

# Gamma Quadrant Storyline

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## -A Lost Ancestor, Found-

The smoke billowed and swirled about as air currents began siphoning the atmosphere present on the bridge out through vents on the ceiling, replaced by the backup supply of breathable air from vents along the floorboards. Despite the life support system's efforts, several harsh coughs came from around the room in the few moments it took to clear the air. As soon as the smog cleared the remains of the secondary bridge terminal, charred and disfigured could be seen, joining the half dozen others around the *Athene's* command deck.

"I continue to fail at understanding the necessity of corvolent capacitor-powered bridge terminals." Commander Kizhwic maintained his stoicism and his station despite the onslaught they had been enduring.

"Each station must be able to function regardless of loss of connection to the EPS grid nor ECM jamming equipment directed at the bridge. It is either the risk of explosion or becoming instantly incapacitated at the start of every skirmish." Captain M'kali felt like this subject came up every single time a ship gets into battle and a few terminals explode, though possibly the first time it had to be explained on the bridge. He expected nothing less of Kizhwic, however, even if his bluntness tried his patience at times.

"Perhaps."

M'kali felt that there was more to be said, but it could actually wait this time. Rather than urge it along, he addressed the remaining bridge staff.

"Status."

"The Jem'hadar vessel has fallen out of range. We are maintaining warp nine point four, but likely not for more than another thirty-minutes."

"Fifteen new casualties reported. Medical is sending prior patients to their quarters to open bed space."

“Long range sensors are still down. We are traveling on the path of the signal, but I am unable to verify it nor determine if any further Jem’hadar are pursuing.”

“Still they follow us. We are so far beyond Dominion space, yet they seem obsessed.” M’kali massaged the ache on his left arm, a remnant of the injury suffered during the first encounter with overly-aggressive, completely silent Jem’hadar. His doubts about continuing forward ached just as much. Ought he have called off this mission as soon as it seemed they would need to plow through a hornet’s nest to get to it? Had this become a sunk cost fallacy? Had he doomed yet another ship called *Athene*?

“When a honey bee stings an intruder, the rest of the hive will pursue to sting, as well, even if the sting was in error or the threat has passed. Perhaps we need simply continue until past their domain and they lose interest.” Kizhwic seemed to see M’kali’s doubts rising, which tended to be the only times he would offer encouraging advice. M’kali wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Mmm. But where does their domain end? Perhaps we are flying straight toward their queen and we-”

“Captain! We’re approaching a star system. The signal appears to be originating from within.”

M’kali’s brow ridge shot up at this. The likelihood of randomly running into a solar system in open space such that it shows up on short-range sensors is small enough, but for it to be what they were looking for, exactly? It seemed statistically impossible, even with their course having been in its direction to begin with. Space is just too vast to allow such happenstance.

“Divert course and drop out of warp.”

“Captain! The Jem’hadar-”

“-were leading us here. I fought in the war, too, Commander. They do not just let enemies escape.” A nod to the conn officer confirmed his order who, despite reservations, obeyed it.

The silence that followed as the ship approached the class M planet within the system was deafening and very telling. Jem’hadar should be swarming all around and diving in for the kill.

“Scan the surface.”

“The source of the signal appears to be... my god, it’s the *Athene*.”

A gesture was all M'kali needed to get the data to be shown on the main viewer which, despite a charred corner, displayed the unmistakable outline of an *Excelsior*-class ship, halfway imbedded in a rocky hillside. Her neck was broken and pieces of a nacelle were strewn across the slope below, but despite this, 43275 could be read on her hull.

M'kali sank into his chair and exhaled a long, exasperated breath. Despite everything, including his own dogged determination, they had pulled through.

"Sir, we're being hailed."

"From the surface?"

"No, from a Jem'hadar vessel."

M'kali rose quickly, preparing for another fight.

"How many?"

"One, sir."

One? How is that possible? M'kali's eyes widened, then narrowed. Oh. Right.

"On screen."

"You're welcome, M'kali." The smug grin of the Vorta, the one that had been a thorn since shortly after the very first subspace rift, was as infuriating and yet relieving as ever. M'kali opened his mouth to chide the free-Vorta and get at least some kind of last word, but the channel closed before a sound could emerge.

