

Love Without Form



By Dr. Winston O'Boogie

Love Without Form

A Star Trek Fanfiction
by
Dr. Winston O'Boogie

Copyright Dr. Winston O'Boogie 2023 ©

— Introduction —

When this story begins, the *USS Voyager* has been stranded in the Delta Quadrant for approximately a year. The events unfold the day after the *Voyager* episode “Projections,” which is episode three of the show’s second season. We learn at the end of “Projections” that *Voyager* was hit by an anomalous radiation surge. Also of note is the tenth episode of season one, titled “Prime Factors” where *Voyager* encounters people from the planet Sikaris who are known for their legendary hospitality—they find pleasure in bringing pleasure to others. Currently, it’s Stardate 48894.9 and we’re in the living quarters of Tom Paris...

– Chapter One –

Ensign Jasleen Singh stands before Tom Paris, her eyes bloodshot and brimming with unshed tears that threaten to spill over at any moment. Her furrowed brow reveals the deep anxiety that gnaws at her core, and Tom, at a loss for how to react, remains motionless and quiet. Time seems to stretch out indefinitely as they both stand looking into each other's eyes, locked in their shared uncertainty. After a long, uncomfortable silence, Jasleen finally gathers the courage to speak.

"Tom, I need you to understand something about these past few weeks together," she implores, her voice cracking with emotion.

"I'm listening," Tom says, crossing his arms in front of him.

"What's gone on between us, this whirlwind romance of ours, it's been more important to me than I could ever express," she says as her eyes beseech Tom, desperate for him to grasp the gravity of her words. "Which is why I don't want either of us to go through what comes next."

Tom can see the fear in Jasleen's eyes, and he reaches out to take her hand, offering a reassuring squeeze. "Whatever it is," he says soothingly. "we'll face it together."

"I don't think that's possible," Jasleen says, holding his hand tighter. "All that matters to me now is that you know how deeply I love you."

Taken aback, Tom's eyes widen with surprise, but a moment later they regain their composure. "I have all kinds of feelings for you, too, Jas," he responds, swallowing hard. "And uhm... I ahh..."

"Tom, you don't have to say anything. I *know* you have feelings for me, and there's no need for you to name them right now," Jasleen says, her voice soft and tender. She places her hand on Tom's chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her fingertips. "But what's happened between us is so much more than I ever thought possible when I left the Gamma Quadrant."

"*The Gamma Quadrant?*" Tom blurts out, taken aback. "When were you there?"

"I was..." Jasleen hesitates as her eyes lock onto Tom's, her expression deeply troubled. Her voice falters as she continues, "That doesn't matter anymore. All that matters is that you know I love you."

Tom's concern deepens as he searches Jasleen's face for clues. "If that's really all that matters, then what has you so upset?" he asks, determined to understand the source of her suffering and offer whatever support he can.

"It's because when I finish saying what I have to say, I won't be surprised if you despise me," Jasleen confesses, her voice trembling. "I mean, how can you *not* hate me once you've heard—"

"Jas, please!" Tom exclaims, interrupting her with a nervous chuckle. "*Hate?* I can't fathom ever hating you."

Tom's expression softens, and he reaches up to delicately cup Jasleen's face in his hands. He's struggling to comprehend how anything she could reveal might be so dire as to cause him to feel such animosity towards her. Her eyes search his with a plea for understanding, while at the same time, his eyes urge her to trust in the strength of their relationship, regardless of whatever secret she's been harboring.

"I know you feel that way right now, but listen," she mutters. "*I've been lying to you.*"

Tom tilts his head in surprise. "You have?" he replies with an air of incredulity.

"Oh, yes," she says, her expression filled with shame. "There have been so many lies that I've lost count. I've been lying to everyone on the crew since the moment I set foot on *Voyager*."

Tom remains rooted to the spot, unfazed by this information, and when he speaks, his voice is full of kindness. "I don't know what you've lied about, but I do *know you*. You're a good person, Jas," he says. "You must have had reasons to lie, right? I don't think you'd be—"

Jasleen gently places two fingers over Tom's lips, silencing him. As she does, her tears begin to flow freely, cascading down her cheeks. She wipes her eyes, and her gaze follows her own movements, drawn to the teardrops that have pooled in her hand. As Jasleen stares at the tears in her palm, a sense of wonder glimmers in her eyes.

"I had no idea this was even possible," Jasleen says, marveling at the tears. "I didn't know I was capable of crying. Look at them! I'm not certain how it's even a biological reality, but here I am with tears falling from my eyes and it's happening because of you."

"Me?" Tom says, arching an eyebrow.

"Yes, you! *You did this*," she explains, holding her cupped hand up to his face. "You and a bit of radiation. You've given me so much, and these tears are absolute proof; the impossible has become possible, all because of you, Tom Paris."

"Okay, Jasleen, now you're *really* confusing me. And honestly, scaring me a bit." Tom places his hands on her shivering arms, and searches her eyes for answers, trying to understand the turmoil she's experiencing. "Why on earth would it be impossible for you to cry?"

His question lingers in her ears, an urgent plea for clarity amidst this emotional chaos, but Jasleen says nothing as she wrestles with the truths she knows she must reveal. Her hesitation is evident to Tom, he can see she's waging an internal battle with herself, and then, as if a dam has burst, a sudden surge of raw emotion floods through her. She can no longer contain herself—she throws her arms around Tom, gripping him tightly, hoping the intensity of her embrace conveys some of the desperation and vulnerability that she's struggling to put into words.

"Thank you for showing me that I'm capable of love," she whispers into his ear.

"What kind of thing is that to say? *Of course*, you're capable of love," he whispers back.

"You don't get it," Jasleen says, pushing Tom away just enough to once again lock her tear-filled eyes with his. "Until I met you, I had no idea I was able to love, let alone *be loved*. Well, I mean, *not like this*."

"Jas, listen to me, you're—" Tom begins.

"I can't put this off any longer," she says with a tone of surrender—she's finally ready to share her devastating secrets. "Tom, I'm not Jasleen."

"Wait," Tom says, taking a step back. "*What?*"

"Jasleen died in an accident back in the Alpha Quadrant over a year ago. I was standing next to her when it happened. Instead of telling anyone, I buried her body, and took over her life," she says, steeling herself for what's to come. "She's dead and I've been pretending to be her this entire time."

"Wow, that's..." Tom's eyes widen with bewildered horror, and for a moment, he's speechless. "... that's unexpected."

"Well, there's more," she continues. "On top of that, I'm sick."

"Sick?" Tom says. "What do you mean *sick*? How sick?"

"I'm really sick, Tom," Jasleen says, her pained delivery leaving no doubt. "*I think I'm dying.*"

Tom's legs give out and he falls backward into a chair as his mind tries to process these revelations.

"That's also unexpected," he mumbles.

"The surge of radiation that hit *Voyager* yesterday," she says, kneeling in front of him. "It did something to me, something that's killing me."

"No, no, that doesn't make any sense," Tom argues, shaking his head. "Nothing was affected other than—"

"I know it doesn't make sense," she interrupts. "But that surge did something to me on a cellular level that I can't explain. *Something's very wrong with me.*"

Tom looks at her, his heart breaking as he realizes the severity of the situation, and says, "Then let's get you to the Doc. He'll be able to help."

"And that brings me to the last thing I've been keeping from you."

"Which is?" Tom asks, grabbing the arms of the chair, bracing himself for another shock.

"I'm not sure he will be able to help since the Doctor has never seen my physiology before," she explains.

"Oh yeah?" Tom says hesitantly. "Why's that?"

"Because I'm not human."

"You're not human?" Tom echoes, his stomach twisting.

"No, I'm not," she confirms, her voice now resolute. "*Tom, I'm a Changeling.*"

– Chapter Two –

Jasleen and Tom stare at each other, and after what feels like an eternity of heart-wrenching silence, Tom finally speaks.

“You’re a *what*?” Tom asks.

“A Changeling,” she reiterates, her voice unwavering.

“A Changeling? You mean like that guy on Deep Space Nine that I met in the Ferengi bar?” Tom asks, his head spinning as he tries to wrap his mind around everything he’s learned in the last five minutes.

