference. “We’re not getting a clear signal from you. I think there’s some difficulty getting through the phase shifts.”

“That’s not unsurprising,” Julia quickly explained. “We’re basically transmitting through fissures created by chronoton particles. There was bound to be some interference.”

“Then we better do this fast,” Mary nodded, drawing on her time as a Vulcan wife to make logical decisions, devoid of emotions and fears for their crewmates. How on Earth did Chris manage this? “Charlotte, we’ll try to check in when we can but at the moment, the deck we’ve appeared on appears to be an alien landscape, not like a ship at all.”
“Like a holodeck?” Charlotte’s voice popped with static.

Julia was already scanning the area with her tricorder, trying to determine if this was the case. Her brow furrowed in confusion as she studied the small display.

“No,” she shook her head. “Those life readings you detected, they’re coming from here,” she swept her gaze across the picturesque scene. “Everything we’re seeing, except for the appearance of a sky, is real. If I’m not mistaken, the sky is probably being simulated by UV lighting and power generators. I suspect if we were able to reach it, we would find that there’s a ceiling above us.”

“So what is it?” Kate inquired as she and Opa had their phasers drawn, watching for any signs of movement in reaction to their intrusion. “A giant arboretum or something?”

“Possibly,” Mary nodded. “Charlotte standby, we’re going to look around.”


Once again, Mary was jarred being addressed that way. Once the line between them was terminated, Mary glanced at Julia who was studying her tricorder, trying to determine what lay behind the curtain of this fake landscape. “Found anything?”

“Well the tricorder works fine in here,” Julia explained. “So will the combadges. Our equipment will function within the station itself since the technology doesn’t have to get through the chronoton particles, so that’s a plus.”

“So where is everyone?” Kate asked, both she and Opa taking flanking positions by the two remaining senior officers.

“I’m detecting life readings all around us,” Julia revealed. “Natural fauna to this world, wherever it is. The tricorder is not able to match what they are, only that there are a lot of them of varying types.”

“Well if we sort this mess out, Alex will no doubt want a science team in here to catalogue all this,” Mary remarked, “but for now, we need to keep going. Wildlife isn’t imprisoning the Captain, there’s a powerful mind or minds doing that. We need to find them. How do we get out of here.”

“Right,” Julia nodded and returned her emerald eyes to the tricorder. “Let me see how big this place is.”

Suddenly, the ground began to quake. Leaves began to rustle as if the trees were shaking in right and a low rumbling was growing in intensity as if it was closing in on them. Mary immediately shot a look at Julia who was studying the face of the tricorder, a troubled expression on her face. A moment later, she looked up, as if trying to confirm the readings she was seeing with her own eyes.

“What?” Mary asked.

“Something is coming at us,” she announced the obvious.

“Like what?” Kate asked, her eyes surveying the area, trying to determine what was coming at them. Judging from the intensity of the quakes beneath their feet, it was moving fast and numerous enough for her to believe it was wise to leave the area.

“They’re lifeforms but it’s difficult to get a reading, there’s so many of them.”

That was all Kate needed to hear. Her priority was to protect Mary and Julia and the idea that there were ‘many’ as Julia described, immediately told the security officer they needed to move before
they were overwhelmed. As it was, the quaking was so loud Julia had to shout to be heard and every other animal in the area had the good sense to vacate before whatever it was approaching, reached them.

“Okay that’s it, Sir, we need to move right now!”

“Right,” Mary agreed.

Breaking through the trees at that moment appeared to be a large herd of quadrupeds, resembling Ankylosaurs with their flat armour-plated bodies. The creatures were thundering forward, so many that it was difficult to count. With their hoofs pounding against the ground or rather the deck covered with grass and soil, the creatures appeared panicked.

“Come on!” Opa had grabbed Julia’s arm and started ushering the Chief Engineer away from the path of the impending stampede.

“Something’s frightening them!” Mary declared. With her mental shields lowered so she could detect the alien presence that had taken over the minds of their men on the holodeck, she was able to sense the creatures frenzied mental processes. They were terrified.

“Like that?” Kate cried out pointing in the distance when the massive head of what appeared to be some kind of alien monster. It stood almost twenty-five feet tall, was covered in bony protrusions that would have no trouble penetrating the herd animals hide and had a mouthful of teeth that were as long as her forearm. It uttered a loud, powerful bellow that made all four women jump and as it continued pursuing its prey, one thing was clear.

It was hungry.

“...Less. He's an old warrior. He will come early, to surprise us.”

Chris Larabee did not offer comment after the Old Chief’s grim prediction but knew better than to disregard the man’s insight. Glancing at the tracker, he saw the younger man nod ever so slightly at having reached the same conclusion. Once again Chris marvelled at this connection they seem to have and knew they had best take the man at his word. While he did not say so, Chris guessed this Chief had more than his fair share of encounters with white soldiers, enough so for the gunslinger to believe his read of the situation was accurate.

Instead, he calculated how much time they really had to prepare for Anderson if the man arrived early. The Colonel had threatened his return in four days but if the Chief’s prediction was right, he would be back in three if Fate was kind. However, after losing his wife and child, Chris knew Fate was a capricious bitch and would leave nothing to chance. Depending on the time of day the man appeared with his group of armed vagabonds, it was more likely they had full two days to prepare.

That was a savagely short time to get this motley collection of runaway slaves and displaced natives into a fighting force, even with seven guns leading the battle. In any case, it mattered little. This was the time hey had work to do and it was best they got started.

“We’ll get the horses squared away and get started,” he stated, gesturing for the others to follow him. At the far edge of the village, nestled behind some tall trees and shrubs was a corral where the Seminoles kept their livestock. It would serve for their horses during their time here. Leading his comrades up the gravel path through the village, Chris took a moment to examine the valley the
Seminoles called home and felt a surge of anger at the violence Anderson had inflicted on these people.

The village was little more than a collection of huts constructed from mud brick and shacks of wood. It sat at the foot of a small valley, surrounded on all side by high rock walls. There were fissures in places and enough rockfall to allow them to climb to the top if they had to but really, other than the main track in, they were cut off from the world. The ground was uneven, with rocky formations scattered throughout the area, blunted by the occasional plant or wild shrubs.

It was plain to see these people didn’t have much, certainly not the gold Anderson believed they had.

Alex, who kept silent for most of the trip here to fly under Chris’s radar, hastened her pace to catch up with the Man in Black. She had chosen to give him a wide berth after their conversation by the creek and opted to ride here with Buck, keeping her promise to stay away from Vin. However, she was still conditioned to think of herself as Chris Larabee’s science officer and aside from keeping him alive, it was her job to offer him assistance wherever she could. Now she approached him ready to present to offer him her observations, especially when she now had a good idea of what they would be facing.

A cannon.

Even before Vin had made the observation, Alex had seen the evidence of it on artillery on this peaceful community. The blasts patterns painted a vivid story of what transpired here with every scorched brick. One hut was entirely obliterated, leaving nothing behind but a mound of debris composed of burnt wood, broken brick and crushed straw. She only hoped no one was inside when it was struck. Elsewhere, the ground told a similar story by the freshly made craters. It seemed Anderson not only had a cannon, but he was also not above using it on helpless women and children.

“He’s probably using a 12 pounder Napoleon,” she announced herself when she reached Chris.

After they dismounted, she was able to study the impact craters more closely and could tell by the depth and width of them, what kind of ordinance they were dealing with. She only wished Ezra was in his right mind because he was the real expert. Ezra had centuries of knowledge about ancient weapons in his head but unfortunately, that man was trapped within the facade of a smooth-talking gambler with little regard for anyone it seemed.

“Judging by the blast pattern, I’d say they’re using grapeshots, not round shots. If I remember correctly, the Napoleons had a range of over a mile, maybe even two for long and short range bombardment. They’ve probably been carrying it around with them since the end of the war. Whatever we do, we have to keep him from firing that thing. He could demolish this whole place without even entering the valley.”

She was right. Chris had been in the war and he knew just how much damage a 12 pounder could do. Hell, it wasn’t even the first time he was on the wrong side of the barrel since the things were employed by both the Confederate and the Union Army. Still, it felt odd hearing a woman talk so astutely on the subject and as he offered his new comrades a quick glance he could see they thought the same.

Alex noticed the reaction and looked at the men. “What?”

“Well,” Ezra was grinning, his gold tooth gleaming. “I think I speak for all of us when I say you seem to be well versed in artillery Miss Styles. If one did not know better, one would think you have intimate knowledge of combat techniques or...” his hazel eyes darkened with the cold, lifeless eyes of
a shark about to make the kill, “you’ve been in Anderson’s company.”

“Oh Christ sake!” Alex whirled glared at him in exasperation, her hands flying to her hips in readiness to defend herself. “Any fool can examine the blast patterns and make the determination. All you have to do is calculate the weight of the cannonball and the amount of gunpowder inside it to determine the dispersal radius when it impacts. Just because I can do math doesn’t make me a spy.”

“Can’t fault the girl cause she’s got fancy learning,” Buck stated, always quick to come to her defence.

“Fancy learning or inside information,” Ezra countered, not about to cry surrender yet.

“Just because she’s smarter than she looks, doesn’t mean she’s lying.” Nathan declared, remembering Ezra’s politics when they first met and was convinced he was regarding Alex with the same suspicion because of her colour. How many times in his life had he been underestimated because of his colour? Nathan was not about to let Alex suffer the same indignity.

“I meant nothing of the sort,” Ezra defended himself but it was plain Nathan’s accusation had hit home among the others.

This was no good, Alex cursed inwardly. She had been forced to play along with this scenario because it was the best way to keep the Captain and the others safe, but her presence was causing too much trouble and it was seriously harming the formation the bond these men needed to make. Somehow, it felt important that link be maintained, even if everything around them was a fiction. These aliens wanted them for something and if she disrupted their plans too much, there was no telling what they would do.

“Mr Standish, I am not working for Anderson. I have my own reasons for joining this expedition but rest assured, I want Anderson stopped. My knowledge of weapons comes from a place of experience. I know my ordinance and I’ve even seen a battle or two. As an observer.”

It wasn’t exactly the truth but it wasn’t an outright lie either. Alex hoped that would satisfy Ezra for now, because if he pushed the point, she would have to fabricate a more complex story. It was Ezra who often told her, the more you compounded the lie, the more likely you would get found out.

“Well I don’t know about you boys, but I could use some grub after we deal with the horses. Looks like we’ve got a busy day and I don’t want to do it on an empty stomach.”

“Attaboy Buck,” Vin said with a little smile, seeing what the ladies man was up to. “Always thinking with your gut but,” he turned to Chris over Buck’s shoulder. “It ain’t a bad idea.”

Chris who was opening the gate leading into the corral where the Seminoles kept their horse and their livestock, tended to agree. “We’ll get the horses squared away and get some food. We got little time as it is, so we can’t waste it jawing on things we can’t do nothing about. If the Chief’s right about Anderson, we got less time than we figured we had, which means we need to come up with a plan and fast.”

The corral was nothing more than a number of pens constructed by gnarled wood to keep the horses and livestock separated. A filled water trough captured the horses’ interest immediately, not to mention the pile of hay in another corner of the large pen. They knickered impatiently as the riders began unsaddling them.

“We’re going to need more guns than we got,” Vin spoke up as he pulled the saddle off Peso. “The seven, I mean eight....” he tried not to look at Alex. “Ain’t gonna be enough.”
When Alex asked to ride with Buck instead of him, Vin had been stung but respected her decision. She was a married woman after all and he ought to know better, even if he felt this connection between them he couldn’t explain. “If we take the high ground, we might stand a chance of beating them.”

“We ought to also find another way for these people to get out if we can’t hold them back,” Alex added, trying to keep her gaze off Vin when she spoke.

She knew him well enough to know he had been hurt by her refusal to ride with him but it only proved Chris was right to make the demand she stay away. Unless she could tell Vin what they meant to each other, it would only complicate the situation. With Vin’s Vulcan abilities, not to mention their marriage bond, it was possible he might break the alien influence over his mind and discover the truth. Alex had no intention of risking the aliens’ reaction if that happened.

“She’s right,” Nathan added his voice to her as he scanned the rock walls and saw the caves. “There’s only one way in and out of this valley and we just came through it.”

“I don’t think the sum of us will be enough to repel a seasoned Confederate force with a cannon,” Ezra pointed out, ever the pessimist. “Then again, I was never in this to save anyone, I merely had time to kill.”

“I can live with it being my time to die,” Josiah spoke up, “but I won’t be too happy to see these folks joining me. I always intended my last journey to be taken alone, I wasn’t up for company.”

“I just don’t understand why they would want to take over this place anyway,” JD spoke for the first time. He was still terrified of saying or doing something stupid that would make Mr Larabee change his mind and chase him away from the group like he was an errant child. He wanted so much to be a gunfighter and he just knew these six men could help him be a good one. “I mean if these people had gold, they wouldn’t be here would they?”

“Sometimes, just the idea is enough my young friend,” Ezra explained good-naturedly. “Once they get the whiff of the possibility, nothing else matters.”

“Yeah that gold fever is a cruel mistress,” Josiah nodded in agreement.

“But they can’t expect these people to make gold if it isn’t here.” JD pointed out, thinking this was a foregone conclusion any reasonable person might have reached just looking at the place. The village was small and the community looked like it was a struggle just to get by. On route into the valley they had seen the small fields where corn and millet were grown to feed everyone, but other than that, the Seminoles had little else, except their dignity and Anderson had taken that too.

“Crazy men don’t think about those kinds of details, boy,” Buck said handing Alex her saddle bag. “They just know what they want and ain’t gonna stop till they get it.”

“My name’s JD,” JD grumbled at Buck, hating to be reminded he was the youngest in their set, even with a woman present. “I ain’t no boy.”

“Sure you ain’t,” Buck said with more than a little hint of teasing. “Boy.”

“Buck,” Alex gave him a look. “Don’t be an ass.”

Buck rolled his eyes at her and met the gazes of the other men before snorting, “Women!”
As they sniggered, Alex looked to the heavens and complained inwardly to herself again.

She really hated this program.
It had been a hard day once they got to work deciding how the Seminole village would be defended. Joined by the Chief and Tennessee Eban, the Captain, as the Man in Black, devised an adequate defence of the village. Making the sensible decision to take the high ground and cutting off alternate routes into the valley, they would force the enemy into a bottleneck that would allow the seven to reduce their numbers significantly. Even so, there was a great deal of work to be done for the plan to succeed when dawn came, not just by the seven but the villagers themselves.

Alex remained in the background, keeping counsel to herself because she had no wish to create friction between the group, not at this crucial juncture in their formation. The original scenario was devoid of women, save for the token love interests and her presence was affecting the group dynamic. Having no idea what the aliens’ intended to do, or why they had chosen to use the captain and the senior staff this way, Alex had to let things unfold as the scenario dictated.

The others had turned in for the night, leaving Alex alone at the fire with her thoughts. The villagers too had retreated to their homes and there was no one in sight, making it safe enough for her to contact the bridge if it was at all possible. Reaching inside her coat where the device had been kept, she swept her gaze across the area once more to ensure she had privacy.

No doubt Chris and Josiah were sleeping off their drunk somewhere since both men played characters chased by demons that could only be held at bay by whiskey and they had imbibed heavily this night. Buck was probably off trying to charm one of the few women in the community and Nathan was busy setting up a healer’s hut for the casualties that would inevitably come with the fighting. Last she saw Ezra, Vin and JD, they were playing cards in the shack provided for their sleeping arrangements.

Satisfied she was alone, she tapped her combadge, realising she could be greeted by silence but was pleased when she heard the soft chirp by the activated device, swiftly followed by Charlotte Richmond’s relieved voice

“Commander, it’s good to hear your voice, are you alright?”

“Yes I’m fine,” Alex said quickly, “I thought it was best to stay out of contact until I was alone. I was forced to disable the arc after attempting to take Buck through it. The minute he saw the thing, the aliens placed him in some kind of comatose state and I couldn’t risk worsening his condition by allowing it to remain open. The minute I disabled the arc, he was back to normal so I’m going to assume any attempt to remove the senior staff from the holodeck might end up killing them.”

“Damn,” Charlotte cursed, disliking the loss of that possibility as a way out of this situation. “Are you able to leave the holodeck?”

“I’m not sure but I don’t want to risk it. I suspect that the only reason I’ve been allowed to contact the bridge at all is that I haven’t tried to interfere in whatever plan they have for the Captain and the others.”

“I guess that’s something,” the assistant chief science officer grumbled.

Pressed for time because she thought she saw a crack of light from somewhere in the village, Alex realised she had to wrap up this conversation and decided to move on. “Were we able to deploy the torpedo and send the Away Team to the station?”

Stars
“Yes Commander. The chronoton particles created the phase shift in the hull and we managed to transport Lt Travis and the Away team into the station. We were also able to detect life readings, although they’re varied and difficult to distinguish. Unfortunately, communication is also a little problematic.”

“Due to the phase shift,” Alex nodded expecting it. “Maintain an open com for as long as you can, if not tell Mary they are to check in every fifteen minutes, without exception.”

“Aye Commander. What about you?”

“I’ll remain here,” Alex sighed, not looking forward to it at all, before adding, “Tell Lt. Rain to go ahead with the plan to join me in the program. We’re at the point in the scenario where the healer is meant to have a love interest. Rain can fit that slot nicely and I need to talk to another normal person before I end up killing someone. These men and their macho crap are plain pissing me off.”

“That bad?” Charlotte sympathised but then what else could they expect from a program set in the Old West?

“I’m drowning in testosterone,” Alex complained. “Not to mention, I am sorely tempted to risk insubordination by knocking the Captain flat on his ass. Captain Larabee is a hell of a commander but the Man in Black is an arrogant son of a bitch.”

“Ouch,” Charlotte winced. “Remember your temper Sir and I’ll relay your orders to Lt. Travis.”

“Thanks,” Alex said grateful she and Charlotte had hurdled their earlier enmity because they worked exceedingly well together. “I got to go. I’ll try checking in later. Styles out.”

Ending the conversation, she leaned back against the rock she had been resting against and took a deep breath, before raising her eyes to the stars above, admiring the holodeck’s handiwork. Even though it was a simulated depiction of a night sky on Earth, Alex couldn’t help but admire the view of the universe from the planet of her birth.

A few seconds later, Alex saw Vin appearing out of the darkness and was pleased to see him, despite her promise to Chris to stay away. His slouch hat was hanging over his back by his chin strap and Alex supposed it was by the aliens’ design no one had noticed his ears even if most of it was concealed by hair. Something with the unmistakable aroma of coffee wafted from the two cups he was carrying as he approached, still staring at her with those soulful blue eyes that made her fall in love with him from the start.

“You ought to be sleeping.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Alex shrugged as Vin offered her a cup and she took it without hesitation. “What about you?”

“Don’t like sleeping indoors. Thought I’d bunk down by the fire.” He gestured at the flames, cackling softly nearby before he sat down beside her, sharing the large rock she was leaning against. They sat next to each other and Alex was reminded of how they often sat alone next to the observation deck window, admiring the stars rushing by the ship.

“I don’t blame you,” she said gazing up into the sky. “It’s a pretty night. I forget how beautiful the stars in this sky are.”

“This sky?” He stared at her oddly. “You seen a lot of others?”

Alex smiled faintly, not answering because it was too complicated to explain that being in Starfleet
meant she had seen so many skies with different stars, that she forgot how breathtaking the view was from the perspective of her native star.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said and made an effort to change the subject. “You know, when stars die, it takes millions of years to know they’re actually gone.”

“Stars can die?”

Alex was suddenly reminded of their first interactions together when he was so full of questions about people and life. He was so sheltered marooned in that rustic world and at the Academy, being neither human or Vulcan had made him an outcast. Eventually, he would form friendships with the rest of the seven but in the beginning, they had talked about everything.

“Yes, they do. It takes time but they die out like everything else. We just don’t know it right away because their light takes so long to reach us that by the time it gets to our eyes, they’ve been gone for millions of years.

“Really?” He stared at her, marvelling at the idea. “How do you know that?”

“Fancy book learning,” she winked at him and then looked up again and pointed to one star in particular. “See that one there? It’s a star called 40 Eridani. It’s 17 light years away from here. One of its planets is hotter and drier than the Territory but its so beautiful. Everything looks like it's painted with burnt gold. The sky there looks like the dawn here and there’s a mountain there that makes you feel like you can touch God if you stand on the top of it.”

Of course, Vin knew she was making all this up, but he liked the way she told the tall tale, making him imagine he could be there himself. “Sounds awful pretty,” he smiled faintly and then pointed at another cluster of stars. “What about that one?”

Alex considered a moment. “Oh, that one. That one is a gas giant, meaning it’s like our sun but it burns a different kind of heat. If you see it up close,” she paused and then added, “through a telescope, you’ll see it's got rings. It’s a lot colder and the planet around it has two moons.”

“Two moons?” He laughed, trying to imagine a sky like that.

“Yeah,” she laughed, aware he was humouring her. “Planet is covered with ice and is so cold the only way its people live is to go underground, close to the core where it’s warm.”

“Never seeing the stars?” Vin made a face. “Don’t know if I would like that.”

“Me neither,” she replied smiling and continued to admire the glitter above.

For a few minutes, there was silence and they enjoyed each other’s company the way they always did, where their eyes spoke a language not requiring speech.

“Did I do something to make you mad at me?”

The question took her by such surprise Alex turned to him with eyes wide before she realised she should have expected the question at some point. After she voiced her intention to ride with Buck, he hadn’t said much, appearing to respect the decision but supposed he was justified in asking why. Even the aliens’ influence over his mind could not erase the bond they shared together and for him, it would be doubly intense if his feelings were a recreation of their first meetings. It would be like he was falling in love with her all over again.

“God no Vin,” Alex put down the cup and touched his cheek. “It’s nothing like that at all.”
Vin leaned into her touch and covered his hand with hers, seeing the affection in her eyes for him but he was also puzzled by her withdrawal. “Then what is it?”

Alex took a deep breath and brushed the ring hanging around her neck on a chain with her fingertips. “Vin, I care for you, I won’t lie but I’m married. I’m married to someone I love very much. It’s just you remind me so much of him it hurts.”

Vin removed her hand from his cheek but didn’t let go even with his disappointment showing. “Where is he?”

“Lost,” she said simply. “He’s lost. I’m hoping I’ll find him again.”

“Maybe I can help,” he offered, even though he hated the idea she belonged to someone else. “What’s he like?”

Alex blinked. “Quiet, a little shy. He’s the sweetest person I know, always has faith in people. When I thought the world was a very dark place, he became the light. He always said I saved him but the truth was, he saved me. I miss him a lot Vin.”

Once again, his heart sank at the obvious love she felt for this unseen husband, thinking he would have given anything to have her care for him that way, but he also knew he would be her creature even if she did belong to another. “We’ll find him, Alex, I promise.”

Alex held his gaze and fought the urge to say more knowing it would only give herself away. “I hope so Vin,” she said softly. “I really hope so.”

Even in this guise, he was still the man who would stand by her no matter what and Alex just knew she had to get him back.

“RUN!”

As Mary and the Away Team bolted, Julia Pemberton who was presently scanning her tricorder, not an easy thing to do with a space dinosaur chasing after them, wondered why Kate thought it was necessary to make that statement. It wasn’t as if they would do anything else. Running right next to them and no less panicked, were the herd animals they had first sighted, doing their best to escape the apex predator looking for a meal.

Unfortunately, the herd creatures, sizeable themselves were stampeding and if any of the men who engaged in the Magnificent Seven program were present, they would have been the first to voice how dangerous such a thing was. The Away Team could become easily trampled into the ground by the terrified animals.

“We’ve got to get away from this herd!” Kate shouted, shadowing Mary to ensure the Protocol Officer was safe as they tried to break away from the animals. It was obvious the predator considered the herd its primary source of sustenance and if the Away Team remained among them, it would consider them part of its meal.

Julia tried to keep her eyes on the tricorder display but had to shift her gaze away when a rotting log appeared over her path and she was forced to jump over it. The herd animals emitted a frightened braying whine as they ran, their terror at the death chasing them filling her ears. She landed on the soft grass and was almost knocked off her feet by one of the fleeing creatures. Regaining her balance, she chanced to look over her shoulders to see the behemoth still in pursuit, increasing its speed as it sought to catch up with its prey.
“Come on!” Opa grabbed her by the arm and prompted her into movement again because standing still would only draw the predator’s attention to her. Like Kate, Opa’s primary concern was the two senior officers in their midsts and though she was finding it no easier to evade the creatures herself, she was determined the chief engineer did just that.

“There!” Kate captured their attention and Julia looked ahead to see the security officer pointing to an enormous log that had been hollowed out by time, directly in their path.

Kate reached it first and ushered Mary into the opening. When the protocol officer disappeared, Kate who had her phaser drawn, waited for Opa and Julia to reach her. Behind them, the monster was temporarily halted in its advance when it managed to catch up to one of the fleeing ‘armories’ as Kate was calling them. Powerful claws held the flailing creature in place as the predator lowered its head for the kill and though Kate’s first impulse was to help, she knew better than to interfere with this ecosystem’s normal functioning.

“Get in!” Kate waved Julia into the log, watching the rest of the creatures coming their way.

The predator was making quick work of its meal and Kate sensed it wasn’t done. The size of it implied that one of the herd wasn’t going to be enough to satisfy its hunger and it would soon be on the hunt again. As it continued to devour its meal, Kate could see it was already lifting its reptilian eyes to search the area for more food. She felt a cold shudder run down her spine when it set its gaze in her direction. The security officer’s tightened her grip around her weapon, more than prepared to fire at it if necessary, damn the consequences.

Julia crawled into the hollow of the logs, cringing a bit at the moist dirt and rotting innards. She wondered how long it had been since it had been a living tree and decided by the small crawling things she could see running away from the trespassers, it had to be some time. Mary had already scooted in further, trying to get further along the shaft to make room for the others. The protocol officer’s severe bun was loose with strands hanging over her dirt-smeared cheek.

Opa was next after Julia and inside the narrow space, the thunder of hooves felt even louder with the inside of the shaft shaking from the impact. Within seconds, all four women were inside the log, disappearing from view of the hunter outside its wooden walls.

“What the hell is this place doing inside a space station?” Opa demanded, her palms braced against the walls to steady herself.

“Well, it’s obviously a habitat of some kind,” Julia answered. “Nothing here is simulated. According to the tricorder, there are more than a hundred different species.”

“I can believe it,” Mary replied and saw an insect crawling through the mud-encrusted wall of the log. It bore fluorescent yellow wings and long fuzzy feelers that made the protocol officer think of rabbit ears. It was scurrying away from the trespassers to its happy home, emerging outside through a small crack in the wood. “It’s possible this habitat was created by the aliens as a way of preserving the animals. If the ratio is correct, it is possible to create a self-perpetuating ecosystem.”

“On a space station?” Opa puzzled at that.

“If there was a planetary disaster, it might be the only way.” Mary explained, having seen similar preserves over the course of her career. Sometimes, the only way to save the animals was to transport them elsewhere and judging by the robust habitat they had just seen outside, it was clear these aliens whomever they were, were quite expert at it.

“Quiet,” Kate hissed.
Everyone shut up immediately and realised why Kate had asked for quiet. Everything had gone suddenly silent.

