

Species 329

*an Outpost Hope One and
DFA Cromwell short novel*

**written by AJ, Anna Maria, Devon, Doug, Miriah,
Nathan, Randy, Rich, Richard and Tabitha**

edited by Tabitha and Richard

Star Trek: Borderlands

<http://www.startrekborderlands.com>

Star Trek: Borderlands is a play-by-email roleplaying community started in 1993. For 25 years, fans of Star Trek have come together to write their own stories of exploration, conflict, friendship, victory and defeat.

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This short novel is a compilation of posts from the [Outpost Hope One Posting Group](#)³ and [DFA Cromwell Posting Group](#)⁴.

¹ <http://outposthopeone.nfshost.com/>

² <https://sites.google.com/site/dfacromwell/>

³ <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/SentinelStation/info>

⁴ <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Cromwell/info>

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outposthopeone.nfshost.com
sites.google.com/site/dfacromwell

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Characters

Played by AJ

Ensign Covaar Tryutu
Science Officer, DFA Cromwell B

Played by Anna Maria

Husar
Member of the Scrivvan Families

Gaspar
Head Chef of *Sushi Bar*

Ilko Seket
Agent of the Obsidian Order

Played by Devon

Brinn
Bajoran Refugee

Lieutenant Eric Desson
Acting Chief of Operations, DFA Cromwell B

Ensign Ariana Serota
Science Officer, Specialty in Geosciences, Outpost Hope One
Delta Freedom Alliance Exchange Officer

Fleet Captain Carson Sesgaard
Commanding Officer, DFA Cromwell B

Played by Doug

Lieutenant Theodore Bear
Intelligence Officer, Outpost Hope One

Played by Miriah

Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Kamaia Pania
Communications and Linguistics Officer, DFA Cromwell B

Played by Nathan

Doctor David Clark
Acting Chief Medical Officer, DFA Cromwell B

Played by Randy

Major Michael Reynolds
Commanding Officer, Intelligence Officer, Delta Freedom Alliance Marine Corps
Executive Officer, DFA Cromwell B,

Ensign Kimberly Wells
Security/Tactical Officer, DFA Cromwell B

Played by Rich

Lieutenant Commander Lionin Favor
Science Department Logistics Coordinator

Played by Richard

1st Lieutenant Mahlon “Farmer” Avinbruch
Pilot, Starfleet Marine Corps

Chief Petty Officer Eiwan
Engineering Operations Officer, Outpost Hope One

Played by Tabitha

The Cooperative

Kal
Scientist

Six of Twelve
Adjunct of DFA Cromwell B, Tactical Drone

Ensign Kit Taylor
Engineer, DFA Cromwell B

Prologue

Location: Gamma V & Federation Science Vessel

Alarms could be heard from everywhere. They were so loud that it was a challenge even to hear your own voice, they were the unnecessary warnings of an enemy attack. Unnecessary because the attacks had been so constant that they were now expected.

Kal could hear the sounds of bombs going off and of phasers being fired, mixed together with the sounds of screaming and crying. The little boy held tightly to his older sister's hand. He was 10 years old and the girl was 17, they were alone, hiding under a table in their half-destroyed home.

Once the attack had subsided, several hours later, the pair headed out into the city in search of their brothers and parents. What they saw would have been scaring to most but they were used to it, they had grown up with it. Grown up to the screaming and the crying, to the sight of children crying over their dead parents. They lived in constant fear of being those children.

"Where's mum and dad?" The little boy asked, looking with watering eyes into his sister's.

"Don't worry Kal, we'll find them." The girl tried to reassure her little brother but she sounded unsure herself. "Mother? Farther?" She shouted as they walked through the warzone. They heard a familiar voice and ran towards it.

"Ji!" The girl exclaimed, picking up a crying toddler and cradling him in her arms "Where's mummy?" She asked softly. The baby pointed and they walked around a corner and that was the moment that Kal's life first fell apart...

A man and a women, and another small child were lying on the ground. The man had third degree burns and the women clung tightly, even in death to the child. Both of them had a hole in their chests where a disrupter weapon had clearly shot right through them. Kam, the older girl, handed the baby to Kal and told her brothers to look away. She went and checked if her parents and her baby brother were... were... yes they were.

The teenage girl returned to the child and the toddler, unable to contain her tears any longer. She wept violently and they understood immediately, they were those children now, they were orphans.

The three children huddled together near the bodies of their parents. Ji was only two years old, too young to understand. He just kept asking "Mummy? Daddy? Ki?" confusedly from his sister's arms (Ki was his, now deceased, twin brother).

It wasn't easy, but the three children survived the next 6 years. They scraped by, and scavenged for food.

Kam worked hard to raise her two little brothers, but Kazon society was a patriarchy, and she was an untrained 17 year old girl, so it was hard for her to get a good enough job to support her family.

The day before Kal turned 16 those alarms rang again, as they had done so many times before. Since the death of their family, the three siblings had always stuck together and they had survived.

Today Kal was applying for his warriors name challenge and was thus away from his siblings. When the alarms sounded he ran to find them but it was too late.

The evil sounds of the alarms rang in the boy's mind as he futilely checked his little brother and his sister for a pulse but it was useless.

They were gone too now, gone forever, and he was alone...

Eight Years Later...

=^= RED ALERT! ^=

Now Kal's favourite sound. The bright red lights flashed across the Federation ship and people started to hurry madly out of their quarters, before the decks were locked down. Rushing madly, it seemed, in no obvious direction, but each individual was trying to reach a place of safety, or trying to find family and friends.

A moment later and Kal heard the words he had patiently waited for, for the past 6 months...

=^= We have engaged the Borg ^=

Security officers began to appear, transported in groups to offer their resistance, but it was a small science vessel, it stood little to no chance against the Borg. Soon it would be assimilated. Kal smiled in anticipation.

=^= EVACUATE DECKS 4-6 ^=

The Kazon heard the announcement and a crazed grin manifested on his pale face, his eyes seemed to glow with the madness. The Borg had boarded, they were on decks 4 through 6, and Kal... Kal was on deck 4.

Six of Twelve. Twenty-seven none Borg lifeforms detected on deck 4, corridor 3a. Twenty-six worthy of assimilation. Assist Four of Twelve and Eight of Twelve. Assimilate all relevant lifeforms.

Six of Twelve, Secondary Adjunct of Unimatrix 11, heard the Collective voices and saw the instructions displayed in Borg alphanumeric in one corner of her ocular implant.

As she approached two humans, she was instructed to assimilate them. She was instructed to the very last detail, as she was with every element of her existence. Although these instructions were too fast to explain in words. The Collective controlled her in the same way that a person's brain instructs part of its body to move.

The drone complied. She pinned the pair of species 5618 together against a wall and shot her tubules through their necks.

Twenty-four non-Borg life forms remaining

Within a matter of twenty minutes there was no one left. Almost no one...

"What about me?" Kal screamed at Six, but she could not see him, or more accurately she did not process him, he was irrelevant. She calmly pulled the cortical implant out of the deactivated Four of Twelve and then stood motionless, ready to be transported.

"Please!" Kal cried grabbing onto the drone.

Threat detected. Remove threat.

Six responded immediately to the command. She grabbed the Kazon by the neck and for a second he had a glimpse of hope. He closed his eyes, expecting to feel assimilation tubules shoot through him and then expecting an end to his suffering.

Unfortunately for Kal, all he felt was a sudden jolt as the drone threw him at a wall, like the useless piece of equipment he was to those he worshipped. He was knocked unconscious.

Six of Twelve and the rest of her submatrix transported back to Probe 635. Six proceeded to her regeneration chamber as the screams of the Collective's latest victims echoed throughout the vessel.

Within an hour it was quiet again, only the peaceful ordered voices of the Borg could be heard in Six's mind. She heard each new voice and she felt the distinctiveness of each new individual, adding to Borg perfection, making the Collective better...

At least that was Six's opinion on the matter, if indeed a drone can be said to have an opinion, it would be more appropriate to say that it was the Collective's opinion on the matter.

Kal woke up several hours later in the sickbay of a DFA vessel with a concussion and a scar down his neck from where the drone had thrown him.

“Why didn't they take me?” He asked the doctor deliriously.

The Talaxian doctor smiled at his patient “You were lucky, it was the Borg, they consider your species to be 'unworthy of assimilation'” he laughed “Wish we were.”

Kal passed out and did not wake up until several hours later recovering in a Starbase.

Chapter One

Location: Sentinel Station, Quartermaster's Office

Kal, or Four of Six, as he often insisted upon being called, was docking his shuttle into the Sentinel Station docking ring. The shuttle was small and badly damaged, it was around 10 years old and had been the closest thing Kal had to a home since he left Gamma V after the death of his eldest sister.

He had proceeded to the station upon hearing that a Borg cube had been engaged in the region. He followed all conflicts related to the Borg, whom he worshipped with an insane passion. He had stalked the Collective for years, trying to be assimilated, only to discover that, like resistance, persistence also tends to be futile. This time however, he had a plan, he thought, although at least a part of him knew that it was a long shot at best...

=^= Requesting permission to dock? ^=

The Kazon asked at the docking ring before entering the station.

Traffic Control had monitored the vessel since it entered sensor range. The ship had criss-crossed the Delta Quadrant, entering and exiting Federation-monitored space a dozen times. At the current range, a shallow scan identified a single Kazon aboard.

=^= Permission granted. Follow transponder to port 34, flight plan attached. ^=

Once he had docked Kal then went to find the registry office, he needed to find out about available lab space and quarters.

His plan was to develop an assimilation virus, with the hopes that the Collective would consider him worthy if he succeeded... then he would no longer be alone. This might sound evil but it was closer to selfishness than true evil. It was also aided by mental instability. Kal had not considered the ramifications for everyone else should his plan succeed; he just wanted to belong to the Borg.

Initially Kal had simply wanted to be assimilated in order to end his own suffering. A suffering caused by the grief of losing everyone he had ever cared for. He had not allow himself the opportunity to get close to anyone after he left Gamma V, for fear of losing them. So as the years went by a grief stricken boy of 17 grew into a lonely and obsessive man of 27.

He had fallen more and more into the void of his own mind, so that by now his initial desire to be assimilated had developed into an obsession. Fuelled by the intense loneliness of self-imposed isolation and self-loathing.

He worshipped the Borg and the fact that they had rejected him only made him worship them all the more; people are in the habit of wanting that which they cannot have...

After much searching Kal finally found the registry office and knocked nervously on the door.

“How can I help you?” The young man wore his uniform crisply.

“Hello?” Kal said nervously “Um... is this the registry... I mean are you the Quartermaster for the station?” He asked.

He felt uneasy. The years of isolation had made him awkward around people, ironic really, considering that he wanted to belong to a collective of trillions.

“This is the Quartermaster's Office, yes.” In truth, a station the size of Sentinel had a number of assistant quartermasters 24 hours a day. “You are looking for residential or commercial?”

“Um... commercial?” Kal guessed, not entirely sure what category research fell into, he struggled to maintain eye contact, he was not used to talking to other people. He'd only really had himself to talk too for the past ten years.

“Excellent. You're looking for a retail space to sell wares and services? Something off-Promenade with office space?” The role of Quartermaster had changed slightly since the new governor took over. The agency system was being transitioned back to a central issuer. “The central tower provides the best views of the Terrarium.”

“Well... I'm um... I'm really looking for lab space.” He explained “I'm here to conduct research...”

“Plenty of that as well. What is your area of exploration?”

“Xenobiology.” The Kazon replied vaguely, he did not want to go into too much detail, but then a thought suddenly occurred to him “I study the Borg” he admitted thinking that perhaps he could gain some information regarding the cube.

“Very exciting.” replied the assistant quartermaster by rote. His last performance review touched on his lack of 'making a connection'. “You must find that very exciting. I do.”

“Well if we understand their technology we'll be able to... to... um... resist them more effectively...” he lied, suppressing his irritation at the idea.

“We have some lab space that includes time with Sentinel's main computer. That will allow you to run your simulations.” The young man pulled up the specifications on the space to better assist with pricing.

“I have heard that there's been a Borg cube in this... area.. have you heard anything about it?” Kal enquired.

He tried to sound casual but his lack of social skills made it hard for him to conceal his eagerness at the thought of the cube.

“I have no direct knowledge of that. A Federation fleet came through recently. Perhaps that triggered the rumour of a Cube in the area.” Perhaps this gentleman's needs weren't quite what he expected. “Were you looking for time on the main sensor array as well?”

Kal thought for a moment, he did not have a lot in the way of credits but he had saved. He had mostly gotten by for the past 10 years by trading various unusual items that he had acquired during his constant traveling, and by doing various jobs that no one wanted due to the vicinity of Borg space.

“Possibly... how much will it cost?” He finally asked.

“It is a costly upgrade. Do you have an estimate on the time you would require, the types of sensors? The fee is due at the time of signing and a minimum two-month buy-in. There is an a-la-carte option.” The assistant quartermaster stared at the Kazon.

“Yes I think I may need some time with the sensors” He said, somewhat reluctantly, he wanted to find out exactly where that cube was, if it were there at all “My research involves studying a nanovirus... so I would need to run a lot of simulations.” He said and then quickly added “A virus to ... um... destroy the Borg... um... neurotransmitters.”

He felt annoyed at himself for even *mentioning* a nanovirus and hoped the assistant quartermaster would not think too much into it, thankfully however he did not seem to care much about what he was saying.

“Of course. You will want computer time, then. There are a number of packages. I can offer a discount if you limit your simulation time to Delta shift.”

“That would be perfect.” The Kazon agreed. It would be far better to conduct his simulations during the night anyway, there was less chance of someone coming in and asking questions. He also rarely slept for more than 4 hours a night, he was an insomniac and his mind tended to keep him awake into the early hours of the morning. He would stay awake just thinking, tossing and turning in bed, dwelling in his misery and nursing his obsession, as such Kal was used to functioning on little sleep.

“So, for the packages--” continued the quartermaster.

“Were do I sign?” He asked.

The assistant quartermaster selected an a-la-carte option. “You name sir?”

“Four of... Kal... my name is Kal.” It would do no good to give his designation, that would raise suspicion, and he had told this man more than he'd meant to already.

“Kal is your given name? Family name? Clan? Geostructure? And you're the fourth of your clan?” With so many non-human species, it was sometimes very unclear how names were structured.

“Just Kal.” He said irritably.

His sister had died just before his coming of age ceremony and so he had never went through with it and thus had never gained his full warrior's name. It was an upsetting fact and lead him to loath his name, which was, at least in part the reason for his adopted Borg designation.

“The first payment of two snips is due immediately. I have you booked on Deck 10, section 34.”

“Thank you... I um... don't suppose you have a map do you?” He asked, handing the man his PaDD to upload a map “This is a very big station... it would be easy to get lost” he said a little awkwardly.

“It is. And I've included a contact number to reach us directly with any further questions or concerns.”

“Thank You. I will um.... I guess I should... um... well goodbye” Kal replied awkwardly.

“Enjoy your day.”

“Thank you, you too.” Kal said with something of a forced smile, he couldn't remember the last day he'd actually enjoyed.

Kal looked at the PaDD again for directions and headed to the nearest turbo lift. Upon arriving at the Terrarium he made his way to his office / quarters where he deposited the few possessions that had not been left in the shuttle.

He then pulled out a small box from his coat pocket and placed it on his desk. Once activated it revealed a faded holoimage of a young couple with three children, two little boys, identical twins of about 2 or 3 and a teenage girl.

That image was all that Kal had left of his family, anything else had been left in the bomb site that had once been his home. He looked with sad nostalgia at one of the little boys on the left, at little Ji.

The child was grinning widely with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes, he looked full of joy and full of love for life.

Kal felt the tears begin to fall, as they tended to when he looked at his long lost family. It had been so long since his sister and brother died, and longer still since he'd

lost his parents, and his other younger brother, but when he looked at that photo it felt as if it were only yesterday.

Had it really been ten years since Kam and Ji died? Seventeen years since his parents and Ki had been lost, seventeen years ago he had truly been four of six.

Kal wiped the tears from his eyes and sighed.

It won't be long, they'll except me this time, I'll prove that I'm worthy, this'll work, it's got too.. then there'll be no more pain.. and I won't be alone anymore, then I'll never be alone again.

The Kazon sighed once more and then went and showered, before deciding to go and find somewhere to eat.

Chapter Two

Location: Sentinel Station, Sushi Bar

After he'd put his things away Kal walked through the station's promenade, trying to choose a place to eat, and looking at the various shops and the crowds of people. It seemed very busy to Kal. He hated crowds and began to feel slightly claustrophobic, another huge irony when one considers his desire to join the Borg.

Kal walked into a sushi bar and looked around, pleased at how quickly he'd found somewhere to eat, before walking up to the bar to sit down.

Gaspar covered his surprise at the sight of a Kazon (he hadn't seen many) and one who actually appeared to be less knuckle draggingly dense than he had expected. Not that he was prejudiced of course. Yes, Gaspar prided himself on his ability to be welcoming and he bustled over, "Why hello and welcome! What can I get you? We have an extensive selection of course..." He waved to the menu board by way of explanation.

"Um hello." The Kazon said awkwardly "I don't really know... I'll just have... um whatever you would recommend."

Kal had never tried sushi before. His diet was rather limited because, in his admiration, he tried to mimic the Borg Collective's strict efficiency. He usually ate while he worked, and the only thing he ever really ate was nutrient supplements; they were easy to drink quickly but they tasted of very little. He had chosen to eat out today primarily to talk to people, the sushi bar seemed like the perfect setting for that. He wanted to gain information about the cube.

"Perhaps a tasting plate of sushi would be best, for the -" Uneducated - "uh, inexperienced palate." Gaspar made it appear, nothing fancy of course since he figured for the young Kazon anything would do.

"Thank you." Kal said, beginning to eat the sushi, the sensation of actual taste and texture was something of a rare treat because of his self-imposed dietary restrictions.

Gaspar waited just long enough before asking, "Well do you like your first taste of sushi?"

"It is very pleasant." Kal admitted "And I've just arrived, it's nice to meet you."

"And nice to meet you..." Gaspar leaned against the bar, "A pleasure of course to find someone who appreciates good food, I don't think you have introduced

yourself.” He busied himself getting out some synthehol and a few glasses, he could probably palm off the fake sake while he was at it.

“Four of Six.” Kal replied automatically and then inwardly chastised himself. That would now need explaining...

Gaspar stopped, gave him a look, “That’s different...from what I have heard anyway. Is it some Kazon thing?”

“It’s a... um... its a long story... What’s... what’s your name?” He asked the man, hoping that the man would press no further upon the matter of his designation.

“Gaspar, but I don’t have a long story...simply that -” Gaspar stopped, noticing the woman approaching. He groaned to himself and forced a smile. “Well, well, what brings you here?”

Husar came up behind Kal, barely glanced at the kid before she reached Gaspar and started into complaint, “You know very well and do not think I will go easy on you because there is a customer here - for your information that shipment of vole bellies you diverted from the Cardassian Cafe and sent my way was both too old and too fatty -” She paused long enough to say to Kal, “I would suggest running away before Gaspar poisons you.”

Kal was startled by the women’s sudden appearance, he had not even noticed her coming up behind him, and he was even more startled by her ... advice.

The Kazon just stared uneasily at Gaspar and wondered if he should excuse himself.

Gaspar glared at Husar for a moment, “What she means, my young friend is that I have neglected to offer you either something to drink or wasabi...assuming you wish to try both.”

“No what I -” She barely said before Gaspar grabbed Husar by the arm and forced her to the chair, before slamming down some sashimi in front of her. “- you know very well -”

Kal stared at the food and wondered if it was a good idea to actually eat it after having heard about the out of date vole bellies. He shuddered at the thought, vole bellies sounded unpleasant enough without them being out of date, he decided that perhaps it was a after all a good thing that he usually only ate nutrient supplements.

“Um... I’m full...” he lied “but I wouldn’t mind a drink?”

Gaspar poured a good sized glass of synthol, that vile fake version of all the good drinks of humanity. But at least he could serve it to the kid and he pushed a glass to Kal as well as Husar, “Try it and tell me what you think, and please eat!”

Husar gave up at that point and drank, before pulling a face and slamming the glass down, “How about kanar? Something decent and something to make me forget about your wretched vole bellies.” She then decided to notice the young Kazon, “What about you? Want to try something real instead of Federation vole pee?”

“Vole pee?!” Asked the Kazon as he drew the glass away from his mouth.

“It’s an expression and not a very polite one.” Gaspar sniffed, “Really Husar can’t you go away and bother someone else....?”

“Hah.” Husar settled herself more firmly on the chair, “I don’t see the boy complaining and we were just getting acquainted. I love to meet new faces...new customers...” She grinned at Gaspar who gave her a withering look, “So how about you try some kanar?”

“Oh.” Kal smiled, he had not had much opportunity to interact with people in a long time and Husar’s personality was something of a shock to the system “No synthanol’s fine.” He said thoughtfully. He didn’t drink much more than water usually and thus knew he would be easily effected by alcohol and that would not be wise considering how many secrets he had.

“Excellent choice. Don’t let Husar lead you astray, she comes from a culture somewhat lacking in sensitivity or manners.” Gaspar put down a large glass of synthehol, some ancient drink called a Shirly Temple. At least that is what he thought he had made...

“Well manners are in the eye of the beholder....after all I don’t point out that your people are only really good at surrendering....that would be rude wouldn’t it? What do you say?” Husar liked to needle Gaspar, mainly because he got in the way of her business and interfered with her profits.

“So.... you have a cafe?” Kal said to Husar, mostly to make conversation.

“Me? No we have a cafe, the Cardassian Cafe, finest food on the station.” Husar said somewhat proudly, then stopped, “I also have a shop, if you want any curios or souvenirs just come by.”

“I’ll um... I’ll have to come and visit sometime.” He said “I’m new to the station.”

“Do tell.” Husar said, “And since you already know my name what is yours?”

Four of Six.” He introduced himself quickly, there was little point in using another name now, he had already told Gaspar “I’m um... here to do research.” He said vaguely.

Husar burst out laughing, nearly spilled her kanar in the process and then stopped, “Wait are you serious? Research?”

“Husar!” Gaspar hissed at her, “Do you want me to throw you out?” He turned apologetically to the young Kazon, “I can have her kicked out if you want.”

“Um no that's... that's okay...” Kal said uncomfortably “but... um... what's so funny?” He asked, although he was fairly sure that he already knew the answer.

“Oh simply that I have never heard of aa....Kazon scientist. Few of any real intelligence among the sarrku but wellllll some sarrku are dumb as zabu -” Husar stopped herself, shrugged, “Ah well who can tell with kids these days. Sorry if I caused offence young...what is it...um...Forty Six?” She mangled the name without knowing.

“Four of Six, and no offence taken.” Kal replied with something of a forced smile.

He felt a deep hatred for his culture, he was quite sure that it was that culture that led to his species status as unworthy. Unfortunately his intelligence was indeed the exception and not the rule. Kal blamed that on the lack of a proper education system in the Kazon sector. A culture too busy with their constant civil wars, a culture that wanted to raise soldiers, not scientists. Had they not been in a constant state of war then they might have developed something the Collective would consider... but then, had they not been in a constant state of war that wouldn't have mattered so much anyway because Kal would have still had his family.

Gaspar sighed. He noted the weird name with a mental shrug and chalked it up to youthful rebellion or the latest idiotic trend amongst the Federation youth, “So you are here to do research?”

“Yes... I'm a... I'm a xenobiologist...” he answered still very vaguely. The truth of his research had to be kept concealed but lies are easier to remember if you keep their quantity small.

“Of course.” Gaspar said, placating. He managed to make another plate of sushi appear in front of the kid who looked rather too undernourished to be healthy. Then again who could tell with kids these days...He would make sure Husar footed the bill, it was the least he could do.

Husar raised an eyebrow but managed to stay polite enough, “That's interesting...I suppose you came here just for scientific purposes.”

“Indeed... I've noticed a lot of different species of people on this station... I tend to focus on the more... obscure. Um... the races we don't know a lot about.” He said, well it was at least sort of true.

“Ha! You have come to the right place, just the races of the Sphere are weird enough.” Husar laughed, “Johvan...Lacosian....You will love them if you like the odd and peculiar.”

“I've heard rumours of a Borg cube in this area... any truth to that?” He asked before quickly adding a justification to the question “They must have assimilated some unusual species... maybe some we haven't even heard of...”

Husar shrugged, “Well not so much in this area but they did give the Kharians a good whacking a while back. You've heard of the Kharians? Warlike, nasty, pains in the backside mainly and rather too grabby if you ask me, at least they were -” She noticed Gaspar's expression and gave him a glare, “- I heard the Borg eradicated them.”

Kal gave Husar a very strange look that expressed his mixed feelings of jealousy and pleasure. He worshipped the Borg and thus relished in hearing about their success, but he was deeply envious of those the Borg had 'eradicated'.

Misreading the younger Kazon's expression Husar continued, embellishing the tale as she went, “The Kharians are one of the three races here and they must have thought they were pretty safe in their empire. Until a few hundred cubes showed up and assimilated the whole stinking mess of them. The way I heard it -”

“Husar!” Gaspar hissed, “You're scaring - I mean disturbing my guest.”

“No, no please go on.” The Kazon insisted, he was now completely entranced.

“See!” Husar grinned at Gaspar, “Everyone loves a good horror story, so let me continue. The Kharians for no good reason were considered worthy of being assimilated. You should meet them some time, they are almost nice now that they were whacked over their collective heads and went screaming back to the safety of the Sphere like Ferengi chasing profit. What's left of the once mighty Empire is settled in the dirt quite nicely.”

Gaspar rolled his eyes and poured more kanar. He mainly hoped she would get drunk enough to sleep or leave. Or perhaps he could roll her off the chair and put her somewhere dark and quiet for a while before she could completely annoy his customer.

Kal was now very jealous, he was trying his best to hide it but he felt it welling up inside. If what Husar had said was true then what did the Kharians have that the Kazons... that he... did not? He shook away the thoughts, the Borg would know better than he did what qualified as perfect after all, he almost sighed as he thought.

Kal looked excitedly back at the Cardassian women, any attempt at hiding his passion for the Borg seemed to have gone out of the window and he became impulsive, lost in his obsession. “Have you got any more stories about the Borg?” He asked Husar, he sounded far too excited.

“Oh yes and we Cardassians love a good tale. I suppose you have heard of what happened to the Kel Dakul? That ship was a good Cardassian vessel, setting off

towards the wormhole with a shipment of farm supplies and some hapless settlers. Good stupid farming folks all of them and barely a brain to be found but then -"

"Yes, yes Husar, let me guess the Borg showed up. Exactly why are you helping Husar to scare people, my young acquaintance?" Gaspar cut her off and folded his arms to glare at the Cardassian woman. He missed the expression on Kal's face, more concerned with Husar telling spook stories.

Kal blushed "Well I um... they are very interesting." He admitted.

Husar snorted and said sarcastically, "Oh don't worry I'm sure if you aren't careful you will be assimilated. It's what they do after all."

Kal did not pick up on the sarcasm and felt upset by the comment. "I can't, I'm not worthy." He said dejectedly.

"I suppose that's what the farmers on the Dakul said....and no doubt they lowered the collective intelligence of the...collective by a few IQ points." Husar laughed at her own joke, "However their loss is my bargain lot of Borg treasures. But I'm getting ahead of myself, now how I came to have some treasures from our local Borg -"

Kal's eyes lit up "You do? What kind of things?? Can I come to the shop now?" He asked eagerly.

Husar stopped, somewhat disgruntled, "Well I suppose but why waste a moment for a good tale of horror, after all the Dakul was going across what was known to be unclaimed space...inhabited by none except -"

"Cardassian colonies that you planted there illegally." Gaspar snorted, and pushed a plate of sashimi at Kal, "Eat up, this one is on Husar."

Kal managed to detach himself from his entrancement long enough to grin at the way in which the pair bickered, it reminded him of the way his parents used to argue before they died, always making digs at one another, seeming to hate each other at times and yet still clearly caring for one-another.

"Oh! Thank you!" Kal said, surprised, he began to eat the sashimi and stared with obvious but quiet excitement at Husar, waiting for her to continue her story.

"Well nevertheless...it was empty and almost uninhabited space. The Dakul sent one transmission to say it was on course, everything was fine. Then...nothing." Husar paused dramatically and drained the glass of kanar.

"No doubt Cardassian technology failed again..." Gaspar snorted and Husar gave him a withering look.

Kal sighed at the interruption. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude, I'm just... interested to hear the rest of the story." The Kazon explained, blushing again.

“See! The kid has more taste than you. Yes weeks later the ship was found...or what was left of it....powered down, just drifting. The cargo was quite spoiled and life support was gone. There was a massive hole in the side of the ship, as if someone had ripped it open and gutted it....” Husar lowered her voice, playing the audience, “And the crew....the passengers...all gone.”

“Cardassian ghost stories? Really Husar...next thing you will be saying that some monster ate them all.” Gaspar sighed, “Don't say I didn't warn you...” He went off to start to total Husar's bill before he said something he might regret.

“So what happened?” Kal asked in crazed suspense after Gaspar had left for the bill “Was it the Borg?!”

“No one knows exactly what happened...but my money is on the Borg. All I know is they found a last entry in the ships log, half destroyed...but the captain was screaming something as the ship was ripped apart around him....” She let her voice trail off for dramatic effect and it was working.

Husar didn't understand the expression on Kal's face but assumed it was fear thanks to her story....and she gave him a conspiratorial look. “And I have some bits from the ship...borg stuff as well....if you really want to see. I trust your credit is good?”

“Yes! Yes I want to see!” The Kazon said “And yes, I have credit and I've got a few things in my ship that might be worthy of trade?” Kal asked anxiously, he desperately wanted to see what the Cardassian had.

“Wonderful, I was waiting for the right -” Sucker -”Person.” Husar jumped up, “Shall we go?”

Gaspar spun around, “Wait - ah -” He saw Husar and stopped, annoyed, “Please come back soon....” It sounded pathetic but it was the best he could manage. And somehow he avoided saying: next time come alone.

“Thank you very much! The sushi was lovely, I'll definitely be back.” Kal said smiling politely, but he was clearly eager to leave and see Husar's treasure. To Kal anything belonging to the Borg was treasure, he would go to extreme lengths in order to acquire it.

“Excellent.” Gaspar bowed a little, oh this was going on the bill to Husar.

“Lead the way?” He asked as he stood up.

Husar smiled just a little, “Oh yes and while we walk, let me see what other stories I can find to entertain you. I know many tales of horror...”

Chapter Three

Location: Sentinel Station, Namche Bazaar

Husar had kept up a line of inane chatter on the way to the store, as much to make sure her young customer followed meekly as anything else. She had basically decided the kid would be good to exploit and she did have some rubbish that was worth getting rid of. So in many ways it was a win-win...or win-lose depending on whether you were Husar or Kal.

As they got close Husar said, "You are lucky that right now no one is around. You realize Borg artefacts are...semi- kinda- illegal." There she made it even sweeter, bait the trap and catch the little vole.

