



## Episode 8-14 – Zeke

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### Prologue

*Most of space is just that. Between the star systems and celestial bodies, the vacuum extends, spanning the vast distances that separate them within the Milky Way. Within this expanse, aside from the occasional pair of virtual particles leaping in and out of existence, all is perfect emptiness; the spread of space rests in a chill and a silence that freeze the soul.*

*Gamma Quadrant Sector 475.31C fits this description as well as any other. Far beyond the border of Dominion space, it waits silent and unknown. Unlike the Federation, the Borg Collective saw no reason even to number it; empty space is of no interest, and keeping track of such matters is inefficient. Sector 475.31C knows nothing of this and cares the same. The mightiest empires of two quadrants make no difference to it. It knows only the silence and the cold.*

*Near the center of the sector, a change now begins. Quantum forces take their subtle action, pulling and merging and twisting at the*

*underlying fabric of space. The turmoil feeds on itself and grows to a macroscopic scale; a vortex wrenches out of the emptiness as the laws of nature scream in protest. Were there any living consciousness in Sector 475.31C to notice the arrival, it would be unable to keep from feeling a sense of darkness pressing on it, for something wicked this way comes.*

*Finally the vortex spins open and expels its creator: a sophisticated spaceship, among the most advanced in the galaxy. Its eight sides, near-perfect equilateral triangles, mark it as an octahedron; its bare mechanical exterior and cold geometry betray its origins. There are many races and many mindsets in the galaxy, but a ship designed with such soulless efficiency and disdain for aesthetics could only have been created by the Borg.*

*The ship, a royal yacht reserved for the Queen, doubles back and heads sharply downwards at top speed. As it flees the sector, another vortex opens, then another, each spewing forth a massive Borg cubeship. Moving in unison, the twin cubes give chase; a few moments later, they successfully lock onto the yacht with tractor beams. Slowly, the cubes draw the smaller ship in, preparing to capture and board it.*

*The octahedron swivels on its vertical axis; something like a shield flares into existence around it and disrupts the tractor beams. It immediately changes direction, evading the cubes for a few short moments before they target it again. The yacht repeats its maneuver three more times; on its fourth attempt, the shield no longer has an effect. In apparent desperation, it lashes out with cutting beams and glowing green torpedoes, damaging the larger vessels but not stopping them. The cubes draw their prey closer and closer.*

*Space writhes yet again, and two more Borg ships enter the fray. One is a cube, the other a sphere whose curved structure contrasts with the sharp corners and edges of its companion. Each new arrival now picks a cube and begins to strike at it with all weapons, pounding furiously at a well-chosen face. The twin cubes struggle to maintain their tractor beams, and succeed -- at the cost of surrendering their positions. Relentlessly battered by the enemy ships, the cubes drift in the direction of the weapons fire, so intent on capturing the royal yacht that they fail to realize their opponents' plan. At last the cubes collide, face grinding against face, sparks flying out into the vacuum to be extinguished.*

*The beams cease; the octahedron regains its bearings. It prepares to depart with its two allies, opening a new and larger transwarp conduit capable of enclosing them all. After firing exactly enough torpedoes to ensure that the enemy cubes cannot be salvaged, it moves into position and releases a message into subspace, one designed to be audible only to Borg drones whose interplexing beacons are set to detect a very specific frequency. The three ships then take their leave, in accordance with the instructions in the message:*

*'Engagement successful. No casualties. All forces in the first division, prepare for an immediate rendezvous in Grid Zero-Two-Six-Nine. Security confirmation code Axum Z-X-Two-C.'*

*No residents of the two cubes are left alive to hear this. With characteristic Borg efficiency, the ships and drones -- now useless to the Borg -- dissolve into near-nothingness and spread their molecules in all directions. The silence and the cold return. In Gamma Quadrant Sector 475.31C, all is perfect nothingness, as it has always been and will always be.*

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'Fall back to six million kilometers!' shouted Captain Yvette Marson. Her helmsman obeyed instantly, reversing course and taking the Nova-class starship *Solstice* to a safe distance. A short moment later, the shockwave hit, shaking the ship badly and sending the crew careening across the bridge. Consoles exploded; lights blew out. The noise grew unbearable, then stopped abruptly as the shockwave continued past the ship.

'Damage report!' Marson released her iron grip on the arms of her command chair, which had kept her in place through the crash. She stood and turned to her tactical officer. 'What the hell was that?'

Lieutenant Tren checked his readings again, but it didn't help. 'I have no idea, sir. It was obviously a massive explosion, and the scans seem to indicate that there were ships at the center of it -- maybe even an entire fleet. But we've got no data on how or why this happened, and we don't know whose ships they were.'

'Damage reports are coming in now, sir,' added Lieutenant Commander Velasquez at Ops. 'We've lost power on decks five through seven and our impulse engines are at half power. Shields won't be back up for another hour, but the warp engines are okay and we didn't lose anyone.'

Marson nodded gratefully; that pain, at least, would not be felt today. She turned to Velasquez. 'Transfer auxiliary power to the sensors and scan the sector as carefully as you can. If there's any evidence at all, we need to--'

'Sir,' interrupted first officer Banks, 'look!'

The crew turned to the main viewer and simply stared. There before them, in living color, was a latter-day Federation legend. A Starfleet ship filled the viewscreen, hull decked with armor that shouted messages of invincibility, nacelles stretched out sweepingly, saucer raised confidently high. The armor slowly peeled back to reveal a glittering duranium hull and the now-famous registry code NCC-74656. Marson could only guess at what had happened, but knew one thing for certain -- somehow, the starship U. S. S. *Voyager* had defied the odds yet again.

Tren broke the silence. 'Should I open hailing frequencies, sir?'

'By all means, Lieutenant. Send this message.' Marson cleared her throat. 'This is Captain Yvette Marson of the Federation starship *Solstice*. If you are who you appear to be, it is my pleasure to say, on behalf of the United Federation of Planets...welcome home.'

Tren and Velasquez fidgeted briefly, which Marson recognized as a sign that they hadn't even considered the alternative to 'if you are who you appear to be.' The captain approvingly noted that Banks didn't bat an eyelash. After punching a few commands into her console, Velasquez spoke up: 'They're responding, sir.'

'On screen.' Marson watched as the viewscreen flickered off, then on again, this time revealing the people whose images had graced every newsholo in the Federation six months ago. Everyone on the *Solstice*, right down to the lowliest crewman, could probably match these faces to their names: Chakotay, Seven of Nine, Tuvok, Tom Paris. And now Marson was personally speaking to the leader of this band of heroes -- Kathryn Janeway herself.

'This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the starship *Voyager*. Honest.' A grin crossed the captain's face. 'I understand your skepticism, but trust me, we are exactly who you think we are.'

Marson grinned back. 'Glad to hear it. We're all dying to hear your story, and we'll have lots of time -- Earth is a week away at warp.'

'Oh, I hope we're not taking you out of your way.'

'Don't worry, Captain -- we were heading that direction ourselves. Just finished a two-year mission scouting twin pulsars.'

Janeway's face lit up with interest. 'Really? Now *that* I want to hear about. We'll trade our story for yours.'

The prospect delighted Marson, but her shock was now making way for her sense of duty. After all, the mystery remained. 'Captain, a moment ago we detected a massive explosion....'

Janeway held up her hand. 'We know all about it. I'll be glad to explain the whole thing to you in person; suffice it to say that the explosion was caused by the destruction of an enemy fleet whose goal was to wage war with the Federation. A war they were quite capable of winning.'

Marson found her reactions mixed. She had no reason to disbelieve Janeway's assessment of the threat; on the contrary. Janeway had seniority over her and, what's more, had survived seven years stranded in the Delta Quadrant. But this was no ordinary deed. If Janeway had indeed destroyed an entire *fleet* of enemy ships -- a huge one, judging from the size of the explosion -- then shouldn't that action be scrutinized to the highest degree? What kind of desperate situation would require such full retaliation, such extreme use of force?

Could an officer who gave such orders be trusted?

Not now, Marson told herself. The questions could come later; she could debate the situation when the time came. Right now, she had the privilege of welcoming home a Federation hero, and it was her honor and duty to do so with open arms.

'Never mind all that for now, Captain. We should be plotting our courses for Earth. Let me say it once again: welcome home.' She glanced around at her crew, then at Janeway's. 'From all of us - to all of you.'

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The mess hall was full of people, but no one spoke. All faces were downcast; all thoughts were dark. The room lay not in a silence but in a hush. At the podium, Captain Kathryn Janeway surveyed her crew, the men and women whose strength had held her ship together for nearly a decade. Inside, she wept for them as much as for the friend they had lost. Each missing face diminished the whole picture.

'This podium,' began Janeway, 'has seen too much use.'

The crew felt the same. How could they not? Too many years, too many battles...too many lives cut suddenly short. Too many funerals.

'I have seen this view of my mess hall and crew a total of thirty-nine times since *Voyager* first arrived in the Delta Quadrant,' continued the captain. 'To say that it's never easy would be an understatement. It gets harder each and every time. This is our shared pain -- this is the burden that we all must carry, together. And alone.'

Janeway moved into the traditional format. 'We are gathered here on this Stardate 55353.9 to pay our last respects to Crewman Kenneth Dalby. His remains could not be recovered, so we commit his phaser, Mr. Dalby's prized possession for many years, to space.'

In fact, only four people in the room knew the phaser's full story -- Dalby had taken it to his grave, but it had then been found by Chakotay after lying undisturbed for untold years. Janeway continued: 'At this time, anyone who wishes to speak in recollection of Mr. Dalby will be heard.'

There was a moment of silence, and then Elizabeth Henley stepped forward. Janeway stepped aside as the former Maquis took the podium.

'I'll keep this brief,' began Henley. 'I don't need to explain Ken Dalby to anyone here. I may have known him a little longer than most, but we all knew him. We knew his personality. We knew his opinions -- he made sure of that.' (This drew a few chuckles.) 'We knew why he was on this ship and how he felt about it. In fact, let's face it...we knew pretty much everything there was to know about the guy. Ken didn't keep any secrets. He wore everything on his sleeves, not just emotions.'

'I won't deny that it could be annoying sometimes, but I appreciated that about him. He believed in honesty and frankness taken to any extreme. And he believed nothing without believing it totally. Ken could be your bitterest enemy or your best friend, but nothing in between. In a galaxy of gray, he was a knight in black and white armor. Protecting those who couldn't protect themselves, fighting for people who deserved it -- that's what Ken was all about.'