The thundering hooves had faded into the distance and now there was only the sound of insects chirping and their own breathing in the narrow space. Kate and Opa were clutching their weapons tight, ready for anything because there was something ominous in this sudden stillness. Mary had left her mind open and though she could sense the aliens, she knew they were not here. Wherever they were in this complex, Mary was certain they were nowhere near this place.

“What?” Mary mouthed when suddenly, a shadow passed over the mouth of the log and an eye the size of a dinner plate, peered at them.

In surprise, Mary uttered a short cry of fright and it was the absolute worst thing she could have done. The sound immediately prompted the behemoth outside into action and it swung its massive head against the log. The force of the impact rolled the trunk across the muddy ground, taking everyone inside of it along for the ride. As they tumbled inside the narrow shaft, slamming into the walls covered with dirt and moss, the world became a whirling dervish of colour and confusion.

“I'm going to be sick!” Julia hollered as they continued to roll, nudged violently forward by the beast determined to shake them out of their hiding place.

“Hold on!” Kate barked as she felt her face slamming against the rough wooden innards and saw the shadow of the beast still looming over the space outside while the opening of the log revealed the fauna they were passing by. Somehow, they were on what appeared to be an incline and the more they rolled by, the faster they were getting. She tried to imagine how much farther they would go before they hit a wall and then remembered the size of the station seen through the viewer. It was almost ten times the size of the Maverick and the Galaxy class starship was more than half a kilometre from end to end, to say nothing about how deep it was.

Screams of indignation and fright filled their ears and Mary who struggling not to get a serious injury, became aware of another sound as the log continued to roll downward, outpacing the creature that was in pursuit. She couldn't see where it was but its bellows were growing distant, even as the trees and shrubs outside tumbled past them so fast they were now a blur. The sounds eclipsing their cries became audible in their ears and it was Julia who somehow managed to maintain her grip of her tricorder to realise what was coming at them next.

“Oh crap!”

Mary blinked. “Oh crap?” She stared at Julia. “What does that mean?”

“It means!” Julia squealed. “WATERFALL!”
Unlike Alexandra Styles, Transporter Chief Rain Nal didn’t have any particular dislike for the Magnificent Seven holo-program.

As a Trill, she possessed three-hundred years of memories to be aware of how attitudes and customs changed, enough so that the period-specific sexism of the program was little more than mildly irritating. She knew Nathan enjoyed the simulation and was happy to participate even if times were playing the damsel in distress did get a little tiresome. Still, he reciprocated by joining her in her favourite holodeck adventures set in Middle-Earth.

Stepping through the arch, she was dressed in a watery green gingham dress of the period, having studied the simulation to determine the best entry point into the story. While she would have preferred to choose her clothing as Alex had done, Rain understood as a canonical character; she needed to play the part. Alex wasn’t a part of the original Magnificent Seven narrative, so it wasn’t necessary for the science officer to appear in any particular fashion.

Stepping through the arch, Rain stopped short when she realised the place she stepped into was shrouded in darkness.

It took her a few seconds to realise she was inside a cave. Dimly lit by wooden torches, Rain could tell by the shadows cast against the rough-hewn walls and the debris of rubble across the floor, the cave had been widened not by erosion and time but by man. What was probably a small fissure had been blasted and chipped away, no doubt to reach whatever ore might have existed within the rock.

“Rain, how long do you think we have to stay here?”

Rain almost jumped by the voice that seemed to materialise out of nowhere. Turning sharply in its direction, she found herself in the company of a group of women, huddled together, staring at her anxiously for an answer. The one who had spoken was not much older than her, with a slender, elegant frame, even though she was cradling a baby in her arms.

There at least ten women ranging from teenagers to young women in their thirties, huddling together in this darkness, hiding from some menace she had yet to unravel. Why were they in here? Rain had timed her entry into the scenario carefully before the Seven engaged Colonel Anderson, the antagonist in this story. Had she miscalculated?

“Rain? the woman asked, continuing to rock the infant who could not be more than a few days old as she waited for an answer.

“I don’t know,” Rain said noncommittally, “I guess they didn’t want us to get hurt when the soldiers come back.”

“Not the soldiers,” another woman who bore something of a shrewish expression on her face, bit back promptly. She had been sitting down on the floor, but now she stood up, brushing her skirt off in annoyance. “Because those men who are protecting the village will try to rape us.”

Who? The Seven? Rain’s jaw dropped in astonishment by the accusation. Nothing she had ever seen in the program would ever make her believe the Seven, even in their fictional world, would display such behaviour. As it was, the scoundrel in the group, the one so favoured by Buck Wilmington, would never stand for it.

“That’s silly. Why would they risk their lives for us if they’re going to do that?”
“You know what white men are like,” she bit back. “They are dogs.”

“The chief would not bring them here if they were dogs Dyani,” the woman with the baby protested.

“The Chief is a man, Toa,” Dyani insisted. “How could he know how they behave around women?”

Rain groaned in exasperation, wondering if it was fate that in every discussion, there was always one voice that would create unnecessary dissension by provoking fear and panic. Whatever the decision of the group, Rain knew she was going to the village. She wasn’t here as one of the women of the Seminole community. She was here as a Starfleet Officer who needed to regroup with her commander to save the Senior Staff. Like Alex, she kept her focus on this fact more than any other because giving into her sentiments would do Nathan and the others little good.

Something that could not be done hiding in this cave like a terrified animal.

“Well I’m going,” she stated firmly and lifted her skirts so she could see where she was going when navigating the uneven ground to reach the mouth of the cave a few feet away.

A rumble of agreement chased her to the entrance and Rain didn’t look over her shoulder to know they were right behind her. One dissenter was not enough to impede their desire to return home, and she could hear boots crushing the gravel underfoot as she neared the doorway. Rain jumped startled when she stepped on something beneath her feet that cracked loudly when her weight pressed down on it. With a frown, she glanced down and saw it was a twig amongst the detritus of dried leaves, the break amplified by the cave’s acoustics.

“Come on out of there now!”

Rain’s spine stiffened immediately. That was Nathan! She knew his voice anywhere. What was he doing out here?

“You don’t want me coming after you!”

Grateful to see him, but also a little annoyed she didn’t have much time to come up with a story as to why he was seeing her again after their encounter in the saloon, his warning was suddenly cut short. What sounded like another branch snapping loudly, followed by a slight woosh and a lot of indignant grunts had her hastening her pace because the whole sequence looked like trouble.

Emerging into the light, she realised the cave was in the rock wall of a canyon, shrouded by shrubs and tall grass.

When she found Nathan, he was hanging by his feet, upside down from a tree.

*Ladies and gentlemen, she facepalmed. My fiance, the doctor.*

“Cut me down!”

Rain rolled her eyes and looked over her shoulder to see the uncertain expressions of the women behind her turn into amusement. They had expected danger in the form of a white man but weren’t sure how to regard a man who looked like he was one of them, especially when he was caught in a snare like a rabbit. Shaking her head, Rain approached him and saw his eyes flare up in recognition.

“Hey, you were in the saloon in Four Corners!”

“Uh yeah,” she nodded, not having the patience to try and lie her way out of the situation. “This is one of the men my father hired to protect the village,” she explained to the others and then regarded Nathan once more. The chief medical officer and presently healer of the Magnificent Seven was
displaying nine kinds of irritation at his present circumstances and did not at all look threatening. “We were sent up here because the men didn’t think you could be trusted.”

“You can trust me,” Nathan insisted, both surprised by her appearance and ornery at being caught in such a stupid fashion. In the saloon, he had thought she was awful pretty when she wasn’t threatening him with bodily harm, and now that she was dressed proper, he found himself admiring that glorious dark hair. “Just cut me down first, please?”

“I suppose we can’t leave you hanging there,” Rain sighed, scanning the ground beneath him before spotting one of the knives his character carried around with him lying against the ground.

“Rain, should we let him go?” Toakhulga, called Toa for short, asked with concern.

“Yeah we should,” Rain said starting to cut him down. “He’s no good to the village the way he is.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“No problem doc. It’s not the first time I’ve come to your rescue,” she muttered under her breath.

Back at the village, the fortifications were being built.

Josiah was building barriers high enough to give horses reason for pause, while previously ruined walls were being restored and trenches dug. Others were gathering rocks to use as ammunition while Alex was taking a break from sharpening spikes all morning. With a cannon in the enemy arsenal, Chris Larabee wanted to use every advantage to use possible to defend the village.

At Chris’s request, she was tasked with bringing bundles of straw to Ezra who was creating life-sized decoys to confuse the attacking force, with the assistance of the Seminole children who seemed to flock to the Maverick’s chief of security. In fact, it appeared Ezra had a real affinity for children, and with amusement, Alex wondered what Julia and her relationship bible ‘Cosmo’ would think about his paternal abilities.

“...the hat is a marvellous touch.”

Alex approached just in time to hear Ezra’s compliment to the little girl who adorned the dummy he was painting with a beaten down straw hat. The child beamed at him in delight before settling back to watch him work as Alex walked by and dropped the bundle in the nearby pile.

“You’re good with kids,” Alex paused a moment to watch the gambler examining his artwork, having given the dummy a face. “Do you have any of your own?”

She knew Ezra didn’t have any of course, but she did wonder whether the gambler he was playing did. On the Maverick, Ezra tended to treat everyone the same as charges he had to protect, young or old. Although he had once famously crawled through a conduit to rescue a Jimmy Potter’s hamster and that was something one did if they hated to see a child upset.

Ezra looked up at her at the question and immediately made a face. “Lord no, that would require far too much responsibility from the likes of me.”

One thing she had come to learn during the last day was the low regard Ezra Standish had for himself. While he had expressed racists tendencies earlier, none of that seemed to be on display now, and Alex wondered if that aspect of the character was written in response to outdated stereotypes at
odds with the character’s later development.

“That’s too bad,” Alex sat down beside him on the ground for a moment, a gesture the man regarded with a raised brow, perhaps not expecting such lack of polish from a lady. “You’d make a great dad if the way the kids are taking to you is any indication.”

“Becoming a father would require locating the future Mrs Standish and right now, our chances of seeing the week to its conclusion do not make it seem likely.”

“Don’t be such a pessimist,” she nudged him gently, forgetting he was not the man who she sometimes played poker with to a standoff on Friday nights, with whom she sometimes shared evenings listening to opera since Vin’s idea of music was 20th-century country music and Julia’s was show tunes.

Ezra gave the woman a look, wondering why she felt so familiar sometimes and yet unable to imagine how a lady could comport herself the way she did without a very odd upbringing. Still, the way she smiled at him, implied genuine warmth and that was something he always responded to since it was often lacking in his associations. “It saves time.”

“I’ll bet,” Alex couldn’t help tease, “somewhere out there, there’s a cheerful redhead with the annoying ability to see the sunny side of everything, waiting for a guy like you to wander into her life and sweep her off her feet.”

Ezra broke into his trademark smirk at that. “That seems oddly specific Madam, though I must admit I have a penchant for redheads.”

It was nice to have someone think of him as more than just a no good swindler who would never amount to much. Seeing the young faces watching him in interest, even though nothing he was doing appeared particularly extraordinary was a nice feeling.

“What about you?” Ezra deflected, warming to the idea of being a father way too much for his liking. “Do you have children of your own?”

Alex thought about the child that was almost hers and Vin and brushed away the sorrow of that loss. “No,” she shook her head. “Not yet. But someday.”

“In that case, I will admit my parental proclivities, might surface someday as well.” He winked at her. “If we survive the week that is.”

“You’re a lost cause,” she shook her head.

“Yes,” Ezra nodded quietly. “I believe I am.”

“HOLD ON!”

Someone shouted and it might have been Kate Stokes, but Mary couldn’t be sure. All she knew was the log she, Julia and the two security officers had taken refuge in was rolling downhill, and Julia’s panic utterance preceded the moment when the wild ride they were taking suddenly smoothed out and they were airborne. Having lived through the gravimetric turbulences the Maverick often encountered in space, each woman recognised the sensation, though comforting when escaped, was only a lull in the ordeal they were presently experiencing.
She was right because a second later, they landed, and it was nothing short of catastrophic.

There was a brief moment of clarity when they aw light pouring in from the simulated sky outside, and the world spun through the eye of a needle, just before chaos returned with a loud roar. The log protecting them, already moist and rotting, was incapable of withstanding the hard impact even if it was water they were plunged into.

It snapped in half, with Julia and Opa caught in one section, while she and Kate remained in what was left. As the trunk came apart, the outside world flooded into view and Mary saw they were moving down a fast-moving creek. Fleetingly, she wondered how far it ran in this artificial habitat.

Around them, the water was rushing ferociously, surrounding them with frothing white foam as they were swept downstream by its current. Beneath her, Mary could feel the wood beginning to crumble, just as she glimpsed Julia and Opa in the same situation, seconds before they went under.

“JULIA!”

It was all she managed to utter before she too felt the wood give way, and she fell in.

The water rushed into her mouth, and Mary’s weight pulled her immediately to the bottom as she struggled to get a hold of herself. When the shock of submersion passed, she noted the water in the creek was fresh and the sky, shimmering above, revealed it was not deep at all. Through the murky blue of it, she saw animal life. There were shoals of fish, crustaceans not that different from prawns, bouncing across the dark shale river bed and spiky molluscs that reminded her of caterpillars.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed her and Mary turned to see Kate’s grip on her arm. The woman gave her a glance of assurance, before kicking hard and propelling them both upwards. Once they broke the surface, Mary drew in a deep breath, replenishing the exhausted air in her lungs while she looked around for Julia. Kate’s security training allowed her to recover quicker and the officer kept her iron grip on Mary’s arm. No sooner than they felt the sunlight on their faces, Kate was steering them across the creek towards the dam.

“We have to find Julia and Opa!” Mary declared once they reached the shore.

“We will,” Kate agreed wholeheartedly because she was leaving no one behind in this place. Checking her phaser, she wanted to ensure the weapon was still functioning. While the devices were meant to be waterproof, Kate’s paranoia about electronics and moisture would not satisfy her until she saw for herself.

“Mary! Kate!”

Mary uttered a short sigh of relief when she heard Julia’s voice. Turning around, Julia and Opa were further along the embankment, approaching them quickly. The Chief Engineer appeared just as waterlogged, but no worse for wear. Guessing Opa must have ensured Julia’s safety the way Kate had kept her from drowning, Mary hurried along the pebbled shore to join them.

The area they now found themselves was no less rustic than the rest of this strange self-contained biosphere. Tall, leafy trees flanked either side of the creek, that was no more than ten meters across, with an embankment composed of rocks and pebbles. Clusters of bushes and shrubs peppered the shore and Mary supposed a botanist might have better luck determining the types of flora they were seeing, but to her, they all looked slightly exotic and very alien.

“Are you alright?” Mary asked when Julia was in earshot.

“We’re okay,” the redhead nodded, running her hand through her hair to slick back the errant strands
across her face. “Just took us by surprise.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Opa muttered over Julia’s shoulder. Like Kate, Opa’s interest was in the environment around them, evidenced by the grip on her phaser.

“Do you still have your tricorder, Sir?” Kate asked quickly, hoping the woman hadn’t lost it when they went into the water. She was surveying the area cautiously, expecting trouble to emerge at any moment. If this ecosystem had been left to sustain itself for God only knew how long, then it was more than likely this creek was the primary source of water for all the animals living here, which meant something a great deal meaner than the apex predator that chased them into the creek, might happen along.

“Yes,” Julia nodded, reaching for the device hooked quite efficiently to the belt around her waist. Using a thumb to wipe the water from the display, she studied the results of the scan over their immediate environment.

“I can’t believe we just went over a waterfall,” Opa commended staring at it and the drop that landed them in this creek, to begin with.

The cascade was almost twenty feet high, and upon seeing it, Mary realised how lucky they were to survive the plunge over. If the log had come down anywhere else other than the creek, they would have been dashed against the rocks framing the shore. As it was, the waterfall was a majestic sight of shimmering beauty, and even though their experience with it was hardly complimentary, Mary had to admit, it was still quite breathtaking.

“Mary, I’m detecting a homing signal about twenty feet, that way.”

“A homing beacon?” Kate’s spine stiffened and glanced at the direction Julia was pointing, forgetting for a moment Mary was the one in charge.

The protocol officer, already feeling out of her depth, had no ego to bruise and was glad Kate was asking the questions she might miss. “Can you determine where it leads to?”

“To a section of wall.”

Julia started walking expecting the others to follow as she kept her emerald eyes fixed on the tricorder display. While it registered numerous species roaming the area, Julia was grateful to see nothing as formidable as the beast that had sent them over the waterfall, was anywhere in the vicinity. If the situation were not so dire, she would have thought the place quite dazzling, with its exotic shrubs, trees and vibrant flowers.

“Why a homing beacon?” Julia heard Opa ask.

“It would make sense,” Mary answered. “If this is a preserve of sorts, you want to be able to find your way out again. Whoever built this place, wanted to mark all exit points for visitors. A beacon would be the easiest way to do that.”

“I think you’re right,” Julia declared as she looked down and saw the ground or instead the deck, becoming visible through the dirt and foliage. It led directly to a thick wall of bushes.

“Hold position Sir,” Kate said firmly, using a tone that meant she’d fight Julia on this if the engineer objected. “Let me.”

Kate took the lead in front of Julia, not about to let the engineer endangered herself unnecessarily when it was Kate’s job to ensure the Away Team was safe. The Chief would expect nothing less
from her. Parting the branches and snapping a few twigs in the process, she saw the six-legged occupants of the shrubs scurrying away in panic. Once she created a gap wide enough, Kate stepped through and realised Mary was right on point.

Against a metal bulkhead, now covered with green moss and thick ropes of vine, was a hatch.
The change in environment was so contrasting, it almost left them disoriented.

Despite being soaked to the skin, a little cold and devoid of her usual cheery sense of being, Julia Pemberton made short work of the locking mechanism hidden beneath years of vegetation. When she finally beached the tangle of hanging moss and vines, she was able to bypass the lock without resorting to Opa’s suggestion they just ‘shoot the thing’. The hatch gave way with a hiss of defeat and slid open after a few seconds under the engineer’s expert ministrations, revealing a new chamber awaiting exploration.

What they found, was an empty corridor.

It was flanked by the wall of the prehistoric ecosystem they were leaving behind and a bulkhead, presumably connecting to another part of the station. Constructed from dull metal, it reminded Julia a little of the corridors in the Sulaco, the ship from ancient Earth she and the Maverick encountered over Fury 361. The comparison made the Chief Engineer shudder a little because just like the Sulaco, this corridor was dimly lit with too many shadows for her liking.

“Well this is a little more like it,” Opa commented, the last to emerge from the hatch which she closed on the way out, preventing any of the creatures from the habitat behind them to escape their self-contained world.

Mary could sense the alien consciousness she felt on board the Maverick all around her, but its power felt faint which puzzled her. She imagined it would be stronger the closer they neared the source. Then again much about this whole affair was perplexing as she studied both ends of the corridor, that could have belonged on any ship she supposed, and decided the only way to learn more was to investigate further.

“Well this is a little more like it,” Opa commented, the last to emerge from the hatch which she closed on the way out, preventing any of the creatures from the habitat behind them to escape their self-contained world.

“Julia, can you find us a way out?”

Julia was already on the case. Her experience on the Sulaco and the xenomorph stalking her prompted her to quickly seek a way out of this catacomb-like corridor. She also wanted to be sure there was nothing lurking in those long shadows and scanned the area with her tricorder to confirm this fact. Eerily, the only signs of life beyond the habitat was their own.

“There’s another access way thirty meters in that direction,” she gestured down one end of the corridor.

“I’ll take the lead,” Kate spoke up and started walking, her phaser drawn as the security officer studied her surroundings cautiously, not one to rely completely on technology. If she had learned anything from Chief Standish, it was the value of instinct. Hers told her the situation was nowhere as benign as it appeared and despite Julia’s assurances of safety, Kate believed technology, like all things, was fallible.

Mary did not object to this in the slightest.

“What about life signs?” Mary glanced at Julia whose eyes were still fixed on the data streaming across the display of the tricorder as it continued to scan the corridor and everything beyond it.

“Well,” Julia raised her eyes to Mary as they continued down the steel corridor, disliking how their footsteps echoing through the room added to the ominous atmosphere. “Massive in the habitat we just came from, but out here sporadic. Fifty life signs, no more than that. The neutronium in the walls
“Fifty?” Opa’s eyes widened in surprise and surveyed the corridor as if she were able to see through its walls to the rest of the station. “For a place this size?”

“That might not be a true complement,” Mary explained, understanding there could be numerous reasons for such a depleted number. “We have no idea what this place is. It could be built for thousands of people, or it could be fully automated not requiring anyone at all. Then again, if it were built for thousands, something might have happened to them.”

“We didn’t see any signs of damage,” Julia stated, reminding everyone of their initial view of the space station, ship, whatever this installation was meant to have been. “Still a radiation leak could have killed all life on board and left the ship intact. Although considering what we just came through, that’s unlikely. That habitat’s ecosystem would have been affected if it were the case. It seems like its thriving”

“Are you still able to sense the aliens Lt. Travis?”

Mary frowned at Opa’s question. “I can sense them around us but nothing more than that. It’s like they’re there but they’re occupied. Most likely by what they’re doing to the Captain and the Senior Staff.”

“So if we distract them, could we break their hold on the Captain?” Kate asked because the whole purpose of this Away mission was the Senior Staff compromised in the holodeck.

“Possibly,” Mary shrugged noncommittally. “However, as Commander Styles would say, we’re just speculating at this point. We need to know more about this place.”

“Oh I’ll bet Alex is having fun,” Julia couldn’t help but snigger despite what was happening. “She hates that program.”

“She hates any program that gives men too much power over women,” Mary answered, not finding any humour in the situation, not when she saw how menacing Chris had been when they had first confronted the men and found out what had happened to them. “You and I both know why.”

Reminded of that fact, Julia’s expression sobered. Sometimes she wondered how Alex could face every day after her ordeal. If it had been Julia, she would have stayed in bed and never come out. She still remembered how her skin had crawled, listening to Gul Lemar, the man in charge of the rape camp Alex was held captive, taunting the science officer. The man treated Alex like they were old lovers, instead of a brutal rapist. Julia could not imagine anything more awful than being in such a creature’s absolute power.

“Is it because of the Cardassians?” Opa inquired, having heard the rumours of how Commander Styles had been when the Cardassian defector had come on board. She had almost beat the man to death with her bare hands until Ezra’s security dragged her off him.

Before either Julia or Mary could respond to the question, Kate thankfully intervened. Neither had any intention of elaborating on that subject.

“That’s none of your business Lieutenant,” Kate gave her junior a sharp look. Kate, who had been in an abusive relationship once before, and survived it with scars of her own, could appreciate the need for Alex to desire privacy. As it was, she couldn’t even begin to comprehend the horror the science officer must have endured and had no wish for it to be the subject of gossip.

Grateful for Kate’s intervention, Mary abruptly shifted the group’s attention elsewhere, especially
when she sighted the outline of a door at the end of the corridor. “Finally, a way out.”

“Let’s see,” Julia stepped forward and joined Kate who reached the door first. Once again, it was a completely functional construction, no different than any of the doors in the engineering deck of the Maverick. The only difference was the blue crystal embedded in the wall above the door dream.

“What’s that look like to you?”

Julia studied it a moment and focused her tricorder’s scan on the crystal before giving Kate her answer. “If I’m to take a guess by these readings, I would say its some kind of monitoring device.”

“Well,” Mary sighed. “I guess that means they know we’re here.”

“I think that was always a foregone conclusion,” Kate threw in and nodded at Opa to be alert when she reached for the door panel, none too different from the hatch controls they encountered earlier and activated it with less fanfare than its habitat counterpart.

The door slid open with the same weary hiss and when Kate stepped through, it revealed a large room with chairs lined up in rows, facing a clear plexiglass screen that took up almost the entire section of wall. It took a minute for Kate to determine what was the other side of the wall was the habitat they just left. Peering through it, she saw that it was the view of the alien ecosystem if one were sitting on the other side of the same waterfall they had come down.

“What is this?” Opa asked once the other had joined her.

Mary knew immediately. “A viewing gallery.”

It was an hour after Rain and the rest of the women were led back to the Seminole village that Alex managed to get her alone.

Buck had been thrilled of course, not at all realising his behaviour was precisely why the Seminole women were hidden in the first place. Considering the disproportionate number of women to men in the Old West, there was a reason for concern. Rape was almost commonplace and while it was unfair to tar all men with the same brush, Alex could understand Chief Tastanagi’s desire to protect his women.

While Chris had assured Tastanagi and Tenessee Eban, who played the father to Rain’s character, nothing untoward would take place with their women, the villagers were still wary and were ushered away from the seven quickly. Fortunately, the Seminoles had no idea of what to make of Alex and she was able to spirit Rain away for a quick update on the situation.

“Commander are you alright?” Rain demanded when they found themselves a quiet corner.

“I’m fine,” Alex assured her. “I’m close to committing insubordination, but other than that, I’m fine.”

Rain nodded in understanding, knowing immediately to what the Science Officer was referring.

“Captain still acting creepy as hell?”

“Creepy, misogynistic, arrogant, you name it,” Alex complained before adding with a wry smile. “I’m just trying to figure out if it is because of the Man in Black, or was he always this way and we haven’t noticed because his filters are on.”

“Alpha male syndrome,” Rain shrugged, getting a bead on the captain’s behaviour almost immediately. “Captain Larabee is about as alpha as you can get, even by 24th century standards. In
this place,” she cast her gaze over the rough and tumble environment, “we’re lucky anyone of them are capable of walking upright.”

Alex uttered a short laugh at that. “True.”

“So what are your orders?” Rain inquired once the moment was over. Ridiculous as this situation was, they were still dealing with a serious threat to their comrades’ state of mind, not to mention the tractor beam the Maverick was caught in.

“We play out this scenario” Alex answered without hesitation. “We can’t take them off the holodeck without causing them harm and until the Away Team gives us something solid to fight this thing, we have to play this out to where it goes.”

“I just hope its sooner rather than later, if we’re going into a fight with a bunch of ancient Confederates, we’re going to be doing it with holodeck safeties off.”

Alex frowned. “Don’t I know it.”

As it turned out, the fight came sooner rather than later.

“No trouble Colonel, just turn around and ride out.”

Chris Larabee knew just by the look in the man’s eyes his warning was going to be ignored. What else could one expect from this ragtag platoon of soldiers, driven by hatred and loyalty to Anderson? Each man carried memories of past glories and the slim hope their labours during the war was not for nothing. Dreams of reigniting the Confederate flame was all that bound them and Anderson knew if he didn’t keep it burning, they would surrender and return home.

“I like that! Audacity!”

Shit, Chris cursed under his breath, hearing the last hope this would end peacefully dissipate with Anderson’s gleeful laugh. It proved everyone’s worst fears the man did not consider them a threat and intended to have his gold one way or another. Looking briefly at one of the rock walls where Alex was taking cover, armed with a rifle, Chris realised she was right. She’d told him he needed more men when they were in Four Corners and the platoon assembled before them more than confirmed this.

They had mobilised the instant the scouts positioned around the Seminole village sighted the tell-tale cloud of dust approaching the valley. Chris and Chief Tastanagi took up post on a rooftop of one of the buildings, while the rest of them hid in the surrounding rocks. Upon seeing those numbers, Chris was silently grateful they opted to take the high ground because there were forty men and a cannon coming at them. The gunslinger could not be sure if what they had done would be enough to repel such a force.

“Move on Colonel,” Vin Tanner drawled from his spot. “These people have nothing you want.”

