



Episode 8-1 - Hiatus

By: Jemima (feedback@jemimap.cjb.net)

1503 hours

The surviving crew of the unluckiest starship in Federation history gazed entranced at long-range visuals of blue-green Earth. After seven long years, they had made it home. Most of them, that is, and close enough to home. One short light-year lay between Voyager and everything they'd left behind when the Caretaker's array dragged them to the far reaches of the galaxy.

At the Captain's orders, Commander Chakotay took the helm - an omen of ill if ever there was one.

"Set a course...for home," Captain Janeway said, one last time.

Chakotay laid in the course and Voyager glided Earthwards on impulse power alone. Yet the viewscreen displayed the fleet approaching Earth at much closer range.

"Very nice, Mr. Kim, but a little premature," Janeway said. The eager ensign had superimposed short-range visuals of the fleet over the long-range scan of Earth.

"It's a standard technique for tactical views," Harry said in his own defense.

"This isn't the Chin'toka Retreat, Ensign," Janeway replied. "The Borg were kind enough to drop us off a light-year from home, but there is a speed limit here in the Alpha Quadrant."

The Captain turned back towards Chakotay at the helm and added, "Keep that in mind, Commander."

Harry restored a non-tactical view of the stars to the viewscreen, with Sol bright but tiny in dead center. The surrounding stars, however, were not streaking along at warp speed.

Voyager had taken a beating, both in the transwarp corridor and in the explosion of the Borg sphere around them, so it was no surprise when Commander Chakotay announced, "Warp power is off-line."

"Bridge to Engineering," Janeway barked impatiently.

"Engineering here," Nicoletti responded over the comm link. Sounds of cheering and modern Bajoran dance music could be heard in the background.

"Report, Lieutenant."

The music cut off suddenly, and only shushing noises accompanied Sue's report, "Sorry, Captain. The explosion of the Borg sphere took out our primary and secondary power couplings. Also the dilithium matrix will have to be realigned before we can go to warp."

The bridge crew saw Janeway's grin, but the Engineering staff only heard her dreaded gravelly voice as she asked, "How long will it take your staff to get off the dance floor and repair the engines?"

"Thirty hours, ma'am," Nicoletti replied nervously. "Engineering out."

Seven and Harry immediately offered to go down to Engineering to lend them a hand with the repairs.

"Hold your horses, Harry," Janeway replied. The young Ensign was ready to get out and push, if that would get Voyager to Earth five minutes sooner. "I need you to reopen the comm channel to Starfleet headquarters."

Harry did so, and a cheerful Admiral Paris reappeared on-screen, next to Reg Barclay and backed by an increasing number of staffers.

Janeway explained their situation to him: "I'm afraid there's a slight complication on our end, Admiral. We won't have warp power back for a day or two. Will you send a transport for the crew?"

Owen Paris was already hard at work on the massive logistical problems posed by Voyager's return. Debriefings, reunions and promotions vied with court-martials, criminal trials and his own son's parole-board hearing for the Admiral's attention. If the crew remained isolated aboard Voyager for a few more days, the Pathfinder staff would have that much more time to untangle legal and personal skeins.

So naturally the Admiral replied, "That won't be necessary, Captain." Prodding Barclay, he added, "Actually, Reg here had an idea for your homecoming."

"Captain Janeway, I was thinking you could land Voyager on the parade grounds at Starfleet Academy," Reg explained in an unsteady voice. "I was just about to arrange the air clearance and the fireworks."

Janeway smiled, encouraging Reg to add, "It will be the party of the century!"

"That sounds perfect, Lieutenant," Janeway replied.

"Should we send a repair crew over to help your staff?" the Admiral offered, though he didn't want too many rumors flying around before Captain Janeway, at least, had been debriefed concerning Voyager's mysterious return home.

Janeway shared the Admiral's concerns. She trusted her crew, but there was a good deal of future technology scattered around Engineering. The fewer people who saw it before Starfleet decided what to do with it, the better. Besides, B'Elanna wouldn't want strangers touching her engines.

"That won't be necessary," Janeway replied. "I think we can repair a few power couplings without calling in the cavalry, Owen."

"If you need any supplies, just shout and we'll have them sent over," Admiral Paris said. "Pathfinder out."

1600 hours

Voyager's newest passenger, Miral Paris, slept soundly in her father's arms. B'Elanna ought to be doing the same, but she was too riled up after Harry and Seven's visit. Her friends had stopped by Sickbay on their way to Engineering to see the Parises' bundle of joy. Unfortunately, they let slip more about the state of the engines than was medically advisable. An hour later, Tom was still trying to calm his post-partum wife.

"B'Elanna, Chakotay can't crash the ship if we don't have warp power."

"You don't know him like I do, Tom," she fumed, propping herself up on an elbow and waving her other hand to punctuate her fury properly. "And what was Sue doing throwing a dance party in my engine room?"

"Lie back, B'Elanna, dear. You know Lieutenant Nicoletti is used to running Engineering during gamma shift when everyone's half asleep anyway. She can't keep the Maquis in line the way you do."

Doc had said the drugs were causing some disorientation, but that it was better not to sedate her. Then the cowardly hologram had deactivated himself, leaving Medic Paris to convince the hyperactive Klingon to get some sleep.

"I'll bust her down to crewman, and then I'll have her clean the plasma manifolds with a toothbrush," B'Elanna growled.

"Of course you will, dear, right after you get some rest." To Tom, this latest threat of violence was actually a good sign - last time she'd planned to have Nicoletti lick the manifolds clean, and before that had been the painfully loud 'space Sue' stage. Now, B'Elanna eyelids were definitely drooping - the exhaustion was winning out over the adrenaline.

She laid back down on the biobed with an audible sigh. "Okay, flyboy, I'll sleep, but only if you promise me you won't let Chakotay drive."

She was out like a light before Tom could answer.

"Computer, reduce lighting to 30%," he said, and then turned his attention downwards.

"Now, Miral, sweetie," Tom whispered to the bundle in his arms, "we finally get some quality father-daughter time. First, Daddy wants to thank you for winning the baby pool

for him. Now don't deny it - I won't tell Mommy. You knew that Daddy bet on 1500 hours. I'll split the proceeds with you 60/40."