'That's how he died, and he wouldn't have wanted it any other way. He lost his life for the same reason he lived it. I don't know if he left us a legacy, but if he did, it's that nothing is too much to give for what you believe in. In the end, what Ken Dalby believed in was us. We can take that with

us for the rest of our lives: whatever we may think of ourselves and each other, a good man decided we were worth dying for. I'm proud to have been on his side.'

Henley stepped back from the podium, still emotional but with her head held high. Many of the crew were now choking back tears. Beside Janeway, Tom and B'Elanna had their arms around each other; elsewhere, she could see Chell trying to comfort Crewman Geron, who had been Dalby's closest friend. After a respectful pause, Janeway stepped forward and again asked if anyone wished to speak. This time it was Tuvok who stepped forward, to the captain's surprise; wondering what her Vulcan friend would say, she ceded the podium to him.

'Crewman Dalby first came aboard *Voyager* seven years, seven months ago,' stated Tuvok. 'At that time, he had spent several months among the Maquis and none on a Federation ship. His adjustment to life in the Delta Quadrant was rapid but not drastic; indeed, his personality and attitude were almost entirely unchanged. As tactical officer, my duties include the evaluation of crewmembers relative to whatever security threats may exist, and this required me to consider Mr. Dalby's possible effects on the then-tenuous Federation/Maquis alliance. My conclusion was that he was an unstable element and a potential threat, as his behavior was questionable and his respect for authority nearly non-existent. It was for this reason among others that Mr. Dalby entered my sphere of consideration.'

Janeway was now beginning to worry. While she had faith in Tuvok's intelligence and good judgment, she doubted that he was considering how emotional beings would react to his words. They were here to speak well of Dalby -- which the Vulcan was decidedly not doing. How did he expect the crew to react? Janeway could already see angry faces in the crowd.

'My early experiences with Mr. Dalby could not be considered improvements,' Tuvok continued. 'When I attempted to instruct him in Starfleet protocols, he reacted with hostility and disrespect. As the training progressed, this did not change, and could be said in some respects to worsen. I did begin to observe positive qualities in Mr. Dalby, such as confidence, will, and leadership, but I considered these less important than the humility and obedience befitting his position.'

'When Mr. Dalby completed my training course, I soon found that I had little reason to continue monitoring him. The Starfleet and Maquis crews were merging with little friction, allaying my concern that he might in some part make this more difficult. Therefore, I relegated his disciplinary problems to the 'back burner' of my mind, making way for more pressing matters. In the seven years that followed, I continued to work alongside Mr. Dalby; we rarely conversed other than in an official capacity, but my understanding of his character continued to increase, as it did with each member of the crew.'

'It is my practice to spend at least two hours in meditation each day. During these periods, I consider all the issues that occupy my mind, from the most critical to the most trivial. However, in the last six weeks, I found myself devoting an increasing amount of consideration to Crewman Dalby. I cannot say with certainty why this increase directly preceded his death; it was most likely an unforeseen effect of the Bubble on my telepathic abilities. Nonetheless, I believe that the results of my contemplation are significant, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to speak.'

'As I pondered Mr. Dalby's progress on *Voyager*, I became aware of a gradual change which I had not previously noticed. In our first year in the Delta Quadrant, his attitude had been aggressive and adversarial; he shared the crew's common goal but did not wish to be bound by its regulations. It was his opinion that the ends justified the means in almost any context. This mindset was well-suited to the Maquis, but a bad fit for a Starfleet officer. His positive qualities -- courage and willingness to defend -- were, in my opinion, misdirected. However, over the course of his Starfleet career, I now realized that Mr. Dalby's motives had changed without my becoming aware. He had maintained what admirable qualities he possessed, but the underlying *reasons* for

them were no longer the same. Reflecting on his time in the Bubble, I reinterpreted his behavior and discovered that it had become based on a foundation of loyalty and solidarity -- it was no longer driven by self-concern.

'A very subtle change, and even more subtle was the change I now observed in myself. My contact with Mr. Dalby had appeared minimal, even over the course of eight years, but this recent meditation had now shown me a new truth of the human condition. It was possible, I realized, for a human being to change on the emotional level in a manner so gradual as to leave the non-emotional level unaffected. This was something I had never before encountered in my years among humans. Despite eight years of apparent non-communication, Mr. Dalby, through his example, had helped me to increase my understanding of the human mind. Such a gift is of the kind I value the most highly.

'I am of Vulcan. My people live their lives with great care and select their friends very slowly. The time this crew has spent in the Delta Quadrant has not been sufficient for me to make such decisions; from my perspective, to refer to anyone here, aside from the Captain, as a friend would be premature. I say this not as an insult but merely as an explanation. I cannot, therefore, say that I considered Mr. Dalby a friend -- I did not. But by the time of his death, I considered him more than a subordinate. I considered him a good officer, a trusted ally, and a man worthy of the uniform he wore. Further, now that his life has ended and can be judged in its entirety, I consider his presence to have made a positive intellectual change upon me. A Vulcan can give no higher compliment.'

Tuvok turned to the coffin and addressed it. 'To you, Mr. Dalby, I offer these final words, spoken by Surak to a dying follower during the Enlightenment. Know that you have lived by the truth within you; know that your life has taken the path it was meant to take; know that your passing will diminish this plane while enriching the next. May your katra find peace and fulfillment in the new life that it begins on this day.'

If the room had been a vacuum, the silence filling it as Tuvok returned to his place would not have been deeper. The crew were astonished and moved in equal measure. Internally, Captain Janeway shook her head...after so many years, her old friend could still surprise her. She hadn't known what she expected, but it certainly hadn't been this. That was the thing about Tuvok -- he would take actions that you could never guess in advance, but when you thought about them afterwards, they made sense. Tuvok did nothing that wasn't...well, logical, but his logic was deeper and more complicated than Janeway could ever understand or predict.

At last, the captain stepped forward and completed the ceremony. 'In accordance with Crewman Dalby's wishes, we now cremate his last remains. As we fire this torpedo, we send the last physical remnants of his years with us into the fire. The mental remnants will never die.'

Janeway nodded to Harry Kim, who began the firing sequence. The crew all turned to face the window as the speakers began to play bagpipe music. Finally, Dalby's torpedo left the confines of *Voyager* for the heat that awaited it. The crew held their salutes until it could no longer be seen.

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'So you're saying she won't even *care*?'

'No. I simply stated that your return is unlikely to have as strong an effect on your former fiancée as you believe it will.'

Harry was aghast, but he resolved to be patient with Seven. After all, she was still only a student of humanity. 'I don't think you really understand, Seven,' he said. 'Libby and I weren't just coworkers or friends. We'd decided to spend the rest of our lives together.'

'I am aware of what 'fiancée' means,' replied Seven in that just-slightly-condescending tone that never failed to drive Harry up the wall. 'But this decision took place eight years ago.'

'Seven...maybe someday you'll understand that eight years isn't all that long where love is concerned.'

'You have been hoping to be reunited with her.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Then why did you attempt to engage in 'recreational activities' with me when I first came aboard *Voyager*?'

Harry stopped walking, to avoid tripping over his jaw.

'I'm sorry,' said Seven. 'Did I say something inappropriate?'

'No!' Harry tried to figure out how to explain.... 'Look, Seven, there are certain impulses that humans have trouble controlling. That doesn't necessarily have any bearing on how I feel about Libby.'

'Ah.' Seven seemed satisfied, but then turned back and cocked her head slightly. 'Then is the same true of your liaison with Assistant Engineer Tal during our encounter with the Varro?'

'Now just a minute--'

'And also your professed affection for Ensign Ballard?'

'The circumstances were--'

'And your interest in the holographic representation of Marayna?'

'*All right!* Point taken.' Harry resumed walking, then paused suddenly. 'Hang on -- how did you know about Marayna? That happened before you came aboard....'

Seven replied with what Harry recognized as her version of a grin -- a very slight smile that seemed to ooze *I win* -- and then headed into the briefing room. Nonplussed, Harry followed. The other senior officers were already there; Captain Janeway waited for the final two to take their seats, then began the meeting. 'I think it's safe to say we have a few things to discuss.'

'What's to discuss?' replied the Doctor. 'The Sernaix fleet is gone -- and we're home!'

'Seems to me I've heard that somewhere before,' countered Tom Paris.

'Exactly,' said Janeway. 'The last time we thought our journey was over, it turned out to be anything but. Things certainly do look good for us right now, but we can't afford to be overconfident. We have to make absolutely sure we don't repeat whatever mistake we made last time.'

B'Elanna Torres stood, having recognized her cue. 'Ever since we arrived in the Bubble, the science and engineering crew have been trying to figure out why it happened. We still don't know for sure -- but we have a good guess.' B'Elanna walked to the monitor at the front of the room and activated it; the others turned to watch.

'This was the situation one second before we brought the warp core online.' An image of *Voyager* appeared, encircled by a series of colored curves representing its warp field. The staff recognized the configuration as stable.

'This was the situation when we activated the core.' *Voyager* remained in place, as did the warp field at first...but gradually the curves began to change shape, widening at the ship's stern and tapering at the bow. Finally the shape grew almost triangular; it had narrowed to a point in front of the ship. The colors had also changed, moving from cool Starfleet blue to bright red.

'This was what happened when Tom engaged the engines.' The frame advanced, as did *Voyager* -- but the warp field, for some insane reason, didn't. Within moments the ship's hull had made contact with the tip of the field's closest band. There was no impact, of course, since the field wasn't a physical object, but *Voyager* vanished instantly. The warp field quickly faded away.

'That was crazy,' commented Tom, echoing the thoughts of everyone in the room. 'A warp field staying still while the ship moves...it doesn't make sense. It's like standing up and finding your clothes still in the chair.'

'That happened to me once,' added the Doctor. When the others stared at him, he explained, 'Programming malfunction. Fortunately, Mr. Paris wasn't there at the time.'

B'Elanna rolled her eyes and continued. 'We have no idea why this happened. Logically, it shouldn't even be possible. But we do have a pretty good idea of what it *did*. When the warp field's shape degenerated, its 'tip' became a local focus point for subspace turbulence, creating a highly unstable situation. So when *Voyager* made contact with that point, there was a massive interchange of energies -- enough to momentarily propel us into subspace.'

'For just long enough to hit the Borg's subspace mine,' finished Janeway, putting two and two together.

'Exactly. It all happened so fast that the sensors had only recorded a millisecond's worth of data before we were shunted into the unstable transwarp conduit that took us to the Bubble. That's why it took us so long to figure out the exact sequence of events.'