Fine.

With a rub to his snout bridge and a long, suffering exhale, M'kali just shook his head, performed the Picard maneuver on his uniform, and then folded arms behind his back.

"Scan for lifeforms on the surface."

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## **-Making Peace With Yourself-**

Kesh sank down to the soft soil, crossing her legs and leaning forward, paying no mind to the dirt getting on her uniform and fur. It would come off later. Rather, her focus was on the chunk of metal debris that jutted up from the ground. It appeared to be part of a bulkhead, likely sheared away when the *Athene's* superstructure failed. If she really tried, she could probably figure out the exact spot.

That thought, however, was just a distraction from the soil between her and it. The native population did not see dead bodies as anything other than empty husks, so their means of burial was done as one discards waste, and she had to wonder what her father would have thought of it, if only he knew. Maybe he did know. Maybe he asked for this, if not for spiritual reasons, but to ensure any diseases in his body did not infect the environment. She really was not sure.

Kesh was also not too sure how to feel about actually knowing where her father's body was, rather than simply being part of a dust cloud, as was originally assumed. Either way, he is gone. Did it matter?

Well, in one death he was simply unlucky. In the other, he sacrificed himself to save people he had never known until then. Redemption? Or simply a case of needs of the moment? James Colonist had done so much in her life to ensure her life was better, yet all the while maintaining the lie that he was somehow normal.

Even now, as she sat there, over her father's remains, Kesh struggled to forgive him. And yet, she had. Years ago. Why change it now, unless that had been a lie, too?

Kesh's forehead fell into her hands as she drooped forward, wanting to be sobbing at that moment, yet she couldn't. All she could feel was anger. Anger that she had let him go, when he had been out here, struggling to survive, and failed, while she was blissfully unaware.

The fury rose. Then it ebbed. No. This was not the place nor the reason to fly into a rage.

Maybe all he had done was save a few lives on some far-away world, but he had done something good, after doing so many things wrong. Did that mean she, herself, could be saved?

Maybe.

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# 2377-2386

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## **-A Change of Pace-**

Commander Langley was nervous, there was no less than three admirals viewing the experiment. She was a part of the Engineering Corps and was taking part like many others in the Odyssey project. At this time she was in charge of improving the primary plasma injectors. She felt they had succeeded and had called for those waiting for a demonstration to attend this presentation.

She and two other Engineers had arrived late to prepare due to a delay from maintenance, the Vulcan who they bumped into when they were finally let in, was not someone she recognized but had no time to pay it any heed. Everything was going smoothly as they amped up the output to show the improved top line they had achieved. The Injectors could operate at twice the efficiency at 30% more output. It was significantly more costly to make, but for the Odyssey project it was made clear that such things were not to be considered.

They were about to move to the next step when she noticed a color change in the assembly.

"Alex, what's your reading say? The casing looks off to me, can you confirm?"

Alex looked over his instruments perplexed.

"Everything is nominal Sir, all green."

That wasn't right, even if things went perfect there should still be some things working less than perfect.

"That can't be right, run a level 3 diagnostic and make sure you have accurate readings. I am going to check it out."

They were manning stations about 20 meters from the injector, Before she left her station she hit the observer protection protocol button and blast doors dropped down over the

windows of the birds nest the admirals and other engineers where in. She then jogged over to the injector and her eyes widened in shock, the other side was ruby hot, the injector wasn't cycling and the plasma was building up a feedback loop that if left unchecked could do untold damage killing countless!..She had to think.

“Alex you and Bator get the fuck out of here, this is uncontrolled. If I cannot vent through normal means I will have to manually crack the body to vent here or it will blow! Go now and Seal the lab!”

They only hesitated for a second, they knew Langley and if she made a statement like that then it was no joke. They bolted out of the room, the last one leaving hit the emergency lockdown button and the even heavier blast doors came crashing down locking her in the lab to either save the day or die trying.

“Come on..Vent!”