“*Exactly like him*,” she affirms, nodding slowly. “Odo and I are–”

Suddenly, Jasleen begins to convulse violently, and all the color drains from Tom’s face as he watches her once-solid legs begin to contort, metamorphosing into a writhing pool of goo. He can hardly believe his eyes as her entire body ripples and undulates, taking on new shapes and forms in rapid succession.

“Jas! What’s happening,” Tom exclaims, leaping from the chair and dropping to his knees beside her. He wraps one arm around her head and the other around her shoulders, the only areas that are relatively stable and not shifting with incredible speed. Tom can feel her body pulsing beneath his hands, her skin rippling like the surface of a lake disturbed by a stone. Tom cradles her, and he can’t help but stare with a combination of awe and terror as her viscous mass coalesces into a shape that’s both humanly familiar and unsettlingly alien.

“That radiation surge has interfered with my morphogenic matrix, and now I’m unable to hold my

shape,” Jasleen gasps, trying to maintain her grip on Tom as her legs and torso continue to shift and change.

“I have no idea what any of that means, so we need to get you to the Doc right now,” he cries, urgently tapping his combadge. “Paris to the transporter room, we need an emergency medical site-to-site transport—”

“No!” she protests. “Absolutely no transporters! Give me a moment, let me focus. I’ll be able to walk...”

Her eyelids flutter closed, and with her eyes squeezed tightly shut, she concentrates on regaining control over herself. Within seconds, Jasleen’s entire body starts to solidify. Her legs, which had previously melted into an amorphous mass, begin to reform to their usual appearance. Tom, sensing her determination, wraps his arm around her waist, lending support as he helps her to her feet. Together, they leave his quarters, staggering down the corridor, making their way toward the turbolift.

Minutes later, they stumble into sickbay, with Tom doing his best to hold Jasleen upright as her body continues to change form unpredictably. They find the Doctor engrossed in his work, conducting tests on a PADD at his desk, but he’s on his feet and by their side in an instant, helping Tom gingerly place Jasleen on a biobed. As they do, the lower half of Jasleen’s body once again begins to morph into a shimmering, viscous pool of Changeling-liquid. The Doctor’s eyes widen in surprise at the sight, but he doesn’t let his astonishment hinder his actions—he quickly retrieves his medical tricorder and starts scanning her, grimacing as he interprets the readings.

“I’ve never seen anything quite like this,” the Doctor says, his voice laced with confusion as he scans his patient. “My medical records say Jasleen Singh is a 27-year-old human Punjabi female. What I can tell from these scans,

you're obviously not her. Your cells are considerably older and certainly *not human*..."

"Doc, you're right," Tom explains, his voice shaking. "She's a Changeling and the radiation that hit us yesterday did *something* to her."

The Doctor scowls and turns to look at Tom, his expression a mixture of puzzlement and disbelief. "*What's a Changeling?*"

"Augh! That's right, you didn't come online until *after* we left Deep Space Nine," Tom says, shaking his head in frustration.

Jasleen, who's writhing in pain and struggling to speak, tries to explain her situation to the Doctor. "I belong to a species with a morphogenic matrix known as Changelings. The radiation that destabilized your program yesterday is now causing my cells to destabilize as well."

"I've never heard of such a thing," the Doctor says, curiously evaluating Jasleen's deteriorating state. "Although I must say a morphogenic matrix is an extraordinary biological feature."

Tom, growing more impatient by the second, snaps at the Doctor. "While her biology might be fascinating, she desperately needs the brilliant medical expertise you love to brag about. So, focus on saving her life!"

"As usual, you're not helping the situation, Mr. Paris," the Doctor says, rolling his eyes. "Now, we need something to contain her, or she'll be all over the floor. Tom, make yourself useful and go replicate a container, one large enough to accommodate her entire form."

"Consider it done," Tom replies as he runs to the replicator. Once he has the container in hand, a sizable rectangular tub that's large enough to comfortably hold Jasleen, he puts it on the biobed and taps his combadge.

“Paris to Captain Janeway. You need to come down to sickbay, there’s something you need to see.”

“I’m sorry, Tom,” Captain Janeway responds. “I can’t abandon my current—”

“Captain,” Tom interjects, doing everything in his power to maintain his composure. “Ensign Singh is a Changeling, and I think she’s dying.”

There’s a long, tense pause before Captain Janeway replies. “I’ll be right there.”

– Chapter Three –

Captain Janeway arrives, accompanied by Tuvok and Security Officer Andrews, and as they enter the sickbay, their faces register shock and disbelief at the sight before them: Ensign Singh struggling to maintain her form, with her legs in a liquid state, pooled in the large container. Tuvok and Andrews cautiously raise their phasers, aiming them at Jasleen as the captain regains her composure.

“Step away from the biobed, Tom,” Captain Janeway says, her voice firm.

“Captain,” Tom protests, his grip on Jasleen tightening protectively. “She’s in a lot of pain and needs—”

“Now, Mr. Paris,” Captain Janeway interrupts, her voice leaving no room for argument.

Tom straightens himself and, with a heavy heart, he takes a few steps away from Jasleen. As soon as he’s at a safe distance, the captain issues an order for a security forcefield to be activated around the biobed. The tension in the air is palpable as the forcefield hums to life, creating a protective barrier between Jasleen and the rest of them.

“Captain, I understand your need for caution, but the phasers aren’t necessary,” Jasleen says, her voice weak and strained as she struggles with each word. “I’m not a threat—I would *never* hurt anyone on this crew.”

Captain Janeway’s expression remains guarded as she responds. “Given the limited information we have about The Dominion, I believe it’s best to err on the side of caution for the time being.”

“I get it, I do,” Jasleen replies. “The Dominion’s reputation for deceit and manipulation is well known. However, I haven’t connected to The Great Link in many

years, and I'm not affiliated with The Dominion. Yes, I'm a Changeling, but I'm *absolutely not* a Founder."

Captain Janeway's eyes narrow as she considers Jasleen's words. "I'm not sure that distinction carries much weight at this point," she says.

Tom, visibly confused by this information, makes a quizzical expression and asks, "What exactly is a Founder? Or The Dominion? Or the Great Link?"

"We'll have to get back to all that at a later time," Captain Janeway says to Tom without taking her eyes off Jasleen. "Right now, I need to know what you did to Ensign Singh. Did you kill her to spy on the Federation?" Captain Janeway asks Jasleen, her tone deeply suspicious.

"I never harmed Ensign Singh," Jasleen insists, her voice filled with sincerity. "I was living on Bajor as a Bajoran edaphologist in the Dahkur province, and hiding from The Dominion, when Jasleen arrived for a mission. She was on an expedition that took her into some of the surrounding mountains and I was part of the local support team. She was researching new ways..."

Jasleen halts mid-sentence, taking a moment to collect herself while fighting against the pain and exhaustion that threaten to overwhelm her. Her appearance and shape are growing increasingly unstable, and her speech is labored, but despite the immense difficulty, she summons her remaining strength to continue.

"... new ways to improve soil conditions other than using expensive reclamators. Ensign Singh and I were together when we were hit by a landslide. I attempted to save her, but my efforts were in vain, and I made a snap decision—I buried her body and assumed her identity, hoping it would help to distance myself from The Dominion. My actions were selfish, yes, but they were never to spy."

The Doctor, who has been moving in and out of the forcefield to assess Jasleen, turns his attention to Captain Janeway. "Captain," the Doctor says. "Over the past few minutes, Ensign Singh's condition has measurably deteriorated, and from what I can gather, it appears to be directly related to Mr. Paris."

"What do you mean Doctor?" Captain Janeway inquires, puzzled.

"It's his proximity," the Doctor clarifies. "Since the two of them arrived, I've observed a direct correlation between her condition and his distance from her."

Captain Janeway raises an eyebrow, asking, "So, the closer Tom is to her, the better she fares?"

"That's precisely what I'm saying," the Doctor confirms, nodding. "I can't explain it, but then again, there isn't much about this situation that I *can* explain. I'm working on devising a treatment plan to stabilize her cellular structure, but until then, it would seem that Mr. Paris is her best hope."

"Captain, please," Tom implores, his eyes pleading. "*Let me inside the forcefield.*"

"Captain," Jasleen whispers, her voice strained with each word. "I'd die before I'd hurt Tom—I'm in love with him."