'And the *Pleiades* and the *Himalaya*?' asked Chakotay.

'Just close enough to be caught in our wake. They were out on the fringes where the subspace pressure was higher -- without armor to back up their shields, they couldn't hold together.'

Without thinking about it, the officers paused for a brief moment as the memory of those lost lives came back. Janeway was the first to speak. 'We're certainly better for knowing more about what happened, but the present is even more important. Lieutenant: in your judgment, is it safe for us to attempt warp velocity in this quadrant again?'

'Absolutely,' said B'Elanna without hesitation. 'The last incident has 'one-time' written all over it. Remember, the Borg knew exactly where we'd be entering Federation space last time. This time they had no idea. If the Borg could do this kind of thing at any time, we wouldn't have been able



to fit into the Bubble -- it would already have been full of their enemies' ships.' Janeway smiled at the image.

Tuvok, eyebrows slightly angled, brought up another question. 'Lieutenant, none of the events you have described uniquely identifies the Borg as the responsible party in our abduction. Do we possess proof that they were the cause?'

B'Elanna ran the facts through her head. 'I don't think so,' she concluded. 'But the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming. Who else could have known *exactly* what layer of subspace to send us into to trigger the mine?'

Janeway turned to her expert on the Borg. 'Seven?'

'The information Lieutenant Torres describes would require precise data and very complicated calculations,' replied the ex-drone. 'It is doubtful that anyone outside the Collective could obtain it unless their resources were even greater, in which case it would not be necessary.'

'Then I'd say we're safe in pointing the finger here. The Borg were somehow responsible for what happened to us, and B'Elanna believes it won't be repeated -- assuming there still *are* any Borg. Considering all that,' Janeway said with a grin, 'I think it's time for us to give this going-home thing another try.'

The Doctor smiled broadly at this decision; Chakotay smiled too, but with characteristic moderation. Tom, Harry, and B'Elanna had the look of people happy more for their friends than for themselves, but were clearly delighted either way. Seven, on the other hand, seemed even more indifferent than usual -- not even Tuvok looked so downright *uninterested*, thought the captain.

Janeway was about to dismiss the meeting when Harry said, 'Captain, as good as this news is, I think we all want to know what's happened since we've been gone. Our scans have shown that time passed at the same rate out here as in there, for us at least, so that's seven more months of Alpha Quadrant to catch up on. Hasn't Starfleet contacted us yet?'

'I'm afraid not,' replied Janeway. 'I'm concerned about it too. We haven't heard a peep from Command, and even the *Solstice* has been minding its own business since that first hail. I'll let you know as soon as we hear anything.'

'We *will* hear something, right? Starfleet can get pretty tight-lipped sometimes.' Memories of the Omega Directive came unbidden to Harry's mind.

'Don't worry,' reassured Janeway. 'I'm sure they'll contact us soon, and if not...well, you can bet they have good reasons.'

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Few planets in the galaxy are as powerful and as respected as Terra, known to its inhabitants once as Tellus and now as Earth. The homeworld of the Federation and command center of Starfleet has become the utopia long dreamt of by Thomas More and those of like mind. Lit up like a shining beacon in space, Gaia welcomes all to her fertile shores. Humans no longer consider this world their only home, but when they find themselves far away, lost in the limitless reach of space or the depth of emotional isolation, it is to Earth that their thoughts always return.

On this planet, inside the mighty walls of Starfleet Headquarters, a discussion was taking place in a room where many discussions had taken place before. Since as far back as 2142, this room -- the Starfleet Council Chamber -- had been the traditional meeting place for the fleet's highest-ranking officers when they had important issues to discuss. Matters as critical as starship deployments in the Romulan War and as trivial as whether or not Jonathan Archer's prototype *Enterprise* NX-01 could technically be called a 'starship' had been debated here. The voices of Robert M. April, Heihachirou Nogura, Sarek of Vulcan, and the Honorable Kobry had echoed within these walls.

Council was not in session, but the room was still in use. The voices were not loud.

'They're absolutely sure?' asked Admiral Alistair Warhol, head of Starfleet's internal investigations group.

'The readings have been checked and re-checked, over and over again,' replied Alynna Nechayev, one of the most senior admirals in the fleet. She spoke with aggressive certainty. 'There's no mistake. This isn't a hologram or an alien replica or some sort of clone made of silver gel or God knows what -- this is *Voyager*, back in the Alpha Quadrant. And that's Kathryn Janeway on the bridge.'

All brows in the room furrowed at the name. 'We'll need to make the preparations at once, of course,' commented Admiral Kwami.

'Not a problem,' replied Commodore Blotnicky. 'We can contact the necessary parties in an hour, and they'll all be here within three days. Plenty of time.'

'Good,' judged Warhol, stroking his chin. 'But that's not all we'll need to do. Having everything ready won't do us any good if word gets out too soon.'

'I've already taken measures to slow the reports of *Voyager*'s return,' said Admiral Richard, 'but this is too big to keep locked down. The whole Federation will know before the day is out. After that, there's not a lot we can do except to limit our own contact with them.'

'Maybe not. I have an idea,' said Warhol. He tapped his comm badge. 'Lieutenant, put me through to Captain Marson on the *Solstice*. Priority alpha-three, captain's eyes only.'

In Warhol's office, Lieutenant Leucking executed the order. Twenty seconds later, the connection was made and Marson's face was on the Council Chamber monitor. 'You called, Admiral?'

'Yes, Captain. I have some special orders for you.'

'Big surprise,' said Marson with a smile. She had clearly been expecting something like this, given the exceptional situation her ship was in.

'First of all, I want you to limit your communication with Captain Janeway and her crew. Talk to her, by all means -- but let her do as much of the talking as possible. It is imperative that you not provide her with any information about recent events in the Alpha Quadrant. If she brings it up, change the subject. Understood?'

'Understood,' replied a confused Marson. 'May I ask why?'

'You may, but I cannot answer you at this time.'

'Ah.'

Warhol sat up a bit straighter. 'The second order is one I'll be carrying out myself. I need you to instruct your ship's computer to execute the commands I am about to give it.' Marson did so.

'Computer,' began the admiral, 'I hereby instate Starfleet Secure Communications Protocol 47. Use the most recent procedures available.'

'That operation requires Level Thirteen security clearance,' replied the computer, exactly the same way Christine Chapel had spoken those words when they were first recorded a century ago. *Some things never change*, reflected Warhol. 'Very well. Voice authorization Alistair Warhol, Admiral. Level Thirteen security passcode theta-one-nu-kai-E. Confirm.'

'Voice authorization confirmed. Communications Protocol 47 now in effect using procedure set 2.82. Apply to all in-system starships?'

'Negative. Apply only to NCC-74656.'

'Confirmed. Command sequence now locked. There will be no further audio messages.'

Warhol sat back again and turned to the perplexed Marson. 'For the record, you didn't hear any of that.'

'I had half a banana in each ear, sir.'

'Very good. You have your orders; Warhol out.'

The monitor cleared and then vanished into the wall, concealed by a small but seamless holographic projection. Warhol looked around the table at his fellow admirals. 'I assume you all know what protocol I just implemented?'

Nechayev smiled. 'Yes. If anything can help, that's it.'

'Glad we understand each other. Meeting dismissed.'

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As Kathryn Janeway walked out of the turbolift with pride in her step, Harry Kim announced 'Captain on the bridge!', a formality he'd never seen the need to use before -- for some reason it felt like the thing to say.

Janeway triumphantly walked around the bridge, ending at her command chair. She stood straighter than she had in a long time and looked out the viewscreen. The constellations were exactly as she remembered, and it was with ease that she found the one she was looking for. 'Mr. Tuvok,' she said, 'start rotating our viewing angle to 45 degrees from all axes. Nice and slow.' Tuvok obeyed; Janeway watched the patterns on the screen roll down and left until they reached the location she wanted. 'There! Hold.'

The viewscreen steadied; Janeway pointed at it, dead center. 'See that? That's the Sun -- *our* sun. And Earth is right next door.' Smiles broke out across the bridge.

Satisfied, Janeway took her seat -- she rarely stood when giving the order to get under way. 'Signal the *Solstice* that we're about to proceed,' she told Tuvok.

'They confirm,' replied the Vulcan a moment later. 'They will be synchronizing their warp field with ours.'

That was the final step; now all that remained was to give the order. 'Mr. Paris,' she said, savoring each syllable, 'set a course...for home.'

She grinned and added, 'And get it right this time.'

'Yes, ma'am!' came Tom's reliable chime. He punched in the same old course, but with new energy -- because he knew this would be the last time. In a flash of blue light that could be seen for a billion kilometers, *Voyager* took flight.

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It wasn't often that the Astrometrics lab could be found without Seven of Nine in it, but apparently Tom Paris had arrived at such a time. *Probably better*, he reflected. *I won't have to ask her to move*. He walked over to the transmissions console and entered a series of commands he'd grown familiar with over the course of several months; subroutines shook the dust off themselves and began going through their motions again. Voyager's deflector dish began to glow in crackling blue.

The massive Astrometrics screen warmed up and displayed the Federation seal. The computer mentioned in passing that use of the Watson comm system at warp velocity was not recommended, but Tom shrugged it off -- this wasn't a time to be strict about safety (not that he ever was, anyway). With a quiet click that sounded vaguely like a sigh, the computer carried out its instructions.

'No response,' said the computer. *That's okay*, Tom thought. *I can wait*.

'Two minutes of comm time have expired,' said the computer. *No biggie*, Tom thought. *That still leaves nine*.

'Four minutes of comm time have expired,' said the computer. *Patience, Paris*, Tom thought. *Remember: patience is a virtue*.

'Six minutes of comm time have expired,' said the computer. *I only have five minutes left? This isn't funny!* Tom thought. *Where is he?*

'Eight minutes of--'

Beep.

'Tom! It's really you! Thank the Great Forest! Where have you *been?*'

Paris grinned. 'Neelix! Am I wrong, or have you put on a few pounds since last time we talked?'

Neelix looked down, then blushed. 'Well, I'm only cooking for three now, and I'm not used to making so little food...I guess I'm overshooting a bit.'

'Say, speaking of cooking for three -- is that a wedding ring I see?'

Now Neelix grinned. 'Engagement. One step at a time.'

'Well, congratulations, buddy! Listen, it's been great talking to you again, but--'

'It's *been*? Come on -- you're not leaving already, are you? It's been seven months! We have so much to catch up on!'