"Semi illegal..." Kal said thinking, that hadn't bothered him until now, with the constant chatter from the Cardassian he had not really had any time to think. "What if we get caught?" He asked reluctantly, he wanted to go in and he wanted to go in now, but it would not be a good idea to risk security showing up. It crossed his mind that Husar was trying to trick him but the bait was just too tempting.

"Oh don't worry, security is unlikely to come by checking on my inventory right now. Or just snooping. Plus I trust you are smart enough to change topics if anyone walks in." Husar said it with a straight face, she tended to assume all sarrku were equally dim witted but well it couldn't hurt to flatter now could it?

"Oh yes of course... I suppose we'd better just... be careful then." He said with relief, he had been worried that Husar had changed her mind about showing him.

The front of the shop was stocked mainly with rubbish and souvenirs designed to appeal to tourists or the homesick. It suited her to have impulse buys there and beyond that more basic foodstuff and groceries.

Further back she kept items that were more exotic (but always legal) and so she ushered her prized customer towards the dimly lit section.

Husar stopped near a chunk of metal on the shelf and watched for Kal's reaction...it was a necessary test after all.

Kal glared at the woman "THAT is not Borg." He said irritably looking at the pile of metal.

"Oh very good..." Husar smiled a little, "You're quite right of course that is not anything Borg...but you have to understand..." She lowered her voice, "I wanted to be very sure you knew what you were looking for. They really get nervous about anything salvaged from a cube." Inwardly she was kicking herself a little, it would have been good to sell a bit of scrap metal as something worthwhile. Oh well.

Kal looked dubiously at the women, wondering if she actually had anything belonging to the Borg or if she was just trying to conn him. “Don’t worry, I know *exactly* what I’m looking for...”

“And that would be what exactly?” Husar gave him a look of suspicion, for a moment she wondered if the little vole had been put in her way to trap her.

“I um... well I collect Borg articles...” He answered vaguely.

Husar was more suspicious than before but still...she had some things she wanted gone before anyone could trace them to her, “Because....why?”

“Like I said, I’m a Xenobiologist and the Borg, they are interesting.” He said and quickly changed the subject “So... where are they. Your Borg treasures?” He asked hopefully.

Husar didn’t answer, glanced almost nervously towards the doorway, then gave a quick shrug and set off towards the storage area towards the back of her shop. For obvious reasons she wouldn’t leave questionable items on display where any idiot sarrku could find them and she ushered Kal into the back. Then gave him a suspicious look again, “You sure you are not security...?”

“No I’m not security” the Kazon said anxiously, he was beginning to worry that Husar would not show him her treasure “At least not last time he checked.” He said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Husar didn’t answer, studied him like a bug, shrugged again, “You better not be.” She could have him disposed of, of course, depending on his connections, the Scravvan families had a talent for making people vanish.

She went and picked up the box she knew was back there, “That ship I was telling you about, there were a few bits of debris in the wreck that were not Cardassian.”

Kal looked at Husar with interest “How did you manage to get a hold of it? The Borg usually... return for their stuff.”

“The ship that found them claimed salvage rights and sold bits to interested buyers before the government or the ever snooping Obsidian order could catch up.” Husar answered, truthfully for once, “They would love to acquire anything Borg...well any technology they could reverse engineer.” The bits of metal in the crate didn’t look like much admittedly but she had something more intriguing if the kid didn’t reveal himself to be a spy.

Kal looked in the crate and listed what he saw, mostly exoplating and parts from external implants “Anything else?” He asked after he’d finished.

Husar debated with herself for a moment, finally said, “It would cost you too much. I doubt you could pay what its worth.” She doubted the mewling little vole kit

had enough on him to pay for the piece, she had acquired it on the cheap from the Orion trader who wanted to ditch the thing in a hurry. So she was inclined to sell him the cheap stuff and kick him out the door...oh yes. No sense in attracting trouble.

“What is it?” Kal pleaded, the desperation in his voice was clear in spite of himself, anything worth that much money... maybe it could be functional... or made functional...

She folded her arms, shook her head. “It is...well the person who sold it to me said it was a broken ahhh what is the word? inter-perplexing beacon? Something like that.” If what she heard was accurate it had been taken from a dead Borg but hey she didn't really want to freak the little vole. No...

Kal became very clearly excited “An interplexing beacon! I've been trying to get a hold of one for years. It is what allows the Collective to send commands even over huge distances. Each drone has a unique frequency tied to their designation and vessels have a large one at their centre, a vinculum. The vinculum connects the drones in the vessel and then the vessel is connected to the rest of the collective through the central plexus.” he noticed himself rambling and blushed.

Husar raised an eyebrow, “Sounds exciting. I prefer not to be at the beck and call of the Central Command but I suppose the collective is used to being mindless sarrku drones.” Husar laughed at her comment and casually added, mentally upping the price of the sale, “You probably aren't interested of course.”

“Oh please let me see it.” He begged.

“You are interested in some curious rubbish my young friend.” Husar retrieved the storage box, “Of course the thing is broken. Or at least has been disabled...I do not want to get into any trouble with the Federation of course.”

“How much are you wanting for it?” Kal asked, he told Husar how many credits he had “and I've got a few things I could trade and um... well I'll do ANYTHING.”

“Anything? Really? Clarify anything.” Husar opened the box just a little, nothing like teasing the kid.

“Anything you want. Whatever you want, whenever you want.”. He said and he meant it, he was desperate.

He thought if he could get the interplexing beacon working he could use it to send a single to the Borg, he would make them think it was from the deactivated drone it came from and thus attract the cube... but not until he had something to present them with, something that would make him worthy.

He knew he couldn't actually implant it into himself, although he would have liked to. It wouldn't work without nanoprobes, and a cortical implant to regulate the

implant. He had scars from trying and failing to attach Borg implants to himself, they always rejected.

“Welllllll....” Husar paused, looked thoughtful, “No, never mind. You couldn't afford the price I'm afraid. Plus it might get you into trouble.” She went to put the box away, but knew the kid was hooked. Everything said he would be willing to pay any price and that of course would be potentially useful.

“Oh come on there must be something you want doing. I do mean *anything*. And not just now, whenever you want me.”

“Interesting. So you want me to sell you this valuable...broken....item and you are so desperate for Borg trash you offer to do anything. No matter what. That is curious and curious usually means dangerous.” Husar stared at the Kazon for a moment, “Why would you offer such a thing?”

Kal shook his head in debate “Because I'm desperate.” He admitted

“Desperate? Hmmm....then I may have an idea. If you are truly desperate.” Husar actually smiled a little, “I have a proposition if you are truly desperate.”

Kal's eyes lit up excitedly “I'll do it.” He said before actually knowing what 'it' was “What is your proposal?”

“Well I can see how much you want this plexi beacon.” Husar mangled the name, unconcerned, “And you could spend all your money to get it...you could. Of course the price has increased since we started this negotiation....and if you have no funds you won't survive long.” She paused to let it sink in a little.

Kal thought, that was true. He had been very impulsive in offering Husar everything he had, but then people are often impulsive when they are desperate. He assumed he'd get by somehow and an interplexing beacon would be worth it.

Kal didn't speak, he just stared at Husar, waiting for her to continue. He knew she was probably taking advantage of him but he didn't much care. What did it matter? - She has an interplexing beacon and a box of Borg technology- she could take as much advantage of him as she wanted.

“I could use someone to do some jobs for me, especially someone who is an unknown and presumably without a Federation record. I assume you don't have a criminal record.” Husar kept her arms tightly around the box as she talked, “Work for me for a week - no, lets make it a month. At the end of that time you can have this for free...and if you prove useful I might let you have some other Borg things.”

“Yes! I agree. I'll do whatever you need doing! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” Kal smiled widely at the Cardassian, the madness gleaming in his eyes. It would be a shame to have to wait for the beacon... but it might give him time to figure out if he could fix it...

“Ah excellent, excellent.” Husar smiled back, feeling a justifiable pride in her cleverness. Why she could exploit the kid and make use of his services...indefinitely.

“This is where I'm staying.” He said, giving husar the number and contact frequency for his quarters “I assume that whatever you want me doing will be something that should not be discussed over comms but if you summon me I will come to talk in person.”

Husar looked at Kal curiously, head tipped slightly to the side in consideration, “Good thinking...surprising for your kind. I didn't think sarrku had the cleverness. Of course I can get you a Cardassian communicator if you work out, something they can't easily monitor.” She hoped anyway.

“Whatever you want. If I have your word that I can have that beacon then I am yours for this month.” He promised.

“A month? Well....I suppose....for the beacon at least.” Husar shrugged and casually turned the box a little to show him just a bit of what was inside. Oh he was interested, she could see that much.

“If I can have everything in that box as well then the next 3 months, and if you come across anything else belonging to the Borg then please let me know.”

“A fair bargain. And I am sure I can get more...” Husar grinned to herself, she knew she could make the kid work indefinitely for the sake of whatever Borg trash she could find. “....eventually.”

“Will you let me see it during the month?” Kal asked hopefully.

Husar was shutting the box and paused, for the first time staring at Kal, “Why would you want that?”

“Because it's beautiful, it's part of what helps to tie the Collective into one entity.” He said, lost in his worship.

“Hah. Clearly you did not grow up Cardassian....you might not appreciate being bound together as mindless drones by the will of the State.” Husar snorted, “Let alone having to dodge the snooping eyes and ears of the government...”

Kal sighed, there wasn't much point in explaining the difference, people rarely understood that the Borg were perfect. It hadn't as of yet occurred to Kal that he might be wrong and the rest of the universe might be right, but then that thought rarely occurs to delusional people. He shook his head and decided he might as well just tell Husar his secret, or part of it, she clearly had plenty of her own.

“The name I gave you, it's a Borg designation.” He said.

“So what exactly is your name since I will have to call on you? Unless I'm supposed to say Forty Six. Ninety six? Or whatever it is. Six?” Husar asked, trying to

get the kid's attention, "And you may as well stop staring at that box, I will let you have something once you do a small job for me. If I am satisfied then I might let you have something you will like."

"Four will do." He replied, reluctantly returning his attention to Husar, away from the box of treasures that seemed to be pulling him towards it with some invisible enticing force. "What do you want me to do first?" He asked, with difficulty forcing himself to focus.

Husar shrugged again, "Follow me out the back and be warned: if you tell anyone what you see I will have you skinned like a vole and hung on the wall."

Kal shuddered at the... metaphor... at least he hoped it was a metaphor.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone I promise!" Kal said "Well you know, except the Borg if I ever manage to get assimilated." He added as a sort of dejected joke.

Husar laughed, assuming the kid was making some obscure joke, whatever...he could be weird about whatever he liked so long as he worked and paid for things. She didn't care, "Maybe if they lower their standards, I have heard they can be picky."

Kal followed the woman out the back, feeling indifferent to her comment.

It didn't matter what she knew. He wasn't stupid enough to tell her about his nanoprobe project, but there was no harm in letting her know that he wanted to be assimilated.

He knew she wouldn't tell anyone, if she did then he had her secrets and he was pretty sure she wouldn't want to lose her spontaneously acquired slave anyway.

Kal was fairly certain that was what he was but it didn't really matter, she could exploit him as much as she wanted as long as she kept her end of the bargain and gave him his stuff... Still that box drew his eyes back to the room where it lived...

"You see my problem of course. The last person I hired to clean up was less than acceptable and quite disappointing." Husar waved at the over full cages, voles were smelly and nasty beasts and rather vicious if someone wasn't prepared.

"I'll have them all cleaned out within the hour." Kal promised, his nose twitched at the unpleasant smell "Or maybe a couple of hours..." he added looking at the number of cages.

"Very good." Husar said, then gave him a suspicious glare, "And you understand this is secret...if security finds out I will know who told."

"I've already said I won't tell anyone. Why would I? Federation laws are of no concern to me and you have a box full of treasure... well its treasure to me. What good would it do me to tell?" He reassured her.

“You may have a point. Well best be about it, time is of the essence and some of these beasts have a special appointment tonight.” Husar was going to reserve judgement for now. She was naturally suspicious of everyone and it was a good way to be.

“Yes I'll get it done quickly.” Kal promised “It might surprise you to know that efficiency is one of my favourite qualities.” He added sarcastically.

“In this case I prefer tenacity.” Husar laughed, “Have you had much experience with Cardassian voles?” The closest cage had some of the quieter voles, those that preferred to just hiss and spit a lot at anyone who came too close. Further back they were housed in individual cages for reasons obvious to anyone who had ever watched them fight.

“Not really.” Kal admitted “Are they going to be um... eaten?” he asked awkwardly.

“These are not eating voles....or rather sometimes the loser will get eaten. These are more for entertainment so they are bred for viciousness. A normal vole has the temperament of a Klingon with a headache, these ones are bred for fighting.” She lowered her voice, not exactly wanting to be shouting about it even here in the back of the shop. “Now you want to keep on gloves -” She handed him a pair, “- and if you have to handle the mean ones use tongs. They can't bite through that.”

“Are you trying to scare me off?” Kal joked putting on the gloves, he looked at the creatures with that indifference often found in sociopaths, or in people who have simply felt so much fear and pain in their lives that they were now numb to it.

He had grown up in a war-zone, his entire childhood was fear and pain and his adult life had consisted of disappointment and more pain. Kal had upon many occasions tried (and failed) to surgically alter himself with Borg implants, he was far too crazy to be afraid of aggressive animals.

“For once I am trying to be helpful, young....uh, Four. Much as I find amusement in someone being chewed on by my pets, I dislike cleaning their cages and if someone is willing to do it I am not about to have you running away, minus a few fingers.” Husar was being sincere, it was a rarity, “You need to watch out for both ends by the way: both the biting and the pooping ends.”

“Don't worry about my running off, I wouldn't mind losing a few fingers if it meant...” he sighed again and then shook his head “Like I said, I'm not going anywhere without that beacon, you keep your promises and my life is yours for now, I only wish the Borg were this easy to get a job with.”

Kal had the habit of making somewhat self-deprecating and cynical jokes, they were one of the many things he used to cope with his own self-loathing.

“Well best be about it, unless you want a few more tips on handling nasty vicious biting creatures with small brains...” Husar gave him a not too gentle shove towards the first cage, “Then again -” you should feel at home. She nearly said it, nearly finished the sentence with a dig at his Kazon ancestry but stopped. It couldn't hurt to give the kid a break, especially one who seemed rather lost. Gah, she was becoming soft, “- never mind. I'll see if I can find anything else you might like.”

“Thank you.” Kal said. He was actually relatively pleased with this turn of events, it would keep him busy and distracted when he wasn't working on his research, he would have that beacon by the end of the month and Husar was in Kal's perhaps unique opinion good company.

She didn't seem to care about his... eccentricities... and that on its own was a rare treat, it helped to alleviate his loneliness and she had managed to entrance him with her stories and her treasures. He knew she didn't care about him but that was a good thing. He was always very careful not to get attached to people, he had been through far too much grief for that.

Husar gave a slight bow of the head, walked out to leave the kid to his job. She was wondering how soon it would be before he got bitten or decided to run...it was almost amusing. She had more than enough to worry about out the front, there was a shipment coming in from the Families, mainly some kanar which she would sell to the cafe -

Kal knelt down next to the cages and began shoveling out the waste. This was often a difficult task because the animals were incredibly territorial and were not exactly pleased by the strange smelling hand protruding into their territory and removing their scent.

Kal seemed to be indifferent to the many bites and scratches he received, he worked with a zombie-like expression and drone-like efficiency. He did not take a single break in the 3 hours it took to clean out the weeks of mess, between his lack of emotion and his efficiency he might already have been assimilated.

Once he'd finished he took off his gloves and washed the blood and urine from his arms before going to find Husar.

“All done.” He announced upon finding the women.

“What?” Husar jumped a little, almost knocked over one bottle. There was no way it would be finished, “You don't seem to be missing any fingers so I doubt you cleaned them all up.”

“Well come and see for yourself then!”

“This had better be good.” Husar muttered under her breath but followed. She made a mental note to remind the kid to douse himself with a neutralizer before leaving. The stink of vole was hard to remove...

The cages were immaculate and Kal had actually cleaned the floor and the walls around them as well so that the back room was probably cleaner than it had ever been in its existence.

Husar blinked, surprised, couldn't think what to say for a moment. Finally gave a slightly nod, “Very well, I am truly pleased.” She put a hand on the kid's shoulder, cautiously since who knows how these sarrku react...”Well you kept your part of the bargain so it seems you are useful after all. Come this way.”

Kal jumped slightly when Husar touched his shoulder, he really wasn't very used to people but then he beamed excitedly at her and followed.

Husar took him into the back office, which was far safer when dealing with illegal goods. She handed him a wrapped item, more useless Borg stuff but since the kid seemed to be interested she could reward him. And get rid of trash. She said, “Found this while you were cleaning, I was told its exoplating.”

Kal looked at the tritanium with adoration and envy, it was a piece from of a drone's exoplating, from the shape of the armour he guessed that it was probably from a shoulder. “Thank you!” He said grinning ecstatically at Husar, he looked like a small child at Christmas and he was clutching his prize protectively as if he expected someone to take it away.

Husar for once had a remotely protective impulse. Mainly because the Kazon was likely to get caught and then expose her...so she folded her arms, “Where exactly did you say you were staying, kid?”

“I'm in the Terrarium.” Kal said “I only just arrived today... it looks good though, close to the labs.”

“Feh, you will lose your money or maybe worse around there. What's more...how did you think you were going to bring back things like that without getting caught? Even here the Federation is jumpy about Borg items...so where were you going to keep your prizes?” Husar shrugged, typical of the newcomers who came to the Sphere all wide eyed and naive. She let her comments sink in before adding, “I have a mutually beneficial idea.”

Kal considered what Husar said, how *was* he going to get his stuff back without being caught? He hadn't considered it until now, he had been far too lost in his obsession to consider anything much other than acquiring the items.

“Would you like me to sleep in the back room?” Kal suggested “It would be more efficient when you needed me.”

He didn't much mind the idea, comfort was not much of a priority for Kal. He'd slept in a variety of uncomfortable places as a stowaway on ships headed into Borg space.

He'd actually spent several nights sleeping in a Jeffries tube at one point. He also quite liked the idea of sleeping so close to that beacon and he would be able to serve his spontaneously acquired master more efficiently.

He couldn't help but laugh internally at how easily he'd been manipulated, *maybe I am as stupid as she said* but it was no good considering otherwise, so long as she owned that box of treasure she owned him as well and he knew it.

Husar actually laughed, "No, I would not suggest you set up home in the back room...no matter how efficient or...whatever you think that would be. No, I was thinking of quarters near here, another proprietor owes me a favor and would rent them out. Nothing fancy but you can leave my shop, go down the side street (so to speak) and avoid being seen by the ever snoopy Starfleeters."

Kal became suddenly suspicious of the Cardassian woman. That side street sounded like exactly the kind of place where he might be... disposed of... without attracting security. He shuddered, remembering Husar's earlier colourful metaphor about skinning him like a vole. It also did not seem to be in Husar's character to be that helpful. "What would be in it for you?" He asked cautiously.

"It helps me out because I also transport certain shipments using the back streets...and if I need you to do something for me I can find you. Plus it keeps you out of sight and your Borg - uh - stuff." Husar understood why the Kazon would be suspicious and he was probably right to not trust her. Then again so long as he was useful she wouldn't eliminate him, "Unless you thought you would just wander the Promenade with your collectables...?"

Kal thought for a moment. It was going to be very difficult to get his stuff back to the Terrarium without being caught... and it did make sense that she'd want him close... he had shown her how useful he could be... it wouldn't really make sense for her to kill him. "Okay... that sounds good, I'd be happy to move." He said "Do you want to show me the way?"

"It would probably be best, this station can be dangerous to a new born little vole. And you positively reek of newness." Husar snorted.

"I need to have this safely in there." He said still clinging to his exoplatting "And then I'll go up and pick up my stuff."

"Fine, now rather than using the main entrance one of the advantages of this location is that there is a convenient back door. Useful for deliveries and other things that I would not want to be common knowledge." Husar said, "So if you want to wrap some packaging around that exoplatting we can go that way."

“Do I tell the quartermaster that I've found other... arrangements? I don't want to be paying for a room that I'm not actually using.”

“Yes. Make sure they understand you got a temporary job and needed to move closer to work. That way no one will be suspicious.” Husar said and it was true. She knew no one would look beyond the surface for now.

“Okay, lead the way.” He agreed and followed Husar out of the shop.

Husar escorted the kid through the rear delivery entrance, which opened directly onto the side alley. It was deserted right now and she knew exactly which apartments she would go for.

The owners owed her a favor since they dumped some incompetent idiots of workers on her...who subsequently ran like scalded voles the moment there was trouble. She learned her lesson however: if you have workers who know your secrets make sure they are close enough to you that you can find them easily and deal with them yourself if you had to.

Chapter Four

Location: Sentinel Station, Luxury Apartments

Gordo had just finished cleaning the recently vacated apartment when he heard the alarm chiming to let him know someone was here. Not exactly wanting to rush he ambled down to the front office (actually a small niche in the foyer) and saw the Cardassian woman...Hussy. No Husar. And a young stranger with her who looked Kazon...but looked like he hadn't had a good meal in years let alone seen the sun. Oh well, he didn't have the brain power to work on the question for long and just grunted, "Husar –"

"Where are the bosses? Not that I am implying you have the intellect of a flea on a vole but....I would rather deal with someone who didn't crawl from the shallow end of the gene pool?" Husar snapped.

"I don't swim." Gordo offered, trying to be helpful. "And Mr. Kang is at the docks right now."

Husar gave an exasperated sigh, "And I suppose Kodos is off betting on voles. Well whatever I will deal with them later."

Kang and Kodos ran the apartments as a side business – as well as a convenient cover. Kang and Kodos Luxury Apartments...as the sign read. The extra E had been added in an attempt to sound fancy (it failed) or antique (it definitely failed).

Originally the apartments had been created from vacant space at the back of the commercial hub on the promenade, useful living space for people who had temporary business in the area or proprietors who would rather live close to their places of business.

Gordo didn't know what to say. Then again he rarely did.

Husar took charge, "I need something suitable for the kid. I will be making use of his services."

Gordo's mind leapt to the wrong conclusion. It happened a lot - and then he started to laugh, hurr,hurr,hurr. Until the woman hit him. Hard.

"Gordo you idiot!" Husar wasn't sure whether to be offended more at the assumption that she would be involved with sarrku...she didn't even associate with fellow Cardassians since her fall from power...or by the fact this evolutionary mistake had made such an insulting assumption. "The kid will be working for me, doing things that are illegal not immoral."

Gordo felt his nose carefully (it was unbroken but sore and bleeding somewhere inside) and said, “So you – I mean he – wants a room?” He hoped that simple question wouldn’t set Husar off...she was prickly as a rule and rude as well.

Then again he thought she might have had something to do with his brother’s disappearance...he hadn’t seen Groud since he did a job for Husar. So he was just smart enough to be careful.

“Finally...” Husar rolled her eyes, “Honestly Gordo, you remind me of a bad science experiment. Or a bad joke...something along the lines of a Cardassian...a Klingon and a Ferengi –”

“What species *do* you belong to?” Kal asked looking curiously at the man.

He doesn’t look fully Cardassian, he must be a hybrid of some sort although Cardassian genes are strong.... but a hybrid with what... The xenobiologist in Kal was curious.

Gordo muttered, “My dad was Cardassian and my mother was Orion... half Orion anyway and....half something else...” He felt insulted but was not sure why; still he turned to the kid to say, “You can ditch Husar, I’ll show you what the bosses have free right now.”

Kal automatically looked at Husar for permission before answering.

“Oh I insist on coming along. Not that I mistrust Gordo but I have a better idea of what quarters would be suitable –” Husar stopped, she didn’t want to say anything that might scare Four about who might have died there before. “And if Gordo is trying to cheat you: which of course he wouldn’t do.”

“Of course not, *no one* here would ever think of manipulating me.” He said in a sort of self-deprecating sarcasm “I would prefer Husar to come with us if that’s okay, I’m moving to work for her so she will know better where she wants me.”

Gordo grunted, somewhat annoyed to have Husar involved. But he was not about to say so and grudgingly lead the way to a newly cleaned apartment, only slightly less grimy than the standard vole cage. He fumbled with the door, eventually forced it open, “This one is empty. You want it?”

Husar went in and recoiled a little. The place had been slightly cleaned and fumigated...but mainly had the stale smell of humanity and the trace of what appeared to be blood on the wall.

Kal followed the pair curiously into a very run-down apartment with an unusual stain on the wall that might well have been blood. Kal walked into the apartment and indifferently started putting down his things, he had been willing to sleep in the back room with the voles, very little bothered him in that respect and so he barely noticed the state of the quarters.

“Right I'll get sett...” the Kazon started but was interrupted.

“No, this is simply appalling. Gordo, you have the brains of a flea - this is both filthy and disgusting. I wouldn't even house my diseased zabu in here.” Husar hissed at him, “And furthermore -”

“It's clean and I moved the body anyways before spraying.” Gordo grumbled, “Whaddaya want? Something for the Federation president?”

“It's okay, I don't mi...” Kal tried but he couldn't get a word in edge-ways.

“No, no, no this is no good. I am not having an employee living in filth...and I am not having you cleaned every time you walk through my door.” Husar cut Kal off, “You might enjoy wallowing in a cess pit, Gordo but some of us know what bathing is.”

Gordo knew he had been insulted but didn't understand how, “So you want something cleaner...that'll cost.”

“How much will it cost?” Kal asked, slightly alarmed but once again he might well have been invisible.

“Just show it and be quick. If you can manage to move faster than a Horta that is. Then again at least they are intelligent and have uses...” Husar stalked out the door, Gordo following long enough to push past.

Gordo did a quick (for him) calculation and decided to try to get the kid into a less grimy apartment, actually one of the better ones. It lacked blood stains and odor, so for him that made it luxury.

Kal stopped outside and looked cautiously at the door, hoping that it would meet Husar's standards since he didn't have any.

Gordo threw open the door, and said, “Well? You like?”

Husar took the lead, “At least no one was murdered here recently...or perhaps you did a better job of cleaning?”

“Murdered!” Kal exclaimed although he was not nearly as surprised as he sounded “Well that explains the blood...”

Kal might not have been too bothered about comfort, lack of hygiene bothered him he but sure he could have cleaned everything pretty quickly, but did have enough self-preservation to feel a somewhat uneasy curiosity as to what had happened to the previous residence of that apartment.

Ignoring the kid for a moment Husar got in another jab, “And it lacks the lingering smell of bad food and overflowing waste...so that is much better my lumpish friend.”

Gordo scratched at his poorly developed neckridge, “Yeah well, being picky comes with a price. I bet the kid can't pay for this one. Well?”

“How much does it cost?” Kal asked again anxiously.

“Never mind the price.” Said Husar grandly and with a touch of irritation, “Kodos owes me one and if he tries to charge full price for a flea trap...even a clean one...I will be taking it out of his hide.” She smiled, “Or rather...out of an employee's hide. I think you might make a nice souvenir of the quadrant, local slug beast stuffed and mounted.”

Gordo understood the threat (even if Husar had lost him somewhere between flea trap and slug beast) but he tried to be tough and muttered, “Whaddever.”

Kal grinned at Husar's 'slug beast' comment, Gordo certainly did look a little slug-like.

“Looks good to me.” Kal said happily, he *sort of* trusted Husar to deal a reasonable price for him, and it couldn't cost more than the place he was currently in.

Husar did a quick visual but at least this apartment was better than the first, “I think it will do.”

Gordo meanwhile was sending a quick message to both the bosses...normally he wouldn't disturb them but with the Cardassian female stirring up things and making demands he had to check in with them.

A few decisions he would make by himself...but anything more complicated than picking food for dinner was a decision for the bosses. He actually hoped Kang would tell her to go breath vacuum -

“Where do I sign?” Kal asked, assuming there must be somewhere he needed to sign in.

Gordo grunted with annoyance as he was messaged back. He put the PADD out grudgingly, muttered, “Mr. Kang says just sign here and whatever Husar wants she can have.”

“Oh excellent! See Gordo, I told you that your bosses knew when to be agreeable and when it might be unwise to cross me.” Husar grinned, “You can go ahead and sign kid, it will be affordable or it will be taken from someone's green hide.”

Kal had already collected his stuff from his previous quarters. There wasn't much, the majority of his 'collectibles' lived in his shuttle because he hadn't wanted to risk bribing them into the station. He just had a case of clothes and a few odds and ends and his precious holoimage.

He put the case down on the floor. “I called the quartermaster, and I told them exactly what you said.” He told Husar

“Really? And were they satisfied?” Or suspicious, she hoped the quartermaster just accepted the story. “What exactly did you tell them?”

“That I got a temporary job and needed to be closer.” He repeated. Kal had been rather dubious as to just how 'temporary' his temporary job would be but as long as she kept producing Borg stuff that was fine.

“Hah! I like it. I think this is the start of a profitable relationship.” Husar smiled and went to shoo Gordo out the door before the lump of worthless minion heard more than he should. She added for the fun of it, “Why don't you find the door code and a welcome basket - take your time my slack jawed friend.”

“Do you want me to come to the shop tomorrow morning to do anything or will you just call when you want me?” Kal asked.

“Come by in the morning, that way we can establish you as an employee. If security see you at the front door it will be more believable. I'll send you off on some errand as well.” Husar was calculating and she did it well, “And don't worry you will be paid.”

“You'll let me have more of your treasure?” Kal asked, his eyes gleaming excitedly.

Husar smiled just a little at the question, “Honestly kid, this is helping me out. I need someone who is not afraid of the voles for one thing and is prepared to turn a blind eye to some of the questionable activities that make life more fun.”

Kal smiled and that was not a common occurrence. Really... he needed someone who would turn a blind eye as well. Someone who wasn't bothered by who he was or what he wanted to be. “Sounds like we both get what we want then.”

“If you help me out I will help you out so it is a win-win. And speaking of which, I would make sure Gordo doesn't see any of your...treasures. That goes doubly so for Kang and Kodos...they are sharp enough to cause problems and Gordo is dumb enough to go running his mouth at a bar. This apartment at least has storage.” Husar smiled again, somewhat amused, “Just don't ask what was hidden there before.”

Gordo lumbered back through the door, muttered, “Ya need the code for the keypad.” He had it scrawled on a filthy scrap of paper which looked unsanitary...He hadn't found a welcome basket, whatever that was but located some old vouchers for free drinks at the Cats Tango. He supposed it would do.

Kal squirmed a little at the paper but took the code and the vouchers. “Thank you.” He said to Gordo. He made a mental note to memorise the code for the door, and to change it if he could and only share it with Husar.

“Well, goodnight.” Kal said nodding at Gordo “See you in the morning.” He said to Husar with a smile. He was, perhaps foolishly, beginning to trust her and was actually quite pleased with how his first day on the station had turned out.

“Excellent.” Husar was feeling satisfied with herself, especially since it gave her a useful employee. And also a way of ditching rather risky items...“I expect you at mid shift, that is usually the best time to be seen moving around right now.” She stopped, “Don't be late and if another Cardassian questions you, play dumb.”

Kal went into his new apartment and put his things away. He placed his prize into a storage cupboard and locked the door with a special key written in the Borg Alpha Numeric code. He looked at his crono and debated whether or not he needed sleep or if he should go to the deflector array to look for the cube.