Tom paused to listen to the sleeping child's breathing. "What's that you say, Miral? 30/70? You did all the work? No, I think Mommy did all the work. Anyway, what good are replicator rations to you?" He listened again. "No, they're not much use to me, now, either; it's just the principle of the thing. We'll split them 50/50 - is it a deal? Good. Daddy's little girl learns fast."

Tom hummed a lullaby in the semidarkness of sickbay.

1900 hours

Crewman Chell surveyed the mess hall proudly. Tables, chairs, galley and viewports were all his. Chakotay had approved the Bolian's request to be put in charge of the mess hall full-time just the day before. His stint as cook would last only one more day, but it was the time of Chell's life.

Back in Engineering, Chell had spent most of his time on repair crews, roaming the halls and hulls of Voyager, welding shut minor breaches and patching together non-vital power conduits. Despite the name 'repair crew', he usually ended up working alone - the other pseudo-engineers were a sullen bunch who never wanted to chat on the job. His colleagues in structural repair always managed to split up the team and get themselves out of earshot. Starfleets were so antisocial, Chell had thought.

Here in the mess hall, however, everyone was willing to talk to the cook. Neelix had trained them well, and now Chell had replaced the Talaxian as the central comm system of shipboard rumor. What would happen to the Maquis when they reached Earth? To the Equinox crew? To the ex-Borg? What had Admiral Paris said when he hailed Voyager? Inquiring minds came to Chef Chell to hear the latest in fact and speculation.

Yes, the Bolian was having the time of his life. He pattered around the kitchen, putting away the leftover Closer Than Proxima Centauri Casserole. The dinner crowd had consumed all the Home Fries, Round Trip Rotini, and Visit Vulcan Veggies. A few leaves of The Green Green Greens of Home were left in the salad bowl; Chell picked them out one at a time and munched on them contemplatively. The vinaigrette was perfect - what a shame his cooking career would never have a chance to get off the ground.

Several tables were still occupied by chatting crewmembers. Chell collected their empty plates, handed out the last of the Return Turnovers and then sat down with a couple of his old friends from Engineering.

"Funny how far a light-year is when the warp core is down," ruminated Crewman Harren. "It would take us over a year to get home if it weren't for old Zefram Cochrane." Impulse drive was fine for tooling around in orbit, but interstellar distances were unthinkably vaster, and insurmountable at sub-light speeds.

"We would never have been in the Delta Quadrant if it weren't for you Starfleets hunting us down," Jarvin joked. "And now you have us where you want us." The former Maquis held out his wrists for Harren to snap on imaginary restraints.

Jarvin wasn't the only Maquis to turn bitter and sarcastic at the sight of Earth. Back in the Delta Quadrant, they had been one crew, but here in Federation space criminal charges weren't so easily forgotten. Nor was that the only difference dividing the formerly Inseparable crews; yesterday, thirty thousand light-years ago, Maquis and Starfleet had been equally far away from friends, family and homes. Now, close up, the Maquis were forced to remember that their friends and family were almost all dead, and their homes still in ruins.

Harren's mind was only on the legal issues. "What did you ever do, Jarvin? Or you, Chell?" he asked, pushing Jarvin's hands away. "Janeway and Chakotay are the ones who should be worried, not us little people. The Cardies will be after him, and Starfleet is going to cashier her."

Chell's biggest challenge as cook was cheering up disgruntled crewmembers - another tradition he'd inherited from Neelix. Maquis though he was, he felt obliged to say, "I'm sure Starfleet will see reason. They can't throw Voyager this huge party they're planning and then turn around and lock up half their returning heroes."

"So it's true about the party?" Harren asked. He was easily distracted.

"I have it on the highest authority," Chell replied. "Voyager will be landing on the parade grounds at Starfleet Academy, and all the family and friends who can get there in time will be there to welcome us home."

"Imagine the security," Jarvin said, trying not to think of his family or his ruined home world.

"I don't know about that, but I have heard a bit about the menu." Chell droned on until his friends remembered how glad they were the Bolian had been transferred to mess hall duty. Yet the distraction was welcome now.

2100 hours

"Admiral Paris is unavailable at the present time," Reg said for the thirtieth time.

As soon as Reg Barclay cut the connection, another caller appeared on his office viewscreen.

"Ah, Mrs. Sharr, it's so nice to hear from you again. It's been almost two hours since your last call." He half-listened to her as he watched the menu for the senior staff reception scroll across another console.

"Well, Mrs. Sharr, if 'that nice boy at Ops' says your daughter is sleeping, I'm sure that's the case. No one has been assimilated." Not lately, the unhappy lieutenant added to himself. Why did the annoying, middle-aged woman insist on looking a gift horse in the mouth?

"There's no reason to use that sort of language about Captain Janeway - she did get the crew of Voyager home, didn't she?" Reg turned the volume down at a squeal of protest from Ensign Renlay Sharr's mother.

"Of course they're not home yet, ma'am, but they're as close to Earth as makes no difference. I'm sure Renlay will return your call when she wakes up for gamma shift tonight."

help. He appended a requisition for holographic hors d'oeuvre to the menu, so the EMH wouldn't feel left out at the senior staff reception.

Mrs. Sharr was waiting for an answer - what had she asked again? "What time? Oh, I think gamma shift begins at 2300 hours. That will be two in the afternoon your time. Do call again if you have any other questions, Mrs. Sharr."

Reg cut the link and sagged back into his chair, wondering how exactly he'd been roped into the job of Voyager's civilian liaison. Paris had a fistful of aides - one of them should have been saddled with the thankless job. The Admiral had rushed off to Utopia Planitia with one of them, in order to borrow an experimental shuttle. Reg was left to notify the families that Voyager was (almost) home. Of course, Barclay had gotten to know all the relatives back when he was delivering letters for the Pathfinder project, and then arranging live communication links once that became possible. He just wished he had an aide of his own to deal with the handful of Mrs. Sharrs.

Whatever would he do after the welcome-home party? The Pathfinder project was certainly over now. There was no obvious next step to Barclay's career, which had, to date, consisted of a series of impossible quests, questionable research projects, shady business opportunities and wildly inappropriate postings like his stint on the Enterprise. Speaking of the Enterprise...