This visibly catches Captain Janeway off guard, and she studies Jasleen intently, scrutinizing her for any signs of deceit. After weighing the situation carefully, she makes the decision to deactivate the forcefield, telling Tuvok and Andrews to maintain their vigilant stance, keeping their phasers pointed at Jasleen. Tom, grateful, pulls up a chair next to the biobed, and as soon as he's settled, Captain Janeway activates the forcefield once more. The moment Tom touches Jasleen, she starts to stabilize and solidify,

providing a sense of relief for Tom and astonishment for everyone else.

“Captain, my patient requires rest,” the Doctor interjects firmly, addressing Captain Janeway with a protective tone. “I strongly recommend that we pause the questions for now and allow her the opportunity to recuperate.”

Captain Janeway, understanding the necessity of prioritizing Jasleen’s well-being over her desire for answers, reluctantly nods in agreement. “Very well, Doctor,” she concedes, and turning to Andrews and Tuvok, she instructs, “Andrews, you stay here. Tuvok, you’re with me.”

As Captain Janeway and Tuvok make their exit from the sickbay, Tom and Jasleen find themselves enveloped in another poignant silence, their heightened emotions a palpable presence between them. Jasleen’s head, neck, right shoulder, and right arm are the only parts of her that still retain their solid form, while the remainder of her body has transformed into an amorphous, liquid mass that pools at the base of the container.

Jasleen’s pain escalates, and it isn’t long before she succumbs to unconsciousness. Tom, expecting the remaining shape of Jasleen to lose its form and pool together with the rest of her in the container, waits and watches. After a few minutes, Tom realizes that even though she’s unconscious, Jasleen is somehow still holding her shape. Emotionally drained from the maelstrom of events that have transpired, he wraps his hand around hers, rests his head on her shoulder, and drifts off to sleep.

– Chapter Four –

Tom, feeling as if his head is engulfed in a thick fog, gradually emerges from his nap. His vision remains stubbornly blurred despite his efforts to focus his eyes, and he attempts to lift his hand to rub the sleep from his face, only to be met with an alarming resistance—his hand seems inexplicably stuck, refusing to obey his commands. Forcing his bleary eyes open, Tom glances down at his immobilized hand, and his heart lurches in his chest. The sight before him defies explanation. His hand and Jasleen's have somehow *fused together*, merging into a single, flesh-colored mass. The sight leaves him momentarily breathless, unable to comprehend the impossibility of what's happened; he and Jasleen are now bound together, quite literally.

Panicked, Tom calls for the Doctor while simultaneously shaking Jasleen, trying to rouse her from her unconscious state. The Doctor, taken aback by the sight of their merged limbs, whips out his medical tricorder, carefully examining the point of fusion and scanning their flesh for any clue as to the cause. As Tom continues to shake Jasleen, her eyes finally flick open, and she immediately looks down at her hand, which has become one with Tom's in a manner eerily reminiscent of a Changeling link. Her sleepy eyes bulge with horror.

"*What have I done?*" Jasleen gasps, her voice quavering.

"Well, it seems you've really taken our relationship to the next level, huh?" Tom quips with a lopsided grin, attempting to inject some levity into the tense atmosphere.

"This isn't funny, Tom," Jasleen murmurs, her expression troubled. "Are you in pain?"

"I can't really feel *anything*, so don't worry, it doesn't hurt," Tom reassures her as he starts poking at their fused hands. "Seems like you tried to link with me while you were unconscious," he suggests.

"How is this possible? Is it because of the radiation?" Jasleen asks the Doctor, her voice cracking with panic. "Earlier I found myself crying and now this? I've never heard of such a thing: *a Changeling linking with a solid!* What's happening to me?"

"Honestly, I don't have the foggiest idea what's happening to you," the Doctor admits, his expression thoughtful. "What I can tell you is that, yes, it's the radiation. It appears that the radiation isn't just causing your cells to mutate, but, for lack of a better term, they're *evolving*. You don't appear to be dying, though I imagine you must feel like you are. We need to figure out how to manage this transformation, separate you from Tom, and then find a way to stabilize your condition."

Security Officer Andrews, unsure how to handle this situation, taps his combadge, saying, "Andrews to Captain Janeway."

"Yes, Andrews?" Janeway's voice responds.

"Captain, I recommend you return to sickbay," Andrews says as he eyes Tom and Jasleen. "There's been an unexpected development."

A few minutes later, when Captain Janeway and Tuvok enter the sickbay, their expressions convey both curiosity and concern as they take in the sight of Tom's hand now fused with Jasleen's.

"Doctor," Captain Janeway says, her tone demanding an explanation. "What's happened to them?"

"I'm not sure," the Doctor admits. "They were resting, so I stepped away to do some research, and when I returned, they were like this."

"Is Tom in any danger?" Captain Janeway inquires.

"I'd like to say no," the Doctor replies cautiously. "But, again, I'm not certain what's happening to either of them."

"Captain, please believe me when I tell you I didn't do this on purpose," Jasleen pleads, her eyes filled with desperation.

"I'm not sure what to believe right now," Captain Janeway says as she shakes her head. "This entire situation has become—"

"Chakotay to Captain Janeway," Chakotay's voice says through Janeway's combadge.

Captain Janeway taps her combadge and responds, "Go ahead."

"You're needed on the bridge," Chakotay explains. "*Immediately.*"

"Understood," Captain Janeway answers as she pivots toward the Doctor. "I want regular updates on their condition," she tells him as she points at Tom and Jasleen.

"Aye, Captain," the Doctor replies without looking up from his tricorder.

Captain Janeway turns to Tuvok, they exchange a nod, depart sickbay, and shortly after, the two of them emerge from the turbolift onto the bridge. The atmosphere is electric, with all the crew's eyes fixed on the viewscreen. It displays a magnificent fish-like creature, adorned with massive fins and boasting three separate heads while it lazily glides through the vacuum of space with an ethereal grace. Entranced by the captivating scene, Captain Janeway doesn't take her eyes off the viewscreen as she moves to stand beside Chakotay who's also sharing in the crew's wonder. Tuvok, maintaining his usual stoic demeanor, takes up his position at his station.

“Chakotay, what am I looking at?” Captain Janeway asks.

“I’m not sure. This creature suddenly appeared on our sensors and started circling the ship,” he answers. “There doesn’t seem to be any immediate threat, and its actions could almost be described as *playful*.”

“It reminds me of a lionfish from Earth,” Harry chimes in. “Except it’s a few hundred times larger and has three heads.”

As the bridge crew marvels at the enigmatic three-headed-space-fish, they’re caught off guard when it suddenly shrinks in size, adopting a less intimidating form. The transformation is rapid and seamless—the once enormous creature gradually becoming smaller and smaller until it’s so small they can’t see it anymore. The bridge crew exchanges glances, unsure of how to proceed.

“Mr. Kim?” Captain Janeway inquires intently.

“I’m... uhm... I’m sorry, Captain,” Harry says, his voice wavering as he peers intently at the console in front of him. “It’s gone.”

“What do you mean *it’s gone*?” Captain Janeway demands, her expression one of exasperated bewilderment.

“It was on the sensors, and then suddenly it wasn’t,” Harry explains, his voice filled with disbelief. “It’s like it shrank so small that it just... *vanished*.”

At that moment, Security Officer Andrews’ voice comes through Captain Janeway’s combadge. “Andrews to Captain Janeway.”

Captain Janeway taps her combadge, her expression hardening. “Go ahead Andrews.”

“Captain, you’d better return to sickbay,” Andrews urges, his voice strained with urgency. “Somehow, and I

can't explain how, there's now a *second Changeling* inside the forcefield with Tom. And it's asking for you."

Alarmed, Captain Janeway swiftly taps her combadge and responds, "I'm on my way." She turns to Chakotay, her eyes wide with astonishment. "A second one? That giant fish-creature must be a Changeling," she says, shaking her head in disbelief. "They're popping up everywhere today. It's like we're back in the Gamma Quadrant."

"Given the frequency of your visits," Chakotay replies, his tone half-serious, half-amused, "Perhaps it's time to mull over the idea of moving the sickbay closer to the bridge."

"Certainly, something worth exploring," Captain Janeway agrees, a hint of sardonic amusement in her voice. "You have the bridge, Commander," she says, turning toward the turbolift.

"Shall I accompany you?" Tuvok asks the captain as she passes by his station.