'I know.' Tom's face grew more serious. 'But there's somebody here who needs this comm time more than I do.' He tapped his communicator and whispered 'Okay, come on in.'

The door slid open to make way for Voyager's second-youngest crewman. Naomi Wildman, subunit of Ensign Samantha Wildman and official Captain's Assistant, stepped slowly into the room, head ducked slightly and hands clasped together. *She's nervous as a Tyrellian fruit fly*, thought Tom. *I don't think she wants to admit to herself how much she missed him.*

Neelix smiled the warmest smile Tom had seen in months and beckoned to Naomi. Slowly, she came closer until she was standing right next to Tom. Finally she looked up, managed to sift a little smile out of her conflicting emotions, and said 'Hi.'

Tom patted Naomi on the head and exchanged a knowing look with Neelix, then headed out to give godfather and goddaughter their privacy. Five minutes were better than none.

\*\*\*

Commander Chakotay sat cross-legged on the floor in his quarters, mouthing the words of one of his people's ancient prayers. It was a prayer more of gratitude than of supplication; he had asked enough of the Sky Spirits during his time in the Bubble. Now was the time to thank them for guiding him through those difficult months. Chakotay recited the words the same way he always did (though not as often as he probably ought to, he thought with a sigh), until he reached the end of the prayer. He had just opened his eyes again when he remembered something; he closed them again and added 'Yesterday a warrior once under my command fell in battle. He fought valiantly and he died well. Please guide him now, Sky Spirits, wherever his new journey takes him.' Now Chakotay was done. He had known Ken Dalby better than Janeway had, so the loss had affected him more -- but it comforted him to know that the man's journey was not over, and he had faith in the Sky Spirits to watch over that journey.

Chakotay walked over to the replicator and began to request a glass of water; suddenly remembering that replicator rations were (once again) a thing of the past, he ordered hot apple cider instead. He took the drink with him to the couch and picked up a PADD. Keeping the lights dim since it was still ship's night, he settled in and began to read; he was on the third page when the door chimed. 'Come,' he said, wondering who it would be this late at night. Seven, perhaps? The ex-Borg kept odd hours, but she was usually busy working in those hours -- her social development still had a long way to go.

The door made way for Captain Janeway, as most sensible things would. *Of course*, thought Chakotay. *She's off-duty now.* 'Kathryn,' he said warmly. 'Can I get you something to drink?'

'Guess,' quipped Janeway. Chakotay smiled and headed to the replicator for a coffee. It occurred to him that she'd just come from a bright hallway, so he asked, 'Would you like the lights turned up?'

'No, it's fine,' she said, taking a seat on the couch. Chakotay followed with the coffee; she accepted it gratefully and took a sip.

'Now,' said the commander, 'what can I do for you at this hour?'

Janeway looked down for a moment, and Chakotay could see the discomfort in her expression. After so many years together, he could read her as fluently as his PADD. 'I've had something on my mind,' she said at last.

Chakotay could guess what, but he didn't say so. 'Is it anything I can help you with?'

'That's the problem -- I don't know. It's safe to say the last few months have been...confusing for both of us.'

'You can say that again,' he agreed, sipping his cider.

'We're friends, Chakotay. And we're captain and first officer. You've been my right hand for eight years, and I couldn't have had a better one.'

'But the question is whether we're anything else.'

'Exactly. At various times over the years, I think we each thought we had that figured out. But this whole business with the Ayrethans has cast everything into a new light...not to mention an experience I had with their cousins, the Inryeth.'

'Oh?' Chakotay had noticed slightly unusual behavior from the captain during that mission, but hadn't made much of it.

'It's hard to explain. I don't actually know that much about what happened, in fact. Suffice it to say that I was...urged to re-evaluate my feelings about you at that time. Not by the Inryeth, but by a force they seem to understand.'

'Sounds fascinating,' Chakotay said, and meant it -- both as an anthropologist and as someone who had encountered similar ideas in his own tribe's religion. 'I wish I'd gotten to know them a little better.'

'I'm not sure any of us knew them at *all*. They and the Ayrethans seem to consider 'enigmatic' a way of life.'

The first officer chuckled. 'They're strange all right, but I think it's safe to say we've seen stranger. Remember that mission back on Stardate 52239.1?'

'How could I forget?' Janeway grinned. 'Let's see...we detected an warp-capable species living on an M-class planet a few sectors outside Devore space. We were running a little low on duranium, so you and I took a shuttle trip to negotiate for it while *Voyager* investigated a nearby stellar cluster.'

'Of course, our long-range scanners couldn't tell us much about the species,' continued Chakotay. 'So on the way, we prepared ourselves psychologically for whatever strange sights and smells we might encounter. We were careful not to assume that these beings were humanoid or carbon-based or anything else we were used to.'

'So we entered orbit and had a talk with the local authorities. They insisted on using text-based communication until we beamed down, and that seemed odd, but it wasn't really a problem. We made a deal to meet them at their government building.'

'After a quick scan to make sure the air was breathable, we beamed down. And to our relief, they looked exactly like humans. No psychological trouble. This would be easy.'

'But then the leader opened his mouth --'

'-- *and nearly shattered our eardrums!*' they said in unison, laughing up a storm. This wasn't the first time they'd told this story. Janeway shook her head. 'Who would have thought that a race so much like ours would live at a completely different *volume*?'

Chakotay smiled. 'We've certainly had some good times, you and I.'

'I know,' said Janeway, growing serious again. 'That may be what troubles me the most. Forget our working relationship -- what happens to our friendship if we take it to the next step?'

'I wish I knew.' *After all,* thought the first officer, *I'm not sure where I stand with Seven of Nine now.*

'That's the risk in any human relationship, of course. You're not Michael -- if things go sour between us, I can't just rewrite you. And I can't risk losing your friendship now of all times. We don't know what's waiting for us when we reach Earth, but it won't be easy.'

Chakotay nodded solemnly.

'I guess what I'm saying is that we need to....' She stopped, looking for the right words.

'Define some parameters about us?'

Janeway smiled. 'Yes.'

This sounded like the lead-in to a discussion, but in fact nothing more needed to be said. Each knew what the other was thinking. Janeway needed Chakotay as a friend and a first officer right now -- anything more would be too big a risk. Later...perhaps. Who knew how things would look when the dust cleared? But the time wasn't yet right.

'Professional?' asked Chakotay.

'Professional,' confirmed Janeway. 'For now.' She took a final sip of her coffee, put a hand on Chakotay's shoulder for a moment, and then left for her quarters to get some sleep.

Chakotay sat back against the couch. He wasn't a Vulcan, but it was his habit to make his emotions secondary to others' -- his feelings were deep but did not drive him. His relationship with Janeway had taken many turns over the years, and Chakotay was used to it by now. The frustration of being so close to her and yet never quite close enough had faded with time. He could wait.

As the commander picked up his PADD to continue reading, he took a look out the window. The perfect simplicity of space never failed to calm him -- and humble him. Only the unimaginable

distances of space could reduce the stars, those mighty infernos of nuclear fusion, to zero-dimensional fireflies whose light you could block with one finger. The darkness was....moving?

Chakotay felt something tapping up his spine...something so tiny the human eye could never see it, so tiny it could hide in a blood cell. He heard the cries of dying tissues, atrophying as their functions were usurped by something else. He saw his mind spreading out to touch a million million others, yet at the same time curling in, crushed under the pressure of those million million minds as they reached out to his.

*No!* his spirit cried out against the evil, though there was no one to hear. *Not again! Not the Borg!*

And then, abruptly, the feeling vanished. Chakotay strained his eyes, but he couldn't see any kind of movement out the window. The simplicity of space was perfect again.

Had he been right? Were the Borg here? Was that evil phalanx on the move again, insinuating itself into every corner of the galaxy in its relentless quest to unite metal and flesh?

....Couldn't be.

\*\*\*

'There!' said the Doctor with delight. He deactivated the encephalo-scanner, removed its input port from Icheb's forehead, and put the device back into its case.

'You're sure?' asked the young ex-Borg.

'Positive. Your guess was right -- as critical as your cortical node was to you as a drone, your body has compensated perfectly for its loss. If I hadn't seen it with my own visual analysis subroutines, I could scan you and still not realize you'd ever had one.'

Icheb decided to ask the question he'd been wondering about for some time. 'Doctor, do you think that it might be possible to remove my other implants in the same way?'

'I can remove them as easy as you please -- the question is whether you'll survive the process. I've run some simulations, but I'm afraid the results have been inconclusive. I'll need to run more detailed scans...perhaps at Starfleet Medical, where the equipment is more up-to-date.'

'But do you think it will be possible?'

The Doctor thought. 'Hard to say. I very much doubt I'll be able to remove *all* your implants, but with enough research and study, I'm certain I'll find a way to eliminate the majority of them. In fact, don't be surprised if you celebrate your 18th birthday without any visible ones at all.'

Icheb liked the sound of that. He was about to say so when B'Elanna Torres charged through the door, carrying Miral. The baby was crying loud enough to wake the dead; B'Elanna wore an expression that could have scared them back into their graves. She didn't even notice Icheb. Instead, she headed straight for the Doctor, shoved Miral at him, and screamed 'FIX THIS THING NOW!'

The Doctor, with an expression that spoke louder than fifty sighs, took Miral and went to get a tricorder. B'Elanna sat down on the other end of Icheb's biobed. She was breathing very heavily, making a very low growling sound in the process, and her hair looked like Wolf 359 ten seconds after the Borg cube left. Nonetheless, Icheb knew he should try to be polite -- after all, B'Elanna



was a friend. Besides, that brief incident during the ship's last overhaul had been *very* revelatory. Icheb had nothing but respect for Tom Paris, but there was always the possibility that he might be killed on an away mission, at which point the half-Klingon would be available again. Why not keep his options open?

'Good day,' said Icheb. 'You look aesthetically pleasing.'

B'Elanna spun around and gave Icheb the most ferocious expression the young man had ever seen. The sweat on her face boiled away. Her teeth were bared and reflected hellish red light from the flaming infernos where her eyes used to be. She looked like a lion about to make the kill, except that the lion would probably leave one or two tiny fragments of its prey intact.

Icheb turned several interesting shades of turquoise and bolted out the door.

'That wasn't very polite,' said the Doctor, returning with Miral. He ducked to avoid her death glare. 'Anyway, I've scanned Miral thoroughly and she seems to be just fine.' (Miral's crying intensified.) 'Although she begs to differ.'