From behind the boulder she was taking cover, Alex saw Vin glanced briefly in her direction, his face still conveying his uncertainty whether she could protect herself in the battle they were about to enter. Just to show him she was fine, she raised the Winchester rifle in readiness to fire, wishing she could tell him he was the one who taught her how to shoot the thing during previous holodeck visits. As it was, she stayed out of sight when the Seven had revealed themselves to Anderson, suspecting a woman in the mix would only add spark to the already incendiary confrontation.
Anderson’s expression hardened at the warning issued by both Chris and Vin and though they could not hear what he whispered to his second in command, each knew what was coming when the second officer turned to his men.

“FIRE!”

The barrage of bullets erupted before Anderson’s captain finish uttering the word.

Alex pulled back behind the rock as bullets strafed the stone in front of her. A single phaser would have ended this entire battle, but those were not the rules of the game, she cursed as she emerged to shoot. Taking careful aim, she emptied all seven rounds into the men below, making sure every shot counted.

For a moment, Vin was forgotten,

Everything going on around her was pushed into the background because right now she wasn’t just a science officer; she was also a soldier. Her shots took down at least three men, and they died where they fell because her weapon’s proficiency allowed her to be very accurate. Still, Alex had to remind herself they weren’t real, just holodeck creations.

The additional guns wielded by Tennessee, the Chief and a few others, provided enough firepower to completely scatter Anderson’s soldiers across the village, like a rock dropped into a still pool. Once the line was broken, the Confederates attempted to seek cover from the gunfire above, dispersing in all directions, trying to return fire while others tried to escape the barrage or go after the men doing the firing.

A group of horses headed towards the rock wall Josiah had constructed and bucked immediately at the height, throwing one or two riders to the ground. More artillery assailed the trespassers, this time, not in the form of bullets but arrows. From the ridge, archers made up of Seminole women, led by Toakhulga and including Rain, showed the Confederates they were no more to be trifled with than their men.

More bodies fell to the ground, abruptly halting horses already panicked by the battle around them. Some riders were thrown to the earth, beset immediately by villagers who clubbed them into submission with rocks and sticks. Others closed in on the dead bodies like locusts, stripping them of weapons and ammunition to use against the rest of the platoon.

Alex’s attention, however, was on Chris Larabee.

Whether or not the Man in Black knew it, it was the starship Captain allowing him to launch such a formidable defence. If anyone had asked her, Alex would have revealed Chris’s strength was his ability to turn a small fighting force into a superior one capable of taking on a larger opponent. Indeed she had seen proof of this herself. He had saved the Maverick when they were faced with ten to one odds against the Dominion through sheer force of will. This was the captain who could stare down the enemy when everything was against them and make him flinch.

If Anderson were at all smart, he’d direct his men to take out the gunslinger first.

Alex ensured no one got near him. One renegade made it all the way to the hut Chris was using to lead the battle. Skulking along the mud wall, Alex caught sight of him about to climb up the ladder when she put a bullet through his skull. He uttered a short cry lost in the cacophony of exploding gunfire before falling on his back; his brain matter splattered over the mud. Another rider charged towards the hut, intending to get close enough to reach Chris behind his shelter but Alex put him in her crosshairs and ended him before he could try.
The Man in Black might have been a son of a bitch, but Chris Larabee was still her Captain.

Elsewhere, the Seminole braves led by Imala, the Chief’s son emerged from their hiding place across the village, armed with traditional weapons and what guns they snatched away from the hands of the growing pile of dead enemies. The surprise ambush on the ground when the Confederates had expected the danger to come from above, proved just as successful, even though Alex flinched when she saw one or two familiar faces tumbling to the dirt. Despite being holographic projections, she had worked alongside these people for the last two days and seeing any of them dead was upsetting.

Shifting her attention from Chris, she saw Josiah stumble from a gunshot wound and felt a surge of alarm at any harm coming to the Counsellor. Josiah helped her through so much in the last year; she was almost as protective of him as she was of the Captain. When she saw another renegade closing in, taking advantage of the man’s injury, she cut him down immediately. The renegade toppled off his horse, only to be trampled underfoot by the startled animal.

Predictably, Nathan was already making his way down the canyon wall into the village, reacting to the growing number of injured, not to mention the preacher who was his friend. He paused long enough to deal with one of the dismounted Confederates about to fire on the women hurling rocks from above. When one of them attempted to shoot down Rain, the healer flung a blade and saved her from that fatal bullet before continuing his descent.

Alex glanced up the ridge to see Vin still in position, cutting down numbers so efficiently; he was a sight to behold. They all were, she thought, sweeping her gaze across the length of the village. Josiah was fighting like a lion, even though he was hurt, using his fists and gun, leaving Alex awed and doubly intent on ensuring he survived the day. Meanwhile, Buck was shadowing JD, maintaining his part in their line of defence, while at the same time making sure JD who looked a little overwhelmed, was never in imminent danger. When Bick was back to himself, she was going to tell him his spirit animal was the Bear Mother worshipped by the Tlingit people, who protected everyone. The stupid jerk had better not get himself killed, she told herself, she would never forgive him.

It did alarm Alex when she couldn’t see Ezra though.

He had been in the thick of the fighting when the gunfire started, but now the position he was occupying was vacant, and she prayed he had not been hurt or worse. Then just as the dark thought crossed her mind, Alex saw his black hat appearing with Ezra attached to it. He was injured. By the way his arm was fastened to his side and the grimace on his face, she could tell he was in pain. Nevertheless, he continued to fight, even though pain showed each time he felt the jolt of the gun he was firing.

No matter how she had come to be here, Alex had to admit; she was damned proud to be fighting with them.

From his vantage point, Vin Tanner’s ability to do damage was considerable. At this time, he had no idea he was the best shooter in the bunch, but the end of the battle would more or less put paid to that question. With the cool efficiency of a seasoned hunter, every bullet he fired met its mark and the soil became covered with bodies.

Anderson was in the centre of this storm, still appearing stunned by the ferocity of their attack. While his men sought direction, he watched the unfolding chaos like someone trapped in a dream, unable to believe the carnage unfolding was really taking place and he was in the centre of it. Vin hoped he remained that way long enough for the Seven to do what was needed to be rid of him once and for all.
Sparing a glance at Alex, because she was never far from his thoughts lately, he saw her taking out the threat to Chris and wondered what it was about the gunslinger the woman was so determined to protect.

During the planning of the attack, she surprised them all by asking to remain at Chris’s side on the roof. The ornery cuss had balked of course but seeing how she was handling a gun, Vin had to admit he was impressed, even if he was attracted to her. Like him, she made every shot and once again, Vin wondered who the hell she was and where she had learned to shoot like that. He was snapped out of his ruminations when he spotted one of the renegades driving his horse up the slope towards her.

“ALEX!”

She turned sharply at his direction when he called out and saw the rider thundering towards her. The deafening roar of gunfire had masked the man’s approach and he was almost on top of her when Vin gave the warning. Vin lifted his gun to fire, hoping to take the bastard out before the son of a bitch lay one hand on her but a shot fired in his direction, drove the tracker back from the ledge he was standing on. Returning fire hastily, he returned his attention to her just in time to see the Confederate jump.

He landed right on top of her and Vin’s blood ran cold. The sharpshooter tried desperately to take aim but unable to do so because they were two bodies entangled on the dirt and he had no clear shot. Vin was about to shout at someone else to help her when suddenly the most amazing thing happened. He knew she could take care of herself but until now hadn’t believed it. Somehow, she got the son of a bitch off her and rolled away from him, before performing a leap to her feet with the agility Vin had only seen in the Indians.

The renegade clambered to his knees, surprised by her speed and went for his gun. Before he could reach the weapon, she threw a forward kick that was almost graceful, connecting with the man’s jaw. Before he could land flat on his back, Alex drew her gun and fired, sending him to the dirt with a stain of crimson spreading across his chest. Holstering her gun, she looked up, flashing him a little smile to tell Vin she was alright.

Vin wanted to reply but the sound of a bugle whined over the gunfire.

“RETREAT”

Anderson having snapped out of his fugue at last, finally gave the call to retreat. As the riders attempted to withdraw, Vin saw Chris giving the ladies hiding at one section of the village the signal to act. The group who had been waiting for their moment, finally acted, springing the trap they had kept vigil on since the begining of the battle.

The thick rope net sprung out of nowhere barring yet another route of escape from the enemy and unseated a few renegades at the same time. Those who managed to keep their wits attempted to hack their way through by dismounting, even though the delay cost them in blood as the gunfire now concentrated on the area at Chris’s direction, took out more men. By the time the rope barricade was brought down, the bugle sounding retreat was almost frantic.

As the enemy fled, Vin watched their departure and said to himself quietly

“Ride on Colonel, ride on.”
As a man who had gone through his entire life with the study of behaviour imperative to his trade, Ezra Standish never thought he would ever encounter a watershed moment requiring to examine his own.

His arm still ached as if he were Atlas carrying the world upon his shoulders, but the pain had become secondary in light of the revelation he just experienced. Glancing at the healer’s tent, Ezra watched the man labour to stitch wound after wound while his deep voice soothed terrified ones with comfort. Ignoring the fact some of the wounded he was attending were men who had fought for the same cause that would have kept him a slave, Ezra found himself suddenly awash with a feeling he thought incapable of experiencing.

Shame.

He felt shame. After all the swindling and outright cheating he carried out over the years, he should have been beyond the emotion and yet he felt it. Turning away from the healer called Nathan, he stared into the horizon of craggy mountains and unforgiving desert, feeling his throat inordinately dry. Reaching into the folds of his jacket with the arm a short time ago, was not much good for anything, he retrieved his favourite flask and unscrewed the lid, needing the dose of reality contained within.

Growing up in the South, it was a given that a negro, he couldn’t even bring himself to think of the more common term used by his contemporaries in the South, was inferior. With slaves everywhere, it was the only way anyone could justify to themselves keeping one human in bondage was right. However, not everyone who believed in freedom for the slaves was an abolitionist or a Yankee. There were people in the South who believed in the same thing and what they fought for in the war, was not the continued oppression of the negro but the sovereignty of their homeland.

Where had he developed such ideas? It certainly wasn’t from his mother. Maude Standish never instilled such beliefs in him and knew she disliked it intensely when he displayed his. More than once, he had caught that look of disapproval in her eyes when she saw him treating a negro as if they were less than nothing. When he asked her about it once, she merely shrugged her shoulders and replied with typical Maude Standish indifference.

“A mark’s a mark Ezra. I care little for the colour of their skin as long as their money is green.”

Yet beneath her blase response, Ezra sensed her disappointment.

Since joining this group of gunmen for the pittance of five dollars, Ezra had found he was the odd one out because he was the only one who saw Nathan as less when the others considered him more. If anything, they thought less of Ezra because he treated Nathan as any decent Southerner would and yet, the more Ezra thought about it, the more he was forced to ask himself what decent actually meant?

Casting another glance over his shoulder, he saw Nathan continuing to work and faced front again, lest he be caught staring.

“Hey, Ezra.”

Ezra looked up to see Vin Tanner staring down at him, wearing that unflappable mask that was unreadable, (except when he was around a certain female in their company), returning to the village.
from his perch above. Even more inscrutable than Mr Larabee, the tracker kept counsel to himself and was one of the few people that didn’t eye him like he was something to be scraped off one’s shoe.

“Mr Tanner,” Ezra tipped his hat in the man’s direction. “Can I offer you some libation?”

Ezra lifted the flask in his direction and winced when his injured shoulder ached uncomfortably, a reaction the tracker caught immediately.

“You hurt?”

“Merely a dislocated shoulder,” Ezra nodded as Vin took the flask, “but fortunately for me, Mr Jackson was on hand to correct the problem, despite my own pig-headedness.”

Vin reacted with a slight nod and looked past his shoulder at Nathan. “Yeah, the Doc’s something else. Can’t believe he learned everything he did carrying stretchers in the war.”

“He was in the Union?” Ezra exclaimed and then wondered why he was surprised. He spent some time in the service of the Confederacy, under an assumed name of course, before deciding after a year or two the cause was lost and he had no intention of staying around to die with the others. During that time, he had seen many... negroes wearing the Union blue. After the Emancipation Act was declared, most of these were southern born slaves who simply walked off the plantation, unaware they were exchanging one master for another.

“Yeah,” Vin nodded, taking note of Ezra’s interest and seeing the gambler wrestling with some rather deep seeded preconceptions. “Told me and Chris after we kept him from getting strung up.”

“The gunfight so sensationally described in the Clarion News,” Ezra remembered how foul a mood the article had put Chris in for the first leg of their journey to the Seminole village. If his errand of mercy had been reported like tabloid trash, the gambler couldn’t blame the gunslinger’s ire. “They were going to hang him for killing their trail boss, was it?”

“Nathan didn’t kill no one,” Vin clarified, staring at the man with just enough flint in his eyes to tell the gambler to mind his words, even if he and his conscience in conflict at present. Nathan did the best he could to save him but the trail boss had gangrene and there’s no saving anyone that rotted through.”

Ezra couldn’t argue with that and once again, the feeling rose up from the pit of him. Shame. Shame because he had behaved no better than a bunch of drunken Texans, judging a man by the colour of his skin and not by his substance. How many times had he been similarly judged or looked down upon because of who he was? Everyone always looked at him a certain way and yet even with his obvious prejudice, Nathan could see past Ezra’s disdain to help.

Mr Tanner was indeed correct, Nathan was something and Ezra was begining to realise he had some serious thinking to do. .

No matter how many centuries may separate the wars fought, there was one thing that remained a constant. The smell.

Alex walked through the medical station or rather the tent Nathan used for the purpose and winced at the metallic odour of blood drifting towards with every fresh breath of wind. Born on the back of the arid, dry breeze native to this part of New Mexico, the stink seemed to feel even more intense, until she forced herself to remember this, like everything else here, was a holographic creation. With the exception of the senior staff, Rain and herself, nothing here was real. It was all a fiction of light and
energy.

Except they felt real to her.

Sweeping her gaze across the cots, filled with faces of men and women whom she fought alongside today, they didn’t feel like holograms to her, they felt real. As a science officer, she knew better than anyone on board how much sentience to credit these people, but they cried for the dead, they cared for each other they lived and breathed in this place like any human being. Alex never thought about religion, she understood spirituality and the interconnectedness of all things, not more than that. What makes these people any less alive than herself or any one of the seven?

When she was an ensign, she chanced to visit a Bajoran camp, well before the end of the Occupation and remembered seeing a resistance party return, their bodies broken and their victories born in blood. Despite it all, the horror, the weeping for the death and the sense of overwhelming odds someday crushing them, they still believed in freedom, in the idea their pain would shape a better future. She had often wondered if she would feel the same if she suffered.

Of course the answer to that question was one she was forced to learn the worst way imaginable and yet seeing these people made her remember it all again.

“Alex.”

Alex jumped and she turned to see Buck staring at her with concern.

“You alright Darlin’? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Alex shook her head and walked out of the tent, pausing long enough to see Josiah being attended to by Nathan, with Chris looking on closely. Unaware, she was being followed, Alex strode away, needing to catch her breath, needing to recalibrate. She walked past Ezra who seemed to be taking a sip from his flask, sitting on the rock, appearing as if he was doing some deep thinking and wondered what was on his mind. Meanwhile Vin was heading towards Chris, no doubt to discuss what came next. They had won a battle but by no means did they have victory.

She finally stopped behind a large boulder and drew in a deep breath, feeling her stomach churning with frustration.

“Hey,” Buck rounded her shelter of stone and stared at her worried “You okay?”

“No, I’m not okay!” Alex snapped. “I’m not! None of this should be happening! This whole situation is a...a...” she stopped herself from saying ‘fake’. “It shouldn’t be happening and worst yet, I shouldn’t care. I didn’t come here to care but I do and that’s crazy!”

Buck offered her a knowing smile, the kind often preceding the appearance of his warm, caring side. It was this side of him every member of the Maverick, including the Captain could rely on, the one far removed from his reputation as a womaniser that eclipsed everything else about him. He leaned against the rock next to her and sighed. “Darlin’, when you become a hired gun, that’s the first thing they tell you, not to care. You can’t afford it because most of the time, that’s what gets you killed.”

“Are you telling me you don’t care?” Alex stared at him in disbelief because the man in front of her had a heart like a red giant.

“Oh course I do,” he grinned. “Just didn’t want you to feel left out.”

Alex uttered a short laugh and then sobered, feeling the emotion well up in her eyes. “I came here for a reason Buck, I came here to keep an eye on all seven of you.”
She saw the question flare up on his face again and raised her hand to stop him before he could ask.

“I can’t explain it, but that’s the truth. I’m here for the seven of you. This village didn’t even register. It was just a place, somewhere all of you happened to be. But the last day, being here, they’ve become real to me in a way I didn’t expect. It’s too much like somewhere else I’ve been, where it wasn’t just one village but an entire people, losing their land, their way of life, their freedom and no one could help them. There were treaties and decisions made by others, where the lines were drawn and they were on the wrong side of it. We stood by and did nothing while good people who didn’t hurt anyone die, because of the uniform. I feel like that now.”

Buck had heard other men speak in the same way before. Hell, he’d make a speech like that once or twice on occasion, remembering the frustration of fighting in a war where lines had been drawn and overnight, a neighbour or a friend became the enemy. He understood what she was saying and wondered what she meant by the uniform. Had she actually served? Was there an army somewhere out there in the world that let their women fight?

“Ain’t nothing much I can say to make you feel better Alex,” Buck spoke kindly, “except to say we fight one battle at a time and deal with the next one when it comes along. Maybe at the end of it, we do some good for these folk, or we could die and Anderson will wipe them all out. The important thing is, we made a stand and we fought. Sometimes, that’s the best we can hope for.”

Alex nodded, absorbing his words and wondered how much of it came from Buck Wilmington, scoundrel and ladies man of the seven gunmen of this program, and how much of it was from the First Officer of the Maverick, who always knew the right thing to say, no matter what the occasion. He was such a paradox this man, who could be as crass and juvenile as a teenager but when it came down to it was one of the best people she knew.

Alex realised with a start if she had met Buck before her ordeal with the Cardassians, she could have loved him.

“You’re right of course,” she gave him a little smile. Stepping out from the shadow of the boulder, she looked over the village, surveying the destruction from the battle they had just fought and realised, she would never be able to take this program lightly again. Mr Watson, the Chief and his family, Tennessee Eban and the children who stared at Ezra with adoration, had become real to her, as much as the Bajorans had been in the past.

Suddenly, this mission had become about more than just freeing the Seven, it had become about helping this village. Perhaps the program would be shut down once they were free of it and these people would become nothing more than bytes of data, but Alex would rest easier knowing in the infinity of programming, they would live free.

Mary stood in front of the clear screen, watching the life beyond the glass go about its business, completely unaware they were being observed.

“What is this? Some kind of a zoo?” Julia was the first to ask after Mary had made her startling revelation.

“Possibly,” Mary shrugged, although her sixth sense told her there was more to it than that. There was a mystery about this place, something beyond Julia’s astute observation. A zoo possibly, but maintaining an ecosystem like this, one that could sustain itself without its handlers had a deeper purpose than simple sightseeing. No, this was about preservation.

Elsewhere, Kate and Opa had fanned out as security officers tended to do, scouring the immediate
area for danger and a way out. This was one part of a very large station and without any clue how long the Captain and the Senior staff had in their current state, there was little time to waste. They needed to move on.

“What do you think Mary?” Julia came alongside the Protocol Officer, who continued to stare at the habitat beyond the glass. “What do you think this place is?”

“I’m not sure,” Mary’s answer was the truth, she didn’t know, but she suspected. She wished it were Chris, Ezra and Alex here. The trio were the best strategic thinkers of the Maverick, although Mary would have put Chris above all the rest, not simply because she loved him, but because he was the Captain he was because he was capable of making deductive leaps based on almost nothing but gut evidence. Ezra and Alex were more methodical.

“Can you sense them?” Julia swept her gaze across the ceiling, searching for the aliens she would not be able to see, but whose presence felt ominous nonetheless.

“I can,” Mary blinked and met her eyes, “but it feels odd. I can feel them but it’s like they’re not concerned about us being here like they’re distracted.”

“On the Captain and the others maybe,” Julia suggested. “Maybe they’re not concerned about us because they can’t be, not if they want to maintain a mental hold on our people.”

“Yes!” Mary’s eyes flashed in excitement because Julia’s observation struck a chord of truth. “I think that might be exactly the case. It means their control has limits and if it does, we might be able to free Chris and the others.”

“Lieutenant!”

Both Mary and Julia looked up to see Kate standing at the furthest end of the gallery, past the orderly row of cushioned dark grey seats. The security chief was waving them over and the two senior officers exchanged a quick glance before crossing the distance. Opa, who was examining a panel on another wall, also left her study and joined them.

Kate was standing in front of a door when they reached her. She was on her haunches, studying the door panel closely and tossed a look at the rest of her Away Team at their approach. “I’ll bet a year’s pay, this is some kind of a turbo lift.”

“You don’t get paid. We live in a society free from the need of currency,” Mary remarked with a smile.

“Someone forgot to send that memo to Ezra,” Julia replied while she ran her tricorder over the nondescript grey door that resembled any one would find on a ship. “I think you’re right, I’m detecting a shaft that runs at least 100 meters up.”

“That would fit the dimensions of the station,” Mary agreed. “Alright then, let’s see where this rabbit hole goes. Kate,” she nodded at the security officer.

Kate acknowledged the unspoken order and pressed the triangular button taking centre stage on the panel. The second it felt the contact of skin, the button came alive with a vibrant green glow, apparently, the universal colour for ‘all systems go’ and buzzed faintly with sound, as if circuits long in stasis, was suddenly awakened. The door slid open a second later, revealing an interior pod that was almost identical to one of their turbo lifts.

Kate stepped inside before Mary could, refusing to allow a senior officer to endanger herself by entering an unknown space, even if it appeared benign on first sight. Stepping into the lift, it was lit
by a row of lights overhead and a panel similar to the one she had just used, awaiting instructions from its newest passengers.

Mary followed her and was joined by the rest of the Away Team. This time, smaller triangles ran up the length of the panel, each marked with an alien cursive none of them could read and the universal translator could not decrypt. There were at least ten of them which obviously meant the different levels in the station. Unfortunately, not knowing where they were in this list, made their next action a guess.

“Where are we going?” Kate eyed Mary.

Mary and Julia exchanged a glance before Mary guessing Julia’s opinion mirrored hers, reached for the panel and pressed the top button.

“If we’re going to do this, we might as well get to the top.”

No one could disagree with that statement. No sooner than it was activated, the triangular button came to life with its comforting green glow and the door slid close in front of them. With a slight lurch, the lift began its journey, filling the space with a light hum to indicate the machinery in operation around them. The air inside the lift was circulated but there was also a hint of something in it Julia detected, mostly because she was an engineer accustomed to tending the life support systems on the Maverick.

“This air is stale.”

“Stale?” Mary stared at her.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “It’s been recycled no doubt but it feels like it did after we mothballed the ship for months at DS5 after the Maverick got damaged from our fight with the Vrihan. Just stale, like the system has not been in operation for a while.”

“Are you saying the air is being pumped in just for us?”

“I think so,” Julia shook her head, hating that she couldn’t explain it better. “I know we’re expected but I wonder whether they’re making it easier for us to move through the ship like they want us to find them.”

“That’s weird,” Opa pointed out.

“What isn’t about all this?” Mary stared back at her. “At present, our Captain is playing out his holodeck fantasy, thinking he actually is a gunfighter. Thank God, it wasn’t a pleasure program...”

“We’d never get Buck out alive.” Julia quipped.

The lift doors came to a sudden stop and slid open. As the light of the next room flooded into the small space with them, Mary’s jaw dropped in astonishment. In fact, all of them gaped in similar shock.

“This can’t be real,” Mary stepped out, staring at the sky above them, the city of tall spires, gleaming towers and domed buildings. She could see paved courtyards, manicured lawns, fountains and streets. Hover type vehicles were moving up and down their length, disappearing around corners. Streetlights and plants lined pavements. There were cafes, shops and businesses. It was a city pulsing with life.

“It isn’t,” Julia said immediately. “This is holographic. All of it.”
“Thank God,” Kate exclaimed, because populating this city, completely oblivious to their presence, was the race that built this odd installation. While they were not human, they were definitely bipedal, with large ecliptical eyes that reminded the security officer of those belonging to insects, yet their bodies were lithe and graceful. Their skin was almost a translucent blue and for a moment, Kate thought they looked like glass blown figurines.

“I think I understand,” Mary said watching these people, whoever they were, immortalised in this place, going about their daily lives. “I think I know what this place is.”

“What?” Julia looked at her.

“A museum.”

As if materialising to counter her statement, a figure suddenly came into view as if transported right in front of them. It barely reached her waist and while Mary saw both Opa and Kate going for their weapons, the size of the new arrival gave them pause. Even though it looked decidedly alien, they were unable to feel threatened.

It looked like a small child.

Lifting its pointed chin to look up at them, the new arrival spoke.

“Help us.”
“You’re missing a hell of a party.”

Vin Tanner looked over his shoulder to see the slender form of the woman who occupied his thoughts much of late, approaching his refuge high in the rocks overlooking the village. Beneath him, the Seminoles and the rest of the men he was riding with on this suicide mission, were celebrating their victory against Anderson and his men but Vin was unwilling to let down his guard. As bloody and ferocious as the fighting had been, both sides limped away from their initial confrontation with enough numbers to ensure their stalemate was temporary.

A battle had been won, not the war.

Vin was maintaining a vigil from the same perch he used to inflict heavy losses on Anderson’s men earlier in the day, watching the night and listening for every sound. He knew they were coming, he could feel it in every fibre of his being. Vin had seen the manic gleam in Anderson’s eyes as he rode away with his tail in between his legs and it was not a look of one who was defeated but one who was crazed with fury at being surprised.

It was not a mistake he was going to make twice.

However, for the moment anyway, Anderson was forgotten when he saw her approaching, a bottle of liquor in her hand. She was still wearing her irons, a strange sight for a woman, but her coat and hat were gone and when she joined him, he admired how her dark hair shimmered in the moonlight. Every time he looked at her, the passion stirred defied reason and he was at a loss to understand why.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen a pretty face before. Hell, he’d encountered dazzling beauties in the past who were dressed proper and behaved like women ought to, and yet it was hers that paralysed him with desire. When she smiled, he thought his heart might break and if he wasn’t so focused on the fight before them, he could spend hours just looking at her.

“How come you’re up here with me? You ought to be down there enjoying the fun. No sense both of us being miserable even if we know something’s coming.”

“I prefer the quiet,” Alex remarked, looking up at the stars and wishing she were out of this holodeck and in the observation deck of the Maverick, seeing them rush past her at high warp.

“I saw you with that Reb today,” he spoke after a moment. “Where do you learn to fight like that?”

“From my mother,” Alex confessed, thinking about Kelien and how she taught Alex being a woman
was no excuse to consider oneself weak. “She wanted me to be strong. She made sure I knew how to fight. She used to say power isn’t in the weapons you carry, it’s in the heart and it’s in one’s honour. Power in those things is all a warrior needs to guide them.”

“Who *are* these people?”