"No," Captain Janeway answers, shaking her head. "I'd like you to collaborate with B'Elanna and Lieutenant Carey on possible solutions for Tom and Jasleen's predicament."

"Understood, Captain," Tuvok confirms, nodding in acknowledgment.

As Janeway and Tuvok disappear behind the closing turbolift doors, the crew returns their attention to their duties, while Chakotay gazes pensively at the view screen.

– Chapter Five –

Security Officer Andrews maintains a steady grip on his phaser, aiming it at the Changeling that has inexplicably materialized inside the forcefield with Tom and Jasleen.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Andrews says cautiously, his voice tense. “But I will if I have to.”

The Changeling offers a reassuring smile, nodding in understanding. “I appreciate your concern,” it replies amiably. “Someone suddenly boarding your ship without permission? That’s not only a huge security risk, but it’s also quite impolite! While some surprises can be pleasurable, I understand that this one isn’t. I apologize for my rude behavior, and I assure you, I have no intention of causing harm to anyone on this vessel. So please, if it makes you feel more comfortable, keep your weapon trained on me. All I ask is that you exercise caution and avoid firing unless it’s absolutely necessary. Can we agree on that?”

Still feeling uncertain about the bizarre turn of events, Andrews hesitates for a moment before nodding. “Agreed.”

“So, you’re like me, aren’t you?” the Changeling asks with a curious tone as it turns to face Jasleen, who is visibly shocked by the sudden appearance of another Changeling. “You’re a polyform?”

“Yes,” Jasleen responds, her voice wary. “I’m a Changeling, too.”

“*Changeling?*” the being exclaims, chuckling. “Ooooooo, I like that! I’ve never been called a Changeling before! Everyone either refers to me as a polyform or a

multimorph. It's always a pleasure to learn a new word that
|—"

The door to the sickbay slides open, and Captain Janeway strides in, her expression tense. Her eyes lock onto the Changeling inside the forcefield with Tom and Jasleen, immediately noting that it appears to be a male dressed in casual clothing reminiscent of what she saw back on Sikaris. She turns to Andrews, asking, "Where did he come from?"

"I have no idea, Captain," Andrews replies. "He just sort of *materialized* inside the forcefield. Maybe he teleported in, I'm not sure."

The Changeling turns to face Captain Janeway, offering a warm smile and a friendly wave. "Greetings and salutations, Captain! I apologize for my rather abrupt entrance, but I've never really done anything like this before. My name is Zorin, and it wasn't my intention to alarm anyone, but I wasn't sure how else to initiate contact," the newcomer explains, hoping to alleviate some of her concerns. "As for my sudden appearance, I've learned how to change into various forms, including ones that can pass through your shielding."

"I'd like to know why you're on my ship Zorin," Captain Janeway demands in her most authoritative voice.

"I sensed there was a polyform in distress," Zorin explains to Captain Janeway. "I wanted to offer my help." The Changeling turns to Jasleen. "I've searched all over the galaxy for another being like me and never found one; not until I sensed you. And I didn't even know I *could* sense others of my kind until it happened."

"What are you doing in the Delta Quadrant?" Captain Janeway asks, her voice measured but curious.

"I'm not familiar with that term, *Delta Quadrant*," Zorin admits, tilting his head.

"It's what we call this quarter of the galaxy," Captain Janeway clarifies.

"What am I doing here?" Zorin grins broadly. "This is my home! I live here! On Sikaris!"

"Sikaris? Well then, that explains your appearance," Captain Janeway replies. "We were just there not long ago."

"Yes, I know," Zorin confirms with a nod. "That's where I first sensed there was another like me on this ship. I didn't want to intrude, and I wasn't sure how to introduce myself, so I followed but kept my distance."

"But that was weeks ago," Tom says. "You've been following us this entire time?"

"Yes," Zorin says, nodding and smiling. "I'm very patient."

"I can't believe there's a Changeling living in the Delta Quadrant," Jasleen murmurs, her voice weak and shaky. "You must be one of The Hundred."

"And what, precisely, are *The Hundred*?" Zorin inquires, his curiosity piqued.

"A long time ago, our people sent out one hundred infant Changelings into the galaxy to explore and eventually find their way back to the Great Link to share what they'd experienced. You must be one."

"The Great Link?" Zorin questions. "What's that?"

"Yeah," Tom chimes in. "I've been wondering the same thing."

Gathering her strength, Jasleen explains, "The Great Link is the central hub that Changelings merge into, forming a collective consciousness where we can communicate and share thoughts and experiences with one another."

"We can *merge*? Since I've never been around other Changelings, I had no idea such a thing was

possible. I imagine it must be quite an extraordinary experience, merging with another. How fascinating! Is it pleasurable?" Zorin asks Jasleen.

"It can be," she replies.

"Oh, I see! That's what's happened here, isn't it?" Zorin inquires, gesturing at Tom and Jasleen's fused hands. "You've attempted to merge with a monoform?"

"This wasn't supposed to happen," Jasleen says.

"Yeah, we're not exactly sure what's going on," Tom admits, offering a perplexed shrug. "We linked by accident."

"So, you refer to this merging as *linking*? And *The Great Link* is when all the Changelings link together," Zorin says, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "There's so much about being a polyform that I still don't know. What a pleasure it will be to learn more!"

With a pained effort, Jasleen manages to craft the semblance of a smile, and says, "I'll be happy to answer any questions you have." But the strain of her condition is evident, and she's unable to maintain the smile for long. Her form quivers noticeably, the vibrations spreading across her body in an uncontrollable shudder, as she continues to grapple with the relentless instability.

Zorin's excitement is dampened when he sees Jasleen's condition worsening. "My questions can wait," he says, his voice filled with genuine concern. "Please, tell me what I can do to help."

"It appears that Jasleen is experiencing morphogenic instability," the Doctor explains to Zorin as he scrutinizes the data on a medical tricorder. "As you can see, this condition is characterized by a loss of cellular cohesion, which is resulting in Jasleen experiencing difficulty in sustaining a solid or consistent shape. I've never encountered a biological makeup quite as unique as

yours, and although my knowledge of Changeling biology is limited, in my estimation the administration of your morphogenic enzymes will be helpful in stabilizing Jasleen's cellular matrix. However, I will need to further analyze the specific biochemistry of both of you before I can tailor an appropriate treatment. With all that being said, if you genuinely wish to help Jasleen, the most valuable contribution you could provide would be some of your own substance. In other words, I need a small sample of, well, *you*."

– Chapter Six –

The Doctor and Zorin make their way to a counter brimming with an array of sophisticated medical instruments. With a gentle nod, the Doctor carefully holds up a sterilized test tube, indicating that Zorin should provide a sample of his Changeling essence. Zorin, understanding the request, extends one of his fingers, and with remarkable control, he extrudes a tiny portion of his substance. The shimmering droplet of viscous liquid detaches from his fingertip and gracefully descends into the test tube.

“Thank you,” the Doctor says, his voice filled with fascination as he watches the Changeling sample settle at the bottom of the tube. “This will be invaluable.”

“It’s a pleasure to be of service,” Zorin says with a slight bow to the Doctor.

After sending Security Officer Andrews back to his usual duties, Captain Janeway turns her attention to Tom, her eyes filled with worry. “Tom, how are you feeling?” she asks, her demeanor tender yet firm.

“I feel fine,” Tom replies, forcing a half-smile onto his face in an attempt to allay the captain’s fears, but his voice wavers, betraying the strain of his situation. “The only problem is if I lose too much of my arm, I’ll have to start flying *Voyager* with my feet.”

Captain Janeway’s expression softens for a moment as she acknowledges his attempt at humor, then turns her attention to Jasleen, who is visibly struggling to maintain her shape. “And how about you?” Captain Janeway inquires.

“I can feel my body fighting against me—it’s an overwhelming struggle that’s taking all of my focus just to

hold my shape.” The exhaustion and pain in her voice is unmistakable, and it tugs at the heartstrings of everyone in the room. Jasleen’s expression turns wistful, and her voice carries a mixture of longing and frustration as she confesses, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I wish we were back in the Gamma Quadrant with access to The Dominion. We could really use The Founders’ help right about now.”

“Who are The Founders?” Zorin asks, curious. “And what is The Dominion?”

“Also questions I’d like answers to,” Tom says, mirroring Zorin’s curiosity.