'I try to be a good parent,' B'Elanna said through gnashing teeth. 'I give her everything she needs. But she *will not stop* CRYING! I don't think she's breathed once in four hours!'

'Rest assured that that isn't the case,' replied the Doctor. 'Her breathing is fine, if slightly irregular. Anyway, I'm afraid I can't prescribe anything -- she's not unhealthy. There's nothing *physically* wrong with her, she's just...crying.'

'Give her a pacifier! Put a gag on her! *Sedate* her if you have to! I can't TAKE this anymore!' B'Elanna slammed her hands against her ears hard enough to fracture an ordinary human's skull.

Doc thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers and grinned. 'Computer, activate program Doctor upsilon-eight-P!'

Miral cried. Miral continued to cry. Miral cried some more. Miral stopped to take a breath. Miral cr-

'WAAAAAAAAA!'

Miral stared at the Doctor with amazement. How had *he* made that sound?

The Doctor simply grinned at her. Apparently he wasn't going to do anything more, so Miral dismissed the whole issue and remembered her many, many woes. She started to cr--

'WAAAAAAAAA!'

This was crazy! There was that sound again...the same sound *she* had been making! How was that possible? The implications were endless! No time to cry when something *this* exciting was going on....

B'Elanna was hearing something odd too. It took her a moment to realize what it was: Miral's silence. She hadn't heard that sound since her duty shift ended. Blessed, blessed silence...but how? 'Doctor, what in the world did you do?'

'Oh, it's quite simple,' he said, jiggling Miral a bit. 'I cried. Babies are fascinated by that sound -- it's one of the reasons they make it so often. Hang on, I'm about due for another one...WAAAAAAA!' Miral's eyes widened; tears were now the last thing on her mind.

'There,' said the Doctor, handing Miral back to her mother. 'She should be calm enough to accept the pacifier now, and that'll keep her busy until nap time.'

B'Elanna looked at Miral, then at the Doctor, then at Miral again. The baby was looking around the room with her mouth slightly open, as if seeking the answer to some sort of question. B'Elanna, still astonished, took the pacifier out of her pocket and thumbed the button on its handle to clean it off. Miral took the pacifier and sucked it with gusto.

The Doctor was still grinning like some sort of holographic hyena. B'Elanna sighed slightly and asked 'Okay, what'll it be this time?'

'What do you mean?'

'There's always something. Every time I come to sickbay, you need me to make some little correction to your program or the holoemitters or your equipment....'

'I'm surprised at you, Lieutenant! Do you really think I'm that opportunistic?'

B'Elanna bit her tongue. 'Sorry, Doctor. Didn't mean to offend you.'

'Oh, don't worry,' said the hologram, smiling again. 'I wasn't offended, just a little put off. Have a nice day!' He patted Miral on the head, then headed off to his office, whistling a sprightly tune.

B'Elanna considered leaving, but her curiosity got the better of her. She followed. 'Doc, can I ask you a question?'

'Certainly! Ask away.'

'What in the world has gotten *into* you?'

The Doctor looked confused. 'Is something wrong?'

'Not *wrong* exactly, just odd...I've never seen you so cheerful. It's almost scary.'

'Ahhhh.' Doc smiled again. 'Well, there's a first time for everything, isn't there?'

'There's also a reason for everything. I'm just wondering what the reason is.'

'Isn't it obvious? We're home!'

'But what does that mean to *you*? You've spent your whole life on *Voyager* -- in fact, you're pretty much the only one on the ship who didn't gain anything from this.'

'But I did! I've regained something I'd almost given up on.' The Doctor's expression grew serious. 'Lieutenant, do you remember my hologram?'

'*Photons, Be Free*? Of course.'

'I wrote that story to make my case to the Alpha Quadrant -- to try to make 'organics' understand the plight of my holographic brothers. But it was only the first step. To make a *real* difference, I need to do more. I need to gain allies, educate the masses, publish articles...build up public knowledge of the situation until I can make a case at the Federation Council. Right now I am the only vocal advocate of holographic rights in the entire Alpha Quadrant. This is my *chance*, Lieutenant! I can save my people from oppression -- I can make the Federation the first major galactic power *ever* to recognize the rights of holograms! When we were lost in the Bubble, I nearly gave up hope. Now I have that hope back, and I don't plan to waste it.'

B'Elanna couldn't help being a little surprised. She'd known the Doctor had strong feelings about holographic rights, but... 'Doc, you sound like you consider yourself a *freedom fighter*.'

'Why not? There's nobody else! You can't imagine how it feels to know that you and you alone can make a difference....'

'You'd be surprised,' said B'Elanna with a slight smile.

The Doctor caught on. 'Of course. My apologies, Lieutenant.'

'None required. You know, Doc...I'm proud of you. You have no idea what you're getting into, but the fact that you're willing to get into it at all says a lot about you.'

'Why, thank you!' said the hologram with evident surprise. 'To be honest, I was expecting you to find all this amusing.'

'Not at all. Frankly, I'm impressed. You're a credit to your 'race.'"

The Doctor was deeply touched. 'I don't know what to say, Lieutenant.'

'For starters,' said the engineer with a smile, 'call me B'Elanna.' She took her daughter back to their quarters, leaving an amazed freedom fighter in her wake.

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It had been eight years since Tuvok last saw his *kaltoh* sticks arranged in the form of a rhombitruncated cuboctahedron. He had hoped it would be longer.

'Well played, my wife,' he said, but couldn't keep a very slight edge of frustration out of his voice. It was, fortunately, imperceptible -- to anyone but T'Pel. And T'Pel was the only other one here. She narrowed her eyes at him for a brief moment, as if to scold him for letting his emotional control slip.

*It was illogical to believe that I would win*, mullered Tuvok. *I have never defeated T'Pel at kaltoh in 75 years*. Then again, he had spent the last eight of those years away from her, honing his skills against the computer and such mental giants as Seven of Nine and the Doctor. Even Ensign -- no, *Lieutenant* Kim had occasionally made impressive moves (though usually by mistake).

Besides, Tuvok had found over the years that logic was not always applicable where his wife was concerned.

T'Pel narrowed her eyes again; apparently she had picked up a wisp of that thought. But if she was annoyed, she gave no sign. Instead, she stood up, crossed the table to where Tuvok was

sitting, and took his hand for a moment. The message was clear even though there was no telepathy involved: *I know you missed me, my husband. And I missed you too.*

Tuvok knew his wife would never say those words out loud or even 'speak' them telepathically. To miss anyone, even a spouse, required emotion. Far more than Tuvok himself, T'Pol was a master of emotional control; if she had so desired, she could easily have become one of the Kohlinaru. Like her husband, she had chosen family life instead, but that had not prevented her from following the teachings of Surak as closely as any Vulcan could. For her to confess to an emotion, even such a moderate one as this, would be a scandalous lapse of logic.

But the message came through, nonetheless. And Tuvok returned it in kind. In whatever form contentment and happiness could take for two Vulcans, they were experiencing it now.

It was a fascinating sensation.

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*Captain's Log, Stardate 55358.5. Voyager is now within two days of Earth. Within 48 short hours, despite the best efforts of everyone from the Kazon to the Borg, we will be home.*

*I'm delighted, but I can't help thinking about the sacrifices of those who got us this far. Hogan, Jetal, Ballard, Admiral Janeway, now Dalby...just a few out of so many. And it's been as hard to lose those who left of their own accord -- I had always hoped to take Neelix and Kes on a tour of Earth, but each of them parted ways with us too soon. I've caught myself missing even my enemies. Kashyk, Ransom, Q, Seska...even the Borg Queen, for heaven's sake!*

*I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. These are the people who have defined my last eight years, for good or ill. But you'd think I'd feel better about finally accomplishing the most important mission of my life. Maybe the lingering sadness will go away when we finally enter orbit.*

*Ah yes, the obligatory report on ship's status. We came through the Sernaix attack surprisingly well; our shields, armor, and weapons are all in working order. However, we have yet to hear from Starfleet -- or anyone else but the Solstice crew. I've ordered a Level One diagnostic on our comm system to determine the problem.*

\*\*\*

Lieutenant Ayala, at Tactical on this shift, noticed a blinking light on his console. He called up the information he would need to report. 'Captain?'

'Yes?' Captain Janeway turned around in her seat, less out of interest than out of desire to move around a bit.

'There's a shuttlecraft entering the sector...it seems to be heading straight for us.'

'Klingon?' asked Chakotay. Janeway stared at him; he shrugged.

'No -- Federation. It's registered to Deep Space Two, and there's one life sign aboard.' Ayala's console beeped. 'It's hailing.'

'On screen.'

The main viewer filled with the face of a man Janeway recognized from the personnel files. She granted him permission to dock without hesitation.

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Naomi Wildman headed down the hall to Shuttlebay One. She had no idea why -- her mom had called her, but she hadn't mentioned what they were going there for.

In her mind, Naomi had come up with three theories. The first was that Captain Janeway needed someone to clean the shuttlebay floor so they wouldn't get in trouble with the floor inspectors at Starfleet Command. This struck her as entirely possible, but it seemed odd that Janeway would send both Wildmans on a mission that only required one.

The second theory was a little more likely: perhaps the captain had finally decided to give Naomi formal piloting lessons, as she'd wanted for so long. Her mother wasn't a pilot by trade, but could certainly navigate when she needed to; Captain Janeway might have reasoned that it was best for Naomi to learn from someone she knew well. If this were indeed the situation, Naomi was sure she'd have a great time, but she wished she were learning from the best -- Tom Paris. That way, she might even turn out to be a quicker study than Icheb, and that would earn her gloating rights for the rest of the year.

Still, this theory didn't strike her as terribly probable. That left only her third and favorite. What if *Voyager* had been sidetracked on the way home by a new and powerful alien race? If there hadn't been any battles yet, it was possible that the captain would have kept this a secret, known only to the bridge officers. Now, *Voyager's* best hope in such a situation would be to negotiate, but what if the aliens distrusted humans on the basis of their shape -- or, worse still, their size? Wasn't it possible that a very short species could still achieve warp technology and advanced weaponry? If so, no human could perform the negotiations without intimidating the aliens by height alone! The solution to this problem would be obvious. Captain Janeway had one officer with both proven diplomatic skills and short stature: her Captain's Assistant. Only she, Naomi, could handle such a situation.

Naomi really liked that idea. It would be her greatest challenge ever, but she knew she was up to the job. She walked through the shuttlebay doors fully expecting to see Chakotay or Tuvok waiting there to brief her.