Vin was fascinated because they sounded like Apache and yet the way Alex fought, while similar was not from that tribe. Nevertheless, he liked their words about honour because in this day and age it was something of a rarity. Vin was an idealist even though outwardly, it might appear otherwise. He believed in doing the right thing, about fighting for the weak. Nothing galled him more than knowing his attempt to deal fairly with the world had been rewarded with a bounty on his head that might mark him for life.

“They’re from pretty far away,” she said evasively but supposed even if she had told him Klingon, he would have no idea who they were. For all he knew, Klingon could be some remote province in outer Mongolia. “Anyway, I learned how to fight because of them and some other things...”

Her voice drifted off into the night as he handed her back the bottle and she took a swig of it, quelling the horror that still surfaced when she thought about the Cardassians. It wasn’t the agony it once was, but it was still unpleasant.

Vin caught the look in her eyes and once again, was unable to imagine how she could be with anyone else but him, not when he saw clearly the pain and knew she was hurt in some way too terrible to be spoken. He wasn’t naive, he knew what it was of course. The kind of pain women didn’t speak about, the one so awful just thinking about it made them flinch was something that happened all too often in the Territory. The idea someone had done something like that to this woman filled him with rage and his jaw clenched just enough for him to get it under control.

“Did he hurt you bad?”

Alex turned to him, her eyes widened in surprise at his question, not expecting him to make such a leap of intuition with her vague statement and then realised this version of Vin wasn’t the shy, isolated Vulcan she met almost two years ago in Four Corners. In this place, he was the experienced bounty hunter and tracker, able to read people and situations with ease. Not to mention their mating bond, whether he was aware of it or not, still existed.

“Bad enough,” she dropped her gaze into the dirt, unable to meet his eyes because it would reveal everything. “I’m okay, I survived.”

*Because of you,* she thought silently. It was true, even though she was functional when she came on board the Maverick, she was a ghost wrapped in scar tissue. Being around people made her uncomfortable, men even worse. Her nights were filled with bad dreams that woke her up screaming in a cold sweat. As the third officer of the Maverick, she would have been in no shape to take charge as she had done now.

Meeting Vin had changed all that. Seeing him so wounded after Charlotte’s rejection had prompted her to reach out to him because the pain in his eyes touched her. After that, helping him navigate a ship full of people because he was terrified of being around so many after spending most of his life on that forgotten world on the Rim, allowed her to heal.

They held each other’s eyes for a moment and though it was a mistake, Alex didn’t pull away when he lowered his lips to hers. When had she ever been able to say no to him, even in this crazy situation? Never she supposed, it was part of the reason he had gotten into her heart so quickly and closing her eyes, she threw caution to the winds, telling herself whatever happened, would happen.
For his part, he delighted secretly when she didn’t pull away as she had done since they met in the bar only a few days ago. When he touched her lips for the first time, it was electric although Vin didn’t know what electricity was to be able to identify the charge of emotion and desire spiking through him the instant they touched. His fingers traced the line of her jaw and relished the softness of her skin. Yet it was her taste that robbed him of all sense. For an instant he saw in his mind’s eye, they would be together for all time.

But it didn’t stop there.

The images filling his head were flashes in front of his eyes and for a moment, he felt like a man trapped beneath a frozen lake, able to see the sunlight but unable to reach it through the barrier of ice. He saw them riding horseback, her sitting above him, bare and glorious while they were making love with the sun on her back. He saw her in a dress that looked an awful lot like a wedding gown and realised it could be nothing else since she carried flowers in her hands. Most jarring of all, he saw her sitting across him in a place that didn’t seem quite real, with the stars rushing past them.

Vin reeled from the bursts of memory, none of which made any sense but one thing penetrated. She was and had always been, his.

Alex blinked at the abrupt end of the kiss when she felt Vin drawing away. When she stared at him, she saw his distress and he was clutching the ground he was sitting on, trying to steady himself. Eyes closed, Vin appeared fighting the effects of disorientation and Alex swore inwardly at her own weakness in responding to his touch. Vin was always the one person who could breach the fortress-like walls around her heart. Appearing as if he were suffering a headache, Alex realized the influence the aliens had over his mind was incapable of completely preventing their mating bond from exerting itself. All it had taken was the contact between them.

“Vin?” Alex started to say when a hand clamped around her forearm in a powerful grip and pulled her roughly to her feet, away from Vin.

“I told you to stay away from him!”

Alex looked up to see her Captain, no she recanted quickly, he was not her captain. He was the gunslinger. His eyes bore into her like points of steel and for a moment, Alex forgot who he was and felt genuinely afraid of the stormy menace she saw in his eyes. At that moment, he wasn’t Chris Larabee. He was a killer who was mad as hell at her. Vin was still on the ground because his mind had become a battleground between the alien’s power over him and his natural Vulcan instincts.

Fear was an emotion Alex swore would never prevent her from doing what was necessary and when she remembered this, yanked her hand out of Chris’s grip, her arm stinging from where his fingers had dug into her skin. She would not be surprised if he left bruises behind.

“Get your hand off me!”

“I told you,” he warned her. “To stay away from him. All you’re going to do is mess with his head. Not if you plan on running back to your husband.”

“All right, all right. I’ll stay away. I just didn’t understand why you had to make it such a big deal.”

“Pard, that ain’t your choice to make.”

Alex’s sharp cry sliced through the fog in Vin’s mind, severing whatever connection he made to the memories he briefly touched by their kiss. On his feet in a second, he assessed the situation even faster to realise by Chris’s slurred words, the man was drunk, but it was the worst kind, the mean kind. Still, Chris Larabee was looking out for him even if he was being an ornery cuss about it.
“The hell it ain’t!” Chris shot him a murderous look for not seeing sense. “We’ve got a job to do and this is only gonna mess with your head!”

“That’s my business, not yours.”

Chris was only looking out for him and Vin suspected in the morning the son of a bitch was going to be plenty sorry for behaving like a mule, but right now he was still drunk and dangerous. While Vin was touched by Chris’s caring, he was going about it the wrong way. Above all that, whether or not it was Alex or someone else, under no circumstances did Vin care for any lady being handled that way.

“It’s my business if it gets in the way of what we gotta do here,” Chris shot Alex a scathing glare despising her for fracturing the kinship he formed with Vin Tanner since they met. “I told you not to play with his heart. You gotta husband somewhere you’re gonna go back to, right? He ain’t something you can play with and then scrape off your boot when you’re done.”

Alex knew part of his venom had to do with the fact he resented her being here, to say nothing about the alcohol bringing out the worst parts of his manufactured personality, stoked by grief and allowed to remain for too long. Nevertheless, his words cut deep, especially when she’d been trying her damnedest to stay away from Vin. Furious at her own weakness for letting this situation escalate to the point both men were about to confront each other violently when they were closer than brothers, Alex’s restraint snapped.

“ALRIGHT YOU BASTARDS! THIS HAS GONE FAR ENOUGH! You’re going to let me tell them the truth because I’m not continuing this charade anymore!. You want to kill them, go ahead, but they can’t play your game if they’re dead.”

Both men stared at her as if she had lost her mind since she appeared to be throwing down a gauntlet to heaven itself and expecting to be answered. Alex knew she was being reckless by this action but she couldn’t keep this up, not without causing more friction between the group who clearly needed unity to carry out the aliens’ purpose. Praying they didn’t call her bluff, she waited with rising anxiousness, their next move.

“I knew she was crazy!” Chris barked at Vin before glaring at her again. Vin appeared confused by what was going on but he was not gripped by outright disbelief.

“I am not crazy, I’ll prove it.” Alex mined her thoughts quickly for the history of the gunslinger in this scenario. “Your name is Chris Larabee. You were born in Indiana, you served in the military with Buck Wilmington and you had a wife and son, Sarah and Adam. They both died in a fire...”

Before she could even finish the sentence, he was on her.

Alex’s back was pressed against a boulder before she realised he was coming at her. Both the gunslinger and Chris Larabee’s reflexes caught her by surprise and Alex uttered a soft cry of pain when she hit the large boulder behind them. Before she could regroup, his hand clenched around her throat, squeezing hard. Closing in just as quickly, she saw Vin moving to intervene even though she was certain Chris did not intent to harm her, merely express his displeasure at her mention of his family.

Screw the court-martial.

Alex snapped her head forward, slamming her forehead against his hard enough to send him reeling. Pain flared across her skull but Alex had fought Klingon warriors on the holodeck enough to be able to take the hit. Chris stumbled, not expecting the assault and backed into Vin, who promptly grabbed
him by the arm and shoved him away from Ale.

“For the last time, I am not trying to hurt anyone, least of all him!”

Alex stared at Chris who appeared to be calming down, the pain from the headbutt and Vin’s action splashing him with the cold realisation of where his rage had taken him. Tugging the chain off her neck, she released the ring hanging around it and handed it to Chris.

“What’s this?” He asked her, still breathing hard and trying to come to grips with the fact his drunken stupor had turned him into a rabid dog.

“Read the inscription!”

Chris took the gold band and studied it, thinking it looked fancier than those bought in a store. Lifting it up for a better look, he read the three words etched in the gold and looked up sharply at Vin, his expression showing his astonishment as well as his confusion.

“What is it pard? What’s it say?”

“It says,” Chris was trying to wrap his mind around all this. “Mine always, Vin.”

Despite its alien appearance, there was no doubt in Mary’s mind, she was staring at a child.

For a few seconds after it spoke to her with a voice so young it tugged at every maternal bone in her body, she took in the sight of the fairy-like child, thinking how beautiful it looked with its eyes round like polished onyx and translucent blue skin. The child looked like a glass figurine, graceful and yet so heartbreakingly fragile. With its lipless mouth curled into a pout, it was a face imploring her for help and Mary could do nothing but respond to it.

“Help us.”

Mary threw a quick glance at the other members of the Away Team, gesturing for Kate and Opa to lower their weapons while telling Julia with an unspoken nod, to let her do the talking since it was to her this delicate waif was reaching out. Dropping to the child’s eye level, Mary smiled at her kindly, trying to appear as compassionate as she could manage, despite what this alien and its kind were doing to Chris and the others. Reaching for the child’s hand, she knew it was just a hologram but her training in the Diplomatic Corps taught her, a connection was for the first step to understanding. To her surprise, the skin of the small hand felt warm, not the cool of a dead, inanimate thing.

“Hello. My name is Mary,” Mary decided to avoid immediately battering the child with questions, especially when the alien needed help. “What’s your name?”

The child’s eyes shifted from black to indigo and the swirl of colour during the change was rather quick beautiful. Mary had encountered thousands of alien races during her career and was unable to identify the species this holographic simulacrum was meant to depict. It was entirely possible this alien was one that was completely unknown to the Federation. Despite the situation that brought them here, Mary could not deny feeling a sense of excitement at this new first contact.

“I don’t have a name. I’m not like the others. I just am.”

It was an answer that engendered more questions but Mary was convinced the child’s gender was female. She cast a glance at her companions to see their confusion as the encounter unfolded.
However, Julia nodded for Mary to continue, hoping the way to returning Ezra and the others to themselves again was by helping this life form asking for assistance.

Mary faced front, revealing her puzzlement. “How are you different?”

“I take care of this place. I take care of everyone.” The child explained, sweeping her gaze across the fake skyline of this holographic city. “I make sure they can live but I’m not one of them.”

“You take care of this whole station?” Julia found her voice unable to fathom how a child could be expected to maintain a vast complex as this. While the engineer had not seen the entirety of the place, this station was almost the size of Deep Space Five. From the habitat they transported into, to this simulated city around them, it was clearly as state of the art facility with advanced technology.

She nodded.

“Julia,” Mary quickly spoke up, “remember, this is a holographic representation of whoever is trying to communicate with us. It may not necessarily be a child.”

“Agreed,” Kate added. “The alien might have come to us in this form because it’s the one most likely to disarm us.”

Mary couldn't argue with that. As the only one of them who had a child, Mary could not deny the child’s visage prompted her maternal instincts to protect.

“Tell me about the others. Why do you have to take care of them?”

The little girl face revealed a frown and Mary saw her brow furrowing in concentration, trying to come up with an answer. “I’ve always had to take care of them but something is not right. I don’t remember everything. Something bad happened and I don’t know everything I’m supposed to.”

“Something bad?” Mary saw the worry across her face and holographic image or not, Mary was immediately compelled to help, unable to bear seeing any child in distress.

“I can’t remember,” her face twisted in dismay. “It happened and now the others are getting hurt. I don’t know how to help them because I don’t remember. Their minds are trapped and if I don’t help them soon, they could die. It’s why I had to stop your ship.”

“Oh my God....” Julia suddenly gasped.

All eyes turned to the Engineer, whose expression was one of shocked enlightenment.

“Julia, what is it?”

Julia looked past Mary but approached the Protocol Officer and the child. D “I think I understand this. I think I know what’s happening.”

“What?” Kate asked impatiently, wanting to know if there was an immediate threat because the child’s words sounded ominous.

“Mary you’re right,” Julia lowered herself next to her. “This isn’t a child. I think it’s a sophisticated interface.”

“An interface?” Opa’s voice was heard behind the senior officer. “To what?”

Julia faced the little girl in front of them. “The ship. I think we’re talking to the station’s main computer.”
“I don’t understand.”

Vin Tanner stared at Alex, trying to understand how his name could be on a ring he never saw before. Even Chris seemed to have snapped out of his drunken rage and appeared just as perplexed by what he had read inscribed on the band of gold. At first, Vin saw betrayal in the man’s eyes because the impossibility of what he was seeing could only be interpreted in one way, that Vin had lied to him about Alex since their very first meeting.

The look diminished however when Chris bore witness to Vin’s own shock and this kinship they developed from their first meetings, lowered down the walls of suspicion into one of trust. They were incapable of lying to each other, no matter what the situation.

“We’re married,” Alex sighed, knowing she had gone past the point of no return and had to continue. There could be no going forward unless she could explain the situation, such as it was, to them and hoped they could believe it. “You and I have been married for almost a year.”

“No we ain’t,” Vin shook his head, unable to accept her words as truth when he could remember none of it. Then again, even as he denied it, his heart was telling him differently. Ever since he met her, there was this inexplicable connection between them and he knew in no way that made any sense, she belonged to him.

“I shouldn’t have done this,” Alex blinked slowly, regret dripping from every word spoken. If Chris Larabee was himself, he would hold the course, not break down and submit to his emotions like a damn teenager. “I should have stayed away from you but it’s too late now, you need to know.”

“Know what?” Chris demanded angrily, refusing to believe any of this and worse yet, furious at himself for having allowed this insanity into his midst. He cursed Buck for ever convincing him to let her join them and infect Vin’s mind with this nonsense. “What are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to save your lives!” Alex bit back, matching his anger with her own. She was annoyed at herself more than she was with him but was unable to believe he could still think she was making up this story, even with her wedding ring still in his grasp as proof.

“By what? Twisting Vin’s mind with this fake ring?” Chris tossed it to the ground.

“Hey!” Alex swept it up into her palm before it had even time to settle against the dirt. Brushing it off quickly, she glared at Chris. “Why would I try to trick him with a fake ring? That makes utterly no sense!”

“You’ve been trying to get into his head since you got here! Now you come up with this story and that ring, to do what?”

“This is my ring!” Alex snapped slipping it on her finger. “I’ve worn it since the day he and I were married and even if I was trying to ‘mess’ with his head,” she glanced at Vin who was still trying to wrap his head around what was happening to react to the confrontation taking place in front of him. “Why would I? He can’t read!”

“What?” Chris’s eyes widened and he saw Vin’s expression turn to one of utter mortification as that particular revelation was made. Without hearing a word from the man, Chris knew instantly she was telling the truth. Vin Tanner couldn’t read.
If anything had the power to shock the tracker, it was that one statement.

No one knew, no one! It was his secret shame and though he got by thus far in life without having it exposed to everyone, Vin always felt lesser because of it. How could a man not be able to write his own name? As one who considered himself capable of handling most things, that inability galled him. Hearing it revealed to Chris Larabee, a man he respected and considered his friend was almost more than he could bear. It stabbed at the heart of his insecurities, reminding him he was incapable of doing what a child knew how to do.

His attempt to respond, however, was cut short by the ear-splitting roar of a cannon.

All three of them reacted immediately to the erupting boom, which was quickly followed by an explosion that obliterated one of the huts around which the celebrating villages were gathered. For a second they could only watch in horror as the building exploded in a ball of cloud and fire. The single shot was enough to demolish the entire structure since what was left even before the smoke completely cleared, was a burning pile of rubble and wood.

“Anderson!”

Alex shot Chris a look, unable to believe it. “This is wrong,” she managed to stutter. “He shouldn’t be here until tomorrow. He wasn’t supposed to attack until tomorrow?”

“You knew?” Chris gripped her arm so hard, Alex felt his nails digging into her skin and she let out an involuntary cry of pain. “You knew he was going to attack?”

“Not exactly,” she tried to explain, understanding how bad this looked. “I knew there was an attack but it wasn’t going to happen tonight. I wasn’t sure exactly when...”

“YOU ARE WORKING WITH HIM!”

Chris went for his gun and Alex’s eyes widened, realising he may very well shoot her dead for what he perceived to be treachery on her part.

“I swear to you I’m not,” Alex managed to say as another explosion followed and this one hit the canyon wall on the other side of the village, breaking apart a section of it and raining down chunks of rock on the Seminoles below. “I told you before I want to save your lives, I wasn’t lying and I’m not working for Anderson!”

For the first time, she realised the gunslinger that was Chris Larabee may well shoot her dead and worse yet, to stop him Alex might have to fight him. She had no idea what to do. He was her Captain, a man who had saved her life more times than she could count, who had stood up for her at the risk of his command. How could she fight him?

“CHRIS!” Vin stopped him before this went any further. “I don’t know what’s going on here but I trust her. I knew there was going to be an attack and so did she. I wasn’t sure when either but anyone who took a good look at Anderson when he was riding out knew he’s too damn crazy to let this village go without a fight! Now you want to pull your head out of your ass and tell us what to do next because that son of a bitch is going to bury the Seminoles under this canyon if we don’t do something!”

Both men stared each other, like titans on the battleground. Chris Larabee was a force to be reckoned with but Vin Tanner had always been the one person who was able to stare him down, who seemed immune to the Larabee glare and could penetrate that sheer wall of stubbornness when the need demanded it. It was not something Vin did often and if had he the mind to remember, he would have
realised he was the only one who could.

Chris wanted to refute Vin’s words but he saw in the younger man’s eyes, a will almost as powerful as his own ready to take him to task if he got out of hand, and yet would never betray him. He saw friendship, respect and a love that was almost as deep as the one he had for the woman who started this quarrel in the first place. Besides, Vin was right. Another explosion followed by screams of pain and terror hammered home the situation they were in and the need to act.

“Alright,” he nodded quickly, shooting Alex a glare telling her this was by no means over but the argument would be tabled for now because a more immediate problem needed attendance. “Those cannon don’t have that much of a range, so he’s up there.”

Chris’s eyes scoured the ragged edge of the canyon walls trying to see the dark barrel of the cannon that was causing this damage. He’d underestimated the son of a bitch, assuming the man would wait until daybreak to make another run at them after all the losses Anderson has suffered at their hands. Somehow Anderson and his men had regrouped quickly enough to take the high ground and because of that, he was going to rain hellfire down on the Seminoles who dared to stand up to him. Vin was absolutely right, the man was insane.

“We’ve got to get up there!”

Even as Vin made the statement, a line of rifles appeared over the edge of the canyon and Chris had just enough time to shout a warning.

“EVERYONE GET DOWN!”

The opening barrage of gunfire was almost as thunderous as the cannon fire. The artillery bombardment sent the Seminoles scurrying in all direction. Vin grabbed Alex who was stupefied by the turn of events, to take shelter behind the rock. The woman appeared utterly astonished and he wondered whether the fear had finally gotten to her or was there something else going on.

Chris looked up long enough to empty a few rounds at the rifles above them but they were too high and he knew his shots were wasted. Ducking behind the boulder with Vin and Alex, he tried to think of what to do and knew unless they reached that cannon, they were all going to die.

Ezra Standish had been settling accounts with his young associates by way of gaining information on the gold mine in the area when the world went suddenly mad.

One moment he was listening avidly to their recollections about their elders’ discussion on the precious metal and the next, he was thrown forward as if God had chosen this minute to smite him down for all his sins. He landed hard against the dirt, hearing nothing except the ringing resulting from the thunderous roar filling his ears the moment he became airborne. Landing badly, his body screamed in pain, especially after his injury during the battle but that was secondary to the sharp stinging across his back as he was pelted with debris.

Groaning, Ezra turned his head and saw the little girl named Rosita, the child who adorned one of the decoys they fashioned for the attack with a hat, lying face down on the dirt. Her white dress, worn for this celebration, was blooming with crimson around the length of broken wood that had been driven into her small body. The sight snapped him out of his disorientated state and he was scrambling to her on his hands and knees, forgetting any pain he was experiencing to reach her.

By the time Ezra rolled her over, taking care not to drive the jagged piece any deeper into her flesh, the ground was pooling with blood and with anguish, Ezra knew it was because the damning wood
had made it clean through her body. Despite the stark reality facing him, Ezra refused to accept it. It was one thing seeing the men he rode with injured or dead, but this little girl, with her sweet smile and her eyes shining with the belief he was someone to be admired had harmed no one.

“NATHAN!”

Even over the sound of exploding artillery and gunfire, rising above the frightened cries and the pleas for help, that desperate call reached Nathan Jackson. Snapping his head up, the healer saw Ezra, the cheater, holding a child in his arms, his white shirt stained with blood.

“You be alright?” Nathan shouted at Rain with whom he had been when the shelling started.

“GO!” Rain ushered him off, her eyes searching for Alex Styles. Like the Science Officer, Rain had studied the scenario of the Magnificent Seven and knew an attack would follow daybreak. She hoped whatever Mary and the Away Team were doing on the mysterious station would prevent them from having to fight that battle but it appeared that hope was premature.

“NATHAN! SOMEBODY HELP ME!”

Ezra looked down at the girl’s face, the sweet child who had flitted around him like he was the most amazing person in the world, did not look back. Her eyes were closed and as he blinked at the terrible realisation dawning on him he felt his heart clench as if a fist had reached through his ribs and crushed it. She was dead. Her light was extinguished and he had been able to do nothing about it.

Little Rosita lay in his arms, her blood soaking through his coat and turning his frilled cuffs red, eyes closed appearing as if she were sleeping, removed from the destruction taking place around her. Her indifference to it made Ezra look up and amidst the sound of artillery shells bursting around them, the frightened cries of panic and horror, the gunfire raining death from above them, saw their victory was premature. They had won nothing.

“Ezra,” Nathan Jackson skidded to his side, having heard volumes in the man’s distraught bellowing. He looked at the girl and knew she was gone. His healer’s intuition telling by the angle of the entry, the piece of wood had pierced through her heart before she even knew what had happened. That was some comfort at least. Although he suspected by the expression of dismay on Ezra’s face, it would not make any difference.

“She’s hurt!” Ezra stared at him when Nathan knelt down next to him.

“Ezra,” Nathan said as gently as he could, resting a hand on the man’s shoulder, a gesture he knew Ezra might throw back in his face especially knowing how Ezra felt about coloured folk. Yet as he did it, he noted Ezra did not flinch, merely raise his sea-green eyes to Nathan’s own, with the understanding of what it was the healer was trying to tell him.

“No,” he whispered and gave the girl another pained look.

“I’m sorry Ezra, she’s gone.”

Ezra’s shoulders sagged and he drew in a sharp intake of breath, crushing the wave of grief pouring unexpectedly at this girl’s passing. He wasn’t one accustomed to caring for others but he confessed having a soft spot for children. When he ran cons, he always made sure they were not the unexpected collateral damage from his schemes. This job had been little more than a distraction, something to occupy his time while he considered his next move. At no point, did it ever occur to him that he might care for these people.

Another explosion near them, startled both men and Ezra felt Nathan’s hand grip his uninjured
shoulder once more.

“Ezra, we gotta go! We can’t stay here and there are other children needing help!”

Almost in response to that statement, Ezra looked up to see another child, one of his familiares from the decoy work, dropping to his knees, covering his head from the barrage of debris raining down from him when a cannon ball hit the ground perilously close to him. Appearing as if he were caught in a trap, the young boy crouched down, too afraid to move another step.

“Yes, yes,” Ezra nodded, raising his eyes to the healer and conveying in that brief second, he saw Nathan as someone worth knowing, someone good enough to ride with, someone repaid with kindness what he had given in arrogance.

“Come on,” Nathan prompted him to let go of the girl whose troubles were over. There would be time to mourn her and give her a proper burial, but right now there still many others who needed help.

Rain didn’t understand what was happening.

One minute she was walking hand in hand with Nathan, enjoying a stroll in this faux night, and the next thing she knew, all hell was breaking loose around them. Like everyone else in the village, Rain was somewhat astounded by the ferociousness of this sneak attack, although for her, the realisation was compounded with the knowledge this was not meant to be happening.

Rain had studied the program just like Alex Styles and knew that the Seven would encounter Anderson again during this scenario, but it was meant to happen the next day, not during the celebration tonight. After Nathan was forced to go help Ezra, she’d lost track of him and as she stood there in the middle of the village square, watching huts turn to rubble and trying to avoid the gunfire from above, she searched the crowd for Alex.

Suddenly, she caught sight of Tennessee Esteban, who played her father in this scenario. The old man was sweet with his overprotectiveness and Rain could not deny even though he was a holographic character, he had just enough eccentricity to appeal to her own quirky sensibilities. When she saw him trying to push his beloved piano out of the way, the one he played all night entertaining the village, her heart clenched in his chest. It was too large a target to be avoided and she started running towards him.

“FORGET THE PIA.....”

Rain never finished the sentence because Tennessee and his piano disappeared in an ear splitting blast that obliterated them both.

“NO!”

Rain dropped to her knees in dismay, telling herself she shouldn’t feel devastated by the loss of a holographic projection but she did. Forced to play the scenario all day, she’d listened to his kind words and his gruff voice, treating her like his child. Rain who lost her parents long ago had responded to him more than she liked and seeing him dead, enraged her.

“Rain!”

Rain looked up and saw Buck Wilmington standing over her. Without giving her chance to speak, he was helping her to her feet, glancing at the wreckage at what was left of Tennessee and his instrument. The First Officer or rather the rogue in this program was giving her a look of sympathy
and understanding but there was also urgency.

An odd sensation overcame Buck Wilmington the instant the shelling had started and everything turned to pandemonium.

His first impulse was to seek out Chris but the gunslinger was nowhere in sight. This hardly surprised Buck. After JD’s caustic words to Chris when the man had tried to offer some advice, Buck had no doubt Chris was somewhere getting drunk alone, which was just as well because the son of a bitch could be mean when the mood took him.

With Chris missing and Seminoles being blasted into the Stone Age, he knew he had to do something. His instincts to take charge of the situation felt wholly alien to him but he knew it must be done and thinking on it a little longer he realised he was the only one who could. Sighting Rain, he remembered how well the ladies of the village had remained hidden from them and realised that skill might be needed again.

“Have you seen Nathan?”

Buck had not but he was certain the healer could take care of himself. Right now, Buck’s concern lay with the villagers who were frightened and panicked, running headlong into mortar and gunfire in their desperation to escape.

“Darlin, you can’t help him now but you can help the others,” he said kindly, flinching a little at the sound of another blast. “You gotta get the women and children back to that cave you were hiding in.”