He decided on the latter...

Chapter Five

Location: Sentinel Station, Astrometrics

Kal walked confidently into astrometrics and typed in the code the quartermaster had given him to use the deflector array during the night. He was pleased, but not surprised to see that no one was there, it was 3am.

He entered a search pattern for a radius around the station for the computer to scan, he did not know where the cube was, he only knew that there were rumours of one in this vicinity.

The Kazon adjusted his search parameters several times but still he could not pick up on the cube. He was beginning to feel annoyed with the deflector array. It was as if something was blocking the view!

After several more attempts at different distances from the station he decided that it must be a malfunction with deflector, but when he tried to access the system in order to look his access was blocked, he finally sighed and put in a call to engineering.

"Hello?" Kal said, hoping that whoever was on night shift would not be too irritated by his call, they probably didn't get many calls at 3 o'clock in the morning.

"Chief Petty Officer Eiwan. Who am I speaking with?" The chief enjoyed the night shift when the lighting was dimmed in most corridors and it was a quieter place. She was running a diagnostic on the environmental systems in preparation for a Gaiarn ship. Their methane-rich atmosphere required particular adaptations. The holographic emitters would furnish an appropriate physical environment.

"My name is Kal" The Kazon replied, a bit reluctantly, but there was no point giving his designation, that would only cause confusion since he was registered onto the system with his real name. "I'm authorized to use the deflector array on a night." He explained.

"Nice you meet you Kal. How can I help you?" replied the engineer.

"I'd like to report a problem with the deflector array." The Kazon explained

Eiwan reviewed the last batch of diagnostics. They were functioning properly. "What are you noticing?"

"That's just the problem, I'm not noticing anything. It's like something is blocking what I am trying to find." He explained.

"I see. One moment." Eiwán double-checked on the sensor logs. The log entry from the lab showed a number of sensor requests. Perhaps Kal was inexperienced. "Perhaps I can help."

"That'd be great." Kal said hopefully.

There was no harm in telling Eiwán what he was looking for, it's not as if there is a law against *looking* at Borg cubes after all.

"I've heard rumours of a Borg cube in this vicinity." Kal began "I am trying to find it, I've tried several search patterns and I've searched a considerable range around the station but it's as if there's some sort of interference... blocking the view."

Eiwán was glad Kal had been forthcoming. The parameters of the scan were unusual to say the least. "The presence of Borg Cube would be restricted by Starfleet Tactical. What is your area of study?"

"I'm a xenobiologist, the Borg are my research area." Kal explained.

Eiwán chuckled. "You're not likely to get much biological data from an astrometrics lab."

"Perhaps not usually, but the Borg are as much technology as biology and a lot of the way in which their collective works is through their vessels." Kal said. "All Borg vessels have a vinculum for example, a fascinating device, they receive their commands from it and it blocks out irrelevant information." Kal paused, noticing that he was rambling too much. "Well anyway... I'd really like to see it."

"Let me check on something." Eiwán muted the channel as logged in as a placeholder member of the Tactical group. It wouldn't give her access to the contents of files but it would let her run diagnostics and inquiries and compare them against a data set. In this case, she ran a couple of scans and compared the results to what Kal had received. There were several gaps in the data marked 'classified secret'.

"The sensor data you're receiving is being redacted through a security protocol. You would have to apply to Starfleet Tactical for clearance to review the redacted data."

Kal sighed, he doubted Starfleet Tactical would approve him, a civilian (and a civilian with a colourful past were they to look through his records) for clearance. He began thinking of ways to override the system.

"What do you think I would need to be granted clearance?" He asked hopefully.

“For that level of clearance? The approval of a command officer and a documented necessity of access.” The engineer knew of very few civilians with that kind of access. They were all former Starfleet officers or Federation officials. She did not know Kal's background.

Kal grumbled, he would need to find a way of tricking the computer into thinking he had clearance but that would mean generating a clearance code and that would not be easy, starfleet systems were very well secured... although Kal was intelligent, determined and insane, a very dangerous combination so he did stand a chance.

“Well, thank you for your time.” Kal said reluctantly to the Engineer.

“You're welcome. Let me know if you have any other questions.” responded the engineer cheerily.

He looked at the readout of missing data he had been given from the deflector array.

“Could you give me an old chart for this sector please, from... a year ago perhaps?” Kal asked the computer.

The computer added the historical scan as a second layer on Kal's display.

/Optical display available./

Kal looked at the old chart, a chart he hoped was from before the cube had arrived, and compared it to his current readout, he was looking to find out where the data points did not correlate, that would reveal the position of the missing data, if he could do that then although he would not be able to see the cube he might at least be able to narrow down its location.

“I'm going to need to filter out anything that'll stay the same.” Kal muttered to himself.

/Please specify spectrum or filter./ The computer flashed an icon that would allow Kal to scroll through and select a number of possibilities.

By default it displayed an optical spectrum suitable to Kal's visual range. The list was exhaustive including false-colour displays in radio frequencies, a variety of radiation types and particle emissions.

Kal selected a view that over-layed the gravimetric distribution for both times as well as searching for a difference in tetryon emission. All Borg vessels emitted low levels of tetryon radiation. He also included chroniton particles in his scan on the off chance that the transwarp conduits had been used to get here. He also scanned for traces from tractor beams and weapons. Chances are, if there was a cube in the area, it was assimilating or destroying something.

/Maps of chroniton particles are restricted./ Noted the main computer as it attempted to fulfill the instructions. It took a minute to parse out each portion of the instruction. */Tetryon radiation map compiled by low-range scans and is not complete./*

With the two caveats, the scan revealed several points of distinction. Two planets showed marked changes in gravitation; one planetoid's orbit had been changed. A third planet had changed it's density, polar tilt and orbit.

“Can you give me details on this planet?” Kal asked, selecting the third planet with the most changes

/Planet Ari-Saae. Class M. Inhabited by warp capable society. Last visited by USS Discovery, Captain MaLaren commanding./

That's the one! Kal thought confidently, Discovery's presence seemed a good reason for that conclusion but what were they doing?

“Can you give me the details of Discovery's mission on Ari-Saae?” Kal asked hopefully although he doubted he'd be granted access.

/Mission parameters are not on file./

“I suppose I need security clearance to view those files?” Kal grumbled

/Negative. Mission parameters are not limited as conjectured. Mission parameters are not on file./

Kal raised his eyebrow “You mean to say that they don't exist... at all..?”

/Correct./

Kal was puzzled and intrigued, what could be so secret that the files did not exist? He logged the position of the planet, he intended to pay a visit, or to attempt to.

“Goodnight.” Kal said irrationally to the computer, he was tired, it was 5:30am and he was meeting Husar in a few hours.

/Goodnight./

Chapter Six

Location: Sentinel Station, Cardassian Embassy

Kal tiredly rubbed his eyes as he woke up in his new apartment. He replicated his usual tasteless supplement, although this time he added a fairly high dose of caffeine in order to keep him awake, he quickly drank the “efficient” breakfast, dressed and headed to Husar's shop. He approached at mid-shift, at the front door as instructed, in order to make sure people saw him.

“Good morning.” The Kazon greeted Husar yawning.

“Well, well, well....look what the vole dragged in.” Husar raised an eyebrow, almost disdainfully, “I have seen more lively things lying in the mess at the bottom of a nest. Are you sick?”

“Oh I'm fine, just waiting for the caffeine to kick in.” He said with a tired smile “Don't worry, it won't affect my efficiency.” He promised.

“I am more worried about contagion than efficiency.” Husar snorted, making a mental note to take a strong antiviral. The kid looked more pallid and pathetic than infectious so Husar decided he probably wasn't a carrier of plague.

“Don't worry.” Kal laughed “Lack of sleep is not usually contagious, so what do you need doing first?”

“A simple task.” Husar gave the kid a PADD, and thumped a fist on a crate, “Take that small shipment to the Cardassian embassy with my compliments. If you return -” Husar stopped, cleared her throat, “I mean if you come back -”

“If?!” Kal said alarmed “You said IF not when!!”

“Oh my people can be prickly and less than welcoming. So if the guards let you be and let you deliver it then it is a good sign. Plus it helps to establish you as my hired lackey.” Husar gave a less than reassuring smile. “I am sure you will be fine. More or less.”

“More or less.” Kal grumbled quietly but it was no good, he had to do as he was told or he wouldn't get that beacon or anything else. “Okay, I'll get it there.”

“The bigger issue will be if anyone in security notices you carrying a shipment of something alive. The Cardassians will happily welcome a few fat voles regardless of whether they look more like fighting voles than ones fit for eating. Federation security might be more nosey.” Husar smirked a little, “So I would be as quick as possible but try to avoid any place too public in case they become noisy.”

“Right I'll try and keep to the backstreets then.” Kal said “Don't worry, I'm pretty good at keeping to the shadows.” And he was, Kal had stowed away on countless vessels and had not, as of yet, ever been found.

“Oh good. I do hope to see you here soon, it's hard to find good help.” Husar not too gently ushered him out the door, wondering if a certain Kazon would end up in the non-too tender hands of her fellow Cardassians.

Kal did well to keep out of more public areas, a good thing since Husar's voles were squeaking and rustling, when he finally arrived at the Cardassian embassy he felt nervous. He put down the heavy box of voles and knocked.

Deben heard the knocking and was instantly alert. It had been a rather long dull afternoon and it was rare someone me by unannounced. So he composed a one hand on a phaser and opened the large main doors to find a pallid Kazon carrying a box...and one that was making an unusual noise.

He frowned a little, “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“I'm here with this, complements of Husar.” he said indicating the box.

“Really?” That made him more cautious, if the kid was associated with criminals then who knows what he really had brought as a gift. “You work for that woman?”

“I'm Husar's newest... employee...” He replied cryptically.

“Realllly...” Deben was even more skeptical now, “Well thank you but -”

“Oh come now, Deben stop playing with - with - our guest.” Seket said from behind the guard, “Please ignore the less than warm welcome and come in by all means.”

“Umm... thank you...” Kal said reluctantly entering the building, he was not at all confident of his safety.

“Seket he probably has a bomb in there if the brat is associated with Husar.” Deben hissed at her, using the refined High Cardassian for effect. “I would -”

Seket ignored Deben and almost elbowed him out of the way, “Yes, yes, sure, a bomb that squeaks and sounds ever so much like live voles in a small box. I somehow doubt Husar is smart enough to create that.”

Kal looked apprehensively between the two as he put his box down. Seket seemed a little too nice and he was therefore more suspicious of her than he was of Deben who was directly aggressive.

“So - young man who works for Husar - and please by all means come in and make yourself welcome - you were saying you work for her?” Seket was pouring on the charm, if nothing else she could have some fun. “And did she tell you what was in the box?”

“Yes, Cardassian voles.” Kal said deliberately avoiding any mention of their purpose.

Deben went to grab the box of what was supposed to be voles, “Let me take that and dispose of it. I'll deal with this Seket.”

Seket's mood shifted, she drew herself a little taller, stared right at Deben, “I have the authority here. Do you really want to challenge me?” She waited just long enough for him to recognize the threat before turning her attention to the Kazon. She held out a hand to Kal, “Please come with me...I would love to see what Husar has so kindly sent to us.”

“Oh I wouldn't want to be a bother...” Kal said hastily, what he really meant was *'I'm not keen on following you into some private part of the Cardassian embassy where you could do away with me'*

“I insist and it is no trouble at all to speak in private...would you like refreshments? You must have been walking a long way for the sake of your...employer.” Seket kept the smile, she wanted to be able to assess this particular situation in private, it was always easier to keep it clean and messes were something she disliked.

Much harder to hide evidence or an inconvenient Kazon when you do it in the foyer of the embassy. She smiled at the thought, “Yes, we must have refreshments and then you can let me see the voles.”

“Oh I'm fine really.” Kal insisted, he suspected Seket might try to poison him.

“Ah but I insist and you look like you could do with a good meal. My, my, whatever is Husar doing with her employees...” Seket was barely listening to the protests, she had her own game to play and was going to enjoy this.

She deliberately chose one of the meeting rooms that were more quiet and out of the way - and where she knew she could replicate anything she wanted. Not wanting to waste good kanar on some unknown sarrku she replicated one of the milder fruit wines. It still had the taste of sour fermenting fruit and was raw enough to make the inexperienced cough...but Seket was hoping to lower the kid's defences not impress him with Cardassian extravagance.

Kal reluctantly followed Seket and much more reluctantly he accepted the drink she gave him, although he only held it, waiting to see if Seket drank hers first, he had seen it come from the same bottle but he wasn't taking any chances.

Kal liked the taste, or rather he liked that it *had* a taste, he knew little of food and drink, only ever consuming his supplements, and so any taste at all was a pleasant change, although he would not have admitted it.

Seket noticed the hesitation and was amused, suspicion was always entertaining and she was in a mood to play games. She drank, “Please join me....” Seket said, watching to see if he would, “And I just realized I do not know your name....?”

“Four of Six.” The Kazon replied “But Four will do, and yes I work for Husar, I only came under her employment yesterday but she um... pays well..”.

That was true enough in a way, to Kal the things Husar gave him were infinity precious because they had belonged to those he worshiped.

“Four? A curious name and I suspect there is a curious tale behind it.” Seket smiled, a little, didn't push further. If the kid didn't spill everything at some point she could find it out another way. It just depended if he was important enough to waste her energy on...and she stood up, “However I am forgetting the issue of what gift Husar has given. I might mention that gift giving is very important for us...very important..”

Kal opened the box of voles to show Seket, they were as aggressive as is too be expected from Cardassian voles and one predictably bit him, although he did not seem particularly concerned.

“Excellent!” Seket laughed, the voles were in a truly savage mood, no doubt from being sealed in a small box and hauled across the station, “You realize what they are used for, of course - or perhaps she did not tell you. Hmmmm....”

“Yes I know what they are.” Kal replied “I clean them out for Husar, they are fighting voles.”

“Fighting voles are generally too lean and vicious to be useful for eating - and are quite illegal to own throughout the Federation. They seem to have some sickly sentimentality over every nasty vicious little thing and someone no doubt was weeping for the poor voles.” Seket snorted, for her it was ridiculous, especially when those nasty mean little faces were hissing up at her just wanting blood, “These are bred to fight and are quite dangerous if you do not know what you are doing...I do hope Husar thought enough to warn you to be careful?”

Kal did not agree with fighting animals, he thought it cruel and unnecessary, they were sentient after all, they had feelings... and he did not see the pleasure people found in watching the creatures kill one another, he had seen more than enough violence and death in his own life.

Kal however would not say this to Husar, he might have disagreed with what she was doing but for someone who wanted to belong to a collective Kal was actually very selfish, that and he had very little will-power, so long as she continued to provide him with Borg stuff he would do whatever she wanted. He certainly was not going to express his opinion in front of Seket, he was actually a little scared of her and anyway, he did not want to mess anything up for Husar.

“Yes I've been warned... and bitten, the males are the worst.” Kal said showing the Cardassian women a large cut where one of Husar's voles had attacked him the other day “If I was going to place a bet on who would win then it'd be that one.” He said pointing to the culprit.

Seket went and looked in the box by way of an answer, “Now most people who bet on fighting voles go for the males...like that one. They can be vicious and use size and strength to tear the opponent apart. However -” Seket moved quickly, grabbed the biggest one from behind the skull, squeezing hard on the skin at the back of the neck. It shook and twisted a moment before calming down....hissing but otherwise not making a move to attack.

Kal looked with intrigue at the way in which Seket handled the voles, making a note that that was how he'd pick them up next time, she was clearly very experienced with the creatures.

“Me - personally I prefer to bet on the quiet ones. Like that female, very quiet, no overt aggression just waiting and watching. I would be more watchful, my young Kazon and approach her with caution and from behind so you are less likely to meet the teeth.” Seket dropped the first vole back. It landed, rolled, was instantly ready for an attack from it's fellows. “But where are my manners? Please drink while we talk business...”

Kal nodded. *The females are usually the most dangerous members of any species* he thought, and he was not thinking of voles, he was thinking of the very scary Cardassian women he'd met.

“Sure... uh... what did you want to talk about? A message for Husar?” He asked

Seket smiled a little, the last thing she wanted was to send Husar anything other than an arrest warrant, “Actually I was wondering how long you had been helping Husar.”

She folded her hands together, studied the Kazon to see what his reaction would be.

“Oh I only met her yesterday.” He said. He was quite determined to remain loyal to Husar, or at least he remained loyal to her box full of Borg treasures, either way he would not give away any secrets easily.

“Really? Only yesterday? And she trusts you will such a dangerous - I mean precious, cargo?” Seket took a deliberate sip of her drink and debated. So far the kid was resistant to drinking but she had another idea.

“Like I said... she pays well” the Kazon replied cryptically, he would not give away too much about himself either if he could help it.

“Really? That is interesting...” Seket replicated some food - nothing too exotic but some very sweet cakes. If the Kazon was like most humanoids he would be persuaded by the sugary flavor of the muffins, combined with nut and toffee drilled over the top. She came back, put them down close enough to Kal to be enticing... “Have you tried these? They are popular in the Federation and even we Cardassians like them more than we should.”

The cakes looked very inviting to Kal, his diet was very limited and looking at those cakes reminded him of a time when it was not, a time before he became obsessed with the Borg.

He could almost see his mother baking cakes in his mind’s eye. So long ago it felt, that happy childhood, destroyed by war. He shook his head reluctantly “To be honest... I've been a little worried you might be trying to um... to poison me..” He admitted.

“Now why would I invite you back here only to mean you harm?” Seket laughed, and took a sticky sweet muffin, “You clearly have heard too many horror stories about Cardassians - but well if you do not want to try some food then I will have to eat alone.”

“So if you don't want to kill me, then what do you want?” Kal asked suspiciously, but he edged his hand towards the tray of cakes.

“I merely wished to discuss some simple business.” Seket paused, broke the muffin in half, “You realize your employer is connected to some questionable people....rumor has it...” Seket looked around, lowered her voice, “The criminal element on Cardassia.”

“You should not believe everything you hear in rumors...” Kal said dryly.

“We cannot get anyone close enough to be sure of course,” Seket said, and it was almost true, “But if you come across anything concrete...any information....I could see to it that you are rewarded for it.” Abruptly with a sweet smile she pushed the food towards Kal, “You simply must try this...you will thank me for the experience!”

Finally Kal relented and tried a cake. The sweet taste was overwhelming to his unused taste-buds, he smiled and his eyes lit up and for a second, for just a second he wondered why he denied himself these pleasures.

The pleasure did not last long though, soon he remembered why he couldn't enjoy these things on a regular basis, he had to be efficient, he had to be worthy... but... but what harm would it do to have another now?

“Um... sure.. I'll let you know if I notice anything.” He lied “Although Husar is clever, I'm sure that even if she was involved in such things she wouldn't let me know.” He sounded at least semi-convincing as he tried to speak lightly.

He had no intentions of doing anything of the sort, after all, what sort of reward could Seket offer that would better than what Husar had?

He actually meant to ensure that his new master knew every detail of this conversation, including what Seket had asked of him, if he showed her his loyalty then perhaps she would let him have the beacon sooner he thought.

Oh just to see that beacon again... The crazed Kazon thought.

Seket raised an eyebrow, studied Kal speculatively, “Sure you will....” She smiled a little, “Such loyalty to her kind is either admirable or foolish.”

“Well I really must be going...” Kal said awkwardly “It has been a pleasure meeting you...” He looked longingly at the remaining cakes.

“Now, now, you cannot run out of here while there is still food on the table...not unless you wish to cause offence.” Seket smiled again, “I suggest you avoid causing offence....and anyway I have a little information for you.”

Kal looked at the women intrigued. He did have a price, but he did not trust Seket well enough to share that price with her just yet. He had been open with Husar easily because she had shared her own secrets, or at least some of them and because he knew that she would not judge the illegal aspects of his... collection... but he was not so sure about Seket.

He shook his head “I am afraid I can't help.” He said, a bit reluctantly, this women seemed powerful, there was every chance she could get him what he wanted most... but he was too afraid to share what he wanted... and it did not seem right to betray Husar, she was the closest thing he'd had to a friend in a very long time.

“What do you know about Cardassia? Probably not much and much of it just exaggeration or rumor...” Seket said and reached into the box of voles again, grabbed out one of the smaller meaner females. “There are two main powers one of which is the Scrawvan families, petty criminals the lot of them. Small...nasty...hissing voles much like this one.” The vole twisted in her grip trying to turn around enough to bite.

“And I suppose I'm working for one of these vicious voles?” He asked a little bit sarcastically.

“If you think a vicious little criminal vole will not rip your throat out when you are no longer valuable or useful think again.” Seket didn't release her grip for one minute and the vole just barely settled down enough to hang there, hissing in fury.

Seket reached into the box with her free hand, grabbed one of the quieter ones. In contrast it didn't make a move, just remained content to stare balefully at Seket - and the other vole - then Seket again.

"Then you have the ones who hunt her kind and establish order. Generally working in silence and in the shadows, not giving too much away. Both sides keep trying to gain an advantage by spying on and infiltrating the other if we can."

"How do I know that you are to be trusted any more than Husar?" he asked "My price... the Cardassian government might not exactly agree with it... at least I know what Husar has to offer."

"We are beyond the Cardassian government." Seket said truthfully, "So think about which side you want to ally with - and who is more likely to be able to reward you."

Kal looked intensely at Seket, trying to decide what to say. Should he tell her what he wanted? Could she get him nanoprobes? He had been trying to get a hold of Borg nanoprobes for years, he wanted to try and inject himself, and, failing that, he would need them for his research. He did not want just *any* nanoprobes though, he wanted assimilation nanoprobes and harvesting them was not exactly easy.

"Oh please eat, you look positively undernourished my young Kazon. And I do not want an answer now...especially one that is oh perhaps not true. Not that I doubt your honesty of course..." Seket smiled almost kindly and put down the second vole she had selected, the one that reminded her ever so much of an agent of the Obsidian Order. It took up a watchful stance in the box, dark eyes staring at Seket as if waiting for her next move.

"Thank you... I will... I'll *think* about it." He said, he could at least promise that much. He now felt very torn, he had intended on telling Husar the details of the meeting straight away but now he was unsure.

"I trust you will think about it...and any time you make a decision just come by. The door will always be open." Seket kept the vole in a firm grip, more interested right now in seeding the ground. If she planted just a few ideas in a particular Kazon brain she should get useful information. Once the table was more or less empty Kal looked at Seket for permission to leave.

"Now I suppose you must be running along before Husar thinks you have disappeared." Seket said, "And - oh I really must be generous." She touched the communicator and snapped an order in Cardassian.

"Oh thank you." Kal said, he felt very relieved, Seket had certainly made him think, and he could not help consistently considering her offer even as he tried, he was wondering what to tell Husar.

“As you leave Deben will have a box for you, just a few snacks. I swear your employer looks like she plans to starve you...oh well.” Seket looked more sympathetic than she actually was, “You do not have to tell her where it came from - in fact I suggest you do not.”

“Thank you, you are very kind.” Kal said politely, fighting between his urge to not eat the cakes because that would reduce his efficiency and the urge to do so because they were so delicious.

“And when...I mean if you have any useful information that you want to exchange for a price....just come back. I think you will find we have more resources than Husar and are more generous.” Seket smiled, it was true at least and it couldn't hurt to give the Kazon some added incentive to watch his boss.

Kal looked tentatively at Seket, it was so so tempting to tell her what he wanted... but no... not yet... he would have to think about it... perhaps make sure he had his beacon first before considering any betrayal.

“Thank you, what should I tell Husar, about the voles?” He asked.

Seket gave a short nod, sighed, “Oh yes where were my manners? Please thank dear Husar for this delightful, generous gift. I am sure we will send a similar token of appreciation soon enough....”

“Well goodbye.” Kal said, he sighed with relief as he exited the embassy but his stomach turned when he realized he had to go and find Husar, what was he going to tell her?

After the Kazon left, Deben came in, still prickly as a zebu with a sore on his butt. Seket smiled at the mental image and looked at him, “You look frustrated...why whatever is wrong?” She guessed of course but equated him with a less intelligent form of life... and one unable to even begin to comprehend the games and machinations of the Obsidian Order.

“I don't know what game -” Deben started to complain, clearly not understanding her motives.

“No you do not.” Seket cut him off, the vole in her hand felt her anger and shook a little, “The Kazon may prove valuable since he is connected to Husar. When he returns -”

“If he returns,” Deben grumbled, “I think the little brat will stay well away.”

“He will return. At some point he will find reason to betray Husar: right now I do not know what his price is but he must have one.” Seket stroked the vole a little with her free hand, noticing how every muscle trembled in response. “Make sure the Kazon is able to come and see me when he wants to without anyone being stupid enough to stop him.”

“As you wish.” Deben gave a barely polite bow, as mocking as anything he had done.

Seket snorted and pinned the vole a little. The sharp little teeth snapped, hoping to find her but failing consistently. She should put the creature back and recycle them, be done with it. Especially when the other voles kept hissing, sensing Seket was near and wanting blood. Instead of releasing it she ran a hand along the spine, just studying it’s reaction and vile temper.

“What do you want done with those?” Deben pointed at the box.

“The embassy cannot be connected with anything illegal of course...” Seket kept a firm grip on the nasty spitting vole, thinking of Husar and petty criminals like her...yes as she thought of Husar she twisted one of its legs. The thought occurred how easy it would be to twist Husar’s head...squeeze her. Eradicate her. Make her and her kind vanish...painfully.

The vole let out a shrill cry and Seket looked down. She shook her head, almost embarrassed at her display of temper. The small vicious creature was yelping a little, holding a forelimb at an odd angle....

“Such a pity,” Seket said quietly, tossed it back into the box.

The voles turned on the wounded one with sharp cries. It would not last long but Seket didn’t watch. She had little interest in vole fighting and even less in watching them tear each other apart.

Seket shrugged, “Send them to the Cardassian Café, let them turn them into stew.”

Deben raised an eyebrow, “Fighting voles are not fit for eating.”

“Hah, slow cook in a stew and who will know the difference.” Seket said, glanced over at the box. “Besides, these ones are not much good for fighting.” She stood up, “Get rid of them while they are quiet, I do not care how.”

Deben bowed again, “As you wish.”

Chapter Seven

Location: Sentinel Station, Holideck

Outpost Hope One didn't even rate a Starbase designation, was small, but one of the most important facilities orbiting the Dyson sphere. Along with Military Starfleet personnel, Scientists, Starfleet Operations, The USS Daystrom, The Lighthouse, the varied facilities stationed on the inner sphere surface, the sum-total was impressive.

And within Sentinel Station there resided a bored group of disparate scientists. People who seemed not to associate well with the others. Buried at the bottom of that pile was the outsider, DFA Ensign Ariana Serota; Geologist, occasional Explorer, and homesick young woman.

It was Christmas time, and she was not aboard Cromwell. Not that she had spent much time there, in fact, she had more time here than on the DFA Flagship, but they were memorable. And Christmas time was memorable.

Ariana sat on a high stool, looking at her upright PaDD, rock samples from the cave in at Oka sitting on her benchtop. Her mind on Christmas on Cromwell instead.

The first invites had been easy, and she quickly went through the science department. There were a few more she intended to send too. It was one thing about parties, they often took on a life of their own. Word of mouth, forwarded invites, comments by co-works fed the party invite through the system until soon anyone with interest knew about the party.

To: (Others)

From: Science Department

Your presence is requested for a holiday party to be thrown on Holideck (She purposely misspelled the word, and after several overrides finally convinced the computer not to auto correct it) Twelve. (Yeah, she chose 12 for the twelve days of Christmas).

At the Hour of 1900, and she gave the date.

RSVP

(DFA) Ensign Ariana Serota

PS: Holodeck settings are for winter, dress accordingly.

To: Commander Favor

Your presence is requested for a holiday party to be thrown on Holideck (She purposely misspelled the word, and after several overrides finally convinced the computer not to auto correct it) Twelve. (Yeah, she chose 12 for the twelve days of Christmas).

At the Hour of 1900, and she gave the date.

RSVP

(DFA) Ensign Ariana Serota

PS: Dress Warmly, Cya there :)

To: Kal, nightshift long range sensors

Your presence is requested for a holiday party to be thrown on Holideck (She purposely misspelled the word, and after several overrides finally convinced the computer not to auto correct it) Twelve. (Yeah, she chose 12 for the twelve days of Christmas).

At the Hour of 1900, and she gave the date.

RSVP

(DFA) Ensign Ariana Serota

PS: Dress Warmly, Cya there :)

Kal was surprised to see the invite appear on the screen of his PaDD and even more surprised when he read it. He looked up the holidays celebrated at this time of year, there were a number from Earth, and, since the invite was from Ensign Serota it made sense that it might be an Earth holiday.

He read more about the holidays and felt conflicted, they were all celebrations that revolved a lot around family and togetherness.

He looked sadly at the holoimage that sat permanently on his desk. Even after all these years looking at that picture hurt, to be assimilated... to not have to feel that pain anymore.

He tried to return his thoughts to the invitation. The truth of the matter was, Kal was a fundamentally lonely person, as one might expect from someone who had undergone so much grief, and his years of self-enforced isolation had only made him even lonelier so Kal actually wanted to go to the party, he wanted the temporary escape from the darkness that swallowed him.

He thought hard for a way to justify going to himself and finally concluded with 'I might be able to find out more about the cube.'. He was lying to himself of course but he had to lie to himself, it was the only way in which he could justify freeing himself from his self-imposed prison of pleasure draining efficiency.

After much thought Kal finally constructed a reply, he wondered if Husar might be going. Part of him hoped she was because there would be someone he knew, the other part of him hoped she was not because he had this horrible feeling that she

might get him to do something on the rare occasion that he was allowing himself pleasure... *no not pleasure* the crazed Kazon reminded himself... *it is to find out more about the cube.*

To: Ariana Serota

Thank you very much for the invitation Ensign Serota

It was a very pleasant surprise, I will be there.

Four of Six

He sent of the invitation before realizing that he'd signed with his designation instead of with his name, he sighed. He hoped that she would know it was from him, she should though, it would have his name at the top anyway since it was a message from his PaDD. Still he grumbled something to himself about being more careful with his names while he replicated something to wear.

To: Captain Theodore, USS Daystrom,

Your presence is requested for a holiday party to be thrown on
Holideck Twelve.

At the Hour of 1900, and she gave the date.

RSVP

(DFA) Ensign Ariana Serota

PS: Dress Warmly, well I guess you don't have to, but the
organics will. Cya there :)

Dear Serota

I regret to inform you I will be very busy and unable to join
you on the holodeck this Christmas please accept my sincerest
apologies

yours truly

Theodore

Theodore was not busy but Christmas was a sore subject for him because it was
the day he was activated and going back reminded him of begin nothing more then a
child's plaything

Lt. Mahlon Avinbruch,

Your presence is requested for a holiday party to be thrown on
Holideck Twelve.

At the Hour of 1900, and she gave the date.