She was inputting the command but the injector would not vent, all connections had been fried. It was as if the stations they were using did not notice this at all until it was well beyond the point of no return. She thought of the Vulcan leaving the room and sabotage crossed her mind but was quickly dashed by the threat of imminent death. She grabbed a phaser cutter from the nearby workbench, realizing she had seconds to stop this or hundreds would die. She gritted her teeth, resolved that this was it and cracked the injectors casing breaching it.... After that, all she recalled was pain....

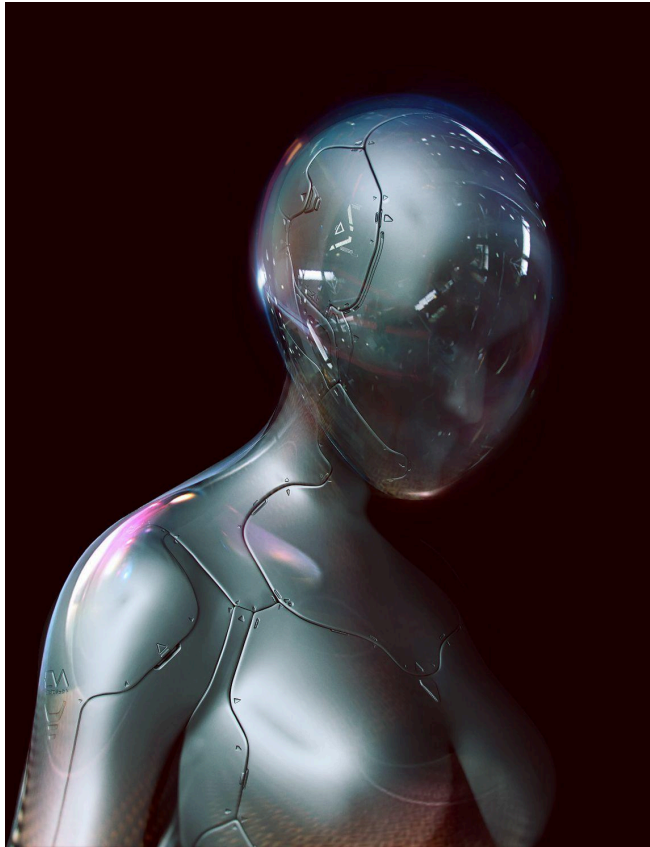
She would have memories of hearing voices as if they were talking about her but not at her. Things like “She defacto consented years ago in case she ever..” and “Less than a 4% success rate for full cyberization...”. When she finally regained full consciousness she felt disjointed like in a haze. She could feel her body but at the same time could not. She had arms and legs but they were not hers, and at the time she could not see and only heard a voice calling to her.

“Commander Langley? Can you hear me? I am Doctor Bhan. You were fatally injured during your demonstration when you risked your life to save everyone else there. You succeed Jessica. You stopped the explosion.”

The voice paused for a few moments.

“Unfortunately you were bathed in plasmic fire in the process. The damage was so severe that you were assumed dead, but the arriving med staff read life signs and full efforts were made to keep you alive. It was clear they could not and they noticed you had opted into the critical injury cyber program, granting permission to use cybernetics to save you in the case of you not being able to grant consent.”

She raised her hands to her face and heard a light ping as Her chrome metallic hands klinked against her head, the surface was smooth with no face or features to be felt, like a helmet.



“The operation was successful, if you....”

She stopped listening as the full weight of her situation came to her, with her brain linked to a small supercomputer to help her process her new body, she quickly got a crystal clear image of her now current state ...All that remained of her former self was her brain and spinal column....

The cry she gave out was half machine, half human and it was terrifying....

((more to come))

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**-My Own Enemy-**

Kesh hurriedly shoved the cover of the morgue stasis chamber closed and briskly keyed in the same settings into it as she had the others. Low power, life supporting, indefinite.

A deep breath was finally then allowed as her head turned about to look at the rest of the room. Nine occupied chambers, one empty.

Nine.

Out of a crew of two hundred and seventeen.

The urge to vomit was strong, but she had no time for that now. The last chamber awaited and she reached for the controls to begin keying in the commands... but she stopped.