“Well, Zorin, I’ll be honest with you,” Jasleen says. “Our people aren’t very benevolent. The Dominion is an interstellar empire governed by a group of Changelings who refer to themselves as The Founders. Their primary objective is to assert dominance and maintain control over all species and territories within their reach. Those they can’t control, they destroy.”

Tom’s eyes widen as he processes the information, and he can’t help but draw a parallel to another well-known threat. “They sound a lot like the Borg,” he remarks, the thought sending a chill down his spine.

A grimace warps Zorin’s features as he utters, “Oh, I’ve had my share of encounters with the Borg.” He shakes his head, a wry chuckle escaping him. “They’re an unfriendly bunch, aren’t they? Those Borg have a peculiar *inability* to grasp the concept of sharing pleasure with others. And now, sadly, it appears my own people are also unfamiliar with the notion.”

“The Founders’ idea of pleasure is an insidious one,” Jasleen explains, her voice carrying a note of bitterness. “They derive satisfaction from subjugating anyone who crosses their path.”

A thoughtful expression settles on Zorin's face. "Do any of the Changelings in the Gamma enjoy sharing pleasure?" he inquires, curiosity dancing in his eyes. "Or are all of them Founders in this Dominion?"

"The Founders would very much like for everyone to think that. They perpetuate the belief that every Changeling is a Founder—it's another one of their deceptions, a tactic straight out of their propaganda playbook. The thing is, while they refuse to admit it, there are Changelings like me who vehemently oppose The Dominion. Over the years, some of us have even attempted to stage a rebellion. We've made efforts to organize ourselves, but we are few and far between, and the Founders always manage to stifle our attempts."

Captain Janeway, caught off guard by this, asks, "So they're actively pursuing you due to your differing views from The Dominion?"

"*Differing views?* Captain, The Dominion's actions *disgust* me. I was a thorn in their side for a long, long time. I made it unequivocally clear I would do anything to stop The Founders and pledged that I would destroy The Dominion. For that, I paid the price—I've been on the run for as long as I can remember. While I was in the Gamma Quadrant, I spent most of my existence barely evading them. When the wormhole opened, I escaped to the Alpha Quadrant, only to find them hunting me there as well. This past year, being stranded in the Delta Quadrant, has been the first time in my life that I haven't had to constantly look over my shoulder for The Dominion."

"What would happen if they found you?" Tom inquires, his concern for her safety evident.

"They'd force me back into the Great Link," Jasleen explains. "The longer I'm separated from the Great Link, the more I develop as an individual with my own thoughts

and ideas. Once I'm forced back into the Great Link, they'll overpower my will, strip away my sense of self, and turn me into a mindless follower of The Dominion. Just another obedient Changeling drone."

"They're really sounding more and more like The Borg," Tom mutters to himself, a hint of unease in his voice.

"They're different from The Borg in that they don't want to add *you* to their collective," Jasleen says while poking Tom. "They believe all solids are inferior and that solids are dangerous in their infantile stupidity."

"Oh," Tom says. "I'm not sure if that's better or worse. I mean at least the Borg appreciate a few attributes about everyone..." Tom changes his voice, talking like a Borg, and hisses, "... *we will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own.*" He smiles at Jasleen as she hiccups a laugh.

A noticeable transformation has taken hold of Zorin's countenance—a stark departure from his usual cheerfulness. His face now displays a sullen and despondent expression, and seeing this change, Jasleen asks, "What's wrong, Zorin?"

"Upon hearing about The Great Link, I was elated with the idea that I could meet so many others like me. After all these years of searching, I thought maybe I could find some kind of family among them," Zorin says, his voice tinged with sadness. "But now I've come to understand that my people are evil overlords who clearly do not understand the concept of sharing pleasure."

Before Jasleen can respond, B'Elanna and Carey burst into sickbay, their faces lit up. In their hands, they hold their PADDs, the screens flashing with the fruits of their labor. As they approach Tom and Jasleen, they exchange a quick glance, both of them look eager to share

their findings—the air around them practically hums with their excitement.

“We’ve been working on your problem,” Carey starts with an enthusiastic tone, his eyes sparkling with confidence. “And we think we’ve got a solution! We believe that, using the transporter, we can—”

“No!” Jasleen interrupts with such force that it makes Tom jump. “I’m sorry, *but no*. I’ve never been through a transporter, and I never will.”

“Why not?” B’Elanna asks, confused and annoyed.

“I’ve studied the transporter technology thoroughly this past year,” Jasleen explains, her voice laden with conviction. “And I have too many reservations and questions about the ramifications of using the transporter system. For example, how do you know that the individual who enters the transporter is the exact one who exits on the other side? My understanding is that they’re essentially a duplicate. A duplicate who’s been disassembled, electronically archived, and reassembled. That’s a polite way of saying that they’re scanned, turned into a digital copy of themselves, killed, and then *the copy* is brought back to life in a new location. The Great Link already raises enough ethical and existential questions for me about duplication, I can’t bear to add the complexities of your transporter system to that list.”

Tom gives Jasleen a supportive nod, then turns to B’Elanna and Carey. “We appreciate your efforts in trying to find a solution,” he says, the gratitude in his voice genuine. “But if Jasleen isn’t comfortable with using the transporter, then I’m not okay with it either.”

B’Elanna’s eyes flicker between Tom and Jasleen, her frustration simmering just beneath the surface, like a volcano on the brink of eruption. However, before the fiery engineer can unleash her ire, Carey smoothly intervenes—

he positions himself squarely between the three of them, a diplomatic barrier diffusing the tension with a placid smile.

"It's not a problem," Carey assures, his words like a soothing balm on the ruffled feathers of the situation. "We'll continue our efforts, and with this new understanding, we'll *definitely* steer clear of any ideas that involve the transporter."

B'Elanna nods, acknowledging their concern and responds with a low, begrudging growl. "*Fine*," she concedes, her voice a gravelly echo of her discontent. "No transporters." Her capitulation is gruff, but her determination remains undimmed, a testament to her tenacity as well as her dedication to her shipmates. "Tuvok had some strange ideas that just got bumped to the top of the list."

"Give us a little time," Carey says with a supportive smile as he follows B'Elanna out of sickbay. "We'll look into Tuvok's ideas."

– Chapter Seven –

Captain Janeway's attention refocuses on Tom and Jasleen, and looking down at their hands, the captain's eyebrows become knitted together in a show of deepening concern. "Your *arms*..." she starts, her voice trailing off as she peers at the sight before her.

Glancing downward in unison, Tom and Jasleen are greeted with the startling realization that their hands, once the only point of their unique bond, have now become *arms* conjoined up to their elbows. Their flesh seems to have merged seamlessly, leaving no trace of where one ends and the other begins. The sight is both fascinating and alarming.

Wordlessly, the Doctor steps forward, his medical tricorder in hand, and begins another round of scans. His face, usually composed and nonchalant, is creased with focused concentration as he tries to unravel the mystery of their unprecedented link.

"I came aboard with the purpose of lending aid," Zorin says, his voice strained with the weight of helplessness. "And now I find myself being quite ineffectual."

"Then distract me from this overwhelming pain," Jasleen says, her form shimmering with every flicker of discomfort. "Tell me about yourself—how long have you lived on Sikaris?"

"For as long as I can remember," Zorin replies. "I didn't even know what I was when the Sikarians discovered me floating around one of their moons. I found them as interesting as they found me, and it wasn't long before we began to communicate. They're a clever people and I was eager to learn. And learn I did! Many on Sikaris

found great pleasure in sharing knowledge with me. Besides that, it's a wonderful place to travel about the galaxy using their spatial trajectors. I've been using them to search for others like me." A wistful sigh escapes Zorin, his voice heavy with sorrow. "From what I can tell, I've been searching for our people for as long as you've been running from them."

"Maybe it's for the best that you never found them. Growing up on Sikaris, you seem to have turned into a very kind, empathetic and thoughtful Changeling," Jasleen says, her voice a mere whisper. "That's not something you find much back in the Gamma Quadrant."

"Have our people always been so hostile?" Zorin asks.