“We’ll never get past that gunfire!” Rain’s gaze moved to the line of shooters, aiming their rifles into the canyon. Having the high ground gave the Confederates an extremely advantageous location to rain down retribution on the Seminoles for their act of defiance.

“You let us worry about that! You gotta get them out of here now!”

Rain nodded and like Alexandra Styles was too conditioned to ignore an order from Buck Wilmington. Whatever he may be in this scenario, to her, he was the First Officer of the Maverick and if he gave her an order (which in this case was a pretty good one), she would obey it.

“Alright,” she nodded. “What are you going to do?”

Buck looked around and sought out his comrades. “I’ll let you know when I figure it out!”

She nodded and left him behind, grateful to be sent on this mission because it meant she could find Alex and determined what had gone wrong. So far, the enemy had played the storyline set out in the program. What had happened to suddenly change the script? Why were they distorting the narrative now?

It didn’t matter, the fact was the enemy had upped the stakes and there was nothing to be done but to figure out what came next.
When Julia made her extraordinary statement, Mary thought she was joking.

Darting back the waif staring at her, full of helpless need, Mary could not imagine the being in front of her as anything but a child. Yet even as her first impulse to dismiss the Chief Engineer’s speculation was preposterous, the weight of Julia’s words began to sink into her consciousness, spreading its truth across the mire of her disbelief. Without even realising she was doing it, Mary started replaying all the words uttered by the little girl since they encountered her a short time ago. From her plea of help to the startling claims she was the guiding force behind this craft, everything she said now took on a different light.

Seeing it from that different perspective, however, made Mary understand better what the child had been trying to tell her.

The remaining members of the Away Team were harder to convince. While Opa appeared shellshocked, trying to wrap her mind around the statement, Kate was less restrained.

“That’s insane. How can that..that..kid be a computer?”

Like the rest of the Away Team, the security officer saw a little girl, albeit an alien one but her speech patterns and behaviour was plainly that of a child. As she thought that however, Kate remembered the Chief’s words about never taking anything at face value. Ezra Standish always stated if the situation was suspicious, the best way to unravel it was to figure out the angle. Right now, Kate was wracking her brain, trying to disseminate all the reasons this alien would have to appear to them as a child.

And none of it was good.

So when Julia approached the ‘child’, Kate’s first reaction was one of caution. After all, if Julia was right and this was indeed a sophisticated mainframe interface, then it might not be as benign as it was attempting to appear.

“Lieutenant,” Kate spoke up. “Maybe you two should step away from it.”

“It’s alright,” Mary tossed her a quick look to stand by. Child or machine, the child was the key to figuring out this whole mess. “I’m sure she doesn’t mean us any harm.”

“I agree,” Julia said, dropping to her knees so she could meet the ‘child’ at eye level. Now that she knew what they were dealing with, she knew how to proceed. “Besides, it spoke of something bad happening. Whatever that might have been, it could be responsible for damaging the mainframe enough so this was the best representation of its AI persona it could manage.”

Just like she had done when she first came on board the Maverick and was an action only Ezra knew, Julia introduced herself.

“Hi there honey, what’s your name?”

“My name?” The girl’s dark eyes widened and stared at Julia for a moment, bewildered by the question. Julia could imagine her processors kicking into gear, searching the banks for an answer.

“Lisi!” The child burst out after a moment, a smile of genuine pleasure on her face. “I remember! I used to be called Lisi.”
Life Support Interface? Julia speculated silently and supposed the acronym would suit for their purposes.

“Hi Lisi,” Julia said kindly. “My name is Julia.”

Mary marvelled at the pleasure appearing on the girl’s face at Julia’s greeting and wondered if the machine intelligence did indeed feel the emotion. Then again, when Chris and the Away Team returned from Fury 361, they brought with them the remains of a 21st-century android named Bishop. Alex in particular, had grown rather fond of the construct and instilled its computer core into a holographic matrix and given it autonomous control of its program.

Bishop, as he was known, was a regular fixture on the holodeck until his transfer to the Daystrom Institute after the Maverick’s run-in with the Vrihan. During the few times Mary interacted with Bishop, she found it very difficult to imagine she wasn’t talking to a flesh and blood person. Both Alex and Chris had become very fond of the android and it, in turn, returned their affection. Enough so that Bishop actually displayed sadness when it was time for him to be relocated to the Institute. Mary recalled Chris refusing to agree to it until Bishop consented and the Captain was assured the transfer would bring one step closer to Bishop getting his own body and an existence beyond the holodeck.

Julia always reacted well to a smile, and she decided whoever programmed this AI was a certifiable genius. She wondered if they were still on this station.

“Lisi, can you tell me what the something bad that happened was?”

Lisi nodded, and her expression became serious as she searched what Julia assumed were her damaged memory banks. Something catastrophic must have taken place for this level of damage to be inflicted on the main computer. Judging by what Lisi had revealed thus revealed to them, Julia guessed the entire station was fully automated and somewhere on board this craft, were aliens with no idea how much peril they were in because of it.

“It was...it was...an ion storm!”

Lisi stuttered out the response, punctuating the last three word like the gasp from an escaping breath. Except for Julia, every member of the Away Team winced, perfectly aware of how damaging an ion storm could be if one were lost in it, unprepared for the worst.

“Ouch,” Kate made a face. When she was serving on the Lexington, they had been caught in such a phenomenon and nearly stranded for a whole day before they could reinitialise their systems.

“Agreed,” Mary concurred. Chris usually navigated around such storms and when he did, issued orders to keep the ship running on minimal operation to avoid any overloads that might damage the ship’s systems.

“An ion storm could have fried the main computer,” Julia looked over her shoulder at them. “Enough so, the memory banks were fragmented. By the sounds of it, the computer was able to maintain primary functions, because there are tons of auxiliary systems in place to keep those from deactivating, especially if it’s responsible for maintaining life support.”

“But anything pertaining to historical data may have been compromised or deactivated because it isn’t considered an essential system,” Mary added.

“Exactly,” Julia nodded. “The system might have sacrificed certain areas of its memory banks to maintain the primary duty of keeping the station running.”
“You mean if we could somehow help it to repair its damaged systems, we might end all this?” Opa was unable to believe all their troubles could be solved by repairing what was mainly a memory glitch.

“No,” Mary shook her head, aware there was more to it than just a problem with the station’s computer. “It doesn’t explain how these aliens are capable of controlling the Captain and the Senior staff or why they might be doing it. Addressing Lisi again, Mary needed more information to determine this. “Lisi, what about the people on board, the ones you have to take care of, where are they?”

“They’re sleeping,” Lisi answered, “they’re supposed to sleep until...” her voice faltered as her expression melted into dismay at her inability to remember. “I can’t remember!”

“It’s okay,” Mary touched her shoulder gently. “Can you show us where they are?”

The girl’s eyes brightened up, “I can show you, but you have to hurry.”

Lisi’s expression darkened, and Kate knew a warning when she heard one. True to form, the security officer reacted immediately to that statement. “Why?”

“Because someone on your ship has made them angry.”

“Angry, how?” Mary exclaimed, realising that someone had to be Alex.

“She’s interfering with the war.”

“The war?” Kate exclaimed, wondering if this situation could spit out any more surprises. “What war?”

“It’s the only thing we remember. The war. The fighting. Everything else is gone.”

“Oh God,” Julia groaned, quickly grasping the extent of the problem. “Mary, if the historical data banks were damaged. The only information that might have survived the storm could be a war.”

“I don’t understand,” Kate looked at Mary. “They’re using the Captain and the Senior Officers to fight a war? How?”

“I think I know,” Mary stood, the pieces finally falling into place, giving her a hypothesis that would make any science officer proud. Still, like Alex, who seldom proceeded without empirical data, Mary needed to be sure. Only then, could they have any hope of saving Chris and the bridge crew. “Lisi, take us to the others now.”

“Yeah,” Julia agreed, “before whatever Alex has done gets them killed.”

Pinned behind a large rock formation near the canyon wall, Vin and Alex remained trapped, unable to leave their hiding place because Anderson was not only raining down cannon fire on the Seminole village but a deadly barrage on gunfire on anyone not caught in the shelling. Somehow, despite their sentries and lookouts, Andersen had found a way up the canyon and captured the high ground, making it exceedingly easy to obliterate the Seminoles from above and kill anyone else who might try to stop him.

Even though Chris could not remove himself to see what was happening down in the village, the cries following the explosions of cannonball fire offered a chilling insight into what was happening. The community wasn’t terribly big and was almost entirely enclosed by walls. It was too small an
area to withstand the bombardment for very long. Taking refuge behind this balanced rock was all Chris, Vin and Alex could do to keep themselves from being cut down when the gunfire started, and yet Chris knew they had to get to Buck and the others. They didn’t stand a chance otherwise.

Alex couldn’t be sure if Anderson had spotted Chris from his lofty perch, but by the way he was directing the Confederates’ guns in their direction, Alex suspected Anderson had given the order to kill the black-garbed gunslinger at all costs. It was a smart play, the science officer thought. With the rest of the seven in the mindset they were presently in, killing Chris would severely cripple their defences, not to mention their morale.

No, that was not an option. Whatever the situation, there was no way in hell Alex was permitting a holographic Confederate to kill her Captain.

Around them, the roar of gunfire and bursting artillery shells was deafening. Bullets were bouncing off the rock in the effort to reach them, sending dust and sharp bits of stone flying through the air because of the ricochet. If they remained trapped like this for long, sooner or later, the Confederates would sneak down here for a face to face confrontation, and they’d be overwhelmed by numbers. Gripped by that realisation, Alex decided this was no longer about playing a part. She was the Science Officer of the Maverick, and her Captain was in danger.

“Chris, I need you to trust me.”

Chris, who was in the process of reloading, continuing to fire even though his bullets were doing nothing to help their situation, paused and looked up at her. Even Vin who was on the other side of the boulder, firing into the canyon top with his mare’s leg, stopped and looked at her. Something in her voice compelled them to pay attention.

“What you got in mind?”

“Something you’re going to have trouble believing, but I need you to trust me.”

Chris let out an exasperated groan. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means exactly that! I need you to trust me!” Alex knew what she had done by revealing her relationship to Vin had prompted the aliens’ into escalating their attacks. What she was about to do now would make that one transgression seem slight in comparison. Unfortunately, Alex had no choice. There was a real chance they could all die right now, so she had to take the gamble the aliens’ game was more important than her attempts to thwart it.

Alex reached into the pocket of her vest. When she removed her hand, she was clutching the combadge she had been carrying throughout this insanity. She hadn’t intended to use it or to make the Captain or the Senior Staff aware of it, not after how the aliens had reacted to her attempt to fill Buck in, but it was too late now. This was about survival.

“What is that?” Vin’s eyes widened, staring at the gold trinket in her palm.

While Alex continued to maintain her silence on the subject, Chris Larabee was mesmerized by it. It was polished gold, shaped into a triangle resting on a circle. The configuration made no sense to him and yet he couldn’t turn away because there was something about that symbol, touching him on a level he couldn’t understand. His mind told him it was an unknown to him, but his heart knew it, Chris was certain.

Alex didn’t answer Vin, choosing to tap the badge lightly, producing a light chirp that was all but swallowed up in the roar gunfire. “Commander Styles to bridge! Charlotte, come in!”
Both men gaped at her as if she had lost her mind because to them, she was talking to herself in the middle of a gunfight. They probably thought she was delusional until Charlotte Richmond, acting science officer, chose to respond...

“Commander, what’s going on? Is that gunfire?”

“Jesus Christ,” Chris fell back against the boulder looking around for the source of that disembodied voice and knew, without doubt, it was coming out of thin air.

“Nevermind that!” Alex barked abruptly at Charlotte. “Put me through to Chanu right now!”

Vin was trying to get over the fact he could hear the voices too and wondered if her madness was infectious. Her words didn’t make sense even if he understood the language. Suddenly, the chaos around them receded into the background, with everything taking place on in front of him and Chris was capturing their undivided attention.

“Yes Sir,” Charlotte replied promptly. “Standby!”

“Who the hell is talking? For that matter, how are they talking?” Chris grabbed her arm, completely overwhelmed and reacting in the only way he knew how - by violence.

“I don’t have time to explain!” Alex wrenched free, not having the patience with his outrage right now, not when she was trying to find them a way to escape and join the others. She already had enough reservations about what she was doing without having to explain herself.

“Commander Styles, Chanu here! What’s going on?”

Relieved at the sound of the Assistant Chief Engineer’s voice, Alex didn’t mince words. “Chanu, listen to me, I need you to tap into the controls of Holodeck 1. Do not under any circumstances shut down the program but I need you to alter the environmental conditions. Give me stratocumulus with a density comparable to an event in London, circa 1952 in the middle of the 20th century. The records should be on the main computer.”

“Are you sure? Can’t I just erase the characters?”

“No! “You do that, and there’s no telling what these aliens will do. Just follow my orders and hurry! We’re getting cut to pieces down here!”

“Are you able to leave?” Chanu asked even as his hands were working fast to comply with her order.

“I can leave, but the last time I tried to get Buck out, he slipped into a coma,” Alex replied and then met Chris and Vin’s astonished eyes respectively. “I can’t take that risk with the Captain and the others. Besides, I think I’ve pissed the aliens off enough already!”

“Understood,” Chanu needed no further explanation than that. “Standby Commander. Effects should be visible in less than thirty seconds.”

“Good! Styles out.”

When Alex faced the two men in front of her again, the assault of gunfire and cannon balls were temporarily forgotten as they stared at her, both wearing expressions of understandable confusion, as well as suspicion. She tried to imagine what was running through their minds, especially with their 19th-century sensibilities and knew of no explanation that would make any sense to them. Aliens, mind control, holodecks? These were constructs so far beyond their time, it would almost seem like
“Chris, I can try to explain it to you, but nothing I tell you will make sense. I’m asking you both to trust me. I’m trying to save us.”

The wedding ring he had seen, the one with his name and the fact she knew he could not read, told Vin Tanner, that something very strange was going on, but she was not a threat to them. He could feel it with an instinct he could not ignore because when she said she was his wife, he believed it.

Chris was wrestling with similar uncertainty. He had not missed hearing the unseen Charlotte calling her Commander nor what she said about trying to get Buck out of here. The fear in her voice regarding her oldest friend was no act. While he was utterly bewildered about what was happening right now, of that much, he was sure. For a few seconds, he did not speak even though he knew he should. The gunfire was intensifying, with a bullet striking alarmingly close to where Alex was standing causing her to jump. She almost collided with Vin and dropped the odd piece of jewellery into the dirt.

“Pard, we got nothing to lose. We’re dead anyway if we don’t get out of here.” Like Chris, Vin had a multitude of questions, but right now was not the time to discuss it. They needed to get moving.

Instead of answering, Chris bent over and picked up the object on the ground and stared at it. That strange symbol had him trapped, like a moth who had discovered the flame. It meant something. Everything in his gut told him that he ought to know, but there was a wall in his mind, between him and the answer. Raising his steel coloured eyes to her, he asked the question that was on the tip of his tongue the instant he heard her mention it to the woman neither he nor Vin could see.

“Am I the Captain?”

Alex saw the struggle etched on his face, the barrier he was trying to breach but could not because the aliens’ influence was simply too strong. Drawing in a deep breath, she saw no reason to lie, because she was confident the aliens would not let him remember even if she gave him his answer.

“Yes,” she nodded. “You’re Captain Chris Larabee, Vin is one of your officers, just like I am. Something happened to all of you, and I’ve been in here trying to figure out how to help. For reasons I can’t explain, the people doing this to you want you to fight it out with Anderson and his men, but because I told you the truth, they’re taking it out on us by this attack. He wasn’t supposed to come until tomorrow. I was hoping this would be over by then, but they’ve changed the rules of the game, and I don’t know what’s coming next.”

Her answer created fresh riddles but her fears for him and Vin was real, and Chris pushed everything aside because right now, they needed to deal with the here and now. At this moment, he knew who he was, Chris Larabee, gunslinger, widowed husband and grieving father, responsible for protecting a village of innocent people with six other men. When the fighting was done, he’d turn his mind to her story and who he was meant to be.

“Alright, we’ll talk about this later,” he took a deep breath and saw the relief appearing on her face, not just hers but also on Vin. “What did you just tell this Chanu fella to do?

Alex was about to answer, but Vin cut her off.

“Look!”

A minute ago, the clear night sky had given the enemy above the perfect advantage to take them and the village apart with bullets and cannon fire. Now the stars had disappeared behind a blanket of witchcraft.
cloud so thick, it was as if heaven itself was starting to smoulder. The heat seemed to bleed out of the New Mexico night, and it was cold with the air feeling thick and heavy in their lungs. All three of them watched the swirling mists descend, enveloping the canyon with its dull, grey mist.

Above them, the sudden appearance of the thick cloud had disrupted the shelling and gunfire as the men above lost their advantage on their targets below.

“This?” Chris stared at her in wonder, “this was what you asked Chanu to do?”

“Yes but I don’t know how long it’s going to last so if we’re going to get out of here. It’s now or never.”

“Can’t argue with her there,” Vin said, maintaining his unflappable persona, not about to question this miracle, at least not yet. He had enough to fill a train, but right now, the opening provided by this sudden fog was not to be wasted.

“Guess not,” Chris agreed and in typical fashion, took the lead. The fact this woman was able to call down a fog was already overloading his senses, he did not want to know what else she could do to aid their situation.

In any case, they had a way out, and he was taking it.
Climb

Buck didn’t believe in miracles but when the fog descended upon the village, coming seemingly from nowhere after enjoying a cloudless night, he was almost ready to believe.

Anderson was continuing his shelling but this time his aim was blind, giving the village a little breathing room to get clear of the fire. As it stood, the village was being pulverised into submission, with most of the larger structures already reduced to rubble. That wasn’t counting the injuries and deaths on top of the damage. As the remnants of Tennessee’s piano disappeared into the mist, Buck knew the old man who played the keys so deftly was also gone.

Around him, the thunderous bursts of exploding artillery, coupled with the familiar stench of gunpowder and the screaming, transported him to a memory he had tried hard to forget. Closing his eyes momentarily, he tried to force away the chill making his skin crawl, as if he were back there on that battlefield, splattered with mud from the ruined landscape, bombarded by cannon fire.

And just like it was then, he shoved his terror into some forgotten place because the need to forge ahead despite the overwhelming situation demanded it. People were gripped with panic and fear, not a good combination in Buck’s opinion. Despite feeling overwhelmed by their present circumstances, Buck’s mind forced past his own anxieties, enough to act. There were plenty of wounded thanks to that bastard’s callous disregard for the women and children, not to mention the men who had bravely tried to fight the barrage of gunfire raining down on them from the top of the canyon. Those who were still standing needed direction.

Buck hollered on top of his lungs. “Everyone into the caves and the woods right now....!”

His words were halted when his boot struck something soft and froze him immediately in his tracks. Following the sensation was a low rumble Buck recognised as a groan of pain. Looking down, he saw a shape that had him dropping hastily to his knees when Buck realised it was Josiah. The preacher had been hit in the battle earlier in the day but not even serious injury would keep him from helping others during this evacuation. Buck caught him by the arm and hauled him gently to his feet, no mean feat considering Josiah’s formidable bulk.

“Come on Preacher,” Buck said as he got to Josiah upright. “No rest for the weary.”

“What about the wicked?” Josiah drawled before coughing, an action which made his chest ache with pain.

“They can come to see me when this is all over.” The rogue returned promptly and shepherded Josiah to the safety of the rocks.

He had no idea how long this fog had come or what agency had allowed it to appear in the first place but he was certain the way their luck was going, it wasn’t going to last long. They needed to use it to their advantage while they still could. Finding his way across the village while lending support to Josiah, Buck sought out the others, thinking they had to regroup to decide what came next. With any luck, they’d run into Chris who would have a plan all thought out by now. Chris was good for plans, always had been, just like it was during the war when they first ran into each other.

“Josiah! Are you okay?”

Nathan Jackson’s voice penetrated the fog before his actual person and emerging through the mists to
quickly flank Josiah. The healer appeared along with Ezra Standish whose expression was unreadable.

“I’m alright,” Josiah assured Nathan. “Just feeling my mortality a little more than usual.”

“Well quit it,” Nathan grumbled, his concern about the preacher’s condition mounting. Only he and Josiah knew the strength of the bonds between them and no matter what, Nathan could never let any harm come to this gentle giant who saved him more than anyone could be saved in any life. “Leave your mortality be until I can take a look at what stitches you managed to rip out.”

“They’re pounding us into dust!” Buck grumbled, “we’ve got to get these people out of here before we can figure out how to stop those varmints.”

“How we stop these scum,” Ezra said through gritted teeth, “is to hunt them and put them down like the rabid animals they are, with extreme prejudice.”

The words were spoken with such venom Buck did a double take and stared at the gambler with some shock. Granted Buck had only just met Ezra, but the brief association had given Buck the impression Ezra was not a man prone to violence, even if he could rise to the occasion and defend himself when required. Right now, there was nothing in his face that displayed his normally wry, affable charm. Instead, Ezra was wearing a storm cloud on his face that would have given Chris’s drunken rages a run for its money.

Buck’s gaze touched Nathan briefly, who simply shook his head to tell Buck this was not the place for that discussion. Nathan knew why Ezra was so enraged and he couldn’t say he blamed the man. Over the last two days, Nathan had seen how fond Ezra had become of the children, or his little helpers, as the gambler liked to call them. Harm to any of them flew against Ezra’s well-hidden sense of chivalry and he simply would not stand for it.

“Okay one thing at a time,” Buck decided to leave the subject alone for the moment because a cannonball had struck a section of the canyon wall and the resulting explosion brought down tonnes of rock down on one of the huts, obliterating on impact. “Let’s get someplace where we won’t get our head blown off to discuss it!”

Fragments of gravel and dirt pelted them after their ears stopped ringing from another blast. The scream that followed became a wail of despair and it was one that could only come from someone dying. In front of them, the ground was revealing the craters from each blast and the destruction that was caused because of it. It revealed itself to them in the debris of a village being blasted into oblivion and the broken bodies at the same time.

“BUCK!”

Relief flooded the big man when he saw Chris Larabee, Vin Tanner and Alex Styles appear through the smoke and fog, closing the narrow distance between them.

“Chris! Where the hell have you been?” Buck demanded, before thinking what was it he thought Chris could do to stop any of this when it was clear Anderson was plain loco. “That son of a bitch plans on burying this entire valley. We got everyone heading for the caves and woods but that ain’t gonna keep them Rebs from hunting them down!”

“I know!” Chris barked not needing to reminded of this fact. “We got to deal with that damn gun of theirs.” The gunslinger’s eyes lifted up as if he could see through the fog to the weapon delivering such punishing abuse upon them and the Seminoles.
“We gotta get up there,” Vin stated. “Somehow.”

“We ain’t never gonna make it up any trail before that cannon blows us to kingdom come!” Nathan pointed out.

“Is there any other way up there?” Chris asked out loud, just as JD and Imala, the Chief’s son reached them.

“BUCK! CHRIS!” JD’s voice reached them through the sound of artillery and gunfire.

The kid was pressed against a fissure in the wall just big enough for a few bodies to take refuge but not enough for the cannons to penetrate. Like the rest of the seven, their newest member and the Seminole warrior were covered in dust and enough blood to reveal they had been helping the wounded get to safety. As they ran towards him, Buck saw JD was shaken, undoubtedly unprepared for the effect reality was having on his dreams of gunfighters and the West.

Standing beside him was Imala, the chief’s son. His earlier hostility at their presence was somewhat abated after their defence of the village. The Seminole warrior bristled with anger at the violence inflicted on his people and was eager to reach the enemy responsible, even if it meant tolerating the assistance of these outsiders in his home.

“We managed to get most of the women and children to the caves,” JD explained breathlessly when they reached him.

“It will mean nothing if we cannot stop that cannon,” Imala stated the obvious.

“No argument there,” Chris returned. “Do you know another way up the canyon? We can’t take the trail, we’ll get cut down before we get even halfway.”

Imala’s expression became thoughtful for a moment before his eyes lit up. “We can climb.”

“Climb?” Alex looked up instinctively, not relishing the climb even though her tactical training at Starfleet Security made rock climbing a requirement. “All the way up there?”

“It’s okay Alex, you can stay here,” Vin said quickly, not liking the idea of her making the attempt, especially after what she revealed about their relationship.

“Like hell I will,” Alex bit back, not about to entertain that idea in any shape or form. “I’m going with you. You need all the help you can get. Even if we reach the top, they still outnumber us five to one!”

“Darlin...” Vin started to say.

“Vin don’t even start,” she shot him a look. “I’m GOING.”

Well, Chris Larabee thought silently, at least this proved one thing.

They were definitely married.

The fog remained in place for most of their journey along the canyon wall. Despite all entreaties to the contrary, Josiah insisted on joining them as they scaled its formidable height, with Imala leading the way. The preacher was determined to keep up with them and Alex was grateful the terrain was a steep incline as opposed to a sheer cliff face. While still nothing to take lightly, it would be less strain on the wounded counsellor, who probably thought this was fitting penance for whatever demons his
preacher persona was out running.

Meanwhile, Alex noticed the gambler’s presence in their company and wondered why he was still there. If Alex remembered the outline she studied before entering the simulation, Ezra’s conman/gambler character had run on the group during the surprise attack by Anderson. True, the Colonel was a few hours early but she didn’t think it would make much difference until she saw the expression on his face.

Alex had only ever remembered seeing Ezra wearing his emotions so close to the surface and that was a split second before he put a bullet into the brain of one Silas Poplar. When the Q entity transported them into a real-life version of the Magnificent Seven program, pitting them against all the Seven’s adversaries, Poplar had murdered Julia Pemberton. Alex never forgot how Ezra looked when they found the redhead’s body, bloodied and broken because Julia had put up a fight.

Now she saw that dark gleam in his sea-green eyes and wondered what on Earth could have provoked such fury in the man because when Ezra was like this, he was damned dangerous.

“Josiah, what’s wrong with Ezra?” Alex whispered over her shoulder at the Counsellor who was next along the chain of climbers after. Thanks to Ezra being further ahead of her, she could ask her questions discreetly without his notice.

It was Nathan who answered. Nathan was last in line, insisting on taking up that position behind Josiah in case the older man faltered and needed to be helped back to ground level.

“One of the kids Ezra took a shine too, the little girl named Rosita, was killed in the cannon fire.”

“Oh no,” Alex winced remembering the sweet child who followed him around, staring at him with the adoration only a little girl could feel for a handsome, distinguished man like Ezra at that age.

Despite his claims he had no desire for a family, made Alex was certain because he was terrified of progressing his relationship with Julia to a state of marriage, every member of the Senior Staff knew how Ezra felt about children. The rumour he’d once called through a conduit to retrieve a hamster for one of the crew’s children wasn’t a lie, he had actually done that. Whenever the Maverick came under fire, Ezra’s primary concern was the safety of the children and he was personally affronted by any invader who targeted civilians.

More recently, during the incident with the rogue changeling who murdered Chris Larabee’s wife and child, an attack while they were investigating the wreckage, caused Alex to miscarry hers and Vin’s first pregnancy. While Alex did not blame him in the slightest for it, Ezra felt responsible for it and she could only imagine what he was feeling right now. Whether it was masked in the persona of the gambler, Ezra’s need to protect the young was just as strong as ever and the loss of even one, made him react in the extreme.

