

STAR TREKTM VOYAGERTM

7



GHOST OF A CHANCE

MARK A. GARLAND & CHARLES G. MCGRAW

Star Trek - Voy - 007 - Ghost Of A Chance

By: Mark A. Garland and Charles G. McGraw

CHAPTER 1

Commander Chakotay's spirit guide had visited him many times in his dreams. Unlike the often arbitrary or chaotic dreams of others, the spirit guide brought clarity through visions that helped explain the world outside as well as the world within.

But it was not the guide that came into the mind of the commander tonight,

finding him as he slipped deeper into his dreams. It was a ghost...

The entity had no true form, though like a strong, cool wind it made itself known. It drew closer, touching his unconscious fleetingly at first, as if unsure, or unwilling. But this seemed to last only a moment. The ghost began to change, enriched by the encounter somehow, and Chakotay sensed a certain excitement. Suddenly he saw into the ghost's mind.

The images were less alien than the ghost that brought them. A beautiful world full of life, and graced with a vast, thriving wilderness. The world moved, passing his mind's eye too

quickly.

When the images settled again, they revealed a huge village nestled among the trees, a place populated by a vibrant primitive culture. He found details difficult to distinguish, but there were many things familiar about these people and their community, and Chakotay could not help but compare them to his own people, of perhaps a thousand years ago.

Their homes were fashioned from the materials they found all around them, as were their clothes, and he saw no signs of suffering or war.

But this vision too lasted only for a short while. New images of death and destruction rushed into the dream. A different place, perhaps, or a different time?

He saw the land split, saw oceans turn to steam and mountains spewing the planet's molten interior upward into the smoke-filled skies. The world seemed bent on destroying itself and all that lived on it in a frenzy of earthquakes and fire. Then the ghost and the images were fading from the dreams, but they were replaced by a clearly understood message, one that echoed through the commander's mind until it brought him shuddering into consciousness. As he sat

up, the fateful pleas of the ghost seemed to radiate outward through his skull until they reverberated off the walls of his cabin. It was a desperate cry for help.

Chakotay looked directly at Harry Kim in the Ops bay as he entered Voyager's bridge. The hiss of the turbolift doors caused the young ensign to look up from his operations and communications panels. Kim was the youngest, greenest member of the bridge crew. Voyager's mission to the Badlands had been his first assignment, but he had already proven himself under fire.

"Status?" Chakotay asked him.

"We will arrive at the Drenar system in eleven minutes," Kim reported.

Another ensign, who was carrying a PADD containing the updated Ops report, moved away from Kim, then handed the report to the commander.

Chakotay glanced briefly at the data. As he looked around the bridge, his gaze lingered only twice. Tom Paris, the young human lieutenant at the helm, regarded Chakotay with his characteristic, only slightly arrogant smile. Though he came from a family full of admirals, his expression was born of

talent and experience, not ego.

Lieutenant Tuvok, the only Vulcan on the bridge, stood in the tactical bay to Chakotay's right, and was at this moment paying strict attention to the screens and displays at his station--something he apparently believed had a higher priority than idle greetings. Which suited the first officer just fine.

Because Voyager was always in unknown, uncharted space, its tactical station was perhaps the most important on the ship.

Chakotay took a deep breath and decided all seemed to be in order,

reassuringly so just now. He slowly exhaled, letting the lingering tension flow out of him. The dreams and visions of the night before still flickered in his mind, too real to let go of, yet clearly not real at all, and not worth dwelling on for now.

Only a dream, he told himself yet again, trying to shake off the images.

He had half expected to find some tangible evidence of his strange visions as he joined the day shift, so real were the images. He had already gone over most of the duty and sensor logs from the previous shifts, reviewing everything that had happened while he slept, but

nothing out of the ordinary had turned up.

Chakotay stepped forward and down, then walked slowly about the bridge's main, lower level, letting the dreams quiet themselves, absorbing the gray-and-black reality of the walls and railings, the strangely comforting electronic glow of many lit panels at the engineering and science stations.

"Six minutes, Commander," Kim said.

"Very well. Captain to the bridge," Chakotay called out, raising his voice to engage the intercom system. It was a routine stop, but one that Kathryn Janeway, captain of the Starship

Voyager, had been looking forward to. She and Tuvok had devised a method of replenishing the impulse engines' deuterium tanks, at least in theory. In just a few minutes they were going to put those ideas into practice.

A few moments later Captain Janeway strode smartly onto the bridge, followed closely by the Talaxian, Neelix. She wore her uniform trim and proper, her hair tucked up into a neat bun on the back of her head, no strand or thread or movement out of place. She stood in stark contrast to Neelix, whose short frame, oddly spotted face, scruffy wisps of orange hair, and bright, multicolored tunic made him seem somewhat

clownlike in her presence.

They made an effective team, however: the eager, ardent and decidedly capricious alien was Voyager's only guide in this part of the galaxy, and Janeway's straightforward discipline, along with a certain measure of insight, allowed her to make good use of Neelix's counsel.

Janeway, like her first officer, made a quick visual inspection as she stepped down and stood at ease near the center of the bridge, beside Chakotay. She folded her arms with a look of satisfaction. "Report," she said.

"Three minutes to arrival," Kim responded.

"It's right where Neelix said it would be." Paris glanced back, raising an affable eyebrow to the alien.

"Thank you," Neelix replied cheerily, bowing briefly from the waist.

He smiled at the captain. "I think you'll find the Drenarian system will provide the perfect opportunity to test your ideas. The system contains several gas giants, most with an assortment of moons that should make any captain happy as can be."

"Thank you, Neelix," Janeway answered him, adding a crisp nod.

She let half a grin slip before turning away. "Bridge to Engineering."

The voice of B'Elanna Torres, Voyager's half-human, half-Klingon chief engineer came instantly back, "Yes, Captain."

"How are we doing?"

"We're all set down here. Whenever you're ready."

"You haven't explained exactly what it is you're going to do," Neelix said, tipping his head to one side almost birdlike as

he awaited Janeway's reply.

She hadn't explained the details of the plan to anyone, really.

She had been a scientist long before becoming an officer, and she had a habit of forgetting that many of those around her did not possess those same credentials.

"We're going to use the Bussard ramscoops to draw raw material from a suitable moon around one of Drenar's largest gas giants.

We're hoping several of them will have rich hydrogen-methane atmospheres. We

should then be able to convert the collected material into usable deuterium slush--at least that's what Torres and I have in mind."

"A full description of the conversion process is available in the computer, should anyone wish to examine it," Tuvok noted. "I can supply you with the file location."

Neelix, for his part, made no immediate request.

"We have reached the coordinates," Kim reported.

"Go to impulse," Chakotay ordered.

"Disengaging main drive," Lieutenant Paris said, touching points on the panel before him. The instant the ship dropped out of warp it slammed into a wall.

Captain Janeway found herself momentarily pinned beneath her first officer as the two of them tumbled to their left and were slammed down onto the deck. The ship lurched to the right then and shuddered violently, setting off alarms. The impulse engines howled as the lights dimmed and systems began to go down.

The captain's head bounced off the gray-carpeted deck plates, and she felt her teeth bite into her tongue, tasted blood. She looked up into Chakotay's eyes as he tried to regain his bearings and attempted to roll off her. Paris was clinging to his station, fighting to regain control of the helm. Behind her she could hear Tuvok wheeze as he thudded against something hard.

The ship lurched to the left once more, sending everyone tumbling yet again. Janeway managed to grab hold of the deck rail and steady herself briefly. She craned her neck and saw Tuvok still at his post, every bit as tenacious as Lieutenant Paris.

"Mr. Tuvok, report!" she shouted over the wail of the emergency klaxon and the onerous groan of the engines.

"We are caught in an intense gravitational field. I am attempting to determine the source."

"That would be a help."

"Captain," Tuvok came back almost at once. "There seems to be a star, a small brown dwarf, dead ahead."

"I'm attempting to compensate," Paris called back. "It's really got a hold of us."

"There was no brown dwarf here before, I'm sure of it!" Neelix cried from the heap he had tumbled into just in front of the captain's chair.

"And it's only been a few years."

Janeway looked at the main viewscreen, but even at this distance there was almost nothing to see. Yet as she looked more closely she began to notice the star's outline, an apparent hole in space where the brown dwarf's dark sphere blocked out the stars behind it.

"Transferring all available power to the impulse engines," Kim said, following procedure perfectly.

"Engines at full," Paris acknowledged. "It's having an effect, but we're still not breaking free." He sat up, rigid in his chair, bracing himself as the lurching ceased--only to be replaced by a steady and rapid shaking that quickly threatened to rattle the starship apart.

"Systems failure reports coming in from all over the ship," Kim reported, even before Janeway could ask.

The captain worked her way along the railing, hand over hand, toward her command chair. "Injuries?"

"Numerous, but all minor so far," Tuvok

replied.

"We're too close. The star's gravity is too strong," Paris said, his voice straining in sympathy with the engines.

Janeway lifted her head and shouted at the ceiling.

"Engineering, can we go to warp? We have to get out of here."

"Yes, Captain," B'Elanna replied. "The upper matter-constriction segments shut down briefly. I'm reinitializing now. Just give me a minute."

"We don't have a minute."

No one said a word for several very long seconds. The shaking grew worse, or it seemed to, as Janeway stood bent-kneed on the trembling deck.

"That should do it, Captain," B'Elanna announced, sooner than expected.

"Mr. Paris!" Janeway snapped.

"Warp drives engaged," Paris said, as the deck again suddenly tilted beneath their feet. Janeway's grip tightened on the deck rail as Chakotay grabbed the chair behind him. On the viewscreen the dark circle began to move, but it did not go away.

"It's still no good, Captain," Lieutenant Paris said, glancing frantically over his shoulder. "We just aren't pulling away."

"Engineering, we need more power!" Janeway demanded.

"You've got everything we have," Torres came back, her voice nearly lost in the background roar of the engine room.

Janeway turned to her officers. "Tuvok, Kim, divert everything to the engines, including life-support, do it now!"

In an instant the bridge went nearly dark, lit only by the dim glow of red

emergency lighting. The ship pitched and shook again as yet another surge made itself felt. Janeway watched intently as the stars off the bow began to move, taking the dark circle with them. Again, they did not go far.

"We still can't break free. We're holding position, but we can't keep that up for long," Paris informed the captain, paying frantic attention to his console.

"Captain." It was Torres in Engineering again. "I have a suggestion."

Janeway's eyes went wide, then narrowed as her mind came around to what was very likely the same idea.

"Emergency flight rules," she said.

"Yes," B'Elanna answered. "We can add a minute amount of antimatter to the impulse reaction chamber. That might give us the extra power we need."

"If it doesn't blow us all up," Chakotay added.

Janeway looked at him, one eyebrow going up.

He shrugged, guileless. "Don't let that stop you," he said.

"Do it!" Janeway commanded.

For a long moment the howl of the

engines and the bone-jarring tremors that swept the ship continued unchanged, then B'Elanna spoke again, "Transferring antimatter... now."

Voyager surged like a boat swept up on a passing wave.

"Hull stress climbing beyond maximum design levels," Tuvok reported calmly.

Janeway looked at him only briefly.

"Keep it coming, Mr. Paris."

"Aye, Captain."

"We're pulling away!" Kim shouted, just as Janeway felt it happen, felt the ship

abruptly move much farther than before as their momentum shifted decidedly away from the darkened star.

"We've lost the warp engines," Paris announced. Even as he spoke, entire panels on the bridge erupted in a series of bright flashes followed by curling smoke and a flicker of flames. The smell of burned circuits filled the stagnant air. The fire-suppression systems quickly detected and snuffed out the flames while the bridge crew scrambled to the extinguishers, then held them at ready until it was clear they would not be needed.

"The impulse engines have dropped

back to within normal levels, and are still on-line," Paris informed the captain, then added, "For the moment."

"Proceed in-system at half impulse," Janeway ordered. "Let me know if the engines get any worse."

"Transferring power back to life-support systems," Kim said, working swiftly. As life-support came back on-line, the computer automatically began to rid the room of the smoke and fumes. Full lighting was restored to the bridge.

Janeway sat back in her chair and asked for damage reports as Voyager finally began to settle down. Judging by the

bridge, she expected the worst. As it turned out, she was not surprised.

"Almost everything is off-line," B'Elanna reported from Engineering, confirming the bad news Tuvok had already begun relating. "The main computer detected stresses high enough to trigger an automatic warp core shutdown. Warp drive, phasers, transporters, anything that uses a lot of power, is gone for the moment. I'm using everything we've got to keep the main computer up and the impulse engines and life-support running. I won't know how bad it is until we can run complete level four diagnostics."

The captain frowned. A long strand of thick dark blond hair had been pulled free from the top of her head; it hung in her face now, as if intent on adding annoyance to catastrophe. She brushed it straight back, only to have it fall again. "At least we're not dead in the water."

"No, Captain," B'Elanna said, "but go easy on the impulse engines."

After that last jolt, I don't know what shape they're in."

"Helm?"

"Sluggish but responding, Captain," Paris came back.

"Understood." She turned slightly to her right. "Mr. Neelix, I'd like another word with you."

The alien appeared to be quite shaken, as he stood straightening his colorful tunic, his narrow fingers shaking noticeably.

"Captain," he said, "I must go to Medical and see that Kes is all right."

"Of course, but first I'd like to know anything you can tell me about that brown dwarf. Anything at all."

"Which would be nothing, Captain, as I

said. It's as much a surprise to me as it is to you. Had I only known--"

"Understood." The Talaxian was not a liar. The captain was going to have to figure this one out on her own. "Very well, you may go."

Neelix turned and rushed through the open door of the turbolift.

Nothing happened.

"It seems you will be staying on the bridge a while longer," Tuvok said with a dry Vulcan finality that Neelix was apparently not inclined to emulate.

For the first time in several minutes

Janeway smiled. She let it fade.

"Mr. Tuvok, contact Medical, find out how Kes has fared and let Neelix know. The rest of you, get to work on restoring these systems.

Mr. Paris, set a course for the system's largest gas giant. I don't see any reason just to sit here and sulk.

Mr. Kim, I'll want full sensor sweeps, the best you can give me.

Start with that brown dwarf, and then scan the entire Drenar system. I want to know everything. Transfer all available data to my ready room.

I need to figure out just what the hell is going on."

CHAPTER 2

As her officers acknowledged her commands and went to work, Janeway breathed a heavy sigh. She gazed at the viewscreen once more. The Drenar system contained a G-class star and eleven planets, and appeared quite ordinary in most respects. Clearly it had never been a binary system, the positioning of its planets was indication enough of that.

With luck, the system would provide

some interesting astrophysical data, and with a little more luck, they would be under way again in a few days' time.

But in truth, just at this moment she didn't feel very lucky.

She left Chakotay on the bridge and headed for her ready room.

For now Janeway's only hope, and Voyager's, was that her crew was equal to the task of getting the starship up and running again, or at least in a condition that would set them once more on their journey home.

There would be other star systems,

places where at least some aid might be found, where proper supplies could be procured--Neelix had assured her of that. But with nothing but a badly crippled ship between the crew and the harsh, endless night waiting all around them, none of those tentative safe oases mattered.

Out here there was no hope of assistance from anyone familiar, no starbases to turn to, nowhere to run. It was a truth everyone onboard tried not to think about very often, though just lately such thoughts had become impossible to avoid.

Janeway blinked the darkness from her

thoughts and went back to concentrating on the data displayed before her on the ready room terminal. The brown dwarf was moving through space undisturbed, and its trajectory was easy to mark, a path that had taken it through the middle of the Drenar system. Its effect on Voyager had been profound, and she was just beginning to explore the more serious consequences that its preceding path implied. She was still deep into the exact calculations when the door chime sounded. She glanced up. "Come in."

The door slid aside, and Commander Chakotay stepped into the opening.

"We are in orbit around the largest moon

of the sixth planet, Captain," he said. "The impulse engines seem to be holding their own, and we still need fuel--more than ever, in fact. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't go ahead with your original plan. With your permission, Tuvok and Kim would like to begin collection procedures."

"Agreed, and thank you," she said. She had intended to discuss that very possibility with her senior officers; it pleased her to find them way ahead of her. "I'll be right there."

"Have you seen the casualty reports?"

Janeway held her breath. "No."

"Nothing serious, mostly bumps and bruises. We did have one broken arm, though. Fortunately it happened in Sickbay."

"Ah, good." Janeway nodded, glancing down at her screen again.

"The bad news is, it was Kes."

Janeway's head snapped up again. Kes was an Ocampa, a species that had a life span of only nine years; at just over one, Kes was already an adult, but she was still young enough to heal very quickly. No doubt she was in better shape than Neelix so far.

Chakotay shrugged. "At least we managed to get the turbolifts working again, so Neelix is with her instead of with us."

Janeway touched her comm badge. "Captain to Sickbay. How is Kes doing?"

"Quite well, as a matter of fact," the holographic doctor said.

"Though I'm sure the other patients would be happier if she were able to assist me again. I can tend to only one patient at a time. She is a great help. I..."

Janeway waited, exchanging a glance with her first officer in the unexpected silence.

"I understand," Janeway said. "She is remarkable."

"She'll be back to work tomorrow. A little stiff, perhaps, but otherwise..."

Janeway found herself waiting again.

He sounded cheerful enough, which was almost unusual. The holographic medical assistant program that had been pressed into service as Voyager's only doctor was doing a splendid job, and Janeway couldn't have been more pleased, but his

attitude and bedside manner were sometimes difficult to manage.

"Yes?" she prodded.

"Captain," the doctor replied, his voice just above a whisper, "if you could please find something for Mr. Neelix to do, and someplace else for him to do it, I would be extremely... grateful."

"We'll see what we can do," she replied, suppressing a chuckle, then signing off.

"I'll add that to my list," Chakotay said. He was grinning as he left the ready room.

Janeway stayed at her panel for a moment, working with the ship's main computer, completing her reconstruction of the rogue star's recent path. The brown dwarf had passed close enough to Drenar nearly to make this a new binary system. An interesting place to study, given sufficient time, which was something Voyager simply could not afford to spend.

Still, enough raw data could be collected to provide for countless hours of analysis in the months, or years, to come.

After another moment she shook her head. She didn't need to be here right

now. She told the computer to continue, then rose and followed Chakotay out.

"Mr. Tuvok," she said, stepping onto the bridge.

"Ready, Captain," the Vulcan answered. "The main deflector has been reconfigured, and approximate calculations have been completed."

Kim nodded confirmation from behind the Ops consoles. "Thrusters are at station-keeping," he said. "I've diverted just enough impulse power to do the job."

Janeway took to her captain's chair, then

rested two fingers gently against her chin. "Then let's begin."

"Activating Bussard ramscoop fields," Tuvok said. Janeway watched on her own monitor as the electro-magnetic fields, designed to be used for emergency collection of interstellar hydrogen during warp travel, began to expand outward, stretching in front of the ship from both of the warp nacelles.

"Deflector field wrap initiated," Kim said, working at his own console.

"Field overlay achieved, Mr. Kim," Tuvok said. "You may begin bending them downward."

"Commencing... now."

On the display, the captain witnessed the results as the two EM fields wrapped themselves around each other to form a tighter, more cohesive funnel, one that began to bend down and away from Voyager at nearly a forty-five-degree angle, an energy funnel theoretically capable of channeling the hydrogen-rich material of the moon's upper atmosphere back toward the collectors located in the warp nacelle caps.

"Take us in a little closer, Mr. Paris," Chakotay told the helmsman, and Voyager slowly, gently descended.

Gradually the mouth of the funnel began to fill with tenuous clouds of hydrogen-methane as the twin fields skimmed the atmosphere's surface, drawing in material the way a draft drew smoke from a room. Paris brought the ship down another hundred kilometers, as close as he dared to get while using the thrusters almost exclusively, but within seconds the ram fields started to collapse as the increased volume of gases leaked through.

"Too much," Janeway told him. "Back us off a bit."

As the ship slowly rose again, the fields

reestablished themselves.

"The process seems successful on a limited scale," Tuvok reported.

"Thank you," B'Elanna Torres's voice said over the intercom.

Janeway looked up from her monitor and smiled. "I think we can live with that. B'Elanna, how long can we sustain the fields at this level?"

"Approximately twenty-seven minutes."

"Good. We might try this again later. Meanwhile, as soon as we're finished here I'd like to complete our preliminary

scan of the rest of the system. The astrophysical data I've seen so far are quite remarkable, but I know there's more."

"Agreed, Captain," Chakotay said.

"Actually, some of the early data would suggest the need for a more thorough survey as well.

The fourth planet appears to have an extremely rich biosphere.

It could even provide a good source of food. And..." He stopped himself, then shook his head.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said.

She sensed there was definitely something more. She stood silent for a moment, studying her first officer and feeling more certain. "You're not telling me something."

"May I have a word with you in private?" Chakotay said, suddenly pensive.

A rare mood for this man, Janeway thought. She nodded once.

"Tuvok, you have the bridge," she said. Then she turned.

"Commander, my ready room.

"All right, what's going on?" she asked evenly, once the door slid closed behind them.

"I had a vision last night," Chakotay said, focusing on many things in the room before finally looking at Janeway. "Or a premonition. I'm not sure which, but it was unlike anything I've ever experienced. I was visited by... by a ghost."

Janeway crossed the small room and sat on the sofa along the opposite wall. "A ghost?" she asked, after giving them both

a moment. She tried to get Chakotay to sit as well, but instead, the commander began pacing as he told her about the beautiful world and its people, then about the destruction he had seen, and the final desperate cry.

"If it's real," he concluded, "if these things I saw are true, then their plea for help was, too."

"And you think we can help these people, whoever they are?"

"I don't know. But I'd like to look into it, at least."

"And there's a possibility that they are

on the fourth planet in this system?"
Janeway said, proceeding.

"Nothing else fits. In fact, that planet may well be inhabited, and early spectral analysis of the atmosphere is consistent with a volcanically active planet. And something else, Captain. I checked with the doctor in Sickbay. Several other crew members have complained to the doctor about nightmares, about seeing things. Visions, you could say."

"Like yours?"

"Two specifically mentioned seeing ghosts."

Janeway looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Are you saying Voyager is haunted?"

"I really don't know."

Janeway couldn't help frowning. "As if we didn't have enough problems."

Chakotay raised both eyebrows, compressing the Indian tattoo on the left side of his forehead. "I know," he said. "But I thought... well, as long as we're in the neighborhood..."

"We'll look into this more." Janeway nodded. "I have a certain fascination

with this system myself. I'd like a detailed survey, including the fourth planet, which should certainly include any effect the passing of that brown dwarf may have had on indigenous populations, if they exist. We'll go through with it. But understand, if we find any pre-technological civilizations living here--" "We'll keep our distance. I continue to be aware of Starfleet's precious Prime Directive," Chakotay cut in, making sure his tone indicated his mild dissatisfaction.

"The Prime--" The door chime interrupted her. "Come," she said, and Tuvok entered the room.

"We have nearly completed refueling, Captain. The impulse engines are now functioning at nearly eighty percent, but Lieutenant Torres estimates repairs to the rest of the damaged systems, including repairing and restarting the warp core, will take several days."

"Days?" Chakotay said, beating Janeway to it.

"It seems we will be in the neighborhood for some time," Janeway said, glancing at her first officer. She had an urge to go over everything one more time, restate all of the possible repercussions--a step that she, perhaps more than any other currently active

Federation captain, felt always compelled to take--but she was also learning to define the line between prudence and paranoia.

"Very well. Mr. Tuvok, we will conduct a complete analysis of this system, but I won't promise anything beyond that." She rose and stood in front of Chakotay, eye to eye. "We still don't belong in this part of the galaxy. I respect your instincts and your beliefs, as well as your apparent desire to look into these visions of yours, but Voyager can't go running off, tossing away the Prime Directive every time the spirits move you, or anyone else aboard."

"Understood, but if an alien race contacts us, in whatever fashion, we are already involved," Chakotay answered quickly, taking up the argument yet again, the same one they had been having ever since encountering the Caretaker and his Array, and the Ocampa.

"I would point out that the consequences of our actions and, logically, our inactions, are potentially equal," Tuvok interjected. "Either way, we might theoretically be accountable."

"But accountable to the present, or to the future?" Janeway countered.

"Both," Chakotay replied. He leaned

toward Janeway, a calm yet discerning look in his eyes. "But we can only live one day at a time."

"If we find a population on Drenar Four, and if I am convinced that they have never seen a spacecraft or an alien being before, there will be no contact of any kind," Janeway stated flatly.

"We will proceed according to the Prime Directive. Is that completely clear?"

"Yes, it is, Captain," Chakotay answered, a somewhat forced but adequate grin finding the corners of his mouth.

"When the refueling is completed we'll head for Drenar Four at half impulse and survey as we go," Janeway told both officers.

"Keep each other updated. And tell everyone to stay out of Torres's way. Dismissed."

She watched them leave, then sat back down, this time at her desk. At half impulse it would take Voyager until noon the next day to reach the vicinity of Drenar Four. The captain knew she should get some sleep for now and let tomorrow deal with itself.

She decided she would at least try. One day at a time, she repeated to herself, shaking her head as she made her way back to her quarters.

She rested for several hours, but did not get very much sleep.

After what seemed like forever, Captain Janeway got up and pulled her uniform back on. A few minutes later she sat once more in her ready room, facing the data console, reviewing the latest data.

The Drenar system was easily old enough to have produced sentient life-forms, and Drenar Four in particular had all the earmarks of a lush, habitable

world. It boasted three very large moons as well, which was most unusual for a planet so near its sun.

As Voyager approached the planet, more data became available.

There was no evidence of an industrial society, just as Janeway had suspected. The upper atmosphere lacked industrial gases such as hydrocarbons, and no unnatural radiation sources had yet been detected.

But as the dark side of this world came under scrutiny, fires too small and too numerous to be of natural origin were clearly evident on the largest continent.

Janeway sat back, nodding to herself. From the looks of things, Chakotay would not be happy. She rubbed her eyes, then sat back from the console and felt a chill sweep through her body, as if a door had just been opened, letting in the cold of space itself.

She shuddered and looked up, and was suddenly aware that she was not alone.

CHAPTER 3

The presence that hovered just above the carpeted deck was insubstantial, nearly formless, but it was there nonetheless, shimmering as if lit from within,

changing as if moved by unseen currents.
Like a spirit, like... a ghost.

Captain Janeway stood up slowly, examining the strange blends of transparent colors as they gelled slightly, further defining the entity. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead, the visitor began to speak to her, not in words, but with images, at first no more substantial than the ghost itself, though they quickly began to clarify.

In her mind she saw what could only have been the same images Chakotay had described--a people dying as their world shook their houses down around them and split their fields apart, as their

sky filled with smoke and fire and their lands turned gray as they were covered with ash and soot. But there was more.

The visions darkened, then came to light again revealing a vast, grassy clearing. On the ground dozens of unfamiliar but quite humanoid aliens lay motionless, most of them still clutching crude weapons--knives and crossbows, axes and slings. Their bodies and simple clothing were marked by terrible burn wounds of a sort Janeway found disturbingly familiar...

Again the visions grew dark, replaced this time by a message that needed no images or words at all. As if through an

instinct or a strong emotion, Janeway understood that the ghost was conveying a clear and desperate plea for help.

Once more the presence faded from her mind, allowing her conscious senses to come back to the fore. She saw the ghostly form of her unknown visitor fading from her eyes as well, replaced by the familiar sight of her ready room. Janeway felt a surge of fatigue move through her as the ghost's last traces vanished. She tried to rise and nearly fell. She put her hands on her desk, steadying herself, eyes closed, taking deep breaths, and let the feeling pass. When she had recovered sufficiently, she cleared her throat, straightened her

uniform, and headed for the bridge.

"What is our position?" she asked, striding as briskly as she could through the doorway, avoiding her officers' eyes for the moment.

"We're entering a high scanning orbit around Drenar Four, Captain," Paris answered, looking up from his consoles.

"We've just begun detailed scans of the planet," Chakotay added.

"We should be seeing some results in a few minutes."

"Good," she said, standing in front of the

commander's chair.

She noticed that Chakotay seemed to be considering her more carefully.

"Everything all right, Captain?" he asked.

"Yes."

The two of them stared at the main viewscreen. Drenar Four was a beautiful world, Janeway noted: blue oceans, white clouds, one very large continent on the day side covered by thick forests and trailing mountain ranges. Even from here, though, she could see clear evidence of heavy volcanic activity

along several mountain chains. Long plumes of smoke and ash painted dark lines across the stratosphere.

"You're sure?" Chakotay persisted.

"What?"

"Sure everything is... all right?"

"No," Janeway said.

Chakotay looked at her. "Captain?"

She dropped the pretense. She leaned close to his ear. "I'd like to talk with you for a moment, Commander, about those visions you had."

Chakotay nodded. "Of course."

"There are some things about this planet that already don't make sense," she whispered.

"Like what?"

"For starters, it's gorgeous. The sort of prize that would have been colonized by any number of races if it were in Federation space.

Unless someone was keeping it as a resort of some kind, a possibility that is rare but not unprecedented. In such places there are usually maintenance facilities or visitor centers, something

easily detectable.

I am surprised to find such a world still in so pristine a condition."

"There is apparently someone down there," Chakotay said.

"Yes, the numerous small fires seem to indicate that," she said.

"Mr. Tuvok," the first officer said loudly, "please report."

"We are registering hundreds of humanoid life-forms," Tuvok told her, examining the gray-and-orange images on his sensor displays.

"A pretechnological society, mostly agricultural. I am still gathering data."

"We're also picking up a lot of seismic activity down there," Kim said, glancing first at Tuvok, then at Chakotay. "Well beyond anything I would have expected."

"What about that, Mr. Tuvok?" Janeway asked, though her gaze had already settled back on the main screen. Her thoughts were still full of ghosts. She tried to push them aside.

"Confirmed, Captain," the Vulcan said, "and on a potentially cataclysmic scale. I am reading numerous earthquakes

moving through the planet's crust.
Radiant shock waves are registering everywhere.

Volcanic eruptions are extremely abundant. The overall level of geothermic activity is unprecedented on a planet of this apparent age."

"Certainly worth looking into, wouldn't you say, Captain?"

Chakotay offered, though his tone implied he did not expect a rebuttal.

"Especially since this is precisely what I thought we would find."

The visions the ghostly entity had brought her were still strikingly fresh in the captain's mind, as were Chakotay's descriptions of his own encounter. "Yes, Commander," she said, still eyeing the planet below.

"I'd say it is." She blinked and tried to shake the fog of images from her mind.

"Mr. Tuvok, would you agree that the indigenous population may be in considerable danger, under such circumstances?"

"There is every reason to believe so," Tuvok said. "I should point out, however, that any attempt by Voyager to aid them in any way would be a

violation of the Prime Directive."

"She knows, Tuvok," Chakotay said.

Janeway looked at them both, then let a sigh pass her lips.

"Yes, I do know," she said. "But thank you, Mr. Tuvok, for reminding me.

Continue scanning, and let's learn everything we can. I'm not rushing in anywhere, not yet. Just looking at the options. It's difficult to explain, but a few minutes ago--" "Captain, alien vessel detected," Tuvok said abruptly, his hands working quickly at the tactical station as a small warning klaxon sounded repeatedly. "In close

proximity."

Janeway attended him at once. "What kind of ship?"

"Unknown configuration. It appears to be in a very high orbit, just slightly below ours, and is presently moving to put the horizon between us again."

"So they're trying to stay hidden," Janeway said.

"I suspect that is the case," Tuvok agreed.

"Stay with them, Mr. Paris," Janeway ordered the helm. "Why didn't we detect

them earlier?"

"A cloaking device?" Kim suggested.

Janeway shook her head. "Then why aren't they using it now?"

"If they had such a device, it could be malfunctioning, but I find that line of reasoning highly speculative," Tuvok said.

Janeway nodded agreement. "Open a hailing frequency."

Ensign Kim worked to comply. "No response, Captain."

"We can get a little closer," Paris

offered.

Janeway took two slow steps toward the main viewscreen, on which the distant image of the alien ship appeared as a dim spot poised between the darkness of space and the wash of reflected sunlight from the planet below. "Do it, Mr. Paris."

The helmsman responded, and Voyager began to close the gap.

"Mr. Neelix, this is the captain. Please report to the bridge at--" "Captain," Neelix's voice came back almost at once, a ready bit of woe already present. "I trust everything is fine."

"No. I need you up here right away."

"But I can't leave Kes. Surely--"

"Captain," the doctor cut in, "Kes is resting nicely. When she wakes up, she should be almost as good as new. The only problem I can foresee is Neelix waking her up."

His tone had grown noticeably more terse with each word.

"On the double, Mr. Neelix," Captain Janeway said.

"Captain," Tuvok interrupted, "the alien ship is scanning us."

They're powering up their weapons systems."

"Damn," Janeway muttered, placing her hands on her hips. "Go to red alert. Engineering, can we raise our shields?"

"Not yet, Captain," Torres replied over the intercom. "I've had to take them completely off-line."

Janeway felt a familiar knot form in her gut--something she had learned to live with in times past, something no good captain could afford to be without. The best remedy was to take positive action, though there were times, like this one,

when no path seemed to present itself.
"Mr. Paris, evasive maneuvers, but let's try not to provoke them. Kim, keep trying to hail them.

Tuvok, arm the photon torpedoes... if we can do that."

"The photon firing systems appear to be inoperative at this time," Tuvok replied, much too calmly.

"Engineering, I need some options," Janeway snapped.

"They're still not responding," Kim said.

"Alien vessel opening fire," Tuvok said.

On the screen a brilliant yellow-tinged energy beam instantly crossed the distance between the two ships, narrowly missing Voyager as Paris frantically reacted. The image on the main viewscreen reeled as he continued to move the ship in anticipation of the alien's next shot.

"Phaser-type weapons, Captain," Tuvok reported, analyzing.

"However, sensors indicate enemy beam strength at less than five hundred megawatts." He paused, waiting. "Four hundred forty-four point seven-two-three megawatts, to be precise."

"That's only half of Voyager's upper phaser array's strength," Chakotay said. "Do you think they're holding back?"

"Approximately forty-three point six percent," Tuvok corrected.

"And it is possible."

"Even at that strength, without our shields, they can still do a lot of damage," Ensign Kim said, a twinge of anxiety in his voice. Despite the tone, Janeway knew his remark was largely an observation. And an accurate one.

The turbolift door hissed open and

Lieutenant Torres rushed out onto the bridge. She went immediately to the engineering bay, where she tapped frantically at panels as they came quickly to life.

"Captain," she said, still working, talking half over her shoulder.

"We have two photon torpedoes ready to launch; we'll just have to do it manually. And I think the phasers are back on-line, but--" She finished working with her hands, then looked straight at Janeway. "But I haven't tested anything yet. I'm just getting the plasma-distribution manifolds aligned now."

"Good work!" Janeway exclaimed, allowing herself a brief lapse in composure. She glanced up in time to see another beam strike out through space just as Tuvok announced the fact. This time the beam struck a glancing blow, shaking the ship, though most of it seemed to miss Voyager.

"Minor damage to the outer hull," Tuvok reported. "Three casualties, apparently none serious."

The turbolift deposited Neelix on the bridge. He went immediately to Janeway's right side, opposite Chakotay.

"Everything all right?" he said, his tone a

combination of sarcasm and fright.

"That shot was too close," Janeway remarked.

"I predict the next one will be a direct hit," Tuvok informed her.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Paris said.

"I simply meant," Tuvok began, "that--"
"I know," Paris said, grinning momentarily.

"Ready phasers," Janeway said. "I want to discourage them from trying that again."

"Was there something in particular you needed me for?" Neelix asked, obviously nervous. "You seem quite busy at the moment, and I really would like to be with my beloved--" "There," Janeway said, pointing at the screen. The alien vessel was visible in some detail now, a great gray wedge shape with several long appendages. "Do you recognize them?"

"Ready, Captain," Torres said, her head snapping around.

Janeway narrowed her gaze as if sighting down the barrel of a phaser rifle, something she simply couldn't help.

"Upper forward array, full burst. Fire."

Voyager's return fire was noticeably brighter than that of the alien vessel, and more precise, the captain was pleased to note, as Lieutenant Kim announced a direct hit. The words had barely left his lips when Voyager's lights suddenly dimmed, followed by a bright flash that erupted from the engineering station.

Janeway saw Torres draw back, then wave a small waft of smoke away with her hand.

"The target's rear shields have collapsed completely," Tuvok reported.

"I am reading some apparent damage to their stern."

"Torres, what happened?" Janeway asked, temporarily ignoring Tuvok's good news.

B'Elanna looked outraged, as if her Klingon blood were about to boil over. She hammered the consoles with both fists, then seemed to regain control, though her chin did not rise. Her hair hung in her face, partially obscuring her expression. "We've lost the phasers again, Captain." Her voice shook--too much adrenaline, worry, or pressure, Janeway couldn't be sure.

"Can you get them back?"

"I... I don't think so, Captain. It's a little more serious this time. I'm sorry."

"Do what you can," Janeway said in response. "None of us are having a very good day."

Janeway closed her eyes. She needed to think of something.

Their best option was to attempt a quiet retreat. Now that the aliens knew that Voyager was superior, there was at least a chance they would not attack again. If they did, and if nothing else changed, she could guess how this might end. She had

to assume the other ship was capable of warp speeds.

"Captain, the alien vessel is hailing," Kim announced, interrupting Janeway's train of thought.

She looked up. "On screen," she said.

"We have audio only," Kim replied.

"That's curious," Chakotay said, stepping closer to Janeway, as if to lend further support. "And more than a little suspicious."

"Perhaps," Janeway said, seeing any contact as an opportunity.

They were in a tight spot, yet all of her crew members were doing their jobs, trusting in themselves, in their ship, in their captain and first officer. Things could be worse, she told herself, feeling the knot still there, though loosened just a bit. The aliens could have any number of reasons, from security to cultural taboos, for wanting to conceal their faces. "Maybe they're just shy," she said. Then she smiled just a bit. She could feel the slight release of tension in the room as the other officers blinked, then nodded to her.

"Proceed," she said.

"Channel open," Kim announced.

"This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager.

We mean you no--" "This is Third Director Gantel of the Televek." The alien's voice was low and dry, though quite humanoid by any measure.

"You are ordered to move away from this planet, or you will be destroyed."

"We mean no harm," Janeway finished.

"You do harm by being here."

Janeway tipped her head. "How?"

"Why are you here?" the voice of the alien asked after a moment.

Janeway felt a slight but growing relief in this exchange of dialogue instead of phasers.

"One moment, please," she said. She signaled Kim to mute the channel, and he quickly complied. "Torres," she said, hardly turning her head, "get back to work on those shields and weapons systems. And the warp drive. Whatever you can do will certainly be appreciated. Keep Mr. Tuvok informed."

"Yes, Captain," B'Elanna answered. She

shut down the bridge's engineering station and headed back toward the lift. Janeway signaled, then accepted Kim's nod once more.

"We are making numerous minor repairs to our ship," she said to the alien, "and we intend to move on when they are completed.

They should not take long. Again, we have no quarrel with you, or with anyone in this quadrant. The repairs are necessary, however, and already under way." She stopped short of apologizing for possible territorial infringement: she was fairly certain the alien vessel was not from the Drenar system, and never

had been.

She waited as a long silence followed. After a moment she decided to try again, the other way around. "Why are you in orbit around this planet?" she asked the aliens. "And why have you fired on us?"

Yet another pause, then: "We are curious as to why you have chosen this planet in particular as the place to complete your repairs."

"I won't bore you with particulars, but in part we are interested in replenishing our organic supplies--foods, seeds perhaps, and several raw materials. We were also attempting to determine

whether the population below is in any danger due to the extreme seismic activity our sensors have detected. But you haven't answered my questions."

It was worth a try, she thought. These aliens had to know something about what was going on down on that planet, and they had to know she was aware that they knew.

She waited for their reaction. The wait was a long one. Janeway began to pace a few steps away from Chakotay, followed closely by Neelix, whose continued silence was for him commendable. Then she turned, waited for Neelix to get out of her way, and

walked back.

"Captain," Neelix said softly, "I was going to say--" "It was just a matter of time, Mr. Neelix," Janeway said. "Now, do you know anything about them?"

"I think so."

"Captain," the alien voice said at last. "You bring up an interesting point. That is, in fact, precisely what we are here for as well, to investigate the planet's unusual geologic disturbances and possibly to offer aid to the planet's inhabitants... if necessary. We only fired upon you because we thought you were going to attack us. We've never seen a

ship like yours."