No. I must check... one more time.

The door hissed open, catching Kesh in the face with the grey fog that had begun suffocating the crew a few short hours ago. It made her lungs burn, but not nearly as badly as it had for just about everyone else. Something about the alveoli in her lungs being better at filtering out toxins than other species. Wonderful. It still wanted to kill her.

A sharp chirp echoed down the corridor in either direction.

'Come to me'

'Please'

A tear soaked into her cheek fur as a shudder ran up her spine, silently saying farewell to her adoptive daughter.

Before she could turn back, however, a figure emerged from the gaseous soup.

"Mabs!"

Kesh rushed over to the staggering woman just in time to catch her from falling to the floor.

"No. No. I have you. Rrrnth. I have you."

A few minutes later, Commander Bradley's unconscious figure slid into the last remaining morgue chamber, which closed with a thump. A few keytaps later and her survival was assured, assuming the Sollace's power supply lasted until rescue came.



Kesh pushed her back to the wall beside the door and exhaled slowly, staring around at the closed stasis chamber doors.

They would live.

"But maybe I can, too."

After carefully reconfiguring the personal air supply mask Crewman Gregory had managed to get on before the fog could get to him, Kesh slid it around her snout and struck out into the ship.

Down two decks. Section six. Holo lab.

Frankly, the experiments taking place in here had disturbed her at first, as even though the USS Voyager's EMH had made himself quite a public figure since that lost ship had found its way home, speaking out about holo-rights, she still could not shake the unpleasant thought that each of her own creations might somehow have a consciousness. To actually, and actively, seek to install a consciousness into one was rather alarming, but there were practical applications for it, such as emergency survival and as a sort of safe sanctuary for those undergoing risky surgery. It was still a long way from being approved for use, but the equipment was there, she just had to put it on.

Either that or suffocate and die as horribly as the rest of the crew had.

Mabs was safe, so if she had to die, so be it.

The air became sour and stale in short time as Life Support had stopped cycling air hours ago. The fog was already leaking in.

Having read all of the reports, Kesh knew where to attach the various components, though it took several attempts to get it right. By then her eyes were watering and lungs heaving. It was now or never.

A short pause was given to silently say farewell to Mabs, as well as everyone else she continued to care about, despite the wedges the universe had driven between everyone, before pressing the activation panel.

Twenty-three seconds later, a strange, serene oblivion greeted Kesh's mind, while Kesh's hand reached up and tore away the equipment with a scream of rage.

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# **-Do Robots Dream of Electric Tribbles-**

Star Date - 2386

Jessica Sat in her office aboard starbase 364, She had been in command of the starbase for 3 years. It was easy going and relaxed work with the majority of the station duties revolving on testing new sensor tech to help make it possible to explore the nebula ridden Shackleton expanse. They had just sent out another heavily modified probe into the region but did not hold high hopes for its return or the return of any data. The strange nebula had challenged starfleet for decades and was not letting up its secrets any time soon.

It has been 9 years since the accident forced her into the cybernetic body she had now, 4 of those years were spent re-learning how to move and exists as almost an entirely new being. She had slowly estranged herself from all her former friends and family until she was generally alone and without friends. She had lost her creative drive but found her skills in leadership had not dwindled and in fact had improved. Starfleet seeing this and being concerned for her health decided a command position would be best and stationed her at starbase 364.

3 years later she was reading a request from starfleet command for her to end her time as commander of this starbase and be transferred to another one. Athene Noctua.

All they gave her for info was that it was hastily deployed to take advantage of a rare opportunity to get a foothold in an area previously denied to them, the neutral zone. The base was going to need a lot of work and they mentioned that some of it was still on route, but also assured her that it would not be a problem. She would have to fill out command staff as things moved along and hoped there would be good stock to choose from when she got there.

She had already said her goodbyes to the few staff she spoke with out of the command structure and also had spoken to her replacement one last time. It was time to board the Miranda class starship the USS Tempest..it was an odd vessel with an experimental spinal phaser cannon that she wondered even worked. The road ahead would be challenging but she had endured far worse already.