RSVP

(DFA) Ensign Ariana Serota

PS: Dress Warmly

Mahlon had stared at his padd for hours. Not all at once but a few minutes at a time every few minutes. He had messed up twice. It had been weeks since he spoke with Ariana. An icon blinked in the corner of this blank display... a closed envelope. Tapping it, he read an invitation. Maybe he was getting a third chance. Damn. What was he going to talk to her about. It dawned on him that he had no real interests. With the guys, he talked shop. He knew enough about beer and baseball to chime in. Ariana was a geologist. A world traveller. He'd have to brush up on something interesting. He tapped the reply.

RSVP Accepted. Added to calendar

Mahlon gritted his teeth. He had been asked out on a date and he added no personalized message. The hottest girl on the station asked him out and he sent her a form letter. He /really/ needed something interesting to talk about. He'd learn about rocks. She liked rocks. He thought he better send her another message.

See you there :)

Mahlon shut off the padd. If he kept typing, he'd make it worse.

Chapter Eight

Location: Sentinel Station, Namche Bazaar

Getting back was far easier than getting there. That made sense really, because this time Kal was carrying a box of cakes, and not a box of voles. He walked into Husar's shop and smiled anxiously at her. "I delivered the... package." He said.

Husar jumped a little, she had half expected to not see the kid again. It had been a test as much as anything else - and admittedly she had wanted to irritate the folks at the embassy. She stared at him, looked at the package, "If so, then what exactly is that?"

"Cakes, would you like some?" Kal said, opening the box of cupcakes.

"What? Where did you get that?" Husar put her hands up, not willing to get to close "Or rather...who gave it to you?"

"Seket said to thank you for the gift." He said, that was true enough. Then his conscience broke "But there is something else we have to talk about... in private." He said quietly, looking around at the shop full of customers

"Hmmm. Sounds curious." Husar shrugged, "Take that box out the back and I will finish with these customers." Well it couldn't hurt to let the kid feed while she cleared the store.

Soon enough she closed the front door and walked out to the storage room. "Well, what is it? Did the big bad Cardassians scare you?"

"They kind of did actually." Kal said with a bit of a grin, *Cardassian women are much, much scarier than the Borg* he thought "But I talked to a woman named Seket, and I really need to tell you what she said." He squirmed uncomfortably "She told me to watch you, offered me a reward for finding proof if you're doing anything... questionable."

Husar folded her arms, "Really? So Seket decided to stick her nose in. I had hoped you were joking...That is interesting of course." Husar was trying to get a read of Kal but the Kazon seemed to be just ashamed..."So why exactly are you telling me this?"

"Because I had too." He sighed "I'm not going to pretend I wasn't tempted Husar, she said any price... but it wasn't right." Kal was quite a loyal person, in his own way, it was a loyalty that had its limits but Husar was the closest thing he had to a friend and he didn't feel comfortable ratting her out to the embassy "That and I

don't trust her." He added "Not as far as I could throw her. I trust you will at least keep my secret and I've seen what you've got."

"Oh I'm sure Seket told you about my supposed connections." Husar snorted and went to grab the box of cakes, "And boasted about who she works for. Or who she claims to work for." Husar poked at one cake that was more syrupy than the others, "Really, quite disappointing. You can keep these with my compliments."

Kal gave Husar something of a mischievous grin "We both know she wasn't lying about the criminal connections" He said lightly "I just don't happen to care. What does it matter to me who your involved with, with what you've got you could be a serial killer and I'd probably still stick around... and thanks." He added biting into another of the syrupy cakes, so sweet, so full of taste.

"Hah. Seket is far more likely to be a serial killer than anyone I know." Husar snorted, "So I would be careful around her kind." So Seket wanted to snoop? That would suggest her normal sources of information had dried up. Or the idiot Star Fleeters had increased security -

"Oh... by the way... I was asked to a Christmas party... do you want to be my 'plus one'?" Kal asked.

He had been in debate about whether or not to mention the party to Husar, but it would be nice to see someone there he knew.

Husar was startled from her train of thought, "A what? Plus one?" She had to think for a moment since her knowledge of sarrku idiom was limited to the more common comments the slack jawed idiots made, "That sounds like a - what is the word - date? Do you seriously lack female Kazon to chase after?"

Kal blushed, he knew she was being sarcastic but still he felt uncomfortable "Er... no, I just meant as a friend." He smiled.

"Ah. So a friendly request then...hmmmm...that is not completely repellent coming from a sarrku." Husar said, "Even one who looks ready to fall asleep right now." She sighed, "You probably better run along, I have a delivery that will have to be done later but I need someone wide awake for this one."

"Well I guess I'll see you later then?" He asked but he was very clearly eyeing the box of Borg stuff.

Husar gave a slight nod, "One thing, before you scurry off -" She noticed again how obsessed he was with Borg junk - and decided to chalk it up to the weirdness of sarrku. It also gave her something potentially use to secure "What is the time and location and I will consider it?"

"1900 hours in holodeck 12." He said smiling "I'm glad you can come!"

“I said I would consider it, if only to understand what passes as entertainment for your kind.” Husar snorted, holding up a hand. “Plus I may be able to make contacts.”

“Okay well I hope to see you there.” He said with a bit of a forced smile, he was still finding it hard to stop staring at the box of treasures, it was so distracting and inviting just sitting there.

“You should take that box with you...or - hmmm - wait, at least take the contents. If Seket is watching she won't know if you have tried any.” Husar doubted Seket would be so crude as to poison the food, it wasn't exactly the style of an agent...but still. “...and if she has bugged the box I can dispose of it.”

“Well okay... if there's nothing more you need...” He said, still staring at the box.

Husar waved him off, “Go eat something, get some sleep before you scare my customers. There will be enough work later when it is quiet and fewer eyes to see.” It was as close as she could come to being nice, niceness was not exactly a characteristic of either the Scravvans or the typical Cardassian.

Kal sighed and forced his eyes away from the box, he picked up what was left of the cakes and walked out of the shop and back to his quarters, in a way he was glad that Husar had had no more work for him, he was exhausted and thought it might be good to get a few hours' sleep.

Chapter Nine

Location: Sentinel Station, Holideck

The Holodeck had been programmed with a wintery scene. There was a wintery glade, in the center was a very large bonfire. Heat could be felt from the holographic fire. Around the fire were wood benches. A leantoo structure with Pine boughs for a roof housed the bar, and bartender. A wood platformed served as a dance stage. Through the magic of holotechnology, the light snow that fell, did not fall on the wood, which remained dry and unslippery. A DJ played music, coordinating lights with the music. Ariana went to the DJ, and had the volume turned down just a bit, she wanted the guests to be able to talk as well as dance.

Mahlon thought he could hear the music down the corridor. He checked his breath, made sure his outfit was presentable and stepped up to the holodeck doors.

A scientist wearing a lab coat over a parka, pushed his glasses higher onto his nose. "Five minutes," he muttered. "Then we're back to the lab." He pushed past the hesitant pilot, "Excuse me..."

The marine pilot felt underdressed. His sweater was plain without blinking lights or noisy ornamentation. His entire wardrobe was black, grey and drab green. If he left immediately, he could visit a shop on the promenade and come back.

"Mahlon!" called the waving blonde, seeing Avinbruch, bouncing over to greet him. She was dressed in a flirty skirt, leggings and Furry Uhg boots. She wore a red ski vest for warmth, and white gloves with the fingers removed. Her hair was let down, wavy and flowing.

"Oh. Hey Ariana." He leaned in for a hug and regretted it even as he was doing it.

Ariana gave a laugh, sloshing her drink, trying to get it out of the way of the advancing pilot. She held the drink high as he hugged her, she wrapped an arm around him, returning the hug.

"This place looks great."

"Come on, let's get you a drink," said Ariana turning towards the bar. She didn't grab his hand, although the thought crossed her mind.

"Scotch. Neat." he asked the bartender.

"All drinks come on the rocks," she said with a wink. "It's just the way we roll."

He gave her a smirk. Only hours later would he get the joke from the station's junior geologist.

Three Scientists sat huddled close together, sipping rum through straws. “Hey Ariana.”

“Hey Guys,” said Ariana. She whispered to Mahlon. “Geneticists.”

“Right.” He would never get that joke.

Kal felt uncomfortable as he came into the holodeck, he was not used to social occasions. The simulated cold air caught him by surprise. Kal had not been outside, either in real life or in simulation for a very long time, he had spent just about 10 years aboard starships or in his shuttle. He was wearing a long black winter coat and equally black gloves. He looked to the inviting fire and headed towards it having noticed Ariana, he wanted to thank her for the invitation. He stood rather awkwardly, not wanting to interrupt the conversation.

“Who's that?” Mahlon had not encountered many Kazon. In the fifty years since the Federation first explored the Delta Quadrant, the Kazon had seen their territory shrink and turned towards in-fighting.

Ariana looked over to where Mahlon had pointed out. A Kazon was standing there, an unusual sight, if one of Ariana's best friends had not been a Kazon back at the academy. “Oh, Hello there,” she said.

“Hello, I just wanted to thank you for the invitation.” He said with a nervous smile “I'm new to the station and so it's nice to get the opportunity to meet people.”

“Well, welcome. I am Ariana,” she paused, “DFA Ensign Ariana Serota, but you can call me Ariana.” She elbowed a silent Mahlon.

“I'm Mahlon.” The pilot left out his rank and position. There was no need to mention he was a Marine.

“Four.” He said, deciding on the name he had given to Husar.

“Four? That's an odd name.” She paused and smiled. “Are you a Bynar?”

Kal returned the smile, he was used to explaining (or not explaining) his unusual designation. “It's um... kind of a nickname.” He explained “My given name is Kal but I hate it.” he blushed, it was not often that he talked to other people... well except for Husar and she generally did most of the actual talking.

“It took a long time to appreciate my name.” replied the marine. “Mahlon is an ancient human name passed down through my family.”

He handed Ariana a box of cupcakes he had copied into the replicator from his gift from Seket the other day “The database said it was appropriate to bring a gift?” He explained unsurely “I don't know much about this holiday I'm afraid but I hope that you like them.”

“They look delicious,” Ariana said appreciatively. “Thank you, Four.”

“Have you stopped by the bar?” Mahlon wasn't sure he liked his scotch on the rocks.

“Yeah, Grab a drink, they have a volcano that is flaming, and you could warm up by the fire.” said Ariana.

Kal smiled and took the offered drink. *So many things I've been consuming lately* he thought but it was so nice to taste actual food and drink, it made him doubt his self-imposed restrictions... but soon the overwhelming madness and worship which induced them would return to put him back into his dietary prison.

“It's really good.” he commented, sitting close to the fire and warming his hands.

Oh can't you just let me enjoy it? Kal silently asked the voices in his head but of course the answer was no.

“So what do you two do?” he asked “On the station I mean?”

“Geo-physicist,” responded Ariana. “Studying the physics of the Dyson Sphere. And an exchange officer for the DFA,” she said with a bit of pride.

“Oh a geologist? I'm um... I'm a scientist to... but I guess you knew that from finding me for the invite... um...” He blushed again and inwardly chastised himself for his awkwardness.

Ariana sighed. Geologist...She was trying to impress Lt Avinbruch, Four was not helping.

“I'm a pilot. Mostly ferrying scientists.” Mahlon described the most non-threatening part of his job. After dropping Ariana off in Oka after the quake, he had lead a Strike Group, boarded an intelligent alien ship, rescued it's sole living inhabitant and then utterly destroyed it. “What is your area of specialty?”

“Xenobiology.” Kal said “I'm using the deflector array because there's a Borg cube in the area and that's my specialty.” he replied honestly, but carefully, always having to be careful not to say too much was another reason Kal was so isolated.

“Cool.”

“Yeah...cool.” She added, trying to remain cheerful.

“You said you're from the DFA right?” Kal asked the women mostly to move the conversation away from himself, he'd feel very awkward if people asked for the reasons for his... interests.

“Yes,” said Ariana. “We pride ourselves on our independence, and our offer of assistance to any that ask for it,” said Ariana. “What about you?” she asked, glancing over to Mahlon, encouraging him to help in this awkward conversation.

“Must be a difficult area of study, Borg xenobiology.” Mahlon wondered if the Kazon was putting the moves on Ariana. He had struck out twice but he didn't want to lose her to the new kid.

Kal would have laughed had he known what Mahlon was thinking. Of course he couldn't deny an attraction to the pretty bubbly girl, her personality seemed so counter to his miserable state, but he was pretty sure she was way out of his league. He had little self-confidence and couldn't imagine Ariana would have even the slightest interest in him, and even if she did, Kal would not allow himself that kind of relationship. He would not even allow himself close friends... it was too risky... they might die and leave him, like everyone else he'd ever cared about.

“Well I've been in and out several Borg vessels and...” Kal began but was cut off

Ariana jumped on Kal's comment. “Really? That is so interesting.” She put her hand on his arm. “When did you meet them?” A xenobiologist's encounter with another species must be an interesting occurrence.

“Oh getting onto Borg vessels isn't so difficult.” He said “If you go alone and aren't threatening they just ignore you.” He sighed “and I'm unworthy of assimilation anyway so there isn't much risk of that.”

“I don't think I could voluntarily beam aboard a Borg Vessel.” said Ariana truthfully. “But you have?”

“My first encounter was 10 years ago, the vessel I was on was attacked.” He said “They took everyone... except me, I was rescued by a DFA vessel actually”

“Really? Was it the Cromwell?” Ariana asked. Not that she believed it would be, but she was homesick.

“I don't think so...” Kal said, trying to think “But I don't remember that well, I was thrown by a drone of a wall... at least I think it was a wall... and I hit my head pretty bad, I was in and out of consciousness”

“You were manhandled by a Borg without being assimilated?” Mahlon couldn't believe the story. He had seen holo-recreations of Borg assimilation right down to the nanotubes.

“When I woke up the doctor told me that the Borg didn't take me because my species is unworthy of assimilation.” He said, he tried to his best keep his expression neutral but the memory was clearly a very painful one.

Ariana glanced at Mahlon. “It's not that you are unworthy...” she said. She looked to Mahlon to give a reasonable explanation.

“The Borg must have already assimilated all of the technology of the Kazon, and, um, don't need any more people.” Mahlon had heard about a species or two in the same boat. He tried to remember a case study, Brunali maybe, that lived near a

transwarp junction but had never been wholly assimilated. Even then a few individuals got assimilated from time to time

“Oh but I am unworthy.” He said with a sigh “Our whole species is unworthy, I think it's because of all the wars and because of the Trabe... we were freed from the Trabe only to keep trying to destroy ourselves with civil wars so we haven't really made much advancement... there's nothing the Borg would have any interest in assimilating.” He gave Ariana a despondent look, it was a difficult topic for him.

“Nonsense,” Arana contradicted. “It's more like you are a secret agent and able to sneak aboard enemy vessels,” said Ariana. “Think about it. Sneaking aboard the Borg cubes, planting devices to spy on the enemy who seeks to destroy individual's lives...”

Kal offered something of a forced smile, he couldn't very well tell her that he worshiped the Borg, he felt very jealous of those individuals whose lives were 'destroyed'.

Then he shook his head, it was something he tended to feel conflicted about, some lives *were* destroyed, how could he argue that? He wanted to be assimilated so that he didn't have to think, or feel, about his loss anymore, and so that he didn't have to be so alone... but he couldn't help but empathize with those people who had lost their friends and families to the Borg.

He didn't really feel much sympathy for those who were assimilated, but he felt a great deal for those who were left behind, those who would never be with their families again.

He tried to push the thought away, not wanting to criticize the actions of those he worshiped, but he felt guilty. Kal was not really someone who wanted to cause others pain, he just wanted to escape his own.

“I'm sorry.” was all the marine pilot could offer in response.

“Perhaps we could change to a lighter subject” he said trying to shake away the pain “It is Christmas after all.” he grinned, wondering if he ought to have said that... he'd only just learned about the holiday's existence.

“How about a dance?” asked Ariana.

Mahlon shook his head. He was not a dancer. Not even for a girl as pretty as Ariana.

“You asked if I was rescued by the Cromwell, is that where you served Ariana?” Kal asked.

Mahlon was sure the Kazon was trying to put the moves on his girl. He shouldn't've felt threatened. “I'm a Marine.”

“A Marine pilot,” Ariana said trying to bolster Mahlon's standing, and confidence. She was still a little unsure since he turned down her offer to dance. What was it with boys and dancing?

“Thanks.” Mahlon *was* a pilot but he wanted to leave that part out. He was more imposing if people thought he was a ground-pounder. “I'm going to take Ariana on a trip around the Sphere. Picnic lunch.”

“We're looking for impact craters,” said Ariana, as if that was such a typical thing to do on a date. Suddenly she let out a high pitched squeal.

Eiwan waved at the geologist from across the room.

Ariana bounced across the room and gave Eiwan a hug hug. “It is has been Ages!” the geologist said. “And that is saying something from someone who thinks an epoch is just a chapter of time.” she said with a grin. “Come and meet Mahlon, and Four.”

“Hi.” Eiwan had traded the PaDD that seemed glued to her forehead for a drink. It was a swirling mixture of fruit juices. She had a smaller PaDD in a concealed pocket just in case. “I'm Eiwan. Engineering.”

“My name is Four, it's nice to meet you.” Kal said shaking her hand “Eiwan?” Kal asked trying to remember where he'd heard the name. “Oh!” He exclaimed “I believe it was you who helped me last night with the deflector array?”

“It was. So nice to put a face to a voice.” Eiwan beamed.

“I would have introduced myself as Kal, that's my official name.” He admitted a bit reluctantly “So that's what's on the system, it was me who called up trying to find a Borg cube.” He explained, wondering if the Engineer would remember him, he probably had a lot of calls, although perhaps not so many trying to find Borg cubes at 5 o'clock in the morning.

“So nice to meet you.” So few Kazon lived within Federation space. “What brings you to Sentinel?”

“Research.” Kal said half smiling, he was always quite happy to talk about his research but at the same time always worried he would give away too many details “I um... I'm a xenobiologist and I specialise in the Borg, I was attracted here because of rumour of a cube in the area.”

Mahlon raised an eyebrow. He wasn't going to enter the conversation. He knew full well there had been a Cube in the vicinity. “Not exactly a lighter subject.”

“I didn't find it exactly but I got a good idea of where it is.” He said enthusiastically but then his mouth quickly closed “Of course I'll need to go through the proper channels to go there.” He lied.

Kal had every intention of heading straight for the location of that cube in his shuttle, he would probably be disappointed to find it was no longer there.

“You study the Borg?” Eiwan questioned.

“Oh um... just for the err... thrill.” He said telling a half truth, he couldn't very well tell them about his plan to create a nanoprobe virus!

Mahlon looked over to Ariana. He was hoping for some alone time.

The look was missed by Ariana. “We could talk about where we come from...” suggested the scientist, thinking Mahlon still wanted a lighter subject.

Kal had been glancing around the room for some time, looking frustrated.

“Are you looking for someone?” asked Eiwan. She wasn't sure how to read Kal. He seemed so inwardly focused.

“I'm waiting for someone.” He explained “A friend... and my employer.”

He wondered if Husar was late or if she just wasn't coming, she had after all only given him a 'maybe'. He suddenly realised with surprise that he cared. He felt uncomfortable at the thought, was he getting too close to Husar? He couldn't allow that to happen, she might die and leave him!

Kal looked very agitated and distracted as he continued to argue with the demons in his head. He tried to shake them away and returned to his conversation.

“It is pretty thrilling.” He said with a grin “Any if you are welcome to come.”

Did I just say that?! The Kazon thought No one else can come, it's a nanoprobe extraction mission not a holiday!

Inwardly he chastised himself and hoped no one would actually accept his offer, maybe they'd think he was joking.

Four of Six you must think before you speak! He thought irritably to himself.

“Your employer?” Eiwan followed Kal's gaze.

“This looks like a private party....I trust the invitation has not been rescinded.” Husar came from behind the Kazon, trusting he would not jump too much. She had decided he was rather too nervous and jittery to be approached without caution - then again most none Cardassians were weird and baffling.

“Husar!” Kal said, pleased to see the Cardassian women “I was afraid you wouldn't make it.”

Husar gave a vaguely apologetic bow, “I would have been here sooner but you know...work...work... work. People always wanting those last minute gifts, why I would swear there was some Federation holiday or something.” She deliberately

looked around the room at the decorations, “Why perhaps there is, it looks quite splendid!”

“It’s called Christmas, a celebration from Earth.” Kal explained, although he knew she probably knew that and was probably trying to make ‘contacts’. “Ariana arranged everything I think.” He smiled and thought suddenly that it might be a good idea to help Husar make her contacts... perhaps if he did well... she would let him have something from the box.

“Excuse me, where are my manners?” Kal said turning to face the others and attempting to sound confident (a failed attempt but he did try) “This is Husar, she has a wonderful shop on the promenade, you should come by and visit sometime” He looked at Husar like a puppy performing a trick, hoping that she would be pleased with him “And Husar, this is Ariana, Eiwan and Mahlon.”

Eiwan was sure she’d met Husar before but couldn’t remember the circumstance.. “Hello.”

“Hi.” said Mahlon with a nod. He wasn’t having any luck leading Ariana away.

“We’ve met,” said Ariana, perhaps a bit coolly. Let her figure out when and where. But Ariana continued on a lighter note. “I am glad you were able to come,” she told Husar. “Although I don’t think we ordered up any Kanar for the party, would you like me to replicate you some?”

“How gracious!” Husar bowed rather more deeply than usual, “However in the spirit of good fellowship, I would be willing to try something none Cardassian. I have heard of something called punching...or is it punch?”

Lieutenant Commander Favor stepped inside the Holodeck amused by the temporary respelling of the room. As he looked around, though, it made sense. The simulation could pretty well be described as a winter wonderland.

He wore a parka. It was bright green with white fur around the inner hood lining and at the cuffs. His pants were dark and he wore heavy boots with deep treads. He had after all been told that it would be snowing.

He noted who was there and several notable people who were not. Ensign Serota was amidst a group that was very actively discussing something. They looked to be having a very enjoyable and engrossing conversation.

Well, he wasn’t one to bust a party. He walked off in a different direction. Ultimately he wanted to get to the bar. Did they serve hot chocolate? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Favor remembered the last time he’d been invited to such an event. He had gone, but in a wheelchair due to the handicap of being an Elaysian in a heavy gravity environment. Friends of his had been saddened by the prospect that he wouldn’t be

able to ski or take advantage of other winter events, so they had offered to lower the gravity within the holodeck. The result had been that the entire simulation acted like a shaken snow globe. White powder drifted in all directions. So did several of the people. The partygoers loved it for about 10 minutes, then several requested gravity be restored. It had been fun while it lasted.

Toraith had appeared wondered where he was “Now I'm looking around he called out where am I” no one could hear him, he went over to Ariana and tapped her on the shoulder, his hand went right through her as if she was a hologram.

Ariana noticed Commander Favor arrive and was pleased. She really didn't think he would have come to a party with so many less important people. She had taken a chance sending him the invite.

On Cromwell, it was always informal on the holodeck, then back to business on the working decks. Starfleet was (much to Ariana's annoyance) always formal and military. She involuntarily fell into the formal role as she turned to the group she was chatting with, walking right through the Gorn

“If you'll excuse me a moment, I have to greet my supervisor, Commander Favor.”

Eiwan had already taken off to speak to him, she hoped that would not make her look like a poor hostess. Eiwan felt a chill. It wasn't the simulated snow. There was an odd relationship between Kal and Husar. It would be rude to step away. “Lionin.”

“Chief!” The Elaysian called loudly. “Good to see that you're here too.” His smile seemed a little off. Though he had a white mustache, his upper lip was colored brown...

“What are you drinking?” asked the Himpanwei engineer.

“Hot chocolate.” Favor said. “It's the perfect drink for a Christmas party. “How about you?”

“Blended fruit pulp with ice.” Eiwan's people could tolerate some fermented drinks. Human wine was so devoid of texture. The more exotic ales were entirely unsuitable for her species. “A virgin daquiri.”

“Commander Favor, Thank you for coming,” said Ariana in an even pleasant voice while she stood at ease, hands behind her back.

“It is my pleasure, my dear.” The Lt. Commander lifter her hand to his lips and kissed it. His eyes rose to meet hers finding a look of shock in them when he got there... “What? This is a party. We're not on duty, today, Ensign.”

“I thought Starfleet was so careful about keeping the vertical hierarchy out of the, um, horizontal exercises,” said the DFA officer.

A woman in a stocking hat came over to the group with Husar, Four and Mahlon...

“Merry Christmas,” she said with only a hint of a slur. Her tone was more controlled than her alcohol level. But perhaps the clue was the small fishing pole sprouting from the front of her cap which held a twig of leaves dangling in front of her, that only caused her to look cross eyed when she tried to focus on the mistletoe.

“Um... Merry Christmas...” Kal said awkwardly, noting that the woman was getting far closer to him than he was comfortable with “Your hat is ... interesting...” He said, awkwardly backing away... she was getting very close!

The woman moved in close, so the Mistletoe hung over the pair of them. She was just a few inches from the Kazon. “It is a tradition, when you meet someone under the mistletoe, you have to kiss them.” She glanced up at the mistletoe, giving Kal a knowing look, which to most bystanders came across as hoping she would remain upright... She puckered up, ready to accept the kiss...

Kal blushed so much that his cheeks looked unusually scarlet against his relatively pale complexion, he didn't want to cause any offense so he quickly pecked the woman's lips and then felt even more awkward.

Kal was not great with people, he had spent the past ten years in isolation.... He looked shyly away and opened his mouth a few times to speak, but no words came out, he was clearly very relieved when she moved her attention to Mahlon, he used that moment to sneak away to the bar.

The woman with the mistletoe hat moved to Mahlon's personal space, and looked up expectantly.

While Favor answered Eivan's question, Ariana glanced back at Mahlon, her expression falling seeing him with the woman.

Mahlon raised a hand and stepped back. “I have a contagious, um, virus. I have to follow medical advice.”

Kal walked uncomfortably to the bar, still looking as though he was recovering from a phaser blast. He stared at the bartender, realizing he had no clue what to order and had really just come here to escape.

“What'll it be, son?” He had been waiting for someone to come over and drink (and tip generously of course). His good ol' buddy Gaspar had told him of this party and he had known the man before he became French or Japanese or whatever it was he claimed to be. So Oskar played his part, finished cleaning the glass (which didn't really need it) and waited.

“Oh... uh... yeah...I...um... I don't really know... anything you'd recommend?” He asked, not knowing what he wanted to order, he was used to his nutrient supplements so anything would have been new.

“How's about a beer...that might be a safe starting point.” Not waiting for a response he located the weakest synthehol. The kid looked like a sneeze would knock him over so Oskar was not about to give him something strong.

“Thanks.” Kal said “That'd um... that'd be great.”

“No problem kid,” Almost casually he pushed forward the tip jar and just waited. In vain. Quietly Kal sipped his drink. There were so many people... for someone who wanted to be assimilated Kal felt very uncomfortable in large groups of people, they tended to make him nervous.

He suddenly realized that he was being rude, he had invited Husar after all... he should probably return and talk to her, he ordered another 3 of what he had and brought the drinks back to the group.

“You are drinking.” Husar said with a tone that was partially judgmental and partially disbelieving... “You had better not show up inebriated tomorrow”

Kal grinned, he was a little surprised with himself, but he figured that if he was going to be inefficient and attend a party then he might as well try some new tastes as well “I'll be showing up perfectly sober, and I might even be awake tomorrow as well.” he promised.

Mahlon managed to step far enough from the mistletoe-bearing woman that she had chosen a closer, easier mark. He breathed a sigh of relief... He looked around for Ariana hoping she hadn't seen him just then... She had disappeared into the crowd...

“F..four...” Kal answered the missletoe women “W..wh.. whats your name?”

“Whomever you wish it to be lad,” slurred the woman. “Could I wash your hair?”

“Wa..wash my hair?!” Kal asked, wondering if he'd heard her right, he looked rather desperately at Husar and then awkwardly back at the mistletoe-toe women, not quite knowing what to say “I'm um.... its meant to be shaved but it grows back so quick..” He trailed off, really having no idea what to say and wishing he could turn himself invisible...

Husar sat down at the bar, “Either fruity punch or kanar...” She said, stirring the humanoid bartender into action. He looked rather sluggish and dull, rather like something found at the bottom of a pond. Then again she felt the same way about many sarrku. “You can put it on my tab.”

“So... what do you do on the station?” Kal awkwardly asked the women, he really wasn't good with small talk and was beginning to wish that he was back in his

lab dwelling in his own comfortable misery rather than out here... with all of these... people.

Mahlon looked around for someone he knew. The room was feeling stuffy. There was a balcony that might offer some fresh air.

The Woman with the mistletoe frowned and Mahlon deviated his course. Instead she set her sights on a pair of twins on the far side of the fire. She headed around the fire, sloshing drink in hand. She would wonder where one would have gone when she arrived, despite the man's insistence he had no twin.

Husar leaned back to study Kal and the female, "Is this some mating ritual amongst humanoids..." She said, more to herself than anyone but Oskar shrugged and put down some beer in front of the pair.

If Husar was any judge Kal was looking out of his depth and uncomfortable. So much the same as always. She snorted and sipped at the fruit concoction which was actually good. And the entertainment was a bonus.

Kal's earlier blush returned at Husar's comment and all he could think was *Frak I hope not!* Husar was right, he was uncomfortable and WAY out of his depth...

He didn't know anything much about basic social interactions, let alone 'mating rituals'! But no... surely she could not be flirting with *him*. Kal had virtually no self-confidence, he was unworthy of assimilation and so he tended to think he was probably just unworthy in general.

Unworthy of even existing. There was no way in the universe that this beautiful woman was flirting with him, even drunk, Husar must have been joking.. *I hope she was joking* he thought, wishing he could hide.

The woman paused to look at the three eyed green alien, and a tall reptilian. "Okay, now I know I had too much," and decided to return to Four, Kal...Kalfore? Something like that...

"Toraith Come on let's go and in a flash they were gone," Imgers said..

"Oh leave the kid alone...he's far too young for you." Husar drained the punch and was rewarded with a glare from the woman, "Besides if you go praying mantis on him I will lose a useful employee." he laughed to herself and ordered more punch, this time telling Oskar to make it stronger.

Again the Kazon blushed but he felt inwardly thankful of Husar, hopefully her colourful metaphors would scare this woman away. He couldn't leave, it would have been rude to leave when Husar had only just arrived, but he was VERY uncomfortable being surrounded by so many people.

Eiwan hadn't spoken with Ariana for so long. "I did hear. It was completely inexplicable?"

“Guess that depends on if you believe in the Writers and other god like beings.” shrugged Ariana. “I couldn't explain it, but I didn't have a chance at really trying either.”

Mahlon noticed the station's top scientist. “Commander.”

Lionin followed the voice to its owner. He'd run into the man before, but couldn't rightly recall his name. Fortunately, he had given Lionin his out. “Lieutenant? Are you enjoying your evening?”

“I am...” Mahlon kept an eye out for the roving woman with mistletoe... She had wandered off but would be back, he was sure. “The party is bigger than I expected. I thought it would be a bunch of geologists and drinks.”

“I'd say it's a pretty good party.” The Elaysian lifted his hot chocolate to his lips. It had already lost some of its heat, but it was still good. When he brought it back down, he used the half empty cup as a pointing device, using it to sweep the room.