“Every man has a soft place in the heart for something” Josiah rumbled, empathising with the gambler pleasantly surprised to see the man was more than the facade of the cynical gambler who would sell them out at first opportunity. “Can’t say I blame him for wanting a little retribution for the murder of a child.”

“Me neither,” Nathan agreed “Any man who’d fire on women and children ain’t no better than a dog and ought to be put down like one.”

Alex couldn’t say she disagreed with the sentiment and as she looked up ahead, she saw they had reached the top of the canyon. The rest of the way was a gradual slope they could cross easily without the need for ropes. Patting the sidearm at her hip, she knew they were minutes away from
another firefight and once again, wished she could use her phaser. However, phasers against holodeck simulations were pointless and she had no wish to set off the weapon in such close quarters. Despite how vast the place may appear, they were still inside a holodeck.

BANG!

The gunshot immediately made all of them look up to see Imala tumbling down the slope to come to a rest a few feet away from where Chris and Vin were standing. The two men had taken the lead, unaware that in real life, they were both expert mountain climbers. Like the rest of their party, Chris and Vin went for their guns even as Imala lay face up in the dirt. The stain of crimson spreading across his chest, revealing the presence of the single bullet that had taken his life.

Appearing over the top of the edge, no doubt having anticipated their opponent might be driven to this course, were Anderson’s men. The Captain who ordered the Confederates to open fire during their earlier confrontation was looking down at the seven, with more than a dozen guns aimed in their direction, ready to fire. With the advantage of higher ground, any attempt they made to fight would be an exercise in futility.

“Surrender,” the Captain spoke in his thick Irish accent. “Or die where you stand.”

While the holographic city around them looked vast, Lisi assured them it was only a few short meters to the nearest version of the station’s turbo lift. The Away Team moved through the urban sprawl, passing the tree-lined boulevards, streets, shops and offices, not to mention the holographic people going about their business oblivious to their presence. Mary saw a peaceful civilisation on par with some of the more advanced cities in the Alpha Quadrant. Its population appeared generally peaceful, although she told herself this could be an idealised version of their history. This simulation was probably one of the hardwired programs unaffected by the memory corruption preventing Lisi from functioning properly.

“Lisi,” Mary suddenly thought as they approached the lift. “Can you show us the war?”

“Why?” Kate inquired, wondering what purpose it would serve.

“Well if it the only memory file still operating, it might give us an idea of what’s going on in these people’s heads,” Julia answered before the Protocol Officer could, understanding the logic behind the request.

“Exactly,” Mary answered. “It might help us to better understand what’s going on with the Captain and the rest of the Senior Staff to know what is the nature of this war they’re fighting. Can you Lisi?” Mary faced the girl/AI again.

Lisi paused a moment wearing an expression of concentration Mary immediately translated as the computer attempting to call up the data. Closing her dark eyes, her thin lips pursed and Mary was reminded fondly of the face Billy made when he was asked to explain himself.

Without warning, the city around them disappeared like the channel of a viewer being changed. Static surrounded them briefly before the scene became one of complete contrast to what had come before. Instead of a metropolis, they were now standing in the middle of an alien landscape, one with a sky painted in shades of cerulean and emerald. Hanging in the sky above them was the faint line of twin moons, both ringed and further than that, was a white star, burning bright.

The landscape was an empty field, not that different from the habitat they had encountered when they first stepped into the station. It was a place of tall trees and wild plants, bursting with life and
colour. The field upon which they stood was covered in knee-high grass and distantly, they could hear the chirping of alien birds.

The two armies appeared on either side of the field like two different waves about to crash against each other. They were of the same species that Lisi was appearing to them. Except one side had warpaint painted across their backs while the others were distinct by the clothes they were wearing. The expression on the faces of either side told the Away Team, the two armies were about to fight.

“Oh my God, how long have these people been under?” Julia exclaimed, staring at their weapons.

“Too long I would imagine,” Mary shook her head.

Their weapons were no more advanced than that carried by Roman legionnaires some two thousand years earlier. They carried weapons little more than spears and arrows, wielding shields and breastplates.

“Bronze age definitely,” Kate commented, her security training pinpointing that aspect of the armies accurately.

“So they’re probably fighting a war that happened thousands of years ago in their history.” Opa mused.

“Yeah,” Julia nodded. “Mary, do you notice they’re not speaking. No war cry, no cussing or anything. Not even to each other.”

Mary did notice and it fit with what she suspected.

“Yes, I did. Come on.”

After seeing this, the need to move on felt more urgent, not only for the sake of Chris and their crewmates but also for the people trapped in a hell they could not escape or for that matter were even aware of.

The lift doors slid open before they approached it and once again, the similarities to their own version on the Maverick told Mary, these people were not so dissimilar to themselves. Lisi said nothing which was what one expected from a machine, now they were able to see past the facade of the little girl. It was obvious the AI recognised the trouble its charges were facing but without help, it could not hope to repair the damage and restore them to the world.

The lift came to a stop a good minute after it began its journey, with Mary feeling as if they had travelled across the entire station to reach their destination. As she approached, however, she could feel the growing presence of alien minds around her. While they did not attempt to influence her, she knew it was her sensitivity to them without the powerful shields Vulcans and other true telepaths possessed, that made them consider her little threat.

The doors slid open and as usual, Kate stepped out first. She eyed her surroundings with caution, uncertain of what she was going to find, only certain she was not allowing either senior officers to face it first. What she saw when stepped into the vast chamber, left her stunned with horror.

“Oh my God....”

“What?” Julia asked and then stopped short at what she was seeing.

Mary knew it was going to be bad, she just didn’t know how much. When she stepped out, she realised she’d vastly underestimated the situation.
Before them, in gestation chambers connected by machinery and conduits, were babies.
Of all the things Alex never wanted to experience after spending six hellish months in a Cardassian rape camp, was being the only woman captured with a handful of men by holographic Confederate thugs.

When they were forced to surrender their guns, because the vantage point the enemy possessed would ensure they were cut to pieces if they attempted to fight, and taken prisoner, this annoying simulation had suddenly become something out of her worst nightmares. After the horror of her Cardassian experience, Alex swore she would rather die than be taken prisoner by any force that might inflict a repeat of that hell.

Now as she was forced to sit on the ground with the rest of the seven, noticing the leer of soldiers who were eyeing her with a look she knew all too well, Alex was poised for the moment when their lust evolved into action and she was forced to deal with it. Alex knew without any doubt whatsoever, the first person who laid one hand on her would die for their trouble, and she didn’t give a damn about the consequences that came after.

Because Alex was absolute on one thing. Never again. Not ever.

“I know they’re gonna kill us, but I ain’t happy about what they’re going to do to the village.”

She sat between Vin and Nathan and noted the tension in the healer’s jaw at that statement. Nathan’s eyes were following those grey uniforms, seeing nothing but creatures who would have little difficulty making all his people slaves again. These men had driven themselves mad in the wilderness trying to maintain that way of life, revealing their cruelty by the way they were dealing with their prisoners and the village. Rain immediately came to mind and what might happen to her after his death at the hands of these brutes twisted his stomach in knots.

Seeing his silent rage, Alex leaned over and whispered, wanting to calm him down because he was liable to react strongly to anyone treating him like a slave again.

“It’s going to be okay Nathan,” she assured him, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. “We’re going to get out of this. “

Noticing her talking to Nathan, one of the soldiers, a weasely looking private who wore a uniform two sizes too big for him, with watery eyes and hollow cheeks, approached her while Alex’s head was turned towards Nathan. She noticed the shadow he cast too late before she was hauled upright.

Vin almost jumped to his feet with similar ripples of outrage moving through the group. Buck was also fighting the urge to come to her defence as Alex found herself standing much too close to her liking to the man who dragged her up. His mouth split his face in an ugly leer and in his eyes, she saw nothing but an animal who would force himself upon a woman because he could get satisfaction no other way. This gleam, she saw not in Lemar’s eyes who raped because of power, this one was of lust and it made her skin crawl.

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF HER!” Vin growled, impotent in his fury at being able to do nothing because of the gun barrel in his face.

“Is she yours?” The private sneered, enjoying the reaction and then facing Alex again. “You’re a pretty little nigra ain’t you? Never seen one like you before, ain’t all darkie like him.” He gestured to Nathan. “Still, you’ll do.”
Whatever restraint kept Alex back crumbled with those three words.

Throwing her head forward, she slammed her skull against his hard and brought down her foot on his boot in quick succession. As he reeled in pain, her arms flew to his neck and spun him around before he could stop her. She didn’t need a weapon to deal with this scum and what she intended was an object lesson for the rest of them. Before anyone could react, because their attention had been focussed on the seven, Alex broke the man’s neck with a loud squelch of bone before he could utter a scream. She released him and he fell into the dirt, quite dead.

During her enhanced tactical training at Starfleet, she had learned how to apply the Tal-shaya technique though she never imagined she would ever have to use the Vulcan method of a merciful killing on this piece of garbage.

Immediately all guns flew in her direction but Alex was prepared for death if it came.

“You want to execute me, I got no problem with that,” she warned in a voice that was cold with menace. “Anyone else tries to lay one goddamn hand on me, they better shoot me or end up like this pig.”

The seven knew she was able to handle a gun by how well she fought during the earlier battle, but even they had not suspected how much she meant it when she said she could take care of herself. Vin had seen her fight earlier but even he was unprepared for how efficiently she killed that Reb. There wasn’t the slightest hesitation, just a coordinated attack that took everyone by surprise. He thought of her words to him and Chris earlier about them being soldiers and after this, had to wonder what kind they were. No soldier he ever saw knew how to fight like that.

“I’d listen to the lady if I were you,” Buck added, wearing a smug smile because he was glad to see she was able to defend herself without their help. “We’re gonna be out of your hair soon enough. Don’t need to get yourself killed just because you can’t wait to scratch your itches.”

It was sound advice. Their guns were aimed in the woman’s direction but they wrestled with the decision whether she ought to be killed for slaying one of their own. The Colonel had a plan on how these people were to be executed and would not take kindly to his orders being countermanded. Yet how could they let one of their own die unavenged?

“That’s enough!” Anderson emerged from his tent at that moment with his captain following to see what was transpiring. Very quickly, he assessed the situation and appeared mildly surprised by Alex’s presence but offered no comment on why these men were riding with a woman. “We’re executing these prisoners in accordance with the articles of war, not behaving like a bunch of savages. Put her back with the others.”

The Confederate named Darcy, with his grizzled features and Sergeant’s uniform, motioned Alex back into place and Alex returned to Vin’s side, grateful that the Colonel as delusional as he was, retained some semblance of military discipline left in his conduct, even if it wouldn’t be enough to save them or the village.

“You okay?” Vin asked quietly as soon as she was next to him again. Two of the company was clearing away the private’s body and Vin couldn’t help but feeling a little smug at that.

“I’m alright,” she nodded, not hiding the fact the encounter, even after what she had done to avoid it, left her shaken. “I’m just not going to let that happen to me again.”

“Again Miss Alex?” Nathan stared at her before he was revisited by an old memory that made him
understand completely. “Nevermind, I get it.”

“One battle don’t win the war boys. Chain them up Sargeant Darcy! Make em nice and tight boys.” Anderson crowed with glee that was sickening.

As Darcy moved to put manacles around their wrists, Alex saw Nathan growing tense again and realised why. Suddenly, the horror she felt at the possibility of being raped again was reflected in Nathan’s face in a different kind of violation. As the steel manacles were clamped around his wrist, his body tensed like a serpent about to spring. In his Magnificent Seven persona, he was reliving a nightmare even worse than her own. Nathan Jackson the healer and former union stretcher bearer was born into slavery and shackles were a symbol of his bondage. To have them around his wrists again...

Alex couldn’t even begin to imagine what was running through his mind.

“Settle down Nathan,” Buck said gently, recognising the same fury in the healer’s eyes. “Don’t give them a reason to kill you before we figure a way out of this.”

“How likely is that?” Nathan demanded through clenched teeth.

“Very likely,” Alex decided, resolving to put an end to this program if it came down to it. She had been avoiding this course because she feared the effect on the minds of the seven but if there was an imminent threat to their lives, she would do what was necessary. The enemy hadn’t found her combadge because they were looking for weapons, so there was a chance for Alex to use it to contact Engineering.

The instant Chris Larabee felt the manacles around his wrists, he set to work.

Ignoring Anderson’s jibes as the Colonel launched into a diatribe about the Battle of Shiloh and the casualties of the day, Chris hid the grimace on his face as he began rubbing the skin of his wrists against the sharp edges of the iron manacles, exposing raw flesh one stroke at a time. Anderson noticed none of this, too wrapped up in his recollections about Shiloh to notice his counterpart making an attempt at escape.

Chris remembered the battle that took place over the course of two days with enormous losses on both sides. Grant and the Union emerged the victors with the Confederate line along the northern border of Mississippi smashed utterly, but too many men died in the process. As Anderson drifted off into that bloody past, Chris could see the southerner on the verge of a complete breakdown. When that happened, there was no telling how many he was willing to see die to fuel his delusion.

They had to break free before that happened. As Chris felt more pain, he held o to the hope that blood was slicker than water.

After spending most of her adult life in Starfleet, very few things had the power to shock Mary Travis.

The art of diplomacy required an iron constitution, particularly when dealing with alien races whose culture could be so offensive, it beggared belief. When Gul Lemar came on board the Maverick, Mary had been forced to swallow the outrage she felt at the Cardassian’s presence on the ship, even after being told what he had done to Alex. The demands of the situation had forced her to keep her personal feelings in check, to see the bigger picture even if the details made her stomach turn.
In some respects, being married to a Vulcan helped her to strengthen her mental fortitude and her patience, allowing her to approach most situations with a logical mind instead of succumbing to the emotion her species could sometimes be celebrated for. It took a great deal to shake her composure and those instances where they shattered like broken fragments of glass at her feet were rare, like now.

As a mother, what she saw rocked her to the core. The others simply gaped, unable to process what they were seeing. The closest Mary had come to seeing something similar was the way the Borg dealt with the infants they encountered. However, not even that memory prepared her for the sheer enormity of what she was seeing.

The pods filled the room as far as she could see. There were so many of them Julia needed a tricorder to scan the exact number. There were more than a hundred. Inside each capsule, filled with gelatinous pink fluid, was the infant version of the species they had seen in the holographic simulation of the city earlier. Conduits and tubes protruded out of various orifices in their bodies, no doubt for feeding or for waste removal. Pads not unlike electrodes were attached to the infants’ temples and for all the monstrous hardware, the children were lying in their pods, appearing oblivious to the world around them, strangely at peace.

Mary could feel their minds and realised the epicentre of the consciousness spreading its reach across space between this station and the Maverick, was here. It was coming from these babies.

As she wrapped her mind around this discovery, she could feel them still oblivious to her presence, or indifferent. Their focus was elsewhere which Mary guessed when Lisi had explained their sleep. Whatever species these children belonged to, they were natural telepaths, unformed and unaware of what they were doing. Driven by a fragmented piece of data they were never meant to absorb without context, their reality was shaped by whatever stimuli they could find.

“Spread out,” Mary instructed, still a little shell shocked by their discovery but aware they needed to investigate further, now that they were at the heart of this whole affair. Remembering what Chris would do in this situation, she added, “but keep a visual of each other.”

“Yes Sir,” Kate nodded and gestured for Opa to stay close to Julia while she remained within several dozen feet of Mary.

Kate had no desire to countermand her orders but Kate knew the Chief’s standing orders when it came to the Senior Staff and Mary Travis in particular, even if she wasn’t about to tell the woman that. Mary wasn’t just the Protocol Officer of the Maverick, but the love of Chris Larabee’s life. His crew was aware of this and security knew even if he never voiced it, the Captain would want her safe at all costs.

The four women fanned out in different directions, never losing sight of each other as they investigated the menagerie of children. The infants were tiny like all newborns, unaware of the intruders, even with their sophisticated mental abilities. The pods came in clusters of seven, with a control station displaying the status of each between a dozen crystals protruding from its face. All the stations appeared to be blinking languidly with a green glow, which ad to be the universal axiom for ‘situation nominal’.

After ten minutes of investigation, where they determined there were indeed at least a hundred pods and each one of them occupied with precious cargo, the group returned to their starting point. While Julia had conducted a more scientific study, Mary’s own examinations revolved around the telepathic reach of these children. Lisi stayed close to her, answering her questions even though the AI’s damaged memory banks kept her from giving fully coherent answers.
“Okay, what have you found?”

“They’re a combination of sleeper pods and stasis chambers,” Julia explained. “From what I was able to determine, they regulate all body functions, provide sustenance and I believe may also be responsible for the neurological development of these infants.”

“Neurological?” Kate stared at her and then glanced at the pods, her keen senses focussing immediately on the pads attached to the infant’s temples. “For what purpose?”

“My guess,” Julia met Mary’s eyes to indicate this was just speculation and by no means proven, “it’s for education. While they’re in the pods, I think they’re supposed to be educated so by the time they reached their destination, they would be fully functioning adults. “

“Then why are they still babies?” Opa demanded, finding this whole thing rather profane. She wanted nothing more than to break the glass and save them. Children should be held with warm arms and plied with love, not left in this sterile, isolated hell.

“Lisi,” Mary looked down at her. “Why can’t you wake them up?”

“I can’t,” Lisi’s expression showed her dismay at this revelation. “They weren’t supposed to sleep so long but I can’t wake them up because their heads are empty.”

“Empty?” Opa stared at the AI, “I don’t understand.”

“I think I do,” Mary answered, all the pieces of this riddle falling into place and knew by Julia’s expression, the Chief Engineer understood it too. “It’s more than likely this is a colony ship. From what we’ve seen so far, this station was built to preserve the civilisation of this species from whatever caused them to leave their homeworld. I believe whoever this race was, they felt their children were their best hope of starting fresh. The children were placed in the sleeper pods, with the ship’s AI caring for them, as well as educating them on route.”

“However,” Julia took up the narration. “Something went wrong during the trip. As Lisi said, there was a disaster that damaged its memory banks. Conditions on board may have deteriorated below the threshold of what the computer deemed safe to continue normal operations. Instead, the AI kept them in complete stasis, halting their growth and development, leaving them as infants.”

“And since the war we saw was all that’s left of the educational matrix, that’s what they’ve been replaying over and over again.”

“Oh my God,” Kate exclaimed, unable to hide her shock.

“They’re a telepathic race,” Mary continued, sharing Kate’s horror, especially when they knew now how these children were affecting others. “They’ve got no context for the war, no understanding of why they have to fight. I believe the computer scanned the Maverick’s databanks when we approached, most likely finding the Magnificent Seven program which was running at the time, the perfect scenario to play out their war, using everyone in it as their avatars.”

“Then why is it helping us now?” Kate stared at Lisi who did not contradict anything Mary was saying.

“Because we were the first to come on board aren’t we, Lisi?”

Lisi looked at Mary and nodded. “I have to protect the Sleepers so I don’t let anyone come here, but when you did, I knew you could help them.”
“The AI must have determined that if we have the technological expertise to penetrate its defences, we might be able to understand their technology and repair its damaged systems.” Julia declared.

“Is that possible?” Kate swept her gaze across the vast chamber.

“I think so,” Julia replied. “I don’t think a sophisticated system like this would be without backups. Unfortunately, the level of damage sustained may have been so extensive, none of those contingencies were initialized and as a result, remained offline.”

A thought occurred to her then and Mary looked at the AI’s avatar in front of them. “Lisi, how long have they been like this?”

Lisi pursed her lips and once again that expression of concentration fell over her face. “176 revolutions of our native star.”

“Revolutions as in years?” Opa burst out, shocked at the thought that these babies were trapped like this for almost two hundred years.

“It’s possible,” Julia remarked, standing by one of the pods and giving it a deeper examination. “Judging by what Lisi has been saying, it's been her responsibility to ensure they remain functional at all cost. That core directive is probably what’s kept these children alive and allowed her to take extraordinary steps to protect them.”

Mary swept her gaze across the pods, trying to imagine what it must be like to have no memory of anything, beyond a war they probably didn’t even understand. All they had was the compulsion to fight because they were denied memories of love, friendship and touch because of the damage to the AI’s memory banks. The holographic scenario of the Magnificent Seven program on the Maverick must have seemed ideal, a world where the players had a story to act out, one involving two forces fighting each other, the way their war must have been fought on their homeworld so long ago.

With a surge of conviction, Mary knew what had to be done. It was the only thing that could be done. “We have to shut this all off. We have to disconnect them and wake them up, damage or not. They know nothing else other than this war because they’ve had no other way to absorb data. We need to bring them into the real world so they can develop normally. Right now, the only reality they know is the simulation. We have to give them a chance to grow up.”
Well, this was just dandy.

Somewhere out there, the love of her life (well the present life anyway), was playing what amounted to a sophisticated version of cowboys and Indians, while she was sitting in this cave trying to figure out what to do about it. What she wanted to do was shut down this silly fantasy program once and for all, dismantling the holographic peril into nothingness so they would return to their right minds.

Except she couldn't.

The alien influence taking over their minds, (damned rude if you asked her), would keep their personas trapped in the program, to say nothing of what the aliens might do to their bodies. So now, she was here in this cave, cowering with the rest of the women from the Seminole village, painfully aware that the shooting and artillery fire had ceased with none of the men coming to tell them it was safe to emerge. The only conclusion one could draw from all this was the village had fallen, and the victors had no idea of their hiding place.

As Rain paced the floor of the darkened cave, ignoring the frightened chatter of the village's women, she considered her situation. Commander Styles had not checked in and that was concerning. The commander had a com badge, just like Rain and her silence did not bode well for the situation. At the very least, Alex would have apprised her of what was happening.

This would never happen in Middle Earth.

As it was, Rain's mood was growing steadily more frustrated because when Nathan wasn't in the guise of the healer, he was one of the sweetest men she knew. Harming anyone was something he just couldn't process. Hell, Nathan got twitchy when he had to shoo away flies! Now he was out there alone, thinking he was some knife-wielding lawman/healer and not one of the best medical minds in Starfleet. It was enough to take an utterly rotten day and make it a worse one.

At Buck Wilmington's behest, Rain followed Buck's orders and retreated with the women and children to the hills, or rather another corner of the Holodeck, to keep out of reach of the devastating bombardment threatening death with every explosion. Due to her conditioning to obey the First Officer of the ship, Rain had gone, even though when she arrived in the caves, she realised she had come into the Holodeck to help him and the rest of the Senior Staff, not hide away like some damsel in distress.

With her, were the other women, including Dyani, Toakhulga and Inola who had sprung the traps when the Confederates were attempting to ride out of the village. As brave as they had been during the battle, the ominous silence was playing havoc with their nerves, as they imagined what the quiet men for their men. Some were weeping because that question had already been answered by the dead they had to leave to reach this place.

Even though they were holodeck creations, Rain knew their grief was as real as any she might feel. Once again the loss of Tennessee Eban stung. The old runaway slave and pianist had thought himself her father and tried to protect her as best he could. He had died defending his beloved piano and Rain knew the instant this crisis was over, she was restoring his character. She wanted to hear him play his songs again.

But first, they had to get out of here.
Leaving the others in the main chamber, Rain headed towards the mouth of the cave intending to use the combadge without uncomfortable questions being asked when one of the women warned her not to leave. Her name was Knasgowa, and she was one of the village matrons, surrounded by a gaggle of children Rain knew were not her own.

"I won't go far," Rain assured her, appreciating the woman's concerns even if Rain was beginning to tire of this chauvinistic world where women were forced to sit quietly while the world collapsed around them because of male stupidity. She was starting to see why Commander Styles took such exception to it. However, she did take into consideration the danger and made sure she was far enough for privacy but not enough to put herself at risk.


"Rain?" Chanu's reply was almost instantaneous. If she didn't know better, she'd swore he had been waiting for someone to respond. After all, someone had to be responsible for the mysterious fog allowing them to escape. She was certain it wasn't apart of the program.

"Are you alright? Have you heard from Commander Styles."

"No," Rain frowned, unhappy by that fact. "I think she's been taken prisoner by the Confederates."

"Great," Chanu's tone revealed everything he thought about this program. The Old West had not been kind to his people and replaying it was not something he wished to experience or had any patience with. "What do you need?"

"I'm tired of sitting on the sidelines," Rain said firmly. "By the looks of it, Alex and the rest of the men are in trouble, so we're going to have to get them out of it. I need you to produce some weapons for me."

"Weapons? What type?"

"Period specific. These people are hopelessly outgunned, we need to even the odds a little to mount a rescue."

"Okay," Chanu considered, "rifles and handguns then. You know how to use them?"

"Point and shoot," Rain rolled her eyes. "How hard could it be?"

Chanu started to get a headache.

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Death by cannon.

Alex had to confess, in the long list of endings she could possibly face during her career, being obliterated by a cannon was not one of them. Staring down the barrel of the weapon, it would almost be laughable if the situation wasn't so dire. She knew the time to put this situation to a stop was dwindling. The Holodeck would obey her commands but if she intervened so overtly, what would be the consequences to the Captain and the others? Already, she'd provoked them into moving up Anderson's attack by revealing the truth to Vin and the Captain? What might they do if she interfered with this execution?

They were moved to the edge of the canyon after Anderson retreated to his tent, positioned directly in front of the barrel. The renegades had gathered to watch the execution, relishing their role as
spectators in the carnage to come. Then as if things could not get any stranger, Anderson emerged again. This time, two of his soldiers, including the sergeant called Darcy, was dragging the Captain of the company towards them. The man was handled roughly, and his former subordinates were enjoying his demotion quite gleefully.

The man was shoved between her and Nathan, forcing Alex to push closer against Vin. The soldier appeared a little shocked, but the expression on his face as he watched Anderson was one of disappointment. Anderson looked similarly grieved, and Alex wondered what could have caused the break between the two men. As the dust settled and the schedule for the execution resumed, Alex found herself once more trying to decide if they were at the point of no return, where she would have to save them by employing a 'deus ex machina' trope to this scenario as she had done with the fog.

"What about it Johnny Reb?" Buck spoke using a voice that sounded like the slow crawl of molasses across the skin. "I bet you never thought your boss would go loco on you."

"I'll have you know," the captain spoke with dignity, defending his Colonel even now. "Colonel Anderson was one of the finest soldiers in any man's army. I owe my life to him."

"And soon your death," Vin drawled.

Alex bristled at such talk because she was being cornered and she knew it. Glancing at the Captain, hoping Chris Larabee had some plan. She noted he was grimacing. Then he spat on his wrist. Her eyes widened when she realised what he was doing and looked up to their jailors to see if anyone else had noticed. There was just enough blood and spittle on his skin to manage what he was attempting to do if given enough time. What he needed was a distraction. What could capture their attention? Inspiration struck her so loudly, she was surprised no one else heard it.

"HEY!" Alex shouted at the soldiers preparing the cannon for the grisly work ahead.

Immediately all eyes, including those of the seven, turned towards her in question.

"Darlin! What are you doing?" Vin hissed.

"I have no idea," Alex muttered, not looking at Vin as she stood up. Newly minted Captain Darcy approached, cradling his gun in his hands. She noted his caution as he stopped a few feet away, probably remembering what she'd done to Private 'Weasel'.

"What you want?" He eyed her with desire as all the men did, but with wariness as well. "Colonel's passed your sentence unless you can think of a way for us to talk him out of it...?"

Alex's gut heaved in disgust but ignored the statement. "How about if I told you where the gold is."

Darcy's eyes sparkled at the possibility.

"You want gold?" Alex stared him down. "We know where it is."