Reg was looking up one of his former crewmates in the Starfleet personnel database when the console chirped again. "Ah, Glinn Doten, how pleasant to see you again. I'm afraid the Admiral is still out." The Cardassian diplomatic attaché was the last person Admiral Paris wanted to speak to right now, in any event.

"The Cardassian government hopes justice will be done' - yes, I'll be sure to pass that along to him, Glinn. Barclay out."

Reg put all calls to the Pathfinder office on hold for a moment while he filled out a personnel requisition form. He signed the Admiral's name at the bottom of it.

0700 hours

Lieutenant Paris had come to the shuttlebay somewhat prepared for the niceties. He blew a bosun's pipe and announced loudly enough for the two crewmen in the observation lounge to hear, "Admiral on the deck!" as Admiral Paris and an aide stepped out of their shuttlecraft.

"At ease," Owen Paris said.

"That's quite a little ship you have there, Dad," Tom said, as he shook his father's hand.

"It's a top-secret prototype, son. You never saw it."

"My lips are sealed," Lieutenant Paris replied sotto voce. "I'm sorry I couldn't arrange a larger honor guard," he apologized, loudly enough for the aide to hear.

The truth was no one quite remembered what to do when an admiral came aboard. It had been so long, and that section of the Starfleet database had been corrupted somewhere along the line - maybe even as far back as the cheese incursion. Tom had been afraid to ask Janeway or Tuvok about the proper protocols. Harry didn't remember, Seven said antiquated rituals derived from seagoing vessels were irrelevant (meaning that she didn't know either) and the several Maquis Tom had asked just laughed in his face or made ribald suggestions.

So the helmsman was winging it. "Everyone's busy with repairs," he elaborated. Some excuse. Sure, a hundred and forty crew members were crowded around the warp core handing Nicoletti and Vorik hyperspanners like so many nurses...

"Not your wife, I hear."

Tom smiled. "B'Elanna and Miral are sleeping, but we can look in on them on our way."

"On our way?"

"Captain Janeway is expecting you in her ready room. Maybe your friend here would like to have breakfast in the mess hall," Tom suggested, eyeing the aide. The Admiral nodded.

Outside the shuttlebay, most of the fleet had already dispersed. Seven ships remained behind in order to escort Voyager that last light-year home.

0730 hours

Admiral Paris found Captain Janeway at her ready-room desk sipping a cup of coffee and sorting through a stack of PADDs. So this was the room, he thought, in which so many plots were hatched and so many voices raised. Yet it looked just like the same room on any other Intrepid-class vessel, if a little worse for wear.

Judging from the senior staff's logs - or rather, from what could be read between the lines - Janeway hadn't been easy to work with. Had she ignored her senior staff's advice that often here in the Alpha Quadrant, she would have been considered a renegade. Instead, she was a heroine.

Apparently, she hadn't heard him come in. "No rest for the weary," he said.

"Owen!" Janeway stood up to embrace her old friend. "You can't imagine how good it is to see you."

He tried for a moment to imagine how he'd feel in her place, and was choked up.

Seeing his discomfiture, Janeway changed the subject. "So tell me, how does it feel to be grandfather to the first baby born in transwarp?" She wondered whether the sacred text had mentioned that the Klingon Messiah child would be born under the sign of an exploding transwarp hub.

"I'm overwhelmed," he answered, slumping into the chair by her desk as if to demonstrate his emotional exhaustion. "Just talking to you through the Pathfinder Project was a miracle, and now here you are on our doorstep! And I was one of the more hopeful members of the Project..." Owen's voice trailed off.

"I suppose our return was unlooked-for," Janeway agreed. She paused to fetch him a cup of coffee then sat down again behind her desk. "It raises many questions you never quite answered for me over the datastream."

"I'm sure everything will be resolved, eventually," he replied half-heartedly. He could use stronger allies in the fight than Reg Barclay - Janeway, for instance, would be a powerful force in the public relations battle, if she didn't end up in the dock herself.

His answer was not sufficient, so she pressed the point. "You'd be surprised how many of my crew are liable to be prosecuted for their crimes - terrorism, violations of the Prime Directive and the Temporal Prime Directive, genocide--"

The Admiral interrupted, "Seven of Nine won't be held accountable for her actions while she was a drone."

"I was referring to the 'Equinox Five', as the Federation News Service calls them." Janeway waved a PADD of news reports at her guest - she'd spent half the night trying to get a sense of her crew's political standing here in the Alpha Quadrant. In the case of the Five, it was a very poor standing indeed.

The Admiral frowned. In his opinion as well, the Equinox crew were the most challenging legal issue of Voyager's return - except, perhaps, for the mysterious return itself. Those five deserved to be court-martialed; he would be lucky if he could swing a dishonorable discharge for even two or three of them. At least he had some pull in those proceedings - Starfleet as an organization could not interfere in the civil legal proceedings which other members of Voyager's crew faced.

"And then, of course, there are my Maquis," Janeway continued. "I don't suppose the statute of limitations has run out on them."

"Starfleet will do what we can to support the Maquis' case, of course," Paris replied, "but the Federation Judiciary hasn't yet determined whether any of Chakotay's crew committed crimes in our territory."

Janeway drained her own morning cup of coffee contemplatively. She was very expressive with a mug - it swung out expansively as she noted, "Ah, yes, it wasn't our territory any longer, once we handed it over to Cardassia."

"No one wants to dredge up pre-war disputes," the Admiral said, "except the Cardassian diplomatic attaché, and his protests do the Maquis more good than harm."

"Politics makes strange bedfellows," Janeway responded, toying with her empty mug. Her mind was clearly elsewhere.

"I wish I could promise more for your crew."

"We know we're not above the law," she replied.

Admiral Paris had the distinct feeling that she was talking about something else entirely. But what?

"So, tell me how you got back here. The fleet reports that you came in the belly of a Borg sphere - you always did have style, Kathryn."

So she told him. When she was finished, an uncomfortable silence remained. Even the recycled air felt stuffy.

"Aren't you going to tell me your opinion of my actions?" Janeway asked.

"What do you think of them?" the Admiral countered.

She answered slowly, "I'm not sure what else I could have done. She had trapped herself in our time, in effect destroying her own timeline. She did that intentionally, of course. No matter what I did, her version of the future was gone for good."