“An open guest list has given us quite the eclectic group.” Bringing his eyes back to the lieutenant, he added... “It's a fair representation of the station's population, I'd say.”

“Yeah.” Mahlon had also lost track of Ariana in the crowd as well. “Very fair representation...”

Lionin Favor wasn't exceptionally good at small talk but he could employ it from time to time. He chose to do so now. “What are your feelings about the decor?”

“Very nice.” Mahlon really didn't have anything in common with the lead scientist. He saw Ariana and started to move in her direction until he saw the leaves and berries moving just above the heads in the crowd... “You?”

“It's very nice.” Favor said, somewhat nonchalantly. “But I think I would shake it up a bit. Literally.” His eyebrows did a little dance as he thought about the snow globe this would turn into if the gravity were shut off. “I might even try it, if it gets boring later.” He pointed towards the mistletoe prowler working her way through the crowd.

“Great.” Mahlon wondered if the scientist could help with the woman bearing mistletoe. He took a step back. “Have you met Ariana?”

“Have you?!” Again the Elaysian was mirthful. Tis the season and all that. “She's in my department.”

Stupid. Of course they had met. Mahlon wanted to get Ariana on her own. “She's great.”

“Whose great?” asked Ariana returning with steaming dumpling on a platter offering them to Mahlon and Commander Favor.

“The Sphere is great..” Mahlon hoped the commander would play along.

A line of scientific inquiry made itself readily available and Lionin couldn't help himself. “Upon what empirical evidence have you based this conclusion, Lieutenant? Or are you still gathering data?”

Nope... “I've only been to the Sphere a few times. Um. I've taken Ariana to the Sphere twice. She tells me the Sphere is great.”

“Really?” asked Ariana holding forth the plate. She looked to the Commander, “Sometimes I wonder if he ever hears what I say,” she said playfully.

“Thanks.” Mahlon picked up a dumpling with his fingers.

“Careful, they are hot...” warned the young DFA Ensign.

Mahlon popped it into his mouth but it was just as steaming hot. Maybe it was better he couldn't form coherent words. He took a swig of his drink to cool his mouth down.

“Yeah, like that...” Ariana turned to the commander offering the plate of steamed dumplings. “Careful, They. Are. Hot.” she said slowly, smiling watching Mahlon.

Ariana gave a brief curtsy and took the plate to Kal and Husar...

“Steamed dumplings,” she said. “And they are still hot.” she added.

“Oh thanks!” Kal said eagerly accepting a dumpling he had not eaten this much actual food in years and though he kept telling himself that it was just to blend in, he knew fine well that he was enjoying it.

Husar for once was too mellow to make a comment about human food, instead she gave a brief bow of the head, “Why, how kind.” She took one, studied it before giving a cautious sniff.

“I'm glad you call came, Are you enjoying yourselves?” asked Ariana, she held forth the plate to Kal, who had already finished one dumpling, and offered him a second.

“Yeah we're having a great time.” Kal half-lied.... he was enjoying the food so it was sort of true but he felt so awkward, there were probably replicators with better conversational skills than Kal.

“Oh good,” said Ariana happily.

“I know I am enjoying myself.” Husar said dryly and waved an empty glass.

“Refills all around?” Oskar said and poured for Husar without waiting for a response. As far as the kid...well Oskar suspected he would probably do better sticking to the light stuff.

“Oh I'm good but thank you.” Kal said to Oskar. He had eaten and drank far more than he was used to all ready, his body wasn't used to this much solid food and so he was starting to feel sick.

“You should talk to Commander Favor. He is the science division head. He may be able to help you on your research,” Ariana told Kal. She held the plate forward to Husar again, who looked like she wanted more, considering how often she looked at the plate in the brief moments she had been here.

“That's a great idea!” Kal said thinking. He couldn't divulge the true purpose of his research to Favor of course... but he could let him know he needed nanites, and perhaps get permission from Starfleet to visit the cube! He grinned to himself, something of an evil grin. *I'll let him think I'm trying to make an assimilation antidote rather than a virus.* He thought. *It would be considered high priority research because it'd be a great weapon... really a great weapon for the Borg of course... but what he doesn't know won't hurt me.*

“Any event that combines food and drink is acceptable to Cardassians after all. And watching humans like that female -” Husar nodded to the rather inebriated female wandering around with mistletoe, “- make a fool of herself is delightful.”

Kal grinned at the comment. He was just pleased that the intoxicated women had found someone else to ... give her attentions to.

“She seems rather free, doesn't she,” said Ariana. “I'll send her your way so you can learn her secrets.” said Ariana excusing herself.

Husar laughed at the idea, “Now this will be interesting my young Kazon. I expect you will survive the experience.” She downed the drink and asked for more, determined to stay.

Kal shuddered slightly “I don't know about you but I think she seemed rather too free.” He said thinking about the women with the mistletoe.

“Exactly. And while such behavior is unCardassian and shameless...I will enjoy watching her throw herself in your direction. I would advise watching out for the mistletoe, I have heard there is some Terna custom involving it.” Husar pushed another drink in Kal's direction but to her disappointment he seemed reluctant.

“If you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to head back to my quarters... I feel a little sick.” He said. While he wasn't keen on leaving the party early, and he felt guilty leaving Husar when he had invited her... he really did feel sick. He had barely slept at all that day and he'd eaten so much more than his stomach was used to.

“What? But...but...” Husar blinked, trying to think of the rest of her sentence, “The night is young.”

“Goodnight, I'll see you in the morning at the shop, enjoy the rest of the party.” He smiled. Husar didn't look like someone lacking in confidence, and he'd only mess up her attempts to make contacts anyway.

“Fine.” Husar snorted, helped herself to a handful of nuts and barely noticed when her employee left. She was determined to finish her drink and then make it back to her quarters before the alcohol really started to hit her.

Kal made his way back to his quarters and just about collapsed into bed, it had been a long day.

Making her way around the fire, Ariana instead found Mahlon holding his drink... “So what did you finally decide on?” asked Ariana.

“What?” Mahlon.

“Your drink, what are you drinking?” asked the geo-physicist.

“Oh. Um.” Mahlon glanced around for the woman again. “I have a drink. Thank you.”

“Oh, Mmm.” she said rocking on her feet.

“You have one too.” Mahlon longed to be in a cockpit. He was not good at these social events. Maybe it was his training as a pilot but he always needed something in his hands. “Great party.”

“Were you serious about the picnic on the sphere?” asked Ariana. “It sounds nice,” she said smiling.

“I was.” Mahlon smiled back. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

“To...Tomorrow?” repeated Ariana startled. “Um, Rocking my dust collection....”

“Sorry?”

It was sudden, the request and Ariana had frozen. Trying to gather her self-confidence, Ariana said “Don't be sorry. My collection can wait another 100,000 years or so,” attempting another Geology joke. It felt flat, sort of like shale, so she just added. “Tomorrow would be nice.” Her excitement lifted her on her toes as she spoke to him.

“I'll sign out a shuttle.” said the pilot.

“Tomorrow...Lunch.” stammered Ariana. She had to give him something for the effort. She would provide lunch, he had specified a picnic hadn't he?

“Of course.” Mahlon had never prepared a picnic lunch. He'd have to get some advice on that one.

Ariana smiled, “Yeah, that'd be nice. She turned away, blushing. *Rocking her dust collection?!* She went for the geologists joke about dusting her rock collection and totally flubbed it when he looked at her that way.

Mahlon suddenly felt very warm. He had asked Ariana out for a third time and it was going to happen.

Chapter Ten

Location: Sentinel Station, Lieutenant Commander Favor's Quarters

Kal felt very sick the morning after the Christmas party. His stomach had been unable to handle the shock from refraining from his usual restrictive diet, as such it was well into the afternoon by the time he felt well enough to embark on his day's tasks, the first of which was to speak to Commander Favor, the head of the science department.

He had thought it best to take Ariana's advice and discuss his research (missing out a few ... details... of course) with Favor, perhaps he could ask him for permission to take his shuttle to the cube, he would do it anyway but it would be easier with Federation consent.

The Kazon rang the chime to the science officer's door and waited expectantly...

Lionin Favor came to the door fresh from a shower. His salt and pepper hair was wet but dry enough to begin curling. He wore a white terry robe with one half pulled halfway over the other. It was tied at the waist with a matching sash. He didn't seem at all uncomfortable answering the door in that state of dress. "Good morning... May, I help you?"

"Hello, may I come in?" Kal asked.

"May you...." Favor looked confused by the request. Who was this and why did they want to come into his quarters. "Oh...oh...sure. Please." He stepped to the side and swept his arm in the direction of his sofa.

"My name is Four of Six, I believe we met briefly at the party last night but I did not have the chance to talk to you... I was hoping I might discuss my research proposal with you and see if you would grant federation permission for something involved."

"Alright, slow down." Favor said. "The party, yes. I believe we did." Favor used the towel to further dry his hair... "Four of Six you said. That's an interesting name. Something I should know?"

"My research is in Borg nanoprobes.." he said truthfully "I have been reading Christina Jameson's report on the subject and am hoping to expand in that general area, she says that Borg nanites act like a virus and so I am looking to develop a vaccine." he lied.

It was half true, Kal was researching nanites, but he was looking to make an airborne nanoprobe virus... not a vaccine. His plan was to create an assimilation virus for the Borg, then they might consider him worthy!

Of course he could not tell Favor that but he did need to tell him that he wanted to work with nanites and Christina Jameson's research from Starbase Horzion popped up at just the perfect time - he could pretend that he was expanding on it.

Favor sat down across from the young Kazon man who seemed uncomfortable in this setting, but determined, nonetheless. "You are a very ambitious young man. It's not every day that someone says, 'Hey, I want to go spend my life investigating the Borg, so much so that I chose my name to reflect my interest.'" Favor's gaze seemed to bore into Four. "I will call you Four, if that's your wish, but the next step gets a little creepy for me."

"Creepy?" Kal asked, more surprised than offended, it was sometimes hard for him to remember how frightening the Borg were to the majority of people "Well at least you're honest." He said with a bit of a grin.

"I tell it like I see, it." The Elaysian responded. "If it hurts your feelings...well, I assure you that I didn't intend it. It was more of a self-statement than a you statement. Would you like a drink? I have juice." He pointed over his shoulder towards where the refrigerator stood in the kitchen area. I even have vodka to spice it up a bit. Have you ever heard of a screwdriver?"

"Well Four is fine then." he replied "And my feelings are not hurt, I realize it's a little... unusual. I would love some juice... maybe *just* juice though please, I drank way too much last night and I'm still feeling a little off." That was partly true, for a normal person he had drank very little but for someone who was used to nothing but nutrient juices and water he had eaten and drank a lot and he still felt slightly sick.

"Juice it is." Favor said getting up and moving toward the refrigerator. He selected 2 10 oz. tumblers from the cabinet on the right and then filled them 3/4 full with the juice before putting the lid back on the bottle and sticking it back inside.

Afterwards he returned to the chair he'd previously occupied and handed one of the glasses to Four.

Kal sat down, he still felt very awkward and uncomfortable, especially with Favor in his dressing gown, he felt like he must be imposing on his free time - a great first impression to give. "This is really nice, thank you." he said sipping his juice.

"I don't get many guests. But I try to be charming when I do get them." Favor smiled. "Now tell me a little more about your project."

“Yes... my project...” He paused “Well you see... I was hoping that I might get Federation permission to visit the...” He paused again feeling uncomfortable “To visit the cube, there's one very close, I picked it up on the deflector array.”

Lionin was sipping on his own juice, but nearly choked at hearing Four's request. He spat it back into his glass, coughing. His eyes watered slightly. He wiped the corner of his left eye with his right index finger. “You want to go TO a Borg cube.” He restated to confirm that he had it right. “That's in....that's unwise.”

“It wouldn't be at all dangerous for me.” He replied “I'm unworthy of assimilation.”

His tone when he said this gave away far more than it was meant to and he hoped that Favor would not pick up on it, every time he said that word, 'unworthy', he felt an immeasurable self-loathing.

It seemed so unfair, all of these people who didn't want assimilating, they were worthy, he did want it, more than anything and he was not!

Favor blinked. “Unworthy.” Time seemed to draw out for minutes as Lionin Favor scrutinized the mind behind the eyes of the Kazon. “I....I don't think that I can help you.” He said honestly. Further, he was already considering notifying Commander Mirel that there was someone on the station with an unhealthy Borg fetish. “I'll tell you what... Send me over some of the research that you've done so far and I'll make sure the science department goes over it and we'll talk again. Alright?”

Kal was disappointed but not surprised. Mostly he was annoyed with himself, he'd very clearly made Favor suspicious.

Why did you mention your designation? He thought to himself, he'd done so automatically. It took him a while to reply, he was thinking over what to do, he could not very well show the science department all of his research, he'd have to make it look like something else. After several minutes Kal finally replied.

“That is a shame.” He said “But I understand, I will be sure to send my research to you.” He was very clearly disappointed and irritable, but he made a conscious effort to be polite.

Chapter Eleven

Location: Sentinel Station, Kal's Quarters

Kal paced his room, he was annoyed with himself, actually he was annoyed in general. *Why did you tell him your designation? That was probably why he was so suspicious!* He thought irritably to himself.

He felt tired, nothing seemed to be going exactly to plan... or things were going too slowly, so long he'd waited... He had been on the Station for nearly a month and had made little to no actual progress with his research.

Admittedly his research had been slowed down by his work for Husar, although he considered his treasures worth it. He stared longingly at them now, they seemed so beautiful to his deranged mind.

He held the piece of head armour in hand, it was so unfair! That armour, it had probably belonged to some individual who had resisted, someone who did not even want the gift they had been given, it made him so annoyed, and so jealous. *Why? Why not me?*

He looked once again at the holimage of his family, he felt so desperate, so alone, oh just to not have to *feel!!*

He NEEDED a way to be considered worthy... anything! He was beginning to think that his plan to design a nano-virus could be a dead end, after-all the Borg had been trying that for years and had not succeeded, if a whole collective of minds could not manage it, it did not seem likely that he could. Maybe he could though...maybe... but... it wouldn't be his first dead end.

He'd been trying to achieve whatever it was the Borg considered worthy for nearly 10 years now, it felt so long. Ten years is an unmeasurable amount of time to someone who's every minute of life felt like an agonising eternity and so every new idea was approached negatively, with the thought that he'd only fail.

He sighed and shook his head, he needed inspiration. He decided finally that he would have a short 'holiday' and go into Romulan Space. The last massive planetary invasion by the Borg was on the Romulan home world, it would be dangerous... but Kal generally had an intimate relationship with danger, he had very little to live for and so he was afraid of nothing.

=^= Four to Husar. ^=

Surprised to be called Husar responded without thinking, ^= Husar here. ^=

=^=I'm going on a research expedition, would you mind if I had this weekend off? ^=

=^=But - argggh. ^= Husar gave an exasperated cry, ^=You realize there is an important match coming up and I simply have to have someone to handle the voles next week. This is very annoying. ^=

=^=I'll be back by Monday. ^= He promised. ^=I'll bring you back some Romulan Ale. ^= He added with a slight grin

=^=Romulan? Ha, if that is where you are heading better watch out...they are crafty people. ^= Husar shook her head at the idiocy of the young, ^=Try not to get yourself killed, it's too hard to find good help these days. ^=

=^=See you Monday then. ^=

Kal packed a few pairs of clothes and his treasured holoimage before heading to his shuttle, this was just what he needed, he decided, it would be a break from nanites and voles if nothing else

Chapter Twelve

Location: Sentinel Station, Shuttle Bay

“Going somewhere?” Seket had been on the docks for another purpose but had seen Kal from a distance. Now this was potentially useful.

Oh great Kal thought sarcastically as he saw the women approaching. He didn't like Seket, she was just *too* nice the last time he'd seen her and she kind of scared him. That and it still bugged him what she'd asked him to do, spy on Husar, it just didn't seem right and the worst part was... he was very tempted by Seket's offer.

“Just going away for the weekend.” Kal replied with deliberate vagueness “Nowhere special.”

“Oh nowhere special? Sounds interesting...mind if I walk with you?” Seket ignored his attempt to brush her off, “I have free time and like most of my kind I am a very curious Cardassian.”

Kal raised his eyebrow “I'm going on a research expedition, researching the Borg-Rihannsu war, I'll be going into Romulan Space, it could be very dangerous.” He said, hoping to put the Cardassian off following him.

“I know! Perhaps I should join you...get to know you a little better.” And try to find out leverage, “I am a scientist after all and do know something about research if that is what you are planning. I could be helpful I know.”

“Well I um...” Kal thought, trying to think of any fair reason for saying no, he could not think of such a reason.

“Plus I have a little gift for you in the spirit of the season. A human custom I know but I think you may be willing to enter into the spirit of it. After all rumor has it you had a very enjoyable time at a Christmas party recently...” Seket left it to Kal to speculate about who might have been telling tales (oh let him suspect Husar, she asked), “...and I know it is something you will like.” There she smiled her most winning smile.

Kal looked at the women dubiously, how had she found out that he'd gone to the Christmas party? He sighed internally, Husar must have told her, he felt that he would never understand them, they appeared to hate each-other and yet the sent one another gifts (and very clearly chatted as well!!!). “Yes.” He said a bit reluctantly “It was... interesting... what is this... gift?”

“Now would I tell you? The whole point is to open it and be surprised.” Seket smiled. A very calculated smile. “I can follow you to your shuttle so you can open it in private.” Her smile broadened a little, “Now come on...”

After he'd realized there was no getting rid of her Kal subsided as she followed him to the shuttle.

“You know... after Romulan space... I was thinking of doing a bit of sight-seeing in Borg space before coming back... thought I should let you know if you're joining me.” Kal said in a tone that suggested total calmness. That was partly true, he had considered a trip through Borg Space, but mostly he just said that in a last attempt to scare Seket of.

“Borg? Really? Romulans are one thing but the Borg...” Seket was surprised but then a Kazon scientist was weird enough and if he wanted to study weird things so be it. She did file it away under potentially interesting information of course, “I would avoid that area since Cardassians are prone to being assimilated. We are a superior species.”

“Well Kazons are not so prone to being assimilated.” Kal replied resentfully “Unworthy. I will be perfectly 'safe' in Borg space, they don't even seem to notice that I exist.”

“You are lucky they do not look twice at you. If one of us was taken -” Seket stopped, she nearly said too much. “Well anyone who knows too much would have to suicide. Information could not be passed on after all.”

Kal raised his eyebrow but said nothing, it almost felt like she was pouring salt in the wound.

Seket shook her head, “I will leave you to your research...oh and will leave you this gift. You may find it a useful distraction while traveling.”

“Thank you.” Said Kal in surprise, he looked at the PaDD, it was full of Cardassian novels, and what appeared to be information about various different species. A quick scan through the titles even indicated a story that may involve the Borg. Kal enjoyed reading, it was an effective form of escape from his miserable life. He smiled slightly at the women, feeling a little guilty “This is very kind of you.”

Seket bowed just a little, “It is the season of giving after all...and might I suggest (if you are unfamiliar with Cardassian literature of course) beginning with a classic novel *Meditations on a Crimson Shadow*. Then again if you enjoy a good mystery there are several *Enigma* tales.”

“Thank you again for the gift.” Kal said, putting the PaDD into his shuttle with the rest of his stuff “I'll bring you back some Romulan ale if you'd like?”

“Hah that would be a fine gift. I can see how inferior it is when compared with a good kanar.

“Well, goodbye then” The Kazon replied, boarding the shuttle and contacting the station for permission to take off, he was quickly away.

“Goodbye.” Seket bowed again. She was rather pleased with the way things had turned out: the PADD she had given Kal had something special. Whatever he read would be tracked and especially anything he found interesting...whatever he lingered on was useful. Seket was determined to find a weakness, something she could use against Husar. It was only a matter of time before she knew what would tempt Kal.

Chapter Thirteen

Location: Sentinel Station, Kal's Shuttle

Kal was sat at the front of his shuttle, occasionally checking the helm but it was set to auto-pilot. He was reading a novel from the gift Seket had given him and was thoroughly enjoying it because it did indeed include the Borg. Like most Cardassian novels, it included the Cardassians winning of course, and while that was disappointing to Kal, who had hoped for an ending with them all being assimilated, he still enjoyed the book. He lingered on the descriptions of the drones and the vessels, reading them over and over, just for the sheer pleasure of delving into his obsession, little did he know how much information he was providing Seket.

So far all was going to plan...Seket had been alerted to the PADD being activated by Kal of course so it was only a matter of time before a discrete package of data was dumped in her computer.

She flicked quickly through what was rather dull and repetitive - of course the repetitive epic was a classic of Cardassian literature she thought to herself with a smirk. Why the lad seemed to take dull and repetitive topics to the level of obsession...

Kal yawned, he considered stopping somewhere for the night, but that would have meant a detour and he hated the inefficiency of detours. Instead he went to a shelf and dug out a med-kit that he'd stolen on one of his various stowaways. After a short search he found what he hoped was a stimulant and inserted it into a hypospray and then injected himself.

Again he picked up his PaDD to see what else was on there, he decided on one of the mystery novels that Seket had suggested, Kal tended to like a good puzzle.

It was baffling to her why he seemed focused on one topic above all others. Then again the taste of sarrku in literature or anything else was baffling typically...what she had learned was that the Kazon focused on anything related to the Borg more than anything else. The information was potentially useful - well if she could find a way to exploit it. For all she knew his obsession was some Kazon thing (yeah no doubt the kid was trying to prove himself by wiping them out) and Seket made a note to do some more digging...before she went chasing after the wrong vole...

After several hours Kal grinned, Rihannsu space...now he just needed to find a way to get in without being caught by the Romulans.

He'd wanted to try and find a way onto one of their ships but he didn't want to be enslaved so he needed a way out as well. Once he was on a Romulan vessel his plan was to try and use their computer systems to access information they may not have shared to the general public about the war, it was a long shot but mostly he was out here for the thrill.

It is ironic, considering Kal's desires to be a drone, but he was a very free person. He was used to traveling the galaxy in solitude and used to danger. A part of him relished in danger and risk, he had little to live for and so he was willing to risk his life just for a relief from the monotony and the misery that his grief brought to his every waking moment.

Chapter Fourteen

Location: DFA Space

Kal had been hit by an asteroid, it had knocked out his sensors and he was basically flying blind. He'd completely missed the intended Romulan space and flown straight through to DFA space instead... He was starting to feel desperate because he didn't even know how to get back to the Station. He had sent out a distress call 3 days ago and no one had answered.

The distress signal appeared on Kamaia's comm-panel. "Lt. Desson, we are receiving a distress call. From a Federation runabout shuttle, NCC-2357."

Desson nodded to Kamaia. "Answer it, find out what's going on."

Kamaia switched the subspace channel from her panel to the bridge.

"Lt. Pania, Cromwell comms here. What is the nature of your distress?"

"Hello?! The Kazon said, the relief clear in his voice 'I'm... I'm uh... lost"

"Runabout pilot, please clarify." said Kamaia.

"Was hit by an asteroid about 3 days ago, this is an old ship and not very well designed. He thought for a minute about the particularly dodgy Ferengi who had sold it to him more than 10 years ago, it was always getting him into scrapes and yet he clung onto it, that shuttle was the only consistent thing Kal had had for the past 10 years, well that and his crazed obsession which by now felt like an old companion. The asteroid knocked out my deflector array and I've been flying blind..."

Kamaia looked to Lt. Desson for orders. "Sir?"

"Do we have a location on that subspace origin?" asked Desson.

"Aye, Sir," said Kamaia. "Relaying the coordinates to helm. Looks like around six hours to get there."

"Desson to Sesgaard."

"Sesgaard go ahead."

"We have a distress call, lost shuttle. Asteroid took out the navigational array. Permission to go and retrieve them?"

"How long?" asked the captain.

"12 hours, there and back." said Desson.

Carson paused. It really wasn't supposed to be his decision. "Check with Major Reynolds. If it's ok, go ahead."

=^= Aye Sir, ^= said Desson.

=^= It's just coming on night here, so I don;t expect any problems. Just let me know when Cromwell returns to orbit. ^=

=^= Aye sir, sweet dreams. ^=

=^= Yeah, Sesgaard out. ^=

=^= Desson to Reynolds. ^=

=^= Reynolds. ^= Michael replied.

=^= We just received a distress call from a lost shuttle. Lost it's navigational array from an asteroid. About 6 hours there. Permission to go and retrieve the lost pilot? ^=

=^= So minimum of 12 hours there and back, ^= Michael clarified. ^= Status of the away team? ^= He didn't like the idea of leaving the away team - with the captain - alone on the planet without their possible support for half a day.

=^= Aye sir. Captain Sesgaard says they are settling down for the evening so they expect it to be a quiet night. ^= said Desson.

So, the captain thought they'd be fine. ^= Go ahead. ^= Michael said. ^= Best possible speed so we can minimize time away. ^=

=^= Yes Sir, ^= said Desson. Michael could hear Desson saying "Set course, best possible speed..." even as the comms officer closed the channel.

=^= Cromwell to runabout, we expect to rendezvous with you in approximately six hours... ^= said Kamaia.

=^= That... that would be greatly appreciated... thank you. ^= Kal replied gratefully.

Chapter Fifteen

Location: DFA Cromwell B

Kal docked and was met by a young ensign, a girl of about 21, bubbling with eagerness and nerves, clearly fresh out of the academy, a great contrast to Kal's 'dead inside' persona.

"Hi, Im Ensign Hope Kit Taylor" The girl said smiling anxiously at the unusually pale Kazon, he looked malnourished she thought but she was in Ops not medical and she didn't know much about Kazons anyway.

"Four of Six" Kal said, reluctantly shaking the girl's hand, she was so energetic he thought she'd shake his arm off.

"That's a Borg designation." The girl sighed "You're not Borg are you...? One's more than enough!"

"No I'm not... wait what did you say? You've got one?"

"Afraid so." Kit said with a sigh, a sigh that indicated someone who had met Six of Twelve.

"Can I meet it?!" Kal said, breathless.

"I dunno..." Kit blushed, should she have told this weird visitor about Six at all "You'll uh... you'll have to check with... someone... let me take you to your quarters."

"Let me see it first... please... I uh... I'm a xenobiologist and the Borg are my specialty. I take it its dead?"

"No not dead... she talks WAY too much for something dead." Kit grinned "She calls herself 'Cromwell's drone' and she says we assimilated her, look I'll have to get permission but I'll take you down to see her once I know it okay alright?"

Location: DFA Cromwell B, Major Reynolds' Office

Kit rang the chime to the XO's office uncomfortably. She'd been here for precisely a day and already she felt like she'd made a mess, should she have told this strange visitor about their drone, she'd not known long herself.

Michael was pretty much settled into the XO's office now, with nearly all his things moved up from the Marine CO's office. This one was so much bigger. And he had viewports. As he caught himself staring out said viewport, he realized that might not be such a good thing. Fortunately, the door chime pulled him back. "Come."

Kit came into the room, followed by the Kazon who was trying to get a story straight in his head.

“Hello sir.” The young woman said “This is uh... Four of Six... the person we rescued from the shuttle. Apparently he's a xeno-something or other and he wants to see Six.”

Michael stood with their arrival, his eyes slowly narrowing at the woman's story spilled out. “He asked to see Six,” he said, just to clarify.

“Nice to make your acquaintance Major.” Kal said “I owe you a great deal of thanks, I'd still be floating about the quadrant without a clue if you hadn't come to rescue me...”

Michael hadn't seen the full report on the recent acquisition, so he wasn't fully up to speed on the man. “You want to see Six?” he clarified.

“Yes, I'm a xenobiologist and I specialize in the Borg, when Ensign Taylor here told me you had one on board I could not help but want to see it.” Kal explained.

Kit looked apologetically at the Major “I promised I'd ask you sir.” she said uncomfortably

“Six is not an exhibit in a menagerie,” Michael said flatly. “We don't just let curious onlookers parade by. What is your reason to wanting to see her?”

“Like I said, I'm a xenobiologist and the Borg are my area of research... it's not every day you get to see a live one. I just want to learn more about it... her... ask questions about the Collective, I don't intend any harm.” Kal replied.

Michael thought a moment before answering. “I'll need to run your request by both the captain and Six before giving a yes, so for now, it's a no,” he said.

“Your just trying to be awkward.” the Kazon replied irritably, losing himself a bit, the prospect was just more than he could handle, to actually be able to talk to one and not just have it throw him against a wall.

Again Kit gave Michael an apologetic look. She didn't like Kal, something about him made her feel uncomfortable, like he couldn't be trusted.

“Not trying to be difficult. I'd do the same if someone wanted to come and see you,” he told him.

Kal sighed reluctantly “Of course Major, my apologies, I got carried away. If you could let me know when you'd spoken to your Captain and the drone, I would greatly appreciate it.”

Michael nodded. “I'll be in touch,” he assured him.

“Thank you for your time.” Kal said politely “And thank you again for rescuing me”

He produced a forced smile. If the Captain said no then he would have to find another way of seeing that drone.

“Thank you sir, sorry for the inconvenience.” The young ensign said with her nervous smile.

Chapter Sixteen

Location: DFA Cromwell B, Cargo Bay Two

Kal was not at all happy when he left the Major's office, he could not stand waiting for approval and so he found out, through a series of subtle questions directed at civilians and cadets, where Six would be and when she would be free.

He decided that that was the only chance he had of speaking to her alone, this conversation had to be private and he figured that any approval he got would be conditional to someone coming with him. It took all day to find out when Six would be alone and where she slept but when he had he headed straight to the Cargo Bay.

Kal stood staring, frozen to the spot, when he came in and saw the drone, just about to step into her alcove... he recognized her.

The Borg are not that easy to distinguish between, and most people would have been unlikely to recognize Six specifically from a Borg encounter, but Six's face was ingrained in Kal's memory.

The trauma she (or more fairly the Collective) had caused him was not something he could ever forget. As he stood there, staring, his mind flashed to 10 years ago. This was the drone that had thrown him against the wall, that had discarded him as worthless, ignoring his futile pleading.

He could almost feel the cold, tight grip of her prosthesis at his neck as the memory flashed by, he could feel the hope and then the pain, the pain and dizziness as his head smashed against the wall...

Of course he knew that she was only a tool to the Collective, that she was not *really* responsible for his misery but at the moment all he could think of was the memory itself - what were the chances, of finding *THAT* particular drone, out of trillions. He tried uselessly to regain his composure but found he still could not move.

Six of Twelve had scanned the strange individual as he entered, Species 329. He did not belong to her Collective and so what was he doing here, and why was he just standing there? "State your purpose." She demanded.

Again he tried to shake himself and this time whispered words stammered out
"I have... I uh... "

Six raised her eyebrow but said nothing, why did strange people always drop by when it was time for her to sleep?

"Do you belong to Cromwell?" She asked simply.

“Uh... No... just uh... they rescued me.” Kal stammered, still too out-of-sorts to lie.

Finally, he was at least speaking Six of Twelve thought...

“If you do not belong to this collective then why are you here? We will not accept commands from you. Do you have permission to be here?”

“Yes.” Kal lied “Uh... Major.... Reynolds said I could see you, I'm interested in the Borg.”