Vin stared at her in shock, wondering if she had lost her mind. This was an extremely dangerous game she was playing, and yet he did nothing to refute her claims. Shifting his gaze to Chris, Vin suddenly realised what Chris was doing with his hands and understood Alex had seen it too. She was stalling for time. Uncertain whether he or to be relieved that she had a plan or worried for her at what would happen when the enemy discovered there was no gold, Vin did the only thing he could. Shut up and let it play out.
"She's lying," one of the soldiers grunted sceptically at Darcy. "She's just trying to save her skin."

"Am I lying? Tell him, Ezra."

Ezra had been oddly silent since their capture. The man was still smarting over the death of little Rosita, and Alex knew when Ezra was quiet, he was at his most dangerous. Unfortunately, right now she needed the consummate gambler and con artist to continue with this charade. If anyone could sell this fiction, it was one Ezra P Standish.

"I'm afraid the lady is correct," Ezra stood up, managing to do it with grace despite his manacled hands. The gambler was all business as he dusted the dirt off his jacket. The persona of the smooth-talking conman fell over his feature so subtly, Alex couldn't help but admire how expertly it was done.

"Surely, you did not think we would be wasting our time with this village out of the goodness of our hearts, did you? We are here for the same reason your Colonel is, we are here for the gold."

"Are you now?" Darcy's scepticism was apparent. "Show us."

"Do I look like a charity?" Ezra's eyes hardened like flints. "You want the gold, release us immediately."

"Or maybe I put a bullet in her head," Darcy aimed his gun at Alex's skull.

Vin immediately stiffened, but Alex told him to stay calm for now. She stared down Darcy's barrel and lifted her chin to show she was not afraid to die.

"Go ahead," Ezra shrugged with such cold indifference, butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth. "I have no particular affection for any of these men or the lady."

"You bastard!" Alex snapped angrily, playing the role of a discarded lover if it captured everyone's attention for a few minutes. "You said you loved me! We were going to run off to Paris together!"

"My dear," Ezra tipped his hat in her direction. "You were a distraction, little more. Something to keep me warm during our stay in this hovel. I'm afraid you cannot take the word of a man in the grips of in flagrante delicto to speak truthfully."

"You pig!" she kicked at the dirt, sending a dust cloud into the air that made the Confederates burst into laughter while leaving the rest of the seven confused.

"Siddown," Darcy growled and waved her to sit with the barrel of his gun. Alex obeyed, still glaring at Ezra but secretly confident he could take it from here.

"Now, I reiterate my offer," Ezra replied. "Let me go, and I'll show you so much gold it will make all of you rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

Darcy's eyes glimmered, and Ezra knew with confidence, the way a shark could smell blood in the water, the man was hooked. Holding Ezra's gaze for a moment as he imagined how he would be rewarded by Anderson for getting them the gold their needed for the cause. Below them, they could hear the drumbeat of Anderson's victory as he carried out his plan to raise the Confederate flag over the Seminole village.

Ezra didn't see the flag.
What he saw was the little girl who was probably lying on the ground where she had fallen, her small body ruined because of the cannonball fired from the powerful weapon these men were worshipping like it was some dark god at their disposal. Little Rosita whose mother would have to bury her when this was all over, because one of his own kind, a Southerner, simply couldn't let go of the past. He thought of how he behaved to Nathan and felt ashamed.

This had to end, and it had to end now.

"Alright then," Darcy waited for him to speak. "Where's this gold?"

"Up in the hills where they hid the women and children," Ezra gestured to the rocks and saw Buck's jaw tightened because the big man didn't like him bringing them into this. Darcy's eyes moved in the direction he pointed, a gleam of something vile crossing his face then and suddenly, Ezra had an idea what was in store for the women of the village if he and his compatriots were executed. Wasting no time taking advantage of Darcy's distraction, Ezra reacted with lightning reflexes.

Effortlessly, the derringer slipped out of his sleeve into his palm the instant Ezra triggered the mechanism. The bullet blew out the back of the man's skull, and as it did so, Chris Larabee leapt to his feet, grabbing the nearest soldier whose attention was on Ezra. Locking one arm around the man's neck, Chris liberated his gun with the other and immediately shot dead the Confederate about to move on the gambler. Another soldier prepared to fire but the one caught in Chris's grip had left his rifle and Vin went for it, shooting it even though his hands were manacled. The bullet put an end to any threat to Chris and Ezra promptly liberated Darcy's gun for himself.

Everything happened so fast, Alex could only watch impressed as the men left behind to guard them and oversee their execution were now either captured or dead. Relieved that her opening to Ezra had worked, Alex saw Chris unlocking the manacles around Vin's wrists first before moving to her.

"Nice distraction," he commented, the barest hint of a smile on his face.

"It's all I could think of," Alex shrugged, never comfortable with compliments and was just grateful no one was hurt.

She was about to ask him what came next when suddenly, the chirp of the combadge interrupted their conversation. Alex's eyes widened, and she immediately reached for her back pocket where she'd placed the device during their climb up the canyon.

"Styles here," Alex expected it to be Charlotte or Chanu.

"Alex! Thank God!" Mary Travis's voice filled the air, capturing Chris's attention immediately. That voice sounded familiar. Though for the life of him, he could not figure out why.

"Mary!" Alex exclaimed with relief. "Where are you?"

Casting a glance at Chris and the others, Alex quickly moved away from them, wishing to have this conversation in private. Chris felt compelled to listen, but Anderson still needed dealing with, so he let her go off on her own while he used the keys he'd taken from one of the dead soldiers to free the others. Yet, even as he watched Alex draw away, something about that voice tugged at him.

Alex found herself a quiet corner away from the others, taking note of Anderson and his men in the village below, spreading across it like cancer as the company's drummer continued to play to its captive audience. Flying high on a pole in the middle of the village, the Confederate colours swayed in the wind while Anderson, swigging something from a dark bottle, seemed exultant by the sight of it.
The son of a bitch was mad, Alex thought before Mary's words snapped her back to the present.

"We're still on board the alien ship, but we've found them. Alex, the aliens are children."

"What?" Alex's jaw dropped in astonishment, thinking she heard wrong. Children were responsible for all this? She almost refused to believe it. "Children?"

"I can't go into too much detail," Mary continued her report. "The children are telepathic. That's how they're controlling the Captain and the others. They've been trapped in stasis for centuries, with no memories except for a war their species fought centuries ago. Julia and I think the way to end this is to revive them."

Alex wasn't sure if that was such a good idea, but then again, she trusted Mary Travis's judgement. "What about if we terminate the program? I can order Chanu to do it from Engineering. Will that help?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," Mary answered, her tone firm enough for Alex to understand the danger without seeing the woman's face. "Their psychic powers are formidable, but they have the minds of infants. They're following the program because that's all they know how to do. Terminating it before we can revive them could be dangerous, not just to our people but them as well. Alex, they're infants. They've been left in gestation pods for centuries with no formative input except that program."

"Great," Alex muttered unhappily, realising they were going to have to play this scenario to its conclusion after all. She hoped shutting it down would keep them from having to fight Anderson and his men, but it appeared that had always been a slim hope. "Alright, I won't order the program shut down, but you need to resolve this and soon. We're almost reaching the end of the scenario, and God only knows what they have in mind once this story ends."

There was a slight pause, and Alex knew Mary was letting that knowledge sink in before the Protocol Officer responded. "Acknowledged. I'll tell Julia to get a move on."

"Good," Alex nodded, intending to return to the others, but Mary wasn't entirely done yet.

"How is Chris? Is he alright?"

Lifting her eyes to the Captain who at this moment was strapping his gun belt around his waist, she took a deep breath and felt profoundly grateful none of them were seriously hurt yet. "He's fine, they all are. You can tell Julia Ezra is okay too."

"Thank you Alex," Mary said gratefully. "Keep him safe, okay?"

"Always. Keep me informed of your progress, Styles out."
Sometimes, when Colonel Emmet Anderson was sitting by the campfire, thinking about home, there were moments of clarity where he questioned his cause.

A sane man would have returned home by now, would have accepted the decision at Gettysburg, no matter how unpalatable it might be. Except he had no home, not anymore. Before the end had come, Anderson returned to his family in Georgia to find the plantation where he and his wife raised two sons and a daughter burned to the ground. Manderley had been in his family for four generations, and yet it's loss was nowhere equal to learning his wife Ophelia and daughter Verity were dead.

From what remained of the nigras still on the property, they revealed Manderley had been sacked by Union soldiers and his wife and Verity, paid the worst price any woman could. Raped and then strangled, their bodies were left behind to be buried by the slaves out of respect to their absent master who was always fair and never cruel. With two sons already lost to the conflict, Anderson had lost everything to the Union.

Returning to his company, he intended to vent his rage on the enemy when the final blow was struck to what remained of his dwindling sanity. The Confederacy surrendered.

Anderson and the men who followed him refused to accept it. Living under the Union after everything he'd lost was unimaginable and that stubborn refusal had driven their existence in the wilderness, determined to bring back the Confederacy at all costs. It was why he was sitting astride his horse, watching the real flag of the nation rising into the air, the way it should be across the land. The gold in this village would make that a reality, it would give him the capital needed to raise a new army, to take back what was lost...

The sudden explosion of gunfire tore him abruptly out of that beautiful dream and Anderson blinked away his confusion to return to the dusty reality he and his men were fired upon. As the ringing diminished just long enough for more gunfire, he saw at least three of his men, including the company drummer, tumble into the dirt, the spread of crimson marking them for death.

"What the hell...?"

He raised his eyes to the top of the canyon where the men who defended the village were being held captive and saw no sign of them. However, the gunfire was not coming from above he quickly realized, but from the hills. Scanning the rocks and trees surrounding the village, he saw the figures taking cover using the natural terrain, to deliver their sneak attack. Long hair and even longer skirts caught his eye and the idea he and his men were being set upon by women, was more than he could stand.

"Get after those bitches!" He swore loudly, waving his horsemen at the direction of the small handful of women who had somehow manage to get their hands on some rifles and were attempting to ambush them.

Leaning against the large boulder that not only provided her with protection from returning gunfire but also a suitable surface to steady her rifle, Rain squeezed the trigger on the Winchester rifle and braced herself. She seldom got to use any guns when she was in the program with Nathan, mostly because her role in the scenario was always as a damsel in distress. Rain had to admire the kick produced by the weapon on firing. Accustomed to the smooth delivery of a phaser, she struggled to maintain her aim.
Scattered along the area, were the women of the village, themselves firing blindly at the enemy, uncertain whether they were hitting what they aimed for. However, a few lucky shots had landed and the enemy on horseback or on the ground, slumped into the dirt dead. Dyani and Toakhulga were surprisingly good shots. A young lady named Grace was taking to the rifle as if she had found her calling. The girl, no more than eighteen, was born free from a mother who had been a runaway slave and found a home among the Seminoles.

They had not asked where the weapons had come from, only considering themselves lucky that Rain was able to lead them to the cache secreted inside one of the smaller caves, so they could launch this attack. The objective was not to win but to give those who were still trapped under Anderson's boot the opening they needed to escape.

It was an effort the Chief did not waste, and as the gunfire erupted, Rain saw him barking orders at the women and children still trapped, to run, which they did.

A short cry made Rain flinch, and she saw one of the women, Melani, who had been anxious about handling a gun at all, drop the weapon in her hand to crumple behind the tree she was using for cover. Rain couldn't tell if she was hit bad, but Melani didn't get up, and that did not bode well for her condition.

"Get back! Get back!" Rain warned when she saw the horses coming their way. Guns or not, they were no match for the cavalry coming at them. This distraction had freed a good many of the Seminoles and Rain hoped, provided an opening for Alex to extract herself from whatever situation was she was facing with the Captain and the Senior staff.

"What's going on down there?"

The gunfight below drew all the men and Alex to the edge of the canyon with puzzlement. After freeing themselves and restraining their would-be executors, they had retrieved their weapons and were preparing to descend into the village to deal with Colonel Anderson and his renegades. Alex was in better spirits, now that Mary's report about the aliens revealed an end in sight to this entire affair, though not before they could dispense with one final confrontation.

"Look," Vin gestured to the women spread out across the edge of the village, engaged in a firefight with Anderson's men with the advantage their surprise had given them, quickly running out.

"Is that Rain?" Nathan's voice rose an octave, horrified that the girl he had taken a liking to was about to get herself killed. "Where they get the guns?"

Alex saw Rain and guessed quickly what the Transporter Chief had done. Leaning over to Chris, she said quietly. "She got them the same place I got the fog."

Chris blinked at that revelation, "you mean she's one of yours?"

"Actually yours," Alex shrugged. "She wasn't staying out of it because Nathan's her fiance."

Gesturing him away from the edge, there was one thing she had held back from him, one thing she knew without any doubt would get him to cooperate now they were almost at the end. He needed to understand the stakes they were fighting for, which was not the Seminoles but the friends he had found defending this village.

"What is happening?" Chris demanded his patience with all this, almost at breaking point. Strange
things were happening, feelings he did not at all like were gnawing at him, and his reaction to such emotions was always anger.

"I told you," Alex drew a breath expecting his ire. She couldn't blame him. In the persona of the gunslinger, his entire world view was starting to crumble, and like the real Chris Larabee, the man had a temper. "I can't explain, but there is one thing I can tell you, one thing I swear on my life," she glanced at Vin, "on his life as true."

"Make it fast," Chris snapped, conscious of the gunshots below them and knowing they had to get down there fast.

"Adam is alive."

Of all the things she could have said, that one floored him. For a moment, he felt nothing but outrage at such a claim. How dare she? How dare she use his dead son like that? The urge to shoot her dead was so strong, he had to fight to restrain his fury. Turning his high powered gaze on her, he saw her flinch at the intensity of his anger.

"No he is not," the word escaped him like the hiss of steam from a boiler about to explode.

"Just like Vin and I are married, I'm telling you Adam is alive. Yes, you remember Sarah and Adam dying but there's more you don't. At this moment, your son is sitting in his qu..." Alex corrected herself, "... room, waiting for me to help you remember who you are." 

"No," Chris blinked, refusing to believe it. He couldn't. Adam was dead, he had buried his body and Sarah's after finding them in the ashes. The memory had been branded on every corner of his soul, it was so strong, there were nights only the drink made it barely tolerable. To know there was a life where at least one of them was alive was a hope that could break him if it were false.

"Chris," Alex tried to be kind, "the only reason he isn't here, is because I wouldn't let him get caught up in this mess. The kid's like you, headstrong, smarter than he looks and brave as hell. He worships you Chris, and he's waiting for you to get out of here."

Chris couldn't process it. The idea of Adam surviving the fire, of living a life where they were father and son, it was too much. He couldn't think of that right now because if he did, he would not be able to function. Yet, despite her words, a small flame of hope was rekindled no matter how hard he tried to believe it fake.

"What do you want from me?" He said finally.

"This whole thing started with the seven of you," Alex explained, relieved at gaining that much from him. "You, Vin, Ezra, Josiah, Nathan, Buck, Ezra and now me and Rain, because we were trying to help you. We're the only ones who can die in here."

"What does that mean?" Chris was baffled.

"It means exactly that. This place isn't real, not really. I know Anderson, and the villagers look like real people, but they're not." Alex wished she could explain holograms and how programs could be rebooted with the holographic deaths rewritten to give life again. The villagers could die, hell Anderson could die, but his character could be reinitialized. How to explain that to a gunslinger from the 19th century? "If anything happens to them, it doesn't matter because the same way I brought the fog and Rain got the guns, they can be brought back. However, if any of us die, we die. Whatever happens, down there, you've got to make sure the nine of us get through it."

Chris didn't understand but once again the strange feeling that came over him after he saw the odd
trinket of hers, and that disembodied but sultry voice gliding over his skin with each word, compelled him to trust her because it was simply how it had always been. His mind knew what it knew, but his heart, an organ he seldom exercised these days, was telling him to believe Alex Styles, especially if what lay at the end of this story, was Adam.

"Chris!"

Vin Tanner interrupted his thoughts with more tangible concerns. "We've gotta get down there pard! Those people are going to get killed when Anderson sends his cavalry after them. Besides if we don't get going, Nathan's liable to take off on his own. You know he's sweet on that girl."

"Yeah," Chris nodded, dismissing Alex's talk for now because whatever the truth, Anderson needed dealing with. Still, it would take time to get down the canyon to be of any help to the villagers below, despite Alex's claims. They didn't have time for the delay, and Chris thought quickly, trying to decide what to do when his eyes brushed the dark, rusty barrel of the cannon and a thought formed so fast in his head, the words were out of his mouth before he had even registered the inspiration.

"Anyone know how to fire that cannon?"

He had some experience with it, but Chris preferred to lead the charge to face Anderson himself. Nathan had been a stretcher bearer during the war and had seen the aftermath of battles, not been involved in it himself. Josiah was a preacher during that time, and Chris knew from experience Buck was a foot soldier with little contact with the weapons. Vin and JD were simply too young.

"I believe I can fulfil that requirement," Ezra Standish spoke, already making his way to the weapon. "You can shoot that thing?" Buck gave Ezra a look of surprise, unable to imagine the scheming gambler fighting in any man's army but then again, as they were starting to learn Ezra was a man of secrets and there was none greater than the person he truly was, beyond the card sharp and grifter.

"I've been in a battle or two that required the expertise," Ezra hid the hint of hurt he felt that none of these men considered him soldier material.

"Good," Chris said approvingly, secretly impressed by how quickly Ezra had weaved the tale of fiction earlier, providing him with the distraction he needed to get free. "Keep them busy until we get down there."

Suddenly what Alex said about Rain crept into his thoughts, and Chris found himself adding. "Make sure those riders don't get anywhere near the women."

"I'll do that," Ezra nodded in understanding and saw the relief on Nathan's face. The healer was itching to go to the rescue of his lady and Ezra wanted to keep her from harm for the sake of the man he had been so against when this all began.

Perhaps he was changing.

"Although," Ezra's eyes narrowed in calculation, even through the dimpled smile on his face, "I do have an idea for my first target."

Julia was already impressed by Lisi, the life model interface to the ship's computer, by its ability to adapt to new situations and its determination to protect the charges in its care. As the Chief Engineer of the Maverick, Julia knew how vital it was for the main computer to continue functioning when it controlled everything from life support to warp propulsion. Once upon a time, Chris Larabee had managed to stave off a Dominion ambush by using the main computer as leverage and saved all their
lives. Lisi had not only managed to keep alive the infants under her care but also maintain the systems on the vast complex they were now standing. Lisi's creator was probably dead by now, but Julia would have like to have met them to give her compliments for such a well designed and durable machine.

A machine, she now realized, was half missing.

When Lisi had said there was damage, Julia had assumed a partial system shut down. In truth, the interface had seriously downplayed the catastrophe that halted this culture's attempt to start a new civilization.

"Oh, my God."

It was Mary who made the exclamation as they were led into the Central Cortex, away from the Nursery as they were calling it. One wall of the room was a twisted mess of ragged metal with only a force field keeping out the vacuum of space. Circuitry boards, crystal panelling and other internal mechanisms were exposed where the section of wall and everything connected to it was ripped away. Half the cortex was missing, not merely damaged but torn apart. How the station continued to function, to do all the things it had since the Maverick encountered it was a miracle of engineering.

Julia was already scanning the area where the worst of the damage had occurred, compelled to know what had caused such destruction.

"What could have done this?" Kate asked, her expression similarly aghast. She'd seen damage like this before, but it usually meant the ship was being blasted to hell by an enemy. Had someone taken shots at this station?

"I'm detecting residual particles of highly charged neutrinos, they're almost affecting space-time if they weren't so minute," Julia explained. "Holy cow, I think the station got hit by a quantum filament."

"A what?" Opa had to ask, having never heard of such a thing before.

"A quantum filament," Mary answered automatically, "it's a strange spacial phenomenon that could be no more than a few meters wide and be hundreds long. From what I understand, there's not much known about them because they're tough to detect, but they have the gravitational strength of a black hole. Just brushing against one can cause serious damage."

"I'm just amazed the ship is running at all," Julia lowered her tricorder. "From what I'm seeing, the only reason the ship is still functioning is that the computer, what was left of it, was able to reroute itself using all the other secondary computer systems throughout the complex."

"Can you find the system that controls the Nursery?" Mary asked, wanting to free those children and the mental captives on board the Maverick, especially after Alex's revelation she and the Senior Staff were about to embark on a final battle with their holographic nemesis.

Julia frowned and turned her eyes on Lisi, her expression sombre. "Mary, it's not that simple. To maintain itself, the computer had to tap into every other system on the station to continue operations. There isn't a direct control to the Nursery anymore. To shut that off, I have to shut it all off."

"All as in everything?" Kate gasped as the full implications set in.

"Yes," Julia nodded grimly. "Life support, propulsion, force fields..." she gestured to the one keeping them from being blown out into space, a few feet away. It all has to be shut down for us to sort out and then reinitialized with a new core, reset to default, whatever that is."
Mary thought of everything they'd seen since arriving on this station, the animal habitat, the sizeable holographic system revealing who these people were, even the interface that manifested as the small child watching them, waiting for them to give the assistance she believed them capable of providing.

"How long would it take?" She asked, knowing whatever the number, it would be too long to help Chris and the others.

"If we're lucky a few days. If not, weeks."

"We can't keep the Captain and the Senior Staff on the holodeck for weeks," Kate stated the obvious. "They're about to go fight whatever enemy the scenario cooked up for them with safeties off."

"I know that," Julia almost snapped. "You think I like the idea of my Ezra running through the wilderness, thinking he's a smooth-talking gambler who can get by on charm and a derringer? For starters, he's not that charming and don't get me started about his money-making schemes!"

"Okay, okay," Mary interjected, sharing Julia's frustration and was even more worried for Chris whose gunslinger persona was dangerous to say the least. "Let's calm down. Julia, we need to think of a way to shut the Nursery down, is there anything you can think of to do that?"

"Sorry Commander," Kate said apologetically, reminded by Julia that Ezra Standish wasn't just the Chief, but to the titian-haired engineer, he was the love of her life.

"It's alright," Julia shrugged, hating to be waspish with anyone and considered Mary's question. "The trouble is, we know so little about this system. If I try to reroute, I might be severing connection to something vital. What we need is a backup...." her voice started to drift, and she walked away to the exposed wall, to stare at the space outside. Not space, Mary realized after a second, but the Maverick.

"What is it?"

"We use the Maverick." She turned to face them again, a sparkle of inspiration in her emerald coloured eyes. "We create an interface between our main computer and this system, using it to maintain the primary functions while we repair the damage. That way, we can decide what systems stay off and what stay on, through our main computer."

"What will happen to Lisi when we shut it all off?"

Opa's question suddenly made everyone turned to the little girl who had been silent all this while, listening to these strangers deciding the fate of her charges, and now it appeared herself.

Mary walked over to Lisi and dropped to the child's eye level again. It was so hard to believe she was talking to a computer when her heart only saw a little girl in need. Perhaps it was the mother in her that could not bear such a thing.

"Lisi, will you disappear if we shut everything off."

The girl nodded somberly. "I'll be gone."

"But if we reinitialize the system after the reboot..." Opa looked at Julia.

"If we reboot," Julia's voice was soft. "What comes back will be the primary interface. This one was created because it was the best the damaged core could come up with. Once we repair it, the system will reset back to its original settings."
"It's okay," Lisi said sadly, "you have to do it. You have to help them."

Mary swallowed thickly and wanted to hug the hologram but knew it would do little good. Lisi wasn't real, not in a flesh and blood way, but it still ached nonetheless to understand what they would be doing would be effectively erasing her from existence.

"We will help them Lisi," Mary promised her earnestly. "I give you my word."

"Thank you, Mary," Lisi smiled. "I knew you could."

With that, Mary drew in a breath to steady herself and looked over at Julia, who was also wearing a similar stricken expression. "Let's get started."
In retrospect, Rain supposed she could have thought this through a little more.

When she saw the riders charging across the village towards her, Rain realized perhaps her brilliant plan to provide a distraction for the Senior Staff and the captured Seminoles may not have been so brilliant after all. As their horses thundered towards her, their hooves spitting bits of rock and gravel in all directions, Rain came to the unhappy conclusion this was precisely the situation Commander Wilmington wanted to avoid.

"Get back to the cave!"

It was an order the women fighting with her were more than willing to obey because firing at the enemy from a distance was one thing, but facing them in possible hand to hand combat was something none of them was prepared for. She saw some discarding their guns and turning tail to run, uttering frightened cries while others simply retreated, their weapons still in their grasp. Rain was one of the last to make a run for it, wanting to make sure everyone was safely away.

"Come on!"

Rain saw Dyani calling after her and turned to leave when the first of the riders reached her. All she saw of him before he leapt off his horse was his tan duster and a wide-brimmed hat. Taller than Nathan, he downed her easily. His weight slammed against her so hard Rain felt as if she had the wind knocked out of her when she hit the dirt. Despite the layers of her costume, she felt every bit of the hard ground beneath her.

While she was still reeling, he rolled her onto her back and straddled her, one hand reaching for her wrist to pin her down. The man pulled his lips back in a sneer, one that properly infuriated Rain, enough for her to recover her senses and throw a balled fist against his jaw, knocking him off her. Flipping upright, her skirt swirling around her as she stood up if somewhat shakily, Rain prepared to run when a meaty palm enclosed her ankle and pulled back sharply.

"You ain't going nowhere, you darkie bitch!"

Landing on her face, Rain’s head connected with a rock half buried in the dirt. The pain radiated across her forehead like fire, and for a minute, she thought she was flying through space at warp. Without a ship. Warmth ran down her forehead followed by the familiar metallic stench she knew to be blood. This time, when he turned her over, Rain was in no position to stop him.

Fortunately, she didn't have to.

An explosion rocked the air so loudly, it seemed to fill the world, just before the Confederate flag and the pole it was attached to was utterly obliterated.

Standing behind the cliff, Ezra Standish looked at the cloud of dust with some measure of satisfaction, though none would ever be enough to soothe the ache in his heart whenever he thought of little Rosita. In either case, the blast was enough to halt every Confederate in their tracks, tearing their attention away from whatever mischief they intended to carry out.

He was unable to see Rain, but Anderson was screaming and shouting, barking orders to have someone ride up here and retake the gun so they could regain their advantage. With the belief he
would soon have company, Ezra picked up another round shot from the cache of cannonballs next to the weapon to fire the gun again.

As the ball of dust he created drifted across the village compound, he saw the spray of wood and burning fragments, the only remnants of the flag he once served. Ezra knew he'd turned a corner. He didn't know how it happened or whether or not he was better for it, but for the first time in far too long, he felt he had stumbled across something important by choosing to follow Chris Larabee into this fight. Something he had no idea was missing from his life, had suddenly become the only thing that mattered.

Friendship.

"Spread out and get Anderson!"

Chris's order reached them over the sounds of blazing guns as they returned to the village and dispersed out under his direction. Vin was sticking close to Chris, making a run for one of the large boulders framing the village square, firing all the way. Although she would have preferred to remain with them, Alex was confident her Captain was safe with Vin at his side, and as always, during these types of confrontations, she stayed close to Buck.

Buck had both guns drawn, firing into the soldiers on horseback, downing one man with a single shot. Seeing one of them about to fire back, Alex fired her own weapon, still finding the kick the gun produced a little jarring. Nevertheless, she put the enemy down before he could harm her commanding officer. Buck gave her a quick glance at that and flashed her a grin.