Pausing, Janeway placed her mug in the center of her desk. Then she addressed that point, in between the two of them, with a dispassion appropriate to an inanimate audience.

"You probably think I should have locked her up and destroyed her ship, but that wouldn't have brought her timeline back. She was the one who altered her past, not me. I had to deal with my present as I found it and do what was best for my people, not for her dead-end timeline. I'm not the time police."

Her tone turned defensive as she finally looked up at him and asked, "So I used her technology against the Borg - was that so wrong? The Borg never stop to worry about the Temporal Prime Directive when they happen upon new technology! And they knew we were nearby. For all I knew, they had seen her over the comm link and had already scanned her shuttle's advanced systems.

"You can tell Starfleet that I was under a great deal of stress. She knew exactly how to convince me - when to chip away at my defenses, when to stand aside and let me stew, how to give me a splitting headache by explaining all the time paradoxes she'd caused. It was like arguing with Borg Queen when you've already been assimilated - looking back on it, I never had a chance." She rubbed her temple absentmindedly.

"It was my idea to kill two birds with one stone - to use the transwarp hub to get home, destroying it at the same time. The consequences of bringing advanced Federation technology back to the Alpha Quadrant were the furthest thing from my mind at the time.

But now that the Borg - if there are any Borg left - know about it, Owen, you can't let Starfleet just throw this technology away.

"I know that to Starfleet Command I'm just a rogue captain who's been on her own too long. But they'll listen to you. We can invoke the Temporal Prime Directive; we'll tell them the technology came from the Delta Quadrant, and nothing more." She waited for his answer.

Instead Paris asked a question. "You could have told me that yourself - why tell me the truth?"

"Because I'm not a rogue captain. I did what was best for my crew, but it's not my place to decide what's best for the Federation. That's your job, Owen."

"Sometimes I wish it weren't," he said.

0900 hours

In the Astrometrics lab, the ever-efficient Seven of Nine contemplated the emotions stirred up by the blue-green planet filling viewscreen. Adjusting to her unleashed emotions was proving more difficult than she had expected. The Doctor had not prepared her sufficiently; that was unsurprising when one considered that his emotions were as constrained as hers had once been, though by pre-programmed subroutines rather than Borg dampeners.

The former drone was awaiting a message from Earth before proceeding to Engineering to help with repairs. When Irene Hansen appeared on the viewscreen at exactly 0900 hours, the Borg part of Seven was pleased with her aunt's efficiency, though her human side had hoped to avoid the call.

"Ms. Hansen," Seven acknowledged the signal.

"Please, Annika, call me Irene."

"Irene, what can I do for you?" Seven had reviewed every social lesson the Doctor had given her in preparation for the return to Earth. Other Terrans would not tolerate her Borg habits the way Voyager's crew had. She would have to adapt.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you at the celebration in San Francisco. I'd like you to come home with me afterwards - you can stay as long as you like. I can show you around the countryside, introduce you to some nice people...you'll meet all your cousins. They're already planning a private little party for you."

"I don't know..." Seven said hesitantly. Her social lessons weren't helping much. How did one put off responding to an invitation?

"I don't want you retreating into some Starfleet lab before you've see the world, Annika. Say, you haven't made any plans yet, have you?" her aunt asked suddenly, worried that her crewmates were trying to overwork the poor young drone.

"No," Seven answered slowly, "I haven't made any plans. I would enjoy visiting you, Irene."

"Then it's all settled. I'll see you in San Francisco." Irene Hansen beamed at her newfound niece then closed the connection.

Seven of Nine considered what she had just done. She and Chakotay had not had time to make any plans, but she suspected - no, she knew - that he expected her to include him in her planning process. The complexity of her relationship with Chakotay had been rising exponentially since date three, and the repairs to her cortical node had only complicated the matter.

Seven had expected that the surgical procedure would merely amplify those pleasant, recreational emotions she had entertained for Chakotay. To her surprise, she had also discovered one of the most powerful emotions of all: self-doubt. It was a feeling unknown to the Borg Collective.

The Commander had certainly been the best candidate for her social experiments when they began on the holodeck. His personal background was intriguing, his appearance satisfactory and the performance of his duties exemplary. Then, there had been only a handful of men to choose from, but now she had a quadrant full of them to evaluate. Now she need not be concerned about living on the same small starship for thirty years with a failed candidate if things went awry - as they so often did with irrational humans.

Seven had chosen not to endanger her friendship with the Doctor or Harry Kim through a romantic entanglement. If the relationship with Chakotay did not succeed - even if he became irrationally angry and bitter about the affair - nothing at all would be lost. In fact, nothing would be changed, since he had been suspicious and cold to her for several years beforehand. In other words, she had adapted to their breakup long before she had begun to date him.

What she had not counted on was success. She had been surprised and flattered when the real Chakotay showed himself as interested in her as her pre-programmed version had been, but ever since Admiral Janeway had warned her about her future marriage to the Commander, Seven had wondered whether she had narrowed her romantic options too quickly.

When Chakotay was present, he could override such doubts. When she was alone, as she was this morning in Astrometrics, her calculating, Borg side came to the fore. There was a whole new world out there to adapt to--

"Seven?" a piping voice interrupted her thoughts.

She turned around. "Naomi Wildman," she replied. Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct to Unimatrix Zero One, appreciated these last few hours in which she could be her old Borg self, before the final adaptation to Earth. "State your business," she ordered the child.

"Hi, Seven. Are we really going to Earth?"

"You are well aware of our destination. The warp drive will be repaired in approximately twelve hours. I must aid the repair teams."

"Do you have to go right away, Seven?" Naomi asked quietly.

"Perhaps not." Seven smiled at her small companion as she returned the view of Earth to the central Astrometrics viewscreen. "I am planning to live with my aunt on Earth," the former drone informed her young protégé. "Voyager is the only family I know. It will be difficult to adapt to a new family."

"You will adapt," replied Naomi, who still resorted to Borg parlance when she was under stress.

"You also will adapt. You will not miss Neelix so much when you go to live with your father." Greskrendtregk was on his way from Deep Space Five, though he would not reach Earth in time for the upcoming celebration.

"I'll always miss Neelix," Naomi pouted. "I wish we were back in the Delta Quadrant with him."