"No," she answers, her tone imbued with the melancholy of lost times. "Once, there was no Dominion, and we lived in peaceful coexistence. Long before The Dominion existed, the Great Link used to live in space. Back then, the Great Link was much smaller than the ocean-sized entity it is today, with considerably fewer individual Changelings composing it. It peacefully roamed through space until it began visiting planets and adopting the forms of solid beings. It's around that time when our unity was shattered. Rather than returning to space and avoiding the solids, the Great Link decided to dominate, control, and rule them, leading to the formation of The Dominion. When some Changelings challenged the idea of The Dominion, the fighting began. And that's the key to understanding The Founders and The Dominion—the infighting. Everything they've built, everything they stand for, it all stems from the great lie of the Great Link."

Intrigued by this, Captain Janeway leans in, asking, "And what, precisely, is this grand deception?"

“The Founders have long perpetuated the myth that no Changeling has ever hurt another. They relish in spreading that fairytale, creating a false sense of unity among our kind,” Jasleen explains. “But let me be clear: *we most certainly do harm one another*. We’ve been harming each other ever since The Founders, under the banner of The Dominion, began perpetrating *heinous* deeds against monoforms. Changelings like myself won’t be complicit in their horrific acts of cruelty.”

“I’m afraid to ask,” Zorin admits. “But would you offer me an example of these acts of cruelty?”

“Sadly, there are many. The Teplans for one,” Jasleen says. “What they did to the Teplans was nothing short of *evil*. The Dominion sought to conquer the Teplan world for *no other reason* than it was within their radius of control, and like any sentient species would do, the Teplans resisted the rule of outsiders. The Dominion didn’t take kindly to this defiance, so they decided to make an example of the Teplans. They inflicted them with a devastating plague and then used the Jem’Hadar to destroy any means they might have to find a cure.”

“What is the *Jem’Hadar*?” Zorin asks. “Is it some kind of weapon?”

“The Jem’Hadar are a genetically engineered race of warriors, bred as slaves by The Founders,” Tom animatedly explains. “They’re scientifically designed to be fiercely loyal to The Founders, who they consider to be gods. However, The Founders know that even with genetic engineering, not every Jem’Hadar will possess the same unwavering loyalty—mutations and imperfections can occur. To account for these deviations, The Founders enslave the Jem’Hadar a second way. Not only are the Jem’Hadar programmed to view The Founders as divine beings to be worshiped, but the Jem’Hadar are also

addicted to a substance called Ketracel-White, a drug they require to survive, a drug only The Founders can provide.”

All eyes slide to look at Tom. Everyone’s surprised at his unexpected and comprehensive outpouring of knowledge, and the room descends into a moment of stunned silence.

“How did I...” A perplexed expression wrinkles Tom’s forehead. “*Where did all that information come from?*” he asks as his gaze flits anxiously between the faces surrounding him.

“This bond we share is amplifying. It’s strengthening with every passing moment,” Jasleen says. “You’re accessing my memories, my knowledge and vice-versa—that’s how I’m suddenly aware of your love for an old Earth music genre named *Rock n’ Roll* and your fondness for playing a game called *Pool* in a quaint French tavern. *Sandrine’s*, I believe it was called. While I may not understand the intricacies of *Pool* or the allure of *Rock n’ Roll*, I know these are passions of yours.”

“Doctor,” Captain Janeway says, looking at how the blending of Tom and Jasleen now reaches beyond Tom’s elbow, creeping past his upper arm and towards his shoulder. “How are you coming along with developing a solution?”

The Doctor, his holographic image unwavering, answers, “I can say that my understanding of Changeling biology has taken a considerable leap forward, thanks to Zorin’s generous contribution.” He gestures towards Zorin who nods in acknowledgment. “His sample has helped lay the groundwork for a cell therapy treatment that should, in theory, stabilize the ensign’s morphogenic matrix.” He pauses, a virtual breath drawn in before the next revelation. “However, the effect this treatment might have

on Mr. Paris while he's like this remains a rather large unknown."

"And how long do you need to bring this cell therapy to fruition?" Captain Janeway asks, her tone layered with the weight of their circumstances.

The Doctor considers her question for a moment before replying. "The process is progressing quickly, so I estimate—"

The sound of the sickbay doors sliding open interrupts the Doctor mid-sentence. Tuvok enters, his gaze sweeping over the room before landing on the disconcerting sight of Tom and Jasleen's melded arms and arches his left eyebrow (the Vulcan equivalent of a human screaming in horror). He acknowledges the urgent situation with a solemn nod to Captain Janeway.

"It's evident that our window of opportunity is rapidly closing," he observes, his words measured but carry an undeniable urgency. "I have conferred with Carey and Torres about potential alternatives that do not involve engaging the transporter systems. In light of our limited suggestions, it seems prudent to disclose that I have been contemplating a particularly unorthodox method that *might* provide us with a solution."

"Oh hey, take all the time you need, Tuvok," Tom says with an incredulous chuckle, undercut with an unmistakable edge of worry. "Just don't be surprised if I start morphing into a Vulcan while I wait—I've *always* wondered what it's like having those pointy ears."

– Chapter Eight –

“Before I propose my strategy, I’d like to ask you three questions,” Tuvok says to Jasleen, his serene voice the embodiment of logical curiosity and analytical detachment.

“I’ll help in any way I can,” she replies, nodding.

“Then could you, to the best of your ability, describe the interplay of consciousness that ensues when two Changelings enter into a link?”

Jasleen hesitates, her eyes growing distant as she retreats into the vast expanse of her memories. She knows she’s just been tasked with the challenge of articulating a phenomenon that is innately profound and infinitely complex, particularly within the constraints of spoken language. After a few moments of introspection and compilation, she begins.

“*Linking* is an intricate dance,” she says, her words drawn out as she carefully selects what to say. “A rapport that pushes past the usual barriers of customary communication, penetrating deeper than any telepathic or empathic dialogue ever could. It goes beyond the cerebral landscape and delves into the realm of the physical. While it’s a fusion of mind, it’s a joining that enters the sphere of shared consciousness *through shared bodies*. Two beings become one—thoughts intertwine, memories merge, emotions mix together—all while combining their biology. It’s an exceptionally intimate and entirely holistic union.”

“Most intriguing,” Tuvok replies, tilting his head in curiosity as his brows arch in inquiry. “Then, when it comes to the notion of *love*, would you elucidate your understanding from a Changeling’s perspective?”

The question visibly startles Jasleen, causing her already wide eyes to flicker with surprise. “Love?” she echoes, her voice soft. “In the world of Changelings, love is an often intangible concept. It’s not constrained to a singular form or direction, but rather it spreads out, embracing every part of our interconnected being. When we are part of the Great Link, we are at once distinct entities and a united consciousness. Loving another Changeling in such a state is as much an act of self-affection as it is a recognition of our collective bond. As fluid entities, our very nature is defined by continuous change, adaptation and transformation, so our emotional landscape mirrors this flux. The love we feel within the Great Link, therefore, takes on countless shapes and shades, embodying a vast spectrum of emotions simultaneously.”

“If that’s true,” Tuvok says as he absorbs her explanation. “What about your feelings for Tom? How does a Changeling conceptualize love for a solid?”

“I’ll be honest, it’s all very new to me. With a solid, experiencing love diverges profoundly from our usual fluid experience—the unpredictability of love without linking is both terrifying and beautiful. On the other hand, your predictable solidity, the *consistency* of your being—it’s alluring in its stark contrast to our mutable existence. It’s focused, it’s individual, it’s external, and there’s an intensity to it that goes beyond words. For a Changeling, to love a solid isn’t merely about the individual, but also about embracing a *whole new aspect of emotional existence*. In that sense, it’s not just love; it’s a journey of both self-discovery and transformation.”

“Fascinating indeed,” Tuvok says. His Vulcan calm is barely masking the curiosity in his eyes, but his attention shifts to the Doctor, and his demeanor is all business

again. “Doctor, might I inquire about the status of your endeavors?”

Engrossed in the intricate undertaking before him, the Doctor multitasks, offering a swift response without so much as glancing up. “I stand on the brink of developing a breakthrough two-stage cell therapy specifically tailored to stabilize a chaotic morphogenic matrix. One that, in any ordinary circumstance, would warrant accolades and perhaps a dedicated symposium—”

“Captain, I’d like to suggest an unconventional plan,” Tuvok asserts, speaking over the Doctor. “I postulate that the connection between Ensign Singh and Mr. Paris is not merely a physiological phenomenon, but also deeply rooted in their emotional synergy. Their fusion appears to be the result of her mutated cellular structure *and* her profound affection for Tom. The radiation surge caused her to lose command of her morphogenic abilities, and now her physique is inadvertently mirroring her emotional sentiments for him.”