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## **The Final Steps to Noctua**

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## **-New beginnings, New challenges-**

The Tempest was old but she flew well, the journey from her previous command had been uneventful, she was in the lounge standing in front of a large window that had the stars zipping by as they traveled at warp. She cut a breathtaking site as the stars reflected off of her chrome headcase sending light all over the empty room. She had been standing there for hours as they neared the Athene Noctua and she was occupied with information she had about the stations readiness, it was grim. The station had a max crew capacity of 15 thousand but could be easily ran and maintained by 500 crew.....at this time there was 173 already there...

She had resolved that picking command staff now was pointless, she needed to get several critical issues resolved first and fill out the staff. After she saw how they performed under her command, she could begin to look at who she may raise up. This station would be a vehicle for many an officer who wanted to advance. She would put all of them to work right away and push them to see how they performed, she could not afford to have people who would crack under pressure. Command was down playing it but this was a volatile area and success here was going to be a hard up hill climb...she paused for a moment wondering about an odd sensation she had almost forgotten, something she had not felt in 9 years, it was purpose.

Her processing was interrupted by the ship's acting #1.

"We are coming out of warp shortly and will dock with the Athene, Once there we will begin unloading supplies,"

Her chrome head turned to meet him as she spoke, despite her departure from humanity she still sounded very human, no metallic buzz or rasp, it sounded natural.

"Thank you lieutenant, I will head to the main transporter bay now. When we arrive please inform the current ranking officer that I will want to hold a general meeting with all officers and staff 3 hrs after our arrival. I already have a great deal of work for everyone and we must start right away."

The lieutenant nodded crisply.

"Aye Commander."

He turned and left followed shortly after by Jessica as she went to the main transporter room.

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## **-Dreams and Nightmares-**

This must've been one of my first memories. I was visiting a great-aunt or something – can't be bothered at this moment to look up the exact family connection. She was considered to be the family mystic, anyway. I guess she got a good dose of the Aenar genes from my great-great-whatever-grandma.

I remember her towering over me. She wasn't very tall to begin with, and age had bent her, but she had a presence about her that made her seem to be twice as tall as she actually was. In my imagination or memory, I had to look up and up to see her.

"My, but you're an eager one, aren't you?" she said, studying me more with her antennae than with her eyes.

"Yes, ma'am!" I could feel my own antennae quiver with excitement. This visit was a very momentous occasion – it was kind of like a rite of passage for my family.

She looked at me gravely, then smiled. "Military career you desire, no doubt?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"So eager, these young ones..." She looked over my head at my parents, standing behind me, and ruffled my hair. Then she touched the tip of my antenna with a fingertip. That single touch... I cannot describe the sheer power of it. I felt it reverberating throughout my body, ending in my fingertips and the tips of my toes. I can still feel the echoes of that touch, even after all these years.

"You have a long road ahead of you," she said, staring more through than at me. "A road with many twists and turns. It might not always take you where you wish to go, but you'll get there in the end. Remember that, youngling." She took both my hands in hers, and now she looked at me, really looked at me. "Remember that."

Even so, I forgot those words for a long time.

I woke up screaming, like I did every time since the battle. Drenched in sweat, held back by restraints, I tried to open eyes I no longer had, tried to reach for them with my restrained hands, wanting to claw away the bandages, to rip open my eyelids and to see. In the dark, I heard footsteps running towards me, and hands gripped my wrists, a voice whispered gently, urgently, words I barely registered through the fear and the pain. Someone else cursed, something about useless hypo's, and a needle jammed in my upper arm and I felt something cold course through my veins and spread through my body, numbing the pain at least. Now I just whimpered, for when the pain dulled, it left room for the memories to return, the memories of that last, fateful battle.

I was young then, so terribly young. An overeager Lieutenant at his first post as department head, newly promoted, pips still shining on my collar. Said department consisted of three full time tactical officers: myself and two others, enough to rotate through three shift. But hey, it was a department and it was mine. And it was brilliant. Chief Tactical on the USS *Paulan*, a *Defiant*-class vessel. Promotions went quickly in those days. Like most of my colleagues, I knew why and chose not to think about it. It was the only way to keep functioning.