"Earth is a new world, Naomi Wildman. Someday, you will love Greskrendtregk as much as you love Neelix now. Do not let memories of the past distract you from the potential perfection of the future."

Naomi's patience, even for Borg advice, had its limits. "Can we play a game of kadis-kot?" she asked.

"Green," Seven replied tersely.

Naomi replicated a kadis-kot board - replicator rationing was just a memory now - and passed Seven the green pieces.

1100 hours

"Good morning, Lieutenant," the EMH said as B'Elanna Torres woke to the sound of Miral crying, again.

"That's what you said at 0200 hours and 0600 hours," the bleary-eyed mother responded. "Will this morning never end?"

Ignoring her question, the Doctor ran a few final tests on his pair of patients. The results on the console over B'Elanna's biobed were within expected parameters.

"You and Miral are free to return to your quarters, at your convenience," he said. "I've arranged a feeding schedule and added your regular checkups for the next three months to your personal database." The EMH checked Miral's neonatal monitor, and, satisfied that it was functioning properly, went into the sickbay lab to give the new mother and daughter some privacy.

When Miral fell asleep in her arms, B'Elanna walked over to the lab to tell the Doctor goodbye. The EMH was glued to a console.

"What are you up to - writing another holo-novel?" she asked him.

"Not yet," the Doctor replied with his familiar enthusiasm. "First, I have forty-seven papers to publish in the medical journals. This one," he told her while handing her a PADD, "is an exposition of Vidiian medical concepts and the organization of their hospitals and research facilities. I was hoping you would look it over for me before I present it at the medical anthropology conference on Risa next month."

"It's been a long time," the once-divided Klingon said. "We certainly had our share of adventures, didn't we?"

The Doctor nodded and took Miral from her arms. He looked positively human with a baby in his arms. He rocked her slightly.

"Delivering your baby was the high point of my career on Voyager."

"Mine, too," Torres agreed. She skimmed the Doctor's report until she came across a mention of Tom, which prompted her to ask, "Where's my husband?"

"He stopped by earlier with your father-in-law. They should be back soon." A swoosh sounded from the other room. "That must be them now."

The EMH followed his patient out of the lab to find Sickbay crowded with Parises. Owen Paris asked after B'Elanna's health. She was unsure what to make of her father-in-law the Admiral, so she answered his polite questions somewhat haltingly. The Doctor interrupted the uncomfortable reunion moment with a more thorough diagnosis, then passed the baby off to her doting grandfather.

Tom observed his unique family of traitor, terrorist, admiral and infant carefully. Once it seemed safe to assume that no Paris or Klingon tempers would explode during the visit, Tom suggested lunch in the mess hall. He invited the Doctor as well, but the hologram excused himself, saying he had his papers to polish up.

1200 hours

Chakotay strode into Janeway's ready room with a stack of PADDs in his hands and a smile on his face. Despite the difficulties of defending themselves and their crew from the twin demons of prosecution and publicity, the Captain and First Officer of Voyager were in rare spirits. They had finally succeeded in their impossible quest to cross 70,000 light years. After that, all challenges seemed as minor and surmountable as the last, short light-year between Voyager and Earth.

Chakotay loomed over the desk with his threatening paperwork. "How did it go?" he asked.

"The ball is in the Admiral's court," Janeway replied, clearing some space on her desk for Chakotay's personnel reports. "I hope I never have to think about the Temporal Prime Directive again."

"Still, we know more than we ought to about the future. Starfleet may be concerned," the Commander suggested as he deposited his burden on her desk and took a seat in front of it.

"That future isn't going to happen," she said with a note of finality, or determination - Chakotay couldn't tell which.

He changed the subject quickly to the official purpose of their meeting: "I finished the Maquis personnel reports. Of course, Starfleet may view my opinion as biased, so if you rewrite them--"

"I was hoping just to add a note to each file." Janeway sighed. "I thought we would have months to resolve this issue before we reached Earth. Now we have hours."

"Don't worry about it too much, Kathryn. We're home again, and that's the most important thing. A short vacation in New Zealand won't spoil the Alpha Quadrant for anyone." Chakotay smiled to reassure her, though a nominal six months in a comfortable Federation penal colony - the most he thought he or any of his crew from the Liberty might be sentenced to - would put a crimp in his new relationship with Seven of Nine.

But that wasn't going very well in any event. Ever since Earth had appeared on the viewscreen, Seven had been distant and uncommunicative. Unusually uncommunicative, that is. She claimed to be busy with repairs; maybe she just needed time to adapt. Maybe. He shouldn't push her, he decided - he'd done too much of that already.

"It will for me," Janeway was saying.

"They won't lock you up," he replied, deliberately misunderstanding her.

"We'll see. Do you have Tom's personnel report here? He'll need it for his parole board hearing."

Chakotay handed her the appropriate PADD. "I have the Equinox Five done also."

"So you've been catching up on the news, too. Public opinion is against them." A shame, but it was bound to happen, Janeway thought. Even now, the former Equinox crew were not accepted by everyone on Voyager - some merely tolerated them. And public sentiment here was more black-and-white than she remembered it. The war had changed many things in the Alpha Quadrant.

"The Maquis seem to be folk heroes now, though," she teased him. "How does it feel to be larger than life?"

"You tell me," he responded in kind.

Janeway dismissed his quip with a light glare. "There is some good news, though," she said, smiling once more. "Icheb has been accepted into Starfleet Academy. In fact, he'll be allowed to join the current first-year class, since his knowledge of the basic courses is--"

"Perfect, I'm sure," Chakotay laughed.

Janeway put down the PADD she'd been holding. "I believe you owe me lunch, Commander. We can finish these afterwards."

"Today's lunch menu is Party Pitas with Festive Fruit Salad. My man in the mess hall is cooking up a storm."

"It's a good thing we're home - I'm not sure how much more of Chell's creative naming I could have taken."

"A rose, by any other name..."

1300 hours

Harry nodded off over a misaligned power conduit for a full ten minutes, and woke up with Jeffries-tube grating marks on his forehead. That was when he decided a lunch break was in order. The Ops officer was working a triple shift. Not that anyone had asked him to - he just wanted to get home yesterday. Tomorrow wasn't soon enough for Ensign Kim.