"Understood," Janeway said. "Please stand by." Again she signaled the channel mute. "Finish what you were going to say, Mr. Neelix," she told the short alien still beside her.

"I have been trying to do just that," Neelix said with minor indignation. "They are a very old race, these Televek. A rather... hmm, unsavory lot, you might say."

"Go on," Chakotay urged him.

"Their past endeavors have included slave trading and piracy, and worse, I'm

told. Though in more recent times they have become very well known in this quadrant as weapons brokers. Dealers in death."

"Parasites that feed off hostilities among others," Janeway said, characterizing them.

"And encouraging them, I believe," Neelix added. "Good for business."

"The truth is, their kind are often necessary," Chakotay suggested.

"Where do you think outlaw resistance fighters like the Maquis got most of their weapons from?"

"These particular traders are not known for their scruples, Commander," Neelix went on. "They frequently sell to both sides in a conflict, or to all sides, raising the level of weapons technology little by little, and usually escalating the death toll in the process."

"Until their customers annihilate themselves completely," Paris said, shaking his head.

"Those practices could indeed generate many enemies," Tuvok suggested.

"Which might make them a little touchy," Janeway agreed.

"They are known to be very secretive," Neelix said. "I have never actually met one of their kind, or done business with them, I assure you. But as I understand it, they normally deal only through specially trained advocates."

"Captain," Tuvok said, "if I may make a suggestion."

Janeway nodded.

"Lieutenant Torres has just informed me that an EPS submaster flow regulator will be needed to restore the phasers. It will be extremely difficult to fabricate one from scratch. Since the Televek are

apparently arms and technology merchants, and since they obviously have phaser technology, it is possible they may be able to assist us."

Captain Janeway had long relied on Tuvok for sage advice in all manner of situations. He had a knack for determining the most reasonable means to proceed, even when there seemed to be none.

Again she found herself looking at him with rapt regard. His idea was extraordinary at first take, but intriguing nonetheless.

"So you're suggesting we try to do

business with them?" Chakotay said, eyeing the Vulcan curiously.

"We need what they likely have," Tuvok said. "It is logical, and possibly in everyone's best interest, to assume a replacement valve could be procured from them and then modified to fit our systems."

"I like it," Janeway said, thumbing her chin as she considered it further. "But what would we have to trade?"

"Maybe they could think of something," Chakotay suggested.

"From what I've heard, they are quite

good at that, Captain," Neelix said. "But I don't recommend you bargain in good faith."

"No?" Chakotay asked.

"No. How can you be sure that they will?"

Janeway nodded at this. "Point taken, Mr. Neelix." She signaled Tuvok to open the channel once more. "Director Gantel, we may be able to work together," she said. "Help each other. An exchange of some kind, a mutually beneficial trade. Would you be willing to discuss such an idea?"

Once again the wait was a long one.

"Perhaps," came Gantel's reply. "We are a reasonable people.

What do you suggest?"

"Captain, we have significant new data on the planet," Tuvok said, leaving it at that, letting Janeway decide whether she wanted to hear it now.

"A moment, again, please," she told Gantel. She made a slashing gesture with her hand, and Kim muted the communication link. "Go ahead," she said to Tuvok.

"Drenar Four is coming apart," Tuvok replied. "The seismic activity is increasing steadily. At the present rate Drenar Four probably will not survive as we know it, and the end will come relatively soon. I've noticed a considerable change in the stability of the planet's magnetic fields as well. They appear to be reorienting themselves."

"If the molten core of the planet is moving about, it would have that effect," Janeway said. She nodded to Kim. The link opened again. "We should be able to agree on one thing at least," Janeway told the Televek director. "The populations on Drenar Four are in grave

danger, and we are both concerned about them.

That might be a starting point. What can you tell us about them?"

"Tell you?" Gantel's voice came back.

"Yes. We are reading numerous primitive villages, some large enough to be cities, but we know nothing at all about the inhabitants. Have you made contact with them?"

"Why, no, Captain, we have not. We also know very little about them."

"I see." She paced a moment, then

looked up, wishing she had a face to talk to.

"We would like to discuss terms," Janeway told him. "We are hoping you can help us obtain some hardware we require. I'm sure that, in return, we can help you with any relief or rescue operations you are conducting here on Drenar Four."

"Of course, Captain, we commend you for suggesting the idea. You seem a shrewd and reasonable people indeed. But we suggest a meeting to discuss this in more detail. On your own magnificent vessel, if you like. I'm sure there exists a variety of terms we can agree on. We

can send a small team of representatives over in an unarmed pod. Will you agree to this? And will you guarantee their safety?"

Janeway looked to Chakotay, found her first officer looking back at her. They both shrugged at the same time.

"We aren't getting anywhere just sitting here," the commander whispered.

That was obvious. "Very well," Janeway said. "We will be waiting, and you have my assurance that your people will not be harmed."

"Mr. Chakotay, you have the bridge,"

Janeway said as soon as the aliens had signed off.

"Captain," Kim said, then waited for Janeway to look directly at him.

The ensign had not served with her very long, but she had no trouble reading the subtle concern in his expression.

"What is it?"

"There is something else, Captain. I ran it twice to be sure; the interference is pretty bad."

"Go on," Janeway said.

"We've detected a highly advanced

stationary power source located several kilometers beneath the planet's surface. It does not match any known configurations."

Janeway quickly made her way to Kim's station and began examining the data for herself. This time Neelix stayed put, apparently content to remain with Chakotay.

"Where?" she asked the ensign.

"Display, please."

"On the main continent, under a ridge of foothills just east of one of the largest villages." He showed her the spot on the monitor. She turned to face the aft deck.

"Mr. Tuvok, what do you make of that?"

"I have no idea yet, Captain, but I am also picking up numerous energy signatures that are smaller but nonetheless similar to the main source.

Most appear to be mobile." He paused, touching points on the panel before him.

"There does not seem to be an organizational pattern, however. They appear and move at random in the area, and for random periods."

"I've been watching the primary signature for a while," Kim went on.

"The power levels tend to spike

downward, then slowly recover, also at random intervals. I don't know whether there is any correlation yet.

In general, though, the median level is slowly declining."

"I'll bet our Televek friends over there will say they don't know anything about that, either," Chakotay remarked.

"It is odd the Televek didn't mention it," Tuvok said.

"I agree." Janeway pursed her lips, still looking over the data.

The magnetic field fluctuations seemed

to be playing havoc with the sensors, making it difficult to get good readings. Still, she was certain Kim was right. The power source was real, considerable, and unlike anything she had ever seen before. Then suddenly she saw something else in the readings, a faint shadow on the surface of the planet that faded from the sensors as quickly as it had appeared. "Did you see that, Mr. Tuvok?"

"Yes, Captain. A brief sensor reflection."

"What could cause something like that?"

"Processed alloy metals?" Kim offered.

"That is the likely explanation," Tuvok replied.

"So... a metal structure," Janeway postulated. "Or... another ship."

"Possibly," Tuvok said.

"I told you they couldn't be trusted," Neelix reminded one and all, hands clutched tightly against his chest. "Will you be needing me any longer, Captain?"

"Your advice is well taken," the captain assured him. "We may need more of it."

Neelix made a face that Janeway found

unreadable.

"But if we know not to trust them, can't we use that knowledge to our advantage?" Paris asked. "I mean, they're the only game in town. We can't change that, but it doesn't necessarily mean we have to let them make all the rules."

"Agreed," Janeway said, "but asking the Televek for assistance or bartering for it would surely necessitate a transfer of knowledge and technologies. I don't want to give away any of Voyager's secrets to a race that probably shouldn't have them--perhaps this race more than most."

"Of course not," Paris said, "but information, to some extent, would have to flow both ways, wouldn't it?"

"The lieutenant makes an excellent point, Captain," Chakotay noted.

"As it stands, we are at a severe disadvantage, and it will only be a matter of time before the Televek fully realize that."

Despite the weight of the situation, Janeway felt a slight swell of satisfaction as she listened to this exchange between the members of her strange crew. Thrown together by fate

and circumstance, seventy-five million light-years from home, their ship lacking half of its major systems, and hostile aliens hanging in orbit off the bow, and still they functioned well--as well as any captain could expect. Far too many of her decisions in this quadrant were difficult ones, but it helped to know she had the people to back them up.

"If we are to help anyone on Drenar Four, or help ourselves, it seems dealing with the Televek on some level is the only logical course," she said, acknowledging Tuvok with a nod.

"Couldn't we just leave the system?" Neelix asked.

"No, not yet," Janeway said. She stood silent for a long moment.

Then: "Mr. Tuvok, you will see to security arrangements. We don't want to appear unfriendly, but I'd rather not take any chances. I'll be stopping off at Engineering if you need me.

Let me know when they arrive. Mr. Kim," she added, turning to the younger officer, considering him a moment, "you're with me.

I want you to go down to the shuttle bay. I may have a job for you."

She turned on her heel and headed for the turbolift with the ensign close behind.

CHAPTER 4

B'Elanna Torres held her lower lip between her teeth as her eyes scanned the data on the main engineering console. "Lieutenant Carey, how are those magnetic constrictor coils coming?" she shouted. He was on the upper level, somewhere out of sight. She saw him peek down at her through the railing, a look of exasperation on his face.

"They're coming."

B'Elanna took a deep breath, then nodded to him. Her greatest regret was that she couldn't do everything herself, but Carey was a good man, as were the others working with him to get the warp drive back on-line.

Let some of it go, she told herself.

But she had to keep everyone pushing hard right now, including herself.

Partly because the captain required it, partly because she couldn't help it. Not with so many systems so badly damaged.

Not when at any moment Voyager's survival might well depend upon the

work they were doing here. Still, there were limits, and some of them applied to everyone.

She bent over the panel and began touching keypads. Schematics flashed one after another on the dark glass screens above the console. She had so many people crawling in conduits that she'd lost track of some of them. Then there was the crew assigned to the transporter subsystems, 11 of which needed work and none of which seemed to be improving according to the red indicators on the display she was looking at right now. She'd been after them on the intercom not ten minutes ago, but she hadn't gone up there and

personally... inspired them. Not yet, anyway.

Another grid appeared as she touched the control. More red flags.

"The captain isn't going to like this," she muttered, thinking out loud.

"Like what?" Janeway said.

B'Elanna looked around to see the captain standing just behind her.

She made a sour face. "Plenty."

"Tell me what's going on."

B'Elanna took a deep breath, tried to

think of a good place to begin, decided there wasn't one. "I've got Carey working on the warp drives; that's our number-one priority right now.

Life-support is stable. The transporters are still down, but we're making progress there. The impulse engines are running at eighty-five percent, maybe eighty-six. That's the good news.

The phasers... well, I'm sorry, Captain, but I'm afraid they aren't--" "I know, Tuvok told me. At least the Televek don't know about it yet.

Not specifically. At least I don't think they do. We're working on the phaser

problem from another angle."

B'Elanna looked at her. "What's that?"

"The Televek may have the hardware we need, if you think you can adapt their technology to ours. It's possible they'll want to cooperate. It seems they are merchants first and whatever else second, and from the looks of things, we are certainly potential customers. They're coming over for a visit."

"I'm more than willing to try," Torres said. "I'd use rubber bands right now if I thought they'd help, but do you think we can trust the Televek to help us rearm?"

"No." Janeway grinned, which seemed to put B'Elanna somewhat at ease.

"That's the tricky part. But I'm willing to try, as long as we proceed cautiously. I would like my chief engineer to be there when we talk to them. Can we spare you down here for a little while?"

B'Elanna looked around, making a quick evaluation. She saw several sweaty brows flash in her direction and couldn't help a little smile of her own. "I think everyone here would welcome that idea," she answered.

"Good."

"Bridge to Captain Janeway," Tuvok hailed. The captain raised her voice to engage the intercom. "Yes, Mr. Tuvok?"

"The Televek are aboard. They are unarmed."

"Escort them to the briefing room. We're on our way."

No two first contact situations were ever the same, but Captain Janeway had seen enough of them to know that there were often similarities and that certain rules of engagement always applied.

She was prepared to give her visitors the benefit of the doubt from the start, but she was equally prepared to give them nothing more, unless they earned it.

"Welcome aboard Voyager," Janeway began, introducing herself after Tuvok had presented the three aliens. Of the three Jonal was the only male, an elegant, strangely handsome figure slightly older than his two companions, who were both stunningly beautiful by any definition. All were physically impressive, a fact well demonstrated by the cut of their colorful two-sectioned tunics, with allowed much of their finely sculpted arms and legs to show.

Like Jonal, Mila and Tassay had skin that was bronze in color, and each possessed a pair of ridges that grew from either side of her forehead, beginning just behind her bright green eyes and sweeping back under her long stark-white hair.

Janeway turned to the others of her crew. "This is my first officer, Commander Chakotay, Mr. Paris is our helmsman, Mr. Neelix, our... liaison officer, and B'Elanna Torres our chief engineer."

The aliens nodded and held their hands out, palms up, an apparent gesture of goodwill. Janeway returned the gesture,

reassured by the knowledge that their transport pod and their persons had been thoroughly scanned for weapons and implants, and nothing had turned up.

"We are not Televek," Jonal said. "We are Drosary."

"We are advocates," Mila, the shorter of the two women, explained. "We are here on behalf of our benefactors."

The other female, Tassay, remained silent as everyone was seated around the conference table.

"Why won't the Televek come themselves?" Janeway asked.

"It is their way," Jonal answered.

"We are only too happy to provide this service, as it benefits all," Mila said, with an affable air that seemed natural in her and her two companions.

Jonal seemed especially attentive, Janeway noticed, particularly to her. And as she looked around, she decided Tassay's regard had already centered on Chakotay. With this in mind, she began to notice that Paris's visual scrutiny of Mila seemed to be reciprocal as well.

These three Drosary were apparently quite friendly, but Neelix's less flattering

comments concerning their sponsors were still fresh in Janeway's mind.

"What can you tell us about the Televek as a people?" she probed, leaning slightly forward. "We hear... disturbing reports."

"Many of which are not true, or we would not be here," Tassay said, speaking for the first time. Hers was another soft voice, even softer than the others', perhaps.

"The Televek are often misunderstood, Captain," Jonal said.

"I have never been fond of misunderstandings," Janeway assured

them.

"Please enlighten us."

"We were found on a war-ravaged world, a world that was not our own," Jonal explained without hesitation. "A place where our people had tried to set up a colony. We were among the thousands who sought to escape the tyranny and genocide that were destroying our home. But the wars that had brutalized our people for so long seemed to follow us, and many of the other colonies as well, involving other races as they went. Soon we became the target of brutal raids carried out by a neighboring world. We were no match

for them. Our people were being victimized."

"Our own government would not help us," Tassay added, speaking directly to Chakotay, it seemed. "They claimed we were outside the primary realms. We were left to fend for ourselves. You can't know what it was like."

"Oh, I don't know," Chakotay said, glancing at B'Elanna Torres, the only other Maquis present. "I think some of us probably do."

Janeway let it pass.

"The Televek rescued a few of us from

the ashes, and offered to train us as advocates," Mila said. "They have been kind to us.

We know them as few others do."

"That's quite a testimonial," Chakotay said, "but--" "But they attacked my ship," Janeway pointed out.

"The Televek are somewhat... nervous at times, Captain," Jonal explained. "It is a consequence of circumstance. When confronted, they have a tendency to shoot first, and often with very good reason.

You must understand, the Televek deal in the finest, and often the newest,

technologies in many a sector, especially defensive technologies. Therefore--"

"And these are offensive technologies, perhaps?" Neelix said, apparently unwilling to let this last pass unchallenged.

"As the premier merchants in their field, the Televek offer a full range of merchandise," Jonal said in answer.

"And why shouldn't they?" Mila proposed, using an almost pleading tone. "What right does anyone have, after all, in a universe such as this, to pass judgment on others without true knowledge of their circumstances?"

"Agreed," Chakotay said, seeming eager to hear the rest. "Please go on."

"Yes, please," Janeway concurred, leaning forward.

"Their position makes them the focus of many races' attention, and for many reasons--from all manner of agreements and disagreements to outright piracy," Jonal said. "This can produce complications. Not everyone is willing to pay a fair price, for example."

"Yes," Tassay added, folding her slender hands almost prayerlike in front of her. "You see, some races will stop at nothing to get the technologies they

desire."

"Furthermore, each time the Televek honor a contract, they make friends, and enemies," Mila said. "Some enemies have been known to carry a grudge. It happens often enough."

"So I hear," Neelix remarked, not quite under his breath. All three of the advocates stared silently at him.

"This is very interesting," Janeway said honestly, "but I still find their aggression toward this ship, a vessel they admit was unknown to them, a bit disturbing. I might be willing to overlook it, but I would like to know more about what the

Televek are doing here, in orbit around Drenar Four. If their only purpose is to help the primitive population below, then I am curious as to what interested them in this planet, or those people, in the first place."

"We'd also like to know what other terms Gantel had in mind," Chakotay added, watching the visitors carefully.

"We want only what is best, of course," Jonal replied.

"And reasonable," Tassay said, again speaking to Chakotay. The two of them sat looking at each other for a moment, as if the conversation had momentarily

ceased to matter.

A passionate people, Janeway thought, not at all certain she liked the idea, though she found it harder to object to Jonal's apparent fascination with her.

"We understand your concerns," Jonal assured her. "We would be happy to answer all of your questions, and then we hope you will answer some of ours. The Televek can supply your people with almost anything they might need to get you up and running again, I am sure. And you may have a great deal to bargain with. At the same time, your ship and your technologies are new to them and, frankly, quite fascinating."

"Our technologies," Janeway repeated.

At that Jonal seemed to stop in spite of himself. "Of course," he went on, as he glanced about the room. "I'm sure you can understand. After all, your vessel is unique in the Televek's experience. It is along those lines that they are most interested in what you intend to offer them."

Janeway had been waiting for this. They seemed a sincere and malleable bunch, these Drosary, but she had the distinct impression she was about to haggle with a polished salesman, perhaps a team of them. She didn't have a great deal of

experience in that field, but nearly all negotiations, like first contacts, were based on a number of common principles, and she had read more than one period novel that dealt with the subject.

The best approach to such a dilemma was to carry very little currency in any one pocket--but to bring plenty of pockets.

"We can offer you certain medical techniques and technologies that I'm sure you would find most valuable," Janeway said.

"We have excellent medical science,"

Mila responded, a flat statement of fact.

"We can also arrange to let you download most of the contents of our library," Janeway continued, smiling broadly for emphasis, "which is filled with texts and data from hundreds of peoples in our own part of the galaxy, peoples you have never encountered.

Some of our greatest works of literature and--" "We find it hard enough to keep up with the many cultures and politics in our own quadrant, Captain," Jonal said. "I hesitate to mention the size of my current reading list. But I will make a note of this. Certainly there is a measure of value there.

What else?"

"What else?" Chakotay asked, mildly indignant.

"As I indicated to Gantel," Janeway said more sternly, "we are also willing to do whatever we can to help you render aid to the people on the planet below, as that is your stated mission here.

The medical and library data are being offered as an added consideration."

"Yes, of course," Jonal said quite agreeably, though he seemed less than enthusiastic. Then he looked at Janeway

as though he had known her for a very long time, as if they had shared, or were about to share, some profound secret together, some defining knowledge.

"May we make yet another suggestion?"

Janeway leaned back. "Please do."

"The Televek deal frequently in weapons, Captain, that is no secret, and to be blunt, yours are quite impressive. To be more precise, my employers would be most interested in learning how you've managed to get your phasers to operate at such incredibly high power levels, all while maintaining such extraordinary accuracy. Also, their sensors indicate that your warp drive

nacelles are not fixed, but are--" "No," Janeway said, a flat statement of her own. A troubled voice was calling to her from the back of her mind, one she had been listening to since her days at the Academy. She purposely took her eyes off the Drosary, especially Jonal, and focused instead on the relief sculpture of Voyager that hung on the wall.

The euphoria that had begun to dominate the meeting seemed to have ebbed slightly, and her inner voice was growing louder.

"Under no circumstances will we give Federation weapons technologies to the

Televek, or to anyone else. That is simply out of the question."

"We are sorry to hear that, Captain," Mila replied, looking at her two companions. They seemed to reach a silent accord of some kind, almost as if they could communicate without speech.

Janeway didn't think they were telepathic, but she found herself wishing Kes were here. The Ocampa had demonstrated some mild telepathic tendencies; she would likely be the best judge of these new visitors in that regard. Still, that wouldn't change the facts.

We're running out of pockets, Janeway thought, still avoiding Jonal's bright green eyes. Voyager's variable geometry folding wing nacelle configuration, which tended to minimize the negative effects of warp fields on the subspace continuum and on habitable worlds, was no doubt a curiosity to the aliens. In fact, their own ships appeared to operate on a more primitive reactor technology. She might agree to discuss that, at least. In a pinch.

She said as much.

"My dearest Captain," Jonal replied, as if greatly saddened, and perhaps a bit ill as well. "I will certainly convey all of

this, I promise you, and in the best possible light, but I do not think these... these preferred arrangements you mention will be enough. I know our patrons are particularly interested in phaser performance. I understand your concerns, but the Televek already possess phaser technology, after all. It is simply an area in which you seem to have made some rather significant improvements."

"Our sensor scans indicate you have two warp-powered payload-type weapons trained on the Televek cruiser," Mila said, tipping her head, letting a thick mane of long white hair drape itself across one dark-skinned shoulder, yet

keeping her eyes on Paris the whole time.

"The Televek might be interested in discussing those. I know they are curious as to why these weapons remain armed even though the Televek have powered down all their weapons."

"They're photon torpedoes," Paris explained, gazing back at Mila.

"They're very efficient, too."

"Captain to Ensign Rollins," Janeway said, tapping her badge.

"Secure photon torpedoes. Maintain

yellow alert." She looked at Mila as the Drosary glanced in her direction. The two women smiled politely at each other.

"Ah, of course," Tassay said, finally speaking again. "This is encouraging. The Televek have weapons of that type as well, and of comparable strength, I believe, but they use a pulse generator. A comparison to your systems would likely be of minor interest, but perhaps some equity could be found there."

"I'd say that is also unlikely," Chakotay responded, glancing candidly at the captain, and she knew that, like her, he was not totally convinced of anything

yet.

"Please try to be reasonable," Jonal said, clearly addressing Janeway.

"It is in your own best interest, after all, to cooperate as fully as possible."

Janeway sat considering her visitors a moment, particularly Jonal, who seemed as pleasant and straightforward as any diplomat in the captain's memory. And utterly attentive toward her, she noted. And they were right, of course. But so was she.

It was the Televek she was ultimately dealing with, after all, not these people.

How could she know that something painted here in black and white would not turn gray once it got over there?

How could she even trust these three Drosary, no matter how reasonable a choice that seemed to be?

Still, her own options were quite limited, while theirs were not.

She was clearly the one under pressure to compromise. But not just yet. She still had a vest pocket remaining...

"Will you excuse us while we talk this over," Janeway said, not really making it a question. "Perhaps you would like to

discuss it as well.

I need to evaluate our protocols, among other things."

"Of course," Tassay said graciously.

"I'm not certain how long our discussion will take. You are welcome to stay aboard, of course. We will try to make you comfortable, and then see if we can reach some sort of agreement."

"Entirely understandable, Captain," Jonal said, showing Janeway a smile full of fellowship. Mila and Tassay joined him in a genial nod.

"Thank you," Janeway said. She signaled the two security officers standing near the door, and they gently escorted the aliens out.

"Wait a few minutes--as long as you can--then bring them back in," she told Chakotay when they were alone. "Keep them talking until I get back. You have the cone, and you have full authority to make a deal if you can persuade them on our original terms, but I have a feeling nothing like that will happen. Despite their overtures, these Drosary, or our friends the Televek, or whoever it is we're dealing with, don't seem terribly interested in anything other than their own terms."

"Can I ask where you are going?" the first officer asked, clearly perplexed.

"The more I try, the harder it is to get all of this to fit together.

If the Televek are involved in some kind of rescue operation, they don't seem very eager to get it under way; I've seen no evidence to indicate it has begun. And when I brought it up, the Drosary virtually ignored the topic."

"They do seem to present a one-track agenda," B'Elanna said, speaking for the first time since the meeting had begun. "I don't think I'd like the idea of them

probing around in our weapons and propulsion systems, even if I was standing right there. And I would be, no matter what. I don't know what this feeling is based on, but something about them gives me the creeps." She looked around the table, apparently searching for confirmation.

"I didn't notice anything quite like that," Chakotay said.

"I definitely didn't," Paris said.

B'Elanna only frowned at this.

"It's not the Televek's style, all this sharing, I assure you," Neelix said,

finally giving B'Elanna what she wanted. "If you ask me, they're up to something. You are right not to trust them, Captain. The stories I've heard are enough to make your skin crawl. Why, I once had a very profitable agreement arranged with some Idsepians, not fifty light-years from here, until it turned out they were also having a rather nasty argument with the Tethoehn, who occupied a neighboring solar system, and before I could get my assets--" "Thank you, Mr. Neelix," Janeway interrupted. "I do appreciate your input. And I quite agree, at least in principle. We can't afford to trust them implicitly, even if we'd like to. We don't know enough, and there is too much at stake."

"Agreed," Chakotay said.

Janeway felt a dull pang of exasperation, something that had haunted her since Voyager's nearly fatal encounter with the brown dwarf--a niggling feeling that things were only getting worse.

Being on the losing end of any situation was something Janeway could not abide, even in the best of circumstances, and these were anything but. She took a deep breath; she was determined not to let anything else go wrong.

"I have to know what's going on down there on Drenar Four," she said.

"Since our sensors can't tell me, and since the Televek don't seem interested in discussing it, I'm going to have a quiet look around for myself."

"I'll go with you," Chakotay offered immediately.

Janeway shook her head. "No. I need you here. Mr. Tuvok, you're with me."

"Captain," Chakotay said. "I--" "Don't worry," Janeway told him, "at least not any more than you have to." Her first officer nodded wordlessly. She bade the others good-bye, and then the Vulcan followed her out.

They walked in silence most of the way, until they had nearly reached their destination.

"What is it you expect to find?" Tuvok asked as they entered the shuttle bay. Harry Kim stood waiting beside the open hatch of one of Voyager's two main shuttlecraft.

"I don't know," she told Tuvok. "People. Volcanoes.

Earthquakes, perhaps. Other than that, nothing, I hope. Though I'm beginning to doubt it."

"Ready to launch, Captain," Kim reported as Janeway acknowledged him.

"Excellent, Mr. Kim." The three of them boarded the shuttle and secured the hatch, then waited for the bay door to open. At the sound of the all-clear, Kim increased the small craft's power levels while Janeway guided them through the opening, into space.

"Bring our visitors back in," Chakotay said, touching his comm badge.

He thought it would serve no purpose to keep the Drosary waiting around

indefinitely, and in truth he felt eager to continue, to try. The two security officers reappeared once more in the briefing room, flanking the three envoys. Once everyone was seated again, Chakotay explained that the captain was conducting her reviews and hoped to rejoin them shortly. He tried to pick up where they had left off.

"I thought we might talk a little more about sensor technologies," he said. "I believe we have a slight advantage in that area."

The three advocates regarded one another with mildly enlightened expressions. "Perhaps," Tassay finally

said, glancing admiringly at Chakotay.

"We would have to determine whether there is any real benefit for the Televek," Jonal said. "But I do see the sensors as a step in the right direction. We are not talking about the sale of empires here, only token exchanges. You needn't be afraid of us, or of the Televek, Commander. They know what they're doing. You must tell this to your captain, help me convince her."

Chakotay couldn't help grinning. "I'm afraid I won't be much help there."

"Commander to the bridge!" the voice of Lieutenant Rollins shouted over the

intercom.

"Chakotay here. What is it?"

"Commander, the Televek have fired on the shuttle," Rollins answered.

Paris was already up and heading out the door as Chakotay sprang to his feet.

"What's their status?"

"The shuttle has taken a direct hit. We've lost contact.

They're descending out of control."

"The three of you will remain here," the commander told the Drosary.

"See to it," he ordered the guards, who quickly raised their hand phasers and trained them on the three aliens.

"But, Commander," Jonal said, despondent, "I assure you, this is--" "Not now," Chakotay said, moving past them.

"Wait, Chakotay, please," Tassay said, reaching for him. "You must let us--" "No!" Chakotay replied coldly, avoiding her hand. He vanished into the hall at a jog.

Kim's shout of warning came at the same instant the energy beam flashed from the

Televek cruiser. The shuttle rocked, then began to spin. As the cabin lights went out, the flash and sizzle of burning systems illuminated the darkness. Then the red emergency lighting brought grim clarity to Kim's eyes once more.

Janeway and Tuvok scrambled up from the deck and dragged themselves into position over part of the shuttle's main console. The spin continued. Kim felt the fear fill his chest, a tightness that threatened to steal his breath. He forced his lungs full of air several times and tried to work past the fright.

"We've lost power in the port nacelle," he reported, hauling himself up among the others, working quickly to evaluate

the rush of data displayed before him.

"That is not all," Tuvok said, sounding somewhat shaken as well, a rarity in any Vulcan, and no comfort to Kim.

"We've got to pull out of this spin or we don't stand a chance," Janeway said, struggling with the controls. "Mr. Kim, see what you can do with those starboard stabilizers."

Telemetry readings glowed next to a screen displaying the shuttle's position relative to the horizon. Kim rerouted the stabilizer controls while Janeway and Tuvok regained minimal control, then began to ease the shuttle into a more

shallow dive.

Momentarily the rate of descent started to slow, and the planet's surface, bathed in daylight, rotated into view.

"We might just make it, Captain," Kim said, feeling a need to say something as he realized survival was now a possibility.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," the captain said, glancing sidelong at him, as if she had known the outcome all along. She hadn't, of course. No one could have. But a part of him almost believed it so, and just when he needed that belief.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, already anticipating her next command, readying the landing thrusters.

"Helm is barely responding," Tuvok reported. "Power levels are down seventy-three percent. I believe we can still come close to our original destination, but it will not be possible to choose a proper landing sight."

"Let's just make it one we can walk away from," Janeway said, to enthusiastic nods from her shipmates.

The shuttle bucked, then rolled, then leveled slightly, only to fall abruptly

again. Kim's gut floated up into his chest once more. He tried to ignore the feeling. He watched the viewscreen as the shuttle slipped through dense banks of black, ash-filled clouds. Then the ground seemed to leap up at them as they broke into the clear. A patchwork pattern of grasslands, cultivated fields, and dense forests lay below, stretching out to nearby hills and mountains in the east.

Another mountain range was visible far to the south, where great plumes of smoke rose to fill the sky.

Kim fired the thrusters, correcting manually as best he could, while the

others struggled to keep the ship's nose in position.

With one final stomach-wrenching lurch, the shuttle pushed back, then settled down and hit the ground with a force that sent its three crew members sprawling.

"Everyone all right?" the captain asked as she and Tuvok picked themselves up off the deck yet again. One dim red light made the shuttle's interior vaguely visible.

Most of the instrument panels had gone dead, Kim noticed as he stood up and looked around him. He moved again to the main console, feeling a bruise on his

lower ribs and another on his elbow. Then he began working, trying to determine what was off-line. "I'm okay, Captain," he said.

"I am unharmed as well, Captain," Tuvok said, "but it appears this shuttle will not fly again without considerable repairs. A separate crew will have to be sent down." He stood beside Kim, examining panels. "We have lost power, at least for the moment, but even if it can be restored it appears nearly everything is out."

"Including life-support," Kim said.

"And communications," Tuvok added.

Janeway nodded, her expression unreadable in the near-darkness.

"Very well," she said. "Let's see if we can find out what's going on upstairs." The captain tapped her comm badge. "Janeway to Voyager, come in."

No response. Kim tried his own badge, then Tuvok, all to similar results.

"It is possible that interference from the planet's extreme magnetic field fluctuations is preventing the signal from getting through," Tuvok suggested.

"That has to be it, Captain," Kim

interjected, trying to make himself useful. He was well aware that Tuvok and Janeway, between them, had more experience than he would likely accumulate in a lifetime. Still, neither of them ever made him feel that he was not a valued crewman, which only increased his determination to be just that.

"Cut off and shipwrecked," Janeway muttered, shaking her head gravely.

Then her hands went to her hips, heralding a change in her mood. "What systems can you get to come back up?" she asked the Vulcan. "And how long will it take? That hope is all we've got going for us right now."

"I cannot guess at the time, but some repairs might be possible.

I will make communications my priority."

"Understood. You'll stay here, then. See what you can do.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kim and I are going to have a look around. Our landing was likely witnessed by someone, and I'd rather spot them before they spot us."

"I'd estimate we've landed just north of our target," Kim announced, recalling the last telemetry data he'd seen just before

they touched down. He had gone over maps of the surface while waiting in the shuttle bay, and maps of this area in particular. The nearby village was one of the largest on this side of the planet. They had been aiming for a spot near there.

For a moment, when they were still up in the clouds, he had worried they might land right on top of it.

"That also would put us only a few kilometers from the hills where the underground energy source was detected," Tuvok added.

"At least we're in the right

neighborhood," Janeway remarked.

"Not that it will do us a lot of good."

"Captain," Kim asked, thinking it pertinent to do so now, "do you think Voyager is under attack?"

"We have no way of knowing," Tuvok said.

"What I mean is, why would the Televek send their people aboard Voyager and then start shooting?"

"I think they were shooting only at the shuttle," Janeway said.

"But that doesn't make sense either."

"That's why we're here, Mr. Kim, to try to make sense of some of this.

And that's what I intend to do. Phasers on stun," she directed him, checking her own weapon as she spoke. "I hope we won't have to use them. I don't want to make contact with the native population if we can avoid it. We have no reason to believe the Televek have."

"Aye, sir," Kim said, placing the hand phaser back on his belt.

"I'm ready."

"Good." She pulled the manual release,

and the shuttle's main hatch slowly opened. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 5

"Battle stations, Mr. Rollins!" Chakotay snapped as he rushed onto the bridge, the chief engineer right behind him. "Rearm photon torpedoes, prepare to fire on my command. Helm, prepare an evasive course."

Rollins stood at Tuvok's station touching keypads on the tactical control panel. "I would advise against firing, sir," he said.

"We're too close to the target."

"He's right," B'Elanna told Chakotay from the engineering bay.

"Without our shields we'd risk the chance of being caught in the backwash."

Chakotay looked from one to the other.

"I know. Arm the torpedoes."

"The Televek are hailing us, Commander," Rollins announced.

"I'll bet they are."

"I knew they couldn't be trusted," Neelix said. He had been lingering near the turbolift door. He walked up gingerly

behind Chakotay, rubbing nervous hands together. "I did try to tell you."

Chakotay nodded, then fixed his gaze on the dark, angular shape of the Televek ship in the center of the main viewscreen. "Put them on," he said, adding, "This better be good."

"Why was a shuttle launched?" Gantel's slightly agitated voice immediately asked. "What were you trying to accomplish?"

"Why was it deliberately fired upon?" the commander countered tersely.

"That shuttle represented no threat to you

of any kind."

"Our weapons fire hit your shuttle quite by accident. It was intended as a warning, nothing more."

Chakotay frowned at this, and noticed his fists were clenched tightly against his outer thighs. He opened them, forcing himself to stretch his fingers. He doubted the Televek's aim was that bad. "A warning against what? The shuttle's mission was purely scientific, an attempt to gather more data. The planet's chaotic magnetic fields must be affecting your sensors, the same as ours. A mission to the surface was the only logical step."

"Apparently another... misunderstanding, Commander," the Televek's increasingly calm voice responded.

Chakotay balled his fists again. "You seem to have a lot of those."

"Only when we are uninformed."

"We have people aboard that shuttle!" Chakotay snapped.

"We regret any injuries, of course. It is quite possible there are survivors."

"Then I trust you won't mind if we send another shuttle down after our people," Chakotay replied. "Immediately."

"That will not be possible."

"Why not?" Paris said, nearly rising out of his seat at the helm.

"You can't expect us to leave them there!" B'Elanna injected.

Chakotay clenched his fists once more.

"We intend to launch a rescue attempt. Do you intend to try to stop us?"

For a moment dead air filled the communication bands. Finally Gantel said, "There is much to explain. We are creating yet another misunderstanding, I think."

"Agreed," Chakotay said.

"Did Jonal and the others arrive safely?"
Gantel asked then.

"Have you spoken with them?"

"Yes," Chakotay said, still trying to control a sense of exasperation that threatened to overwhelm him. "And they seem to have almost as much trouble getting to the point as you do. Now, I want some answers."

"Of course, but first, may we speak to our advocates?"

"Right now?"

"Yes. I believe that may be the best way to proceed. Confusion serves no one. Direct communication serves best. They can help us both, I assure you."

"I can think of at least one other option," Chakotay told him, glancing first at Paris, then at Torres, aware even before he saw their faces that he was speaking for them as well.

"And if we obliterate each other, all is lost," Gantel said. "In the interest of cooperation, and the well-being of those in the shuttle, you should summon our people."

"Very well. Mister Rollins, have our Drosary visitors brought directly to the bridge. They are to be kept under full security at all times."

"Commander," Rollins began, "if I may say so, sir, I don't see where that will help. In fact, it might confuse--" "No, we are going to have this out, here and now," the commander replied. "Mr. Paris, maintain surface scans. Keep trying to find a way through that EM-field interference. If you get anything at all, speak up. That goes for everyone."

Chakotay paced silently as his orders were carried out. Within moments the

three Drosary advocates stepped onto the bridge. Two armed security officers preceded them, while another two followed behind. As soon as the channel to the Televek was reopened, Jonal began a rapid discussion, which was quickly joined by Mila and Tassay. The content, however, was difficult to determine; it was as if they were speaking in a code.

Clearly, however, there was some disagreement or other, and it centered around Voyager--specifically, around "a class-nine joint venture," in Gantel's words.

"And what of the salvage?" Jonal asked.

"There can be no argument on this," Gantel replied.

"That was our original position," Tassay said.

"I have always advocated continuous evaluation," came Gantel's answer.

"Especially when it is most opportune," Mila said with what could only have been a touch of sarcasm.

"I can only recommend that we grant them the right of applied incentives," Jonal said emphatically. "Second tier, of course."

"How generous," Gantel replied, biting back. "I'm sure the first director will be pleased with that."

"And she will be more pleased, I suppose, with all of nothing," Mila chided, more sternly than Chakotay would have expected. Yet another long silence followed. The three Drosary stood calmly about, waiting patiently, as if they knew exactly what was to come.

"Agreed," Gantel said at last, "contingent on the first director's decisions, which are, we expect... imminent."

"Indeed," Tassay muttered, while the three of them exchanged a quick look, which Chakotay was inclined to read as a grimace.

"Sounds a lot like a family dispute," the commander remarked quietly, leaning toward his fellow crew members. The bridge officers exchanged glances, none of them terribly encouraging, Chakotay thought. "I'm beginning to wonder whether the Televek know what they're doing," he said, deciding a bit of cheerleading was in order.

"They know, Commander," Neelix said from between the command chairs, displaying his talent for never missing a

word of any conversation he was within a parsec of. "Believe me, they do."

Thanks, Chakotay thought.

"I just hope we do," B'Elanna said broodingly.

"So do I," Paris confided.

Chakotay could only nod.

"Commander," Jonal said, after an exchange that seemed to have something to do with contingencies, followed by a brief farewell.

"On behalf of our patrons we would like to renew our efforts to find avenues of

cooperation and to allay our differences. We have additional information to share, which could benefit all concerned. We will begin by assuring you that if proper communications are maintained-- something the three of us will see to directly, with your cooperation, of course--no further misfortunes need occur. The Televek were trying to prevent trouble, not start it, whether you believe that or not."

"That is true, Chakotay," Tassay said, moving closer to him now, looking at him with remarkably soulful eyes. "We must take one step back, I think, before we can move forward."

"First, the Televek are willing to be more flexible with regard to terms," Jonal said. This statement was accompanied by enthusiastic nods from the other two Drosary. "Second, they are prepared to coordinate efforts to locate your shuttlecraft on the planet's surface and, if possible, to communicate with any survivors. Ultimately it may even be possible to rescue the crew, but that is more complicated, as we will explain."

"Go right ahead," B'Elanna said coldly, barely beating Chakotay to it.

"Please," the commander said instead.

"We do not believe our warning phaser beam could have destroyed the shuttle, even though it made contact, as it was not of sufficient strength," Jonal said.

"The facts would tend to contradict you," Chakotay countered.

"The planet itself may be responsible for what happened," said Tassay.

"Why the planet?" Paris asked.