Six raised her eyebrow “We will have to verify this with Major, we received no instructions regarding your presence, you could be a threat.”

=^=Six of Twelve to Major Reynolds.^=

Kal futility tried to stop the drone from tapping the comm-badge but she held him at arm's length.

=^=Reynolds, go ahead.^=

=^=There is an individual in Cargo Bay 2, Species 329, he says that he has permission to be here, we wish to verify this.^=

=^=I gave no one permission - which species is 329? Let me guess. Kazon?^=

=^=Yes, Kazon, we do not know his designation yet.^=

Michael muttered a curse under his breath. ^= Not only does he not have permission to be there, he was told specifically not to approach you. I will be there shortly, ^= he said, already on his way out of his quarters. MJ was sleeping, and the monitoring device was keeping an eye.

Six of Twelve glared at Kal, he had deceived her.

Kal looked anxiously at Six, this was NOT going as he had planned. He had not expected Six of Twelve to be loyal to Cromwell, he figured she was a prisoner. He had also thought that she would be easy to manipulate, indeed she would have been, had he been able to keep his composure long enough to try, but he had been in shock, he had not expected THAT drone.

By the time Michael arrived, he had picked up Kimberly Wells. “Was I not clear?” he asked Kal.

“I uh... you uh... I'm...” Kal stammered, looking anxiously at the floor.

He turned to Six. “Sorry he disturbed you. I know it's time for your regeneration. We will take this elsewhere.”

Six did not much understand apologies and so she said nothing in response, she would not have minded speaking to Kal had his presence been authorized but it was not and Six's main concern was that that made him a threat.

Threat or not though, it was now contained. She scanned curiously over the Kazon for a further second before returning to her alcove. It was strange, she thought she'd deactivated him 10 years ago...

“Goodnight Major, Goodnight Sir.” Six said, not bothering to address Kal, whom she deemed unworthy of her politeness, not because he was Species 329 but because he had disobeyed an order from her collective and then lied to her. As far as she was concerned he was therefore just as irrelevant, if not more so, now as he had been 10 years before.

Michael motioned for Kal to follow him out into the corridor. “Ms Wells, please take Kal into custody. A night in the brig should be ample opportunity for him to consider his actions.” he turned to Kal. “We will talk again in the morning.”

“Yes sir” Kal said downcast. He'd been in worse places than a brig, he'd slept in jeffery's tubes more than once and so although he was not exactly pleased, what really bothered him was that he had not been able to speak to the drone and so the trouble he was in had not even profited him, he muttered irritably to himself, he should have waited for consent.

“After you, sir,” Kimberly said to the man, indicating the way he should go..

“Don't hurt him any more than you have to,” Michael said as he walked away.

Kal followed Kimberly's directions silently, still looking at the floor. “I just wanted to talk to her.” he complained

Kimberly said nothing until they reached the brig. She did the required scan to ensure he had no weapons and to log his biosigns, and then she indicated the expected cell. It had been a while since she had had to use them.

Kal frowned and went into the cell without argument, glaring as the force-field lifted.

Kimberly waved pleasantly. “See you in the morning,” she said.

Chapter Seventeen

Location: DFA Cromwell B, Brig

At 0445, Crewman Wells noted her prisoner was awake. Few people sleep well in the brig, so his being up so early wasn't a surprise. The Major's call had come just moments before. She stepped out of the monitoring room and walked down the corridor into the secured section.

"The Major is already up and starting his day. He said he can either meet with you now, or at 0930, which is the first break in his schedule."

"Now would be good if he doesn't mind... please." A now much more subdued Kal replied. He'd been dreading this discussion and thought it best to get it over with.

"I'll let him know."

The room Wells had led him to looked to be a typical interrogation room: Featureless, with a table and some chairs. Nothing else. He had been there only a couple of minutes when the door slid open and Reynolds stepped inside, carrying a PaDD. "So, tell me about last night," Michael said, taking a seat across the table. He laid the PaDD, deactivated, on the table to his left, just out of Kal's reach.

Kal looked anxiously at the PaDD, wondering how much the Major already knew about him. He was generally intelligent and had been mostly careful enough to stay out of official records but he was also crazy and therefore impulsive, he'd made mistakes. "I went to see the drone." Kal replied reluctantly.

"In direct conflict with my previous order," he reminded Kal.

"Yes." The Kazon muttered quietly.

"Why?"

"I told you, I'm a xenobiologist and... do you know how rare this is?! You have a LIVE drone... I couldn't help myself."

Michael frowned. "Why?" he repeated. "And let's try the truth this time."

Kal sighed, he'd not told anyone the truth, well other than Husar but it was not even 5am, he'd barely slept and he was still very much shaken after seeing Six the previous night. He remained silent.

Michael sipped from his coffee cup, his eyes remaining on Kal. He said nothing. Just waited.

"I want to be assimilated okay!" He finally admitted, the silence getting to him "I just wanted her to tell me what it was like." He looked dejectedly up at Michael.

Kal was broken, he'd been broken for a long time. He was miserable with his constant failure, swallowed by loneliness and grief. It was that failure that had driven him to take this 'holiday' in the first place and so it had not really taken much for the truth to fall out, he'd only really needed someone to directly ask because really... he was lonely... he *wanted* to tell someone.

Michael slowly set his cup back on the table, his eyes never leaving Kal. This... was not what he expected. Revenge for a dead loved one, curiosity - intellectual or morbid, wanting to spout hateful epithets - all those things he would have shrugged off... But... he wanted to be assimilated?

"Before we go any further," he said, "you need to be apprised of your rights under the DFA constitution and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. You have the right to remain silent. Should you choose not to exercise that right, anything you say may well be used against you in criminal, civil, or military proceedings. You have the right to have counsel present before I ask any more questions. Do you prefer to invoke your right to silence?"

"No" Kal replied with surprising calm, he knew this day would come around eventually, it was only a matter of time.

"Do you wish to have counsel present?"

"No." Still the surreal calm swept over him, it was almost a relief.

"Do you have any questions about your rights?"

"I do not." Kal replied "I haven't really done anything, I mean sure, I disobeyed your order, but I did not actually say or do anything to the drone and the last time I checked wanting to be assimilated was not a crime"

"Do you still wish to speak with me?"

Kal shrugged "Is there anything you want me to say?"

"There are thousands of questions I would like to ask," Michael said flatly. "But the most important one is, are you out of your frakking mind?"

"Almost definitely." Kal replied, his voice deadly calm.

Michael held his silence for a long time, then sighed heavily. Was this some kind of game to this guy? "Let's go back to 'why'," he said.

"Why not?" He asked angrily, now lost in his crazed worship "You're so lucky you know, all of you! They consider you worthy of their perfection but you reject it. All I want, all I've wanted for the past 11 years and anyone else could have it easily and doesn't want it! WHY?! You tell *me* why! Maybe she can tell me why! Why am I not worthy of their attention?!"

Michael sat impassively through the man's tirade. He wanted to be assimilated. Because of reckless pride? Because it hurt his ego that he hadn't been considered worthy of assimilation? "There are a lot of dead and assimilated people who wish they wouldn't have been worthy of their attention," he said softly. "I would use my dying breath to ensure I didn't become assimilated. Why would you want to be Borg?"

"They don't feel." He said, the madness of his worship swapped suddenly by the overwhelming grief of remembering his loss, so much loss "And they never lose anyone, sure people die all the time but there never gone..."

Michael held his eyes for a long moment before closing his. But only for a moment. Of course, there was a back story. A horribly, ugly, gut wrenchingly tragic back story.

"Individuality's overrated anyway." Kal said irritably. It was not his fault for believing that, his life had not done much to show him otherwise, he was drawn to the collective, drawn to the idea of a vinculum that stopped him from feeling, drawn to the sense of belonging he'd been so cruelly denied by war, drawn to the harmony that would replace the madness constantly erupting in his mind and drawn most of all to the concept of never having to suffer another loss. "Let me speak to her!" He demanded and then relented with a desperate "Please"

Michael held his eyes for a long moment longer. "No," he said quietly. "Not now, at least. Maybe later. But before you speak with anyone else," he said, standing and taking both his PaDD and his coffee cup with him, "you need to speak with a doctor."

He left the room without another word.

Kal sighed but said nothing, he knew exactly what kind of doctor Michael had in mind. *If you'd just waited you would have been able to speak with the drone* He muttered irritably to himself, this was not the first time that his impulsiveness had landed him in trouble.

Michael stepped out of the interrogation room and into the observation room. Wells was in there, and watching the door as he stepped through. "I didn't imagine all that, did I?" he asked.

"I wish I could say you did, sir," she told him.

"Dammit," he muttered. He tapped his commbadge.

=^= Reynolds to Sickbay. ^=

=^= Doctor Clark, here. How can I help you? ^=

David led his past patient out the door.

=^= Can you break away doctor? If not, this can wait until later. ^=

"Just finished up, sir." He didn't know the voice of this particular officer yet, but he assumed he would soon.

"Meet me in security, please. Bring your medical kit, but no sharp objects..."

"Security? But--" David began, but he cut it off to a more formal, "Uh, yes, sir."

A security crewman showed Clark back to the observation room where Reynolds and Wells were still staring at Kal in the next room.

"Thank you for coming," Michael said.

Clark put down his bag which held a medical tricorder, a hypospray, and a rack of medicines for the spray. He also had brought his personal equipment, but that was hidden safely.

He pointed at the screen that showed them the man in the next room. "I need you to examine him."

"What seems to be the issue with this man?" The man in the next room seemed healthy.

"The primary question is, is he sane? I'm not sure if he is crazy, wants me to think he's crazy, or just... is seeing the world in a way many of us would think is crazy. But I need to know the difference. That's more your specialty than mine."

"Ah, you mistake me. I'm a doctor, not a psychiatrist. Although, technically, a psych--"

"As a physician, and you are much better qualified to judge his mental capacity than I am."

"Point taken. I'll see what I can dig up." He whipped out the med tricorder and passed it in front of the man.

With the distance, and all the monitoring equipment in the wall, the tricorder didn't read that far away. "Sorry," Wells said. "Too many electronics. You'll probably have to go into the room with him to use that."

"Dammit. Alright. I'll talk to the man..." He motioned for Michael to turn off the force field and entered the room.

"We'll be watching," Michael said. "Just in case. But I don't think he's going to be violent."

"Alright, Mr..." he addressed the distraught man in the brig.

"Four of..." Kal sighed "Kal, just Kal" the Kazon replied.

"Ah, Kal. What seems to ail you?"

“There's nothing wrong with me.” Kal protested “You all advertise individuality and yet, as soon as someone has a different opinion to yours, their crazy.” He complained.

“Please don't cast judgment on me until I know the whole story.”

“All I want right now is to see the drone, let me see her.” Kal replied unhappily.

He must have meant Six. “Did she harm you in any way? Do you need to settle a score? Because I will have anything she did brought up to the captain if you need.”

“I've already told your Major, I WANT TO BE ASSIMILATED!” He replied aggressively but he quickly subsided, even in his madness he did not have the energy at present to hold aggression for long, he returned to looking miserably down at the table. “Look, they don't feel and I don't want to.” He said simply “Please just let me see her, she can tell me why I'm unworthy, what I can do to improve.”

Clark's breath hitched. Separation anxiety could get bad in drones, as he understood, but this man (who was of the same fungus-haired species he noticed in the corridor earlier) was bordering on mania.

“Were you a former drone?” he asked Kal.

“If only.” Kal replied irritably “My species is unworthy of assimilation.”

“What happened to you then? Is she the source of your scars? Or someone else perhaps?” He was bordering on frustration. This was SO not his department...

Kal looked away, he'd not spoken to anyone about his family in more than 10 years and did not intend on doing so now “I have my reasons” He replied vaguely.

“Well eventually you will have to get mentally evaluated or confined to quarters. I don't want to take this to Dr Lovett,” in fact he'd rather handle as much as he could from now on, “but I will involve the rest of the staff if need be.”

“No don't do that!” Kal exclaimed, too many people were already involved and this could go on his record if he wasn't careful, if it hadn't already, and OH1 might find out and that could seriously mess up his research. He sighed.

“Technically that drone did cause the scar, but I didn't realize that until I actually saw her and it was not really her doing, it was the Collective's.” He took a deep breath “I wanted to see the drone because I want her to tell me what I need to do for the Borg to consider me worthy of assimilation.”

A species the Borg wouldn't assimilate? Clark had never heard of that. “And what would you be able to tell her?”

“I'd ask her what I needed to do, she'd know, she was in their mind, she'd know what they wanted, what they considered worthy.”

David internalized this.

“I lost everyone” He said slowly “Everyone I ever cared about... if I was assimilated I'd never lose anyone again and I'd not have to feel anymore” *And I'd never be alone*, he thought but did not say.

The long denied tears were now beginning to well in Kal's eyes as he thought of his family, he clutched tightly at the holodisk in his pocket containing their photograph and he took another deep breath.

“I guess you want to hear the tragic backstory?” He asked sarcastically “Well here it is; My mother, father and my little brother were all killed in a civil war when I was 11 years old, I SAW them, I saw their bodies, I saw...” He trailed off, now crying and shaking at the memory.

“I am so sorry.” David knelt by Kal and out a hand on his shoulder. “Perhaps you will see them again in your next life?”

“Not religious.” He sighed, not scornfully, he wished in a way that he could be “Much as it would be nice to think I'd see them again... I kind of think that once you're dead that's it.”

Kal had never been religious and by now he did not have much faith left in anything at all. The closest he came to faith was his worship of the Borg and they rejected him.

David sat back in silence and sadness. “I can't imagine.”

There was a long silence while Kal tried to regain his composure, another deep breath and he continued

“It was just me, Kam and little Ki after that” Again he wanted to cry, it hurt so much to say those names, they had not left his mouth in nearly 11 years “And then when I was 16 they were killed to... they left and I was alone.” Kal looked angrily at the doctor “So there you go, there it is, now can I please see the Borg drone!” he demanded

“Oh, and I suppose you want me to help you commit suicide too.” He angrily retorted.

“It's not suicide, I'd still be alive, let me talk to the drone!!” He glared at the doctor “I'm an individual with free choice aren't I? Pretty sure it's my problem if I ...” he began to rant madly again but was cut off.

“No! Of course not. Assimilation is a last resort. LAST!” he added when he saw Kal try to reply. “I know you're hurting. Decisions we make in grief can be decisions we come to regret. Grief does horrible things to a mind; believe me, I know... Worst of all, you wouldn't even know what you're regretting.”

“Oh but that's the best part not the worst.” Kal replied “I wouldn't know so I couldn't care and it's not like there's anyone to miss me so what's the problem?”

“You would have everyone onboard this ship missing a friend and crewmember.”

“I've got one person on the Sentinel Station who *might* be considered a friend and even she's just using me.” Kal said, thinking of Husar “Pretty sure she wouldn't miss me much, I keep to myself. If you don't get close to people then you can't lose them.” He sighed “Just let me talk to her please.” The anger in his voice had now been replaced with desperation.

“And what makes you think she won't just lift you up and ragdoll you again?” He fumed.

“Worth the risk.” Kal shrugged, after that all he would say was 'let me see her'.

Clark sighed. “Alright. I'll see if I can set you two up. But I come along, and at any sign of trouble, I pull the plug.” With that, Clark left the brig.

Chapter Eighteen

Location: DFA Cromwell B, Brig

It had been nearly two days since Kal had been put into the brig, he was more subdued this morning than he had been yesterday, tired of arguing, tired in general.

“Can you ask if I can speak to Major Reynolds at his next convenience please?” He asked the woman who was standing guard outside his cell.

“I will pass along your request,” she told him.

An hour later, Major Reynolds appeared outside the forcefield. ‘You asked to see me?’

Kal took a deep breath when he saw the Major appear outside his cell. “Good morning.”

“Is it?” Michael asked.

“Not particularly” the Kazon replied with a hint of aggression, his mornings were never ‘good’ and the past two had been anything but, he shoved down his anger as best he could though, he was too tired to be really angry now and he knew he’d catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, he took another breath “Sorry, thank you.”.

Michael simply waited.

“Will you please let me talk to the drone?” He asked (for the 20th time in 48 hours), before the Major could produce the expected no Kal continued to talk “Can't I talk to her from here, through the force field, or over comms?” He requested “Then even if I did ask her to assimilate me she couldn't, please Major Reynolds, I NEED to speak to her. That psychiatrist, Dr Clark, he said he'd set up a meeting... please... it's not like I'd be alone with her.” He'd given up all hope on a private conversation now.

“The ‘drone’ goes by Six of Twelve,” Michael said. “And while I'm still not sure this is a good idea, I will speak with her about it. If she is willing, then she can come here, but the forcefield will remain in place between you.”

Kal paused for a second, as if considering what to say.

“That's my best offer,” he told him simply.

“Thank you! That would be great!” He answered very quickly, not wanting to miss his chance, he just hoped Six of Twelve would agree to speak to him.

Kal stood up quickly as he heard the Major and Six coming towards his cell, once they arrived he just stood and stared. She looked different to the last time he had

seen her, the DFA symbol on the front of her armour was unmissable and he noticed the flags on her shoulders and the code and serial number underneath her comm badge.

“We were informed that you wish to speak with us.” Six of Twelve said monotonically “We did expect that you had something to say, if you just wanted to look at us we could have sent you a holoimage.”

Michael backed off a few paces, out of their immediate vicinity but close enough to intervene if he needed to...

Kal shook his head, snapping out of his daze and opened his mouth to speak.

“I want to be assimilated.” He said, nervously glancing at the Major.

“We know...” Six replied “We cannot comply with this request. We will not assimilate you or anyone else without command from our collective, and no one in this collective is likely to give such a command. If we assimilated you, you would be a threat to our collective. We deactivate threats, we do not create them.”

Kal sighed heavily and stared again at the drone.

“You say you need commands.... commands from who? You’re severed aren't you?” he asked.

“We are severed from the Borg, we are Cromwell's drone now.” She pointed to the label underneath her comm-badge “We take commands from this collective.” Six said “And we will not allow it to come to harm.” She added in a tone that suggested a warning.

Michael had noticed the flags and the serial number. He saw it as a big step for Six.

Kal sighed again, that explained why she was loyal to them, she wasn't a prisoner, she was either here voluntarily or they'd reprogrammed her somehow and he doubted the latter, Borg code was not at all easy to work with - he knew.

She didn't seem adverse to the idea of assimilating him for personal reasons though, she just seemed worried he'd damage her 'collective'.

He thought, very careful about what he said next, glancing nervously at the Major every second, this might be his only chance and he didn't want to mess it up.

“Perhaps I should introduce myself...” He said “My name is Four of Six...”

“Our designation is Six of Twelve” Six said “Why have you got a Borg designation when you are not Borg?”

“Because I want to be” Kal said grumpily “My real name is Kal but I'd prefer you didn't use it.”

Michael watched, silently.

“Now that you know that we cannot assimilate you, is there anything else you require or should we leave?” Six asked.

It did not seem at all strange to Six that someone would want assimilating and so she did not comment on it. It was unusual for individuals, most of them objected voluminously to assimilation, but Six could easily understand why he would want to be Borg and individuals tended to want different things so it was not particularly odd to her.

“Yes.” Kal said with forced calm “I want you to tell me why... why do the Borg consider me unworthy?”

Six shook her head “The Borg do not consider *you* unworthy, they consider your species unworthy, you, as an individual, are irrelevant.”

Kal glared “Why are Kazons unworthy?!” He demanded

That was something that Michael, too, was curious about.

“Species 329 are unworthy of assimilation because you have nothing the Borg want. Your constant self-destruction has led to a society that is very much delayed technologically, and biologically you have nothing they do not already have. Of course you could serve as extra drones but you lack harmony to too great an extent, the Borg believe that assimilating Species 329 would distract from their perfection.” Six of Twelve explained. She explained this very mechanically, statement of fact, she had no idea that she was hurting Kal.

The blow hit Kal badly, he was speechless. He just kept staring at Six, at the Major and at the floor. 'Distract from their perfection'... he would never be worthy then?

That news seemed to crush the Kazon. Michael had warned him he might not want to hear what Six had to say.

“Is there... is there anything at all that I could do to prove my worth to them?” He asked between tears, desperate and exhausted.

“Unlikely.” Six said coldly, although some slight sympathy was creeping into her now, she noticed that Kal was ‘leaking’ “Not impossible.... but we cannot tell you what the Borg want, because if we do you might give it to them and that might threaten Cromwell.”

Kal did not speak for several minutes. When he did he looked pleadingly at Six of Twelve, he spoke to Michael though, she had declared that she was under his control and so the request needed to go to him.

“Can you not just tell her to give me some nanites and let me assimilate myself, I'll be far away from Cromwell.” He pleaded.

“We suggest against this.” Six said quickly “We will comply if you wish but even this plan would present a threat because he would bring the knowledge of Six of Twelve's existence back to the Borg and it is possible they might come to find us.”

“I won't authorize anything that might benefit the Borg Collective in any way,” Michael said quietly. Kal glared at Six and Michael, it was so unfair.

“Why do you want to be assimilated Four of Six?” Six of Twelve asked Kal “If it is because you wish to be a drone then why not just be a drone for another collective?”

Kal blinked a few times, not understanding what she meant. Not too surprising, few people ever understood much of what Six meant.

“I'm not aware of any other collectives with drones.” Kal said sarcastically

Six raised her eyebrow “You are speaking to a drone within a collective.”

Kal looked at the Major “What does she mean?” he asked

Michael's eyes remained on the Kazon. “I thought she was clear,” he said. “She has chosen to belong to the Delta Freedom Alliance.”

Six sighed and explained her unusual life-style for the umpteenth time...

After she had finished Kal looked at her “I don't think that's exactly what I want.” he said dryly “YOU are a piece of equipment”

“And what do you think you would be if you were assimilated by the Borg?” Six asked

Kal shook his head “I don't care what I'd be, I only care that I wouldn't be able to feel anything...”

“Deactivation has the same effect.” Six commented tonelessly.

“Yeah maybe... but I'm too scared for.... And uh... and anyway... I want the perfection and the... the escape from loneliness, surely you must understand that.”

“We do.” Six agreed “But the Borg are not perfect.” It was weird to say that, six months ago she could not have imagined *ever* saying that “Individual collectives are not perfect either, we are all trying to reach our perfection and there is no guaranty that the Borg will get there first... at least with a collective of individuals you are not forcing others away from their chosen existence.”

“I LOST EVERYTHING!” Kal just about shouted “I lost my whole family.” The tears were coming back and he was holding back the psychosis.

“If you were assimilated you would cause other individuals to lose their families.” Six said simply.

Kal subsided. He was a very selfish person and had never even considered what he'd be doing to other people. He'd never considered that he could be leaving children without their mothers and fathers, he had never considered that being assimilated might mean causing others the kind of pain he had had to live with...

He sobbed “I'm so alone Six of Twelve, I just want it too end.”

Michael empathized with the man. He really did. But he seemed to have no idea what he was asking.

Six felt genuine empathy now, loneliness was a companion of hers.

“We know.” She said “But you do not have to be. When we were severed we thought that we would be lonely forever... we still sometimes miss the voices of the Borg but we are no longer lonely because we found a new collective, you must do the same.”

“But they could die.” Kal said, now sobbing violently

“So could any of us,” Michael said gently. “Hiding away is one way to deal with the pain... Trying to make the universe a better place is another. Maybe you just need to re-examine your choices.”

Kal looked at the Major through bloodshot eyes, still crying but less, mostly because he was too exhausted to go on. He noticed something in his voice, it was something he had not heard before, more than sympathy, understanding.

He wasn't sure what Michael had gone through, but something in his words and his voice suggested that he had suffered a great deal of pain as well.

“What could I possibly even do that would be of any use to anyone?” Kal asked miserably.

He did not have a very high opinion of himself. His sister and younger brother died on his 16th birthday, during his Naming Ceremony, and so he had never taken his warrior challenge, never received his adult name by Kazon standards he was nothing and it was part of why he had taken the Borg designation, he loathed his name because it made him feel worthless. And then the Borg had rejected him, by their standards he was irrelevant, and he worshiped them, honestly believed they were perfect, so that rejection had impacted his confidence all the more, he really did feel unworthy and generally undeserving.

“I am willing to bet you have something to offer,” Michael said. “Something that will make your chosen collective better, by your having chosen it.”

Kal shook his head "Doubtful" he said quietly, more to himself than to Michael and Six "The Borg don't want me, why would anyone else?"

"The Borg do not want Species 329 because they are their lack of harmony has led to a lack of development in their society." Six explained "But individuals are all different, you and your society are not the same things. Individuals make different choices and think different things so is no reason why you cannot be of use to another collective, even if the Borg consider your species unworthy."

"There are Kazons who have joined the DFA," Michael said. "It takes choosing things beyond what Kazons typically choose. But... it seems you're already well on your way to that."

Kal looked unsure, he'd spent his entire adult life trying to prove his worth to the Borg but if what Six said was right, if they thought Kazons 'distracted' from their perfection then that would be a fruitless endeavor. He then thought about what Michael said, a way to deal with the pain is by making the universe a better place, could he make the universe a better place?

"I don't know how." He said, to Michael rather than to Six, but Six, being Six, interrupted.

"We can show you how to be a good drone." She offered "And then it will be like belonging to the Borg but you will hurt no one, and we will ask Sel'ra to show you how to control your emotions so that you do not leak and shout so much."

Kal gave the Major a very dubious look. Six's lifestyle did not sound at all like something he wanted to try, he thought it sounded incredibly monotonous, and pointless as well if he still had to feel... but it was arguably the closest thing to what he'd been asking for and it was also the first offer he'd been given.

"Uh... I don't know... I don't think that Major Reynolds will want me wandering about the ship... and...uh..."

Michael shrugged. "We can discuss some liberalization of your movements," Michael said. "Classified and critical sections of the ship would still be off limits to you - but they're off limits to a number of folks aboard. We could find things for you to do. Provided you're willing to behave and honor the rules."

"That... that'd be great." Kal replied sheepishly.

He felt a dazed and very tired. He didn't have any plans at the minute, or really any idea what to do with his life so he might as well stay with Cromwell for now, at least until his shuttle was working.

He wondered about going back to OH1 but his whole reason for being there, his secret assimilation virus research, seemed a lot less appealing now. He did at least have something to go back to though, he had Husar.

He was too tired to think about it now though, he had an entire purpose to find and the Major and Six did seem to be offering to help with that.

He looked uneasily at Six... why was she smiling at him? That was enough to make anyone feel uncomfortable.

“Well, let's start with confining you to quarters and public areas only. And you must wear your comm-badge at all times. Taking it off would be seen as an offense,” he said.

“Yes sir.” Kal replied tiredly, drying his eyes “I won't take it off.”

“We suggest that we watch him during the day and that he is locked in his quarters at night.” Six of Twelve offered “If he is a threat then we could hold him in our prothesis and call you for instructions?”

She didn't trust Kal, she felt sorry for him, she even wanted to help him, but she knew what the call for Borg perfection was like and she was still worried he might threaten her collective. It occurred to Six rather suddenly, and for the first time, that that must have been how they had felt when the brought her on board.

“While he is in our presence we will help him to adapt.”

“If you're willing to accept that responsibility, then I think it sounds like a plan,” Michael said. “If you can't watch him for a period of time, he needs to be in his quarters. For now. Good behavior will be rewarded,” Michael said. “And who knows, maybe you'll think of a place for yourself in the grand scheme of things.”

“We will comply,” Six said. She was only too glad to be watching Kal, she would make sure he did not harm her collective.

Kal looked tiredly between Six and the Major and finally sighed “I suppose I had better comply as well then” he promised dejectedly, and with a hint of sarcasm at the word 'comply'. He yawned, he was physically and emotionally exhausted.

That sounded promising, Six thought, not noticing any of Kal's emotions. He was not crying anymore and by Six's logic that meant he was not sad... he did look like he needed to regenerate though.

Chapter Nineteen

Location: DFA Cromwell B, Ten Forward

Kal had been locked in his quarters since his release from the brig the previous night, a thing that had not bothered him because he had been asleep.

He had slept for almost 12 hours straight and only woke up when he did because someone was pressing the chime on the door. He checked the chronometer, it was 8:45am.

He did not need to check who it was, she'd been very clear about when she would arrive and she was exactly on time. He put his dressing gown on and went to the door.

"Good morning Six." He yawned, rubbing his eyes, they were still bloodshot from the amount of crying he had done the previous night, when he was in the brig and then when he had cried himself to sleep.

"Good morning." Six replied monotonically "Come with us."

"What now?" Kal asked "I need to get dressed"

Six glared, two minutes he had been her subunit and he was already impacting her efficiency. Why would that dressing gown he was wearing not do? Individuals were very particular about their clothes. "Be efficient," she said "we must be at Ten Forward for 9am."

She had specifically left Brinn's 5 minutes early in order to collect Kal and she had expected him to be ready, *she* had been up since 4am.

"Uh yeah... sorry" Kal stammered "I'll be two minutes"

Kal was generally quite efficient, it was a quality he had mimicked for a long time due to his obsession with the Borg, he returned to Six in 5 minutes, having showered and dressed, he was holding a nutrient drink.

"You were 5 minutes and 24 seconds." Six of Twelve chastised, he had said he would be two "Follow us."

Kal followed Six quietly, he did not know what to say, he did not know what he was doing or why, he barely knew who he was, he had to find some new sense of purpose and Six's unusual offer was the first he had been given.

"When we arrive at Ten Forward you will ask DW123 for commands." She explained

“Do not ask us for commands because we will only refer you to one of our command sources. Comply with DW123 and be efficient.”

Six felt a little bit out of her depth, she could not even advise herself and so how was she supposed to look after this... individual? Cuddles and her ficus were easy subunits, they did not need instructions, but Kal would and she could not give them, the best she could do was teach him her own subroutines and refer him to her command sources for anything else.

Kal quietly thought that, for someone so compliant, Six was very demanding but he said nothing, there wouldn't be much point, he'd tried talking to her about her thoughts and quickly found that it was like talking to a machine, which made sense given that that was what she claimed to be, all he received was a list of people who 'think for us'. He sighed, he was still tired in spite of having slept for so long, he actually had a severe vitamin deficiency which probably did not help much with his mood, and he felt that today was destined to be a long day.

Covaar stepped into Ten Forward. It had been some time since he had enjoyed a meal in the common area, and he figured that tonight was just as good as any other to give it another go... He made his way over to one of the empty tables with a view out one of the windows. There was an interesting view of Demeter, and he really could appreciate that.

One of the servers came over and took his order, which was for a few slices of ham pizza. It was something he had learned to love when he was at the Academy. It was a bit of an addiction now.

He lifted up his PADD and started to read a book he had started while traveling to the Cromwell. So far, it was a pretty good read.

Kal had been watching Six for most of the day and attempting to help her with her jobs. Six found his 'help' was usually more of a hindrance. He was too tired and ill to perform efficiently and he insisted on asking her what to do, a waste of both their time since her answer was always “Ask DW123”. When Six noticed Covaar come in she came up to him, they had yet to meet.