"See, I knew I was growing on you."

Alex rolled her eyes as a bullet fired too close to them impacted on a rock wall, making them flinch with the bits of grit it sent in their direction.

"Will you just move!"

With that, they ran for one of the empty mud huts and slipped behind the cover of its doorway and open window, to resume shooting.

Meanwhile JD, Josiah and Nathan had found their sweet spot, a Confederate wagon, and was laying waste to the enemy there. The Counsellor who was one of the gentlest men she knew was an absolute demon with a rifle, a stark dichotomy to the preacher he was supposed to be. One after the other, he unsaddled the enemy struggling to regroup from the coordinated attack. Behind him, Nathan was searching the area for Rain in between shots. Alex hoped the Transporter Chief was alright, having lost sight of her once they began their descent down the cliff.

"GET ANDERSON!" Chris shouted as he put down another Confederate soldier, with Vin keeping pace with him, making sure no one could draw on the gunslinger. Captain or gunfighter, Vin was not about to let any harm come to Chris. As much as he cared for Alex, there was something inside Vin, something that felt compelled to always have this man's back, no matter where they were.

"NO MATTER WHAT! GET ANDERSON!"

Whether or not Chris Larabee remembered his true self, the Captain of the Maverick still taught a masterclass when it came to strategy. Before they had descended into the Seminole village, Chris mapped out their plan of attack, unaware he was directing them to set up a kill zone. Once they surrounded the Confederate renegades on all sides, locking the enemy within their snare of bullets,
there was only one order that mattered.

Take out Anderson at all costs.

This rabble was only as good as the fanatic that led them, and Chris was confident without the Colonel, they would disband.

Comprehending the danger their commander was in, a number of the riders surrounded Anderson, their bodies and horses acting as shields for their Colonel. As the village's defenders focused on their gunfire in the square where Anderson was presently trapped, the Seminole Chief had mobilized his own people to attack. Wielding the same guns used by the women who had provided their escape earlier, they were now firing upon the Confederates outside the square, cutting down those numbers before they could sneak up on the seven and their familiars.

Not that some didn't come through.

Alex heard movement behind her and turned just in time to feel the sting of a gunshot across her bicep. Uttering a small cry, she spun around and fired, putting a bullet in the man's chest before she stumbled back against the corner of the doorway behind which she was taking cover. Another rider rode across the back door, preparing to finish the job when Buck fired once, ending him before he could pose any more threat than that.

"You're hurt," his expression showed his concern and once again, Alex was reminded why she loved this big idiot. The heart on this man was like a red giant and at moments like this, it showed.

"I'll live," she winced, even though she was lying because she knew Buck. If he for one moment thought she was seriously injured, he would think of nothing else. There was nothing the man abhorred more than harm to a woman. "Keep firing! We've got to kill that crazy son of a bitch!"

Buck flashed her a grin. "Miss Styles, you do turn a lovely phrase."

Chris took aim, lining his shot to take out Anderson, who was still surrounded by his men and had retreated to the trees in the middle of the square, using it for cover. Firing again, his bullet struck the tree bark, and Chris cursed, simply unable to gain a clear line of sight to make the kill. Cursing under his breath, he glared at the Colonel, painfully aware if they didn't kill the man, this thing could go on indefinitely, and if he got away, he'd just put some other community through this hell again.

"I can't get him!" Chris hissed angrily, pausing a moment before making another attempt.

Vin took aim and fired with his mare's leg, faring a little better when he struck Anderson in the arm, however instead of faltering, as a man with a large hole in his bicep ought to do, he stared Vin dead in the eye and fired. The tracker had barely enough time to duck down behind the rock to avoid getting hit. As he did so, he glimpsed Buck taking his shots and noted Alex was not visible. He'd seen her a moment ago and wondered where she was. Had she been hit?

Buck's bullet struck Anderson in the other arm, and yet the man was still in the saddle. Josiah made an attempt, and it still did nothing to stop him. With the same stubborn determination that refused to accept the war had come to an end, Anderson continued to fight, oblivious to the pain, caring only that he would not yield the position.

"Bastard won't go down!" Josiah's voice carried over the gunfire.

Chris took another shot, this time striking the flesh of Anderson's thigh. While the man registered the pain, he did not falter, reacting only by removing the brown bottle in his jacket to take a swig of its
"You can't kill me!" He shouted each word with a slur. "I am a ghost of the Confederacy, and I will not die!"

"He's so pumped with that laudanum, someone could chop his head off, and he wouldn't feel a thing!" Nathan shook his head in disbelief, finally understanding how Anderson was still managing to fight after failing to shoot down the Colonel. With each greedy gulp of the dark fluid, Anderson was gaining strength to keep going.

"He'll feel this!"

JD ran out from behind the wagon, both guns blazing, offering a clear challenge to the Colonel, who was more than ready to take up the gauntlet thrown in his direction. Continuing to pull the trigger on both his guns, it was only when the audible click of the empty chamber reached his ears, did JD Dunne realize he was about to die.

"Alright," Julia looked up at Mary after securing the remote interface to the exposed circuitry of the Central Cortex, where it would link to the Maverick's main computer. "It's now or never."

"Do it," Mary ordered.

Thanks to Lisi's help, the station's shield was lowered, allowing the Maverick to create the link needed to maintain the facility's primary functions. Where the Maverick had been a distant sight in space through the exposed bulkhead earlier, now the ship's hull blocked out the stars. Other members of the engineering team had transported into the area, with Claire Mosely leading a team to seal the hole in the hull before they made the switch. In the Nursery, Doctor Zheng and Maria were ready to take charge of the infants the instant they were disengaged from the stasis pods and their simulated world.

"Here goes nothing," Julia took a deep breath and keyed in the shutdown sequence...

"Buck, what the hell are you doing?"

Alex shouted after Buck, whose reaction to JD in danger was almost Pavlovian. As soon as the kid put himself in the Colonel's sights, Buck bolted out into the open, ignoring the fact there was still a lot of bullets being exchanged, and he was running out into the open. All Buck could register was the fact JD was in danger. In this scenario, they had known each other but only a few days, but Buck's protective instincts, when it came to JD Dunne, overrode the power any alien had over his mind.

He was sprinting through the line of fire in full strides when suddenly something struck him with the intensity of a sledgehammer to the brain.

Memories crowded in so fast, Buck's race across the ground faltered momentarily as his head swam, trying to process the floodgates that were just opened in his mind. However, all that was shunted aside because slicing through this deluge of information was one thought overriding all others.

The Colonel was about to kill JD.
This time, when Buck resumed running, he did so with a new determination in his step. He was moving fast with the kind of agility that came with being a Starfleet officer, required to complete annual survival training requirements and hand to hand combat with aliens a good deal bigger and meaner than he was. He was also running with the awareness of someone who knew how to assess the situation and approach it with caution at a second's notice.

Launching himself at JD with only seconds to spare, he slammed into the kid with a full body tackle, sending them both sprawling out of Anderson's path and into the ground. Both men tumbled across the dirt in a tangle of limbs like a rolling dervish. Unable to stop after being denied the swipe that would have killed JD, the Confederate colonel rode past them, his sabre finding no flesh to blood its blade. Conscious the man was coming back, Buck scrambled to his feet and saw Anderson pull up his rein to his horse, forcing the animal's head to rear up in reaction.

Buck dragged JD to his feet. The junior lieutenant still looked dazed, but the fresh gunfire exploding around their ears snapped him out of his disoriented state.

"Get clear!" Buck shoved JD towards the safety of the wagon, his eyes fixed on Anderson who was barking further orders at his men.

Scanning the area, Buck realized there had been a slight pause in the shooting. From where he was, he could see a similar effect rippling across the faces of the men he was fighting with...no serving with, he realized. He was serving with them because...

"Buck, what's going on?"

JD looked confused. The kid was looking around the area, trying to understand the situation through the still thick fog in his mind.

"We're in the middle of a gunfight, that's what!? NOW MOVE!"

While he still felt a little muddled, JD Dunne's conditioning to obey that voice was too strong to ignore, and his feet were moving even before the words had stopped ringing in his ears.

The First Officer of the Maverick, now entirely in charge of himself, straightened up as Anderson charged again. The Colonel was galloping towards him, raising the sabre Buck was certain Anderson wielded in dozens of battles throughout the war, preparing to cut him down. Except this time, he wasn’t coming after a kid who didn’t know better, this time he was coming after someone who was prepared for a fight.

Drawing both his guns, Buck didn't waste time trying to reason with a mad man and fired every round at his disposal. Anderson was a mad dog who needed putting down, and Buck was done with any kind of man who would rain down death on women and children.

The first bullet struck Anderson dead centre. The crack of the gunshot was loud enough to make the white stallion beneath him stop in its tracks. This time, Anderson felt the pain. A grimace spread across the sallow complexion of his leathery face, at the same time the spread of blood appeared across his chest. The second bullet silenced his cry of indignation when it struck him in the throat, making the words become sickly wet gurgles of agony.

Unable to remain in the saddle, the Colonel fell from his horse and landed on the ground hard. Despite the mortal wounds he sustained, his expression took on the determination of one who refused to die on someone else's terms. Forcing himself to stand, even as he was dying from a thousand cuts, Anderson faced Buck Wilmington intending to use the last second of his life to make a final stand.
He never got the chance to draw the gun he attempted to reach.

Buck's final shot ended him once and for all. This time, the back of Anderson's skull exploded outward, the gruesome climax from the single gunshot wound to the head. Buck watched dispassionately as Anderson fell flat on his back, his eyes staring into the sky he could no longer see. Buck stood over him for a second, noting the sabre still in Anderson's hands and decided he would not have like to have known how that steel would feel against his flesh.

Around them, the remaining renegades, shocked by the death of their commander, had stopped shooting, uncertain what to do next. With Anderson dead and their captain no longer there to lead them, they were in disarray. Too many of their brethren had fallen in the battle for this village, and their faces registered the dilemma of men who no longer knew why they were fighting.

It was not a predicament they would have to suffer for any longer.

"Computer, halt program."

The world was suddenly locked in frame. From the Seminoles who were valiantly defending their homes alongside the seven to the renegades who were debating whether they ought to keep fighting, the village was frozen. Smoke and dust swirling about the area were now stationary clouds going nowhere. Silence enveloped the cacophony of noise into a comforting blanket of quiet.

Buck looked over his shoulder to see Chris and Vin approaching him, the Captain's order having brought about this premature end to the battle. "Chris..."

"Yeah," Chris Larabee nodded, having regained his senses enough to comprehend the situation they were in and the danger that came with it. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Buck nodded. "What did we just go through?"

"I'm not sure," Chris admitted looking around the village to see Josiah, JD and Nathan coming towards them. Even Ezra was making a brisk descent from the cliff top to join them. Then out of one of the huts, Alex emerged, clutching her shoulder as she came to join them. Beside him, Vin's reaction was immediate.

"Alex!"

The helmsman's blue eyes widened at the sight of blood and hurried towards her.

"Vin," Alex burst into a smile before they met in an embrace Vin was careful to deliver without aggravating her injury further.

Alex felt her chest surge with relief as they held each other, grateful he survived the fight. With the safeties disabled, there had been no way for her to know for sure. However, the instant she heard the Captain disable the program, Alex knew whatever Mary had done on that alien station worked. The gunslinger was gone, and the Captain, who always put the safety of his crew above all else, was back.

"Hey a little help here!"

From another corner of the village, Rain's irate voice snapped as the lady sat up from where she had been lying amidst the bushes and tall grass. Her forehead was bleeding, a sight that instantly drew a reaction from Nathan whose healer's instincts were already prompted when he realized Alex was injured. Upon seeing his fiancee's condition, those instincts went into overdrive.
"Rain, you're hurt!"

"Gee whiz Doc," Rain grumbled getting to her feet unsteadily. "Can't put anything past you."

"What's happened here?" Chris demanded.

"Well," Alex let out a sigh. "It's a long story, Sir, but I can tell you one thing for certain."

"What?" Chris stared at her in expectation.

Alex's eyes narrowed. "I really hate this program."
"Captain's Log - Stardate 2378.623

It has been almost a day since myself, and the Senior staff were released from the influence of the race we now know to be the Val'ea.

From what Lt. Travis has been able to conclude from her preliminary studies of the Val'ean archives, the race fled their home planet two hundred years ago when their native star system in the Beta Quadrant was on the verge of nova. Due to limited resources, it was decided an infant population would be easier to manage during the journey. Embryos were placed in sleeper tubes, slowing their growth while their mental development would be aided by the simulated reality prepared for them.

If all had gone according to plan, the children would have spent their formative years being educated, developing social skills and experiencing a normal childhood in their mental playpen. Meanwhile, in the real world, their bodies would continue to grow and mature, albeit at a slower pace than usual. When a suitable planet for colonisation was found, the Val'ean children would then be revived as fully functioning adults, ready to begin life on a new world.

Due to the almost total obliteration of the Central Cortex during the station's encounter with a quantum filament, the computer intelligence was forced to improvise as best it could. Attaching itself to the auxiliary computer systems on board, the AI called Lisi maintained the ship's environment and course, but the programming for the simulated reality was lost in the destruction. What remained of its memory banks was the record of an ancient battle fought very early in the history of the Val'ea.

With no other experience to draw from and still trapped in their infant forms since the computer had deemed the conditions for revival unsuitable without adult presence, the children played out their war, aided by their formidable telepathic abilities, on any helpless ship that happened by. The AI understanding the children's desperate need for mental stimuli facilitated this goal by capturing ships and allowing its charges to play out the war through its crew. This sometimes resulted in the crew either fleeing the scene or killing each other.

When the station encountered the Maverick and the Holodeck on board, the AI or Lisi as Lt. Travis called it, realised the Holodeck was the perfect environment for the children to play out their war. It would have trapped myself and the Senior Staff in an endless loop fighting Colonel Anderson and his band of renegades until we were dead and then moved on to the rest of the crew. It was only after the Maverick penetrated its formidable shields to beam an Away Team on board, did Lisi recognise we might be in a position to help the Val'ean children.

As of now, Engineering with the assistance of Lt. Travis is rebuilding the Central Cortex so the backup archives of the Val'ea, fortunately, kept in a separate location on the station for just this very type of emergency, can be uploaded again. Upon completion, the station will be directed to one of the many habitable worlds in Federation space to fulfil its original purpose. The children however, will not be returned to stasis and will now have to reach adulthood in a real-world environment.

The USS Potemkin is presently on route to join us at our location, where they will take charge of the Val'ea and its occupant for the journey to their new home. In the meantime, however, the Maverick is playing host to the one-hundred infants removed from their stasis tubes."

After it was all said and done, Chris had to admit he was somewhat embarrassed.
When fragments of his behaviour in the Holodeck return to his memory, and he remembered just how menacing he had been to Alexandra Styles in particular, Chris was inwardly mortified. It was one thing to play the surly gunslinger in a holodeck fantasy, but something else entirely to be that man. The Man in Black, for all his attractive qualities, was a dangerous character still grieving for his family and more than willing to let his Colt peacemaker do the talking for him.

Chris remembered how he physically handled Alex at points during the affair and was somewhat surprised she was as restrained as she had been. Except for Vin Tanner, anyone putting their hands on Alex without her permission was generally going to have a bad day. Yet she tolerated his manhandling and made him feel worse when Chris remembered how determined she was to keep them all safe.

In fact, Chris made a mental note to put in commendations for all the ladies who worked so hard to free himself and the Senior officers from the influence of the Val'ea. From Alex and Rain having to deal with the situation on the Holodeck to Charlotte who was left in charge of the Maverick, and finally Mary and the Away team on the Val'ea station. All of them had displayed exemplary conduct, and Chris wanted them to get the credit they deserved.

For now, however, they had other concerns.

"Buck, really?"

Chris stared at Buck Wilmington who was wearing some kind of harness across his back, with one of the older Val'ean infants bouncing happily in the contraption. The child was no more than a year old and staring at the luminous surroundings of the bridge with wide-eyed fascination. The little girl's expression of wonder was so precious, Chris couldn't help but be touched by it all. He still remembered what a delight Adam had been as a baby, and a part of Chris Larabee was still saddened at the memory he and Sarah never had any more children.

"Oh come on Chris, I'm just helping Nathan with babysitting duty, beside Daisy is no trouble." Buck peeled off the harness and removed its precious bundle as he prepared to take his seat next to the command chair. Handing the child to Mary, who was next to Chris in her customary position, the Protocol Officer's arms were already outstretched to take the little girl off his hands.

"Daisy?"

"Well we got to call her something," Buck insisted, looking at the baby reaching for Mary's gold locks in interest. "Can't just pin a number on her. Besides, she looks like a Daisy."

"Daisy is a lovely name," Mary agreed with a smile, delighting in that sweet face as all mothers were known to do when confronted by a cherub that brought back fond memories of their own child at the same age.

"I know that," Buck shrugged, aware he'd miss the little girl when she was gone. "I mean Nathan's team is stretched to the limit. Audrey King and some of the teachers in the school have helped out, hell even Josiah is babysitting in his office."

"Josiah?" Chris exclaimed, trying to picture the Counsellor with a baby in his arms. Next to an infant, Josiah would look like a damn giant.

"Yeah," Vin drawled from the helm. "Says it's practice for when he becomes a grandfather."

"That's true," the Captain had to admit. Josiah's oldest daughter was present in the family way and was not that long from giving the Counsellor his first grandchild, something the man was extremely
"Think of it this way, Captain," Ezra said from his station. "The children have delivered us from the mission on Kreetassa."

Chris broke into an involuntary grin and then stifled it when he saw Mary's frown. No matter how guilty he might feel by his behaviour in the Holodeck, one thing he certainly was not regretting too deeply was the fact the mission to Kree had been handed over to Captain Khalish and the USS Endeavour. When Chris thought of Khalish (an arrogant Menken who thought the sun shone out of his ass), performing the humiliating ritual in his place, he could not help but burst into a smile.

"Yeah, that's a shame," Chris's expression was one of pure innocence.

"Right," Mary narrowed her eyes at him telling Chris he was fooling no one with that. "At least my speech isn't going to waste. Lt. Able of the Endeavour is going to use it instead of drafting one of her own."

"Vin, how is Alex doing?" Chris asked, still grateful his dignity would remain intact.

"Oh, she's fine," Vin swung around in his chair to face the Captain. The Maverick was holding position next to the Val'ean station they were calling the Ark for now, and so Vin could afford a little time away from the controls. "Nathan fixed her up good after we got out of the holodeck, so she's resting in our quarters."

"I'm surprised she's not here," Buck remarked. "You know Alex, she hates doing nothing. I didn't think you'd be able to keep her away from the bridge."

"Me neither," Vin admitted, giving the matter some thought at Buck's remark. Alex was rather vague when he asked her how she intended spending her day off. "She said she wanted to catch up on things."

"Well she deserves the rest if she wants it," Chris declared, once again reminded of how hard Alex had fought to keep them alive while at the same time, dealing with their Magnificent Seven personas.

"Still," Ezra remarked, always one to latch on to a mystery. "I wonder what that could be."

A day and a half later, after the Potemkin had arrived and on the eve of the Maverick's departure from the area, they found out.

Answering the invitation from their Science Officer to come to the Holodeck in their Magnificent Seven costumes. Chris Larabee and the rest of the senior staff, including Inez and Casey, stepped through the arch and found themselves once again in the square of the Seminole village.

However, instead of the battle-ravaged community near decimated by artillery and gunfire, what was before them was a vibrant, living community with no sign of the damage inflicted by Anderson's renegades or his cannon. The mud huts had been replaced with sturdier brick constructions, adorned today with flowers and colourful decorations. The landscape surrounding the village was also greener, with the trees and bushes growing through it flowering. Instead of hard, dry dirt, the ground was covered with wildflowers and lush green grass. It also appeared there was now a creek meandering through the village, its source a small cascade flowing from a fissure in one of the canyon walls.

Music filled their ears as they sighted Rain standing next to Tennessee Eban, who was playing his beloved piano, now restored to its original state. The Transporter Chief was wearing a lavender
dress, smiling at the old man who appeared to be having the best day of his life, playing his music with his daughter at his side. Meanwhile, the delicious aroma of spices drifted through their air, rankling their stomachs as the village women laughed and gossiped at the table where they were preparing food.

"Welcome," Chief Tastanagi greeted with arms wide. "We did not think to see you again, but we're happy you've come on this special day."

Chris glanced at the others in confusion, though he was still glad to see the village in such good condition. "We were just passing through, but what special day?"

"The day we name my son," Imala, who they last saw dead on the ground at the top of the canyon was beaming broadly, cradling his son in his arms as he approached them. No longer was he the hostile man they knew when they first encountered him. Instead, the child in his arms had softened his temper somewhat, enough so he could see the men who had tried to defend his home as allies, not enemies.

"Imala!" JD exclaimed, a small smile of pleasure crossing over his face at the sight of the man. Even though Imala and the rest of the Seminoles were holographic fantasies, they had become very real to the Senior Staff during this whole affair with the Val'ea. Imala's death had stung, especially when he had been willing to trust them enough to help him defend his village, despite his dislike of the 'white' man.

"This is your lady, gunslinger?" The Chief smiled graciously at Mary, who wore the pink dress she often favoured in this simulation, with gold hair flowing loose across her shoulders.

"Yeah," Chris afforded himself a smarmy grin. "This is my woman, alright."

Mary shot him a look that told him plainly what she thought about that but still managed to meet the Chief's eyes and offer him a smile. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Mary."

"EZRA!"

Ezra Standish, who like the rest of the seven, was marvelling at the state of the village when he was suddenly surrounded by a group of children, one of which was the little girl called Rosita. Like all children, she was clothed in the traditional Mexican dress of the day, wearing a hibiscus in her hair as she beamed in Ezra in obvious delight. There was no sign of the terrible injury that had taken her life and once again, she stared at Ezra, her face beaming in pleasure at his return.

Ezra returned Rosita's gaze, feeling a wave of emotion coursing through him, one he didn't realise Julia who was standing next to him, dressed impeccably like the Emporium owner she played in the simulation, noticed. Threading her fingers through his, he didn't register her touch until she squeezed. For a second, his sea-green eyes touched her eyes, and Ezra knew despite her somewhat Pollyanna view of the world, when it came to him, Julia saw through all his masks.

"Well hello my dear," Ezra said, returning his attention to Rosita, brushing an errant strand of dark hair out of her face. "Aren't you as pretty as a picture today?"

She giggled and then asked in a meek voice. "Can we have a trick?"

"A trick?" Ezra exclaimed with fanfare, his dimpled grin showing. "Would all my little helpers like that?"

"YES!!!" Came a chorus of replies. Some of the children were bouncing up and down on their feet, others clapped, which only made Ezra's grin wider.
"I will, of course, need the help of my lovely assistant here," he gestured to Julia.

"Hello Julia," the children waved at her brightly before she and Ezra were led away from the group.

As they drifted into the village, surrounded by children, they passed by Rain who had left Tennessee at his piano to join her comrades. Nathan, upon seeing her approach, met her halfway, sealing their greeting with a chaste kiss.

"Rain, what is all this?" Nathan asked, speaking on behalf of the others.

"We wanted to see how the story ended. You know, after we chased away Anderson and his army of morons. Unfortunately, we did leave the place in a bit of a mess, so we decided to put things right and add a couple of little extras for the Seminole people."

"Like the creek?" Josiah gestured at the waterway that wasn't there before. Some children were drawing water from the stream, while women were filling up buckets for the drinking and washing needed for the festivities.

"Yes," Rain nodded. "Carrying water from a well is just too hard. After having to do it myself, I didn't want to inflict that on anyone else, even holograms. So we made a few improvements, added the creek, made the land a little more receptive to farming and increased the livestock just a little."

It was foolishness Rain knew. After all, when they left this simulation, this world would cease to exist, but like Alex, the Seminoles had become real to her, and knowing in some digital realm where programs existed beyond the view of the world, these people's lot in life had improved made her feel better.

"We?" Buck inquired, aware of only one person on board the Maverick, other than Ezra Standish, with the expertise to alter a holographic simulation to this degree.

"Hi all," Alex chose that moment to appear.

Alex had been looking over the program, wanting to make sure the adjustments she made to the setting had taken place without any corruption to the data. For once, she was dressed in the persona of the doctor in the Magnificent Seven story, wearing a long dark skirt, her favourite white blouse and red vest.

"Alex!" Vin exclaimed, taking note of what she was wearing and thinking she looked amazing in the costume of the period, no matter how much she might abhor it. "You did this?"

"With help from Rain," Alex winked at the Transporter Chief. "What do you think?"

"I think it looks outstanding Alex," Chris looked about approvingly, enjoying the mood and the colour of the place. By now the Chief and Imala had gone back to the festivities, avoiding the talk about holograms and adjustments. "It's nice to see everyone back here again."

Alex caught his meaning and tended to agree. "When you can fix some things for the better, you should."

"Damn straight," Buck grinned, pleasantly surprise at Alex's efforts on behalf of the Seminoles. "I didn't know you had such a soft side Commander."

Alex made a face at Buck before regarding Inez, whose arm was wrapped around Buck's waist. "It will be a great day when you have him properly trained, Inez."
"It's a work in progress," Inez, wearing the costume of the barmaid in this scenario, winked at Buck who brightened up cheerily.

"You shouldn't mess with perfection."

"Ha!" JD snorted and before Buck could react, took Casey's hand in his. "Come on, Casey, let's go dance."

"Sounds like a plan," Josiah remarked and saw Dyani waving at him, trying to catch his eye for just that very purpose. "Gentlemen," he tipped his hat at them and headed off in her direction.

"So does this mean you're gonna join us from now on?" Vin looked at Alex hopefully, wondering if she had turned a corner in her relationship with this time period.

"I didn't say I liked the program that much," Alex groaned and then supposed she had asked for this considering what she had done with this scenario.

"Actually," Buck spoke up. "After all this, I figured we'd try something different Chris. I mean I think I speak for us all when I say I think we might need to give this program a rest for a bit."

Chris couldn't deny he wasn't receptive to the idea. He still felt uncomfortable by his behaviour even though Alex assured him she took no offence because it was entirely out of his control.

"Yeah, I can't argue with you there. This has all been a little too real for my liking," Nathan admitted. He had not liked seeing Rain hurt in the aftermath of the battle and considering the situation, was aware she could have been killed because their 'game' took on deadly proportions.

"Chris, this wasn't your fault," Mary pointed out. "It was just an unusual set of circumstances."

"Captain," Alex reinforced Mary's comment, suspecting she knew what lay at the heart of his hesitation. "Just because I don't like this program, doesn't mean it isn't a good one. You should keep playing."

"Maybe in a few months," Chris gave her a look of gratitude, aware she was trying to absolve him of guilt. "We'll see."

"So what's this something different Buck?" Vin propelled them past the moment. Ezra and Julia were entertaining the gaggle of children, while JD and Casey were dancing to the music being played by Tennessee. Meanwhile, Dyani was plying Josiah with so much food, he looked like a Thanksgiving turkey. Vin suspected the woman figured feeding Josiah was the way to the Counsellor's heart.

"Well, the kid I got this program from, came up with a new simulation that's an offshoot of the Magnificent Seven story. Apparently, after the original version popped out, a lot of different writers tried their hand at new stories, some of them taking the seven completely out of their Old West setting."

"Really?" Chris raised a brow at that. "Like what?"

Buck grinned, glad to see Chris's interest. "You ever heard of the ATF?"

THE END
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