"That is key to what we must talk about," Mila answered. "You don't know what

you are dealing with here. The Televek themselves have only begun to figure it out."

"In the meantime, they will power down their weapons once more, provided you will do the same," Jonal said soothingly, as though the idea was nothing more than a detail. "It is difficult to talk when the prospect of obliteration is only seconds away."

Chakotay stood considering, noticing how at ease these Drosary seemed to be once more, and then how Tassay was looking at him, concentrating on him, as if hungry for inspiration. Or, Chakotay mused, perhaps there was even more to

it than that.

"Understood," he said. "But you'll keep in mind that we tried this once before."

"Again, communication--" "I know," Chakotay answered Jonal.

Tassay moved still closer to him, smiling now, which somehow seemed to make her entire presence warmer by a few degrees. Some part of him recognized the effect on another level, one he was trying to ignore.

She was not an unattractive woman, but he simply had no time for personal relations at the moment, and he didn't see

where she did, either. But the Drosary were aliens, complete with alien customs and ideals, something one couldn't lose sight of. It was possible they did not share his own aversion to mixing business with pleasure. Perhaps these Drosary were not only affable but capricious as well.

"We'll adjourn to the captain's ready room," he said, thinking it best.

"I have a lot more questions than answers, and I intend to start changing that ratio."

"An excellent suggestion," Jonal agreed.

"You too, Neelix," Chakotay said, which seemed to please the Talaxian not in the least. He wanted to be with Kes, of course, but right now she didn't need him as much as Chakotay did.

As the commander turned, he realized that Mila had drifted nearer to Paris and had already engaged him in a separate conversation.

The commander cleared his throat loudly. Paris looked up and instantly caught the meaning of Chakotay's forbidding glare. The lieutenant stood up and took Mila gently by the arm, then turned her away from the helm station. "We wouldn't want you accidentally to

touch anything," he said in explanation. "Why don't you go with the commander?"

"Oh, of course," Mila said, obviously somewhat embarrassed.

Everyone smiled.

They might all be spies, Chakotay thought. The question was whether or not it mattered. Either way, he intended to find out.

"Are you coming along?" Mila asked Paris.

"He is of more use to me out here,"

Chakotay said.

Mila looked remarkably childlike as she tipped her head.

"Please, Commander, I insist. After all, your vessel, like our own, is at station-keeping. Do you not value Paris's opinions?"

Chakotay didn't like being squeezed, but then, he didn't like much of anything that was going on just now. What all this amounted to was another delay, and it wasn't worth that.

"Very well," he muttered, allowing the irritation to show in his voice.

B'Elanna Torres stood not a meter from him, squarely between the Drosary and the ready room door with her arms folded in front of her.

She would be the next one the Drosary wanted to come along. That was clear enough. "Is there anyone else you'd like to have join us?" the commander asked.

Mila looked directly at B'Elanna, then looked away. "No, this will be sufficient."

The look on B'Elanna's face could have soured Drindorian dragon's milk.

Chakotay shook his head, then threw up his hands. "Good," he said, glancing at B'Elanna as he brushed past her.

"Someone has to get some work done around here."

"Commander, it's all right," Torres said as the ready room door slid open. "It's more than all right."

Chakotay paused and held her gaze for a moment. He had seen her this serious before--an overreaction in most people, but not in her, especially when lives were at stake. Just now he found her mood a comfort. He nodded to her and went inside.

As they gathered in the small, sparsely appointed ready room, Mila managed to get a smile out of Paris, who seemed clearly to be warming up to the beautiful young Drosary, a reaction that Chakotay had to admit was understandable, even under the circumstances. Tassay remained close by Chakotay's side as he stood in front of Janeway's desk and leaned back against it. The others settled on the large sofa on one side of the room. Tassay sat on the end nearer the commander.

"Where is your captain?" Jonal asked. "I had hoped to continue our discussion with her as well."

"She... has been detained a while longer. I have full authority to negotiate."

Jonal's expression did not change. "Very well, Commander."

"My first priority is to rescue the crew of our shuttlecraft," Chakotay said. "I think we should start there. The Televek apparently thought that in order to warn our people about something down there, it was worth endangering their lives. You were going to tell me what that something was."

No one said a word at first. Chakotay watched the Drosary for a moment, noting the silent communication that

went on almost constantly among them. He sensed an earnestness about them now--a sincerity that seemed to transcend even this most awkward situation. He didn't trust the Televek, but he felt almost certain these three Drosary could be trusted to a point, that they were not malevolent in any case.

Especially Tassay.

"The surface of Drenar Four is unapproachable," Jonal said then.

"The Televek have tried. Your people would have failed to land there in any case."

Chakotay decided it was time to play bold with what facts he had and watch the Drosary's reactions. "You should know," he said, "that we have detected a substantial power source hidden several miles beneath the surface of the planet's main continent. We also think the Televek may already have a ship down there, in the same region. I trust you intend to explain these things as well."

"Ah; Commander," Jonal said, gently smiling, "my compliments to your ship and your crew. Perhaps some of your sensor technology would constitute worthy barter after all."

"Of course we can explain all that,"

Tassay reassured the commander.

"Then do," Chakotay prodded.

Jonal looked as if Chakotay had done him a favor--which was a welcome response, if not precisely what the commander had been expecting

"Very well," Jonal said. "You see, despite every effort, the Televek have been unable to assist the population below.

Landings and even close orbital passes are impossible due to an advanced planetary defense system. Anyone traveling too near the surface

experiences attacks that result in massive systems failures.

If the approach continues, the result is destruction.

The power source you spoke of apparently has something to do with this defense system, so far as the Televek can determine."

"In fact, the Televek have already lost a ship in just that way," Mila said further. "The cruiser now in orbit was one of two.

Daket, the commander of the other ship, felt certain that he could remodulate his

shields in a manner that would allow safe penetration.

Gantel did not agree. Finally Daket decided to make the attempt. His ship apparently crashed and has since been out of contact."

"And that's what your friends were trying to warn our shuttle about?"

Paris asked, incredulous.

Mila put one slender hand on his forearm and nodded. "Truly it is," she said.

Paris frowned. "They couldn't just open

a channel?"

"Gantel believed there wasn't time for a discussion," Tassay replied.

"A warning shot seemed like the best choice."

"The Televek themselves have never encountered any offensive or defensive system like this one," Jonal said. "It is intelligent, remarkably fast, and quite powerful. They even believe it may have come from some other part of the galaxy. Your part, perhaps, though you seem unfamiliar with it as well."

"That is true, at least so far," Chakotay

conceded.

"We have another suggestion," Tassay said, practically in Chakotay's ear. He pulled away from her instinctively, putting a slight space between them. For now, at least, he told himself.

"I'm still listening. What do you propose?"

"Applied incentives," Tassay said happily.

"I heard you mention that before," Paris said. "What is that all about?"

"Incentives are the lubricant of life,"

Mila explained. "They are utterly empowering, when properly exercised--something any Televek can tell you. And," she added, grinning fondly at Paris, "this holds true for nearly all political, business, and personal negotiations."

"Simply," Jonal said, "if Voyager could help the Televek analyze this remarkable defensive system, then disarm it, then both ships could work together to search for your shuttlecraft as well as for the missing Televek cruiser. Joint efforts could then be made to help the people of Drenar Four, as far as is practical."

"And for this, you would supply us with

the repair components we need?"

Chakotay said.

"Without any other exchange of equipment or Starfleet technologies?"

Neelix pressed. "No phaser specs, that sort of thing?"

"Correct." Jonal seemed quite pleased with himself, as did his lovely companions.

Paris seemed almost as pleased as they were, but Chakotay was trying hard not to get too carried away. "What do the Televek get out of all this?" he asked.

Jonah shrugged, a very human gesture. "They would like to rescue their people just as you would yours, of course, but I will admit, Commander, that they wouldn't mind acquiring that Drenarian defensive system, or even some small part of it. It has, after all, defied their very best efforts so far."

"To that end, they might help repair your phasers, in whatever capacity you see fit, of course," Mila said serenely, "as long as the right salvage terms can be negotiated."

Paris looked at her. "Just what do you know about our phasers?"

Mila politely feigned a scoff. "The Televek are very good guessers.

Your phasers are not currently powered up, nor were they during the recent shuttle mishap. Therefore, they are likely being repaired, as are so many of your other systems. You needn't confirm any of this, of course, if you prefer not to."

"A perceptive bunch, indeed," Neelix said quietly.

"If that were the case, why would the Televek have such a specific change of heart?" Chakotay asked. He sat still, eyes steady, waiting for the answer.

"Because they are convinced they will need your phasers," Tassay told him. She was sincere once more, her childish grin nearly gone. "Their hearts have nothing at all to do with it."

"Ah," Neelix said. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"You see, Commander," Jonal said, "they have had some time to consider the problem this situation poses, and they have come up with a plan."

As I understand it, the defensive system's power levels are gradually dropping, and eventually free access to the surface

will be available.

But even if the surface can be reached, the power source and presumably the defense system's control center are both located in a cavern more than seven kilometers below the planet's surface. There seems to be no expeditious way of getting to it."

"There may be tunnels, or possibly a network of caves that lead down to the site," Paris suggested.

"And if there is not?" Jonal asked. "If the passageways have been sealed or hidden? Time may be short. As you already know, the planet is becoming

very unstable."

"You mentioned a solution," Chakotay said.

Jonal nodded. "It has occurred to Gantel that if you could show the Televek how to improve their phaser efficiency to your ship's levels, it might be possible to use them to bore a hole that deep, and in rather good time. Short of that, you could simply use Voyager's wonderful phasers to do the job, once they are repaired. Assuming they need repairs, of course."

All three of the Drosary were smiling. Chakotay had to admit it made sense. The transporters might be out for some

time, and he wasn't about to tell the Televek about them. The devil would be in the details, but...

"I'll run the idea past my chief engineer, see if she thinks it can be done. As it happens, we do find ourselves in need of a replacement component for the phasers, an EPS flow regulator. It is something we can manufacture ourselves, but it will take considerable time and resources. If the Televek happened to have something comparable on hand--" "Aren't you afraid of letting them in on all your secrets, Commander?" Neelix said, visibly concerned. "The captain said--" "The component is a basic one," Chakotay

said, speaking to everyone. "Very little information would be exchanged."

"Then you do see this offer as it is intended?" Mila said, hopeful.

"Yes. It would speed things up," Chakotay agreed. "And as you point out, the planet is unstable. Time is something our survivors may not have much of." He paused, still uncomfortable about discussing Voyager's lack of firepower in such a tactically difficult situation.

But this did seem like the only solution right now.

"I think I'm starting to like the idea as

well," Paris said, smiling like the others.

"I'm inclined to think there is another catch somewhere," Neelix said, though his tone had softened.

"We are hiding nothing, Commander Chakotay," Tassay said.

"Nothing at all."

"When will your people be ready to begin working with the Televek?"

Jonah asked.

"My crew is ready now."

"Wonderful, and I'm sure you'll come to

see this as a sensible decision," Jonal exclaimed to one and all. "And you must admit, it does sound like a first step toward a possible eventual sharing of more... unfamiliar information, does it not?"

Chakotay reminded himself of his discussions with Janeway and Tuvok, but this was the path that had been set before him, the only clear direction. There might not be another. "I cannot predict the future, but at present I think this limited agreement can be made," he said in answer.

"More than enough for now," Tassay said with enthusiasm, and Chakotay

thought for a moment she might reach out and give him a hug.

Jonal was the first to stand. "We will inform Gantel at once."

"By all means," Chakotay said, rising too, leading everyone back out onto the bridge. Within moments contact with the Televek had been reestablished. Jonal explained everything perfectly. With very little discourse, the Televek agreed.

"But there may be a temporary... problem," Gantel said, addressing Chakotay. "I will need a moment. Can you stand by?"

"Of course," Chakotay said, more than a little curious. He stood at the center of the bridge for several moments. No one in the room said a word. Just as he was beginning to grow impatient, the Televek's voice sounded on the comm once more.

"As I suspected, a minor delay, Commander," Gantel began. "You must understand, the cruiser you see before you is not a merchant vessel, and we are not presently carrying in our inventory anything quite like the equipment you need. However, your needs, and of course ours, can still be met. You have my word as third director. I will explain in detail shortly. In the interim, you may

of course transmit the specifications for your EPS flow regulator. In return, you will be sent all of the sensor data we have collected on Drenar Four. We will work from there."

"Shortly?" the commander repeated, skeptical.

"Very shortly."

"Very well."

"Good!" Tassay exclaimed, taking Chakotay's forearm gently in one hand.

"Can we get you something to eat or drink?" Paris asked, speaking to Mila at

first. Then he looked up. "Any of you? I mean, this might take a while."

"Yes," Tassay said happily, "that would be wonderful."

"If you don't mind, of course," Jonal specified. Then he moved toward Chakotay and quietly took the commander briefly aside.

"Is there any chance the captain could join us again?"

"I'll take you to our dining area," Chakotay said. "But I doubt Captain Janeway will be there. Unless she manages to free herself of her present

duties."

Jonah shrugged somewhat dourly. "I see."

Chakotay gestured to the security guards as they left the bridge, indicating they should come along.

B'Elanna Torres hurried up the hallway on her way to the galley.

She had put off eating anything for hours now, but hunger was beginning to take its toll. She needed a little something to stave off the jitters, something she could

eat quickly. Repairs were proceeding, everyone was still leaping through hoops, trying to make some real progress, but she hated the thought of taking a break herself.

Finally, though, her needs were beginning to affect her disposition.

She had a bowl of oatmeal in mind, or perhaps a cold sandwich.

She'd long preferred human food to Klingon, just as she had always chosen to focus more on her human half than on her Klingon heritage.

Most human dishes, like human beings

themselves, were softer and easier to stomach. And in some cases quicker--a particular advantage just now.

She hesitated while the galley door slid open, then pushed her way inside.

"Torres, won't you join us?" Commander Chakotay said, waving her toward the long, shiny table where he sat with Lieutenant Paris, Neelix, Kes, and the three Drosary advocates.

Quite a crowd already, B'Elanna decided. They didn't need to make it any larger. And in any case, she was not thrilled with the idea of wasting a lot of time talking with creatures who didn't

seem that interested in talking to her-- and probably for good reason.

She still wasn't sure why, but she didn't like these Drosary no matter how she tried to rationalize the situation, and she was fairly certain they didn't like her, either. "I'm a little busy right now," she said.

"I've only got a minute."

"Just for a moment, then," Chakotay said, to agreeable nods from the others. "I insist."

It wasn't an order. The commander was apparently just being cordial, for

whatever reason. But that wasn't the point. She didn't want to tell him no. She decided it wouldn't hurt to ask Kes how she was doing in any case.

"Please, we would enjoy your company," Jonal said, waving much as Chakotay had done, getting it almost right. A change of heart, perhaps, B'Elanna thought, noting that even Neelix seemed to be enjoying the Drosary's company just now. But prudence had always been considered a valuable survival trait by nearly all species, B'Elanna thought, including both of hers.

"Let me grab a bite first," she said, lifting lids on pots, searching for

breakfast, though she wasn't at all certain what meal the time of day required. She ended up with a bowl of something that was apparently hot cereal but was definitely not made of oats. She tasted it as she walked toward the table. The grain was palatable, a variety Neelix had helped find and gather several weeks ago on a planet very much like Drenar Four. You just needed to put a lot of sweetener on it, she decided. An awful lot.

"How's the arm?" she asked.

"Better, thanks," Kes replied. She grinned broadly. "We have an excellent medical staff."

"So I understand," B'Elanna said. She sat down and began to spoon the thick yellowish porridge into her mouth.

"The doctor can hardly manage without Kes," Neelix said proudly.

"But he'll just have to manage for a little while longer."

"Your concern for one another is refreshing," Jonal said. "Even among different species."

"We have a great deal in common, it seems," Chakotay began.

B'Elanna looked up. "Who does?"

"Tassay and I. The Drosary and the Maquis. Our part of the galaxy and theirs." He smiled with genuine enthusiasm, something of a surprise to B'Elanna. "The Drosary have always desired a peaceful existence," he continued. "They would rather put their resources into building a colony, a better way of life, than fighting wars for governments they feel they have no part in.

All that was taken away from them."

"One of the reasons we started our own colony," Tassay interjected, "was to

escape the destruction of our culture, which goes back much further than my current homeworld's culture. The old ways, the old traditions, are all but gone now. All of our ancient customs are being lost."

Chakotay sat back and gazed warmly at her. "It seems we have even more in common than I thought."

"I ended up on that colony, where the Televek found us, for a very different reason, I'm afraid," Mila said, apparently addressing everyone, but looking mostly at Paris. "Personal reasons, I guess you could say."

"Tell me about them," Paris said, as sincere as B'Elanna had ever seen him.

Mila grew somber for a moment, thoughtful. Then she seemed to recover.

"Very well. There was an accident on a small commercial space transport during a routine trip to one of my world's two moons. The ship was nearly lost, and many people died. I was the pilot. It was a systems failure, pure and simple--I was there, I know what happened--but that was never proven to the satisfaction of the review board. I lost my commission. I had a hard time living with the stigma, the stain, that followed me after that. Until I finally got far

enough away."

"I... I do understand," Paris told her, taking her hand in his, gazing raptly at her. "Maybe too well." They seemed to have still more in common than Tassay and Chakotay, B'Elanna reflected, silently nodding as they both glanced toward her.

They turned to each other again, and she watched Paris for a moment, watched him doting on Mila. Then she turned instead to Chakotay, who seemed to be paying a great deal of attention to Tassay at the moment.

It's enough to make anybody sick,

B'Elanna told herself, noticing she was not quite as hungry as she had been a moment ago.

"You seem upset," Jonal said to her, disturbing her speculations.

She looked at him. She was. "What makes you think so?"

"I can tell, that's all. Though it looks almost out of place on you."

No one had ever told her that before. "What do you mean by that?"

"You have many great responsibilities, I'm sure, but I am nearly as sure you

have the means to meet them. You seem so... competent." His smile was soft, not the least acerbic, as she was sure hers would have been if she had been inclined to attempt one. She couldn't tell if he was being empathetic or diplomatic.

Either way, she wasn't much in the mood. She shrugged. "It can get a little rough sometimes. Goes with the territory, I guess."

"You are different than many of the others."

"I'm only half human," she said, purposely glaring at him, "if that's okay

with you."

"I assure you, it is. And I understand your reaction, I think, though you seem to be among very good people here. I admire this Federation of yours. You see, on my homeworld I too am something of a--a mixed breed, or half-breed, you might say. Mila and Tassay are as well. But the dominant society there has not yet risen above the ignorance that so often complicates such things."

"I... didn't know," B'Elanna said, somewhat stunned by the gentle man's words. "But for me, I think it's probably a little more complicated than that." She

thought of how many times people had told her they understood what it was like to be B'Elanna Torres, how ridiculous she always thought they were.

Though what she was doing right now was possibly worse. "Or maybe it isn't," she said. "Maybe I don't know."

"B'Elanna has had her share of successes as well as setbacks," Chakotay remarked.

"I'm sure we would all enjoy listening to you talk about them," Jonal told her. Mila and Tassay quickly agreed--Mila still holding Paris's hand while Tassay marveled at the tattoo over Chakotay's

left eye.

"It's so nice to find beings who care about the lives of others the way you do," Kes said, smiling softly at the Drosary. "There is so much we can all learn from each other. So much I want to learn."

"The similarities do make the differences easier to understand," Neelix said, typically aiding Kes by any means available to him.

Neelix and Kes had seemed largely content simply to observe the conversation until now. B'Elanna wasn't sure she liked the change.

"Sometimes there are things about others that we can never understand," she told Kes before glancing at Jonal.

"I suppose that's true," Kes said, "but working with the doctor has made me realize just how precious all life is and how easily it can be lost. It's wonderful to find people who embrace that same basic ideal."

"Isn't she remarkable," Neelix said. It was not a question. He grinned broadly at Kes and kissed her cheek. The sentiment seemed to carry all around the table. It stopped at B'Elanna Torres's chair.

Something about the Drosary still bothered her. She couldn't shake the uneasy, restless feeling the visitors seemed to inspire in her.

Especially Jonal, despite the fact that she saw nothing at all wrong with him, specifically. Nothing dire, certainly...

It was the fault of her untrusting, unsociable Klingon side, she imagined; perhaps she wasn't unusually perceptive, just cursed.

She finished her porridge and stood up, regarding the others. In a way it was getting harder to dislike these strange

visitors, and easier to understand why If they got her the relay she wanted, with no new; unmentioned strings attached... well, maybe it would all work out.

Jonah gazed glowingly at her. She looked into his eyes and tried to smile, but something inside her churned. She tasted yellow cereal at the back of her throat.

"I--I have to get going," she sputtered, swallowing. Then she left them sitting there.

CHAPTER 6

Janeway stood at the edge of a neatly cultivated field, straddling a row of low,

leafy orange plants bearing small round fruit that reminded her of young tomatoes. Bushier plants grew in alternate rows starting thirty meters to her right. Squash, she thought, or something very much like it. The crew of Voyager wouldn't get a chance to sample much of this produce, though.

Everything in the field was dying.

Thick blackish-brown powder covered the land and all that grew from it to a depth of several inches. Rains had stiffened the early layers, but the soft dust on top led Janeway to believe it hadn't rained in a while. Someone had apparently been trying to keep the plants

clean, the dust between the plants was deeper than the dust on them, but efforts seemed to be falling behind.

Kim plucked a small young fruit from the plant at his feet, brushed it off, and tucked it into the sample bag at his waist.

He toed the plant and dislodged a thick cascade of dust and soot that tumbled from its stems and leaves. Clumps of the dark stuff still clung tenaciously to the plant.

"Definitely volcanic ash," Janeway said, reading its composition from her tricorder.

Kim held up his own tricorder and resumed scanning. "Most of it fairly recent, I'd say," he noted. "I'm surprised there's not more of it, judging by the activity in those mountains."

He pointed due south. A ridge of mighty peaks could be seen well in the distance, much like those just east of their current position, though more extensive. The southern mountains featured two great plumes of angry black smoke that rose seemingly to the top of the sky--the same clouds that the shuttle had flown through on its way down.

Janeway adjusted her tricorder from

geologic scans back to the electromagnetic range. She instructed Kim to resume scanning for bioelectric and organic signatures in the direction of the largest village, nearer the eastern hills. As had been the case early on, the results were immediate.

"I'm reading multiple life signs, humanoid, and they're definitely on the move. They're approaching from the east, from the village, I'd say, Captain."

They had scanned this same group of people earlier. Few details could be discerned from such a distance, but they had assumed the party was headed toward the downed shuttle. Now that

assumption seemed correct.

"Range?"

"Just under two kilometers."

"I don't think that's the only company we've got, either."

Janeway turned slightly, allowing the tricorder to triangulate more accurately.

"There. EM scan."

Kim recalibrated his own tricorder, waited, then slowly nodded.

"These readings are definitely artificial. And they seem to coincide with the ferric metals readings we've been

getting. I'd say it's the same source."

Janeway frowned. "So would I."

"I put the contact no more than a kilometer or so the other side of the village, near the hills."

"What would you say are the chances it's a Televek cruiser that's landed?"

"I'd say the chances are pretty good, Captain."

They stood staring out across the fields toward the forests beyond. A bristled carpet of tall, spindly trees, swaying gently in the warm morning breezes,

covered the high ground as far as the eye could see.

Crooked lines revealed the paths of mountain streams descending from distant peaks. This was high summer on Drenar Four's main continent, and one could not help but be impressed. It was a beautiful world if you looked under all the soot, and if you didn't mind that it was trying to pull itself apart.

"We'd better get out of the open, Captain," Kim said, adjusting his tricorder again, repeating his earlier scans. "Those people are moving at a good pace. They'll be emerging on the far side of these fields in just a few

minutes."

"And they will no doubt find the shuttle after that. We have to assume that's what they're looking for. And when they find it, I'd rather be outside watching than inside waiting. We may have to get Tuvok out of there, at least for the time being."

"What then?"

It was a straightforward, sensible question. She just didn't have a good answer. She placed one hand on the ensign's shoulder, gave him a gentle pat. "Don't worry, Mr. Kim.

Whatever happens, I'm sure we'll keep busy."

They turned around and headed back the way they had come. The shuttle lay just beyond a knoll, toward the far side of an expansive grassy field. The field, one of many in this area, was surrounded by low, forested hills. Fields that had been left fallow, apparently. Janeway was fairly sure a stream ran by somewhere beyond the low bluff that stood just on the far side of the shuttle. They were probably going to need water, among other things, though she feared they might find only a flowing stream of mud.

"How are we doing?" she asked as they

entered the shuttle's open hatch. They found Tuvok lying on his back, probing a web of circuitry under the navigation console. He had removed several of the access panels in the shuttle's forward control section, more in the rear cargo area.

"I am very close to restoring minimal power to some of the primary systems, including the computer and the sensors, both of which seem to be largely undamaged." He pushed back, then pulled himself up off the deck and moved toward another panel. "Mr. Kim, would you be so kind as to lend a hand?"

Kim nodded and went to Tuvok's side,

then took the probe from him and held it in position. Tuvok was apparently trying to use one section of conduit in place of another. Kim used the probe to fuse the connection. Tuvok stood up again suddenly and tapped the main console.

"It looks good," Kim told him.

"Let's see what we've got," Janeway said.

At this, Kim withdrew the probe. Tuvok entered yet another command, and selected panels throughout the small ship suddenly flickered to life.

"Good work, Mr. Tuvok!" Janeway

cried.

"A good beginning, but little else, I'm afraid," Tuvok said.

"The rest of the repairs will take more time."

"Sensors will do for now. I want you to scan these coordinates."

She held her tricorder up and let the Vulcan examine the readings. He nodded, then moved to the sensor panel and began working.

"We think it may be a ship, just as you suggested," Kim told Tuvok.

"We can't determine anything more, though," Janeway said.

"Wreckage could easily read about the same, including those EM emissions, if someone left the lights on."

"Contact verified, Captain," Tuvok said after a moment. "I am reading what appears to be a fully operational Televek cruiser, very much like the one we encountered in orbit. I find no indication of damage of any kind, and power levels are consistent with those of its sister ship. I am also detecting considerable activity in the area surrounding the cruiser."

Janeway let out a sigh. "I knew they were up to something. I just wish I knew what it was."

"When we find out, I'll bet we won't like it," Kim said.

"Captain," Tuvok said, looking up at her, "the cruiser is also in close proximity to the underground energy source we detected from Voyager."

"How close?"

"Almost directly above it."

"Then they might be the ones who put it

here," Kim suggested.

"Possible, but highly unlikely," Tuvok replied.

Janeway looked at him. "Why?"

"The cruiser and the energy source are separated by some seven miles of earth and rock, and I am reading no direct connection between the two points, physical, radiant or radio. Also, the underground energy source has a complex energy signature, including trace tetrayon emissions, while the Televek cruiser is using a conventional matter-antimatter power source."

"So their signatures are entirely different from each other," Janeway said, considering. Tetryons were rare indeed. The Caretaker had produced similar emissions, but it had been extragalactic in nature.

The Televek, most certainly, were not.

"Any change in the readings from the underground energy source?" she asked, moving to Tuvok's side now, examining the data for herself.

Tuvok called up side-by-side displays of Voyager's earlier reading and the shuttle's current scans. "The overall output of the power source is still

exhibiting a continuous, steady drop.

Present levels continue to spike downward, then recover, though for no apparent reason."

"The Televek might be draining it somehow," Janeway suggested, this time sparing Kim the task. "But maybe they're not taking the energy directly into their cruiser. A storage facility, perhaps. Scan for anything that might fit that description."

"I do not believe the Televek have the capability," Tuvok said as he made a fresh sensor sweep. He looked up after a moment. "No such facility has been

detected, but I will continue to examine that possibility."

"Very well, Tuvok," Janeway told him. "But I think you are quite right about Televek capabilities. Which leaves us with plenty of possibilities, certainly. Clarification, however, seems in short supply." She grinned at the others; attempting to make light of their situation, at least for a moment. Only Kim grinned back.

"We have to go," she said with a sigh. "A party of Drenarians is headed this way. At least we think that's who they are. Shut everything down and lock up. I don't think the locals can do much more

damage to the exterior. With luck, they'll nose around for a while, then move on. After they leave, we can come back and try to get communications working."

"Understood," Tuvok replied, already complying.

Once the hatch was sealed, they made their way up the face of the steep bluff, then hid among the thickly clustered trees that crowded its edge. The knoll east of the shuttle was just tall enough to block the captain's view of the fields beyond, but soon enough she saw thin puffs of gray smoke rising above the ridge.

The approaching Drenarians were kicking up ash clouds, giving their position away. Janeway made a mental note to remember that.

It wasn't long before two dozen or more humanoid individuals appeared.

Even at a distance they seemed somewhat taller and huskier than most humans. As they descended the gentle slope and edged slowly, cautiously, toward the shuttle, Janeway noted that their features were crude and almost brutish. Thick, long, dark hair and heavy beards obscured the heads and faces of the males, and the few females didn't look much different, though their hair

grew even longer. They wore sturdy handmade clothing, most of it apparently woven. Their shoes and packs, though, had clearly been made from animal skins.

With the last of them came three stout wooden wagons, small and two-wheeled, drawn by oxlike beasts that stood about complaisantly, chewing on the trampled, semiclean grassy tufts beneath their feet, as the caravan reached level ground and paused. The handful of individuals who appeared to be leading the way began to fan out, cautiously circling around the shuttlecraft, their bodies crouched low to the ground. They carried weapons,

Janeway noticed now. Most held long, heavy knives that reminded her of ancient Roman short swords, but a few carried what appeared to be well-crafted, and probably quite deadly, crossbows.

Janeway began to wonder if these people hadn't been given some of their tools and technology, which seemed to postdate their lifestyle and brutish physiology considerably. It was possible the Televek had been here for quite some time.

When they completed their circle, the Drenarians held utterly still, as if they were waiting for something to happen,

waiting for some kind of sign. Nothing moved. Even the breeze seemed to have died.

"Their actions tend to indicate that they are motivated by curiosity rather than hostility," Tuvok suggested.

"I agree," Janeway said. "That could be some kind of attack formation, but they don't look like a trained army. If they were, I don't think so many of them would have died the last time they tried this."

"The last time?" Kim asked.

"We have seen no deaths," Tuvok

pointed out, still watching the Drenarians below. "To what are you referring?"

"I've seen these people before, in... in a dream. A vision, you might say. They died horribly. Phaser burns all over their bodies.

Chakotay has seen them too. I suspect the Televek were responsible.

Or will be. I have no way of knowing if, or when, those events took place."

The crouched Drenarians began inching closer to the shuttle now, drawing the circle smaller.

"But you suspect that what you saw has already happened?" Tuvok asked.

"I don't know, but it's certainly possible."

"If that is true, I am surprised they would come so near something like the shuttle," Tuvok said.

"So am I," Janeway replied. "They're either very brave and curious or utterly foolish."

One of the men had finally reached the shuttle. He used the tip of his knife to poke at its hull just aft of the port

nacelle.

When nothing happened, he struck the hull solidly, producing a metallic thrum that echoed across the field. He drew back, startled, a motion imitated by the others, but their trepidation lasted only a moment. As they all drew near again another male began trying to work the tip of his blade into the seam along the edge of the rear hatch.

"They don't waste any time, do they?"
Kim noted.

"Remarkable," Tuvok said.

"They're clever, from what I can see,"

Janeway muttered. "I doubt they have the means to get inside. Still, they could conceivably do more damage if we let them poke around long enough."

"But if they did get inside..." Kim said.

Before anyone could say another word they heard the quake. A low, distant rumble at first, it grew rapidly, approaching from several directions at once as the ground beneath their feet began to twitch.

The noise and the shaking seemed to build on each other as the quake rushed upward from the planet's crust, then swept through the bluff beneath their

feet, knocking them to the ground.

"Grab on to something!" Janeway shouted, wrapping her arms around the smooth trunk of a stout young tree, pulling herself close to it as the growl of shaking earth became deafening. A hundred meters north of the shuttle the grasses abruptly heaved upward as a vast area of bedrock was pushed several meters skyward. An adjacent strip of land seemed to vanish entirely.

As Janeway watched the split in the earth travel still farther northward, racing toward the horizon, she felt thankful it had not come the other way and swallowed the shuttle whole.

Below, the Drenarians were scrambling to gather together in the open.

They huddled close to the waving grasses, watchful of developing dangers. So helpless, Janeway thought, and no doubt frightened.

How could they understand what was happening to their world? As it was, with all the resources of Voyager at her disposal, she wasn't certain herself.

Suddenly Janeway felt the ground directly under her feet start to move.

Behind her a series of loud, echoing cracks sounded as trees began to snap in

half. Then the tree trunk she was clinging to began to rise.

"Head for open ground!" she commanded, updating her strategy, pointing to the Drenarians. There wasn't any choice. But as she tried to stand, the edge of the bluff jerked, then abruptly gave way. She saw Kim and Tuvok being thrown forward toward the field below.

She reached back toward the next closest tree as the earth disappeared from underneath her. Her hands came up empty. She felt herself falling, tumbling down the slope in a jumble of earth and roots and rocks. Sharp pain registered

on her right side, and then her left leg turned underneath her. Abruptly her head slammed against something huge and hard, and she slipped quietly into darkness.

*** Captain Janeway was having a dream, though she was certain it was not her own. The acrid smell of hot sulfur and molten metals burned her nose and lungs; the smoke that curled and swirled from every direction made her eyes water. Blinking, then squinting, she found herself high up, and standing on a plateau only a few dozen meters from the edge of a great precipice. Far below and stretching out into the eerie distance lay a vast, glowing lake of molten lava. The

steam and smoke and the high, arching cavern walls were illuminated for kilometers by the reddish glow of the lava lake, but more light came from behind her, bright light that radiated all around her, bringing stark detail to the entire plateau. As she turned, she was forced to raise her hand to block out the unnatural glare.

The plateau swept back to the nearest wall of the cavern, perhaps two hundred meters away. There, bathed in cool white light from dozens of fixtures set in the rock, and radiating light of its own, she saw an enormous machine unlike anything she had ever encountered.

Composed of thousands of glowing or darkened tubes all set in massive, curving banks of smooth metal, the components reminded Janeway of heat sinks coupled with scores of generators, though the scale was beyond her experience. Several of the tubes stretched from the plateau upward into the darkness of the cavern's ceiling. Still others twisted back into the cavern wall. Small, flat panels were scattered in wavelike patterns throughout the apparatus. Janeway tried to move toward the machine, but her feet would not cooperate.

Trapped, she thought, choking briefly, wondering how long she could survive

in the heavily tainted atmosphere. What kind of dream is this? she wondered. Unless it wasn't any kind of dream at all. And if it wasn't, it occurred to her that death might be a real possibility here.

She had never dreamed in such vivid colors before or wiped wet tears from her cheeks as the smoke continued to irritate her eyes, nor had she ever coughed so. No dream was this clear.

She closed her eyes, rubbing them against the sting. When she opened them again, she saw something pass by just over her shoulder, moving swiftly along the plateau's edge. She turned to follow it with her eyes, but only caught a

glimpse of a tenuous figure, almost impossible to see in the strangely lit, heavily polluted air. Still, it reminded her of a similar apparition she had encountered once before, aboard Voyager. Another of Chakotay's visiting spirits... or hers.

She saw several figures now, each so vague she could barely be certain she was observing anything at all. Yet she could sense them, too.

Near her. Almost a part of her. Then the dream began to fade away, replaced by growing darkness. She wondered if this was indeed the end.

The ghosts had somehow brought her here, and the poisons in the air were killing her. Perhaps they didn't know, she thought. She found it impossible to believe that the ghosts would go to so much trouble, aboard Voyager and then here, simply to lure her to an elaborate death.

The darkness became nearly complete. She waited for pain, for panic, for anything, but nothing happened. Then, in a sudden fresh glow, the cavern dreams were replaced by a new image, that of a fantastic alien vessel, a ship several hundred times Voyager's size, and completely unknown; in all her studies of countless Starfleet and alien records

and in all her travels, she had seen nothing to compare with the ship that was now passing before her, blocking countless stars from view.

Composed mostly of smooth, curved sections, the ship glowed brightly in the night like Earth's own moon. It featured several towering assemblies of tubes not unlike those that made up much of the machine in the cave. She saw the ship passing star systems, countless numbers of them, traveling on for what must have been ages.

Then the ghost that had appeared to her in her ready room was there again, drifting nearly formless in the dark as the

alien vessel and its universe faded from view. The ghost called to her as it had before, communicating without words, telling her to come, telling her of its pain, and pleading with her... for help.

CHAPTER 7

Gantel paced the floor in front of the lavish, thickly upholstered chair that dominated the center of the cruiser's bridge. The chew stem he held between his teeth had turned ragged and lost all its flavor, and the subtle effects of its mildly euphoric chemical contents had long since worn off. He had another stem in his pocket, but he wanted to keep his edge just now, much as it pained him to

admit it.

"Sit," his second associate, Triness, told him, making the request sound as much like a demand as possible. "You always think of something." She was the only one on the ship who would dare speak to Gantel in such a tone, at least where nonbusiness issues were concerned; he was constantly challenged during general commerce sessions, but that was only to be expected.

Here he outranked everybody, and he seldom let anyone forget it.

"I will sit when I can do so with a favorable review in my hands," he said,

pausing long enough to rake his long fingers through his great mane of thick white hair. "I will sit when my apparently overrated acquisitions director has something positive to tell me, instead of zero gain after zero gain."

"Daket deserves his rating, and you know it," Triness said, though she was apparently only defending the first associate on general grounds.

"You want everything to go perfectly, of course, but even you cannot bend the universe to your will. And neither can Daket. He has been faced with many--"

"Unforeseen difficulties. I know."

"An associate in his position, I think, requires a certain--" "Triness!" Gantel interrupted sharply, failing in his attempt to keep his voice level. "We are faced with an impending visit by First Director Shaale herself. I can grant Daket all the dispensations in the universe, but Shaale will require a great deal of me. I know the acquisitions team has... legitimate excuses, but Shaale never puts those two words together. In the meantime I have to make deals and apparently concessions with these Federation people, none of which makes good sense so far--unless we get results. But for the time being, I am dancing slow and dancing fast at the same time."

"I'd forgotten what a good dancer you are." Triness smiled curtly.

"How long has it been since we danced? The last time was on Grelra Seven, I think, just after the revolt."

"Which revolt?"

It was a joke. Triness chuckled. "Why would anyone keep track?"

"I don't know," Gantel said, chuckling with her just a bit.

"You have been regional leader seven times, my dear," Triness cooed, playing

the part of a doting mate, something she had never actually been. They were not lovers, though neither of them had yet ruled out that possibility.

Gantel eyed her warily. "What of it?"

"That buys a lot of dispensation."

"Ah, all true," Gantel said, preening.
"Quite true."

"Even Shaale must take that into consideration."

Gantel sighed. "In a perfect universe. You won't mind if I worry just a little, all the same?"

"If you did not, you would not be a third director."

They both smiled. After sixteen missions together, they were becoming quite a team. He took as much comfort as he could from the thought, then turned again to the business at hand. "It's just so complicated.

The assignment gets more demanding and less manageable by the minute.

And I cannot decide whether these Federation people are a blessing or a curse. It would have been so much simpler if they had been relatively

unarmed. Then we could have simply wiped them out."

"Simplify," Triness suggested, mostly in jest, "until you think of something."

Another joke, but Gantel suddenly saw a way to take this to heart.

What he most wanted was a way to get these strange visitors out of the way, or better yet, entirely under control.

But there were many ways to control others.

"I may have an answer," Gantel said, as the thought became fully formed in his

mind, bringing with it a sense of relief. He always seemed to think of something. Always. He was simply reluctant to believe that circumstances would never change. "We will tell these Federation people the truth--or part of it, in any case. If we give them everything they want, more than likely we will not get what we want.

But if we give them just enough, they might believe... just enough."

"They don't seem like the cooperative type to me," Triness said, understating the issue.

"Exactly. They're going to discover the

first director's fleet soon enough, and that will complicate matters enormously. Unless..." He turned the thought over in his mind and noticed the most remarkable feature in the process.

"Unless," he continued, "we tell them ahead of time, make it part of the deal, and involve them, to an extent. After all, once the fleet arrives, our options will multiply by many factors."

"That revelation must be handled correctly."

"Of course."

"And what will we have Jonal say we are doing about the components they

have requested?"

"There are many such components among the holds of the first director's fleet, are there not?"