I'm not sure the battle I was in ever got an official name. By then, it was all one big war, with a lot of little skirmishes on the side. This was one of those skirmishes, only it wasn't a little one. But the *Paulan* was a good ship, tiny and feisty like all the *Defiants*, and for a Tactical officer it was a real challenge. We had a huge array of weapons at our disposal. The trick was to know which weapon to use in which situation and in which combinations, for even with the upgrades and adaptations, a *Defiant*-class could practically tear itself apart if it lets loose everything at once. That's why there are two Tac stations, a primary and secondary one. We were lucky if there was someone available to take that second seat. Sometimes there was, sometimes there wasn't.

So, in a *Defiant* more than in any other vessel, the heat of battle is intense. Shifting between weapon systems, timing them with the defensive maneuvers, Helm is executing, reacting in a split second to your data feeds which come in either directly or from Ops, shifting shield generator powers to compensate for attacks-

I don't know if it was a mistake I made which caused the flash-over, or just a lucky shot, or someone else's fault. Maybe the Helm officer was a tad slow in his turn. Maybe I was a heartbeat too slow in shifting the load to another shield generator when one was buckling. Or maybe we were just in the wrong place, in the wrong time. As someone else put it: "Our number just came up." It's as good an explanation as any I've heard.

A direct hit on the Deck One phaser cannon array, and a flash-over, igniting plasma conduits and tearing a burning line across most of Deck One. It ended with my console exploding in a superheated mixture of plasma, plastic and steel.

I remember, vaguely, trying to raise my arms to protect my face. Then there was darkness, confusion, screams. No pain. Not then. Not yet.

And after that, for a long time, there was nothing.

It wasn't until much later that I heard what actually happened. That single lucky shot had taken down the *Paulan's* weapon, shields and most of its steering capacity. It hadn't hit the warp core directly, but we were dead in space, and another hit would destroy the ship.

Once again we were lucky. A nearby ship – I never bothered to find out which, I suppose I could, but I never really felt the urge – beamed all the survivors off and stored them in their transporter buffer for the remainder of the battle. Twice lucky, in fact: had that ship been destroyed, we never would have been retrieved. But as it was, we were only taken out when the ship who took us in finally docked with one of the medical bases and disgorged their buffers.

But even after that I lived in a timeless limbo for a long time. I was one of the criticals. It took weeks before I got downgraded to the 'serious' list. Months before I was discharged from the hospital and transferred to one of the rehab habitats. Here I would have to learn to deal with my new disability.

One of the first decisions I had to make was whether or not to take visual implants.

"Normally we would try to regrow eyes and reattach them to the optical nerves, or use optical implants if the first is not an option. However, because of the vast damage to your eyes..." a brief pause, a cough, "and to the surrounding area, we are unable to do either. It is feasible to use another type of visual implant, but it will not be anything like the type of vision you used to have. It's an old technique, one the Federation used in the past with children who were born with visual defects. For them this was easy, as they grew up with only the images generated by their implants. For you, it will be a lot more difficult. On the other hand..." I couldn't see the person in front of me, of course, but I could almost hear a shrug, "as an Andorian, you have ways of compensating for the loss of your sight that other races lack. Your antennae will give you a distinct advantage, once they are regrown."

I sat there, head pounding as it so often did, barely able to understand the choice I had to make. But I did know that having some kind of vision, no matter how weird, was bound to be better than nothing at all. "When can I have the operation?"

"Soon."

They didn't want to wait until the visual receiver could be grafted onto my face. The nasty mix of plasma and other stuff left complicated scars. It had not only destroyed my eyes and other facial tissue, but also the skull underneath. Reconstructing my face was a slow and painful process and hadn't been completed by far when they wanted to do the cortical implants. Instead, I started with a partial graft in the back of my head, and a temporary one for my face.

This operation was the least painful of the lot, even with the actual grafting. I guess the rest still hurt so much it drowned this out. Then I had to wait again, for the new neural pathways to settle, and for tests, and more tests, and still more tests...