“Would you like anything to drink?” Six asked

Covaar glanced from his book, his eyes widening in surprise. He had heard that there was a Borg drone on board, but he had yet to meet her. For a few seconds, he was speechless, but he got over it. “Uh ... I ... uh how about a chamomile tea?”

He watched her walk off, and shivers ran through his shoulders. The last time he had a lot of interaction with a Borg, it all started with a hand, and the Cromwell was almost assimilated. He was not sure he was ready to socialize with a drone.

“What is your designation?” Six asked when she returned with the drink, Kal still standing grumpily behind her doing nothing of any use.

“I ... uh I am Covaar ... Ensign Tryutu.”

“What is your function?”

Covaar considered the question for a moment, not really sure what she meant, but then he realized she was asking about his assignment on the ship. “I am a xenobiologist.”

Six smiled, Covaar was a scientist and he was probably good at it too, all the individuals she'd met on Cromwell were good at their functions.

“Will you watch our sub-unit while we work please?” She asked him “He belongs to species 329 as well, he is looking for a collective and a function that is outside what is usual for your culture... Six of Twelve does not know how to help him adapt... he is a useless drone.” She glared at Kal as she said that, he'd done nothing but get in her way all day.

It was a shame really, Kal would usually have impressed Six but he was too ill to be much good at anything today. The stress of the past few days combined with his mal-nourishment had left him very unwell, Six had not noticed or she would have taken him to sickbay.

Covaar looked at Kal with surprise. He was not really sure what a sub-unit was, but it seemed to imply some sort of pet or underling, but that seemed like a wrong assumption since it was another Kazon... Since his own relationship with his people was not really great, Covaar assumed this was not going to go well...

“Hello, I didn't know there were other Kazon's on board.” he said to Kal. He studied Kal, and the new arrival did not seem to be in the best condition.

Kal looked nervously at Six and then back at Covaar. Kal's relationship with their society was not great either. He blamed their civil wars for his family's deaths and resented them for being the cause of his unworthiness.

“Um... hello.” Kal said “I'm Four of Six... it's nice to meet you... I... I've not been here long, Cromwell rescued me.”

“Would you like to have a seat and join me?”

Again Kal looked at Six, this time as if asking for permission. His expression was lost on her but his inactivity was not.

“Comply.” She said simply.

“Um... thank you.” Kal said, reluctantly 'complying'. The reluctance quickly dropped away when he actually sat down though - he was exhausted.

Six watched to make sure Kal had sat down and then turned to Covaar.

“Thank you, we will return for him in 30 minutes when our function here ends.” Six of Twelve said “Please call for us if he decides to be a threat and we will detain him and call Major.”

She left abruptly, not bothering to explain why Kal might pose any sort of threat... not that he did, or even could, in his current state.

Covaar had glanced back and forth between Six and Kal, a little confused. He was not sure what was going on. Was Kal training to be a Borg ... and could someone actually do that? Why would anyone want to? Or was it some sort of unique sexual thing between the two of them that was spilling over into the public arena?

Either way, the scientist was not going to allow the situation make him uncomfortable. “What does Six mean when she calls you a subunit?”

Kal looked sleepily up at Covaar and yawned.

“Subunit?” He thought for a moment, Six had been referring to her him as her 'subunit' all day “I'm not totally sure to be honest but she's been calling me that since she agreed to watch me last night.... she calls her toy that too, and her ficus.” he laughed a bit dejectedly “I think I'm Six of Twelve's plant.” He said sarcastically but with a hint of embarrassment.

He actually had no idea what she meant by the term, he'd learn that later. 'A part of us, like our implants' she would say.

In part, Covaar was at a loss for words. It seemed like Six was working on building her own little collective on board without using assimilation. He was not sure how he felt about that, but it was a lot better than her using assimilation. “It does seem like she is making the ship her home.”

Again Kal yawned and then tried to shake himself, he didn't want to be impolite, he actually really appreciated Covaar's offer to sit down.

It had been a very long day and he was tired, sitting down with Covaar had been the first time he'd sat down at all today. Six naturally assumed that just because she could work constantly without break then he could too.

“You said you were a Xenobiologist right?” Kal asked.

Covaar nodded. “Yeah.”

“Me too, although I mostly specialise in the Borg... that's uh... how I got myself arrested and why I'm under Six's guard at the moment. I was so eager to see her that I ignored Major Reynolds' order to wait.”

Kal didn't tell Covaar the true reason he hadn't waited and the true reason Michael had him under watch, the fact that he wanted to be assimilated.

Kal had not been verbose, but there were so many questions that came out of the statement: How did a Borg specialist get drawn into living out a mini-collective? What had Kal done that he would be placed in this situation? Covaar couldn't believe that Reynolds would use this type of a situation to sanction Kal for being over anxious.

Covaar was also becoming more concerned about how ill Kal appeared.

"Has being supervised by Six prevented you from getting proper sleep? Is it a too much for you?"

Kal laughed a bit "Well I certainly got what I wished for, I see plenty of Six now." *More than I'd like* he thought but didn't say "It's definitely something for my research though... being her... charge." He made a point not to say 'subunit' but 'charge' was bad enough, he did not at all like being dependant on others "You know she doesn't sit down or eat or drink or anything.. She just receives command after command, if it wasn't for the DFA marks on her armour... and the fact that she hasn't assimilated anyone... I... well she's no different to the drones I've seen in the Collective... except she talks more... a lot more" He groaned "and asks a lot of questions."

Six appeared at that very moment and gave Covaar his tea but she said nothing.

Covaar accepted the mug of tea. "Thank you," he added in order to be courteous.

"So what's your area, do you have a specialty?" Kal asked. He actually liked Covaar, he didn't seem like the majority of aggressive Kazons he remembered from his childhood, Covaar was the first of his own species Kal had talked to since leaving.

Kal was not the only one to be pleasantly surprised by this experience of interacting with another Kazon. "I am a xenobiologist. In a way, it is not all that different from what you do, but instead of focusing on a singular group, I research lower species from just about anywhere. That also provides insight to the thigh species from the same planets or habitats."

Kal listened with interest, he almost wished Husar was here to see, she'd have probably gone into shock at meeting another intelligent Kazon, and one who wasn't crazy! Listening to Covaar talk actually restored a little bit of faith in him, if only for a second. Why could there not be more like him? If there were, then his society might have been considered worthy or... or... he might not want assimilating in the first place, he might still have a family.

"What got you so interested in the Borg?" asked Covaar as he took a sip of his tea.

Kal did not want to answer that truthfully, did not want to say what it was that made him so fascinated with the Borg. He did not want to admit his desire to be assimilated, his desire not to feel the loneliness and grief anymore. He shook his head and decided on a small lie, there was some truth in it after all.

“Well... you said you study a number of different species, that was my initial desire too, that's what drew me to the Borg, they've assimilated trillions of people from probably millions of civilizations.” He frowned, trillions of people and they wouldn't have him “Once I'd started to look into them I found their whole... race... fascinating.” The next part was true, he was caught up now, talking about his passion “Imagine what it must be like, to be a part of a hive mind, to have the knowledge of trillions... and the automatic sense of purpose, the aspiration of perfection, oh if only..” He stopped himself and looked awkward, he'd nearly said something he shouldn't.

It was no real secret anymore of course, the Major knew, Six knew, but the moment he mentioned his desire to be assimilated Covaar would think that (or know that) he was crazy and Kal liked Covaar, he'd rather have him think he was sane, at least for as long as possible.

“How did you end up on this end of the Quadrant? Our people are a few years distant?”

Again Kal frowned “I left Gamma V when I was 16” He admitted “After I lost my sister and younger brother... civil wars.” He looked at Covaar and wondered if he might understand, anyone who was raised in the Kazon system had likely lost friends or family, perhaps not their whole family as Kal had but it was a war-zone, an almost constant war-zone.

Covaar nodded. He could definitely understand. For most of his people, their childhoods were periods of loss. Actually, that wasn't all that different for those of any age.

“I was out here headed to Rihannsu space.” Kal said truthfully “Hoping to learn about the Borg invasion of Romulus... I live on the Sentinel Station, Outpost Hope One... I'm conducting research on Borg nanites there.” He didn't explain that his research was generating an assimilation virus.

It was an interesting area of research to explore. “I am sure living and working at Outpost Hope One is quite interesting.” Covaar had heard some really interesting stories, and he was pretty sure he would not have felt welcome there. “Though your research on nanites must be even more interesting.”

“What about you?” Kal asked “You don't hear of many Kazon DFA officers, what brought you out of the system?”

The most immediate response was a wrench in the gut, but Covaar was going to be fair. Kal had shared and so would he.

“In some ways, our stories are not all that different. You mentioned our people and the constant fighting. I couldn't stand how we were basically the hyenas of the Quadrant. I couldn't live among people who were constantly looking for the downtrodden and take advantage of them. I couldn't be like the rest of my family or our clan. My father despised me and said I was weak for wanting something else ... so I ran away.”

Kal felt a great deal of empathy for why Covaar had left, thinking back he realized that, if only his father had had the sense to take them away, the rest of his family might still be alive. Kal was only 10 when his parents died but even so, he remembered his father well and he had been much the same, the sort of person who saw a desire for peace as a weakness... and yet... Kal would have done anything to have him and his mother back and his siblings back.

“It's not an easy society to get away from.” Kal said sympathetically, he had escaped by stowing away on a Federation vessel and then seeking asylum which he was then granted “You are lucky to have found somewhere you can be accepted.” Kal had to hold back tears when he said that, he had yet to find such a place, his own doing really, he had not found a home because he was too afraid of losing it.

Covaar took a sip of his tea to calm his frayed nerves. In a way, he still suffered from PTSD when looking back on his past. “I was fortunate and found a way to get into the Academy. Even while not being accepted by my classmates, it was better than what I had come from..”

“And on Cromwell?” Kal asked “Do you still get the judgments?”

He remembered Husar's first impression of him and possibly her continued impression, she'd thought the mere idea of a Kazon scientist ludicrous.

“Things are definitely improving. I showed myself to be different from the clans. A lot of people still judge me, but a lot of others have accepted me and become good friends, family even.”

Kal was clearly perturbed by the last word but he tried not to show it, he was at the point of considering staying on Cromwell but that was more out of not knowing what to do with himself than expecting a home, he could never let himself get close enough for that, it was too risky.

Kal noted that Six had not bothered to offer *him* any tea, he frowned, would she offer food at all or expect him to somehow produce glucose from the nanites he didn't have?! He shook his head, he was starting to doze off again and it took a lot to remain conscious.

“Well,” he said, with a weak grin, “if she”, he indicated the drone with his head “Can be accepted here then I'm pretty sure anyone can.” He held back the tears of envy. “I'm glad you've found a home here and I wish there were more people like you, people like you almost restore what little faith I have left in our kind.”

Covaar nodded in agreement while also notice that his companion seemed to be exhibiting signs of weariness. “I'm sure you will succeed in your research or anything you set your mind to. You seem like quite a strong individual.” He bit back a surprised inhalation at the word he had chosen and the irony of using it with someone who was looking to sacrifice his individuality to join a collective with Six.

“No, I'm not.” Kal said softly “You are a strong person, I'm just...” He didn't finish the sentence, he wasn't sure what he was other than Six of Twelve's 'subunit' at the moment, what he really was was lost.

Covaar felt a great deal of sympathy for the other Kazon. He had been through dark periods in life and knew that one could bounce back. He was about to say more, but their time together seemed like it was coming to an end.

Six returned within half an hour, exactly half an hour.

“Thank you for watching our subunit.” She said to Covaar.

She had very much appreciated the break from Kal, he'd been getting in her way, he really was a useless subunit.

“Four of Six, we will go to Brinn's now.” She informed him.

Kal stood up reluctantly, feeling a bit dizzy “Right,” he said.

“Thank you very much for your time Ensign Tryutu, it's been a pleasure talking to you.” Kal said, smiling weakly at Covaar. He wondered who Brinn was and why they were going there.

“It has been a pleasure for me, as well,” said Covaar, who toasted Kal. “It would be a pleasure to get together and talk again. Maybe we can arrange to do some research together, as well.”

“Goodbye.” Kal said, he smiled but he did not feel comfortable committing to anything, not yet anyway.

Six had liked Covaar as well, not least for babysitting Kal, she would find out more about him next time she saw him, hopefully when Ten Forward was less busy, maybe he would be her friend.

The pair left to Brinn's, Kal more or less staggering behind the drone but Six was still not noticing that there was anything wrong with him.

Covaar watched both of the others walk off and found that despite what he would have normally expected, he had a pleasant time and looked forward to spending time with both of them again.

Chapter Twenty

Location: DFA Cromwell B, Brinn's Quarters / Sickbay

Kal was exhausted. He clearly was not at all well, he had not been well to begin with, and Six had treat him like another drone, she'd not offered anything that vaguely resembled a break, other than the time he'd spent with Covaar anyway, she had not even thought to offer him food.

It was not really Six's fault though, she'd never been responsible for a person before and, unlike with her ficus, she had not been instructed as to the care he required.

Of course Kal could have asked for food, he could have asked for a break, but he was still obsessed with the Borg, in spite of himself, and he was trying to prove himself to Six. A foolish thing to do since Six did not care one way or another how Kal behaved, so long as he did not do anything that would make him a threat, he could have slept all day in Ten Forward for all she cared, instead he had spent most of the day getting in her way.

She pressed the chime to Brinn's door uneasily, he had sent her away that morning and she was afraid he might do the same now.

"What!?" called Brinn through the intercomm.

"It is Six of Twelve." Six replied "We have a sub-unit, a fairly useless subunit but we are trying to help him to adapt, can we come in?"

Kal muttered something under his breath but said nothing, he was very subdued today, not having the energy to be anything much else.

Brinn opened the door curious. "You have a sub unit?" He saw an emaciated Kazon. "You are not a stuffed animal." A pause, then, "You are not worthy of assimilation."

Kal glared at Brinn. *Really?* Already someone was pouring salt in that particular wound? Still he said nothing though, he just looked at Six.

"He is not." Six of Twelve agreed, indifferent and unaware of anything Kal may be feeling and clearly very pleased that Brinn had remembered, she thought he was doing well with the information she had been giving him over the past 3 months, he learned quickly, she thought, he really was the closest thing she had found to a perfect individual, he reminded her of the Collective "Species 329 are unworthy of assimilation into the Borg collective, Four of Six is looking for a function within another collective. We are watching him to make sure that he does not become a

threat to Cromwell and we are helping him to adapt.” She sighed “Or we are trying to but he is a useless subunit.” she complained.

Brinn brought them into the room. “Did you feed and water him?” asked Brinn going to the replicator.

“We did not?” Six said surprised, this was the first time it had occurred to her that Kal might actually require sustenance “No one told us to.”

Brinn paused. “You fed and watered your ficus this morning. You regenerated last night. If you are going to collect subunits you must take care of them.” Brinn said. He didn't care if Kal followed her home or not.

“We will comply.” Six said indifferently. She actually cared more about Cuddles and her ficus than poor Kal at the moment, but still, she did not want him deactivating, he might be a good sub-unit with better care. “Provide instructions regarding his care.”

Kal glared “I'm not a child!” he objected weakly “Or a plant.”

Six and Brinn were talking about him as if he wasn't even there and he resented it, he might have said so if he had the strength to do anything at all.

“Here, drink this,” said Brinn ignoring the Kazon's comment. He had concocted a pineapple tasting drink they had used on RAK to revive time travelers. “Speaking of which, Six, you need to report to Dr. Clark for a full physical.”

Kal accepted the juice meekly and began to sip at it.

He had a feeling that he wanted to say something but he could not think straight and the juice tasted good. He was pretty severely dehydrated from the amount of crying he'd done the previous night.

“We saw Dr. Clark last night after our malfunction.” Six of Twelve said “Is this not sufficient?”

“No, he treated you for what happened. He only fixed what was obviously malfunctioning. You need a complete physical, mapping your Borg implants, checking your metabolism.” He said gazing at her, assessing. He put his hand on his chin. “Do all borg have the same metabolism?” he asked.

“We will comply” Six said “And all Borg have a similar metabolism” She explained “Our metabolic rate is determined by our nanites rather than by organic components, as such there is no individual variation in their performance. However there is still some variation depending on the original species, for example, some species have additional organs and the nanites would work harder to maintain them, slightly slowing the metabolic rate of that drone.”

“I'm done,” Kal said rather rudely.

He felt sick and he had a fever, there was definitely more wrong with him than that which Six's neglect had caused.

Brinn pointed at the half-finished drink, but not turning towards the Kazon.

Six raised her eyebrow at Kal and collected the glass to recycle, she returned quickly.

“When do you want for us to go to sickbay?” She asked

“Now,” said Brinn. Rose’s conversation made him consider how better to take care of Six, and with Six's presentation of her assimilated....

“We will comply, but Dr. Clark gave us a routine physical on Tuesday, why is another necessary?”

Brinn looked askew at her. She was not following commands well. Hang over? Or something else? “If your diagnostics are within normal parameters, I guess there is no reason to repeat them,” said Brinn, not willing to argue with her.

“Should we commence with our subroutines now?” Six asked.

“Sure,” said Brinn.

Six turned to Kal and found him asleep, his head on the table, she ignored him and went to prepare Brinn's dinner.

She returned within half an hour and set a plate down in front of Brinn and one in front of Kal who was now at least half - conscious now. He looked up at her wearily, he was hungry but he felt too tired to eat.

“Eat,” said Brinn between mouthfuls.

Kal opened his mouth to object but did not.

“What happened today Six?” asked Brinn.

Six began to relate her day to Brinn, Kal remained silent, eating his pasta.

Brinn did not flinch when Six related how Major Reynolds had reprogrammed her to override his commands. She even seemed proud of the fact that she had tricked Reynolds into making the choices for her. Brinn considered that as he ate some garlic bread he had replicated. Six was becoming devious.

Kal was perking up a bit now he'd eaten and drank, that pineapple juice had been very refreshing and his head was starting to clear... He spoke for the first time to Brinn since arriving. “Thank you for the juice” He said, still quite weakly.

“You better go to sickbay as well.” Brinn told Kal. He had hardly touched his pasta.

“I don't want to go to sickbay!” Kal objected. Doctors made him nervous, ever since that time he had woken up to a doctor after Six had thrown him against the

wall. That doctor had been the first to inform him of his unworthiness and as such Sickbays and hospitals tended to bring back bad memories.

“Irrelevant.” Six replied without feeling “Brinn is Six of Twelve's command source and you are our subunit, you will comply.”

Kal glared “I will not.”

Six raised her eyebrow, she was tired of him “You are sick. Dr. Clark is our friend, he will repair you and then you will function more effectively. Comply.”

Kal frowned and sighed “Fine, but I want to see Dr. Clark *specifically*” he demanded “I know him at least”

“Wow, he is your subunit.” said Brinn.

Kal glared at Brinn “I am not her... subunit” he said irritably. He did not like feeling so dependent on others, he was used to being alone and was generally a very independent person, ironic for someone who wanted to be a drone.

“What are you then?” Six asked tonelessly. She very much wished he *wasn't* her sub-unit, he was annoying and useless but she had told Major that she would look after him and so she would.

Kal glared at Six but said nothing, he hated feeling this helpless. He didn't know what he was, he'd lost all original sense of purpose.

“Toast?” Brinn asked handing him some cooked bread. It would be easy to the stomach. The boy still looked green. Orions, perhaps. Kazons were not supposed to look green.

“Thanks.” Kal said with a forced smile, he began nibbling on the toast.

Six scanned Kal and looked at Brinn “Do you think he will be of some use when he is better?” She asked.

“I don't know, what does he do?” asked Brinn.

“We do not know what to do with him.” Six explained “He is trying to find a collective and a purpose. Our purpose was given to us, the Borg and then Cromwell made us into what we are, how do individuals decide upon their purpose?”

Kal sat quietly eating his toast, still far too tired to put up any argument at the way in which they were still talking as if he was not there.

“Start by getting him so...Not sick,” said Brinn. “To sickbay with him, before he infects the crew with parasites or something.”

“We will comply.” Six of Twelve said, suddenly concerned that Kal's illness might endanger her Qu.. no not her Queen... not anymore.. so why did he still feel like he

was? She tried not to think about it, it was not at all pleasant when her programming did not align with her feelings. She still *felt* like she was Brinn's drone.

Through Sel'ra's training Six now had a fairly good grip on most of her feelings. She never complained about disagreeable commands like sitting and she was rarely distracted by her curiosity.

She had been determined that her feelings were irrelevant and, she did not belong to them, they should have no control over her actions. None of this suppression had been very difficult because Six did not feel much to begin with... actually Six felt practically nothing most of the time.

But this was not an ordinary feeling... it was more like the 'loud voice' - difficult to ignore. She was sure she could comply with the programming in most cases, certain that she could obey the Captain's orders over Brinn's... but ... she could never harm him, and she was not sure she could ever let anyone else harm him either.

Six of Twelve sighed heavily, there was little point in even trying to work out what was going on in her mind and there was a task at hand, she had to protect her 'not Queen' from Kal's illness. She looked at the Kazon, who was still nibbling on his toast.

“Come with us now,” She demanded “We are going to sickbay.”

Kal frowned “But I'm still eating...” he said “And I don't want...”

“Comply.” Six replied impassively.

Kal put down the toast and reluctantly followed Six out of the room, he was beginning to realize that resistance might well be futile, he needed her because at the moment he felt lost and she was all he had.

Chapter Twenty-one

Location: DFA Cromwell B, Sickbay

D'Troyan sighed as she completed the first job of her daily routine in sickbay. The good thing of having real doctors working in sickbay was that she didn't have to deal with the constant bad humour of the EMH. On the other hand, since they had installed the EMH, most of the doctors thought that they could use the EMH program as an excuse to leave the sickbay commandless anytime an away team was assembled. When the Dr Romulan left, she was left in charge of sickbay... A nurse as Acting CMO! No one ever believe that!

That's the problem of having just a degree in Biology. If she had finished her studies and got her medical licence, she would be the one boldly partying where no one has gone before...

Kal felt slightly better after having eaten at Brinn's but he was still exhausted and nauseous, he also had a fever. Kal hated Sickbays and doctors and really did not want to go but any objection he made was only met with 'comply' so by now he'd given up and was in fact 'complying'. Brinn had told Six to bring him to sickbay so that was where they were. She would get him checked out, drop him at his quarters and then regenerate, she thought.

When the pair entered the sickbay Six immediately noticed Helen, she had yet to meet her.

"Our designation is Six of Twelve" Six said "What is your designation?"

"Designation?" Helen repeated trying her best to understand what the Bor'girl wanted. "I am sorry sweetie, but I am not a ship or a car to have my designation written on somewhere on my body." She added in a humours voice.

Six looked confused and then said proudly "Our designation is written here." She pointed to the label and barcode just above her com-badge.

Kal sighed dramatically "She means what your name?" He translated, it was quite clear that he was, at this point in time, wishing that he was still in the Brig.

The nurse approached the boy Six was helping to walk. "I am Nurse D'Troyan." She offered as she grabbed a medical tricorder and started a non-invasive scan of Kal.

Kal jumped slightly at the medical tricorder but said nothing.

Six of Twelve did not offer any reassurance although, in fairness, she did not realize Kal's apprehension.

"What happened to him?" She asked Six.

“Our sub-unit is malfunctioning.” Six explained “He has been useless all day, he keeps sleeping, he says that his stomach hurts and his temperature is above that which is within a normal range for Species 329. Will you repair him please?”

Helen couldn’t help but stare at Six. Sub-unit? Malfunctioning? Species 329? It seemed that Helen would have to tell the Bor’girl that she was no longer in a cyberpunk holodeck simulation anymore.

Kal glared at Six, he did not at all like the way she spoke for him.

He looked uneasily at Helen, he had hoped to see Dr. Clark, not that he liked Dr. Clark but at least he knew him.

“Six... you said I could see Dr Clark” He whispered.

“No” Six corrected, she did not whisper “*YOU* said that, we said nothing. Who you see is not relevant as long as they can fix you. You will comply with this individual’s commands. Do you understand?”

Kal opened his mouth to object but instead muttered an irritable “Fine” he turned to Helen “I’m sorry if I sounded a bit rude... it’s just... sickbays make me nervous. I’m Four of Six.” He bit his lip “Six of Twelve’s subunit” he added with a tone that indicated reluctant acceptance “Where do you want me?”

“I am not Clark, but I can help you.” The Nurse offered. “Here.” Helen indicated a biobed and then helped Four of Six to sit on it.

Taking a hipospray gun she adjusted the dose of antipyretic then placed the device aside and made sure Kal was comfortable. Kal nodded, he actually liked Helen, her voice was reassuring, although the whole surrounding made him uncomfortable and he did not like the biobed, lying there brought back instant memories of waking up from his concussion ten years ago, the second he climbed onto it he began to shake. He looked to Six for reassurance, which of course she was oblivious too. Seeing only her stoic expression he looked at Helen and took a deep breath.

“What next?” He asked uneasily

“I need to give you a medicine for the fever.” She indicate the hipospray. “You might feel a sting, okay?” She told him before pressing the device against his neck.

Kal looked uneasily at the medicine but nodded. He fell asleep very quickly, he had already been exhausted.

Helen placed the device aside and waited until Kal had closed his eyes probably because the medicine was already working on his body, easing the stomach ache as well as the fever. Then she looked at the Bor’girl and indicated the empty CMO’s office. “You and me, now!”

Chapter Twenty-two

Location: Kal's Shuttle

Kit was just finishing of the repairs to Kal's shuttle, which had more or less meant the complete installation of a new navigational system. The ship was in a bad state and she would have been amazed had she known that he'd had it 10 years and actually survived, it was an old Federation shuttle, about 50 years old Kit guessed from the model. It still needed a lot doing before it would be able to make its way back to OH1 but at least the navigational array had been repaired and it was space worthy. She decided now would be a good a time as any to test the newly installed sensors and so she called for its pilot.

=^=Hello, this is Ensign Taylor from Engineering.^=

Kal almost jumped a mile into the air when he heard his comm-badge, he had more or less forgotten that it was there, no one had spoken to him much since he left sickbay. He was in a far better state now, and to Six's pleasant surprise had indeed been a useful 'sub-unit'. He had even more or less managed to adjust to Six waking him up at 5:45am in order to go with her to Brinn's.

He somewhat resented his position and was very much tired of hearing the word 'comply' but at least he had been busy. Kal liked to be busy, he needed to distraction from his thoughts and Six certainly kept him busy.

Trying to mimic the drone's efficiency usually left him exhausted by the end of the day but as far as Kal was concerned that was probably a good thing, if he was asleep or occupied then he was unable to dwell on his lack of purpose or on his ever present grief.

=^=Uh... Hi... this is Four of Six... uh... did you dial the right frequency?^=

=^=Four of Six... fvdad! Is the Captain collecting Borg or something? I'm looking for Kal.^=

=^=Yeah that's me,^= he said a bit reluctantly. ^=Hate the name though, just call me Four okay?^=

=^=O...kay...^= The ensign replied. ^=Well I've just finished installing the new sensors in your shuttle, taking it out for a 3 hour test and could do with a pilot and it's your ship so...^=

Kal looked at Six for permission but quickly realized she wouldn't understand unless he explicitly asked. "Is it alright if I go on a test run with my shuttle Six?"

"Yes." Six replied tonelessly "We will go now."

It was a Tuesday so she was not working in Ten Forward, she was about to head to Brinn's but called to inform him that she had to watch her sub-unit in case he deactivated Ensign Taylor.

Kal frowned at the realization that she was going with him, she was *always* with him and he was getting tired of her. He laughed inwardly at the thought, when he considered his instance on seeing her, he certainly got what he wished for, and in so many ways too. He might as well be a Borg drone for the amount of freedom he had with Six.

She had informed him that he belonged to her in the same way that her toy and her ficus did, that he was a part of her like her implants. Her description had made him shudder but there was no point in objecting.

For one thing it was either 'supervision from Six' or 'confined to quarters' so his options were limited, and for another, Six's constant company was the only thing keeping him (ironically) sane, he would have gone completely insane (well if that ship had not already sailed) had he been left to wallow in his misery alone.

Six and Kal entered the shuttle bay to meet Kit who was ready to leave.

"What are you doing here?" Kit asked the drone in surprise.

"We are watching Four of Six because he is a potential threat to Cromwell." She explained "He must be with us or confined to his quarters."

Kit gave them both a dubious look. She had looked up Six's serial number, mostly out of curiosity, it was listed as a weapon. She was going to be in a shuttle for 3 hours with a criminal and a talking weapon? That did not sound good.

"You will provide instructions for Six of Twelve and our sub-unit while we are with you."

"Your 'sub-unit' can provide instructions for himself!" Kal complained.

Six just raised her eyebrow "Comply with this individual's instructions." She said tonelessly and as if Kal had not even spoken.

Kal sighed and gave her what she expected "I will comply."

Kit had read Six's file, she claimed to be equipment that needed to be controlled but Kit was still a bit dubious. She'd had a bad experience with the Borg as a child (as opposed to all the other people who'd had good experiences with the Borg?). Her and her family had escaped but she'd known people who had been assimilated or killed and Six, in spite of her DFA armour, brought back some unhappy memories.

She took a deep breath, the captain had said that if she saw something that needed doing, she should do it and this needed doing. She'd read the mission reports pertaining to Six, she always needed a 'command source' and Kit had already

considered volunteering for the job, this would be a good way to see if she could do it. It was only a 3 hour flight test... what could go wrong?

“Alright.” She said “Umm... get in the shuttle. Sit down in the back seat.” She commanded, she looked at Kal “I'm assuming you know how to fly your own ship? I'll be watching the sensors in case anything goes wrong, don't pull any stupid tricks or I'll tell her to shoot you.”

Kal rolled his eyes at the ensign and climbed into the pilot seat “Everyone ready?” he asked

“We are ready.” Six replied.

“Me too.” Kit said “Follow the course I've set exactly, it's just to a small nebula, 90 minutes there and 90 minutes back.”

“Aye Captain.” Kal said sarcastically.

“Captain Sesgaard is not here.” Six of Twelve said in confusion.

Kit rolled her eyes, this was going to be a long three hours...

Everything was going reasonably well for the first hour although the trio barely spoke. Six had, of course, had plenty to say and had asked non-stop questions to Kit for about twenty minutes after leaving. She probably would have continued for the whole hour but the frustrated ensign had shouted “Oh stop talking!” and to her intense surprise Six said “We will comply” and then fell silent and had not spoken since. Six of Twelve had been unhappy in the silence though and had finally thought to point to her PaDD and her headphones, Kit had nodded and said “Yes, listen to your music”. That kept her reasonably content, although still not particularly happy. She hated to just be sitting, without tasks and wished very much that she was taking commands from Brinn as she normally would be at this time.

Kal was a terrible pilot and had had several very close encounters with asteroids, comets and debris, but the sensors and the new navigational system had been working well so far, and so, other than a few complaints from Kit about how bumpy the ride had been, the test flight was going as planned.

Kal also hated silence, almost as much as Six did, though for different reasons. He hated silence because it allowed him time with his own thoughts and Kal's mind was not the sort of place anyone wanted to spend much time with, least of all him. He wanted a distraction and so he'd tried to make small talk with Kit.