"Yes, but--" "Well, then," Gantel said, smiling, "we will simply tell them the truth!"

"The truth?"

Gantel's smile broadened. "As any physician can tell you, even poison, in small doses, can sometimes be beneficial."

"I see." Triness tipped her head, a warm

look of admiration on her face. "You know, I have always been attracted to the great contemporary artists." She glanced at the others on the bridge, all of whom quickly found ways to mind their own business. Then she rose, leaned close to Gantel, and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'll get Jonal and the others on the comm," she said as she straightened up again. "But we will need to communicate our message very carefully."

Gantel nodded, satisfied. "That will be fine."

"I understand you have some additional news from the Televek," Chakotay said. He glanced at the others in the briefing room: Paris, Neelix, and Kes were seated to his left at the table, the Drosary to his right, while two security officers remained stationed at the door. He felt a pang of apprehension, but he tried his best to suppress it, at least until he had heard the advocates out.

"Yes, Commander, I must inform you that we have met with a small problem," Jonal said bleakly.

"More a minor delay, really," Tassay

explained.

For a brief instant Chakotay let doubt fill his thoughts and, with it, a flicker of rage. Negotiations had barely gotten under way, yet already they were turning into a delicate tangle, and each effort to smooth the way seemed to create new ripples. What now? he wondered wearily. There were nearly two hundred people aboard Voyager who were waiting for results and whose future depended on what their commander did or didn't do, not to mention the fate of the captain and an unknown number of Drenarians on the planet below.

He took a deep breath. "And what is the

nature of this, delay?"

Jonal folded both hands on the table in front of him, presenting himself as an individual who was suddenly completely at ease.

"To elaborate on what Gantel started to tell you earlier, the cruiser now in orbit is not a merchant vessel. In truth, they are carrying only enough spare parts and supplies to provide for their own minimum backup needs. Prudence requires they not compromise that status. The Televek neither expect nor desire further hostilities between your two peoples, but a systems failure aboard their vessel would leave them nearly

defenseless--against you or any other threat that might arrive."

"That would be unacceptable under any circumstances, as I am sure you can imagine," Mila added.

"So you can't supply us with the phaser flow regulator," Paris said grimly, though as he glanced toward Mila, he smiled, affected by her look of concern. She had been clinging to Paris, just as Tassay seemed committed to following Chakotay around, as much as either man could allow. Neither of the women had been anything less than polite about it. In fact, the only ones aboard Voyager who weren't being thoroughly polite were

Neelix and, to a lesser extent, B'Elanna Torres.

Chakotay fixed his eyes on Jonal. "But how can we help you if you can't help us?"

"Oh, I'm sure they have something in mind," Neelix said. "I just wonder if anyone around here is going to like it."

Chakotay found himself disposed to apologize for the short alien's behavior, but he fought the urge. Neelix, after all, was an authority on this sector and its people, if an eccentric one.

All sensibilities aside, he could not be

so easily dismissed, or censured.

"I think what Neelix means is that the Televek are a very resourceful people," Kes offered, not above smoothing feathers where her mate was concerned, and used to it.

"Then he knows them well enough," Tassay suggested.

Jonah smiled. "In fact, I am pleased to tell you that all will soon be well. The Televek have sent word to one of their merchant fleets, which was already bound for an area near this sector on quite another matter. The fleet contains several of the largest transports in the

quadrant, and they are even now making their best speed toward our location. I am told your EPS regulator will be instantly obtained as soon as they arrive."

"Also, the transports and the other ships will be on hand in the event that at least some of the population of Drenar Four can be evacuated, assuming that becomes necessary," Mila said. "And of course to assist in any salvage operation we may be fortunate enough to undertake."

"They should arrive sometime tomorrow," Tassay assured the commander.

"That sounds reasonable to me," Paris said.

The door hissed open, and B'Elanna Torres entered the room. She immediately sat at the end of the table nearest the door, opposite Chakotay, visually acknowledging everyone, her expression serious.

"Meanwhile, we might discuss the details of our joint mission to disarm the planet's defensive system once everything is in place," Jonal continued, "so that salvage will be possible."

"In the interim, the Televek are still

interested in your offer to share sensor specifications," Tassay said. "It may help in our combined efforts to assess the situation on the planet."

"I can see to that," B'Elanna said. "If that's what you want, Commander." She fixed Chakotay with a pensive look that made him feel even more uneasy.

Apparently her brief willingness to give the Drosary the benefit of the doubt had abated somewhat.

"It is," the commander told her. "But I will approve all transmissions, and I would like to review the data we have received from the Televek cruiser."

"Wonderful," Jonal said.

"Yes, especially for the Televek,"
Neelix remarked, rolling his eyes.

Kes squeezed his arm. "Neelix, please,"
she said.

"I'm sorry," he told her, "but if you ask
me, these people have done nothing at
all to earn our trust. Why should we give
it to them just because they ask for it?"

"We are attempting to earn trust as we
go," Jonal said, "for both sides."

"We have to try to work together,"
Chakotay said. "There are many lives at

stake."

"Agreed, but the Televek themselves haven't even shown us their faces," Neelix pointed out. "And they seem conveniently unable to give us anything more substantial than rhetoric and sensor data."

"That is a fair observation," Torres said.

"You could lighten up a little," Paris told Torres, a concerned look on his face.

"You know, the captain gave you her trust when you asked for it. And you, Neelix."

"That was because at the time she didn't

know me very well," Neelix answered.

"My point exactly," Paris said.

Chakotay caught Kes using her hand to hide a grin.

"I think I'll agree with Neelix," B'Elanna said evenly.

"And I think we should get on with this," the commander said, scowling at the others. Then he tried a more affable expression as he turned to the Drosary.

"Anything we can do that might expedite rescue efforts should be considered."

"Yes, please, that is the goal of this

meeting," Tassay said, assisting Chakotay in that small way. She was a fine choice for an advocate, he thought, as were Jonal and Mila. Indeed, that choice spoke well of the Televek, even if Neelix and B'Elanna didn't.

"We are getting important data from the Televek, which I've been piecing together with our own," B'Elanna said. "At present there exists no safe means of approach to Drenar Four. The defensive system makes use of comparatively small, highly concentrated individual energy fields, which it directs toward any perceived threat."

"The cruiser the Televek lost reported

multiple systems failures before contact was broken," Mila said.

"Unfortunately these fields your engineer describes are immune to phaser, photon, and other conventional weapon fire," Jonal said.

"The Televek have also tried scrambling their frequencies with dampening fields, but to no effect."

"So the defensive fields work like an artificial immune system," Paris offered.

"Well put," Mila told him, to nods from Tassay and Jonal. Paris took the compliment well.

"He is just remarkable, isn't he?"

B'Elanna said in a mocking tone, smiling at Mila in the same manner.

"But what I hear everyone saying is that there's nothing much we can do," Neelix said.

"We've already detected some of those fields moving about down there," Chakotay confirmed, trying to keep the discussion open.

"They seem to be confined to the surface, at least for now."

"They are not always," Mila warned.

Jonah said, "If current trends in reductions at the main power source continue, the system should soon grow weak enough to eliminate the problem entirely. After that, rescue and salvage operations can be easily carried out."

"What do you mean by 'soon'?"
Chakotay asked.

"We estimate two weeks."

"But the rate of the seismic activity down there is increasing so fast that we might not have that much time. This planet might be nothing but rubble by then."

"The Televek estimate they have nearly twice that long," Tassay assured him.

Chakotay took little comfort from this. No race, no technology he knew of, could predict the exact outcome of the kind of inexplicable violence that was occurring within Drenar Four. He was fairly certain that the aliens' guess was no better than anyone else's. Tomorrow the planet could decide to settle down and behave itself and stay quiet for a century--or it could turn itself into an asteroid field and take the captain and the others out with it. He shook his head.

"Paris, B'Elanna, this situation is

unacceptable. I want some other options. See what else you can find out about those energy signatures.

Put anyone you can spare on it. Work with the Televek wherever possible. We need access to the surface, and we need it now.

Meanwhile, let's take another look at our computer models. I understand that one major quake and several smaller ones have occurred in the last few hours. Maybe we've learned something from them."

"An excellent suggestion, Commander," Jonal said graciously.

Paris and Torres acknowledged Chakotay, then got to their feet and started out the door. Mila rose to go with Paris, but Chakotay decided he had to draw the line.

"You three will remain with us," he told the advocates. "These officers have work to do, and there are certain security concerns, which I am sure you can understand."

Each of the Drosary quickly acquiesced. Chakotay wondered if, in their place, several of his own crew would have done the same.

"Commander, are you all right?" Tassay asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Probably not, he thought. He could only guess what his expression must be like; he made yet another effort to soften it before attempting to answer.

"Yes," he said. "I'm fine."

CHAPTER 8

The ceiling seemed low, the walls close, though there was not enough light in the room to allow further details to emerge. The smell of damp, smoke-permeated wood filled the air. Captain Janeway lay perfectly still, moving only her eyes,

drawing slow, shallow breaths as consciousness grew more certain. She dared not try anything more; it hurt to blink, her head was throbbing so.

Now she began to notice noises coming from somewhere beyond the darkened walls. Voices passed once, then again, and in between, she heard other sounds, a changing pattern of clatter that made little sense to her. When she was reasonably sure she was alone, she gently attempted to move her arms and legs, and found them to be in working order, though her left knee was sore. Next she tried to lift her head, and the pain exploded from within.

She let out a moan and pressed one hand to the top of her head.

The welt was sizable and tender. She also felt dried blood but nothing fresh. It was coming back to her now--the shuttle, the Drenarians, the earthquake, and the fall. She checked her belt and found her tricorder and phaser still there.

Slowly she sat up and watched the world spin. She waited for it to stop, then got carefully to her feet. The ceiling was low; she had barely a foot of clearance. She reached toward the length of heavy cloth that covered a nearby window and pulled the curtain gently back, and light entered the room. She

wincing as her eyes reacted; she turned away from the window, looked about inside instead, and discovered she was in a log cabin much like those built hundreds of years ago on the American frontier. The furnishings--a table and a few chairs, a bed built along one wall, and a storage chest--were all simple and handmade, but neatly constructed. They featured hinges and braces of finely crafted metalwork. An oil lamp, unlit, rested on the table.

As she looked back toward the window, she noticed it had glass in it.

She hadn't expected that. Outside she could see another cabin much like the

one she was in. She folded the curtain flap under, which left a wedge of open window when she let go. Before she could do more, she heard voices outside, coming closer.

She steadied herself, one hand close to her phaser, as she heard the door latch move. She had no desire to demonstrate what the weapon could do--surely these people had been through enough already--but she was too weak to fight hand-to-hand, if it came to that.

When the door opened, the first one through it was Tuvok.

The Vulcan was followed closely by

Kim. Then an older Drenarian male entered, neatly dressed in dark slacks and a long-sleeved tunic. The alien's clothing was clean and in good condition, but it looked nearly as old as he was. His hair was dark with a sprinkling of gray, and his face, unlike those of the other Drenarian men she had seen, was clean-shaven.

Up close the heavy head and facial features Janeway had observed earlier seemed less harsh, and she noticed a subtle hint of orange coloration in the wrinkles of the man's skin. Janeway felt the Drenarian's deep, dark eyes upon her as they faced each other, and she instinctively looked away, not certain

why those eyes bothered her.

"Captain, you are well?" Tuvok asked, leaning forward to assess the damage to her head.

"I've been better," she said, waving him off.

"I would like you to meet a new friend of ours, Nan Loteth. Mr. Loteth, Captain Janeway."

She put out her hand, but the Drenarian only stared at it as if it were an unknown animal. Janeway withdrew the offer.

"They are not familiar," Tuvok

explained.

"His people helped carry you back to their village after the earthquake," Kim said, sounding quite cheerful. "What's left of their village, that is. The quakes have knocked at least a third of it down, and a few sections have fallen straight into the ground. This section is relatively untouched, so far."

"But it may not be for long," Tuvok added.

Janeway looked up. "Explain."

"Since the last quake, according to Loteth, volcanic activity to the south has

actually decreased somewhat, but every aspect of this planet's behavior seems to be in flux," Tuvok reported. "At present the prevailing winds are from the northwest, which is why the rain of dust and ash in this area has ended locally, but if they should shift sufficiently it would be cause for concern."

"We've been waiting for you to come around," Kim said, something he apparently just had to get out. "Everyone has."

"They seem a most amiable people, Captain," Tuvok said, "and they have treated us with kindness. I have taken the liberty of explaining that we are here to

help them."

"I'll bet they're impressed so far," Janeway replied, still reeling a bit, getting her sea legs.

Nan Loteth moved past them and went to the corner, where he poured something from an earthenware pitcher into a metal cup.

"Drink," he said, his voice breathy but even. He handed the cup to Janeway.

"There isn't any lead in this, is there?" she asked, hesitating.

Tuvok produced his tricorder and

passed it over the cup, then shook his head. Janeway nodded. The water tasted awful. She drank it all.

"You aren't afraid of us?" Janeway asked the old man, recalling what she had seen in her first vision--if that scene had been real.

The Drenarian took the cup from her.
"Of you, no."

"They claim they knew we were coming," Tuvok explained.

"They say they were told by the spirits in the hills, the spirits of their ancestors," Kim said.

"The ghosts," Janeway said.

"Apparently, Captain," Tuvok replied.

"I think I've met some of your ancestors myself," Janeway told Nan Loteth.

"Twice, as a matter of fact. I'd like you to tell me more about them, if you don't mind."

The Drenarian nodded. "My people have always turned to the wisdom of those who have gone before, those we call the Jun-Tath.

They protect us, comfort us, counsel us. Are you not guided in this world by

those in the next?"

"Many of my people believe they are, though I have never personally known anyone to describe an encounter quite like the one I had," Janeway said. She described the ghostly entity she had seen in her ready room, and the dreams Chakotay had told her about, but stopped short of relating the dream--if it had been a dream--of her visit to the smoky cavern.

Nan Loteth seemed to understand completely. "We have been shown to you, and you have been shown to us," he said, wearing a gentle smile Janeway had thought his features incapable of.

She decided there was a great deal to learn about these people, and despite the pain in her skull, she found herself eager to do so. Her unease had all but vanished.

She thought to say so, but hesitated as the earth began to shake perceptibly beneath her feet. A minor aftershock, only a fraction the intensity of the earlier quake. Still, it was more than enough to remind her that these people, whoever they were, were in danger of being lost to the universe forever. She looked in the Drenarian's eyes, and she was all but certain she could see this same thought reflected there.

"The Jun-Tath told us of the others, too," Nan Loteth continued less easily, raising his voice somewhat. "Of a time when demons would descend from the skies, of the suffering of many, of the coming of the end of the world. When the others came in their great sky-boat, we knew in our hearts they were the demons we had seen in our visions.

But some were not convinced. They had to be sure. They went to the clearing where the sky-boat rested, near the temple of Jaalett, and they watched. Nothing happened at first, but then the beings began leaving the boat for a time and returning."

"But no one made contact with them?"
Janeway asked.

"No, our people stayed well away from them. When no one came out or went in for one full day, some of my people went closer. My own brother was among them."

Nan Loteth paused as the pain in his thoughts seemed to touch his face.

Janeway remembered her first vision clearly enough. She waited for him to go on.

"When they were almost close enough to touch the sky-boat, burning light came in

streams from the boat's hull and struck down all who stood there. Some say they heard the screams of the dying in the village itself."

"Phaser fire," Janeway confirmed, hearing her voice crack. She could feel the Drenarian's pain and fear. She had been there, after all. "I saw them, the bodies of your people. I wasn't sure it had really happened. I had hoped that..." She fell silent and stood just looking at Nan Loteth.

"That would seem to verify that the cruiser is at least partially operational," Tuvok correctly noted. Janeway kept her attention on Nan Loteth.

"I went to the site," he continued. "A few of the men lay there still moving, some moaning, where they had fallen. Then the moaning stopped.

The ones who had stayed back among the trees told us what had happened."

"You had to leave them there," Janeway said, nodding. "The bodies of the dead."

"We dared not go too close for fear we too would be burned."

"It was the only logical decision you could have made," Tuvok assured him.

"So you've stayed away since then?" Kim said, nodding in anticipation of the answer.

"No. We attacked the people of the boat from the trees at the edge of the clearing," the Drenarian said to everyone else's surprise, "but our weapons were of no use against them. We wounded a few of them, I think, but they set the forest ablaze, and we were forced to move away.

After a time, we returned home.

We thought they would come for us, and we have waited, ready to fight them however we can. So far they have stayed

near the hills."

"And so much for the Televek's story about mounting a rescue expedition," Kim muttered darkly.

"We are not creatures of war, Captain," Nan Loteth said in a supplicating tone. "We have been at peace for five generations now.

Our leaders have joined in a pact that has allowed us all to prosper.

We do not have great armies to fight these demons.

That is why the Jun-Tath have sent you

to us."

"An interesting theory," Tuvok commented, his eyes wide.

"You still took quite a chance approaching our shuttle like that, after what the Televek--the demons--did to you," Janeway said.

"Your vision of our landing must have been a very clear one."

"As was my own vision of you, Captain. And your two companions.

That is why you were brought to my house. The Jun-Tath have chosen me to

Speak with you, I think. It is my great honor."

"And mine," Janeway reciprocated, trying out a smile of her own; it didn't hurt as much as she thought it might.

"Do you have anyone watching the sky-boat?" Tuvok asked.

"Yes, but few would survive an attack if it came." Nan Loteth sighed, and the lines in his face seemed to deepen.

"Since the first attempt, a few of our bowmen have fired on the demons again, but now our arrows only bounce off their clothing."

"Light armor of some kind," Kim speculated.

"Your people are very brave, my friend," Janeway said, thinking of the Prime Directive, then trying not to, at least not for the moment. "And we intend to do whatever we can to help them stay that way. I promise you that."

Nan Loteth nodded, then turned and started out the door. The four of them made their way into a little yard between two houses where a flower garden now shriveled and died under ash and dust.

Janeway could easily imagine how fine it all must have been. She noticed that

the sun was low in the sky and that the shadows were growing long. The group moved on, around the corner and into the street.

From where they stood, the village seemed to go on endlessly in all directions. They were only four houses from the nearby intersection that was shaped like a crow's foot. And the area was busy indeed. The smooth dirt streets were lined with houses and shops, many of them two stories high.

People walked in and out of numerous shops, and the Drenarians' now familiar beasts of burden pulled wagons loaded with goods and children down the center

of each street. Again, Janeway was reminded of a frontier town--or perhaps an early American Indian village, she reflected, as she watched a woman pass by carrying a baby on her back in what could easily have passed for a papoose board.

Janeway watched a young man making his way toward them. He was carrying a stool and lighting oil lamps that hung on wooden poles. No moths gathered near his flames, nor did she note any other kind of insect. She had been stung and bitten on dozens of worlds like this one, but here insects were not a problem. This was not paradise, she realized. The planet's ecosystem was breaking down

utterly, yet another indication of the Drenarians' grim situation.

A small crowd began to gather in front of Nan Loteth's house, their eyes wide under their heavy brows, to observe the strange new visitors.

Their expressions were familiar enough to Janeway.

She never ceased to be amazed by how similar most intelligent peoples were, not so much physiologically, but inside, in their hearts and minds, and how easily one could see that, even in the most alien eyes.

Janeway and her officers greeted the other Drenarians, then stood about for a long, awkward moment.

"You came from up there, from the night, just as the demons did."

Nan Loteth pointed toward the sky. "The Jun-Tath have shown me this."

Janeway looked up. The stars had begun to appear and, with them, all three of the planet's moons, each one no more than a crescent. The smallest moon had just appeared over the big hills to the east and seemed to be chasing the others into the sky.

Janeway looked at Nan Loteth and saw the glow in his eyes suddenly dim.

"You do not answer," he said glumly.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "Yes, we came from the sky."

"Which star is yours?" he asked.

Janeway looked at him with mild surprise. It was one thing for a primitive people to imagine beings, perhaps gods or demons, descending from the sky or from mountaintops, or arriving from across the seas, from some far distant and unexplored part of their own world.

Humanity's past was filled with gods of every manner and purpose--angels and spirits had filled mankind's mythical skies by day and by night--beings who controlled all the functions of the heavens from mountains and unseen worlds.

But that was not what Nan Loteth had said at all.

"What do you know of the stars?" she asked, regarding him more seriously now.

"I have seen them."

"What do you mean?" Janeway asked,

glancing at Kim and Tuvok, both of whom seemed as fascinated as she was.

"Wait right here," Nan Loteth said, his eyes suddenly wide and full of excitement. "I will show you."

The old man disappeared back inside his cabin with a spry dash that made Janeway blink. She waited only a moment for his return.

"This is how I see," Nan Loteth exclaimed. He held in his hands a long, smooth wooden tube, which he gingerly handed to Janeway.

She quickly recognized the device; it

was composed of two tubes, one slightly smaller than the other, allowing it to slide in and out, thereby changing the overall tube length. A neatly cut glass disc had been fitted into either end of the tube.

"You look through it, like this," Nan Loteth explained, gently taking the tube back. He raised the device lengthwise toward the sky, then put the smaller end up to this right eye. Holding it steady, he aimed at the largest of the three moons, which had nearly reached its apex.

Janeway watched him with fresh regard.

"Look," he said excitedly. "You look."

He handed the tube back to Janeway. She held it as he had and aimed it at the moon.

Countless craters and stark mountain ranges leaped into focus as she gently slid the smaller tube out of the larger one, just a bit. The instrument was crude, but it was one Galileo himself would have been proud of.

"It is true, isn't it," Loteth said, "that the stars are suns, like our own sun? I have seen the other worlds in our sky, the ones that follow our world on its journey through the skies.

They have moons, just like those." He

waved at the three bright satellites crossing the darkened skies overhead.

"Quite remarkable," Tuvok said.

"Yes," Janeway agreed, now considering the Drenarian with fresh amazement.

"So you actually believe we might have come from one of the other worlds in this solar system?" Kim asked, equally surprised.

"No, I do not think so," Nan Loteth said.

Tuvok and Kim looked suddenly bewildered. "Most curious," the Vulcan

said. "I would have thought--" "No, Tuvok," Janeway said, watching Nan Loteth, "you don't understand. He doesn't think we're from his system, he believes we are from a world belonging to one of the other stars he sees."

"Yes," the Drenarian said, nodding, though his tone had grown more pensive. "Is... is it so?"

"I understand, Captain," Tuvok replied, now properly impressed.

"I do, too," Kim said.

For a long moment no one said another word, which apparently made Nan

Loteth uncomfortable. "You must tell me," he said, almost pleading.

"Many will not speak of this with me. They keep their children away.

They say that beyond the sky there is only the realm of the gods. I have been told many times that, if I am fortunate, the Jun-Tath will one day heal my mind in a vision and I will cease to think such thoughts."

"That figures," Kim said, shaking his head.

Tuvok nodded. "I can well imagine how some of your contemporaries might feel

that way."

"Then you think I sound like a fool, just as they do," the old man said, despondent now. He took the telescope back again, let it hang at his side, bowed his head. Then his eyes came up, peeking at Janeway puppylike from under that ridiculous brow.

She couldn't help but smile at him.

"Now you think I am a joke," he said. "I am sorry."

"No, Nan Loteth. You do not sound like a fool, or a joke." She placed one hand gently on the arm that held the

instrument. "You sound like a scientist."

"A... scientist?" the old man repeated.

"Yes. And a good one." Janeway turned and tugged gently at the Drenarian's arm, directing his attention toward the sky again.

The heavens were half obscured by thick volcanic clouds, but where the winds had blown them clear the stars were multiplying as the darkness continued to deepen. "We are from a world much like yours, one that orbits a star, up there, just as yours does, but our star is much too far away for us to see from here. So far away, in fact, that we may never see

it again. Though one day, perhaps, your people might find it."

Nan Loteth's breath had quickened.

"How many stars are there?

How many worlds?"

"Far too many to count."

The old man's mouth hung slightly open.

"And what are these other worlds like?"

"Many are very much like your own,"
Janeway said.

The ground shook once more, another aftershock that did little more than rattle nerves and spook the draft animals along

the street.

Still, Janeway knew there would be more quakes like the one they had experienced at the shuttle, and if computer predictions held, they would grow in severity. Meanwhile, the wind might shift...

As the tremor subsided, Nan Loteth asked Janeway to follow him up the street. "You need food," he said. "We haven't much, but what we do have is yours." He set off walking, leaving no one any choice. The rest of the crowd, more than three dozen strong now, came quietly along behind them, speaking only in whispers.

"Tuvok," Janeway said as they went, "Could the Televek have something to do with what is happening to this planet? Could the destruction be related to that anomalous underground power source, or to the Televek's attempts to get at it?"

"I doubt the Televek are capable of anything on that scale.

However, I find it hard to believe that their arrival here during such a major geologic event is simply a coincidence."

Janeway nodded, then wondered if they were thinking along the same lines. "Can you explain?"

"I cannot. It is what I believe humans would call a... a hunch."

Janeway paused and stood looking at him. She and Tuvok had known each other for many years. He was as logical and staid as any Vulcan she had ever met, but sometimes, she had come to realize, he was capable of much more than that. "Mr. Tuvok," she said softly, "it would seem that I am starting to rub off on you."

"I would consider that a compliment, sir," Kim told the Vulcan, butting in before the other could respond.

Tuvok drew a long, contemplative breath. "Very well then, Mr. Kim, I will take your advice."

The walk continued past stables filled with animals and emitting a smell that seemed to change very little from one part of the galaxy to another. The next large building featured double doors flung wide.

Peering in, Janeway saw what could only have been a blacksmith shop, judging by the bellows, three in all, that hung from the ceiling, with foot pedals rigged to work them. Two craftsmen were on hand, hammering at glowing bits of metal.

Building spaceships, Janeway thought, which brought her right back to the situation at hand.

"Mr. Tuvok, would you agree, then, that the Televek's proximity to the underground power source is also not likely to be a coincidence?"

"Yes, but I remain doubtful that they control it, or that they have gained access to it. We have seen no evidence of that."

Janeway nodded. "Agreed."

"But they haven't given up trying," Kim

said.

A woman, trailed by three children, moved cautiously to one side, allowing the strange aliens and the small mob that surrounded them to pass. No one seemed interested in blocking the way, yet no one panicked, either, which was something Janeway might have expected. She said as much to both her officers.

"I've never met a people quite like them," Tuvok agreed.

"Neither have I," Kim said with a wry grin, "but Voyager is my first mission, after all."

"We haven't forgotten," Janeway assured him.

"They are physiologically well behind mankind on an evolutionary scale," Tuvok said, "and yet they have inventions and ideas far ahead of anything early man was capable of, or the early ancestors of present-day Vulcans, for that matter."

"But the possibility still exists that they're being manipulated by some outside presence," Kim suggested.

"Perhaps," Tuvok said, "but I would suggest that they are simply very intelligent."

"An interesting theory, Mr. Tuvok," Janeway said, finding the idea quite palatable. In man, just as with every advanced species mankind had encountered, the sudden emergence of intelligence as an evolutionary advantage, a key survival trait, had ultimately allowed those species to leap up the natural-selection ladder. With the Drenarians, things had simply gone a little faster than usual. Their first leaps had been nothing short of extraordinary, and their progress showed no signs of slowing down.

"Can you imagine Neanderthals developing villages and agriculture like

this?" Kim said.

"The Drenarians are a remarkable people," Janeway agreed. "And as long as we're in it this far, I'll admit that I believe they are definitely worth saving. The trouble is, their own planet doesn't seem to agree."

"They may need protection as well, Captain," Tuvok said. "The Televek have left them alone until now, but there is no reason to believe they will continue to do so."

"Agreed. We may have to organize them somehow."

"Nan Loteth isn't one of their leaders," Kim explained, leaning toward the captain and away from the Drenarian just ahead of them, "although he does seem to be a respected citizen, a wise man of some kind."

"They have delegates who convene to form a governing council, which makes the laws and supports several regional chiefs," Tuvok said. "Nan Loteth, I believe, is one of the delegates."

"It reminds me of the Five Nations," Janeway said.

Tuvok looked at her. "I do not believe I am familiar."

"The Iroquois Confederation," Janeway said. "A self-governing Native American coalition of sorts. It guaranteed peace and cooperation over an entire region. The framers of the early American Constitution drew heavily upon the Indians' ideas."

"I'll bet Chakotay would have gotten a kick out of this conversation," Kim said.

"When we see him, we'll tell him about it," Janeway answered.

"In the meantime, we have to find a way to make that possible."

The Televek are the key. I'd like to go poke around their cruiser, see what kind of shape it's in, maybe get some idea just what they're up to."

"I can tell you that." Nan Loteth had apparently heard much of their conversation.

"Then tell us," Janeway prodded, "please."

"They want to steal the spirits of our ancestors. They have come for the Jun-Tath."

Tuvok cocked his head. "How do you know that?"

"I saw it in a vision. The spirits themselves have shown me.

That is the most important reason for your being here, I think.

You are not here for us alone. You are to help us save the Jun-Tath from the demons."

"But how could anyone steal a ghost?" Kim wondered.

"May I remind you, Ensign," Tuvok said, "that these particular ghosts show up on our tricorders, and that their EM signatures are virtually identical to those

of the unidentified underground power source?"

"A source they seem inclined to cluster about, and which the Televek cruiser is presently practically on top of," Janeway added.

"So," Kim said, attempting to catch up, "you're saying that if the ghosts are somehow connected with the energy source, and if the Televek are after that source, then in effect they are after the ghosts."

"A logical assumption," Tuvok agreed.

Janeway nodded. "That's what I was

thinking. Which is why we need to learn more about their plan and its progress so far."

She faced Nan Loteth. "You must take us to the Televek demons' sky-boat," she said, "as soon as possible."

"Very well," came the Drenarian's answer, followed by a shrug.

"But first you will eat."

They arrived just then at a merchant's stall. A tarp covered a street-facing table full of foods. A young female Drenarian stood on the other side, smiling. Janeway was handed something

that reminded her very much of a sweet potato. She started to peel it, but the young woman minding the booth told her to leave the skin on.

"Its slight bitterness counters the sweetness," the woman explained.

Then she handed over a bowl of brownish sauce thick with floating herbs, and waved them toward it. The captain dipped the tuber into the sauce and took a cautious bite, remembering the water. She was pleasantly surprised.

"Ah, good!" the Drenarian woman said when she saw Janeway's smile.

She then gave the captain a small loaf of very dark bread into which large chunks of sweet fruit had been baked.

"Kim, remind me to have Neelix talk to these people," Janeway said, talking with her mouth full. Ensign Kim seemed to understand completely.

As she was washing the meal down with a sharp but palatable milky juice, a third tremor, much more violent than the others, rumbled up through the rock beneath their feet. It shook the landscape and rattled the booth's sturdy table, then rattled Janeway's teeth. This quake was felt more than seen. It was not as severe as the first one, but the tremors seemed

to be coming closer together now. She put the empty juice cup down and turned to her host.

"These earthquakes represent a great danger," she told him, thinking it time. "They're the result of a larger problem, one you may not be entirely aware of. Your world is apparently re-forming itself, shifting internally due to forces we have not yet studied completely.

We do believe this planet may eventually tear itself apart, and you with it, perhaps in a matter of weeks, or even days."

Nan Loteth's expression was grave, but

he did not look shocked, and his nod told Janeway that she had underestimated him again.

"Something is wrong," he agreed. "Very wrong. The earthquakes and the volcanoes to the south, they are not right, not normal.

There have been no stories of such disturbances for many, many generations. We have waited for the Jun-Tath to tell us what is happening and what to do, but they have not done so."

"How long has this activity been occurring?" Tuvok asked the Drenarian, already taking tricorder readings of the

current tremor.

"For one full year, since the night of the third crescent."

Tuvok nodded. "And how many quakes were as severe as the one in which the captain was injured yesterday?"

"Many. I don't know the number, but they come more often now.

We used to think the mountains would grow quiet again, and the earth would be still. Now many fear it will only grow worse, as you say."

He looked toward the east, to the angry,

darkened sky.

"You mentioned a date," Janeway said, following his gaze, her thoughts just beginning to turn fully around. "The third crescent."

"A religious event of some kind?" Kim suggested.

"Perhaps," Nan Loteth said.

"You mean you don't know?" Janeway asked.

Nan Loteth looked skyward once more. "I know only what I have seen through my glass. The third crescent is like the

other two, but smaller, and not so full of holes."

"Curious," Tuvok said.

Kim was still looking at the Drenarian.
"What is?"

"The third moon," Janeway said, nodding to herself as she followed the Drenarian's gaze to the curved, pale sliver of light that continued to rise above the hills. "You're saying the earthquakes began when the third moon arrived."

"Soon after, yes," Nan Loteth replied.

"One year ago?" Tuvok asked.

"Yes. And I do not think they will stop until the wandering moon goes away again."

CHAPTER 9

Captain Janeway stood stunned by the realization, something she should have seen from the start. She could see, looking at him, that even Tuvok was embarrassed by his own lack of perception in this matter.

Suddenly, however, the truth seemed obvious to both of them.

The two larger moons followed similar orbits around the planet, almost trailing each other across the sky when observed from the planet's surface, though in fact one had a much smaller orbit than the other, allowing it to appear to overtake the more distant moon from time to time. The third, slightly smaller, moon was at odds with the others, and no doubt with the planet itself.

When the brown dwarf star passed by the Drenar system it had certainly dislodged a number of planetary bodies, including Drenar's new third moon, which likely had been orbiting one of the system's large, outer gas giants at the time. Drenar Four had captured the moon

as it traveled sunward, and the opposing tidal forces that had resulted from the pull of the three moons amounted to a celestial tug-of-war. A war the planet was about to lose.

If all three moons came close to lining up, as it now appeared they might, it would be a noteworthy event to say the least.

"The question is, how long have we got?" Kim wondered, seeing the implications clearly enough himself.

Tuvok stood with his tricorder open, playing at its small controls with deft fingers. "I am attempting to form an

extrapolation," he said in answer.

"Please do," Janeway told him, content to wait. His knowledge in many areas was equal to her own, but being a Vulcan, he was unquestionably quicker. As the moments ticked past, however, she began to wonder.

Finally, with Kim looking strained, she said, "Is there a problem, Tuvok?"

"Yes, Captain. The patterns of magma movement beneath the crust have been occurring on a tremendous scale. However, their patterns are entirely unpredictable. In addition, the destabilization is increasing

exponentially. There is no doubt that the planet will ultimately be destroyed by this process, probably in a matter of weeks, perhaps as few as two or three.

But..."

Tuvok looked at Janeway and softly sighed, indicating that a bit of guesswork was involved in what was to come next. With Tuvok, however, you could dismiss nothing. He seldom went out on a limb, and when he did it was a short, stout one.

"Go on," she said.

"Considering the strength and frequency

of the quakes, I believe it is possible that the planet's crust might rupture in a catastrophic manner much sooner than that--during the next full tide, to be precise, when the pull from the moons reaches maximum intensity. At that time, the combined fracturing and consequent erupting would reach a scale that could easily render the planet uninhabitable."

"They do look as if they're close to lining up, don't they?" Kim said, staring up at the night sky. Janeway nodded. The third crescent moon had risen higher now, and the first two moons were clearly drifting toward a common destination as well. Their projected orbits were easy enough to determine;

even at a glance the prospects didn't look good.

"It is true, I think," Nan Loteth said, apparently grasping most of what they were saying. "The twin moons have always crossed once a year, and this year the crescent moon seems determined to join them."

"How long, Tuvok?" Janeway asked. She stood in front of him, holding her breath as he continued to work with the tricorder.

"Again, it is difficult to say. I will have to make some additional calculations. However, at present I estimate the next

full lunar alignment will occur in..."

Tuvok worked the keypad again, then shook his head.

"What is it?" Janeway asked.

"I wanted to be certain, Captain. The alignment should occur in approximately twenty-nine hours, seventeen minutes."

"That's what I was afraid of," Janeway said. She let her breath out, and felt an uncertain amount of her limited strength seep out with it.

"That doesn't leave us much time."

"Captain," Kim said. He had flipped

open his own tricorder upon hearing this last from Tuvok, and was busy scanning, apparently hopeful. "I've been monitoring the levels of magnetic interference, and I'm detecting the largest drop yet in this area. We might be able to get through to Voyager now."

"You are welcome to try, Mr. Kim," she said.

The ensign tapped at his comm badge. "Away team to Voyager. Kim to Voyager."

"Go ahead," a voice replied through the comm, though it was garbled and unidentifiable. Still, all three away team

officers heard it clearly enough.

Janeway instantly tapped her own badge.
"This is the captain."

"Rollins here, Captain. Are you all right?"

She could barely make out the words, could only hope that Rollins was having better luck on his end.

"Yes, we're fine," she said.

"We can't get to you," Rollins said. "A planetary defense system is keeping everyone out."

"What kind of system?" Tuvok inquired.

"Not now, Tuvok," the captain said.

"Mr. Rollins, you have to listen to me carefully."

Quickly she told Rollins about the third moon and the coming lunar alignment, and what that apparently meant. "These people may only have a day," she said.

"Not to mention us," Kim added.

"Yes," Janeway acknowledged. "And it looks as though I was right about that second Televek cruiser."

She paused, getting the feeling that she was talking to herself.

"Voyager?"

Nothing. Kim and Tuvok tried as well but got the same results.

"We've lost the signal again, Captain," Kim said apologetically, as if it were his fault.

"Damn! I wonder if they got any of that?" Janeway asked, not expecting an answer.

"It would appear there is little Voyager can do, even if they have received some of the information," Tuvok remarked.
"At least for the time being."

"What was all that about a defense system?" Kim asked. "The only trouble we ran into was the Televek."

"It's possible that's exactly what our mysterious underground power source is doing here, and the transient energy readings we're picking up in the hills," Janeway said. "Though if that's the case, the defensive system doesn't seem to be working."

"Did the entity that visited you aboard Voyager seem like part of any defense system?" Tuvok asked.

"Not exactly, and if it is, it doesn't seem capable of defending these people

against the Televek ship that landed. Still, the ghosts must be connected in some way."

They stood near the edge of the city now, looking down a wide, smooth promenade illuminated by starlight and moonbeams. Nan Loteth cleared his throat, the first time Janeway had heard him do that. She wondered if he'd picked the habit up from one of them.

"So what do we do now?" Kim asked gingerly.

"In the absence of alternatives, I recommend we follow our plan to investigate the Televek presence here,"

Tuvok said.

"The temple of Jaalett is nearly half a day's walk along this road," Nan Loteth said. "If we leave tonight, we will be there before morning."

"We'll go there soon, but not right now," Janeway said. Then she faced Nan Loteth. "First, I'd like to get back to our shuttlecraft and make another attempt to get our communications equipment working so we can contact our friends in our other sky-boat. They need to know about the moons, and especially about that Televek ship near your temple. Our friends may be in more danger than we are. There's no telling what our friend

Gantel and his advocates are doing."

Nan Loteth nodded vigorously. "I will send men from the village with you. I have been told that the demons have visited your sky-boat already and may still be there. You will need good warriors to protect you."

"That makes sense; the demons must have witnessed our landing," Janeway said. "But you must listen to me, Nan Loteth. I don't want any more of your people getting killed. Don't worry about us. We can protect ourselves. We will go alone, for now. When we return, you may take us to your temple so that we can see the demon ship for ourselves."

"If the Televek have been there for a while, they may have gained access to the shuttle's interior by now," Kim speculated.

"A logical concern," Tuvok agreed.

"If they are inside our shuttle," Janeway remarked, looking from one officer to the other, "they are just going to have to leave."

"When will you go?" Nan Loteth asked.

Janeway took a deep breath. "Now," she said, seeing no point in delaying their departure. She was exhausted, and she

wanted nothing more than to stay here for a few days, but at that instant yet another aftershock rumbled beneath her feet, reminding her that for now, rest was not possible.

The three of them set out walking toward the edge of the village, moving out of earshot, waving goodbye.

Gantel ran his hands through his hair in mild exasperation.

"That is rather bad news," he said, purposely understating the gravity of the situation as he received the

communication. It would be too easy to get excited and upset, and that wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Do you think their ship received the transmission?"

"There is a strong possibility they did," Triness said sadly.

"But it couldn't have been very readable, and we were able to correct for it within minutes. I doubt a substantive exchange was made. The only thing we got from the message was information about the three moons. I for one am surprised it has taken these Federation people this long to figure that out, if indeed they

have. They are a pathetic bunch, I think."

"Always the optimist," Gantel told her, but then, that was one reason he liked having her around. Hers was a bothersome job, in its own way, but one she didn't seem to mind.