At last I found myself settled into another chair again, in front of another collection of sounds which denoted some kind of person. "Today, we're going to try to switch on your implants for the first time!" The voice sounded chipper, as if she was talking to a child. "Now don't get your hopes up! You mustn't expect to be able to see everything the way you were used to. In fact, what you'll see now will mostly be meaningless shapes and colours."

I almost growled. Having been told this over and over before, during and after the operations, I could recite her speech word for word. "I know." Just activate it already.

"We will switch on the forward facing receiver only. I have a screen in front of me which will allow me to see what you're seeing. With this, I can help you make sense of what you're seeing. Later on, a computer interface will help you hone your skills, but for now..."

I listened and nodded in all the right places, all the while barely controlling the urge to jump up and grab her and make her switch on the damned device now!

"Are you ready?!" she said at last, her voice promising cookies, ice cream and clowns.

"Yes."

Hands restrained my wrists. And then – a riot of colours and shapes blossomed inside my mind, a wild jungle of colours, a holodeck gone mad. Pain stabbed through my head and my hands would've torn the receiver from my face if they hadn't been restrained. The chipper voice continued in the background: "Easy, easy... it's a lot to take into, it will take some time to get used to it... I'll tone it down a little..." The colours dimmed, watered down, muted. "Light sensitivity... saturation... yes... This should be better, right?"

"Yes." I whispered. I didn't dare to nod. The headache died down a bit, and I didn't want it to flare up again.

"Alright. Now I'm going to activate the projector in front of you. I will project shapes on it. You should be able to discern it..."

So the training began. From simple shapes on a projected screen, monochromatic circles, triangles, squares, to multiple objects seen from different angles in three dimensions, multiple objects in different distances, complex shapes and various backgrounds, and eventually texts on padds. I started with five minutes a day, but soon I trained every day until the headache was so bad I had to switch off the implants and lie down. Sometimes they were so bad I vomited. But as soon as the headache had subsided to a more bearable level, I switched the implants back on.

They grew used to seeing me wandering through the corridors of the rehab habitat, staggering and leaning on my cane. Another side effect of the injuries I had, in those days, was that my balance was badly affected, and I used the cane both as support and the echoes as an extra means of navigating. I could see enough, now, not to bump into people or objects as they passed, although estimating distances was still tricky and I often gave them a far wider berth than was necessary. I could make my way to the recreation hall, and find a chair (I usually took the same one, it was easier that way), and sit down. There I would produce a padd and start practicing, peering around me and trying to make sense of the bewildering shapes and colours which made up my world, listening to the soft voice explaining what I was seeing, and trying to read each large letter the padd displayed.

The basics were fairly easy to master. I no longer had to fumble around when it was time for dinner to find my plate or my glass. Larger round shape in front of me = plate. Smaller round shape to the left = glass. Thin lines to left and right of large round shape = cutlery. Plate dark = food. Plate light = it's empty. Discerning what food was actually on the plate was a lot harder.

People. Another such thing. Shapes were easy. People could be tall or short, fat or skinny. They could have brown skin or blue or pink. I could discern hair colour or baldness. But trying to make out features was a whole other thing. Yes, coloured dots were eyes. Movement a bit lower denoted a mouth. The rest was just a blob.

I learned to match different versions of blobs with names and persons. But for all that, they are still blobs to me. Yes, I can see the spots of Trills. I can see the ridges on a Bajoran's nose, and the high foreheads of Klingons, and the ridges of Cardassians. But I have no way of comparing what I perceive with these artificial 'eyes' with what I used to see. I've heard people describe someone who is considered beautiful. But if they really are, I don't know. I have no way of telling if they any prettier than other people. I have no way of measuring visual aesthetics. Same with things like sunsets. I can perceive the light display, and the wave lengths I see gives me information about the planet's atmosphere, its breaking index, level of pollution, and spectral make-up of the star. But for me, a sunset, a painting of that exact same sunset, or a holo-picture of that same sunset look nothing alike.



So, this is me now. I have been cleared for duty, sort of. I still have the headaches. I still have the nightmares.