Instead, to her disappointment, the only one there was the officer on duty, Crewman Chell. Shuttlebay duty wasn't exactly demanding -- Chell had his feet up on the console and was flipping through one of Neelix's old cookbooks, *How to Cook For Forty Humans*. Naomi looked carefully around the room, but couldn't see anyone else...not even a PADD with her instructions. How did the captain expect her to perform the negotiations without knowing anything about these people? Then again, maybe they didn't have any useful information, and she would have to wing it. That would be even more of a challenge. Naomi smiled broadly at the prospect.

A light on Chell's console flashed. He didn't notice -- his book was in the way. The light flashed again, then twice more. Naomi was about to say something when the flashing light was replaced by a loud beeping sound. Chell immediately snapped to attention, pressed several panels on his console, and looked around the room quickly. 'Get back, Naomi!' he said. 'You're past the force field line.' Naomi didn't need to be told twice -- she darted back to her mother's side.

The bay doors opened with their customary lethargy. Naomi tentatively reached forward; the force field crackled around her fingers, making her forehead horns tingle. After enjoying the sensation for a moment, she pulled her hand back to watch the (hopefully alien) ship fly into the bay. Instead, to her surprise, she saw the familiar shape of a Class 2 shuttlecraft. More surprising still

was the registry code: NCC-04192. Weren't codes with zeroes at the start reserved for starbase support craft? That was how Naomi remembered it.

The shuttle came to a landing; the doors closed; the force field flared briefly and vanished. Naomi saw her mom exchange a look with Chell that communicated something to him. Why was she being kept out of the loop? It made no sense! The Captain's Assistant was a critical member of the crew. Whatever the reason, Naomi could only wait patiently as the shuttle's door opened and its lone occupant walked out.

The man was oddly-colored and taller than the average human. Naomi didn't recognize him or even his species (reigniting brief hopes of a negotiating session), but her mom obviously did -- she immediately ran towards him. Then, to Naomi's astonishment, they hugged -- and *kissed!* Who was this? What gave him the right to kiss her mother? And why was she so happy about it? She was a married woman, for heaven's.... oh.

Naomi nervously approached the happy couple, now well aware of the truth and feeling its weight on her shoulders. If talking to Neelix again had put her emotions in disarray, *this* was enough to scramble them like Ktarian eggs. Ktarian...she would have to practice pronouncing that word. She would need it.

'Naomi, I want you to meet Greskrendtregk. He's...he's your father.'

She looked up at her Ktarian father with his Ktarian horns on his Ktarian head. The harsh-sounding word echoed through her half-Ktarian brain as if shouted by a Ktarian into a Ktarian cave. She felt Ktarian for the first time in her half-Ktarian life. She didn't think she liked the feeling.

'Hi, dad,' she said as Greskrendtregk took her into his arms for the first time, and she felt a little better.

\*\*\*

The mess hall was as packed as Harry Kim had ever seen it -- and that included the time the Hirogen had filled the place up for a while. *Everybody* who didn't have bridge duty was there. But then, that was hardly a surprise. When was the last time the crew had finally come home after a journey this long?

Oh, wait. He knew the answer to that one. Ah well, it didn't count.

Harry walked over to Chell, who was serving some sort of sushi. 'When does the countdown start?'

The Bolian checked his wrist chronometer (a cumbersome phrase, in Harry's opinion, but it served). 'We're down to three hundred seconds now. The official countdown starts at forty-seven.'

'Why forty-seven?'

Chell shrugged. 'As good a number as any. On my planet, sixty would sound odd. Can I interest you in some Terra-Nuts Sushi?'

'I'll pass, thanks.'

'It's still here if you change your mind. Mike! Come on in, the party's just getting started!'

Chell bustled over to greet Ayala. Harry walked around the room a bit, ending up at the serving table, where he cut himself a piece of Earth Day cake. He groaned internally to see eight candle-holes in it...at least he'd missed the lighting, and the Happy Earth Day song that had doubtless accompanied. The puns were pure Chell, but something about this setup reeked of a certain helmsman's involvement.

Tom wasn't here now, of course -- he was busy flying the ship. He'd missed his first chance to pilot *Voyager* home and he wasn't planning on missing the second. Likewise, the other senior officers had all wanted to be there. (Except Seven. Come to think of it, Harry had no idea where she was; he hadn't seen her on the bridge or here in the crowd.) Harry's decision to watch from here had come as a surprise to the captain, but she'd seen no reason to disallow it.

The real reason Harry had chosen to come to this party was emotional. It had taken him seven years to realize that *Voyager* was his home. He had made that discovery too late, or so he'd thought, but then the Borg had sucker-punched them all one last time. (A sudden thought flashed into his mind: did 'See you soon, Harry' have something to do with that? It seemed unlikely, but anything was possible where the Borg Queen was concerned....) At any rate, his feelings about their embublement had been mixed at first, but he'd soon come to accept and welcome this extension of his time on *Voyager*. Now, that time too was about to end -- and he intended to spend every last second of it with his friends.

In the center of the crowd, Harry could see the Delaney sisters laughing it up with Sue Nicoletti. Henley and Geron were smiling again, and even Harren was being sociable. Harry looked around again, this time to check for any conspicuous absences; the bridge officers and the Doctor were all missing, of course, but Harry also couldn't find any trace of T'Pol. Then again, that wasn't really a surprise. Since her arrival on the ship, the Vulcan matron had kept mostly to herself. She'd been pleasant enough and gotten along well with the crew (by all reports, her counseling skills weren't bad at all), but she had never really joined the 'family.' *Pity*, thought Kim; *this ship's Vulcan population always did need a female influence*.

Finally Harry noticed Tal Celes standing alone off to the side. The young Bajoran had remained shy to the last. Harry decided to go talk to her -- she didn't seem to have anyone else, and neither did he. Besides, she was cute.

Forty-seven seconds. The countdown began.

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In her quarters, T'Pol savored the peace and silence of Vulcan meditation. Hers was a quiet life, but it held more meaning for her than a busier one ever could.

With her mind, T'Pol began to reach outwards. Telepathy was not her strong point -- it had always held more interest for her husband than for her -- but she had come to know her personal limits and do as much as possible within them. She lightly brushed the hundred minds around her, drawing strength from that contact and increasing her range. This was the first step in a complicated meditation.

*Forty-two...forty-one...forty....*

The second step was to see oneself in a greater number of dimensions. For convenience, most humanoids reduced their standard worldview to two dimensions; T'Pol would need at least four. She focused the energy of her powerful mind on understanding time as a continuum, just like the three spatial directions. Slowly, slowly, the three-dimensional mask of space fell before her eyes, and she began to see herself and her surroundings in more than the present.

*Thirty-four...thirty-three...thirty-two....*

Now to back up, to view the scenario from a distance so that she could take it all in at once. Her field of telepathic vision drew farther and farther back. She gained a strong, distinct sense of Tuvok on the bridge, then of Vorik and the other Vulcan crew, then the remaining telepaths, and finally the nontelepaths and less defined cases like the Doctor. Most were humans, of course, but T'Pel understood humans. It was a characteristic of her family. T'Pel was of a somewhat more important family than her husband, in fact; Tuvok was distantly related to the house of Sotek, but she was in the direct line of T'Pol, the first Vulcan to serve on a Starfleet ship. It was from her that T'Pel drew inspiration when dealing with the human mind, for T'Pol had come to know humans better than any Vulcan before her and most since.

T'Pel listened to the voices of these minds. She watched them unite to begin constructing a shape.

*Twenty-five....twenty-four...twenty-three....*

As the shape grew well-defined, T'Pel recognized it: it was *Voyager*. She drew back farther to see the space around it, and soon she had gained enough telepathic distance to add Earth to her image. The ship pointed straight for Earth and was proceeding there with great speed. The minds knew this, and they rejoiced. The numbers continued to descend.

*Sixteen...fifteen...fourteen....*

A telepathic explosion caught T'Pel completely off guard. She fell forward, losing all her mental distance from the ship. Slowly she regained her presence of mind and pulled herself together, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Something...something had been added to the image, too quickly for her to comprehend. No, not one something -- many somethings. The Vulcan stood, steepled her fingers together, closed her eyes, and concentrated one more time. Perhaps she could regain this new telepathic image, understand it, before it was too late.

*Eleven...ten! Nine!*

Now T'Pel was standing atop *Voyager* as it moved closer to Earth. She found herself unable to adjust the field of vision this time; a little bit of the chill of vacuum managed to creep in. Perhaps this vision was more...real than the last one in some way.

*Eight! Seven! Six!*

T'Pel looked around. She was not alone.

*Voyager* flew silently on its way. Beside it, on the left, was the *Solstice* in escort formation. But T'Pel could see another ship of the same class on the right, flying in perfect symmetry. It didn't look as real as its sister ship, yet there it was...a telepathic image constructed from whatever telepathic images were constructed of.

T'Pel turned around to face the aft of the ship -- and nearly lost her telepathic hold completely. Behind *Voyager* was an enormous flotilla of ships. The nearest was a large one, heavily scarred from battle, which was of vaguely human design but certainly not Starfleet. To T'Pel's amazement, this image overlapped with the aft section of *Voyager* itself. Behind it were two smaller ships, one on each side; the first was a garbage scow of some sort, the other a small shuttle from some distant alien world. Farther back still were two Starfleet ships, very faint, of the



Defiant class. T'Pol could see a great many more ships, even more distant, but they were too far and too alien to be recognizable.

Behind this unreal fleet was an enormous Borg cubeship, but one the Borg themselves could never have made. Its design was Borg, but it had an strange, undefinable quality to it...a quality that was distinctly non-mechanical. The ship was *Voyager's* ally, and it was, in some sense that T'Pol couldn't pin down, beautiful. Nothing created by the Borg had the least bit of beauty to it, and so this cube could not be theirs. Then what was it? The image was confusing. All the images were confusing.

And yet, together with *Voyager*, the picture as a whole took on a strange coherence. T'Pol could look at the individual parts and question them, but the whole was a telepathic vector of incredible magnitude, directed inexorably at Earth. There was something true, something right, about her vision. She understood something about -- about the journey.

T'Pol opened her eyes and folded her mind back into itself. Her whole experience had taken only three seconds. She would remember it for a lifetime.

*Three! Two! One! ZERO!*

In the company of ghosts, U. S. S. *Voyager* came home.