"They know the shuttle crew is alive, in any case."

"We gave them reason to hope that was true," Triness pointed out.

"Is there a chance that Voyager's sensors could have picked up anything we wouldn't want them picking up?"

"No," Triness said. "The breach was along a very narrow microwave band."

"A definite consolation. Is Daket having any luck locating the landing party? Or has he as many excuses for failing at that as he has for his failure to obtain access to the power source?"

"One of his teams has located the shuttle. We think the occupants may have been taken into a Drenarian village."

"Leave them there, then. For now. We can destroy the village later on and be done with all of them."

"Precisely what Daket was thinking."

Triness grinned.

Gantel sat contemplating the situation. There was nothing he could do now but wait and see what the starship commander would do next, if anything. Over the years the third director had gotten very good at waiting for favorable developments, and his patience had been rewarded often enough. He could only hope for similar results this time--preferably before First Director Shaale arrived and was forced to intervene. Better to ask for the fleet's assistance with regard to specific plans and obvious results than to go begging for help in apparent desperation. He wanted that lovely Federation starship to be a

gift to Shaale, not a burdensome military consideration, at the very least.

He looked at the strange vessel that filled the main viewscreen.

Soon, he thought. Soon enough...

"At least we know they're alive!"
Chakotay said, rushing onto the bridge, then huddling over the tactical station, crowding Rollins out of the way.
"Computer, repeat the last message from the away team."

The ship's computer complied. Chakotay

listened intently, straining to make out the words that came through, words twisted and muddled by a thick ocean of interference.

"Let me see if I can clean that up a bit, Commander," Rollins offered.

Chakotay lent a hand. They played the message back again and again, adjusting the filters each time, then using the computer to enhance the results.

"That's as good as we're going to get it," the ensign said finally.

Chakotay heaved a deep sigh. The message wasn't that clear, and it got worse the farther they tried to go, right up to the point at which the signal was lost altogether. Several things, though, were clear the third moon was new, the coming lunar alignment was causing the earthquakes and magma eruptions, and the tidal forces now building might cause the planet literally to come apart.

"How long until the lunar alignment?" Chakotay wondered aloud, tapping at the console to engage the computer in the task of answering his question. He waited. He didn't like the answer.

The other timetables facing him ran through his mind, and he began to feel very uncomfortable. He checked the figures one more time to be certain.

"Commander..." Rollins began, seeing the answer too. Then his voice trailed off as he realized the implications.

"Mr. Rollins, you have the conn," Chakotay said, practically lunging away from the console. He headed straight toward the turbolift. "If you need me I'll be in engineering."

"I already have a job!" B'Elanna Torres

snapped, moving from one console to the next, leaving her commander standing there.

Chakotay frowned as he glanced to either side. Numerous engineering personnel worked feverishly at every station, occasionally calling out to one another, while others came and went in a constant procession.

He went after the chief engineer, who had momentarily settled near the power transfer conduits leading to the dilithium housing.

"Well, I've got another job for you," he said.

"How many people do you think I am?"

"What's your status right now?"

Chakotay asked, brushing past her question.

Torres made a sound somewhere in her throat, which Chakotay was sure owed little to her human side. She tossed her fallen bangs back out of her eyes and looked at him. "We're making progress," she said with a firm nod. Her features relaxed just a little bit, an indication she truly meant what she said. "Slow, but sure."

"I've got something I want you to hear,"

Chakotay said. Most of the crew knew there had been a message from the captain, but he knew B'Elanna hadn't had a chance to listen to it yet. He ordered the computer to repeat the best version of the message.

B'Elanna played it several times.

"What do you expect me to do?" she asked skeptically.

Chakotay was sure, just by the look she was giving him, that she already had a pretty good idea.

"You tell me," he said.

She looked straight past him with a cold, distant stare, one that his years with her had taught him meant her mind was operating at hyperspeed, which was exactly the result he had hoped for. The best way to approach B'Elanna Torres was not to barge in, ordering her to produce results. Better to tell her you had a question, one that no one else could answer. What she lacked in discipline she made up for in determination and brains.

She looked down suddenly and began pacing the floor. After a moment she raised her eyes and focused them again. She made her way straight to the main engineering console and began playing

her fingers across the keypad panels. On one of the screens before her a simulation appeared; it began to change as B'Elanna reworked the mathematics.

Then she shook her head in frustration.

"What are you thinking?" Chakotay asked, quietly drawing up beside her.

"What's wrong?"

"The way I see it, our only option is to reconfigure the main deflector to project a subspace field, which can be wrapped around each moon in succession and used to help Voyager move them.

Similar attempts have been tried before with Galaxy-class ships. It's exactly like

trying to push a boulder up a hill. In this case, however, the boulder is too big and the hill is too steep, so we'll have to use the subspace field to make the boulder temporarily lighter. We'd never be able to alter the course of any of these moons significantly, but if we can move each moon a little, the accumulative effect might be enough to ease their destructive alignment. We'll just be postponing the inevitable, but we can postpone it for quite a while."

Chakotay couldn't help giving her a broad grin. A little time was all they needed. "How long can we postpone the disaster?"

"Weeks, decades, maybe centuries. I don't know. The calculations are incredibly complex. It'll take hours."

"We don't have hours," Chakotay reminded her.

"In any case, we need the warp engines back on-line before we can even consider the attempt. No warp engines, no subspace fields.

And they'll have to be reconfigured to do the job. They won't be available as ship's drives."

"Understood."

"And we don't have any time to waste, I'd say," B'Elanna added.

Chakotay let his smile broaden. "I thought I already had you working on it."

"Yes, sir," Torres said after a momentary pause. She frowned coldly.

"Anything else?"

"I'm sure there is. I just haven't thought of it yet."

B'Elanna began to growl.

Chakotay stepped back once. "That's the B'Elanna I'm so crazy about," he said,

nodding to her. He turned and made a hasty exit, thinking it best. B'Elanna made no attempt to stop him.

When Chakotay arrived back on the bridge the three Drosary visitors and their security detachment were waiting for him as ordered. He quickly explained the facts about the lunar alignment and what he intended to do about it. "We don't know if we'll be successful in the attempt, but we do think we can at least buy the planet and everyone on it some time. Perhaps, with the help of the Televek, we can do even better than that."

"Remarkable," Jonal replied, seeming genuinely impressed. "You and your people are a source of constant amazement!"

"Agreed," Tassay said, sidling up to Chakotay once more, apparently pleased to be back in his presence. Mila had already fetched up next to Paris and seemed amused at something the lieutenant had just said.

Chakotay was sure he didn't need to know what it was.

"Of course I will speak of this with Gantel at once," Jonal said.

"Can you transmit whatever calculations and projections you might have?"

"Of course. I'll see to it right away. Mister Paris. Have Torres transfer all pertinent data to the Televek, whatever we've got. Mister Stephens," he added, speaking to the young ensign who had taken Kim's place at Ops. "Open a channel."

Jonal explained the idea to Gantel quickly enough. No reply was immediately forthcoming, but finally Gantel agreed that it was a commendable concept, after which he repeated many of the same things about

human resourcefulness that Jonal had said. But there was something different about Gantel's reaction. Chakotay had come to know the Televek's voice, that being his only means of identifying the commander, and he thought Gantel sounded mildly incredulous. In a moment, however, that attitude seemed to change.

Once the upload transmission had been completed, Jonal and Gantel continued to talk for a few moments, and Chakotay wasn't sure he liked what he heard. The trouble was, he couldn't understand much of it.

They seemed to be speaking in circles,

using numerous metaphors and similes. There were direct references to continued cooperation and communication, and a repeated endorsement of the plan to move the moons, but a certain pessimism clearly existed. "I am sorry," Gantel said. "This is something they will simply have to accept."

"As you say," Jonal replied. He turned to Chakotay once more.

He did not appear grim, but neither was he jubilant, not by a long shot. "I regret to inform you, Commander, that the Televek will be unable personally to assist you in your valiant efforts at this

time--efforts they do support in principle."

Chakotay was having trouble believing what he was hearing. "What is the problem?"

"There are two, actually. While the Televek are of course familiar with warp field manipulation techniques, the cruiser now in orbit does not have the control capability such an endeavor would require."

"Couldn't modifications be made?" Paris asked. "Perhaps our own engineers could help."

"Not quickly enough, and, as I'm sure you understand, Gantel does not want your technicians working aboard his ship. At least not yet."

"You said there were two reasons," Chakotay reminded the advocate.

"Yes. You see, Commander, the Televek are convinced that the continuing drop in the energy levels of the plant's defense system are directly related to the seismic activity. This is based on records gathered from previous encounters with the planet, which date back several decades. Therefore, it is possible that if the seismic process were somehow to be interrupted, or even slowed, the defense

system might not be recoverable."

"But stopping the quakes would put everyone out of danger!" Paris exclaimed, rising out of his chair, examining all three alien visitors with suddenly wary eyes.

"Yes and no," Mila told him, bending slightly to bring her own very serious face close to his. "With the system revitalized, you would still not be able to get down to the surface to rescue your away team or any of the indigenous populations, perhaps not ever. And your own people, and any Televek survivors, would not be able to get back into orbit, whether their ships were functional or

not. All of them would be trapped on Drenar Four indefinitely."

"But at this rate they might all be dead by the time we can safely get to them," Paris said.

"Or they might not be," Tassay replied.

"If it turned out that way, we'd just have to find a way to defeat the planet's defenses," Chakotay said, trying to sort things out.

"Easily proposed, but difficult to do," Jonal replied. "The Televek have tried, and they are not the first. But you haven't heard me out.

When the other ships in the rescue fleet arrive, it is entirely possible that, working together, you and they could find a means.

Also, depending on how much time the planet itself has left, some of those arriving ships might be able to assist in the attempt to realign the moons."

Chakotay considered this for a moment. It made sense, especially from the aliens' point of view. He just didn't like it very much. There were far too many "ifs" and "buts." On the other hand, none of the facts seemed to be in his favor just now. And none of the options seemed

workable.

"We do understand how you must feel, I assure you," Tassay insisted, then waited for Chakotay's response, sincere as could be, the commander noted. His training and, perhaps more importantly, his experience had taught him never to completely trust anyone, not even the Federation, and yet he found himself doing just that where Tassay was concerned.

He decided to try and keep her at a distance, at least for the time being. The whole idea bothered him more than a little. The Drosary had earned his trust so far, he thought, and he believed he

had earned theirs. He wasn't sure he could necessarily say the same of the Televek, who were the ones he was ultimately dealing with--a point he thought it best to keep clearly in mind.

"Very well, but I trust the Televek won't object if we go ahead and begin trying in the meantime. We're not even sure the attempt is plausible."

The Drosary turned to one another and mumbled for a brief moment.

Then Jonal looked up. "Of course not, Commander. We will inform Gantel. I'm sure he will understand, just as you do."

"Of course," Chakotay said, drawing three quiet Drosary smiles.

He noticed that Paris had calmed considerably and was now standing nearly face to face with Mila; an aura of chemistry hung about them.

Chakotay cleared his throat loudly.

"Who is minding your station, Mister Paris?"

Chakotay heard the turbolift door hiss open. He turned in time to witness B'Elanna's brisk entrance onto the bridge. As before, she headed straight to the engineering station, barely glancing at the others on the bridge. Her eyes

never met those of the Drosary--or anyone else, for that matter--though Chakotay noticed she managed to frown rather heavily.

"Sorry, sir," Paris said as he sat down hastily and began a quick review. Mila stepped back a bit.

B'Elanna tapped at her consoles, then turned abruptly to face the commander. "Would you like my report?" she asked, looking past him to the three advocates with what Chakotay read as a mild flash of venom.

"Of course I would like your report, Lieutenant," Chakotay told her.

She still clearly had a problem with the aliens, for which he really didn't see any basis. Not yet, anyway. He made a mental note to have a word with her.

"What about... them, sir?" she asked, nodding at the Drosary.

"Would you rather we spoke in the captain's ready room?" Chakotay offered rather curtly.

B'Elanna didn't hesitate. "I would."

"Very well." Chakotay bit the words off as he started across the bridge. He took a deep breath and calmed himself

somewhat as the ready room door slid aside. He turned, then waited for the door to close behind B'Elanna.

"It's not like they're transmitting everything we say," he told B'Elanna. "We're controlling that, and frankly so are they.

They've been very helpful, at least to a point, and I'd say--" "Do you want my report or not?" she interrupted, standing less than a meter from him.

Chakotay reminded himself of her Klingon temper, her ongoing struggle to control that part of herself, and his desire to give her the chance to do so.

He saw her mixed heritage as one of her greatest strengths and had always tried to encourage her to accept herself as she was, just as he had. Of course, her more aggressive nature could get out of hand. He didn't understand her animosity toward the Drosary, something he thought had diminished since their talk in the mess hall, but he didn't think confronting her over it would do anyone any good right now. He nodded.

"I have the warp engines back on line."

Chakotay felt a sudden swell of enthusiasm. "That's very good news, B'Elanna," he said, trying to maintain a proper measure of composure.

"What about the main deflector dish?"

"That was one of the first things we were able to repair. It wasn't damaged very badly. I'm a little concerned about the engines, though.

They aren't exactly specification ready."

"What can you give us?"

"Sixty percent, maybe. And I can't guarantee how long that will last, or if it will be enough."

"I know a way to find out," Chakotay said.

B'Elanna nodded. "The computer is still working out the calculations, but we should be ready to attempt diverting the first moon in about an hour. I suggest we try the smallest moon first."

"That's also the one closest to us."

She nodded again. "It's up to you."

"I agree." He raised an eyebrow.

"Completely. And thank you, Lieutenant. We'll begin as soon as you're ready. I'll have Paris get right on it as well. Anything else?"

She just looked at him, hands fidgeting at

waist level as she stood there. "No, sir, I guess not," she said.

He didn't believe her. "I think you should give our guests another chance, B'Elanna." Chakotay stepped toward her, stood just in front of her. "There is nothing inherently wrong with people getting along. Or are you worried about the captain and Kim, or--" "If you want to get this show on the road, you're going to have to let me go back to work?"

B'Elanna said evenly.

Chakotay sighed. "That's it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Dismissed."

The door slid open again as the two of them moved toward it.

B'Elanna lingered for a moment in the opening, looking out onto the bridge. Mila and Tassay had gathered around Paris for an amicable chat. Jonal was standing near the captain's chair having a casual conversation with four other members of the bridge crew. Their small group suddenly chuckled at something Jonal had said, and then the banter quickly resumed.

Then Tassay looked up toward the ready

room. She smiled and started toward Chakotay as soon as she spotted him. B'Elanna turned and stepped back into the ready room, clutching Chakotay's sleeve as she did so and pulling him back inside. She let the door hiss shut again.

"Don't you see it?" she said in a peppery tone, glaring at him.

"See what?"

"We have possibly hostile aliens on the bridge, in a tactical situation."

"The situation is unusual, but in effect the Drosary are ambassadors, so their

presence is not unprecedented by any means," Chakotay said, considering. "Under the circumstances--" "But everybody likes them.

Jonal is the life of the party, Mila is practically sitting in Paris's lap, Tassay can't wait to see you--for God's sake, if she had a tail it would wag!"

"You just don't know her as well as I do."

"But you just met her!"

"She has quite a story to tell, B'Elanna," Chakotay said, trying again.

"Her people do. She comes from a very large, extended family. They have a great respect for all life, for their creator and the gifts he has given them. She says that, in their own way, the Televek have always had a similar philosophy. They are terribly misunderstood by most peoples, especially in regard to their business dealings. They believe that by selling comparable goods to both sides in a conflict they are in effect preventing either side from gaining an unfair advantage, thereby often preventing slaughter. They've made enemies because of this, and it's made them overly cautious, but--" "I guess I'm just a little too impressed, Chakotay. Did it

ever occur to you that they also can make twice as much profit that way?"

"Yes, of course. But you're still not seeing the situation from their side. I am at least trying to."

"You think I don't see them clearly? I watch them, Commander, the way they talk and act, the way you and everyone else around here acts when they are around, and I don't know why, but I keep getting this urge to rip them in half."

"Then get over it, Lieutenant. Soon enough, if we cooperate with them, work with them a little, we will have the captain and the others back, and we'll

also have our phasers back in working order. We might even save a race of people who alone are probably worth all of this trouble, maybe more. Then we'll be on our way, and so will the Televek."

"I see. Sounds sweet."

They faced each other in silence for a moment. Chakotay didn't want it left like this. He knew there was more he wanted to say.

And he couldn't say for sure she wasn't right.

"You are key to so much of this," he

finally added. "You have to work with them. As chief engineer, you could at least try to keep an open mind."

She closed her eyes, then opened them and looked up at him again.

"Maybe things just aren't happening soon enough."

"I know, but they will. This is your Klingon blood talking, I think.

I'm not saying you shouldn't listen to it; we both know it will always be a part of you, that you need it, but... maybe you should try listening to your human side, for now."

B'Elanna took a breath. "My human side feels the same way," she said.

"And, Commander, since you are acting as captain, you could also try to keep an open mind."

She turned away. This time when the door opened onto the bridge, she stepped through and kept going.

Chakotay watched her leave, then found Tassay standing there, waiting for him to come toward her. She was lovely, and highly skilled as a negotiator, and very, very friendly.

It was almost too good to be true...

CHAPTER 10

An indirect approach seemed wisest. Janeway led the way around the south end of the Drenarians' extensive planted fields, following a line of trees and brush that bordered the field.

Finally the three of them drew within sight of the knoll where the shuttle had landed. They crouched lower among the bushes, using them for cover. Ash and soot had covered them from head to toe, blending them in with their surroundings almost completely.

Nan Loteth had given them lengths of

cloth to tie bandanalike over their noses and mouths, which helped them to breathe. These had proven quite effective.

Janeway's first concern was that any Televek present might have infrared sensing equipment trained on them. Tuvok kept watch with his tricorder. He ran a fresh scan, and decided that, so far at least, they had apparently not been detected. Kim continued scanning the planet itself. Earthquakes were often preceded by a sudden jerk that was easily detectable. That wasn't much, but some warning, at least, would be helpful.

The morning sun was already growing uncomfortably hot, and their brisk, obstacle-fraught hike had made them sweat, causing ash to cling to their skin. The cool shade provided by the trees felt good, as did the gentle breeze.

When they neared the site, they dropped down into a shallow ravine, keeping their heads low. As they drew up approximately parallel with the shuttle's location, Janeway dropped down on all fours, then waited while Tuvok and Kim did the same. Then they crawled up and forward through the thick, natural hedge.

From here the shuttle was plainly visible just over one hundred meters away. It

appeared largely untouched, though the main hatch had clearly been opened, and just as they had feared, the shuttle was now well guarded. Half a dozen figures clad in black-and-white uniforms stood about, visually scanning their surroundings. At this distance details were difficult to discern. Still, Janeway was sure, as she shaded her eyes with one open hand, that she could see long white hair peeking out from under their squat helmets. Televek, certainly. Or Drosary.

Or whatever they were calling themselves this morning.

"Captain," Tuvok said, raising his

tricorder and tapping at it once more, "the bioscans of the Televek guarding our shuttle are precisely the same as those of the Drosary advocates aboard Voyager."

"You read my mind, Mr. Tuvok."

The Vulcan tipped his head toward her. "I have done no such thing, Captain."

"Then I guess we just think alike."

"I'm getting the same readings, Captain," Kim said, duplicating Tuvok's scans.

"Doesn't this mean that we've been had?"

"That is the only logical explanation,"

Janeway said.

Tuvok looked at her. "Captain--" "I know," Janeway said, grinning. "I read your mind." She turned toward the shuttle again. "This also means that everything Gantel and his advocates told us was a lie," she muttered. "At least we have to assume as much. Which means that three Televek are up there on my ship right now, lying to Chakotay. And we don't know exactly what they're up to. We must make contact with Voyager again at any cost."

"There are probably more Televek inside the shuttle as well," Tuvok pointed out. "In all, too many to attempt

a frontal assault."

"If the main hatch is blocked, we'll just have to think of something else,"

Janeway said, looking around, seeing no easy approach. Each of the Televek was holding a stubby energy rifle, and the sentinels were spaced fairly evenly around the shuttle.

Thick, knee-high grass covered the ground between the tree line and the shuttle, but it would not provide any real cover.

"Any trace of sensor equipment in use?" she asked Tuvok.

"I continue to find none, Captain," Tuvok said, holding his open tricorder out again, moving it gently from side to side.

"They don't need sensors," Kim said.

"With all that open ground we'll never get close without drawing their fire."

"Agreed, Captain," Tuvok said. "I am scanning several bodies in the grass, all approximately twenty meters from the shuttle.

They are almost certainly Drenarian."

"Nan Loteth's people," Janeway concluded.

"I'll bet they never knew what hit them," Kim said.

Janeway briefly envisioned the scene, energy beams striking unprotected flesh from well beyond the range of the Drenarians' primitive weapons.

She shook the image off, but as she peered out into the tall, soot-covered grasses, she could see several dark shapes. The three officers observed a long moment of silence. Nothing changed in the field.

Janeway looked out to her left, eyeing the bluff where she had fallen the day before. A large part of hillside had

fallen away during the last big quake, but the newer edge was rather like the old. She had an idea. She didn't like the variables, but there wasn't time to worry about that.

"We'll have to split up. Tuvok, I want you to stand by here.

Try to get a little closer if you can, but keep your head down.

And keep your face covered, so you won't choke on the dust.

Don't risk being seen. Kim and I are going to work our way up there and attempt to draw some of those guards

away from the shuttlecraft.

If that strategy works, the rest will be up to you."

Tuvok briefly appraised the situation, then nodded. "I understand, Captain."

"Good. If you're able to get aboard, I want you to get communications working first. Contact the ship, tell them what we know. After that, if possible, see if you can get the transporter operational."

"Captain, even if I am able to do so, I doubt we will be able to transport anyone up to Voyager's high orbit," Tuvok said. "The same magnetic fields

that are hampering our communicator signals might well distort the transporter beam."

"I know," Janeway said. "And you're right, but I may have something else in mind. Don't worry, I'm not holding you to any promises."

Tuvok gazed out at his target. "Very well, I will do my best."

Janeway touched Tuvok's shoulder, stopping him as he instantly prepared to belly-crawl out beyond the tree line. "I know you will," she said.

"And we both know we have to try to

make this work. But not at the expense of one of my best officers."

The Vulcan turned to her for a moment. "That would be an unfortunate waste." His expression did not change. She didn't expect it would.

Janeway nodded and let him go.

They watched Tuvok inch his way out through the grass. Then Janeway slid back, signaling Kim to follow, and the two of them headed toward the higher ground.

"On my mark." Chakotay watched from the captain's chair as the smallest of the three moons drew nearer, filling the main viewscreen.

The maneuver had required only a minor course correction; Drenar's newest moon was in an orbit only slightly higher than Voyager's had been.

The three Drosary stood clustered to his left, well out of the way, exactly where the commander had asked them to stand. He had stopped short of removing them from the bridge entirely, at least for now, but he didn't mind keeping them in check. Still, they had complied with his requests without the slightest incident,

saying they completely understood. Chakotay took this as another sign that he was largely right about them, and that B'Elanna was overreacting.

As Voyager slowly closed the distance, using only a fraction of the impulse engines' output, the details of the moon became more clearly visible. The surface was unusually smooth.

"Moving to optimum position," Paris said, alternating his attention between his console and the main screen. "Things must have been pretty quiet wherever this moon used to be," he added, observing the moon as Chakotay did.

"Ice may have covered its surface," Chakotay suggested. "That would have evaporated as the moon traveled sunward."

"Like a giant comet," Paris suggested. "Must have had one hell of a tail."

"We should be able to detect its debris trail without too much trouble," Chakotay said.

"If you two are through sight-seeing," B'Elanna said over the comm, "we are ready down here."

"Good," Chakotay answered. "Mr. Paris, engage the warp engines."

Mr. Rollins, activate the main deflector."

The commander stood up and moved to Ops, where Ensign Stephens kept watch in place of Kim. Over the ensign's shoulder he watched the monitor displaying the warp field, a misshapen bubble that reached out from the starship's bow and bumped into the giant moon, which was hundreds of times Voyager's size. The bubble slowly spread out until it touched nearly a third of the satellite's surface.

"That's all we've got," B'Elanna said.

Chakotay nodded. "Impulse power, Mr. Paris. Easy does it."

For several minutes everyone remained in place, fully engaged in silent station-keeping. Then: "I show movement, Commander," Stephens sang out, to the sound of relieved sighs from one and all.

"Warp engines are holding at sixty-three percent," Paris reported.

"All three graviton polarity generators on-line and operating within acceptable limits," B'Elanna added.

"Good work, Torres," Chakotay told her.

"Rollins will have to keep compensating for the moon's density variations manually," she responded. "I'll keep a watch on things down here. Meanwhile, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to being all those other miracle workers you think I am.

Torres out."

It would be hours before they were through with just this moon, then they had to see what they could do about the others. After that, they might have to go back and work on this one again.

Even by their best estimates, it would be some time before any significant effect

was felt below on the planet. But for the first time since Voyager had entered orbit around Drenar Four, Chakotay felt that they were getting somewhere.

He looked up again, willing the moon to move. "Progress, Mr. Rollins?"

"Point zero zero three percent, sir."

"Very well. Steady as she goes."

Janeway experienced a sense of foreboding as she approached the edge of the bluff. The top of her head still ached from the last time she'd been here.

She edged forward with extra caution until she and Kim were in good positions, hidden behind the dense trees, some of which had recently fallen into one another. She could see Tuvok from here, a dark shape in the tall grass still at least fifty meters from the shuttlecraft. None of the Televek seemed to have spotted him yet. She knew their ignorance wouldn't last long.

She drew her hand phaser. "On stun," she said as Kim drew his.

She took aim. "Ready... fire."

Twin bright phaser beams flickered toward the shuttle, and two of the

Televek guards dropped instantly. Janeway fired again as the others scurried for cover. One of them fired back, a wild shot that found only air. Kim managed to drop another guard before the opportunity was lost. Janeway's second shot missed. All the remaining Televek were behind the shuttle now, and all of them began firing back. This time the shots were much closer.

"Reset," Janeway said. She put her phaser on full, then fired again, aiming high, letting the beam strike a large spike of rock just beyond the shuttle and causing the rock to explode. Kim chose a young tree ten meters to the left. It burst

open when the heat of the beam seared its trunk. Smoke and steam curled from the split pieces.

"Now let's send them an invitation," Janeway said. She stood up and fired once more, making sure she was seen. Kim grimly did the same.

Much of the dust that had covered their clothing had fallen off. On the ridge, against the drab forest background, the two officers made an excellent target. The Televek immediately tried to fire on their position, but Janeway had already turned and leaped out of the way.

Kim followed.

A little too close, Janeway thought, though she didn't let her opinion show. She signaled Kim, and they moved back from the edge and waited, silent. Soon enough they heard the Televek guards coming out of hiding, firing preemptive shots at the trees where Janeway and Kim had just been, then moving toward the bluff. She heard them calling to one another as they climbed up the loose hillside.

"Let's not make it too easy for them, Mr. Kim. You go, that way." He did as he was told. When the first Televek peeked over the edge, Janeway fired. She aimed and hit a fallen tree, a warning shot that

landed just inches from the Televek's head, then turned again and sprinted deeper into the forested area.

Kim was just ahead of her now. She was catching up, but she could hear the Televek right behind her, also catching up. Her plan was working--perhaps a little too well.

Tuvok raised his head up far enough to get a clear view. He held there, carefully watching the shuttle. He saw only one Televek remaining, crouched in a defensive position behind the starboard nacelle, concentrating on the tumbled-

down hill as the guard's comrades scrambled up the loose dirt and fought their way over the top. They all disappeared, chasing the captain and Kim.

Tuvok dropped back down and began to crawl more quickly, though he was careful not to kick up too much dust.

A few meters ahead he reached the dead Drenarians, who had probably been killed the night before, Tuvok surmised. They lay stiff and cold, their waxen faces oblivious to the heat of the midday sun. He crawled past them, toward the shuttle, keeping a steady eye on the one remaining guard.

The position of the guard and the open hatch forced him to circle the shuttle so as to use the ship itself for cover. When he finally reached the hull he was near the bow. He set his phaser on stun, then rose, stepped around the bow, and fired, taking the partially hidden guard completely by surprise. The guard slumped silently to the ground. Tuvok rushed on, past the nacelle, certain there was no time to waste. He paused beside the hatch, then took a deep breath and charged in through the opening.

Another helmetless Televek stood tinkering at the main control panel, apparently hurrying to get some

particular task accomplished. He was holding a blunt energy weapon in one hand while he attempted to use some type of probe with the other.

When he looked up, Tuvok fired.

Tuvok moved forward, stepping over the Televek's still form, and began examining the work the intruder had been doing. A number of circuits had been patched or rerouted.

"Thank you for your assistance," the Vulcan said out loud, nodding to the figure at his feet. "You have saved me a good deal of time."

He put away his phaser and dragged the Televek just outside the shuttle. Then he slipped back inside, activated the emergency lighting system, and manually closed the hatch, sealing it shut.

Tuvok needed only a moment to appraise the situation. The Televek's repairs, apparently intended to restore main power, had indeed been helpful, but much work remained to be done. He wasted no time in getting to it.

CHAPTER 11

Gantel sat quietly in his vast suite--vast for a battle cruiser, certainly--gazing wistfully at the baubles that filled every

shelf, every corner, and much of the wall space. Even the chairs and tables were the finest available; the dining set was the prize among them, an antique older than some stars, or nearly so.

His wardrobe was the match of any director's, tenth level on up, with the possible exception of Shaale herself.

But his life had many such amenities. He dined on the finest cuisine, foods prepared by a chef he had personally abducted from a Torthesian resort nearly nine years ago, and worth the effort, make no mistake.

His collection of music--a passion

considered curious by many Televek, but one he indulged nonetheless--was unequalled anywhere, so far as he knew, and would surpass even that high mark once he acquired the music libraries of the Federation starship Voyager.

Still, as his eyes came to rest on the set of exotically crafted, painstakingly hand-painted Pollian vases, neatly arranged from small to large, his mind sought to digress into a pool of swirling, self-indulgent doubt. For a moment, but for just a moment, he did not resist.

It was the goal of any civilized creature to obtain position, power, and wealth, and he had done so by doing what few

Televek dared: he had taken some big risks; he had taken the important chances, despite what that tended to do to his stomach, and only when he had thought the time was right. It was a question of both want and need, as far as Gantel was concerned. When you wanted something badly enough, you needed to find a way to acquire it. And he had.

His success had cost him, though--three mates, so far, some gastrointestinal therapy, and a short list of enemies he had spent some years keeping an eye on. But all that was to be expected. And it had been worth the risk. Hadn't it...?

An old friend had once told him that there came a time in every director's life, and even in every associate's, when absolutely ridiculous questions would arise to plunder the sanity of the mind.

Questions like "What is the meaning of life?"

All this, Gantel thought as he looked past the priceless vases to the jeweled Awakening Day ceremonial chalice, something from his own world, then on to more of his belongings. But the temptation was to imagine there might be another meaning. A deeper, more spiritual one.

He had always laughed at such idiocy. Failings could be traced to mistakes, successes to adroitness. And enough successes piled one on top of the other constituted fulfillment. But then what?

...

Gantel blinked. One needed to be drunk, or at least getting there, in order to ponder such topics, and he simply couldn't indulge himself to that extent right now. Not with so much going on at once, so many variables, so many ways for something to go wrong and leave a blight the size of Drenar Four itself on his otherwise splendid career.

His instincts told him to make a deal with himself, sell himself a purely adequate bill of tried philosophical goods, just as every other Televek did, the same package his own parents had promoted. And the truth was, Gantel had very good instincts. No one could deny that.

He stood up and slowly crossed the room, where he paused to examine the contents of a case filled with hand weapons, ancient sharp-edged instruments he could only imagine trying actually to use in hand-to-hand combat. The idea was incredible, in fact.

He could only imagine what the wounds

would look like, what a death like that might be like. He thought of it often, in fact.

At the far wall a curved shard of burned metal rested on a shelf, kept in place by three transparent pins. The piece, a meter long and roughly twice as wide as Gantel's own head, was jagged on all but one edge. It had been part of the armor used to protect the Vanolens' massive primary space habitat. And it had been impenetrable, a problem the Thaitifa, in their quest to rule the Vanolens, had come to Gantel to solve. Briefly, Gantel had fretted over his decision. The Vanolens were a glorious people.

Their civilization had been around for millions of years. Even longer than the Televek themselves. Artisans at heart, the lot of them. And their cities in space were simply remarkable. He had spent some time there in his youth listening to music, and he still remembered the name of one particularly alluring windwhyle player he'd met at the East Ocean Symphonic Review, and the many talents she embodied.

Gantel had been only a third associate then, and the stars knew there were more than enough eager associates of every rank scrambling to climb up one more rung on the ladder of success.

But as luck would have it--though to this day he had never admitted that luck had anything to do with it--he had come into possession of a phase-shifted payload device capable of delivering any obtainable warhead to any programmable point inside virtually any fixed defensive barrier.

In the end, of course, he had sold the delivery system to the Thaitifa, and they had used it to great effect against the Vanolens. The sale was what mattered, after all, not the ones who had died, not even the real estate that had been obliterated, and in the end he had been able to find comfort in that belief--that and the fact that the Thaitifa had paid the

most ridiculous price imaginable, a boon that by itself had propelled Gantel to first associate at his next evaluation.

It had been the right choice. And in any case, if he hadn't closed the deal, some other associate would have, sooner or later.

His one true regret was that the delivery units he had sold the Thaitifa were the only ones he'd had on hand. Before he was able to obtain more, the Garn, from whom he had purchased the weapons--a race of methane-breathing quadrupeds who, during negotiations, had given new meaning to words like "challenging" and "awkward"--had managed to lose the

war they were fighting, and lose it in a big way. There had been nothing left but ashes by the time Gantel got around to going back.

With a sigh Gantel meandered back across the room and, from one of the taps over the microbar, drew an icy glass of berry juice--a blend selected from nine different worlds, a combination of flavors to please any palate. He drank it all. It tasted wonderful. He was coming out of the dark pool now, exorcising his doubt, feeling better.

He had met with failure more than once along the way, the price of taking

chances, but throughout his celebrated career Gantel had managed to find a way to cover up his worst setbacks, usually by placing most of the blame on someone else; and to be sure he had closed on many a marginal deal, snatched breakthroughs from the jaws of calamity, fooled the sharpest opponents into trusting him completely, and turned the needs and suffering of others into opportunity and profit many times over.

Drenar Four was no exception, he told himself, setting his glass down.

"Enta sa tnoai," he said out loud, quoting in the ancient tongue: "Seize the deal."

He focused once more on the situation at hand. The cruiser's shields had been repaired, and Gantel was relatively certain that the Federation ship's photon torpedoes could not collapse them, at least not in a first volley. And without any shields of its own, the Federation vessel would not survive long enough to fire many rounds.

Triness would see to that.

Jonal and the others were doing a fair job under the circumstances; they were as capable a team as any he had fielded in some time. The trouble was, like most Televek, Gantel hated to rely on others, an instinct the Televek had retained

since prehistoric times. But civilization, and success itself, usually required the delegation of responsibility. A director, certainly, must direct.

Moreover, his plan to feign assistance, though certainly risky, was a good one; it had been working famously, and should continue to do so.

Although this new wrinkle, moving the moons around to alleviate the tectonic pressures within the planet, had the potential to pose some nasty complications. Still, though, he doubted the visitors had the time or the resources to make any real difference. They would be finished as soon as he said so. All he

had to do was keep things from getting any more convoluted, keep the risk factors from escalating, until the rest of the plan could be "We have the first director on our extended scans," Triness said, her voice nearly as melodic as the strains of a Vanolen windwhyle to his ears. And indeed she spoke mostly welcome words. He wasn't looking forward to First Director Shaale's arrival, but unless something went incredibly wrong--something he had resolved not to think about, at least not constantly--the rest of the week promised to turn out very well indeed.

Gantel drew a second glass of juice with a sigh of imposed satisfaction. He

marveled at the color and the tantalizing aroma; then he set the glass back down. He wasn't thirsty anymore. And his stomach didn't feel quite well.

"Very good," he said, gathering up his director's dress coat, shrugging the weight of it onto his shoulders. "I'll be up in a moment."

Chakotay watched the viewscreen fill up with moon. The first phase of their efforts had gone well indeed. Though the process was akin to watching water evaporate, the first moon's trajectory had been measurably altered. The second

moon's movement would be much less impressive, and the strain on the warp engines as the deflector was again activated was sure to worsen.

But B'Elanna insisted that what little Voyager was beginning to accomplish was within the desired parameters, and she hadn't advised calling the mission off--not yet, anyway. Chakotay took her word on all of it. Nearly impossible feats of precise engineering under extreme duress were the sort of thing she was good at; he'd staked his life on that more than once.

He rose from the captain's chair, then returned once more to the ops station

where he had been standing for much of the past few hours, peering over Ensign Stephens's shoulder. The whole thing was theory.

They couldn't be sure that their effort would have a large enough effect to ease the violent turbulence within the planet, or whether the benefits, even if they succeeded, would come in time. But it made sense to try, if only to help ease the sense of helplessness that Chakotay knew the crew felt.

"Commander," Paris said, "extreme long-range sensors are picking up several vessels. They appear to be on a direct course toward the Drenar system."

"Those are certainly the Televek transport and supply ships we told you about," Jonal said, drawing up beside the Commander at Ops. The Drosary glanced at the panel where the sensor information was displayed and smiled, first at the ensign, then at Chakotay. "Just as promised, help is on the way."

"You will all be quite pleased when the Televek vessels arrive," Tassay said as she and Mila joined the others. "They will help bring our problems, and those of the people below, to an acceptable solution."

And when all of that is finished, before

we go our separate ways, there will be time for some of us to get to know some of you a little bit... better, perhaps."

Chakotay found her looking only at him as she spoke this last.

Looking into him, it seemed. And he felt for a moment as if he were staring deeply into some part of her as well.

"I certainly hope so," Mila said, strolling back toward Paris's station, running one fingertip lightly across the back of his neck. He seemed to weather the assault well enough.

"You are a wonderfully skilled pilot,"

she told him. "I'll bet you're the best your Starfleet has to offer."

"You don't have to tell him that," Chakotay remarked. "Just ask him, and he'll be glad to tell you."

"I was a good pilot, too," Mila said, slightly more serious.

"One day I will be again, and I will demonstrate my skill."

Paris looked up at her, his expression softer than any that Chakotay was used to seeing. "I believe you," he said. "And I think you'll get your chance, just as I have."

Chakotay turned at the sound of the turbolift door opening behind him.

Lieutenant Torres stepped onto the bridge and stopped in mid-stride.

Her eyes narrowed, and she pursed her lips.

Chakotay followed her gaze to Paris and Mila, who were engaged together in what was becoming a special moment. Mila bent over, her nose nearly touching the lieutenant's as he raised his face to hers. They whispered briefly to each other, grinning frivolously.

When Chakotay looked back, he found B'Elanna still rigid, fists clenched at her sides, only she was looking at him now. He felt Tassay behind him then, her warm breath on the back of his neck.

One of her hands gently touched his side. "I hope things work out perfectly," she said softly, "for all of us."

Chakotay felt a little chill, and perhaps he also felt guilty, as if he'd just been caught in a lie. He gently brushed Tassay's hand aside.

"You have something to report, Lieutenant?" he asked Torres, hearing his voice crack as he spoke. He cleared

his throat and waited. The answer seemed to take a while.

"Not right now," Torres said stiffly.

"Then why are you on the bridge?" Chakotay asked, feeling slightly annoyed. After all, she wasn't helping anyone just standing there casting a dark mood over the bridge. At least, he didn't want to think she was helping...

Again she paused. "Just checking the image on the main screen," she said. Which made no sense. It wasn't any different from the monitor screens in engineering.

"Checking for what?"

"It's a long story, I guess," she answered.

"It's just..." She looked away from the screen, looked at everyone on the bridge.

"Just what?"

B'Elanna let a look of sad frustration cross her features for just an instant, very different from the strict expression she had brought in with her. "I have a lot to do right now. Duties.

You understand, or at least I think you do. I know you used to."

She spun on her heel and tromped back toward the lift door.

"Where are you going?" Chakotay asked.

"I'll be in Engineering," she said, "doing what needs to be done." And then she was gone.