The mess hall was crowded. It looked like an end-of-the-month replicator ration drought, though replicator rationing was over forever. As was their journey. Harry was still not quite awake when Chell handed him a Party Pita and poured him a mug of Celebration Coffee, but once ensconced at a corner table with a PADDful of the latest repair reports he livened up a bit.

His mind was not on power relays, however. Just two tables away, the Delaney sisters were laughing with Ken Dalby at some private joke. Janeway and Chakotay were deep in conversation across the room, but he thought he could see her half-grin, even from this distance. Tom, B'Elanna and Admiral Paris were trying, by turns, to quiet a fidgety Miral down.

Why were they all smiling so much more than he was? Harry was the one who wanted to get home more than anyone, and now that they were back in the Alpha Quadrant, he was the happiest of them all. Wasn't he? At last he would see his parents and taste his mother's cooking again. He would finally be promoted - they would be so proud of him. Ensign Kim, soon to be Lieutenant Kim, was happy.

But Ensign Kim wasn't laughing like Jenny Delaney. Ensign Kim wasn't smiling proudly like Tom Paris. He wasn't even grinning slyly like Captain Janeway. Harry was trying to remember why he had wanted to return to the Alpha Quadrant so badly, and what exactly he was so blindly happy about.

What if there were a counselor aboard Voyager, or Neelix were still around? The Talaxian would have told him that sometimes, when you get something you've wanted for a long, long time, you lose all sense of direction. You don't know where to go next.

But Harry knew exactly where he was going. He would stay in Starfleet, of course, and like the rest of the crew of Voyager would be reassigned to some other ship. Voyager herself would be put in dry-dock for a complete refit, if not permanently decommissioned.

Everything he'd ever wanted... Harry was very, very happy, but he still wasn't smiling. Ignoring his PADD and his pita, he closed his eyes and turned his thoughts back to DS9, seven years ago. Could he recapture the enthusiasm of a young ensign embarking on a

career in Starfleet? Almost, but not quite - it had been too long ago. Harry's mind drifted to Tom and B'Elanna's wedding, to his friendship with Seven of Nine, to building the Delta Flyer and the Astrometrics lab and repairing the ship, over and over again.

Those were the warm and alive and smiling memories - all the night shifts and little moments that had made up his day-to-day life in the Delta Quadrant. He couldn't remember a thing about his career ambitions, except the occasional crack of Tom's about pips. He couldn't remember how it felt to pine for home, though he had wasted so much of his time doing it.

"This was home," he said aloud.

"So you are awake." Harry's eyes snapped open; Tom was leaning against his table. "I bet B'Elanna three diaper changes that you were snoozing over here. You let me down, Harry."

"Sorry, Tom. I already had a nap back in the Jeffries tube."

"Well, if you're not too busy getting Voyager to Earth single-handedly, I'd like to introduce you to my father." Harry didn't respond quickly enough for him, so Tom added, "He's handing out pips."

Harry laughed out loud. "Okay, Tom, I'm coming."

1400 hours

Admiral Paris was needed at Starfleet Headquarters. He accompanied Tom and B'Elanna back to their quarters on his way to the shuttlebay.

"Home at last," his daughter-in-law sighed as she collapsed on the couch. "Just roll the bassinet over here, Tom, and I'll be fine."

Home to Admiral Paris had always been a house on Earth, not a cabin aboard a Starship. "You're free to stay at the house in San Francisco for as long as you want," he said, continuing their lunchtime conversation. "I'll have everything made up for you before the party starts."

"I'd like that," B'Elanna said, her eyes half-closed already. She wondered how long they would stay with her father-in-law.

She had warmed to Owen Paris much more quickly than Tom had expected. Even he was getting along unusually well with his father. Tom also wondered how long this uneasy peace would last before a Klingon or Paris temper flared. For the time being, Miral had the old man under her spell. She had the entire family under her tiny thumb already.

Tom glanced at the chronometer on the desk console. "Dad, your aide is waiting for us. You have to get back to arranging our big party."

"I do have other duties, Tom."

"Of course you do, Dad. Say goodbye to my wife--too late, she's already asleep." They stood over B'Elanna and the baby, who were stretched out comfortably on the couch, for a moment, then tiptoed out of the room.

"Well, this isn't goodbye, son," Admiral Paris said as they made their way down the hall to the turbolift. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, if there are no more delays."

"Harry will see to it that we're on time for the party, sir."

"He's a fine young officer."

"Oh, you should have known him back when he was green. He was the worst kind of Ferengi-fodder. But we've all grown up a lot since then."

They entered the shuttlebay in silence. The Admiral's aide was already aboard the shuttle running a prelaunch check. The two Parises waited outside.

"So, what are you going to do about the debriefings?" Tom asked his father.

"That's classified."

"I'm sure half the things we did in the Delta Quadrant are classified, or ought to be. You haven't decided yet, have you?" Tom prodded him.

"No, not yet. Kathryn Janeway has quite a talent for getting into impossible situations."

"And back out of them," Tom added. "I'd say keep the hull armor but ditch the transphasic torpedoes."

Admiral Paris considered his son's advice. "You have a promising future in Starfleet Command, Tom."

"I'll see you on Earth, Dad."

Tom blew his bosun's pipe once more as his father climbed aboard the shuttle.

The older Paris turned back towards him for a parting shot before closing the shuttle door: "I'm proud of you, son. You'll make a better father than I did."

Lieutenant Paris saluted Admiral Paris wordlessly.

1600 hours

Ensign Kim was back at Ops for beta shift. Things had been relatively quiet after Admiral Paris's shuttle left. Two of the other Starfleet vessels had chased off an opportunistic Ferengi trader who had wanted to sell Voyager's crew some long-forgotten Alpha Quadrant delights. It was a shame, Harry thought; Tom would have appreciated a bottle of Romulan Ale.

A civilian transport passed through the hovering 'fleet vessels unchallenged, however, and transmitted the proper clearance codes to Voyager.

"Commander Tuvok, the Safe Haven is hailing us," Harry announced.

"Put them through, Ensign."

"This is Captain McAdams of the Federation transport ship Safe Haven, with a delivery for you." The captain smiled at them, enjoying his fifteen minutes of fame in the Voyager drama that had gripped the Federation for so long.