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### Interlude

*The Unicomplex of the Borg Collective no longer exists. Its network of transwarp conduits is damaged beyond repair. The Queen of the Borg is dead. The balance of power in the Milky Way galaxy has changed forever -- and it is not done changing yet.*

*Aboard the dead Queen's royal yacht, a man stands alone in the primary control node. He watches the universe move by him with the unthinkable velocity of transwarp. He is the last survivor of a once-strong race, and he has taken on a task whose magnitude terrifies him. He is also a Borg.*

*A Borg, but not a drone. The concepts are distinct. A drone has no will; or rather, it has a will, but it is the same will 'possessed' by every drone in the Collective. It is the will of the Queen, whose wish is their command. No one commands this man, and so he is not a drone. He is only a Borg, and even this is in a strange sense that he does not fully understand. The universe has not seen fit to give him that particular knowledge yet.*

*The universe keeps many things to itself.*

*Another Borg enters the node. He too is not a drone. He bears a message from the Collective's information-gathering scanners, one of the few networks that survived the recent cataclysm undamaged. Then, as if to prove beyond a doubt that he is not a drone, he speaks with one voice -- his own. 'Axum, we just received the latest packet of information from our scanners. Most was irrelevant, but I thought you would want to see this item.'*

*The Borg called Axum winces at the word 'irrelevant'; his companion lowers his head slightly in apology. Axum takes the message and reads it thoroughly, running it through his mind in every detail to make sure nothing is missed. Then he turns back to the window and stares in evident*

frustration. He clicks a button and the message dissolves, its heat absorbed by the ship's systems for reuse.

His companion is perplexed. 'You asked to be notified if any news of Voyager became known.'

'I did. Thank you.' Axum frowns. 'I'm better for knowing, even if it doesn't change anything. What news from the fronts?'

The companion recalls the information he stored earlier. 'Fifteen of their ships have been destroyed in the last week. We have lost eleven. Their death toll is estimated at two hundred thousand, ours at ninety thousand.'

'Good. If this is what we must do, Curris, we should at least do it well.'

The drone called Curris nods. He begins to leave, then turns and says, 'A detour to Sector 001 would not delay us seriously enough to cause problems.'

'No. The Borg aren't welcome in that sector. And I can't ask anyone else to join me in this task. For me to see Annika again would only make things worse for both of us.'

'Understood.' Curris leaves. Axum remains in the control node, looking out at the darkness surrounding him. Such a cold universe, he thinks. A universe slowly dying as the last of its heat boils away. In a universe like this, what a terrible, terrible thing to be alone....

The viewport fills with transwarp conduits. The viewport fills with Borg cubes. They fire all weapons.

## End of Interlude

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In space, no one can hear you scream. But there are people in San Francisco who swear they could hear the cheering of *Voyager's* crew as the ship finally entered Earth orbit.

In the mess hall, hands were shaken and hugs were exchanged. The crew's excitement knew no bounds -- even Vorik was almost smiling. A few of the more emotional crewmen were weeping with joy. On the sidelines, Harry Kim watched with satisfaction but kept his own excitement contained. As a senior officer, he was supposed to set an example at times like this.

Besides, he wasn't all *that* eager to reach Earth anyway. This was home...wasn't it?

Tal turned to him and slapped him on the back. 'You think too much, Harry. Get into the spirit!' Suddenly remembering who she was talking to, she jumped back two steps and clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes the size of Xanic plume apples. 'Sorry, sir! I forgot! I...I...AAAAAAA!' Before Harry could stop her, she dashed off into the crowd. Harry shook his head and went to try one of Chell's Returnovers.

\*\*\*

Tuvok had known Captain Janeway for many years, but he'd never seen her quite this happy. How much was sincere and how much was for appearances? The Vulcan considered a quick

mind-brush to find out, but decided against it. Telepathy was among his most powerful tools -- and such tools were best reserved for when they were truly needed.

Tuvok's wife didn't share this philosophy. She reasoned that her mind was capable of telepathy for the same reason that it was capable of thought -- to better understand the universe. A Vulcan never held back the power of thought, so why place limits on telepathic powers? This was in fact one of their major intellectual disagreements, and it had fueled many debates between them over the years. Tuvok had come to understand, if not agree with, T'Pol's point of view, which is why he had felt no annoyance on realizing that she had been performing a powerful telepathic meditation while *Voyager* was entering orbit.

Janeway stood, straightened her tunic, and gave her comm badge a tap. 'All hands, this is the captain,' she said. 'As of fifteen seconds ago, *Voyager* is in orbit around Sol III -- Earth. This concludes our present tour of duty. Our two exploratory missions -- first in the Delta Quadrant, then in the Bubble -- took us a bit out of our way, but as you can see, we got back safe and sound.'

'In the last eight years, I have counted on all of you to keep this ship together. You came from many different backgrounds. Most of the crew were Starfleet officers when we left, and some were Maquis; whatever Command decides, I want you to know that I consider each and every one of you a Starfleet officer today.'

'Our journey was long and difficult. We had to deal with the pain of homesickness and isolation. We had to make peace with people we might never have trusted otherwise. We all lost friends. But now, at long last, our sacrifices have borne fruit. We have run the gauntlet, and now we can rest.'

'Let me make one thing clear -- you're not off the hook just yet. This family has gone through too much together to split up completely. We will undoubtedly take many different paths from here, but we live in a galaxy where communication is effortless, even at great distances. When we find each other again -- and we *will* find each other again -- I expect you all to be in one piece with some interesting stories to tell. That's my last order to you as your captain.'

'At any rate, thank you all for coming along for the ride. You may now disembark, but feel free to stick around a while longer if you wish. You've done more than I could ever have asked of you, and I hope you all receive the reward you deserve. Good luck.'

'Oh, one last thing -- I advise all crew members to look out the window when you get the chance. The view is not to be missed. Janeway out.'

The captain sat down again, looking rather sad now. Tuvok suspected that the emotional nature of her speech had brought home the reality that *Voyager's* crew would no longer be united. Fortunately, she didn't have long to think about that. 'Captain, it seems the communication apparatus has resumed operation.'

'How do you know, Tuvok?'

'We are receiving a hail from Starfleet Command.'

Janeway grinned. 'On screen.'

Admiral Owen Paris appeared on the main viewer. To Janeway's surprise, Reg Barclay wasn't with him; to her greater surprise, he didn't look pleased at *all* to see them. 'Captain Janeway,' he

said, 'it is imperative that you come to see me at once. We have a matter of critical importance to discuss.'

Janeway was stunned. 'Aye, sir. Chakotay, Seven, you're with --'

'No! Come alone. And make sure the transport is untraceable. Paris out.'

Tom turned around in his pilot's chair. His father's urgency (and the absence of even a quick nod for his son) had clearly disturbed him. 'Captain, what's going on here?'

'Ask me again when I get back,' replied Janeway wryly as she stepped into the turbolift. 'Maybe I'll have an answer for you then.'

\*\*\*

Owen Paris was not one of Starfleet's most powerful admirals, but he knew quite a few of them. To his frustration, they were rarely the paragons of honor that those with such power should be. Paris didn't consider himself infallible, but he never deviated from his principles -- it appalled him that so few of Starfleet's most powerful officers took that same attitude. There were too many Dougherties and not enough Quinns.

Paris waited patiently for his old friend to arrive. She needed to know what was coming.

The familiar whine of Starfleet transporters filled the room; Paris looked to the side and saw points of blue light spreading vertically as a glowing mist began to form. *Old-style transporter beam*, he observed in passing. *Makes sense*. At last the beam congealed into Captain Kathryn Janeway, one of the last people Paris had expected to see alive again. He wished he could give her the joyful greeting she deserved, but there wasn't time.

'Kathryn. Take a seat -- I have something urgent to tell you.'

She did. 'I had Tuvok use the silencer subroutine he designed personally while we were in the Delta Quadrant. It's very unlikely that the beam-in was detected.'

'Good.' Paris rubbed his chin. 'Headquarters knows you're here, of course, but they may not actually send for you until daybreak. That should give me time to explain the situation.'

Janeway looked relieved. 'About time. We haven't heard a word from any official sources since we got back, and no one on our escort ship would talk about current events. Ensign Wildman says that even her husband was tightlipped.'

'He was under silencing orders from Admiral Warhol, no doubt. And anyone else who tried to contact the ship was deflected. Did you discover any problems with your comm system?'

'No...it just didn't seem to be working at distances greater than a million kilometers or so.'

'That was Warhol's doing as well. I have reason to believe he used one of his top-level clearance codes to perform a 'quiet' shutdown of your long-range receiver. The receiver would still have shown all the signs of being operational, but no incoming messages would get farther than the deflector dish.'

'So you think Command *did* contact us?'

'No question about it. I sent a message, and I've spoken to several others who did. None of those messages reached you. They were probably deleted on arrival; I doubt that Warhol would risk storing them, either on your ship or here on Earth.'

'You keep talking about this Admiral Warhol. Is he the Commodore Warhol who was vice-chair of the internal investigations group when we left?'

'Yes. He's head of the group now; the promotion came five years ago. His conduct has officially been above reproach, but his dedication to preserving Starfleet security is strong enough to take him to dangerous lengths. I believe his current target is you.'

'But why?'

'That's what I need to explain to you. Have a look at these sensor logs.'

Admiral Paris activated the monitor and replayed three video clips. By the time they were done, Janeway knew exactly why the situation was so dangerous. And why she was to blame.

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Naomi Wildman rematerialized in the middle of San Francisco. Behind her were her parents and two friends she'd asked to bring along -- Seven and Icheb. Of the five, only one had been born and raised here on Earth, but each had some reason to call it home.

Naomi held her mother's hand and walked beside her as the Wildmans led their party of five through the busy streets. Icheb stood as close to Seven as politeness allowed, hoping to absorb some of her confidence and invulnerability to nerves. Of course, Seven had more *reason* to be nervous -- this was mostly just another planet to Icheb, but it was Seven's long-lost homeworld. Yet somehow the tall ex-drone seemed unconcerned. Seven's strength never ceased to inspire her protégé.

'Look!' said Samantha. 'There's the science museum, and there's the artisans' market, and there's that Creole restaurant where you and I used to have lunch all the time....'

'That one? No, no. It was the one in New Orleans,' replied Greskrendtregk.

'You think so? Guess I could be wrong -- it's been so long. But that's definitely T'Plana Hath Park over there.'

Indeed it was. They entered the public park and picked out a picnic table. While the adults began unpacking the food, Naomi ran up one of the lush green hills. 'Come on, Icheb!' she called out.