Chakotay stood silently contemplating B'Elanna's last words. He could hear Tassay trying to talk to him again, continuing the same conversation, as if nothing had happened. "I have such plans," she continued. Something about taking a shuttle through the rest of the Drenar system in a couple of days to do some sight-seeing. He was trying very

hard not to listen.

"Commander," Rollins said, "those ships are approaching optimal sensor range. I'm scanning now."

"Excellent," Jonal said, moving toward Rollins in the tactical bay as the ensign worked at his consoles. The Drosary stepped closer and attempted to look down at the readings, but Rollins waved him off as if he were a fly buzzing too close.

"Those are definitely Televek reactor signatures," Rollins reported.

"They are such punctual people, these

Televek," Tassay said, her voice loud in Chakotay's ear.

"And nearly as friendly as we are," Mila told Paris, again nose to nose.

"Commander," Rollins said then, looking up, wide-eyed. "This is odd.

They don't look much like transports or supply ships. Any of them.

I'm trying to verify tonnage, configuration, and energy curves, but as far as I can tell, those ships are all identical to that--" Jonal wrapped his arm around Rollins's neck, cutting him off in mid-sentence.

At almost the same instant Mila wrapped an arm around Paris's neck and tightened it, nearly lifting him out of his seat.

Chakotay tried to move, but he felt hands grabbing him, reining him in. Before he could utter a sound, Tassay had one hand over his face, an arm firmly around his middle. She bent him backward far enough to immobilize him, nearly far enough to break his back, and held him fast.

"We'll have to take control ahead of schedule!" Jonal shouted.

Chakotay watched as Mila forced Paris to one side, then used her free hand to

tap rapidly at the helm panel. The ship lurched once, hard to port, then again, to starboard, shuddering as the force rippled through the hull and deck plates. Then Voyager came to a full stop. Jonal held Rollins aside and worked the tactical controls. In a moment he looked up at the other Drosary. "We are secure at the moment."

Chakotay tried to struggle, but that effort quickly proved pointless.

The two security guards stationed on the bridge were of little use at the moment as well. Even as Jonal, Mila, and Tassay performed their tasks, they held their captives so as to shield themselves

against the guards' drawn phasers.

Chakotay was amazed at the strength the Drosary possessed; it was even more remarkable than their well-defined physiques would suggest. He was helpless against her hold, as were the others.

"What do you want?" he managed, though his words came out garbled under the pressure of Tassay's hand.

"We want all of you to remain perfectly still, or we will snap the necks of these officers one by one," Jonal replied. He turned to Chakotay. "Tell your officers to do as I say."

Chakotay said nothing at all. He couldn't give these people that kind of freedom; he wouldn't.

Jonal asked again, but the commander kept still. "Very well, then, they will do what you say," Jonal said angrily after only a slight hesitation. "Have your guards put down their weapons.

Then I want the bridge sealed off."

The difference was subtle. Simon says, more or less. But Chakotay thought this was something he could try to work with.

"Seal the doors," he told Stephens, who quickly complied. He told the guards to comply as well.

"A good start," Jonal said. "Seal the conduits, too. I want the computer to begin continuous scans of all areas surrounding the bridge.

We don't want anyone breaking in through a wall somewhere. Tell the computer to do that, or Tassay will kill you. Once that happens, you will be replaced by another bridge officer, who will die in turn, until I get what I want."

"Very well," Chakotay said, giving the commands. There wasn't anything else

he could do just yet.

"Doors and conduits are sealed, scans are in place," Stephens reported after a moment.

"Now change the bridge computer control authorization code so that no one can surprise us," Jonal ordered, grinning slightly.

"Change it to accept my voice, my name."

"I can't do that," Chakotay muttered.

"Then I will kill you, and that one," Tassay said, nodding toward Stephens.

Her voice sounded different, cold.

Chakotay grudgingly nodded, and once again the ensign complied.

"Computer, transfer all controls, authorization code alpha-fine, abacrom-dexter, six, four, zero, nine, one. Copy voice authorization."

Chakotay looked to Jonal, who nodded and spoke his name. The computer confirmed the transfer.

Jonal seemed to worry over the tactical console for a moment after that, tapping at it sporadically. Then he straightened, his expression one of mild satisfaction.

Chakotay made an effort to straighten as well, but Tassay seemed disinclined to allow it. She had her other hand around his throat now, but she wasn't squeezing very hard.

"I'll bet you don't even think I'm cute," he said to her. When she made no reply, he added, "I thought we were just starting to get somewhere. I had a little country house with a white picket fence all picked out."

Tassay adjusted her grip. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I know you don't," Chakotay said.

"Open a channel to Gantel," Mila told Jonal, apparently anxious.

Jonal nodded silently, then worked at the console. "Done!" he shouted the moment contact was established, obviously pleased with himself.

Suddenly the screen was no longer filled with the planet's smallest moon.

"We have a visual," Stephens said as the fact became evident.

The face on the screen was that of a male who could have easily been Jonal's brother. The room in the background

was well lit and decorated with colorful tapestries. Several other figures stood about, apparently attending the communication. They all looked much the same.

The women could have been Mila and Tassay's sisters.

"You're all Televek," Paris said, stating the obvious, squirming to no avail.

"So it would seem," Chakotay muttered.

"Gantel," Jonal said, acknowledging the image on the screen.

"The bridge is secured. We are in

control of the ship."

Gantel's expression didn't change.

"Already?"

"There was no choice. They are fairly bright, as you know. They were about to scan Shaale's fleet. They would have figured the situation out."

"That is what I like about you, Jonal, your ability to adapt. It is just as well. Our pods are ready. The teams have been assembled. We can begin launching almost immediately. You haven't damaged anything valuable, have you?"

"Of course not."

"So you are pirates," Chakotay said.

"Oh, we are much more than that, and you, my friend, are a fool," Mila replied. She jerked Paris off the floor to punctuate the statement, and to still his struggling body. "All of you are fools. No wonder you wandered so far from home and got lost."

"I liked Jonal's opinion better," Paris muttered.

"Whatever, it still doesn't change the fact that they have some very impressive technology," an impatient Gantel said from the screen.

"Most of which we will find quite valuable, I am certain. Jonal, do you intend to stand there like that until we relieve you?"

"No, of course not," Jonal replied. He turned to Chakotay.

"Commander, tell all of your people to move toward the forward area of the bridge, between the helm and the main screen. They won't be needed for a while, and we can keep a better eye on them there. We will tend to all stations. Your only task now is to wait quietly."

"And after you've stripped Voyager of

whatever you want, what will you do then?" Chakotay asked, as the bridge crew began to comply. "What happens to us?"

"They'll either kill us, or leave us here to die," Paris said bitterly.

"We have no intention of stripping your vessel," the Televek commander answered from the screen again. "I plan to take the whole vessel home!

After we've finished using it to help retrieve our salvage from the planet, of course."

"Do you have any intention of helping

those people down there?"

Chakotay asked, his tone implying he already knew the answer.

"We are interested in the defensive system that protects them," Gantel said. "We have no need of the Drenarians, nor do we need any of you.

The most obvious solution is to escort all of you down to the planet, once we've disarmed the system. Then we'll let the universe decide your fate."

"Leave all our troubles behind," Jonal said, smiling at Chakotay.

"It is amazing that so primitive a race could create such a ship," Tassay remarked.

"Indeed," Mila said.

"Such a windfall," Gantel agreed.

"We aren't so primitive," Paris said.

"What makes you think you're any better?"

"Oh, but we are better, and we are right," Jonal said, letting go of Rollins and motioning him to join the others, who were nearly all gathered in front of the viewscreen now. Mila let go of Paris, who moved slowly away from

her. Finally Tassay let Chakotay go as well.

Jonal and Mila collected two discarded phasers and trained them on the crew.

"You are barbarians, thieves, and liars," Chakotay said in response.

"Not at all, Commander," Jonal said.

"You see, we represent a leap in evolution far beyond what any one aboard Voyager could boast. Our instincts are empathic. They no longer alert us to primitive dangers long vanished from our way of life. We react instead to other intelligent beings' minds, to their psyches, their most immutable

characteristics. This facilitates familiarity and, with practice, manipulation."

"So now we're buddies," Stephens said, shaking his head.

"You knew exactly which buttons to push with each one of us, in order to win our trust," Paris said.

Jonah nodded. "Once we had spent a little time with you, yes."

"You're salesmen," Chakotay said grimly. "Natural born salesmen."

"Sure," Paris moaned. "And we bought a

lemon."

"Nine lemons, if you count the cruiser in orbit with us," Rollins said.

"The other eight are approaching at warp eight, according to the last sensor data I saw."

"We are well adapted to survival in an advanced social environment," Mila said, looking straight at Paris again.

"While you are still better suited to life in an armed camp set in some wilderness outback."

"I'd like to take you out into the wilderness," Paris told her, smiling

sickly at her.

"You still find me attractive, don't you?"
Mila cooed, smiling back.

"I knew you did."

"I find you repulsive," Paris said,
suddenly glaring at her.

"But I would like to do something
primitive to you, like break your neck."

"I should silence you right now!" Mila
shouted at him.

"I see no reason not to," Gantel said
from the screen. "None of them will
survive in any case."

Mila's grin returned, but her expression was filled with malice now.

She glanced at her two companions, who quietly nodded to her.

"How can you call yourselves advanced and still have so little regard for life?" Chakotay challenged them.

"We have exceptional regard for life, Commander," Jonal said.

"Our own."

"I won't let you kill him," Chakotay said bitterly, stepping forward, all but

blocking Mila's shot.

"You will once you are dead," Tassay said, taking the phaser from Jonal and aiming it at the commander.

Mila raised her arm and aimed her weapon as well. Jonal frowned.

"Get on with it."

"Very well," Mila answered.

But with that all three Televek suddenly began to change into pillars of sparkling matter. They cried out in hollow, echoing voices as they disappeared from the bridge in a fading cloud of

transporter particles.

Cheers burst from the lips of every officer present.

Chakotay turned to Stephens and made a quick hand motion, two fingers drawn across his throat.

Stephens reached the ops station in three leaps and complied.

The main screen went blank. He looked up, panting.

"Transmission terminated, Commander."

"Unlock everything," Chakotay told him. He took another breath.

"Computer, release all controls, authorization code alpha-fine, abacrom-dexter, six, four, zero, nine, two."

"Control status, normal," the computer replied.

"Chakotay to transporter room!" the commander shouted, slapping hard at his comm badge. "How--" "The aliens are in custody and headed for the brig, Commander, and Lt. Torres is on her way up to see you right now," the transporter officer replied. An instant later Lieutenant Torres stepped once more onto the bridge.

"Torres!" Chakotay said, holding both hands out toward her, grinning.

"B'Elanna!"

"It is me," she kidded. She smiled back, purposely demure, as she met him halfway and returned his embrace. He let her go almost at once.

"It seems Neelix wasn't the only one in this part of the galaxy who'd never seen a transporter before," she told him.

"I bet they'll never forget it," Chakotay replied.

Torres smiled at the others. "I suppose

they left without even saying good-bye."

"As a matter of fact, they were just about to," Paris told her as he reclaimed his station. "Thanks," he said, when B'Elanna looked at him.

"I'm just glad they're gone," Rollins added as he began working to restore normal control.

"Yes," Chakotay said less enthusiastically, looking up at the blank screen, well aware of what was out there. "But I'm afraid most of them haven't gone very far."

CHAPTER 12

Gantel leaned forward in his chair, opened his mouth--and found no words appropriate to the occasion. A splendid series of curses came to mind, but by then it was too late even to curse.

The Federation ship had broken contact. He uttered the obscenities under his breath for his own benefit. Then he turned to his crew.

"I've never seen anything like that!" Triness said, an unfamiliar touch of nervousness in her voice. "It is as if my own eyes--" "That's why I want to see it again," Gantel said. "Run the last few minutes of transmission back. We need

another look. Have the computer analyze the images:" They watched again as Jonal, Mila, and Tassay vanished from sight and the screen went black. The computer was of no immediate help.

"It looks as though they were vaporized somehow," Triness said as the cruiser began to come about. Her eyes narrowed as she and Gantel stared at the blank screen. "Yet no weapon was used, at least not by anyone on their bridge."

"None we know of," Gantel said. His gaze drifted, until he sat looking at his feet, staring at as fine a pair of K'Heplian leather boots as had ever walked a deck. This was the kind of

situation that could go either way. Boon or bust. With the fleet due to arrive in no time, whatever he did next would make the difference between risk and ruin.

The problem was, no hint of a solution seemed willing to present itself.

But he couldn't just stay here, doing nothing.

"Range to target?" Gantel shouted.

"Four hundred thousand kilometers," the helmsman said.

"Close to one hundred thousand immediately."

The screen lit up again with a view of near space. The planet's smallest moon filled most of the field, but a minute spot could be seen crossing its equinox, moving into the light. The moon began to grow as the cruiser drew forward.

"Whatever they did, they must have done it from a remote location," the navigation officer said, taking her chances by speaking out of turn.

"So the technology may have control limitations." Her comment was met with nods all around.

"Still, imagine the power such a device

would give an aggressor," Triness said.

"Imagine the price it would command!" Gantel exclaimed.

"More than enough to make up for the loss of the envoys," Triness suggested.

Gantel nodded agreement. "And a hundred like them."

Then Triness seemed to come to some fresh perspective. She looked at Gantel as if he had changed color.

"What is it?" he asked.

"At the moment," she said, her eyes drifting back toward the main viewer, "I

am most concerned about... the range of the weapon."

Gantel considered this briefly. He had to agree. They were already getting very close to the Federation ship. "It's range must be limited, or they would have used it against us by now.

What is our present distance?"

"One hundred fifty and closing."

"All stop."

"Agreed, the device must have a short range," Triness said.

"Or," Gantel suggested, "they were saving it. Keeping it a secret until they needed to use it."

"Indeed," Triness said, her lips pursed in speculation.

Gantel leaned forward to peer at the Federation ship. "This must be done right. Whatever this device is, it must be ours. I want to present it to Shaale myself."

That was the key, of course. The kind of bold maneuver that would put him in very good stead with the first director, perhaps even earn him a special commission. But more importantly, he

would, if he handled the deal correctly, retain the distribution rights to the device. And if the stars were on his side, the distribution profits would be in addition to whatever windfall came from the recovery of the defensive system on Drenar Four.

Overall, this would be the most successful, most profitable mission in memory--anyone's memory, so far as Gantel knew!

Surely that possibility was worth the risk, a thousand times over.

The Federation ship was apparently a treasure trove of technological wonders.

Even if nothing of value proved recoverable from the planet itself, the capture of Voyager, intact, meant Gantel would succeed.

The hard part, of course, would be doing just that.

"Have they raised their shields yet?"

"No," Triness reported. "Their shields must still be down. I have raised ours."

"Very well, let's get a little closer."

"I didn't know the transporters were functioning again," Chakotay said, as he

watched the Televek approach. The cruiser came to an abrupt halt, maintaining a little more distance than earlier.

B'Elanna shrugged. "They weren't, until... well until just a couple of minutes ago. I was trying to tell you we were close when I came up here the last time."

"Why didn't you?"

"Everyone seemed a little... preoccupied."

"I guess we did at that," Chakotay said, an intended note of apology in his voice.

"Anyway," Torres went on, "when the ship lurched both ways and came to full stop I had a pretty good idea what was going on, and who was behind it. When the bridge was suddenly isolated, I knew."

"You were completely right about them," Chakotay said. "You knew all along, didn't you?"

"My Klingon blood, I guess." She looked at him and smiled. "And my human heart."

Chakotay couldn't help but smile back. Torres often came to him for guidance, yet this time he had been the one in need.

He looked at her with subtle admiration. He wanted to say something, but a simple thank-you would not have sufficed.

"B'Elanna," he said, "who we are is sometimes our greatest weakness, but it also can be our greatest strength."

The lieutenant said nothing for a moment, but Chakotay knew even before she nodded that she understood.

"Commander," Stephens said, indicating the main viewscreen. "The Televek are trying to hail us again."

"I'll bet they're not too happy," Paris

said.

"I'll bet their friends in that fleet of cruisers heading our way won't be very happy when they get here, either," Rollins added.

Chakotay frowned. "Any change in the planet's status?"

"It's churning in the continental region again, Commander," Ensign Stephens reported crisply. "Major eruptions from numerous active volcanoes, and quakes everywhere, offshore as well."

"How bad?"

"I can't get a clear enough reading, but I think this is the worst we've seen since our arrival."

Chakotay stood utterly silent as he considered his next move. He took a deep breath. "Go to red alert. Target weapons.

Transporter room, can you get a fix on the away team?"

"I've been trying, sir," Hoffman said over the comm. "I've located three signals that I think may be them, but I've been unable to make a positive ID, and I can't get a good lock. We're still fighting an ocean of interference down there.

Those could be Drenarians, or even Televek for all I know. I'm sorry, Commander."

"Understood. Mr. Rollins, you have the bridge. Keep those photon torpedoes trained on that cruiser. I'll be in the transporter room.

B'Elanna," he added wryly, already headed off the bridge, "get back to work."

The turbolift door closed just in time.

Drenar Four was coming apart. Tuvok

felt the quake approaching, but he was ill prepared for the violence it contained when it fully arrived.

Even after bracing himself, feet apart, hands pressed against the console and bulkhead, he was quickly knocked away from all supportive surfaces, then thrown down to the hard deck. He crept along the moving floor, eyes unable to focus as the vibrations increased further still.

The ground beneath the shuttle heaved, tossing him upward. He tried to stay as limp as possible, aware that nothing quite facilitated the breaking of bones like rigid muscles, but the first impact

point proved to be the side of his head. Which, fortunately, did not give very much. He watched the deck charge up to greet him yet again. Then the shaking returned.

A brief quieting of the shock waves allowed him to distinguish between up and down. He ached in numerous places, but nothing hurt enough to suggest a critical injury. Getting his wind back, he scrambled straight under the main console just in front of the pilot's chair, the only place inside the shuttle where he thought he might stand a chance of wedging himself in firmly enough to stay put.

A second series of shock waves arrived, more brutal than any Tuvok had ever experienced, but this time he did not take flight.

He felt the entire shuttle move once more, bouncing its way perhaps a meter or two to the west. Then it held, shaking with the rest of the world but tipping up sharply at the bow, as if pointing toward the heavens from which it had descended. A moment later the shaking suddenly stopped, leaving an all-encompassing silence inside the small compartment.

Tuvok slowly extracted himself from his twisted position on the floor and tried to

stand up. One knee cracked and made him wince. His head swam for a moment, and he felt a sizable shoulder bruise announce itself as he tried to lift his arms.

All in all, however, as he attempted to work the worst of the kinks out, he considered himself fortunate. He turned toward the main console and tried to bring up the power. Everything was out again.

Back to basics, he thought. It took several minutes to find the ruptured feed, and several more to patch it back together. Next he made use of the probe the Televek had supplied, a crude but

effective instrument. Within minutes he had restored power to half of the systems on the shuttle. But as he moved on to his first priority, the communications system, he realized there was no hope of repairing it.

That entire section of the console was split in two, from the instrument panel to the deck, and many of its components had been ruined.

Tuvok let a long, grim, illogical sigh seep out before he took a fresh breath and turned to his second challenge: the transporter system. The damage to this portion of the main control panel was minimal, but he couldn't get the controls

to respond, leading him to suspect trouble with the transporter itself. He started toward the stern of the shuttle, clinging to anything he could find in order to keep from tumbling straight into the rear hatch.

Beginning just moments from now there would be a series of aftershocks, if not another full quake. He expected things would only get worse.

And the Televek might return at any moment.

Time was short.

Tuvok saw no logic in pessimistic

speculation, but he could not help acknowledging the grim status of the mission, and his aspect of it in particular.

Then he set aside his doubts, quickly and efficiently. "I will work faster," he said out loud, as if Drenar Four itself could hear. He censored himself, then executed a controlled tumble into the aft compartment. He went to work precisely where he landed.

Phaser fire lit up the darkened woods and sent clouds of burning bark and hissing splinters into the air as errant

shots struck the trunks of trees. Janeway and Kim stopped running momentarily to return fire, and to watch the pursuing Televek dive for cover.

They stayed pinned down for only a moment.

Slowly, first one, then another of the aliens began to turn out in a flanking maneuver, crawling for the most part, heads down.

The undergrowth was just thick enough so that Janeway couldn't get a clear shot. Finally she signaled Kim to fall back again, the only thing they could do to avoid getting caught in Televek

crossfire.

Once they had scurried far enough away to risk it, they stood nearly upright, then ran as fast as the tangle of green and brown would allow.

The footing grew especially treacherous in places.

Janeway was stepping over a small boulder and glancing over her shoulder when she heard Kim shout into her ear.

In almost the same instant she felt him hit her hard in the side, tackle style, knocking her off her feet. She lay there, face in the dirt for an instant, then got her

arms under her and lifted her head up. She heaved air into her empty lungs, filling them back up. As she shook off the daze from the fall, she understood.

The earth here was split, partly a result of the natural roll of the landscape, though in this place there was clear evidence of recent changes brought about by the quakes. A great chasm cut through the forest from left to right, it was no more than two meters wide but too deep and too shadowed to allow sight to penetrate. Turned around, checking for their pursuers, Janeway had nearly stumbled into it. Kim had been more observant and had acted quickly. He had saved her life.

"Thanks," she said.

Kim's grin was feeble but sincere.

"You're welcome, Captain."

"We'll have to jump over it," she said.

After allowing Kim to help her to her feet, she collected her hand phaser, and then they both stood back a few paces and broke into another sprint.

They cleared the empty distance easily enough, but no sooner had they rolled up and gotten to their feet than they were forced to drop as the heat of a phaser beam passed between them. The Televek had found them again.

"Keep moving," Janeway snapped, starting off once more. "Fire over your shoulder. Watch where you're--" Before she could finish, the ground began to rumble. Then it shook with an all too familiar tremor.

Janeway grabbed the nearest tree only to find it suddenly being uprooted as a fresh, jagged fissure appeared from nowhere, crossing the forest floor right beneath her, racing to join the one they had just jumped across. She heard Kim yelling to her again.

"I know!" she shouted, letting go, leaping backward. The underbrush dug at her

back when she landed. This time, though, it was she who helped Kim to his feet as the tremors momentarily subsided--but did not end. A fresh wave was already beginning.

Janeway glanced back. She could see two of the Televek getting up, looking for their quarry as they got their bearings again.

One of them spotted the two Federation uniforms right away.

"They're still coming," she said, tugging at Kim's silt-covered uniform sleeve.

"So we're still going," he replied,

wasting no time in complying.

As they leaped the new ravine, the quakes reintensified, sending the far edge of the gap straight up half a meter, just as they landed on it. They rose with the land, shins bruised, momentum carrying them forward, and tumbled helplessly down the other side, then down again as they reached a wide natural gully.

Janeway saw Kim trying to grab ahold of the trees and scrub; she was already trying to do the same, but the intensifying shock waves emanating from beneath them made every target a moving one.

The world was "shaking and undulating like a storm-tossed sea.

Both officers plunged downward until a pair of massive fallen trees blocked their path. As they slammed into the smooth bark, the quake abruptly ended, as if a great hand had reached out and stilled all motion.

"Captain, are you still all right?" Kim asked, groaning heavily as he spoke the words, trying to get up again. He closed both eyes and flinched as he attempted to straighten his back; then he moaned again.

"I think so," Janeway answered, making

a face she thought nearly matched Kim's as she tried to get her own legs underneath her.

Winds were building now, shifting, as if a great storm was approaching, but the thickening gray clouds that filled the sky were not from any weather system, Janeway was certain of that.

Soon volcanic ash would begin to fall from them, blanketing everything, eventually smothering all the life in this region, even if the world itself managed to survive.

"Maybe those Televek fell into that new crevice," Kim said wistfully.

As his words joined the gusting winds they were made mute by another phaser blast. Kim cried out, then fell, clutching his right leg.

"You're hit!" Janeway shouted, snatching at the ensign's uniform.

She raised her weapon and fired in the direction of the attack without looking up, concerned primarily with Kim's condition, and with getting him to cover. The apex where the fallen trees crossed stood more than three meters tall, and the trees themselves were nearly that thick as well.

Janeway managed to move along the massive trunk of one fallen tree, pulling Kim with her until they reached a spot where the trunk was only a meter high. Here Janeway propped Kim up, then heaved him over the tree bole. She fired again, then scrambled over the trunk after him.

She got the ensign sitting up, then poked her head up enough to find a target, and fired over the top of the trunk. She was forced to duck again as several Televek weapons fired back.

Great chunks of wood were torn away as the phaser blasts gouged them out. Bits and pieces of wood and bark showered

down on Janeway and Kim. They huddled still lower. "How is it?" she asked, trying to examine the phaser burn.

"I don't think they've finished me yet, but it doesn't feel very good," he confessed. The young officer seemed lucid enough, if less than chipper. He was holding his leg still, taking deep breaths, and looking up at her as if this was somehow his own fault.

"I didn't ask you to play human shield for me," she told him.

"But I appreciate the gesture."

Kim smiled at this, nearly erasing the

lines of pain from his face for just a moment. Janeway recognized the consequences of the sudden lull in incoming fire. She rose up slightly and fired back once more, trying to find real targets this time. The Televek were lying along the upper edge of the gully, but she couldn't tell exactly where. It didn't matter, she was certain they wouldn't stay put for long.

She saw two heads pop up, and then two energy weapons fired. She decided to duck rather than take a shot, instincts screaming, and found it had been the right decision as the part of the tree trunk vanished in a wet hail of steaming, exploding tree fibers exactly where her

face had been.

"These trees will be vapor in a few minutes," she said. "Do you think you can still walk?"

Kim tried to move the injured leg. She watched as pain turned his features into twisted disarray. She checked her own phaser and noted that the charge was nearly depleted. Kim's weapon would have more charge, but not much more.

"Our situation doesn't look good, does it, Captain?" Kim wheezed, trying to get comfortable, though that was clearly impossible.

Janeway knew that he relied upon her for courage and guidance at least as much as any other member of her crew. She wanted to tell him she had a plan, that they would get out of this mess, that everything was going to be all right, but as she thought the situation over, she decided that Kim deserved to hear it straight.

Another round of phaser fire landed, burning so much of the tree trunk away that they were forced to move more than half a meter to one side.

She looked at him as they settled again. She had all the rhetoric memorized, especially the part about all of the cadets

knowing when they joined the Academy that they might one day be called to put their lives on the line, but that speech wouldn't suffice either. She had given most of her life to Starfleet, but she couldn't go out quoting dogma.

"Kim, I want you to know--" "Captain!" Kim shouted, staring past her.

An unnatural ringing sounded in her ear, and a bright glowing cloud assaulted her eyes as she turned around. The sudden mixture of alarm and revelation that followed nearly caused her to cry out. Then she watched Tuvok materialize just inches from her. He wore one of the shuttle's transporter armbands on his left

arm and carried two identical bands and a tricorder in his hands.

"Captain," the Vulcan said, standing up, looking down at her.

"Duck!" she yelled, yanking hard at his sleeve as a Televek beam seared the air a hand's breadth away from his head. He crouched beside her.

"Thank you, Captain."

"You're quite welcome. I take it you've been busy."

"I wish I had better news to report," he conceded. "I am afraid shuttle

communications are completely disabled. But as you can see, I was able to get the transporter working."

"I knew you'd come through, Tuvok," Kim said, making a face that passed for cheerful.

"However," Tuvok continued, his sullen look growing more so, "it is not working very well."

Shots burned into the trees once more. Janeway picked up Kim's hand phaser, then nodded toward the Televek on the crest of the hill. Tuvok drew his weapon from his waist, and they both rose up and opened fire.

Even before they had dropped back down, a fresh salvo of return fire arrived from their left flank, vaporizing the trunk of a sapling not half a meter behind the three officers. Janeway and Tuvok both took aim and fired a continuous burst at the point of origin. Janeway's phaser went dead. She put it on her belt and started using Kim's weapon.

"This one won't last long," she told the lieutenant.

"Then I am just in time," Tuvok said, putting one of the bands around Kim's upper arm. "I suggest we move Mr. Kim to safety first."

"Agreed," Janeway said, helping him fasten the band.

"I was unable to provide the transporter with sustained minimal operating power, so I activated the system using an automated pulse power curve, which repeats itself every four minutes.

There was no other choice. When the curve peaks, the pulse provides enough energy to transport one person. That is how I was able to join you."

Janeway nodded, impressed with what Tuvok had accomplished in so short a time, and understanding his logic

completely. She was already preparing for contingencies. "When is the next power peak?"

Tuvok examined his tricorder. "In exactly fifteen seconds."

"Good. Kim goes first, then you, then me."

"I guess I'll be seeing you guys around, then," Kim said, attempting another grin.

Janeway winked at him, then silently put on the last armband.

Tuvok concentrated on the tricorder. He tapped in the command, then sent it. Four

seconds later Kim dematerialized and was gone.

"Keep firing, Mr. Tuvok, and stay down," Janeway ordered. "You have the left flank; I'll take the hill."

They fired several shots, then moved farther down along the massive, battered tree trunks. Janeway checked her weapon. Only a small charge remained. Another shot hashed, biting into bark just above Tuvok's head, this time from their right flank.

Janeway fired two parallel bursts at a dark glimmer of movement, and a figure pulled farther back into cover behind the

trees.

She thought she might have hit her target, but there was no way to tell.

"One minute, eleven seconds," Tuvok reported. "Captain, I do not see how you can hope to fend the Televek off by yourself for another ten minutes."

"You're going to leave me your phaser, aren't you?" Janeway asked.

There followed a brief pause. A gentle tremor shook the earth.

Another phaser shot seared into hardwood just inches away.

Tuvok looked at her, his features calm.
"Indeed, I insist, Captain."

Vulcan humor was subtle, but Janeway was a fan.

The attack had quieted for a moment. They used the opportunity to return fire in three directions. Then they ducked down once more and waited.

"Ten seconds," Tuvok said. She gave him the go-ahead. He nodded grimly. "Five seconds," he said. "Three." He keyed the tricorder and sent the command. Nothing happened.

Janeway mouthed a silent curse. "What's wrong?"

"It would seem that there is not enough power. My initial calculations were correct. However, the condition of the transporter and the number of variables--" The tree trunk shattered, sending Janeway and Tuvok backward in a fresh shower of splinters and pulp. Janeway found herself lying on her back, looking up at the trees as they waved in the building winds beneath clouds of smoke and ash. She felt the ground start to shake again, harder still. An aftershock, or another full quake. She tried to sit up, discovered Tuvok doing the same beside her.

They looked up the hill together, their eyes drawn to the four Televek rushing down on their position. Janeway could hear more footfalls from their left flank.

"If we remain perfectly still and offer no resistance, they may decide not to shoot us," Tuvok said almost too calmly, a perfectly logical assumption.

"I wouldn't count on it," Janeway said.

Janeway watched the closest Televek raise his weapon and take aim as he stumbled toward her. Then the forest blurred and disappeared.

CHAPTER 13

Daket stood beside his cruiser, leaning on a flanged section of the hull, catching his breath. He'd been in the woods with one of his teams, going over scores of unremarkable ground echo readings, killing time while he waited for Tolif's team at the downed shuttle to report in. Then the latest round of quakes had shaken the forest hard enough to bring trees crashing down and send the bedrock heaving up.

Daket was still young and agile, thank the stars, and probably just plain lucky, he guessed. After all that he'd been through, he was still here, still alive and

well. He was destined to collide with greatness one day, he had no doubt of that, but at times like these he wondered whether the universe clearly understood that fact.

Somehow he'd managed to sprint into the clearing before the second, even more violent quakes had hit. For a time he worried that the end might well be at hand for all of them, that this absurd planet might have come to claim them, but this second round of tremors had finally subsided like the others.

Temporarily...

The clearing around the cruiser had

remained fairly stable, and the cruiser itself had come through the experience unharmed, but Daket knew that was part luck as well, and he didn't trust to luck. The quakes were getting worse, and the next one might spell disaster. All of which only made his current set of dilemmas that much more convoluted.

Not one single member of this team wanted to die here, and Daket would not hold on to his status as a director for long if the others decided they could not trust him in that regard. And neither could he blame them. Indeed, in their position, he would have been plotting exactly what he knew they were plotting.

Not that he was willing to die, either. He had been certain from the outset that the risks on this mission would be unacceptable.

Daket didn't like to take chances. He never did, in fact, unless he was forced to do so. Which was the case at present, of course. His was a difficult position.

Despite the intensive foot searches and scanning operations his teams had been carrying out for days now, he had been unable to discover an access route to the exotic, and doubtless extremely valuable power source that lay several kilometers below his feet.

Nor had he learned much more about his elusive target. In short, his mission was a complete failure.

He had managed in his reports, however, to describe his team's efforts and circumstances in a truly superlative light, as would any proper associate, or director, so as to make himself and his crew seem utterly commendable. The trick, certainly, was to report all of the positives and omit all of the negatives--nothing every bottom-fed manager and assistant in the sector didn't do. But Daket liked to think he was especially good at it, and he thought he had proven that fact on Drenar Four.

Even that small success seemed threatened now, however. The problems were being compounded. It wasn't just the dead ends, the earthquakes, the volcanoes, the injuries, or the endless complaining that Gantel and his people incessantly poured down on him from their stable orbit--it was the new aliens now. They weren't content with troubling Gantel, apparently.

"Find their shuttle" the third director had said. "Be certain there were no survivors," he'd said. "Then repair their shuttle and we will take it with us," he'd said.

It had all sounded simple enough.

Nothing had worked out that way.

The small craft from the Federation starship had landed, not crashed.

Not only had this left the ship intact, but several armed and able survivors had emerged as well. And before Tolif's team could reach the site, the Drenarians had taken the visitors to their village. Their town was no fortress, certainly, but a great amount of time and manpower would have been required in order to extract the Drenarians' new guests.

The alternative, unfortunately, was to

live with the threat these Voyager people posed. That was unacceptable as well, but it had so far been less risky than the other option.

"We have them under close surveillance," Daket had several times reported to Gantel. "Each breath they take is being counted."

The aliens had been somewhere in the village, after all, and that was close enough. But even before the following dawn Daket had been presented with yet another troubling report from one of his scouts: a small party that included the shuttle crew had left the village, heading back in the direction of the downed ship.

The team Daket had in place at the shuttle had been ready for the imminent return of the visitors. Daket could only hope his people would be able to dispose of the intruders quickly when they arrived, and that the whole process would not cause too great a delay. After all, playing tag with the landing party was not his primary task--or even his secondary goal, for that matter.

"I am seeing to the work on the shuttle personally," he had since told Gantel, even though he didn't quite know where the little vessel was.

He'd told Gantel he was seeing to the

ground echo work personally, too, and the grid search teams, and the energy source evaluations, and whatever else Gantel asked about. That was, of course, what Gantel wanted to hear. And that was the important thing.

"The third director is hailing you," a voice from the bridge said over Daket's belt communicator.

"You will explain that at the moment I am in the field inspecting the extensive damage to our operations caused by the last round of quakes, that lives and equipment are being lost, but we are coping. Tell him I will contact him shortly."

"Yes, Daket."

The comm went silent. No one on the bridge knew he was standing just outside the ship.

Daket looked up to skies clouded with volcanic smoke and ash.

Time was running out. He had a growing urge to tell Gantel that this mission was entirely senseless, that he and his crew had waited long enough, done all they could, risked too much already.

That it was time to go. The presence of those who had landed in the shuttle and

that of their friends in orbit didn't matter one way or the other, as far as Daket was concerned, especially with the first director on her way here. He was almost certain Gantel would agree if he were down here instead of up there. But Daket was as certain that saying so would only get him into more trouble than he knew how to get out of.

And he didn't want to risk that.

Gantel kept insisting that Daket hold on and keep working until Shaale and the fleet arrived. "We must appear to be fighting against failure, exploring every option right up until the last."

And he was right, of course. Gantel hadn't gotten to be a third director by misreading his opportunities. Or by going easy on those directly beneath him, as Daket had discovered times enough.

It wasn't that Daket's excuses weren't good ones--they were classic--it was just that Gantel did not want to hear any of them. Which left Daket at a considerable loss. Rules were not rules anymore, it seemed.

Daket looked about the grassy clearing. His teams were beginning to come and go in regular patterns again, setting up new probes and going out to take readings on the ones already deployed. It

was possible the quakes would reveal underground passageways, or even create them, though Daket didn't think anyone on this planet was quite that lucky.

At least not anyone working with him. And probably not even Gantel.

He checked the time. He hadn't gotten a report from the team at the shuttlecraft in several hours, which was unacceptable to begin with.

Moreover, that was quite probably what Gantel wanted to know about.

Tolif, who was in charge of that bunch,

was a competent fellow, and usually quite punctual. Daket shook his head. He had endured enough difficulties for one day, and nearly been crushed by falling timbers on top of all that.

"I don't need this," he said out loud, to the planet itself, and to the filthy skies above, as he pushed off and headed back into the cruiser.

"And I certainly don't deserve it." He headed straight for the bridge.

"Still no word from Tolif?" he asked, though he was quite sure he would have been told.

"None," said Tatel, the young female associate on duty. She had only joined the crew on this trip. Daket hardly knew a thing about her, and that suited him just fine.

"Try to raise them again. What was their status at last contact?"

"Progress was being made. I have a report."

Daket looked at the screen at his command station. Tolif's notes were thorough, but they offered nothing promising. Nothing at all. The shuttle systems were badly damaged, and getting them back on line was proving to

be a difficult task. An update had been promised, but it hadn't come. Worst case, they had all died in the recent round of quakes. Daket shook his head; it would be difficult to put a positive spin on that.

"Very well," Daket said gravely, shrugging his shoulders. "Did Gantel say what he wanted?"

"There have been some developments in orbit, I believe."

Which meant nothing good, certainly, Daket decided. Any developments in orbit would have little effect on his end of operations, unless time or

circumstances had necessitated a change in plans.

Unless--could he dare hope?--they were finally going to leave this broken-up, boiling pit of a planet. Daket couldn't imagine what grim task Gantel might have in mind, but anything would be better than sitting here. Almost anything, surely. He ordered Tatel to make contact.

"Wait," Tatel said, leaning forward, working at her controls. "I have a response from Tolif and his team."

Daket looked up, his eyes wide. "Yes?"

After a pause that seemed endless, the associate sat back and made a decidedly sour face. "It..." she began, "I'm afraid it isn't good news."

Janeway felt a surge of relief as Voyager's transporter room appeared before her eyes. She felt a second, smaller comfort as Chakotay and a pair of security officers lowered their weapons and grinned at her like so many children. She turned and found Tuvok standing beside her.

"Take Ensign Kim to sickbay," Chakotay said, signaling the security officers to

help Kim as Janeway stepped off the transporter pad. "Did we interrupt something?" he asked, glancing at the weapons in the others' hands.

"A most welcome interruption," Janeway assured the commander.

"I would agree," Tuvok added.

"Next time," Chakotay told the captain, retaining his grin, "don't stay away so long."

"I'll try not to. And by the way, the next time the spirits move you, remind me to pay closer attention."

"Yes, sir. And may I say, you look terrible?"

Janeway glanced down at herself. She was still covered with dirt and ash, much of it now caked with sweat, and her uniform was torn on both sleeves and at one knee. Tuvok looked only slightly better. She nodded. "Thank you," she said. She moved toward the door, waited for it to slide away, then headed out at a brisk pace. Chakotay fell into step along side her.

"What's our status?" she asked.

"Where do you want me to start?" Chakotay said, though it was not a

question. "We figured out what you meant in the message you sent, then we did some calculations. The lunar alignment will spell catastrophe for the planet. And a lot sooner than anyone expected."

"I'm not surprised," Janeway said, letting go of any last hope that she might be wrong. "Go on."

"Torres worked out a plan to move the moons a little at a time, one by one, using a projected warp field and Voyager's impulse engines. We estimate the collective effect will be enough to prevent precise alignment from occurring. We've already begun the

effort. We've completed the work on the first moon, and we're ready to move on to the second."

"Your statement would indicate that you have the warp engines back on-line," Tuvok said.

"Yes. And the transporter, as you know. And all thanks to B'Elanna.

I was getting to that." The commander's smile rather resembled that of a father relating his daughter's latest achievement. Janeway almost envied him that status. The young, often volatile lieutenant had been forced upon Janeway by her new first officer when the Maquis

and Federation crews had been thrown together, but B'Elanna was turning out to be every bit the prodigy Chakotay had insisted she was. And she was certainly earning her keep this day.

"I'll have to thank her personally for that last one," Janeway said with a slight shudder. "Truth is, we were in a pretty bad way down there."

"I estimate we had a five percent chance for survival," Tuvok added.