“And what’s your proposed strategy to unravel this Gordian knot?” Captain Janeway inquires, her tone harboring a hint of skepticism.

“Upon the administration of the Doctor’s cell therapy, I plan to conduct a Vulcan mind meld with Mr. Paris,” Tuvok explains. “Concurrently, Zorin will initiate a link with Ensign Singh. This interconnected four-way bond could hold the key to disentangling this extraordinarily emotional conundrum. If my understanding of shared consciousness holds true, all involved will reap the benefits of my honed mental and emotional discipline, aiding us in achieving our intended goal of separating them.”

“Absolutely not!” Captain Janeway retorts emphatically, a tinge of disbelief permeating her voice.

“The risks associated with such a procedure are simply too great. I can’t believe you even suggested it.”

“Captain, with the utmost respect, I don’t believe we have the luxury of debating this,” Tom says, his placid exterior masking the deep-seated worry that lingers in his eyes. “As I sit here, I’m watching as my own body becomes indistinguishable from Jasleen’s. If there’s even the slimmest possibility that this could slow or even halt the process, then I’m ready to take that risk.”

It’s Jasleen’s sober tone that hammers home the urgency of their situation. “Captain, I simply cannot bear the thought of bringing harm to Tom. And with every passing moment, we inch closer to a point where the damage I’m about to inflict may very well be *permanent*.”

The silence in the sickbay is deafening, as Captain Janeway surveys the ever-growing link between Tom and Jasleen that now stretches past their shoulders to their necks. Captain Janeway struggles to keep her worry at bay when an unsettling realization dawns on her, one that remains unspoken but hangs heavily in the air: if this fusion encroaches upon Tom’s head, his individuality, his very existence, might be subsumed entirely. In this moment of extreme peril, her options appear frustratingly limited.

Captain Janeway shifts her attention to Zorin, asking, “I trust you’re willing to try this?”

“Willing?” Zorin replies, his voice resonating with the thrill of anticipation and a sense of gratitude for being asked. “Captain, it’ll be an honor to be of service in something so exhilarating!”

“Alright then,” Captain Janeway commands with a nod, her voice resolute. “Let’s proceed.”

– Chapter Nine –

“I’m going to initiate the first phase of the cell therapy,” the Doctor informs Jasleen, his voice steady despite the tension in the room.

The Doctor’s hands dance across the medical console, his actions precise and swift as he prepares for step one of the procedure. With a final tap, a luminous field of energy engulfs both Tom and Jasleen. The light hums and shimmers around them, casting long shadows on the walls of the sickbay, and bathing their faces in an ethereal glow.

“This should begin to stabilize your cell structure,” the Doctor continues, never taking his eyes off the monitors. “Once you’ve separated from Mr. Paris, I’ll administer it again with a more potent agent, one designed to not just strengthen your cells, but *solidify* your entire morphogenic matrix.”

“Remarkable!” Zorin exclaims, peering over the Doctor’s shoulder at the scientific information displayed on the screen. His eyes are wide with a mixture of awe and professional admiration. “I’ve delved deep into understanding my own biology, but this, Doctor, this is pioneering work. It’s leaps and bounds ahead of anything I’ve ever conceptualized.”

The Doctor turns to Zorin, and a smile of not-so-humble gratitude tugs at his lips. He nods appreciatively, a warm glow of recognition lighting his eyes. “Thank you, Zorin. It’s always gratifying when one’s efforts are acknowledged by a fellow scientist.” He continues in a barely audible mumble, “Or anyone at all...” Tom hears this and rolls his eyes.

With a resounding hum, the energy field dissipates, its azure glow fading into nothingness as it concludes its function.

“Gentleman,” the Doctor says, casting a pointed look between Tuvok and Zorin. “I believe it’s time for you both to utilize your unique talents in this metaphysical experiment of yours.”

Tuvok approaches Tom, his normally stoic face softened by a hint of empathy, while, at the same time, Zorin reaches out his hand to Jasleen. As the Vulcan’s fingertips gently press into Tom’s temple, and Zorin’s form mingles with Jasleen’s, Tuvok intones the familiar incantation, “My mind to your mind... My thoughts to your thoughts...” and the journey begins.

A flood of emotions and ideas swirl between the four of them, and for a moment, there is a sense of disorientation as each of their minds strives to find its bearings in this communal space. They all begin to feel the other’s presence as the boundaries dissolve—they’re no longer separate entities; they’ve all merged into a shared consciousness. While each of them remains a thread, a distinct individual, they are all now part of a unified whole, an interwoven tapestry of thoughts, memories, and feelings.

The divide between solid and Changeling, between human and Vulcan, blurs. They see their differences not as barriers, but bridges that link them together, creating an understanding deeper than any spoken language. The solidity of Tuvok’s disciplined mind anchors them amidst the swirling sensations of the multi-faceted bond, giving them the strength they need to navigate this unprecedented physiological landscape. Tuvok’s stern wisdom, Tom’s resilient optimism, Jasleen’s passionate

defiance, and Zorin's ability to share pleasure, all converge into a harmonious balance.

While it's precisely the outcome Tuvok anticipated and intended, the four intertwined minds are not merely trying to solve a problem, they're delving into each other's lives, traveling through the peaks and valleys of each other's existence, and becoming intimately familiar with each other's personal histories and deepest secrets. They are all, in a rather profound way, walking a mile in each other's shoes.

Jasleen's life unfolds like a haunting melody. Together, they all experience her journey, tasting the bitter tang of her fear, the fiery resolve that fuels her, and her indomitable quest for freedom amidst her lifelong struggle against the oppressive Dominion. They share the crushing loneliness of her time on the run, her burdensome cloud of mistrust, and the ache of a soul yearning for deeper connection.

Tom's journey, on the other hand, reveals a history of the condemnation of never feeling good enough, eventual personal growth, and indefatigable optimism. They witness his past indiscretions, the echoes of regret, and the resolute commitment to change for the better. They feel the comforting warmth radiating from his personality, the sturdy pillar of his resolve, and the tempestuous seas of human love, as passionate as they are volatile.

Zorin's narrative is an eloquent testament to his ability to bestow pleasure on others and his deep-seated yearning for companionship. They all sense his desire to find others of his kind, his aspirations of establishing a family—a joy he has observed countless times among solids but has never been privy to himself.

Tuvok's mind is a sanctuary of calm, guided by the principles of Vulcan logic and discipline. His steady serenity and unwavering purposefulness become a beacon of understanding to the others, offering a unique perspective on love as a conscious choice of commitment rather than an impetuous emotion.

Within this group mindscape, pooling their shared experiences and individual talents, an innovative plan takes shape. Through Tuvok's detached dispassion and Zorin's adaptability, Tom and Jasleen begin to feel a greater sense of self-control. Thanks to Tuvok, Jasleen begins to parse through her overwhelming love for Tom, treating it as a force independent of her physical form. She dials down the intensity of her affection, discovering a newfound control in separating emotion from physicality. Meanwhile, thanks to Zorin, Tom is now deeply in tune with his own corporeal form on a level he never imagined possible. Focusing on reconstructing the original image of his arm, he envisions every contour, every sinew, as vividly as if he was looking directly at it, a mental portrait painted with the finest attention to detail.

As their respective visualizations stabilize, an unspoken consensus resonates through the link, a shared understanding pulsating with readiness: *it's time*.

Channeling their collective energies towards this singular goal, they dive into the task. Tuvok's Vulcan discipline anchors them, a bastion of calm amidst the swirling tide of emotions, while Zorin's fluid Changeling adaptability lends them the necessary flexibility for this metamorphosis. His understanding of Changeling biology aids in orchestrating this delicate decoupling, guiding Jasleen's transformation with expertise born from his lived experience. Moments later, a surge of energy ripples through the psychic connection, an electric wave signaling

the culmination of their effort. With a burst of release, the amorphous mass that was once an indistinguishable blend of Tom's arm and Jasleen's liquid form untangles itself, re-solidifying into two original and distinct entities. Tom and Jasleen, the once-fused pair, find themselves separate but still holding hands, and they share a silent, profound look.