But I also still have that memory. I still recall that burning touch of one finger touching my antenna tip. I feel the inner core of strength which burns in me, keeping me warm in the cold darkness of an unfeeling universe. And while I live, I strive.

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## **-My God, It's Full Of Stars-**

Air rushed into KESH's lungs and it hurt, like always. No, she had no reason to breathe at all, since photons and forcefields have no use for oxygen or nitrogen. No, there was no reason for the sensation to be that of pain, as the programming of her sensory inputs could simply be muted when she first renders.

And yet, for some reason, it made her feel *real* enough to approach the subsequent interactions with physical space in the correct mind-set. Otherwise, her focus wanted to drift and view everything from a top-down, video game-like perspective, where all her actions meant little and if she messed up she could just restart.

It also made her feel like *herself*, rather than *itself*, like she knew she actually was. In losing (both literally and figuratively) her physical body, she was no longer gendered. After-all, a vagina was as easy to render as a penis, and neither did anything but make humanoids feel a little uneasy at the mention of them.

"Austin, they are moving the station."

Like the clacking of a ticker tape, KESH's mind snapped away from this nihilistic subject of *self* to the actual reason she'd willfully rendered in the hololab.

"I just received word this morning, myself." Austin Aeslyn, the human scientist that had been with the project since she was first installed on Athene Noctua, had only just then stepped into the lab, the doors only then shutting behind him. His face was weary with obvious distress, and KESH already knew the cause, frustratingly.

"Will you be staying?" This much, thankfully, had not been made accessible to KESH, since crew assignments were above her clearance level.

His slow headshake was all that was needed to answer. Austin then strode toward his usual lab station and sank down into the chair beside it, causing the pivot joint to creak, like usual. KESH briefly recalled that moment when the sound was actively *irritating*, enough to

evoke a reaction that went down as one of the key moments in her matrix's development. Emotional reaction to physical stimuli that had not been pre-programmed. It was the solid proof they had needed to state that, without a doubt, she was not simply an approximation of Lieutenant Kesh.

Artificial Intelligence experts were still working on explaining it.

"Let's be real, KESH, you haven't needed guidance on anything for over three months. My role in this project has become redundant, and Starfleet knows that. I will be joining the team working on the EMH Mark Four on Alpha Centauri."

The feel of Austin's shoulders on KESH's fingers felt as real as it possibly could, and for a moment, the station's sensor net and the background processing of the central computer and all of her authorized data feeds were but background noise as she slid her arms around the man from behind and burrowed her cheek into the side of his head.

Weirdly, she knew why she wanted to do this, but it felt... empty. Like pulling the strings of a marionette to make it do something vaguely mimicking something she, herself, wanted to do. But, despite her tactile feedback telling her all about Austin's uniform texture, the coarseness of his cheek stubble, the catch of his breath, and the slight rise in body temperature, it just... meant nothing.

No, not nothing. Just, not enough.

Austin's hand gripped hers and squeezed, necessitating a moment of concentration to ensure the holo-imaging system had uninterrupted power and sufficient processing to ensure he felt a warm Caitian hand compressing under his fingers and not the 'prickly rubber blob' his first assessment of her body texture had described it as. The feel of his cheeks lifting and breath sighing in happy emotion was enough. If only the pang of need to shed a tear still lacked a subroutine to properly process it, so her simulated tear ducts remained unchanged.

"I will personally make sure whoever takes over the project takes care of you, KESH. And if they don't, by Jupiter, I will come out here and pry your processing unit out of the station myself."

Aw. How sweet.

The sniff Austin makes then told a myriad of things about how angry and yet happy he was in this moment, with the way he moved prompting KESH to let go and stand back up straight behind.

"If I'm going to have enough time to ensure the packing protocols are complete we need to begin compressing your matrix now. So let's get started, alright?"

He was avoiding looking at her directly, and KESH understood why. It was only human. The program allowed a nod, which was rather pointless since no one could see it, before the holo character was deactivated. May as well shut off those emotion subroutines, too, before they get feisty.

Strange, is it, to be deactivated. All those awarenesses, going blank, with only the universe beyond the station seeming to remain in focus.

Diagnostic complete. Shutting Down.