"You are a comfort," Janeway quipped.

"Thank you, Captain," Tuvok said, "but I fail to see how you could find such a

statement comforting."

"There's just something about you, Tuvok," Chakotay murmured.

"Lieutenant Torres has mentioned that to me on several occasions," Tuvok said. "I do not understand it, but I am pleased by it."

They slipped into a turbolift as the door opened. "Bridge," Janeway commanded. She slapped at her comm badge.

"Captain to Sickbay. How is Ensign Kim?"

"He is doing very well at the moment," the holographic doctor replied, sounding

almost cheerful. The doctor seemed to enjoy clear-cut emergency medical procedures, as opposed to day-to-day minor aches and pains he ordinarily had to deal with. He had, after all, been programmed for the former, not the latter.

Overall, though, Janeway had few complaints. For a hologram, the doctor had a remarkable variety of abilities, and together he and Kes, his talented protegee, seemed to meet Voyager's every medical need.

"Is he in pain?" Janeway asked.

"No, Captain. I've begun healing most of

the damage, and I'll give him something to make him rest. He'll be as good as new in a couple of days. Should I expect to see more wounded?" The doctor sounded almost too cheerful now.

"That is a very good question. I'll let you know when I have an answer. Janeway out."

"Our three visitors were all Televek, of course," Chakotay continued.

"We believe nearly everything they said was a lie. A little while ago they attempted to take over the ship. They failed thanks to B'Elanna Torres."

"Where are they now?" Tuvok asked.

"In the brig."

"Good," Janeway said. "I'd like to have a talk with them."

"We have another problem," Chakotay went on. "Long-range sensors have confirmed a fleet of Televek ships headed toward this system at near warp eight. We were led to believe they were rescue and support ships, but we now suspect they are battle cruisers. The Televek seem interested only in acquiring this planet's defensive system, which primarily consists of that underground power source we've been

monitoring."

"Our information would seem to agree,"
Tuvok said.

"They have a ship down there, too,"
Janeway said. "Another cruiser, just like
the one in orbit."

The door opened, and the three of them
rushed onto the bridge, Chakotay in the
lead.

"Commander," Rollins yelled from the
tactical station.

"What is it?" Janeway said, right behind
him.

"Captain, we've got problems. The Televek have raised their shields again and aimed their weapons. They've been trying to hail us, but we've been stalling. It doesn't seem to be working.

Gantel saw his people vanish from our bridge."

"Vanish?" Janeway asked, one eyebrow raised.

Chakotay nodded grimly.

"Welcome back, Captain," Paris said, obviously pleased to see her in one piece again.

"Thank you, Mr. Paris. Continue red alert. What is our weapons status?"

"Photons armed and ready," Paris replied. "Phasers are still inoperative."

"Captain," Stephens said from behind the consoles at the operations station, "the Televek are still hailing us. They are demanding--" "Very well." Janeway trained her eyes on the main screen. The Televek cruiser hung in the distance. She placed her hands firmly on her hips.

"Open a channel, Mr. Stephens. I am good and ready for this."

"Gantel," Triness said, obviously a bit unnerved, "First Director Shaale's adjunct is signaling. They require a report."

No one among the crew had ever served directly under the first director--even Gantel had only met her once--and her imminent arrival did no one's nerves a service.

"Tell them we are honored, of course," Gantel said. "And a report will be forthcoming."

"When? They will ask."

Gantel glared at Triness. He needed an answer. The trouble was, he didn't have one. "Soon."

"Very well," Triness said, clearly forlorn.

The first director's timing was a perfect disaster. Everything was going wrong at once, and nothing very right was happening to balance out the negatives. Gantel felt a slight panic welling up inside him, felt despair clawing at his throat until No! he told himself, getting a grip.

He immediately turned the panic into

brutal rage, a talent that had stood him in good stead over the years, especially in times like these.

If you went after everyone else, and did it loudly enough and fiercely enough, sometimes you could soar above the very worse crisis. Often you could lay enough blame to avoid personal injury. At the very least, you could gain a degree of satisfaction.

There was nothing left for it.

"What's the problem with Daket?" he bellowed at the bridge crew.

"We have him on the comm now,

Director," Triness answered, obviously pleased with her sudden good fortune of timing.

"Put him through!"

"Director," Daket said, his face filling the screen, his expression one of practiced but shallow confidence. "My team surprised the intruders when they returned to their shuttle.

They chased the aliens relentlessly through the woods, wounding several of them on the run, even as yet another life-threatening round of quakes--" "Yes, and what became of the visitors?" Gantel demanded, not interested in the details at

the moment.

Daket looked pallid now, deathly so.
"They... they vanished."

Gantel shook his head. "I know what you mean. I've just seen it for myself. Jonal and the others..."

"Then they are all dead?" Daket said.

"Perhaps, though I don't know for certain. What is your status?"

"Ah, of course. My status. In fact, throughout the painstaking process of--"

"Daket, Shaale will be here soon. Give me the bottom line. You don't have a thing, do you?"

"Correct," Daket admitted after a pause.

"Very well. Prepare to leave the surface, but wait until you get my order. We are going to deliver a worthy gift to the first director when she arrives, you and I, one that might make up for some of our... setbacks. If we cannot immediately meet our first goal, we must concentrate on our second, the starship itself."

With Daket's nod Gantel touched a pad on his own small instrument panel, canceling the signal. He only hoped Daket would be of some use if the need arose. Daket was the sort who wouldn't take a chance if his life depended on it. Gantel could hardly blame him at the moment.

"Prepare for battle," he commanded the bridge crew. "Shields at maximum. Helm, steady ahead. Prepare to fire on my command."

Gantel waited as the two ships drew slightly nearer each other.

The way he saw it, he had only one chance: attempt to disable Voyager without completely destroying her, then board her and take over the controls. At that point he could simply eliminate whatever crew had survived the attack.

He would then present whatever was left of the craft to Shaale.

With luck, those wonderfully powerful phaser systems would survive the action, along with the remarkable vanishing device, and he could still salvage this whole operation, right under the first director's nose.

Too good to be true, no doubt, but it sounded infinitely better than the alternatives.

Gantel straightened himself in his chair and took a breath.

"Triness, hail the Federation vessel."

Tuvok moved to assume the tactical station, eliciting a look of welcome relief from Rollins. The Vulcan's fingers moved only briefly; then he looked to Janeway and nodded.

"Commander Gantel on-screen," Stephens said.

The face of the Televek commander appeared just as Janeway had expected it might. A face Janeway was seeing for the first time, yet one she felt she had seen many times before. Gantel did not look pleased.

"What have you done with my people?" he demanded immediately, almost as if

nothing else worth discussing had occurred.

"They are being held for crimes against the Federation," Janeway said.

"I'll decide what to do with them."

"You have no right to hold them or to judge them!"

"We have every right. They lied to us, threatened my people, and attempted to seize my ship. But the crimes your emissaries have committed pale in comparison to those your people on the planet below are guilty of. I've been to the surface, Gantel. I know about the

other ship, and about your assassins."

Gantel fumed. "I won't discuss that."

"I think you will."

"You are an insolent fool, Captain!"

Gantel roared, leaning forward until his image filled the entire viewscreen.

Janeway got the impression he didn't act this way often, though he seemed to have a flair for histrionics.

"I am beginning to think at least one of us is a fool," she said.

Gantel stared at her. "You have no business here, yet you feel you have the

right to make rules for others and apply them at will. I must inform you that you do not. And you have few options in any case. If you attempt to fire on us, or if you try to leave orbit, we will destroy you. That is something I wish to avoid, but occasionally it is necessary to accept one loss in order to prevent two."

"Your own people are aboard my ship," Janeway reminded him. "And they're going to stay here for a while."

"Their families will be compensated," Gantel said flatly. "You have lost, Captain. One way or another, your ship, or whatever is left of it, will be boarded and taken from you. We hope to take

Voyager intact, thus sparing the lives of your crew, but if we have no alternatives, so be it."

"Captain," a breathless voice hissed from just behind Janeway's left ear. She glanced back to find Lieutenant Torres standing there, chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She had apparently been running. Janeway hadn't even heard the lift door opening. She turned her head slightly. "Yes?"

B'Elanna nodded toward the face on the screen.

"Gantel, one moment, please," Janeway told the Televek commander.

"Do not cut me off, Captain," Gantel protested. "Not again. You are in no position to--" Janeway signaled Stephens, and the comm went silent.

"I've been monitoring things from Engineering," B'Elanna said.

"I didn't want to use the comm."

"Yes, yes," Janeway asked impatiently, "what is it?"

"I suggest you try the shields, Captain."

Janeway reached out and took B'Elanna by both arms. "Shields?"

Torres's earnest expression was softened by a modest grin as she nodded. "Shields, Captain."

"Lieutenant," Janeway joked, shaking her head as her own smile broadened, "remind me to make you my chief engineer one of these days."

With that she spun half around again and faced the screen. "Mr. Tuvok, shields up!"

The face on the screen had darkened suddenly. As Gantel listened to someone on his bridge, a silent vow seemed to emanate from his tightening lips,

something Janeway could not decipher.

"Mr. Stephens, reopen that channel."

"Open, sir."

"Gantel, you won't mind if we don't go quietly," Janeway told him.

Abruptly, the image on the screen was gone.

"Hail the surface. Get me Daket!"

"Yes, Director," Triness replied.

Gantel could see his career dissolving before his eyes as his carefully laid plans fell to pieces. One way or another,

though, the Federation ship and its captain were going to solve his problems. At the very least, they would cease to be one, shields or no shields.

"Tell Daket I need him up here at once. We are engaging the Federation ship."

With this order too, Triness complied. After a moment she nodded.

Gantel stared unblinking at the ship on his screen. Then he stood up and pounded the little console in front of his chair with his fist. He would catch Voyager in a cross fire if he had to, but he didn't want to wait for that. "Very well. Open fire."

CHAPTER 14

Daket eased himself back into the comfort of his chair on the bridge and received the message with a mixture of trepidation and relief. He was being ordered back into orbit, finally, and probably not a moment too soon, given the rapidly deteriorating condition of the planet--another round of aftershocks had rattled the cruiser only moments ago. But with the first director's fleet still several light-years out, and with Daket's mission here anything but complete, the order made only one kind of sense.

"Did they describe the tactical situation

in detail?" he asked Tatel.

"Not specifically, but the message was unusually brief, and they did not wait for a reply. I've been monitoring communications between Gantel and the Federation vessel. They were discontinued just a time ago. Gantel's cruiser is now moving into what must be an attack position, though he is keeping his distance."

Daket didn't like the sound of that. "Get everyone back here immediately. Prepare for departure. The field personnel are not to go back for anything. Equipment that cannot be carried in one trip is to be left behind."

Daket waited nervously as his orders were conveyed to his crews both on and off the cruiser. No matter what efforts were made it would take at least half an hour to get packed and powered up.

It had actually taken longer than that during the drills they had conducted, but of course everyone had known they weren't really getting out of here at that time. This was not a drill.

And there was at least one positive aspect to this dilemma: Tolif and the rest of his remarkably incompetent team at the Federation shuttle would never make it back in time.

"Daket," Tatel said, turning away from her consoles, a flicker of poorly concealed distress in her eyes.

"What now?" Daket asked.

"I'm reading engines and weapons--"
She stopped as she glanced back at her instruments.

"I am listening," Daket reminded her.

"I'm receiving another message. Gantel is attacking Voyager."

"Put it on my monitor."

Daket looked at the screen that rose from

the floor just to the right and front of his command chair.

"I am detecting weapons fire," Tatel said.

"I see it." Daket heaved himself up out of his chair. The way he saw it, one of two things was about to happen: either Gantel, bold and irrational as ever, would be destroyed by the Federation ship, leaving Daket in command of the entire mission--or Daket's own timely arrival in orbit would be a deciding factor in the success of whatever unfortunate engagement Gantel had gotten himself into. Either possibility would, under the impending scrutiny of

First Director Shaale, likely lead to Daket's promotion to director, and all with an extremely limited amount of risk and effort on his part. A promotion that he felt was long overdue. He just had to be careful. Extremely careful.

In either case, he couldn't wait to get off Drenar Four and back into space, even if it was only to get shot at.

"Initiate emergency departure procedures. We'll have to leave a few people behind."

Tatel looked up, and Daket had trouble reading her expression.

The stress was getting to her, he thought, like everyone else.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Nothing," Tatel said. She went quickly to work.

"Televek weapons powering up. Targeting beams detected. They are firing," Tuvok announced from the tactical bay. A single bright energy beam signaled the attack. Then a second, different volley erupted from the cruiser, quite unlike anything Janeway had ever experienced. A continuous string of

blue-white cluster-style bursts streamed out of the attacking ship's lower hull; they reached Voyager almost instantly, and their rapid impact was quickly felt.

"Report," she ordered.

"They are using a photonic pulse weapon of some kind," Tuvok said.

"The individual pulses are not very intense, but in great numbers their impact is formidable."

"Shield integrity is holding, levels dropping slightly. Down fourteen percent," B'Elanna Torres said from the bridge's engineering bay.

"How long before the shields collapse?"

"If the Televek can maintain this level of attack," Torres said, "I estimate shield collapse will occur in four minutes, twenty-seven seconds."

"Give or take," Janeway heard Paris say under his breath. She nodded to herself. The pulses and energy beams continued to pound the shields, shaking Voyager with their impact and sending shock waves through the hull and deck, making the ship ring like a giant bell.

Janeway wasn't sure the crew would last as long as the shields.

Gantel was leaving her no choice.
"Ready photon torpedoes."

"Forward photons armed and ready,"
Tuvok answered.

"We have to make these torpedoes count," Janeway said. "They're all we've got right now, and we can't get any replacements. We can't afford to waste a single one."

"I have every intention of making them count," Tuvok said, looking up, somewhat perplexed.

"Range two hundred thousand, target

locked," Paris said.

"Shields down thirty-seven percent," Tuvok dutifully reported.

Janeway held her breath, nodded. "Fire one."

"Torpedo away," Tuvok said as he touched his panel. The loud echo of the weapon as it fired sounded throughout the ship.

Janeway watched as the first salvo reached the cruiser and vanished in a fierce white flash.

"The Televek's forward shields have

collapsed," Tuvok said, his voice a monotone now. "They are trying to rebuild them."

"Open a channel," Janeway said. "Tell them to stand down or be destroyed." She turned to Chakotay. "Without our shields, they must have thought they could take us out quickly," Janeway speculated.

"But they must have detected our shields when they went up."

"And they must have assumed they could knock them out again without much trouble. Let's see what they'll do now."

Chakotay nodded. "I wouldn't care to guess."

"No response to our hails, Captain," Stephens said.

For the moment hostilities had ceased. No one on the bridge spoke a word as all eyes watched the main screen. Then both Televek weapons opened fire again, just as before. Voyager's lights dimmed momentarily, then brightened somewhat as the shields absorbed the initial impact.

"Evasive maneuvers, Mr. Paris," Janeway responded.

"Captain," B'Elanna said, "we can't keep this up forever. The shields are down nearly fifty percent and dropping. Unless we start rerouting power from vital systems, they're not going to protect us much longer."

"Televek forward shields are building up again, Captain," Tuvok said.

"Twenty-three percent and climbing."

"Captain, enough is enough," Chakotay said.

Janeway eyed the main screen with cold resolve, then nodded in agreement.

"Target two," she said. "Fire two."

Tuvok touched his panel once more.
"Number two away."

Almost instantly the second torpedo crossed the distance between the ships. It penetrated the Televek's partial shields and detonated, spilling most of the blast inward, where it struck the cruiser directly. The impact caused a massive rupture in the cruiser's hull.

Gases and debris poured from the opening, leaving a trail as the ship veered off. It exploded in a violent fireball a second later. A huge cloud of debris and vapor particles began to spread out through space, continuing the

orbit the ship had been maintaining.

"Apparently the Televek underestimated the strength of our torpedoes," Chakotay suggested.

"I guess so," Paris said.

To his credit, Janeway noticed, Paris wore no smile at all. She looked around the bridge, saw similarly solemn faces looking back. If there had been another way, she would have taken it, and she was certain that the entire crew knew that.

"Captain!" Neelix said, his voice thin and excited, as he hurried off the

turbolift, Kes trailing close behind him.
"We saw the whole thing on the monitors. Splendid! Splendid job! I knew all along those Televek weren't to be trusted."

"I think we all agree you were right," Janeway conceded.

"He often is," Kes said with a smile.

"It's good to see you up and around, Kes," the captain said.

"Thank you, Captain," Kes replied.

"She does look remarkably well, doesn't she?" Neelix remarked.

"Captain," Ensign Stephens said, intently examining one of the ops panels. "I have located the shuttle on the planet's surface.

Clear as can be. It just... it just appeared."

"That Televek cruiser may have been making the magnetic field interference seem much worse than it is," Chakotay suggested.

"Agreed," Tuvok said, looking down at his own displays. "We are scanning clearly now."

"Run a full sensor sweep of the area around the central power source," Janeway said. "Look for anything we might have missed, anything that might help us. And get a fix on that second cruiser down there. If they lied about everything else, they would have lied about its condition as well, which is what I've suspected since we spotted it."

She waited while Tuvok ran his scans. There was no sign of a liftoff as yet, but the Televek vessel's power source was active and levels were rising, indicating possible preparation for one.

Considerable activity was taking place in and around the site; warm bodies and

equipment were being moved toward the cruiser.

"Looks like we may be getting some more company up here," Chakotay said. He examined the readings over Janeway's shoulder as he joined her and Stephens at Ops.

"We don't have much time, either way," Janeway said, half talking to herself. She looked at Chakotay. "Gantel had no intention of helping the Drenarians on the planet. And neither do his friends in the second ship. If anyone is going to do anything for those people, it will have to be us."

"And it'll have to be now," Neelix agreed, his lightly spotted brow forming a dark line over his small eyes. "We've still got an entire Televek war fleet breathing down our necks."

"There just isn't time to finish diverting the moons," Chakotay said.

"I don't want to abandon the effort any more than you do, but--" "I know."

Janeway placed her fist loosely against her lips and cast her gaze downward, trying to concentrate. There was a way.

Like pieces of a puzzle, one she should be able to assemble, the answer was in her head somewhere, just around a

corner. This she knew. She just needed to gather all of the pieces...

"We're missing something," she said, turning to the others. "We must be."

"What we're missing is our best chance to get out of here," Neelix suggested.

"Captain, it never was your responsibility to protect or assist these Drenarians in the first place. I can appreciate your compassion--I feel the same way--but sometimes, when you've done all you can do and it just isn't enough, the only alternative is to accept that fact."

"I think he may be right about that, too,

Captain," Kes said gently.

"Your people are so willing to help wherever and whenever help is needed, to do whatever needs to be done. I've seen it again and again.

It's one reason why I'm so glad to be here, learning from you. But I've also learned that even the best doctor loses a patient sometimes.

It's the will of the gods, perhaps, or it's just their time. You can't hold yourself responsible."

Janeway didn't have a good argument at the moment. She felt numb.

"We're talking about losing an entire world. And a most remarkable people. You haven't met them, Kes. They are worth saving, a fact that seems lost on the Televek. I don't want to give up."

"If I may, Captain, numbers of individuals do not make the Prime Directive any less valid or logical," Tuvok said.

"Captain, why don't you just beam up as many Drenarians as you can, then leave before it's too late?" Neelix suggested.

"Yes," Kes agreed. "You could save dozens that way."

"I've thought of that," Janeway said, "and we may be left with no other choice, but I'm reluctant to let it come to that. And we have another consideration: if we tried to flee on the impulse engines we'd be sitting ducks. We would have to reconfigure the warp drive first. I'm not sure we have the time, and I am sure that would mean abandoning any hope of lunar realignment. And I don't know of any other way to stop the planet's destruction."

"If we didn't have a fleet of cruisers closing in on us, you could keep trying to move those moons," Neelix said. "But we do, Captain. There isn't anything you

can do about that."

"I have to agree," Chakotay said thoughtfully. "We can't fight them all off with just a few torpedoes."

"Or with the shields already half depleted," Torres added. "We'd be no match for so many ships even under ideal conditions."

Janeway felt her uncertainty turn into something firm and determined in her gut. If she let Voyager be destroyed, she would be helping no one, but the idea of running away, of letting so many perish...

A flicker of an idea tickled the back of

her mind. She looked up, trying to think clearly, trailing after her thoughts so as not to lose them. "Mr. Neelix, what was it you just said, about being responsible for protecting these people?" Janeway stepped down and walked slowly across the bridge to the captain's chair.

Then she turned, still sorting things out, beginning to get somewhere.

Chakotay looked at her. "What is it, Captain?"

"Whose responsibility is it to protect the Drenarians?" she asked. "I mean, if we can't protect them, who can?"

"No one," Neelix said.

"I guess it would be whoever built the planetary defense system," Paris offered.

"Yes," Janeway said, looking at him, "but whoever that was is gone now.

The defensive system, however, is still here. And that must be the key."

"It would seem the system is faltering, Captain," Tuvok said.

"And we do not know enough about it to address that particular problem in the time remaining."

"But that's just it, Tuvok," Janeway said, growing more excited, seeing the solution more clearly as she turned and paced just behind Paris's back. "I think I may know what's wrong, thanks to something I saw in a dream." She stopped and faced Chakotay.

"Something the ghosts showed me."

"Captain," Neelix said, "what Tuvok said, about there not being enough time, well--" "And if I'm right, I can think of only one way to fix it." She spun half about once more. "Lieutenant Torres."

"Yes, Captain."

"I'll need a shielded antimatter container fitted with a detonator. I want it charged and ready for transport as soon as possible. And two antigravity floaters. How soon can you supply them?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "In about five minutes, Captain."

"Good. Meet me in the transporter room in six minutes." She paused again, still finishing the idea in her mind. "Mr. Tuvok, have the transporter room get a fix on that underground power source everyone is so interested in. There is a plateau down there, at the western end, I think. Have them locate it. I want to get as close to ground zero as possible."

"What do you plan to do, Captain?"

Paris asked, staring at her.

"Blowing yourself up won't help." His expression was one of intense concern.

"I'm going to try to recharge that defense system's batteries.

I'm not sure it will work, but I know I have to try, and I think we have just enough time."

"You'll need someone to go with you," Paris volunteered, rising out of his chair.

"No, I'll go," Chakotay said. "If anything

goes wrong, Paris can get the ship to safety as quick as anyone." He looked hard at Janeway. "I stayed behind the last time. This time I'm going."

"What if you succeed, and that defense system decides to come after us?" Neelix hastily asked. "As Tuvok said, we don't know enough about it."

"The captain may know more than you think," Chakotay said.

"You'll have to trust me, Neelix," Janeway told the Talaxian, who silently nodded in return.

Chakotay stood beside the captain,

pressing her for a response to his request to accompany her.

Janeway sighed audibly. She didn't like the idea, but she didn't hate it enough to deny Chakotay his wish. She had gotten to know the commander well enough to recognize the look in his eye. He was a Maquis, after all, and they seemed to have a preference for being in the thick of things. Besides, if her plan didn't work, the rest might not matter anyway. "Very well," she said. "Let's go."

"The Federation ship launched a photon weapon of some type at Gantel's cruiser.

A direct hit," Tatel said, anxiously watching her tactical panels while maintaining contact with Triness, her counterpart on the bridge of Gantel's ship. "The cruiser has lost its forward shields."

"Impressive, for a single strike," Daket said, managing at least to sound self-assured. "Small wonder Gantel is so interested in acquiring that ship."

"I have downloaded a report on the Federation's secret weapon," Tatel added.

Daket was already somewhat familiar with this--a secret technology that

somehow had allowed these Federation people to make their enemies, Gantel's emissaries, vanish into thin air without any visible actuators or support apparatus. Capturing such a device was indeed a most enticing prospect, as long as the would-be captor did not become a victim.

"Transfer the report to my console. I'd like to read it," he said. At least, I'd like to try, Daket thought, not certain he would get the chance.

"You have it," Tatel said. She went back to scanning her screens again, and listening to communications from orbit. She frowned suddenly, an unusual public

expression for any Televek.

Daket didn't like the look of it. "What?" he prodded.

"Gantel is planning to continue the attack. They are rebuilding their forward shields, transferring power." She paused, apparently waiting.

"What now?" Daket asked, certain he wanted to know, though increasingly certain he would not like what he heard.

"They've opened fire again. Voyager's shields are weakening.

Gantel believes that if he can deplete

them another ten percent, they will collapse. If he waits, they may be able to recover, or outmaneuver the attempt. The Federation ship is apparently quite agile. Gantel has stated--" Tatel went silent. She held still for a moment, staring down, then she played her fingers once more over the panels before her.

After a few seconds her hands rose, then hovered in the air just above the console, as if she feared what it might do.

"Report, Associate," Daket insisted.

"We have lost contact with Gantel's ship," she said, turning away from her

controls. "They must have taken damage." She was looking at Daket with eyes full of pain and... remorse, perhaps, which was clearly misplaced.

A character flaw, he decided. As if she could have done something. As if they mattered more than she did, Daket mused, scoffing at the idea.

Already he was getting to know her too well, perhaps. A replacement would be best, when they got back home.

"Check your instruments," he told her.

"Functioning normally."

"Then their communications must have been knocked out."

"No," Tatel said, slowly shaking her head.

When she said nothing else, Gantel asked: "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean they're gone. No readings, no telemetry, nothing on sensors.

Only the Federation ship is showing up."

She looked worse now; Daket was sure he had never seen such an alien expression on a Televek face before. Tatel wasn't quite right, he decided.

Able, efficient, loyal, but not right. This was no time for futile laments.

Everything had just changed. It was time to act, to address the facts. The prospect of disaster was real, something Daket was already having trouble dealing with.

He felt every muscle in his body growing tense, a condition he had been fighting, a minor battle he had lost. Nothing compared to Gantel's, of course.

At least not yet.

"If there is a positive spin to be put on any of this," Daket told the bridge crew, stating only the obvious, "I would be interested in knowing what it is. How

long before we can lift off?"

"Three minutes. Most of our personnel have returned. We have only--" Daket cut Tatel off. He had decided pretense was largely useless at this point.

"Anyone who has not returned in three minutes... will wait here. Time has run out. The fleet will arrive in less than an hour. We will be on hand to greet Shaale."

With luck--something that seemed to be in short supply this day--Daket would learn precisely what had befallen Gantel's vessel, so that he could avoid that same fate. Or he could simply stay out of harm's way until the fleet arrived,

which was clearly the more attractive option, provided he could make it work.

In any case he couldn't just stay on the surface. If the earthquakes didn't destroy him, Shaale would see his career destroyed. He could have no defense for such inaction. He'd accomplished next to nothing, which was hardly an excuse for continuing to do so. Gantel's unfortunate end meant there was no one to help, and no one on whom to shift the blame--but it also meant that if anything good did come of this mission, Daket was in a position to take most of the credit for it. A delicate and risky position, to say the least, which did nothing for the throbbing in his head or the burning

sensation in his stomach, but an opportunity nonetheless. A beginning... or an end.

"Two minutes," Tatel said.

Daket felt his chest tighten. "I know," he said. "I know."

The place looked much as it had in the dream, but the differences were immediately apparent. Everywhere, Janeway could see signs of deterioration in the great underground cavern. She stood with Chakotay in what might have been the exact spot her consciousness

had occupied when she had visited here before, and as she breathed, she was reminded of the stark reality of this place.

The smell of smoke and sulfur made each breath difficult, though oddly, it was not as bad as she had perceived the same air to be during the vision.

The machine was every bit as massive and remarkable as she remembered, but it had been damaged in numerous places. Dozens of tubes had been broken or crushed by falling rock. The entire plateau was littered with rubble, Janeway noticed, as she let go of the package they had brought along, leaving

Chakotay to tend it. She turned slowly in a circle while Chakotay steadied the antimatter container. Large sections of the cavern walls had been sheered away, collapsing into piles of debris; some of them had even tumbled over and into parts of the machine. In those places, the bright tubes had gone dim, or completely dark.

The walls themselves were marked by massive cracks that ran from the roof of the cavern to the floor of the plateau, or beyond it and over the edge, reaching toward the great abyss below. Some of the cracks were clearly very deep.

Janeway realized that Chakotay had been

silently following her gaze, seeing all of this for the first time. And they could see quite well.

Not only the machine itself, but also the dozens of fixtures surrounding it radiated light. They combined to form a small subterranean sun. But in the vast region beyond the plateau the darkness gathered quickly, concealing the distance entirely.

"It's a natural cavern," Chakotay said softly.

"I believe so," Janeway said.

"Nature can be a powerful creative force."

In the silence between their words a low rumble could be heard, a sound that came from deep beneath their feet and reverberated in the chasm all around them. "It also can destroy what it creates," Janeway said, just as the mild aftershock sent a small cascade of rock and gravel tumbling down a wall somewhere beyond their sight, out in the darkness.

She turned again toward the cavern wall behind them. "There," she told Chakotay. "That's what all the fuss is about."

"I've never seen anything quite like it," he said, steadying the antimatter

container. "It looks so simple in a way." He squinted at the machine. "Was it in this condition in your vision?"

"No. It's been damaged, but that isn't all that's wrong with it.

That isn't why we've been reading such erratic and continuously fading power levels. At least I don't think so. There's another factor.

That way," she said, nodding in the other direction.

Chakotay stared at the wall of glowing tubes for a moment longer, then he turned and grasped his side of the antigravity

unit.

They started slowly toward the edge of the plateau, keeping the container between them, careful of their footing. When they were less than fifty meters from the edge, Janeway paused and pointed.

"That's it," she said. "Down there."

She hadn't seen this in a vision, not exactly, but she had known, somehow, what she would find if she came here. The ghosts had wanted her to come here; it was something she knew she had to do.

This close, and with their eyes adjusting further to the dimming light beyond their position, more detail emerged.

The mighty ocean of glowing molten lava that had boiled for kilometers below the cliff had grown cool and dark. A lava dome had formed there, containing the fires of the planet's heart.

Fires that had burned here for ages.

Janeway let the antimatter container hover again, let Chakotay steady it, while she pulled her tricorder free and flipped it open. She scanned, rotating in a full circle, switching band widths. After a moment she looked up. "I had to

be sure," she said.

"Of what?" Chakotay asked, the perfect audience.

"The defense system, the machine, it uses geothermal energy as a power source. It's virtually unlimited unless something cuts off the flow of lava."

"Like an earthquake?"

"Or several dozen of them. I suspected something like this when Nan Loteth told us that the volcanoes to the south were new."

"So you think that when the crust shifted,

part of the lava flow was redirected away from here," Chakotay said.

"Exactly. Apparently this pool never completely drained, but it cooled enough to allow a dry dome to form over the top of it."

She examined the tricorder readings again, confirming her hunch as best she could. "Subsequent quakes have returned much of the flow to this area, as far as I can tell, but it's trapped under the lava dome. If we can open a big enough hole in the dome, let the lava underneath it come up, I think it might return..."

Janeway fell silent as a sudden wave of

dizziness nearly toppled her.

She felt herself stumble forward, toward the edge. Then her eyes saw nothing, yet her head was filled with images. She faced the ghosts again, many of them this time. They seemed to be crowding all around her, pressing nearer, whispering all at once. Their messages were jumbled. But slowly, clearer impressions emerged. As before, no words were spoken, but Janeway understood. Her perspective had changed. She wasn't in the cavern anymore, but on the surface, in an area just outside the village, a place she somehow recognized, even though she was certain she had never been there

before.

Anguish filled her heart as she went with the ghosts to this place.

They took her through the trees, past the bodies of numerous dead Drenarians.

Abruptly they emerged into a clearing, the place where Nan Loteth had told her the second Televek cruiser had landed.

But as they broke out of the woods the reason for the ghosts' great concern became apparent. Winds swept the grasses and nearby branches as the cruiser boosted itself off the ground, rising skyward, fully operational, as Janeway had expected. It rotated until it was nose up. Then it slipped away

through the clouds and was gone.

A small band of Televek ran into the clearing from the far trees just after the ship had vanished. They stood yelling and waving at the clouds in anger.

Janeway had no idea why they were not aboard. And at first she had no idea why the ghosts would be upset by the Televek's departure from a field littered with dead Drenarians. Surely they knew what the Televek had been after, just as the villagers did. She tried to communicate this to them but she had no means. She could only gaze up at the shrinking hole in the clouds, made by the cruiser, at the sky beyond.

Then she remembered Voyager; the ghosts seemed to want this image in her mind. They pushed it aside momentarily to show her what could not have been a memory of her own: an external view of the ascending cruiser achieving orbit. Then she saw Voyager again, following a moon, orbiting Drenar Four. Alone. The images did not change for several seconds, until the second Televek cruiser appeared yet again, moving up into a high orbit above the planet, seeking an intercept course with Voyager.

The ghosts pressed suddenly inward, closer to Janeway's mind.

Sorrow, she thought--that was the only word she could use to describe what she felt from them now. They were terribly... sorry.

Sorry they were so weak; sorry they could not help the Drenarians; sorry they were helpless to do anything to help Voyager--to help by doing something specific, Janeway sensed, though she received no clue as to what that was.

"That is why I've come," she said out loud, not certain whether she had actually spoken. But she thought she heard the sound of her voice echoing around her as the last word left her lips, heard it with her ears.

The visions faded from her mind, and she was once more standing in the mammoth cavern. She looked at Chakotay and found a darkened, worried expression on his face. He steadied himself, looking dizzy for an instant, then better.

"You saw it too?" she asked.

"Yes. We don't have any time to waste."

Janeway nodded, and they crossed the distance to the edge of the plateau.

"This would be an unfortunate time for one of those big quakes to occur,"

Chakotay said, as they stood only inches from the drop.

Janeway nodded, remembering her earlier fall. When she leaned forward and peered over the edge, she could see the dark lava dome below, but not clearly. "The detonation should occur just above the surface in order to produce the maximum effect. I want the biggest hole I can get."

"Agreed," Chakotay said, leaning forward next to her. "I wouldn't want to have to do this twice."

"Any guess as to the distance?"

Chakotay frowned. "I'd say it's about six hundred meters."

"That's where I'd put it, too."

"I'll set the floaters at minimum negative buoyancy. Drenar Four's gravity is about ninety-seven percent earth normal, so that should allow the container to drop at about two meters per second.

Janeway ran the numbers in her head. "We'll set the timer at four and a half minutes. Ready?"

Chakotay nodded. Both of them went to work. As Chakotay finished with the second floater, Janeway activated the

timer.

They stood up and held their breath, then they both pushed. The container drifted free of the plateau and slowly began to descend.

Janeway tapped her comm badge.
"Transporter room, this is the captain.

Beam us up."

There was no response.

CHAPTER 15

Daket had opted to wait until the energy levels of the planetary defense system dropped again, a decision that would

cost him additional moments. But weighed against the possibility of an attack, he felt he'd made the only sane decision; the ferocity of the planet's ghostly defenders was legendary. It wasn't worth the risk.

He would never know, of course, if his trepidation had been justified, but as he watched the sensor images of the Federation ship grow, watched the planet display itself fully on the main viewscreen, visual proof that his cruiser had safely achieved a low orbit, he thought the evidence was clearly on his side.

An uneventful ascent, Daket mused. The

very best kind.

What happened next would likely be anything but.

He had glanced at the report on the remarkable Federation weapon that made Jonal and the others disappear. Gantel had no doubt intended to seize Voyager more or less in one piece, had been playing for time, looking for an angle. Then he'd gone to the edge of sanity and attacked, alone. Unfortunately, his plan had backfired.

Daket also noted that Gantel had been keeping his distance from his target during the entire engagement, no doubt

concerned about the range of Voyager's exotic secret weapon, something that also concerned Daket.

Perhaps the device had been used against Gantel after all? Daket could only hope he would not directly find that out.

"We are closing," Tatel said. "Shields at maximum."

"Maintain a distance of two hundred thousand kilometers from the target."

"Yes, Daket, but at that range our weapons' energy levels will drop approximately three-tenths of a percent

per--" "I am aware of that, but the distance will be a problem for them as well, I presume. I plan to use this mutual disadvantage to my advantage." Daket paused, smiling to himself. He wondered if even Gantel could have maintained such presence of mind under so much duress. He didn't think so. "That should put them within range of all our weapons," he went on, "while leaving a comfortable margin for safety."

Or error, Daket thought. He didn't have to destroy Federation ship, after all; he just had to make a valiant effort and keep the crew more or less occupied until the fleet arrived. The result would be adequate for his purposes, and to do

more would be foolish, as Gantel had so brilliantly demonstrated.

Daket took a breath. "Target weapons. Transfer all shield power to the forward shields and then keep the bow straight on. If they fire their photon weapons we will attempt to maneuver away from the torpedoes, or target it with our dispersion beams and destroy it. But if we take a direct strike, I want to face it with enough shields to withstand the blast. If nothing else, we can learn from Gantel's mistakes."

Several seconds passed while the cruiser's position was corrected and the shields were restructured. Directly Tatel

turned to Daket and grinned slightly, nodding.

Daket grinned back. "Commence firing when ready."

"Commence firing," Tatel said to the fourth associate manning the weapons station, a young man who had a natural flair for accuracy--something Daket was counting on in no small measure.

The pulse cannon and forward phasers lit up the darkness of space between the vessels. In the distance a sphere of sparkling energy suddenly glowed to life, surrounding the Federation ship, evidence that her shields were

attempting to absorb and deflect the assault. Now, Daket thought--wishing he were close enough to use his finely honed senses to determine better what the commander of that ship might do next--now it begins. He leaned forward, resting both elbows on the small console before him. He placed his hands just under his chin and began watching his opponent, waiting for... anything.

"Second cruiser is moving to a high matching orbit," Rollins stated, again at Ops, while Tuvok took command. "They will be within targeting range in less than a minute."

"Which means we're moving into their

weapons' range as well," Lieutenant Tom Paris said. That meant Voyager might have to move away from her current position and well out of transporter range, something no one wanted right now. He couldn't imagine what was taking the captain and Chakotay so long. They should have signaled by now.

Tuvok moved away from the ops bay where he had been reviewing the power allocation with Ensign Stephens. He made his way quickly to the captain's chair and neatly seated himself. Neelix and Kes remained silent. The two of them stood just beside Tuvok, hovering at the back of the bridge's lower level,

hand in hand.

Neelix had urged Kes to go to Voyager's sickbay, where the details of what was happening would not directly affect her, but she was not needed there now, and she had insisted on staying here.

"Maintain red alert," Tuvok said.

"Prepare for evasive maneuvers."

"Aye, sir," Paris answered, "but--"

"Cruiser closing to two hundred thousand kilometers," Rollins said.

"Their weapons systems are powered up, and they have raised shields."

"On-screen," Tuvok said. "Mr. Paris,

bring us about. Mr. Rollins, arm forward photons."

"Tuvok," B'Elanna said, looking up from the engineering station displays. "I recommend we avoid another firefight if possible."

Our shields will not withstand another encounter like the one we just had."

Paris couldn't resist giving her a sidelong look. That wasn't the kind of statement B'Elanna was known for, and she knew as well as he did what the alternatives meant. Paris took that as a bad sign.

"I appreciate the advice, Lieutenant," Tuvok replied, "but that may not be an option."

"Lieutenant," Rollins said, "the cruiser is now within range, but they're no longer closing. They're holding position, matching orbits with us."

"I think you should listen to B'Elanna," Neelix said. "We may be able to come back around."

His expression was not one of fear, Paris decided, but of concern.

Neelix had never been burdened by the need to make command decisions of the

sort that Tuvok now faced, but he had managed to survive on his own in this part of the galaxy for many years, and he had exhibited no lack of loyalty--either to Kes or to the captain and crew of Voyager. It was not self-preservation that motivated him now; it was group preservation. Paris didn't have a problem with that.

"I'm reading a substantial power buildup in their forward shields," Rollins added, "but..."

Tuvok looked up. "Yes?"

"The energy matrix pattern isn't familiar."

Tuvok stood up again and moved to the aft area of the bridge's upper level. He stepped into the tactical station bay and stood over Rollins's shoulder, examining the data for himself.

"Lieutenant Torres, what would you make of this?" He reached past Rollins to work the short-range sensor controls; then he tapped once more, and the data appeared on a screen at the engineering station.

B'Elanna quickly analyzed it.

"They're using an overlay pattern of some kind," she said after just a moment.

"They appear to be loading their forward shields by systematically depleting all the others."

"Then they have made a foolish mistake," Neelix said. "We can attack them from behind."

"We can't maneuver fast enough for that," Paris told him.