Tuvok signaled Harry to cut the audio and summoned Captain Janeway. She emerged immediately from her ready room. The Vulcan yielded her the comm.

Still in her unquenchable good mood, she smiled at Captain McAdams. "Thank you for coming so far out of your way, Captain."

"Don't mention it, Captain Janeway. Shall I beam your passenger over?"

"Just send Ensign Kim the coordinates, Captain."

McAdams nodded. "Safe Haven out."

Janeway turned to Tuvok, who had assumed his position at tactical. "Would you see to our passenger, Tuvok?"

"Shall I have a security detail meet me in the transporter room, Captain?" he asked.

"I'm sure the matter is well within your own capabilities - however, it may require some time. I'll take over your duty shift here." She waved him along, making it clear that no more discussion of the matter was desirable.

"Yes, ma'am," Tuvok replied. Apparently this was a classified matter - that would explain the Captain's unusually elliptical statements. He did not bother to speculate on the identity of the person as he made his way through the lifts and hallways of Voyager - there were too many possibilities, and too few clues to work with.

When the Vulcan arrived in the transporter room, the crewman on duty yielded the console to him, explaining that Ensign Kim had reassigned him to a repair team.

A highly classified matter, Tuvok revised his estimation. The coordinates were already laid in; once the crewman had left, he engaged the transporter himself.

When the transport was complete, he looked up. She was already stepping down from the transporter pad. It was illogical to be unable to speak - to cover his lapse in control, Tuvok stepped around the transporter control console and approached her.

It was also illogical to stare. He forced himself to speak.

"T'Pel."

"Tuvok."

"You should not be here," he said, holding out two fingers to her.

"Your arrival was also unlooked-for," she responded, taking his fingers in hers.

"It is not logical for my wife to be allowed aboard Voyager," Tuvok explained. "The rest of the crew will not see their families until we reach Earth."

"I was returning to Vulcan from a conference on Vega when I was informed of your return," T'Pol replied. "Since you were ill and required the fal-tor-voh, Starfleet requested that Captain McAdams make a small detour to rendezvous with Voyager."

"My condition is not yet serious," Tuvok protested.

"That is for your doctor to determine. Shall we visit him now?"

Tuvok nodded and escorted his wife to sickbay.

2000 hours

"Deanna!" Reg exclaimed. He brushed aside an ensign who was trying to get him to sign requisition forms. "It's been too long!"

"Reg, it's good to see you again. You look busy - I can come back later," Troi offered, hoping to escape the mob of cadets and other hangers-on filling the Pathfinder offices.

"Oh, no, no - I was just doing some paperwork. Voyager will be going to warp in about an hour, and we're all going to watch the scans. Aren't we?" Reg shouted his question to the room. The cadets cheered. A lieutenant rolled his eyes and stalked off.

"But Reg, Voyager isn't scheduled to arrive until late tomorrow morning," Deanna protested.

"I requisitioned plenty of snacks." As if to prove Barclay's point, a cadet came around with a bowl of pretzels.

"I'm glad to see you getting along with your coworkers so well, Reg," Troi said, politely taking a couple of pretzels.

"Oh, these are mostly cadets from the Academy who volunteered to help with the celebration." Reg grabbed a handful of pretzels and munched as he spoke. "Admiral Paris and most of his staff are over at the Judiciary building straightening out the Maquis business. Come join me in front of the main monitor - the early bird gets the best seats."

"Thank you for thinking of me, Reg, but I'm here on business, not pleasure."

Barclay's face fell - he knew why she had come, of course, but he had hoped she would join in his all-night party-before-the-party.

Deanna went on explaining her presence unnecessarily: "Admiral Paris requested my services as a counselor. Voyager's crew will have plenty to adjust to, once they reach Earth."

"Well, as you said, they won't be here until tomorrow," Reg said hopefully.

"I understand you have copies of the crew's personnel files here." Eyeing the juvenile crowd in the main room, Troi asked, "Is there somewhere where I could go over them in private?"

"Of course," Reg answered, realizing that keeping her in a room nearby was the most he could do, for the moment. He showed her to a small office already occupied by a sullen lieutenant who glared at Reg for his trouble.

2030 hours

"Lieutenant Torres would be proud of you all," Nicoletti told her tired, overworked Engineering staff. "We've finished the repairs half an hour ahead of schedule. Let's run the final diagnostics and get this ship home!"

That pesky Bajoran dance music blared from the speakers again. Sue wiped the sweat from her face with her shirtsleeve and sighed. They would never behave this way around Torres, or poor Joe Carey. Tabor just stood there looking innocent, but Sue knew an instigator when she saw one.

Vorik frowned slightly as he ran the warp core diagnostic. If there was anything more illogical than Humans, it was Bajorans. He would miss his illogical associates in Engineering, nevertheless. Perhaps, he thought, he should apply for a posting to Utopia Planitia. He had rebuilt these engines so many times that he would be bored on a normal Starfleet mission, where major repairs and refurbishments were left to dry-dock. He had also enjoyed the experimental aspects to working in Engineering aboard Voyager - adding alien technology to the ship and seeing how far it could take them. It was illogical to thrive on excitement, however. Perhaps he should return to Vulcan to undertake the Kolinahr discipline.

When the diagnostics came back within specs, Nicoletti joined Tabor on the dance floor in front of the warp core. Vorik sighed; even Utopia Planitia would be dull after Voyager.

2050 hours

Troi was just starting to make a dent in her workload when Reg poked his head into the office. "Deanna, Hildegard, come out here! Voyager is about to go to warp."

"Reg, how many thousands of starships have we seen go to warp?" Deanna asked.

"Admiral Paris is back, too," Barclay added defensively.

She should at least greet her temporary boss, Deanna thought. "I'm coming, Reg - just let me finish this page."

Reg smiled and went back to his crowd of adoring cadets. He'd explained the Pathfinder Project to them five times already, letting slip a bit of classified information in the process - but if you couldn't trust Starfleet Academy cadets, whom could you trust?

2100 hours

Ayala was at tactical, Tom at the helm and Janeway and Chakotay in their usual places. At Ops, Harry was waiting for confirmation that the other seven ships were as ready and eager to head home as Voyager was.