They had had a few brief conversations, the usual sort of things, talk about holo-novels and music and hobbies. Most of their chats ended quickly though because they had little in common and about 40 minutes into their journey Kit had made the mistake of asking Kal where he was from, that had brought back unsettling memories and generated an awkward silence.

After an hour and a half they reached the small nebula Kit had described, she yawned and rubbed her eyes, the quiet was sending her to sleep and it had taken considerable effort to concentrate on the sensor readings.

“Okay, I think we ought to head home now.” She said “This shuttle's not ready for long journeys yet and I don't want to burn out her engine.”

“Alright heading...” Kal began but at that point they were hit.

They didn't know what it was, but it had hit the run-down old shuttle with considerable force and knocked out its newly installed navigational array. Kal tried to go to warp launched them into the middle of nowhere.

Once she'd recovered from the shock Kit groaned, she knew the shuttle wasn't ready to go to warp, it would not power up again, not that that mattered much since the sensors were down, she would not have known where to warp too even if they could have done so. She glared at Kal “What was that thing?!”

Kal shrugged “I don't know, came out of nowhere...” He replied apathetically.

“It can't have come out of nowhere, YOU weren't watching the sensors! Where did you get your pilot's licence anyway?!” Kit sounded more angry than she was, truth be told she was afraid, she didn't know where they were, how far away they were from Cromwell or what to do and she was attempting to conceal her fear by shouting at Kal.

“You need a licence to be a pilot?” Kal asked innocently, in such a way that Kit could not tell whether or not he was being sarcastic or genuinely did not have a pilot's licence.

She glared at him, giving up, and turned to Six “What about you? Do you know what hit us... or where we are?”

Six pointed to her mouth to indicate that she had been told not to talk.

Kit sighed. “You can speak now Six.” she said, in a voice far gentler than that which Kal had received. Her anger was quickly wearing away to be replaced with desperation and fear. Kit was 21 years old, fresh out of the academy, she did not have the experience for dealing with this sort of situation at all, she wasn't even command track, and all she could think to do was ask the people around her. Unfortunately for Kit, one of those people was a drone and the other was... well she wasn't sure what to make of him... but he didn't seem to care if they lived or died and had thus far offered no useful suggestions.

“We were hit by a Space Amoeba. They are large space dwelling single celled organisms, unworthy of assimilation.” Six of Twelve replied “Kal should have detected it on the sensors, and no we do not know where we are.”

“Do you... do you know what to do?” The girl asked anxiously, she was very clearly out of her depth.

Six raised her eyebrow, she was asking *her* what to do? She thought for a moment before replying. Six might have lacked in individual thought but thanks to Sel'ra's teaching and her Borg implants, she did possess remarkable calm, her mind was clear of most feeling and so, unlike poor Kit, she was able to think clearly.

“If we were still connected to the collective then we would send them a signal and another vessel would come to retrieve us.” She offered. It was not really advice, she was not connected to the collective, but she hoped it might spark Kit's individual innovation.

“Right! A distress call... yeah...” Kit blushed “I really should have thought of that. Okay open subspace communications Four and send a message to Cromwell saying...”

Life support failing. Oxygen Levels 63%

Kit cursed at the shuttles warning, things were just getting worse and worse! “How close are we to a breathable atmosphere?”

“Well... I don't know if it's breathable or not, sensors aren't working remember... but....there's a planet maybe 2 minutes away at impulse.” Kal replied with a slight grin, he'd seen the planet straight away and hadn't bothered to mention it.

“How do you know?” Six asked, giving Kal a perplexed look “How did you pick up a planet without working sensors?”

“Oh I used my profound intelligence too calculate the probability of a planet being close to here and then I extrapolated from....” Kal began sarcastically.

Kit glared and cut him off “He looked out of the window Six.” She said, pointing to the planet now less than a minute away “Take us into orbit.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Location: Nekrit Expanse, Riley

“Okay” Kit said, taking a deep breath. They were now in orbit of the planet Kal had located 'the old fashioned way' but they had no idea where they were, and, since the shuttle's sensors were down, they did not even know if the planet could support life, although there was enough water to be seen from orbit, and water was always a good sign of an M-Class planet.

“Any chance of your finishing that sentence?” Kal asked, interrupting Kit's train of thought.

“Provide instructions!” Six demanded, adding all the more to the young ensign's stress.

“Okay...” Kit continued “I suppose we better get into environmental suits and land... uh... do you need one Six?” She asked dubiously, she was not certain how well the suit would fit around her armour.

“Unlikely.” Six of Twelve replied “We are designed to function in most environments, including those that would be inhospitable to other lifeforms.”

Six could not be certain that she'd be okay, she couldn't be certain of anything without sensor readings, but the Borg are capable of surviving in incredibly harsh environments, even in the vacuum of space, and so she did not expect any issues.

“Alright Kal take us dow...” Kit began but Kal interrupted her.

“I'm receiving a communication from the planet!” He said, pressing the console to let it play.

=^=We are the Cooperative, welcome to our planet, do you require assistance?^=

Kit jumped. The voice, or the voices, she had not heard them since she was 4 years old and still she remembered them. The echoing voices of thousands speaking at once. “Is it..?” She asked Six

“No.” Six replied calmly “If it were the Borg our proximity transceiver would have activated, it has not.”

“It sounds like the Borg...” Kal said excitedly, he had heard those voices many times before but... not as many times as Six of Twelve.

“It is not the Borg Collective” Six assured them. The voices were similar to the ears of individuals, but they had not grown up to those voices being their only

thoughts, Six knew, these were the voices of thousands, not trillions, and these voices had the hint of emotion, the voices of the Borg did not. Although, more than anything else, Six knew it was not the Borg because she was still standing there, unassimilated.

“The Borg offer assimilation, not assistance. We do not know who they are but they are not Borg.”

“You'd better answer.” Kal said, looking at Kit who had found herself in-charge by default.

“Right” Kit replied, shaking herself, she would just have to trust Six, they didn't have much choice, oxygen on the shuttle was now down to 43% and they were lost.

=^=This is Ensign Kit Taylor of the DFA Cromwell... it is nice to meet you. We were hit by a Space Amoeba and our sensors are down, we're... lost. Life support on our shuttle is failing, may we have your permission to land please? ^=

There was a short pause. Thousands of minds making a decision as one, not through the immediate but forced consensus of the Borg but through a diplomatic debate inside their mind.

=^=You may land. ^= The voices replied. ^=If you can locate it then please land on the western continent of the planet, there is a large complex there, you should see it as you enter the atmosphere, we will meet you there. ^=

Kit looked dubiously at Six and Kal before speaking “You heard them, western continent. Six of Twelve, use your ocular implant to scan out of the window for this complex, Four - don't crash.”

“We will comply.” Six of Twelve said.

As Kal took the shuttle slowly into the atmosphere he headed to what he hoped was the West, Six's implant was scanning their surroundings, they could not see much from this height but Six could detect life-forms - Borg lifeforms - and yet it could not be the Collective. After a considerable search they located the large complex and Kal landed the shuttle next to it.

The three stepped out of the shuttle and took in the scene.

They were standing next to a collection of buildings, all several stories high, the 'complex' looked like it could have been a city where it not for the vast amounts of farmland separating the buildings.

The buildings were clumped together in twos or threes and then there was a large field with unusual fruit, vegetables and grasses growing in it separating them from the next clump of buildings and then the next and so on.

It was impossible to see how far the unusual farm-city went on for but Six could detect lifeforms as far as her implants range in every direction, all Borg.

There were what seemed like thousands of people, either moving about the city or working in the farms.

What Kit and Kal found strange was that the people did not talk, there were even children, who seemed to be playing, but they did not utter a sound.

A lot of the people around them had Borg implants but none of them looked like Six, most of them had normal skin pigmentation and the vast majority of their implants removed, revealing only scars or the remains of irremovable components, none of the children had scars or implants.

The trio were approached by a group of 5 people, 2 men and 3 women. One of the men was Klingon, the other was Vulcan, and the three women were Talaxian, Devore and Human. "Hello." they said, synchronously. "Welcome to Riley."

Six was the first to speak "You are Borg, we detect Borg signatures from you... but you did not alert our proximity transceiver from orbit, explain."

Kit glared at Six, she thought the drone was very rude, but she said nothing.

The group around them did not seem offended, they all smiled, all at exactly the same time, it was an unusual sight.

"We *were* Borg." The group explained "49 years ago our cube was hit by an electrokinetic storm, severing us from the Collective. We began to regain our individuality and it was wonderful at first, our memories came back and as we removed the Borg implants our skin pigmentation started to return to normal." The group sighed, remembering something unpleasant. "Unfortunately when our individuality returned so did a lot of hatred. There were 80,000 of us at the time, 80,000 severed drones from thousands of different species, many of those species had a historical hatred for one another or were currently at war. Fights broke out and the planet quickly turned into a war zone."

"This doesn't look like a war zone." Kal said, he knew well what a war zone looked like, this planet was peaceful, more peaceful than any he'd ever seen, there did not even appear to be arguments.

"And you do not look like individuals." Six added, noting that the group spoke together.

"Well..." They continued "A small group set up a cooperative, it was built on the principles of tolerance, understanding and acceptance of our differences. This group worked together, trying to make a life for themselves and using their neurotrancievers to share their thoughts at times. Unfortunately this cooperative was constantly under attack, as we said, the planet was a war zone. We decided that

the best way to stop the fighting was to re-establish a link between every person on the planet, to regain the harmony we lost when we were severed from the Borg. We needed to reactivate the neuro-electric field generator from the cube in order to do this but we had no means of returning to the ship... not until Chakotay arrived."

"Chakotay?" Kit asked, thinking, she remembered hearing the name "Commander Chakotay of the USS Voyager?" She asked, she'd read the files on Voyager, the first Federation ship to (accidentally) enter the Delta Quadrant.

Six had also heard the name before, she knew plenty about Voyager, though through a different source, and probably a very different perspective to Kit.

"That is correct." the group said. "Voyager. They helped us to reactivate the field generator, we only needed it active for a few minutes to re-join all of the people on the planet." The group smiled in eerie synchronicity again.

The Cooperative had neglected to mention the fact that they had used their link with Chakotay in order to force him to reactivate the cube's generator.

"After that we activated the cube's self-destruct sequence and have been operating as a single mind ever since." The group explained, they saw Kit shudder and added, the same soft smile on all of their faces. "You don't need to worry, we do not want to assimilate you."

Kit gave them a dubious look, they weren't conventional Borg, she could see that much, but they were still a hive mind and the way they talked together made her uncomfortable.

"Why don't you come inside?" The group offered, gesturing to one of the buildings. "And we can find out how we can help you?"

Kit glanced at Six and Kal, they were both smiling, clearly much more eager to engage this collective in conversation than she was. She sighed "That would be lovely, thank you."

The group of five had dispersed, leaving only a single person, the human woman, to speak for their collective. She led their three guests into the large building and indicated a turbo lift.

She did not speak, the turbo lift shot up and the group exited into a large apartment. There were around 20 people there performing various tasks, cooking, cleaning, eating, sleeping, reading, 6 children were silently playing, smiling but not laughing.

The women showed Six, Kit and Kal into a sitting room area and asked if they wanted any tea. Kit said yes, Kal asked for water and Six stood silently and said nothing. The women handed the group tea and sat down, she gave Six, who was still standing (no one had ordered her to sit) a strange look, but said nothing.

“Before we go any further, may we ask your names?” The women asked.

“Our designation is Six of Twelve.” Six replied.

“Four of Six.” Kal said, nodding slightly at the women.

“And I'm Kit... what's your name?”

“Ah yes, Ensign Kit Taylor, we spoke to you on the shuttle.” The women replied “My name is May.” she replied. “You said that your shuttle was damaged by a Space Amoeba, we are repairing it at this moment but the damage was extensive, it could be a couple of days, we don't often get visitors and would be very pleased if you would stay with us.”

“That would be much appreciated.” Kit said gratefully, letting her guard drop somewhat. “And thank you so much for your help, is there any chance of getting a message back to our ship from here?”

“We are afraid not.” May replied “You mentioned that your proximity transceiver did not detect us.” she said, addressing Six. “There is a reason for that, the electromagnetic energy in this system creates a sort of dampening field, it's the reason we're still here, the reason the Borg haven't found us. We cannot send a message out of the nebula.”

“Where are we?” Six of Twelve asked, the Cooperative's cube had been the only Borg vessel sent here and, as it had not returned, Six had no memory of this location.

“The Netrik Expanse” May replied “This planet we named Riley, after the person who started the original Cooperative.”

Kal frowned, he'd heard of the nebula, it was between Kazon and Borg space.

“May, if you do not mind my asking... it's very quiet.” Kit said “Why does no one speak?”

May laughed. “We do not need too, we are a hive mind, we communicate with ourself through our link.” The women suddenly smiled. “We do not often have the opportunity to ask this... but... would you like to join us? Every new mind adds something to our collective, new thoughts, new memories, new ideas”

Kit started back “You said you weren't in the habit of assimilating people.” she said anxiously.

“Oh no, not permanently, and certainly not if you don't want to... but if you would like... we would very much like to hear your voices.” May explained.

“Please!” Six of Twelve said to Kit.

The offer was unimaginably tempting to Six - to hear thousands of voices, to be a part of a collective consciousness again, if only for a short time.

Kit looked dubiously “I’ll pass but... yes Six you can connect with them.” She looked at May. “I want her back though, within the hour you understand.”

“Of course.” May said sincerely “And what about you?” She asked Kal.

Kal did not need or desire Kit’s permission, he’d wanted this sort of offer for ten years, he hadn’t even expected to be asked, had thought they would consider him as unworthy as the Borg had done.

“That... that would be amazing” he stammered, smiling for the first time in years.

Connecting Six of Twelve to the Cooperative was not difficult, they were able to use her existing neuro-transponder. Connecting Kal meant installing one, but the device they installed was like the one they had used on Chakotay 49 years ago, a removable device that attached to the Kazon’s neck.

Kit watched the process a bit dubiously but she was optimistic. The Cooperative had not forced her into any such action, nor had they even tried to persuade her once she had said no, they seemed genuine and Kit tended to believe the best in people, she was idealistic by nature, a quality that could prove either good or bad depending on the circumstances.

Once connected Six and Kal ceased to be Six and Kal, instead they were the Cooperative. Their voices were indistinguishable from the thousands of others, but it was not quite the same as the Borg, their opinions were listened to, their ideas and their memories apart of them, as were the thousands of other ideas, memories and opinions.

Six and Kal saw through thousands of eyes, felt through thousands of bodies, were in thousands of places all at once. They were the farmers, the builders, the engineers, they were the people cooking and cleaning and reading, the people playing in the holodeck and the children laughing, they were *everyone*.

And their voices, they were there, they just did not know which bodies they belonged to, it didn’t matter. When the Cooperative decided to do something, when they had problems to solve, all of those voices ‘talked’ in much the same way as when you are considering all of your options and you discuss the matter in your mind. They had the combined processing power to control thousands of bodies as one entity, essentially one person multitasking on an unimaginable level.

The farmers grew food to feed the entity, to feed all of its bodies. The Cooperative’s ‘body’ was the spread of all of its components, it spread thousands and thousands of kilometers and included not just the people but the buildings and the technology, the turbo lift that had went up for May without being asked had been controlled directly by their Hive-mind, it knew where to go because they did.

Kit left Six and Kal and went to where a group of people were working on their shuttle, she decided she should probably help. The group found her difficult to work with at first because they had to talk to her verbally instead of just thinking to 'theirselves' but they quickly got used to it, nominating one of their bodies to talk to her.

Kal and Six's bodies were now occupied with the Cooperative's tasks, Six's body was repairing a turbo lift and Kal's was preparing food, though neither Six nor Kal knew this exactly, the Cooperative knew what two of its bodies were doing but Six and Kal did not exist in any separate or identifiable way.

An hour passed and Kit returned to the sitting room, the Cooperative released Kal and Six as they had promised.

A single tear fell from Six's human eye as the sudden rush of loneliness hit her, she clutched Cuddles tightly and thought of Brinn, Kamaia, Captain Sesgaard and Cromwell, she was one body again, one mind, but not alone, she had a home to go to.

Kal's reaction was far worse than Six's. When he had been connected to the Cooperative his thoughts were still there, his grief was still there, but it had been dulled by tens of thousands of other minds. Kal's pain had been only a tiny pinch in the Cooperative's mind, a drop of water in the ocean. Now he was alone again the thoughts rushed back to him leaving him in agony, the tears streamed from his eyes but he said nothing, the pain was too unbearable to describe.

Kit was surprised at the reactions of the pair "What's wrong? Did they hurt you?" She asked alarmed.

Six answered, she knew that Kal couldn't, she had seen a glimpse into his mind.

"We are sad because we are lonely, because we will miss the Cooperative when we go home." She explained. In a way Six's reaction was dulled, the Cooperative had let her out gently and it had not produced to shock of her severance from the Borg. She was sad, she knew that she could be very content here, but she also knew this was not home, Cromwell was home, that's where her family was, where her friends were. It pained Six to break from the hive mind but not enough to make her want to stay, she was Cromwell's drone, not theirs.

"HE is sad because he has just LEFT his home, we suggest you re-establish his connection now." She smiled, perhaps a bit sadly, she'd gotten used to her 'subunit', she was going to miss him but this was where he belonged, she knew it, they had belonged to the same entity, she couldn't help but know it. "He has found his collective, he is theirs now."

Kit looked at Kal, he was still sobbing and shaking.

“Is that what you want, do you want to stay here?” she asked softly.

Kal looked directly into her eyes and spoke with a clarity that seemed an unusual contrast to the uncontrollable crying.

“More than anything”

Kit looked to May and nodded. She re-established his link.

Chapter Twenty-four

Location: Kal's Shuttle, on the way back to Cromwell

Kal's shuttle was repaired within a day, the Cooperative were just as efficient as the Borg in some ways, having so many bodies it would be difficult not to be, although, unlike the Borg, they left plenty of time for pleasure as well.

The Cooperative had informed Six and Kit that Kal was quite alright with them taking his shuttle, he wouldn't be needing it anymore.

They had taken Kal's holoimage out of the shuttle though, Kal's lost family where *their* lost family now.

Six and Kit were sitting in the living room with May, ready to say goodbye. All of the bodies in the Cooperative had names, not designations, every new part of them that was born received a name as children born into any other society do.

"Have you got any plans?" Kit asked May. "Your society, collective... do you have any plans for the future?"

She asked mostly out of curiosity, the Cooperative had shown every sign of being technologically advanced. Their architecture were an unusual combination of ideas from the various cultures their collective contained, it looked strange and yet beautiful, the vast number of ideas from the Cooperative's mind, all inspired by individual cultures and blended together in fascinating ways.

A lot of their technology was Borg or an adaptation of Borg technology, the interfaces they used to connect to their buildings for example, the Borg combined technology well and the Cooperative had used that, but they had holodecks and other forms of entertainment as well, and technology for growing food, things the Borg would have considered irrelevant.

While Borg tech was often the basis of their devices, their technology was distinctly different from that of the Collective's, often built upon by the innovation the Cooperative was able to possess. The Cooperative could innovate where the Borg could not because all of their voices could express themselves. They were clearly capable of building ships but Kit had seen no evidence of any.

"We have been considering that question for a while." May admitted "A good proportion of our mind wants to make ships, to make contact with the outside but another equally substantial proportion is afraid, we are safe here, safe from the Borg. If they ever discovered our existence it would likely mean our demise."

Six considered a discussion she'd had with Kamaia a while back, she and the Captain had explained to her that the DFA 'assimilated' new worlds by asking them (rather than forcing them) to join. Her understanding of the diplomatic process involved was basic but she did know that you had to ask if you wanted to expand your collective.

“Will you join our collective?” She asked suddenly.

Both May and Kit gave her a look of confusion.

“The Cooperative cannot come home with us.” Kit said to Six, grinning at the thought of bringing more than 80,000 people home with her.

“Oh we know that! They would not fit.” Six sighed “We mean... would you like to join the DFA?”

There was a pause, the Cooperative had been isolated for 50 years, all they knew of the DFA was what Six and Kal's interface had shown them.

“We do not think that we want to join your organisation... not at present...” May replied, the Cooperative had a better idea of the politics involved than Six did and were not exactly keen on abandoning their splendid isolation to get involved with the powers of the Delta Quadrant. “However... if we ever decide to leave our planet, if we ever decide to explore, then you may consider us a friend.”

Six smiled and looked to Kit “Provide instructions?” she asked.

“How about 'time to go home'?” Kit said. “Thank you very much for your hospitality, we hope to see you again sometime.”

“And thank you for the connection.” Six said in earnest “We... we never expected to feel that again.” A tear welled in her eye again but she wiped it away, Six wanted to belong to a Hive Mind... but she wanted to belong to Cromwell more.

“You are always welcome to visit our mind.” May replied, smiling at Six. “And you are always welcome to visit our planet.” she said to Kit with a grin. She knew Kit would never be convinced to connect to them.

The pair embarked in the newly repaired shuttle, Six assimilating what she needed from the Cooperative in order to fly the shuttle since Kal was staying behind. They'd been gone two days now and Kit was wondering if anyone had noticed their absence, she thought it very probable that they had, Six's schedule would have seen to that, DW123, Brinn or Kamaia would certainly have noticed the lack of Six and Kit's roommate and the rest of the Engineering team would have noticed hers, she hoped they'd not caused to much concern.. would the Major have sent someone looking for them?

Epilogue

TO: Outpost Hope One, Sentinel Station, Husar

FROM: DFA Cromwell B

BEGIN MESSAGE:

This message is being sent due to the request of Four of Six, also known as Kal. Our designation is Six of Twelve, we belong to the DFA vessel Cromwell B.

Cromwell answered a distress call 14 days ago and rescued Four of Six. His shuttle had been damaged by an asteroid and he had become lost.

While we were repairing the shuttle Four of Six disobeyed our collective and was placed in the brig. He was allowed to leave under the condition that Six of Twelve watched him, so that he did not threaten Cromwell.

Four of Six acted as our sub-unit for 8 days, he was a useless sub-unit at first but we found out that this was because he was sick, once Nurse D'Troyan repaired (she prefers the word 'healed') him he was of more use and after some practice he became an efficient sub-unit.

Once his shuttle's navigational sensors had been repaired Kit told Four of Six that we must perform a test. During this test the shuttle was hit by a Space Amoeba (Four of Six is a useless pilot), he sent us into warp in spite of the fact that the shuttle could not handle it and we ended up in the Netrik Expanse.

We met a collective designated the Cooperative. The Cooperative allowed Six of Twelve and Four of Six to experience their mind and Four of Six chose to stay with them. Before we left the Cooperative they asked us to send this message from Four of Six:

Husar, I hope Six gets this back to you. I wanted to say thank you and goodbye, you're the closest thing I've ever had to a friend and I'm going to miss you. I wanted to let you know that I found what I was looking for, that I found peace and home.

I know you were mostly just using me but even so, your companionship meant more to me than you can possibly imagine.

Watch out for Seket and if she, or anyone else, asks what's happened to me then tell them I'm dead, we (the Cooperative) would rather remain a secret for now.

~ Four

END MESSAGE

For the second time Husar went to call the kid and remembered Kal was off somewhere on some foolish expedition. Kids....why it made a good Cardassian shake her head in disgust, Husar would never have wasted her time running all over the galaxy. No, she did her duty and was a good Scravvan. Not like kids these days...She grumbled again as the computer beeped, a signal that there was a transmission.

She almost ignored it but read the message and shook her head again, idiot kid. Silly idiot kid. She went to reply, angry then stopped. What was the point when he wouldn't get it?

She grumbled again, that's what she got for replying on a fool Kazon. Now she had to go clean up his apartment of course, before Kang and Kodos did it for her. Kid goes off and never comes back, oh that will serve him right. Not that she will miss him around. She went to erase the message and stopped herself. It could wait. Time enough to clear away everything and start again.

Husar shook her head again, muttered to herself. Why anyone would think she cared about the brat. Hah. She was only upset at losing a valuable employee. That was all. She muttered again and shut off the terminal. Shut and locked the door. Stalked off to the back room to fume. Yeah that was it.

The fact he saw fit to warn her about Seket as if she was a barely furred vole. It was infuriating and she would chew him out when he came back. But then he wasn't coming back and the thought made her kick over a box, cursing under her breath. Feh, she may as well go deal with Gordo and have someone to spit and hiss at. Later. Right now Husar was content to sit in the back room and be alone...

Location: DFA Cromwell B

Six was carrying her ficus, she was pretty sure it needed repotting now but she wanted to check with Millar before she attempted it (or really she hoped Millar would do it for her because she only had one hand and her prosthesis was not designed for the delicate job of plant re-potting). Her scans revealed a single lifeform but as she approached she frowned, it was not Millar.

There was a Kazon making his way through the arboretum. It wasn't quite like a hike, but it was one of the closest things someone could get to a walk in the woods without escaping into a holodeck. He glanced up when he saw someone approaching and was surprised to see the Borg. "Hello, Six. What brings you here?"

"We are here to see Millar." Six explained. "He must be elsewhere because you are the only life-form we have detected."

Covaar nodded. "I think we are the only ones here." He noticed the ficus and had to admit he was a little surprised to see it. He hadn't considered the fact that Borg might be interested in gardening. To each his own....

"How is Kal doing? I have been thinking about him since our conversation in Ten Forward."

"Four of Six is gone." Six explained simply "He was assimilated by the Cooperative."

Covaar cocked his head in wonderment. He had heard of the Collective, but the Cooperative was a mystery to him. "I am unfamiliar with that term. It is not something I have heard of in relation to the Borg."

"The Cooperative are a collective of severed Borg, they form a hive mind of 86,000 life-forms. Six of Twelve joined their mind when we met them but we came back because we are Cromwell's drone, not theirs. Four of Six chose to stay with the Cooperative because he was content with them and they considered him to be worthy."

Interesting, thought Covaar as his eyebrows rose in surprise. "So, it is like a secondary Collective independent of the main Borg Collective?"

"Yes." Six of Twelve agreed. "They were all severed drones, like Six of Twelve, but they formed a new hive mind... it is not like the Borg hive mind though... they do not restrict their thoughts and feelings with a vinculum. It is less efficient, because they argue with themselves, for example, some of their mind wishes to leave the planet but another part is too afraid and they cannot reach a consensus on the matter." she explained. "They do all understand each other though, they understand

each other perfectly because they are joined and so the lack of harmony will not destroy them, only slow them down.”

The Cooperative certainly were interesting. They lacked the forced consensus of the Borg, allowing for 80,000 opinions and all of those opinions were considered by the mind as a whole but there was no conflict because each of those 80,000 people understood one-another perfectly and because hurting someone within their society would equate to hurting yourself. They were one but, much like any individual, they had many different points of view and considered them before deciding what to do, they had 'mixed feelings' about leaving the planet.

“And members choose to be a part of the Cooperative?” He was surprised as to how different that was from how the Collective worked. He wondered how that might operate differently as a result of that freedom of choice in joining.

“Some of them chose.” Six said “Others were forced. The original members created the hive consciousness in order to stop the civil wars that had arisen on their planet after they were severed from the Borg. They do not wish to expand like the Borg though, they only assimilated Four of Six because he wished it and they let us leave.”

“May I ask why you chose the Cromwell over that Cooperative?”

Six thought, sometimes she did not know and sometimes she even regretted leaving, it had not been easy. Staying with the Cooperative had been very tempting, it was the closest she could ever have had to her previous existence without rejoining the collective but... it was not where she belonged.

“Six of Twelve returned to Cromwell because we are Cromwell's drone, not theirs.” She stated simply. In a way it had been that simple, this was home, it would not reach its perfection as quickly as either the Cooperative or the Borg, not in Six's opinion, but it was home. Six did not make many decisions but the one she did make was that she would rather achieve her perfection inefficiently with Cromwell than achieve it efficiently anywhere else.

“Will there be any chance that I might see Four again?” asked Covaar. He used the new name, rather than Kal out of respect for his choice.

“Possibly.” Six commented “It depends on how long it takes for them to reach consensus. Part of their mind wanted to leave their planet and explore but the other part was afraid that leaving would result in the Borg finding them. They do not wish to belong to the Borg again. They did say that they would be our friend if they left and so you might meet them one day.”

Covaar was intrigued by the Cooperative the way Six was describing it. There seemed to be a higher level of individualism that was found in the Collective, though

the individuals seemed to be more interconnected than other people. “Could he not just decide to come and visit?”

“He will not be an individual anymore.” Six explained “If you meet Four of Six again you will really be talking to the whole Cooperative, the individual you knew is only a small part of that now, but his thoughts and his feelings are a part of them.”

To say that he fully understood what Six was saying would have been a fib, but he thought he grasped the basics. “Has joining the Cooperative helped him deal with his sadness?”

“He is happy.” Six said confidently, she had felt that during her connection with the Cooperative, she had felt the peace Kal had found with the Cooperative “The Cooperative share his sadness with him, they share a little bit of it between all of their minds so that it does not hurt like it did before because it is spread out.”

The Kazon nodded. “That is good to hear. I know things were difficult for him.” It seemed that Four had found an alternate way to ease his pain. A part of Covaar was saddened by the fact that it meant he couldn't be the person he was in order to do that.

It was then that Covaar realized that this might not be easy for Six herself. “How are you handling his absence? I know that you two were close ... he was a part of your own mini-Collective. I think he referred to himself as a 'sub-unit-1'”

“We do miss him sometimes.” Six admitted “He was a useless sub-unit at first but that was because he was sick, once he repaired he started to improve.”

She had actually considered asking Kal to join with her literally, she had not because she knew that his grief would have overloaded her implant in a collective of two.

She did miss Kal, but, while Six was far from perfect, she was not selfish. Growing up in a hive mind does, if nothing else, teach you not to think of yourself, not to put your needs or desires first, Six had no 'self' and Kal leaving did not affect 'us'. So she smiled slightly, she knew Kal was happy, she had felt it.

“But he will serve his new collective well.” she finished confidently, “and he will be content for the rest of his existence.”

He had studied the drone before him as she had spoken and wondered if she really believed the last statement. She, too, had once been a part of a larger unit, supposedly happy with being a part of the Collective. She had chosen otherwise, which was evidence not only by her presence here on the Cromwell, but also by her other choices. They seemed to be evidence of a higher individuality than even she had chosen to admit.

“Do you wish he had stayed?”

“We do not think so.” Six said, unsure.

She tended to ask others what she wanted, she did not know if 'we' would have preferred Kal to stay and she did not realise that he was asking did 'I' want him to stay because she did not consider herself to be an individual.

She thought a little longer before continuing

“We do not think so, he was a potential threat.” Six said “And he probably would have betrayed us to the Borg in the end.”

She had felt Kal's obsession for the Borg (it just about rivaled the obsession they have with themselves) and he had outright told her that he wanted to be assimilated. She was pretty sure he would have betrayed them in some futile attempt to prove his worth had he chosen to stay. “We do miss him, but he is better where he is. He was looking for a collective to belong to, we had thought that it would be Cromwell, but we were wrong. He has found the existence he was looking for.”

What Six meant, and did not have the words to express, was that she missed Kal but she was happy for him.