"Agreed," Tuvok said. "It is logical to assume that this commander is aware of the fate of the first cruiser, and is determined to compensate. Their shields are apparently quite sophisticated. I believe they are attempting to provide an adequate defense against our photon

torpedoes."

"They're still reinforcing, layering their forward shields," B'Elanna continued, looking down, her fingers working the controls. "If they can keep the bow facing our attacks, I think they can hold us off for quite a while."

"Which is probably why they aren't getting too close," Paris guessed.

"Agreed," Tuvok said.

"And by maintaining distance," B'Elanna added, "they can fire their energy weapons at us while maximizing their chances of avoiding a direct torpedo

hit."

Tuvok came as close to frowning as a Vulcan could. "Helm, hold position until I say otherwise. Mr. Rollins, try hailing the cruiser.

I would like to attempt negotiations one more time. I cannot believe such a successful race would abandon all reason when given an opportunity to--" "They are firing," Stephens said.

"Confirmed," said Rollins. "Photon pulse and phaser fire."

"Believe it, Mr. Tuvok," Neelix moaned.

His words were punctuated by a series of shock waves that pounded Voyager with a nearly deafening roar--an experience with which the entire crew was already too familiar.

"Commander!" Stephens said, shouting after Tuvok as he headed back toward the bridge's lower level, stumbling slightly on the shuddering deck.

"The captain is hailing. They're ready to beam up."

Tuvok whirled about, stood absolutely still for a moment. He nodded to Stephens. "Put her on," he said. Then he raised his voice to shout over the din

permeating the ship. "Captain, we are under attack. We will not be able to drop our shields in order to beam you up. I will attempt to move the ship out of danger, then return for you at the earliest--" "I'm afraid we won't be here when you get back," Janeway said anxiously. "The detonation timer is set, and we can't get to it.

In about four minutes, nothing is going to matter to us anymore."

"Shields down to fifty-three percent," B'Elanna dutifully reported.

Paris could hear the frustration in her voice, could see it on her face. He knew

exactly how she felt.

"Helm," Tuvok said, "evasive maneuvers."

Paris didn't like the sound of that. "We can't just leave the captain," he said pleadingly, but he prepared to comply nonetheless.

He saw no alternative, but neither could he accept the prospect of abandoning Janeway.

"I would prefer to retrieve the captain and Mr. Chakotay if at all possible," Tuvok said. "But we cannot remain here, and we cannot drop our shields."

"Tuvok's right," Chakotay said, his voice just loud enough to be heard.

"There's nothing you can do for us."

"Maybe there is," Paris said, looking at the main viewscreen, at the nearest moon still displayed there. "I may have an idea."

His fingers began working the helm controls. "It just might work, if there's time."

"Whatever it is," Janeway responded in a level voice, "this would be a very good time to try it."

Paris looked to Tuvok. The Vulcan nodded, a blanket go-ahead.

Paris engaged the impulse engines. The small moon on the screen began to grow larger again, then began to move to port. The pounding ceased as Voyager evaded the barrage of weapons fire.

"The Televek cruiser is pursuing, maintaining distance," Rollins said.

"They are retargeting."

"Three minutes, Mr. Paris," Janeway said from below the planet's surface.

"How is it going?"

"Hold on, Captain," Paris said. Sweat was gathering on his brow, beginning to seep into his eyes. He blinked sharply and fought the urge to take his hands away from the controls. "We've got plenty of time."

"Bridge to Engineering," Tuvok said, just as the Televek weapons found Voyager once again. Paris glanced up and saw the Vulcan watching the moon now. He understood, Paris thought. He understood completely.

"Engineering," Lieutenant Carey responded.

"Mr. Carey, you will go at once to the transporter room, where you will personally stand by for immediate beam-up of the captain and Commander Chakotay."

"Yes, sir," Carey answered. "I'm on my way." He signed off immediately.

"We'll only have a moment," Paris said.

Tuvok nodded. "Lieutenant Torres, prepare to drop the shields on my command. How long will it take to raise them again?"

"They're taking quite a beating. It'll take at least a minute and a half, unless..."

Paris glanced back to B'Elanna. She was looking from one bridge officer to the next, intense awareness in her narrowed eyes.

"Nothing. I'll be ready," she said. She turned back to her station and went to work.

Paris did the same. The maneuver wasn't a terribly tricky one, at least not ordinarily; he simply had to put Voyager into orbit around the moon. But they would only have half an orbit during which the moon would be between Voyager and the Televek cruiser--when Voyager was on the planet-facing side of

the moon.

They wouldn't have time to try again, and their speed was much too high right now. Braking would have to be absolutely precise.

No matter, Paris told himself. He would deal with that.

"One minute and thirty seconds," Chakotay said from the planet's depths, his voice still as calm as a Vulcan's.

"We are hurrying, Commander," Tuvok answered calmly, though he seemed as close to showing angst as Paris believed him capable.

Paris was aware that for a Vulcan, that serene demeanor came naturally, a characteristic of the species; Chakotay's nearly inhuman emotional control seemed to come from another source.

The two of them and Captain Janeway were an inspiration to one another, Paris had noted, often drawing from each other's strengths. They were an inspiration to him as well.

He waited until the last possible moment, until Stephens verified that the moon had begun to pass directly between the two ships; then he reversed the impulse engines and made one final

course correction.

Voyager slowed just enough to allow the moon's gentle gravitation pull to capture her, if only for a moment, and swing her around toward the planet.

"All clear," Rollins stated, sounding breathless.

"Lieutenant Torres," Tuvok said.

B'Elanna nodded. "Shields down."

Tuvok raised his voice. "Bridge to Carey. Beam them up--now."

"We don't have a good lock, Lieutenant," Ensign Carey replied.

"We're at just over 41,000 kilometers from the planet's surface, that's at the extreme limits of our transporter range."

Tuvok rocked back on his heels and wrinkled his brow--in an almost human expression, Paris thought. "I suggest you try anyway," he said tersely. "That is why I called you."

"Yes, sir. Engaging--now."

"Fifty seconds," Chakotay's voice informed the bridge. "How is it going?"

"Boosting to maximum gain," Carey said. "Transferring all available power."

Recalibrating the targeting scanners. Mr. Tuvok, we have a coordinate lock. It's not perfect, but it might do."

Paris watched the moon spinning beneath them on the main viewscreen, then falling away behind them. The assumption was that the Televek ship would follow them around the back of the moon. The risk was that the cruiser would instead double back, and be waiting when Voyager emerged on the moon's planet-facing side. He didn't see them so far.

"Fifteen seconds," Janeway said. "If anyone's interested."

"Transporter room," Tuvok said. "Please report!"

Lieutenant Carey's voice came back quickly. "Bridge, we are engaging now."

Janeway stared at the towering underground walls, and the hardened ocean of lava that stretched out before her. She wouldn't die alone, but that was little comfort. She glanced down, eyeing the time readout on her tricorder: fifteen seconds, fourteen. "It wasn't supposed to work out like this," she said.

Chakotay looked at her. "I know. Don't

give up," he said, following her gaze.
"We've still got... six seconds."

Janevay started to speak, but the words froze on her lips as she and Chakotay dematerialized. "Five," she said, as she found herself standing on Voyager's transporter pad.

"We've got them!" Carey shouted.

"Captain," Tuvok's voice said from the intercom, "you are needed on the bridge."

Janevay still held her tricorder in her hand. She glanced down: two... one... zero. "Bridge, are you reading anything

on the planet?"

"We are registering detonation, Captain," Stephens responded.

"Thank you." Janeway closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. In the ancient cavern beneath the surface of Drenar Four the antimatter explosion had ruptured the lava dome, allowing hot magma to flow back up, reforming the molten underground lake. No instruments told Janeway this was so. She just knew. She looked at Chakotay and saw the same certainty reflected in his eyes.

She couldn't help returning his mild grin of satisfaction.

"We'll be right there," Chakotay said. He turned to Carey.

"Beam us directly to the bridge."

Janeway cleared her throat as the bridge appeared all around her and her first officer. They were greeted by a chorus of welcomes.

"Mr. Paris," Janeway said, still allowing herself a soft smile, "that was nice work. All of you," she added, looking about.

"The shields are on line," B'Elanna said half a moment after that.

"I've got them up to sixty percent, but I can't do much better than that."

"Very well," Janeway acknowledged.

"What have you done about our friends in the second cruiser?"

Chakotay asked.

"Oh, they're right behind us," Paris answered. "Or coming around to flank us."

Tuvok bowed his head in a semiformal greeting. "We will know in approximately twenty seconds," he said.

"Understood," Janeway said, taking to her chair. "Look sharp, everyone."

"Photons?" Chakotay asked Tuvok as the Vulcan returned to his post at the tactical station, relieving Rollins.

"Armed and ready," Tuvok said. "But they may not do us any good."

The cruiser has reinforced its forward shields, an effort that we believe will prove quite effective. And they are keeping their distance. I estimate they will be able to survive several direct photon detonations, if they are unable to avoid them altogether."

"I certainly don't intend to throw any torpedoes away," Janeway said.

"We'll have to think of something else."

"No sign of the Televek, Lieutenant," Stephens said. On the screen the moon had nearly vanished from sight. Black space filled much of their field of vision; the crescent of the planet itself filled the rest.

"You sure they're right behind us?" Chakotay asked.

"Confirmed," Tuvok said, working his console. "I have the cruiser on sensors now. They are just leaving lunar orbit,

following our trail precisely."

"Are we still within range of their weapons?"

The ship lurched, then shook as the Televek answered Janeway's question.

"Evasive maneuvers, Mr. Paris," Janeway ordered. "Buy us some time."

"They seem curiously intent on simply following us around," Tuvok said, cocking his head.

"Explain," Janeway said.

"Their energy weapons lose power and accuracy over distance, yet they do not

advance for a maximum assault, presumably because their fleet will arrive shortly. I believe that 'buying time,' as you say, is precisely what they are attempting to do."

"So, unlike Gantel, this Televek commander is in no hurry to be a hero," Janeway mused, as the thrum of weapon fire contacting the shields ceased momentarily, further testimony to Paris's skill as a pilot. The respite would be a short one, she was certain of that.

"We could leave a trail of mines behind us," Paris suggested, still working the helm controls, "and use approximate settings on the timers."

"I suspect they would detect and destroy explosive devices of that type," Tuvok said. "Their shield and sensor technologies have been demonstrated to be as advanced as our own."

"What about another antimatter container?" Chakotay suggested.

"Properly shielded, they wouldn't scan anything like explosives, only the EM fields."

"We'd need an external detonator, and they would be able to detect that," Janeway said.

"If we had phasers, we could just leave a container behind, then detonate it from Voyager when the Televek got close enough," Paris replied.

"But we do not have phasers, Lieutenant," Tuvok said.

"Therefore, we cannot--" "No, we don't have phasers," B'Elanna said, stepping away from her station, leaning on the upper level railing, "but the Televek do."

The ship shook as another Televek shot landed. "We are all aware of that, Lieutenant," Neelix said.

"Neelix!" Janeway said, causing the Talaxian to step back slightly, nearer Kes. B'Elanna's expression was one of intense concentration as Janeway turned to face her. "What are you getting at, Torres?"

"We could use a class-one subspace probe. Replace most of the instrument package with a shielded antimatter container. That wouldn't do any good against their reinforced forward shields, but I'm guessing they can't reconfigure any faster than we can, which gives us some time. More than enough, I think."

Janeway took one step closer, her eyes locked with B'Elanna's.

"If we program the probe to follow the ion trail from their impulse engines..."

"It just might get close enough,"
B'Elanna finished.

"Captain," Tuvok said, clearly catching on, "it should be possible to modify the probe to radiate a deceptive energy pattern, one that mimics those of a message buoy."

"Make them think it isn't dangerous,"
B'Elanna said, backing up the idea.

"That might buy us a little extra time,"
Janeway agreed.

"But won't they see us launch the probe?" Kes asked.

"Yes, unless..." Paris said slowly, allowing the thought to form behind his darting eyes.

"Unless?" Janeway prodded.

"Well," Paris said, shrugging, "they followed us around one moon.

They just might follow us around another. Once more around the horn?"

Janeway felt a twinge of satisfaction as all the pieces of the plan seemed to

gather. "How long before the rest of the Televek fleet arrives?"

"Approximately twenty-one minutes," Tuvok answered.

"At this rate, our shields will be gone by then," B'Elanna reminded everyone.

Janeway nodded. She looked at the main screen once more, at the second moon coming into view in the distance, larger than the one they were leaving behind.

"Mr. Paris, lay in a course for that moon. Take us around it. B'Elanna, ready that probe."

Voyager shook as the pursuing Televek

cruiser found her again with full weapons fire. Lieutenant Torres sprang from her station, remarkably sure-footed under the circumstances, and sprinted off the bridge.

"They're going around behind the second moon," Tatel reported.

"Do we follow?"

"Yes, of course, but continue to maintain distance," Daket said.

"They are an unusually resourceful lot, a lesson many of our colleagues have

already paid dearly to learn." Daket sat back, waiting out the maneuver. He planned to have his own last lessons taught to him at a great price by one of the lovely and talented aquatic masseurs of Troevsta Prime.

"The Federation ship has entered a shallow lunar orbit," Tatel announced a moment later. "Matching now."

Daket watched the small, sunlit white dot that was Voyager go dark and disappear behind the great looming moon just ahead. Out of sight. Out of range. It didn't matter. He could play the game for another few minutes, which was all he needed to do. He had already

begun to relax, telling himself that the worst was over, and the best, by his estimation, was coming very shortly.

"Orbit acquired."

"Be prepared for any sort of surprise," Daket cautioned.

Tatel nodded. "Their ion trail is steady. They have yet to deviate from their projected course and speed."

Daket took subtle comfort in that. It was short-lived. A proximity alarm sounded softly from several consoles. Daket tapped at his panels, studying the displays. He found what he was looking

for, a very small contact directly below the cruiser, rising, moving steadily into a low lunar orbit. "Analysis."

"It appears to be a probe of some kind, sublight, compact, unarmed," Tatel said. "Is there any record of probes associated with Drenar Four's defensive system?" Daket asked.

"Checking now," Tatel responded. They waited while computer file data was searched. Nothing turned up.

"The probe is rising directly off our stern," Tatel said, obviously growing somewhat concerned. "Closing to one hundred thousand meters.

It is emitting a beacon signal of some kind.

The frequency doesn't match anything in the computer."

"A beacon?" Daket said.

"It poses no immediate threat," Tatel went on. "It isn't even scanning us. Nonetheless, I recommend we begin reconfiguring the rear shields."

"That would take too long, and if the probe is from Voyager, that may be exactly what their captain wants us to do. A trick designed to make us

vulnerable to their attack. They must be desperate by now, and they are nearly out of time."

Tatel was silent now. She hadn't thought of that.

Daket smiled to himself, then leaned back in his chair. This was not the time to start taking chances. He felt a mild glow of satisfaction, and he did not intend to let it go cold just yet.

He would be hailed as a hero and promoted, and he would grow rich if anything at all came of this mission. Another few minutes of outwitting these Federation interlopers and it would all

come his way.

Tatel squirmed in her seat. "The probe is closing on us."

Daket nodded affably. "Let's not take any chances. Use the aft phasers to destroy it. Now."

"Targeting probe," Tatel said.

"On-screen."

The probe appeared as a negligible dot on the aft viewscreen.

"Firing."

The cruiser's thin energy beam touched

the point in space that was the probe. A blindingly brilliant white flash filled the screen, and a chill shook Daket's body. He opened his mouth to scream. He didn't get the chance.

CHAPTER 16

In the aft view displayed on the main bridge screen Janeway could see the halo of the antimatter explosion, a bright white glow that blossomed, then faded somewhere just beyond the moon's horizon.

"Report," she said, fighting a tightness in her throat.

"Massive damage to aft portions of the cruiser," Tuvok said.

"Their shields have collapsed, main power is apparently off-line, propulsion systems inoperative."

"Excellent, Captain!" Neelix declared.
"It seems you've blown their backside off."

"I believe I said that," Tuvok remarked.

Janeway nodded, then took a breath.
"Survivors?"

"I am reading life signs in the ship's forward segments, but not many," Tuvok

answered. "Life support is failing."

"We can't just leave them," Janeway said. "Mr. Paris, bring us around again. Tuvok, prepare an away team."

"Are you sure they're worth saving, Captain?" Neelix asked, his voice taking on a suddenly serious tone. "I get the feeling they would sell their own children if the deal looked good enough."

"That's a bit harsh, don't you think?" Janeway asked.

"If I may, Captain," Paris said, "they would never go back for us," Paris said.

Janeway looked at him. It wasn't a joke, not coming from Tom.

He knew what it was like to have others give up on you, then to have someone pull you back. She tried to smile. "I'd like to think they might," she said.

"There are always a few good apples in the barrel, Mr. Paris. I've had to believe that."

"I'd like to believe that, too," Kes said, leaving an earnest silence in the air.

"Yes, sir," Paris said. "I just meant--" "I know." Janeway tapped her comm badge. "Captain to Sickbay."

"Yes, Captain," the doctor responded.

"You may have some new business in a few minuses."

"We're ready down here, Captain," the holographic doctor said, "despite the fact that this is the first attempt anyone has made since we arrived in this system to inform me about what's going on. Can I assume these new patients will be members of our crew?"

"No. Televek, actually."

"Of... course," the doctor said after a pause. "You know, that really is the sort

of thing that makes difference to medical personnel."

Janeway glanced at Chakotay, found him hiding a chuckle behind one hand. The doctor was right of course, that was the hell of it.

"Understood," she said.

"We're approaching the cruiser's position again, Captain," Paris announced. "We should match orbits in approximately--" "Captain," Tuvok said, his fingers responding to a warning klaxon that sounded almost in concert with his words. "The Televek fleet is dropping out of warp, entering the

Drenar system."

Daket pulled himself up to a sitting position. He rested there a moment, trying to breathe, choking instead. Dim emergency lighting cast everything in purplish-blue as he looked about the bridge. Every control panel he could see had gone dark. The engines had been lost; he was sure of that. How they had managed to escape complete annihilation he could not imagine, but he did not intend to spend time questioning that small bit of good fortune.

He tried to stand and found that the effort

produced intense pain.

Glancing at his right leg, he saw a wound just below the knee caused by a tangle of flying metal. He looked more carefully about the bridge, straining to make out details. He saw enough movement to tell him that most of the bridge crew had survived, but they were not on their feet, and the bridge itself was ruined.

"Tatel!" he shouted, gagging on the air as he tried to refill his lungs. The smoke was nearly invisible in the surrounding twilight, but it was thick, he decided. And possibly toxic.

There was no way to know for certain.

"Here," Tatel said, a slim figure rising and stumbling toward him.

Daket realized the deck was pitched to starboard several degrees.

"How bad is the damage?"

"I don't know," she said, choking the words out. "Every system is off-line, including life-support. And we're leaking air. I can hear it."

"No positives there," Daket moaned, shaking his head.

"We must assume that much of the stern is destroyed, along with the landing bays. I don't think there is anyone alive beyond section three. My concern is that the ship might break up."

"We have to get out of here," Daket groaned.

"We should be able to reach the forward emergency pods," Tatel offered.

"Can you move?" She was looking down at his leg.

"I'll have to," Daket said, gritting his teeth. If they could actually reach the pods, and if they could get aboard before

the cruiser broke up, and if the pods would launch, and if the Federation ship did not attack the pods and destroy them as soon as they were launched--which was precisely what a Televek commander would do, what Daket himself would likely do, he thought grimly, all things being equal--if all that happened, it would constitute the first thing that had actually gone well during this entire venture...

The other four members of the bridge crew were limping or crawling away now, following Daket's overheard advice. As they began to move, a deafening groan issued from the cruiser's ruptured hull, metal tearing at metal. The

sound was felt as well as heard. Daket hastily tried to scramble up as the others around him vanished through the bridge's forward hatchway, scurrying toward the pods. The pain in his leg stopped him cold.

He winced and eased himself back down, listening to the bulkheads twisting apart. When he looked up, he saw Tatel coming back toward him. The groaning had stopped, if only for a moment.

"I will help you," Tatel said, reaching down, grabbing Daket's large frame beneath his arms, and hoisting him up. She was apparently stronger than she looked.

Daket said nothing, but he did not object. In fact, he was quite grateful for the assistance as they made their way through the open doorway into the corridor beyond, then began to navigate the fallen beams and rubble and smoke. For the life of him, though, he could not figure Tatel's angle, her motivation, for such a foolish act of bravery. But then, not everyone had commercial command potential, something Daket himself had always known he possessed. It followed that in order for him to be "more," someone else clearly had to be...

"less." Not all Televek were created equal, after all. And in any case, he

suspected Tatel wasn't quite right. As she pulled him into one of the pods Daket decided Tatel was simply a technically proficient but hopelessly provincial fool.

"Put a full tactical display of the Televek fleet onscreen," Janeway said. "Include our position. How long before they're on top of us?"

"Approximately two minutes, eleven seconds," Tuvok replied.

"Captain," Kes said, her expression making her seem to have lived all of life

in the last few moments, "I think you should listen to Neelix now. Your only alternative may be to leave."

An obvious statement, Janeway thought, but after so much, having no choice left but to abandon Drenar Four was a hard thing to accept. She could only assume that Kes knew this, and knew as well that, coming from her, the words would be easier to hear, Janeway could see it in the young Ocampa's eyes.

"Bridge to Engineering," Janeway said loudly. "Lieutenant Torres."

"Yes, Captain."

"How long will it take to reconfigure the warp drives?"

"At least fifteen minutes." Torres was silent for a moment, as if she had lost her breath. "And that's if we don't run into problems," she added finally. They both knew that would not be enough time.

"Get right on it," Janeway said. "Do the best you can."

"Our problems are about to be compounded," Paris said, glancing up at the main screen, "unless we get moving."

"Agreed," Janeway said. Paris was carrying out orders, bringing Voyager

around the nearby moon once again, just approaching the position of the cruiser that had paced them here. Paris would find the derelict, or he would do whatever he could to take Voyager to safety.

The problem with the latter was that no safe place existed. The combined Televek fleet could outgun and outmaneuver Voyager many times over, rendering any tactical attempts to hide behind planets or moons quite hopeless. Yet if they lingered here, Voyager's future would certainly consist of only minutes.

"Abandon the rescue attempt," she said

at last. "Helm, plot a course toward the outer gas giants. Mr. Stephens, try hailing the Televek fleet. With a little luck, I may be able to buy us some time."

"The Televek are not responding," Stephens said after only a moment.

"The fleet continues to approach at nearly full impulse."

Tuvok said, "Their heading will bring them directly to us. I estimate they will intercept in fifty-nine seconds."

"If we leave the system without warp capability we'll be sitting ducks," Chakotay said.

"And if we stay, they'll cut us off," Janeway muttered. She looked up at the screen as the image changed to real space, magnified many times.

At least a dozen ships could be seen now, small shining dots like tiny stars against the black night of space. She stood up and stepped forward. There were words that needed to be said to the crew, both Starfleet and Maquis, men and women who had truly begun to work together and hope together.

She had always thought there would be time to say them. It wasn't working out that way.

"Arm the photons and transfer all available power to the shields, including life-support. We won't fire unless they do, but I want to be ready." She looked around her, found Chakotay looking back. "We won't go quietly," she said. "I promise you."

He returned a silent, solemn nod.

"Captain," Tuvok said, his voice raised above his usual Vulcan monotone. "I am detecting multiple energy readings from the planet.

Similar to previous contacts, but stronger." He paused.

"Much stronger. I'm also reading a massive buildup--" "In the cavern!"

Janeway said, eyes wide as she spun one-half turn to face the tactical bay.

"How many individual readings?"

"Dozens, and all of the contacts appear to be headed toward space."

"Put it up," Janeway ordered.

The tactical display Tuvok had been monitoring appeared on the main screen. All eyes watched as a cloud of energy bursts swept up from the planet's surface. They rushed past Voyager's

position in an instant, then continued out into space.

"Projected course?" Janeway asked.

Tuvok paused, verifying. "They appear to be on an intercept course toward the Televek fleet. Their individual power levels are continuing to rise to extraordinary levels."

Janeway narrowed her gaze and watched the ghosts cross the screen, watched the Televek fleet bearing down on them, nearly arrived at Drenar Four, close to Voyager's own position now.

"I'll just bet they are," she murmured,

nodding to herself.

"The energy beings are attacking,"
Stephens said.

"So it would seem," Chakotay replied.

"The Televek do appear to be under attack," Tuvok said. "Though the nature of the attack is not clear. No weapons have been fired by the energy entities. The Televek are firing, but their weapons are having no verifiable effect."

Chakotay raised his eyebrows. "How do you know the fleet is under attack?"

"The Televek are having... technical difficulties. They are experiencing an extraordinary number of system overloads and failures."

"I've got their ship-to-ship communications," Stephens said.

"Let's hear it," Janeway said.

The speaker suddenly erupted in a jumble of voices and background noise. Most of the noise sounded like a series of small explosions.

Fire control and massive outages seemed to be of utmost importance to most of the voices being heard.

"It sounds as if entire consoles are shorting out, catching fire," Chakotay said.

"Sensor and audio data indicate that all of the Televek ships are having similar problems," Tuvok said. "The Televek continue to attempt counterattacks, but I have observed no effect on their targets."

"That's because they're only chasing ghosts," Chakotay said with a grin. He looked to the captain.

"Our ghosts, Commander." Janeway smiled back.

The audio confusion was suddenly interrupted by a thundering voice, a female voice. "Withdraw!" the Televek commander shouted.

"I have a visual," Stephens reported.

Janeway nodded to him.

The woman's face appeared on the screen, a Televek not like unlike the others, though she was far older than anyone Janeway had encountered so far, and clearly she had wealth and stature beyond the dreams of most.

The bridge of her ship was like the court of a queen, gaudily upholstered and

decorated with tapestries, glittering fixtures and fine, scrolled metal arches; her mantled uniform was exquisite in design and color--bright colors, Janeway noted, as if the whole of the universe was supposed to notice her.

"Try to open a channel, Mr. Stephens," Janeway said, as she watched and listened to the Televek commander shouting in a frantic, yet somehow utterly authoritative voice. A cold intensity gleamed in her narrowed green eyes. Heads would roll, Janeway thought. One way or another.

"Captain," Tuvok said, "two of the cruisers have lost all power.

Life pods are being launched. The first of those are at present being collected by neighboring vessels. Several of the other cruisers appear to be maintaining minimal power and control, but I am also showing massive systems failures on the lead ship. A reactor core containment failure is imminent."

Janeway was still watching the woman who had threatened to cast doom on them all. "Any luck with that hail?"

Stephens shook his head. "They're not responding, Captain."

"I didn't think she would."

"It is too late in any case," Tuvok said. The image of the Televek commander, Shaale--if Jonal had told her the right name--suddenly vanished, replaced by a view of space. To one side of the screen a brilliant multicolored flash suddenly lit the heavens.

"The lead cruiser has been destroyed," Tuvok finished. "I am not reading any survivors."

"I'm picking up a hailing signal from just off our starboard," Stephens said.

"Confirm two contacts," Tuvok added. "They are Televek pods."

They must have come from the damaged cruiser we left orbiting the near moon."

"They're signaling their fleet that they're coming, Captain," Stephens added.

"How many life signs?" Janeway asked.

Tuvok studied his console. "Eleven in one pod, six in the other."

"Good." Janeway tapped her comm badge. "Bridge to transporter room.

I want you to beam Jonal, Mila, and Tassay onto the second of those two pods. Tuvok will transfer the

coordinates."

"Aye, sir," came the transporter chief's reply.

"Are you just letting them go?" Chakotay asked.

Janeway sighed. "I'm not going to keep them in our brig for the next seventy years." She held his gaze for a moment. "Comments, Commander?"

Chakotay shrugged agreeably. "Not a one, Captain."

"Transporter room reports all three prisoners beamed aboard the second

pod," Tuvok announced.

"Good," Janeway said, knitting her fingers together behind her back.

"Mr. Tuvok, I'd like you to put the tactical display back up on the main screen."

As the image appeared, it was clear that the surviving Televek ships were turning, heading away. Two hulks remained, drifting not far from the debris that marked the place where Shaale's vessel had been.

"Bridge to Engineering."

"Torres here, Captain."

"Belay that warp drive reconfiguration order. We've still got moons to move, and it looks as if we just might get the chance."

Janeway turned to Chakotay and saw a stark, wide-eyed look suddenly cross his face. He gasped as his breath seemed to catch in his throat.

She tried to reach for him, but suddenly she couldn't see him anymore, and the ghosts were with her.

Voices filled Janeway's mind, but they were not all the voices of ghosts. Among them were the frightened, astonished voices of more than one hundred forty men and women, the entire crew of Voyager. All together, somehow, somewhere, they touched one another in the gentlest way. Then the ghosts began to speak to everyone at once.

There were no words, just as before; it was more a sense, an essence, a tacit meaning. This time, however, there were no visions of suffering, no attacks, no fear, no omens of catastrophes to come, no dead. Just a notion that could only be translated into words like "thank you"...

"the children"...

"thank you"...

The children were the Drenarians,
Janeway thought, sure of it.

But the people of Drenar Four were not
the children of the ghosts, and the ghosts
were not their ancestors. The reality was
better than that.

Yet even as those thoughts came to her,
the images in her mind--in the mind of
everyone on board--suddenly changed.
She saw something of the great
consciousness that had sent the ghosts,
the presence that had spoken to her and

to Chakotay, and that spoke to the others now.

At their first entry into the alien stream of consciousness a blizzard of perceptions overwhelmed the crew, bits and pieces of galaxies and worlds and peoples, information that came in emotional as well as visual form. But the stream quickly narrowed and became an image only Janeway recognized, that of a fantastic alien vessel, a ship several hundred times Voyager's size... passing before her eyes, blocking countless stars from view...

CHAPTER 17

Lieutenant Torres waited patiently to be addressed while Janeway listened to the reports of the other officers gathered at the briefing room table. Voyager was almost back to normal.

"We're ready to get under way, Captain," B'Elanna said in turn.

"We have nearly full warp capability, and full impulse." With Drenar Four's three moons finally moved into their projected positions she had at last been able to reconfigure the warp drives. She had even managed to get a small repair crew down to the planet to retrieve Voyager's damaged shuttlecraft.

And according to preliminary data, the planet itself had already begun to quiet, though this change was measurable only by using Voyager's sensors; it would be weeks before the Drenarians noticed a real difference. But it would be enough of a difference, B'Elanna thought, quite pleased with the notion.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Janeway said. "A good job, all of you."

"How soon will we be leaving?" Neelix said, the first time he had spoken this morning.

"Soon enough," Janeway told him. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

Neelix looked slightly miffed. "I'm not, Captain. I simply wanted to mention that before we go, we ought to take one of your shuttlecraft over to those abandoned Televek cruisers and do a little... poking around, for inventory's sake."

Janeway and Chakotay looked at each other, then both of them turned toward B'Elanna.

"Agreed," B'Elanna said. "After all, they did say those ships might have the kinds of parts we need. Maybe that was the one thing they were telling the truth about."

"Neelix," Janeway said with a smile,
"I'm going to take you up on that."

Paris, lay in a course to those abandoned ships. We'll beam over.

Commander," she told Chakotay, "and B'Elanna, make a list. We're going shopping!"

Within minutes Voyager stood alongside one of the silent, drifting Televek cruisers. A moment later Captain Janeway, Chakotay, Paris, and Lieutenant Torres materialized in a darkened corridor, handheld lights revealing smooth, unadorned walls.

"Chakotay and I will take the bridge."

Janeway said. "You two know what you have to do. Keep in touch."

They split up, each pair making their way, listening to their own heavy footfalls echo in the otherwise utterly still air--stale air, Janeway noted, thick with the smell of burned circuitry and uncertain chemicals. And cold. Interior temperatures were falling steadily.

Janeway could already see her own breath.

Life-support had been eliminated along

with everything else when the ghosts had attacked.

Guided by Rollins on Voyager's bridge, Janeway found the Televek bridge quickly enough. She and Chakotay went to work at once, looking over the various systems, attempting to determine the extent of the damage.

"We aren't going to get main power on-line," Chakotay said. He was crouched at one of the five compact console clusters that made up most of the bridge. "The primary feeds are melted, along with all contiguous components."

So they weren't going to be able to

analyze or test any Televek technologies--not right away, in any case--but as Janeway examined what she guessed must be the tactical and weapons control center, she saw that it hardly mattered. She stood up and let out a deep sigh. "Even if we could route power in here somehow, everything is ruined. The destruction was quite thorough."

Chakotay stood up as well. He nodded, a gesture barely noted in the reflected glow of his flash beam on the panels to either side.

Janeway tapped her comm badge once more. "Torres, Paris, we've got nothing

in here. Are you having any luck?"

"Negative, Captain," B'Elanna replied.

"Engineering is completely useless.

Everything is burned beyond repair.

Some of it is still smoldering. The ship's

fire-control systems must have begun to

function for a short time before the

power went dead. Otherwise, I don't

think we'd be standing here right now."

"Captain," Tuvok's voice interrupted.

Janeway tapped her badge once more.

"Go ahead."

"I am scanning what appears to be a

sizable storage area very near the

engineering and weapons sections of the cruiser. But the entire section is well shielded. Direct transport inside will not be possible. Subsequent scans indicate a similar room aboard the other derelict. Also, those same scans have turned up very little in terms of stockpiles or supplies, other than ship's stores, and equipment in use."

"You'd expect more, wouldn't you?"
Janeway said sardonically.

"Yes, Captain. If the Televek are indeed arms and technology merchants, and if they are routinely as cautious as we have been led to believe, then it is logical to assume they would take the precaution of

carrying valuable merchandise in just such an area."

"Acknowledged. Janeway to Torres. Did you get that?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I want both of you to meet us in the corridor near that storage facility at once."

"We're on our way, Captain," Paris replied.

The away team met at where two hallways intersected. They found themselves facing a large double

hatchway composed of two-inch-thick terminium. Both B'Elanna and Chakotay looked the entry system over carefully before offering Janeway a mutual shrug.

"It's locked," the Commander noted.

"And without power to anything, we can't bypass the seal," B'Elanna said.

"We're going to have to do this another way."

"Agreed," Janeway said. Janeway gave both officers the go-ahead.

All three of them stood back as Janeway tapped at her badge.

"Transporter room, we're going to need a Type III phaser compression rifle, immediately."

A moment later the rifle materialized on the deck at Chakotay's feet.

The commander picked the weapon up and set it to maximum, then held it in both hands at waist level. He waited while the others looked away, then fired point-blank at the center of the doors. One full burst was enough.

"Take care that you don't get burned," Janeway warned as the four of them stepped forward, their faces warm from the heat of the phaser, and used their

hands to push the big doors aside. They slid open easily.

Paris was the first one through the entryway.

Janeway raised her light with his to scan the room. She could hardly believe her eyes.

The room was immense and filled to every corner with dozens of containers, large and small. But without opening a single one it was clear what most of them contained. Diagrams had been attached to the cartons, all of them depicting hardware and components, from EPS conduits and regulators and

graviton generators to phaser emitters.

And in between the many stacks and rows of crates, on open pallets and protected by clear covering, there rested larger equipment meant for heavy excavation and assault. The Televek had come prepared for some serious digging and a no-contest perimeter defense.

"I can tell you right now," B'Elanna said, striding up to a short stack of crates, the end cap of an aisle formed by dozens of crates, all slightly larger. "We've got that EPS regulator we need, and about seven more, right here."

She laid her hand on one of the crates

and seemed to trace the surface with her fingers, then she looked back at the others and smiled.

"They're a little different from ours," she added, turning again to the diagram on the crate's exterior, examining it more closely. "But I think this'll work."

"Janeway to Voyager. We're going to need an engineering team over here right away. We've got a big job for them."

B'Elanna started tapping at the nearest crate's keypad while the others headed into the stacks.

The rest of the away team, led by

Lieutenant Carey, arrived moments later and went straight to work, cataloging first, opening crates when necessary, then reviewing the data they had collected with one of the two engineering officers. Six hours later Lieutenant Torres pronounced them finished.

Not only would the storeroom provide the EPS unit they needed to bring the phasers back, but one large crate held a precious bonus--a pair of warp-capable tactical probes roughly the size of Voyager's photon torpedoes. B'Elanna examined the find and decided that the entire guidance and instrument mechanism would have to be gutted, but

the units could be converted to resupply Voyager's limited stores.

And there was more--a considerable collection of components and hand weapons, no doubt on both ships, all for the taking, but many of them would have served little purpose aboard Voyager, and it was not immediately clear what some of the others were for.

Moreover, Voyager's own storage capacity was severely limited.

In the end, choices had to be made. The second cruiser was largely left alone.

As Janeway sat in the captain's chair

reviewing the final list of procurements, she found she had few complaints.

"That will be all for now," she said, adding a satisfied smile as she handed the PADD back to B'Elanna. She placed both palms flat on the arms of the chair and gazed at the main screen, which was filled with a view of Drenar Four and the stars beyond. "Prepare to get under way," she told the bridge crew.

"Are you planning to visit the Drenarians again before we leave?"

Chakotay asked from his own chair, just to Janeway's left.

"No," she said. "We've gone over the line as it is. I think the Prime Directive has been bludgeoned enough for now, current arguments notwithstanding."

"Of course, Captain," Chakotay said wryly.

Janeway looked at him. "Haven't we already had this conversation?"

"Several times," Paris remarked, eyes steady ahead.

"It remains a question that has no definitive answer," Tuvok said. "We cannot be sure how much of the Drenarians' current civilization is the

result of the ghosts, or the being or beings who created the ghosts.

Therefore, one cannot truly say whether or not we acted irresponsibly when we attempted to avert their destruction."

"I have some idea," Janeway said, looking first at him, then at the others. They waited quietly for her to go on. She took a deep breath.

"It's something I learned in the visions I had--or was given. I've had some time to collect my thoughts, and I've got my theories. The Drenarians are convinced that a very ancient god visited them, and that before it left, it opened their hearts

and minds to the spirits of their own ancestors. I believe the dying god who passed this way ages ago was actually an alien being possessed of remarkable technology, a being composed of pure energy, perhaps, possibly from another galaxy.

What all of you saw, in the vision we all shared, was a glimpse of its spacecraft."

"Yes, Captain," Tuvok said. "It would be illogical to assume anything else."

"Agreed," Chakotay said simply.

"What made the alien travel to the surface of Drenar Four I can't begin to

know, but it spent time among the local inhabitants and grew quite fond of them, of their remarkable civilization; perhaps it was even impressed, as I was, by their natural prowess. But either the alien was dying or it implied that it was, and the Drenarians did everything they could to make its final days as satisfactory and fulfilling as possible--little more than gestures to the alien, certainly, but well received, I believe."

"So before it left, the alien created the ghosts to help protect these people," Chakotay concluded.

"Yes," Janeway said. "It built a sort of fence around the planet, but one that

would blend with their own culture, without compromising it any more than necessary."

"Like the Caretaker," Paris said, making the connection. "It wanted to protect the race it had found, though for a different reason."

"It could even have been the second Caretaker," Chakotay said offhandedly, as if the idea seemed almost too possible.

"Maybe, but I didn't see that in any of my visions," Janeway said. "We may never know."

"Then in essence we did precisely what that alien did," Tuvok suggested. "We protected the Drenarians while interfering with their culture as little as possible."

"Yes, I'd say so," Chakotay replied, nodding mostly to himself.

"They have lost a certain innocence now, though, haven't they?"

Janeway said, rather melancholy. She looked up to find the others staring back at her, obviously concerned--about her, she knew, but not just her. "But they've lost none of their promise, I think," she added.

"Present, or future," Tuvok said.

Janeway acknowledged him with a nod.

"Thank you, Mr. Tuvok."

"It was right, to help them," Chakotay said, his expression almost pensive.

"We couldn't have just walked away."

"You can only live one day at a time," Janeway conceded grimly.

Then she let a smile find her lips.

"Take us out of here, Mister Paris."

The smile tightened.

"Take us home."

*** The end *** To my wife, Genevieve,
Who makes all the difference.

M. A. G.

With love and thanks to the women who
have shaped my life-Elizabeth, Nancy,
Nora Mother, wife daughter C. G. M.

*** With thanks to Tyra Turner and John
Ordovery, For the chance to join the
Voyager on its odyssey and special
thanks to Angela Frey, for helping to
polish all the rough spots *** Other Star
Trek Voyager books: 1: The Caretaker
2: The Escape 3: Ragnarok 4: Violations

5: Incident at Arbuk 6: The Murdered
Sun

The End