Chakotay, relieved of paperwork for the moment, took the opportunity to consider the personal consequences of Voyager's sudden return to Earth. In his heart, he had never expected to see this day - he preferred living in the present over dreaming of an unlikely future. Yet those who chose to live for the future alone, like Kathryn and Harry, had turned out right after all.

Would he have started dating Seven of Nine if he had believed Voyager might make it home any day, thereby upsetting the former drone's fragile emotional equilibrium? He wondered whether he had really convinced her that relationships were worth the risk involved - perhaps when the ship landed on Earth, she would again attempt to alter the parameters of their relationship. He could only wait and see.

"Our escort is ready to go to warp," Ensign Kim reported from Ops.

Janeway gave the word: "Do it."

"Yes, ma'am!" Tom said, and somehow managed to manipulate the flat helm console with a flourish more appropriate to the outre buttons and levers of the Delta Flyer.

The stars began to streak across the main viewscreen, but then swiftly disappeared in a brighter flash.

"What--"

The shock wave cut off Janeway's question. As Voyager rocked, a greenish haze filled the viewscreen. The ship went to red alert.

"We hit some sort of subspace mine," Ayala announced.

"We're being pulled in, Captain," Harry added.

"Pulled into what?"

"It looks like the same transwarp corridor we came out of," Chakotay said.

"It can't be," Janeway said. "The transwarp network was destroyed."

"We're in it already." Harry agreed with the Commander: "It's a chronoton echo of the transwarp corridor, possibly created or reenergized by the mine. It's highly unstable."

"Deploy armor," Chakotay ordered. Ayala engaged the ablative hull armor.

"Two of the escort vessels have been drawn in with us," Harry reported. "The Pleiades and the Himalaya - their shields won't be strong enough to resist the stress--"

An explosion on-screen interrupted Harry's prediction, and verified it. "The Himalaya has been destroyed with all hands," Ayala said solemnly.

"We have to get out of here now," Janeway growled.

"The corridor is dissolving around us," Kim said. "I'm detecting an aperture directly ahead. There's no way to tell where it leads."

"We'll take it. Hail the Pleiades - tell them what we're doing and have them follow in our wake," Janeway ordered.

On the viewscreen, a ragged black gash appeared in the green miasma.

"Approaching the aperture coordinates," Tom reported. "Out we go..."

2104 hours

Troi and Reg had wormed their way through the crowded room to the Admiral's prime position under the main viewscreen, which showed only stars now that the ships had gone to warp. When the cheering of the cadets had quieted down, Deanna said to her superior officer, "Admiral Paris, it's good to see you again."

"Deanna!" Paris said, turning towards them. "What a pleasant surprise. I didn't realize you were back on Earth."

Deanna's eyes narrowed. Reg sensed anger.

"Something is amiss," a Vulcan cadet announced. Reg had put T'Lin on subspace scanner duty; she was to report Voyager's progress towards Earth, on demand. "The scans show only five ships, and they are turning about."

The Admiral and his staff crowded around T'Lin. Paris muttered something about rogue captains. Deanna began to clear the other cadets out of the room.

"The Pawnee is hailing us, Admiral," his aide reported.

"Put them on screen. And get these people out of here!" Paris barked.

The cadets fled at once, scattering pretzels in their wake.

"What happened, Fred?" the Admiral asked the distraught captain of the Pawnee.

"There was an explosion, sir - a subspace mine, with a Borg power signature. Voyager, the Pleiades and the Himalaya are missing."

Paris sagged against a nearby console. "Missing?" he asked.

"We've detected no debris, only excessive graviton and chronoton particles."

"The transwarp corridor..." Paris murmured.

"God knows where they are now, sir."

The bridge crew of the Pawnee and the staff of Pathfinder stared at one another despondently.

"At least they're with friends, Fred," Paris said, finally. "Pathfinder out."

Troi put a reassuring hand on the Admiral's arm as he closed the comm link.

"Deanna, I have a city full of anxious relatives who are going to need counseling. Can you help me out?"

"Of course, Owen."

"Reg," the Admiral added, "cancel the party and reopen the Pathfinder Project. Maybe they're back where they started." Paris shook his head, thinking rather that maybe there really were time police.

"Mrs. Sharr is going to kill me," Reg muttered.

2109 hours

"We're clear of the corridor," Harry confirmed.

"What about the Pleiades?" Chakotay asked.

"Scanning the wreckage for survivors," Harry said, putting the sobering image up on the viewscreen. The Pleiades had been a Defiant-class starship; now it was a nacelle with a scrap of hull attached and no overt signs of life.

Ayala announced, "Our hull armor has sustained heavy damage - armor integrity is at 3%."

"We're lucky we made it out alive," Chakotay said.

"Beaming eleven survivors to sickbay," Harry informed them. The Pleiades had had a complement of 47.

Janeway didn't seem to hear Harry's words; instead, she stared silently at unfamiliar starscape on the viewscreen.

Tom broke the uncomfortable silence. "What was that thing we hit?"

Ayala ran through the sensor logs and concluded, "The subspace mine had a Borg power signature."

"The Borg Queen..." Janeway muttered. The sphere hadn't had time to destroy Voyager outright, but the Collective had left behind a deadly trap. And she had walked right into it.

The silence dragged on. The bridge crew dared not disturb the crestfallen woman in the big chair. Only Chakotay ventured a half-whispered, "Captain?"

She turned towards Ops. "Harry, please tell me we're not back in the Delta Quadrant."

"I'm still running the sensor data through the navigational database, Captain," Ensign Kim replied.

Tom looked up at the viewscreen sharply. A navigational check shouldn't take more than a second or two. How long had the main computer had already to fix their position? Two minutes? Three?

"Harry?" Tom prodded, after another full minute had passed.

Harry's voice shook like a green ensign's as he reported, "According to the navigational database, these stars aren't in our galaxy at all. In fact, the distribution of extragalactic matter does not match that of our universe."

"Are you saying we're in another universe?" Janeway asked.

"I don't know where we are, ma'am."

So this was what came of trying to cheat fate.

(The Beginning)

Written by: Jemima

Beta: Jade

Editor: Dakota

Producers: Thinkey, Anne Rose and Coral