As the four of them break the psychic connection, their minds retract into the privacy of their own consciousness. The experience was more than a means to an end; it was a journey into understanding love itself. They have all gained new perspectives, whether it's about the intensity of a Changeling relationship, the courage to experience shared pleasure, the tranquility in logical commitment, or the joy and pain of human emotion. They have shared more than thoughts and memories—they have shared the universal emotion of love from four separate perspectives.

"Well, I must confess," Zorin says, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "That has to be one of the most uniquely pleasurable experiences I've ever had."

"It certainly was very enlightening," Tuvok remarks in his typically measured voice. Then, with a dry undertone, he adds, "It has inadvertently provided me with more insight into Mr. Paris's life than I had ever desired." Tuvok looks down at Tom's arm, now restored to its original condition. "And since our objective has been achieved, I will take my leave."

With a curt nod, Tuvok pivots gracefully, his every move embodying Vulcan reserve and decorum, and makes his way out of the sickbay.

– Chapter Ten –

“Having successfully separated yourself,” the Doctor says to Jasleen, amazed at what he’s witnessed but still maintaining an air of calm professionalism. “We can now proceed to the second phase of your cellular treatment. Mr. Paris, if you could kindly step back from the biobed.”

Obediently, Tom releases his grasp on Jasleen’s hand and retreats a few steps. Almost immediately, a luminous field of energy springs to life, encasing Jasleen in a celestial aura. As he waits, Tom lifts his newly restored hand, studying it. He rotates his wrist, traces the lines on his palm, flexes his fingers, and as the familiar feeling of *control* surges back to him, a small, triumphant smile appears on his lips.

“It works fine, but it feels *different*,” he muses aloud, scrutinizing his hand. He stretches out his fingers, juxtaposing them against the ones on his other hand, comparing them to each other. He turns to Captain Janeway, asking, “Captain, does this hand strike you as being somewhat bigger now? I could’ve sworn it used to be smaller.”

The corners of Captain Janeway’s mouth tug upward into a warm smile, her eyes reflecting her underlying relief that Tom has come through the ordeal unharmed. “I’m sure I don’t know,” she responds with an air of amiability. She then executes a crisp about-face; her boots echoing softly against the sterile floors of the sickbay and leaves the room in her characteristic stride.

Jasleen sits still while her treatment continues, and Tom watches her in a contemplative silence. The profound dive into her psyche has left him with an intimate

understanding of her existence—he has witnessed her life, felt the constant shadow of fear from being pursued by The Dominion, and sensed the deep longing she harbors for a connection with her own kind. He knows how much she desires a companion, another Changeling she can safely link with, and he also knows Zorin yearns for the very same thing. Tom tugs at his ear thoughtfully, considering them both.

Once the second phase of Jasleen's treatment is successfully concluded, the Doctor, in his familiar cordial manner, bids the trio goodbye. They return his gesture and leave the sickbay, moving on to the ship's mess hall. A quiet camaraderie ensues as Jasleen and Zorin find a comfortable spot next to each other at a table, and Tom positions himself opposite them, his role subtly shifting from participant to observer.

The conversation between Jasleen and Zorin flows effortlessly, with Zorin talking extensively about his life as the only Changeling on Sikaris and Jasleen reminiscing about the nuances of the Changeling society back in the Gamma Quadrant. Tom remains silent, his usual playful banter noticeably absent. Instead, he quietly watches, his attention carefully tuned into the intimate dialogue unfolding before him, and thanks to what he learned in their shared bond, he knows what he must do.

As the conversation weaves its way through various topics, it inevitably steers towards the subject of Zorin's impending departure from *Voyager*. The mere mention of it seems to hang in the air, casting a somber shade over their otherwise vibrant exchange between the two Changelings.

"Leave? No, no, Zorin, you can't leave—*not yet*," Jasleen counters, an impassioned look in her eyes. "I'll

have a word with Captain Janeway. I'm sure you'll be able to stay onboard for a—

Before she can finish, Tom softly intervenes. "Jas," he says, extending his hand across the table in a gesture of sincere affection. His voice, although soft, carries an unspoken depth that beckons her attention.

Jasleen turns to Tom, her smile deepening as she places her hand in his, saying, "Yes, Tom?"

"Zorin doesn't want to stay on *Voyager*," Tom explains, his smile warm and understanding. "And he also doesn't want to leave you."

"What's that mean?" Jasleen asks, her eyes flashing between Tom and Zorin. "What did you two share with each other in the link?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's not about what he and I shared, it's about what all three of us shared," Tom says, squeezing her hand. "*You need to stay here, Jas. In the Delta Quadrant. With Zorin.*"

The unexpectedness of his statement leaves Jasleen blinking in surprise, and the sounds of the mess hall fade into the background as she digests this. These words hold a weight of truth that wasn't obvious to her at first, but certainly is now.

"But what about us?" Jasleen finally asks, her voice tentative.

"You and I have shared a unique experience, but the thing is—you *two* share a unique *existence*. I've been inside both of your minds, felt your figurative hearts beating as one with mine, and I've witnessed firsthand the mutual longing that you both have. I know what you've both been looking for *and it's each other*. Maybe you can even..." he trails off, searching for the right words. "... *create something new together*. A new generation of Changelings. A new Great Link. Not one based on

dominance or power, but one that is centered on shared pleasure and love—just as you’ve always *wanted*, and Zorin has always *imagined*. You two can make it *real*.”

Jasleen, deeply moved by Tom’s impassioned speech, turns her head to face Zorin. “And this is what you want?” Jasleen asks him.

“More than anything,” Zorin affirms with a solemn nod, his eyes reflecting the sincerity of his words.

Without the need for further contemplation, Jasleen rises from her seat, a resolve sparkling in her eyes. She gazes lovingly at both Tom and Zorin, a bond forged in the fires of their shared experiences glinting between all three of them. With a determined nod, she declares, “Then let’s not waste another moment. We need to speak with Captain Janeway. *Right now*.”

Leaving the convivial hustle and bustle of the mess hall behind them, they swiftly make their way to the nerve center of *Voyager*, the Bridge. As they step onto the command deck, Captain Janeway gracefully rotates in her command chair to greet them. Her gaze, previously lost in the infinity of the star-dotted expanse visible through the view screen, now settles on the incoming trio with a curious expression.

“Captain,” Zorin says as he approaches Captain Janeway. “I cannot express my gratitude sufficiently for your hospitality as well as your support throughout this rather unexpected escapade.”

“It’s been my distinct pleasure,” she says with a nod. “A bit of a wild ride, but that’s par for the course on *Voyager*.”

“He’s leaving *Voyager* now,” Jasleen says, nervous about Captain Janeway’s reaction to this news. “And I’m going with him.”

Captain Janeway's gaze sweeps across the three of them, coming to rest on Tom. He meets her eyes, his lips curving into a knowing smile, and he nods once. Captain Janeway's brow furrows momentarily as she pieces together the silent conversation, and when the realization this situation was inevitable dawns, her features relax, transitioning into a soft smile of understanding.

"Of course," she responds with a light chuckle. "I hope you two will find what you're looking for."

"Oh, *they already have*," Tom says, laughing. "I have a unique perspective on that."

There is no grand farewell, just a subtle exchange of goodbyes. Jasleen, now carrying the wealth of knowledge gleaned from her link with Zorin, discovers within herself the ability to morph into an array of forms she had never even fathomed. With a nod of understanding, Zorin and Jasleen both shrink down to miniature proportions, and the pair elegantly weave through the labyrinthine systems of *Voyager* until they slide through the mesh of the exterior shielding. As they emerge, unfettered, into the boundless expanse of the cosmos, they take on the forms of fantastical sea creatures, their bodies shimmering with hues borrowed from distant nebulae and stars, radiating an almost whimsical luminosity against the velvety darkness of space.

The crew of *Voyager* watch in silent wonder from the ship, their gazes following the two Changelings as they pirouette and somersault around the vessel, painting arcs of stardust in their effervescent wake. In an exquisite dance of unity and love, Jasleen and Zorin converge, their bodies interweaving into a singular, resplendent entity—one giant space fish. In a final salute to *Voyager*, they flick their tail, casting a rain of starlight in their wake. And then, with an exuberant surge of energy, they swim away,

leaving behind *Voyager*, and venturing forth into the mesmerizing infinity of their new frontier.