The young Brunali began to walk over to her. 'No, no!' laughed Naomi. 'We're outside, *really* outside -- we can run around all we want! Whee!' Icheb didn't see the point (wouldn't he get to the same place, regardless of speed?), but he gave chase as ordered.

Naomi felt freer than she'd ever felt on *Voyager*. The wind blew through her hair and filled her lungs with pure, unprocessed oxygen. This was a new and glorious feeling, and she loved every minute of it. To run through the grass of a real planet with a real sun smiling down on her -- this was paradise. This was where she belonged. This was...this was home.

Icheb caught up to Naomi, and they played tag and rolled down the hill for a while. Outdoor activities were starting to grow on Icheb. At last they tired out and returned to the table for their

food, which they ate ravenously. Watching them with a smile, Samantha leaned against Greskrendregk and savored the sheer perfection of the moment. Seven, meanwhile, had already eaten and had little to do but observe the others in the park. She glanced around at this cross-section of humanity with interest.

To her surprise, she also noticed this cross-section of humanity glancing at her with interest. Indeed, one of the young men couldn't keep his eyes off her...until the young woman with him noticed and slapped him in the face. (This struck Seven as atypically harsh for a race as peaceful as humans, but she had never fully understood humans anyway. Perhaps her understanding would improve now that she had more of them to study.) However, these were not the only ones who had noticed her. A group of humans...no, two groups...seemed to be looking at the two ex-drones with something like revulsion and something like hatred.

Seven had some idea of why this was, and it didn't particularly bother her. Well...all right, it was a little unsettling. But she could handle it. Over the years, many people had hated her for reasons she had never fully understood. Once, on a planet called Jectaris, she had nearly been killed in an unprovoked attack -- a local resident had attempted to crush her with a bathtub, of all things. (It bothered her that quantum physics suggested the existence of alternate universes in which the attack had succeeded. ) At any rate, Seven had learned that she could not expect to be welcomed everywhere she went.

Icheb was another matter. The young ex-drone had also seen these onlookers and was clearly very disturbed. A flash of compassion came over Seven, and she decided to take his attention off this problem. 'Icheb,' she said, 'direct your ocular receptors in that direction.'

'She's telling him to look that way,' whispered Naomi to her parents, who held back a chuckle.

Icheb looked -- and was glad he had. There, before his ocular receptors, was the one building he had most wanted to see, the first step in joining an organization he deeply wanted to become part of. The campus of Starfleet Academy was right there for the taking. Jettisoning his customary reservedness, he grinned broadly. Naomi, feeling the need to contribute, patted him on the back.

Her task complete, Seven returned to her observations. To her surprise, she was interrupted by a comm signal. 'Chakotay to Seven of Nine. Please report to Astrometrics.' Mildly annoyed at the lack of notice, she took her leave of the others and beamed up, leaving them to enjoy the sunny afternoon.

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'And what did she do?'

'She turned around, looked those Xrabipta right in the compound eyes -- and pulled a phaser out of her *hair!* I'm not kidding!'

Amid the sound of uproarious laughter, Neelix disappeared from view for a moment. Chakotay was concerned. 'Neelix? Are you all right?'

'I'm okay,' said the red-faced Talaxian, pulling himself back into the field of view. 'Sorry, I was literally rolling on the floor there. Her *hair?* I can't believe it!'

'Neither could I, but then I realized -- she'd done it up in a bun that day for the first time in years. Now why would she have done that unless she had something up her sleeve? And at *that* point I was annoyed with myself for not guessing sooner.'

'Shame on you, Commander,' grinned Neelix. Chakotay hung his head low, inciting even more laughter.

'Now let's hear about *your* adventures. How are you and the other Talaxians holding out?'

'Not bad at all,' said Neelix, smiling out of pride now instead of amusement. 'Commander Nocona came back a few months ago with a bigger ship, but we'd just finished fortifying the shield. Before he could even make a dent in it, we'd sent up enough small fighters to make him think twice. We haven't seen him since.'

'Well done,' said Chakotay. 'You've more than proven yourself as a leader.'

'Welllll, I still don't really think of myself that way. But Mr. Tuvok said the same thing when I talked to him this morning, so I guess maybe I should take the hint.' They shared a smile.

'Far be it from me to steal someone else's conversation material. Let me ask you about something our Vulcan friend never would. How's your relationship with Dexa coming along?'

The Talaxian blushed a bit. 'We're engaged. The wedding will be in two months unless something comes up.'

'Like what?'

'Well, you never know -- those Xrabipta just might want their next target to have a little less hair!'

Both men burst out laughing, even more so when Chakotay added, 'In that case, I'll be sure to get the Doctor a security detail.'

Neelix sighed contentedly. 'That's enough of *my* love life. How about yours?'

'I don't have a love life,' said the commander uncomfortably.

'Oh? What about your relationship with Seven of Nine?'

'It's your turn.'

'What?'

'To resequence the signal parameters so we aren't limited to eleven minutes.'

'Oh, that's right. I forgot.' Neelix tried to remember the code to enter. *Whew!* thought Chakotay. *Now I have time to figure out how to explain to him.*

As if on cue, Seven entered the room. 'You sent for me, Commander?'

Chakotay nodded. 'Don't you remember? It's our turn to talk to Neelix.'

'I was scheduled to do so with Lieutenant Kim.'

'He traded timeslots with me so he could visit his parents this afternoon. That's where he is now.'

'I see.'

Neelix had finally figured out the code. 'Got it, Commander! We've got a seven-minute buffer zone before the MIDAS array has to cool down. Seven! Sorry, I didn't see you! When did you arrive?'

'Nineteen seconds ago,' answered the ex-drone.

'Well, who's counting?' said Neelix with a smile. 'It's wonderful to see you again! And seeing both of you together...well, it does my heart good to know I can still be a good morale officer at this distance. Congratulations!'

Chakotay cleared his throat. Seven glanced to the side.

'Um...congratulations *are* in order, right?'

Seven took a sudden interest in the floor. Chakotay cleared his throat again.

Neelix sighed the sigh of the downcast. 'I see. What happened?'

Chakotay looked for words. 'Well...you see....'

'I terminated the relationship due to Commander Chakotay's inadequacy as a candidate,' said Seven.

'*What?*' shouted Neelix and Chakotay in unison.

'I later re-evaluated that decision,' continued Seven dispassionately. 'At the time, however, a much larger group of candidates had just become available. I had chosen Commander Chakotay only because of the limited selection.'

'I thought it was because of my advice!' replied a stunned Neelix.

'It was. Your advice was what incited my evaluation. When that evaluation became invalid, it was necessary for me to discard it.'

'And me,' said Chakotay.

'Yes,' said Seven.

Chakotay stared blankly at Neelix. Neelix stared blankly at Chakotay. Neelix and Chakotay stared blankly at Seven.

'Is something wrong?' asked Seven.

'I certainly hope so,' said Chakotay. 'This is *not* what you told me when we talked about this before.'

'On the contrary. It *is* what I told you when we talked about this before. Perhaps my wording was different.'

'Perhaps you should --'



'Guys! Guys!' interrupted Neelix. 'Calm down. Let's just forget I ever brought this up, all right?'

Chakotay had no objection to that. 'So...' He tried to think of a new topic of conversation.

'Perhaps I should go,' said Seven. 'The diagnostic on *Voyager's* comm system is not yet complete.'

Chakotay snapped his fingers. 'Neelix, Seven just reminded me -- perhaps there's something you can help us with.'

'Certainly, Commander! Anything you want.'

'Our long-range comm system has been offline for the last week,' explained the first officer. 'We haven't had problems with this transmitter, but ordinary communications haven't been working. In other words, we've had no way of knowing what's been going on in the Alpha Quadrant. Now, am I correct in thinking you've been in touch with Reg Barclay?'

'Yes, that's right,' said Neelix. 'This comm system still worked, so Reg set up a device on Earth just as you had on *Voyager*. We've been in touch quite often.'

'Then you must have heard about any important news.'

'Hmm...now let me think.' Neelix tugged on his whiskers, a Talaxian gesture of variable meaning. 'Yes, there was one pretty important thing. A little while after you disappeared, Starfleet started detecting --'

The screen went black.

'Oh, come on,' said Chakotay. 'Our luck can't be *this* bad!' His fingers flew over the console.

'If these events were taking place in a work of literature, I would consider them clichéd,' agreed Seven. She too tried to restore the connection. Suddenly --

*'Alert! Alert! Vessel Zero-Zero-Zero under heavy fire! Our weapons are ineffective! We need reinforcements NOW!'*

'Find the source of that transmission!' demanded Chakotay. 'Chakotay to bridge: Red Alert! Prepare to respond to a distress call!'

'Seven of Nine to the bridge. Belay that order.' Seven turned to Chakotay. 'The distress call is well out of *Voyager's* range. It is being sent directly at the MIDAS array. The array picked up the signal and transmitted it to us; that's why we lost the connection to Neelix.'

Chakotay sighed in frustration. To hear a distress call and not be able to help in the least.... 'Chakotay to bridge. Confirm Seven's belay order.' *Whoever's on the bridge must be pretty confused by now, he thought.*

(Indeed, Crewman Gilmore *was* confused. No matter what she tried, she couldn't get her fingers out of this Chinese finger puzzle. She'd have to ask Chell about it before it became a serious problem.)

*'We've sustained damage to 74% of our outer hull. Our regeneration alcoves are inoperative. We have lost 459 crew. We cannot survive any more of this!'*

'Can you determine the source of the message?' asked Chakotay.

'It is Borg,' said Seven.

'That goes without saying. Can you be any more specific?'

'The transmission has been encoded with a frequency specific to the Queen. The source must be either the Unicomplex or her personal transport, and the Unicomplex no longer exists.'

'Then she survived Admiral Janeway's virus somehow?'

'No. The speaker is not the Queen, and more to the point, he is not connected to the hive mind.'

'How do you know?'

'I recognize the voice,' said Seven.

*'Only one of our transwarp coils is functional! We cannot escape! The enemy cubes are attempting to drive us into the --'* Static cut off the end.

'Enemy cubes? Why would a Borg ship be fighting its own cubes?' wondered Chakotay out loud.

'It is possible that another race has chosen to build cubical ships,' said Seven.

'Doesn't sound likely.'

'I did not say it was likely.' Seven checked her console. 'The transmission is degrading. Something has happened to the MIDAS array.'

*'All second-division forces, regroup in Grid --'* Loud explosions drowned out the voice for several seconds. *'-- not survive! Annika! I love you!'*

Silence.

'The MIDAS array is no longer responding,' said Seven. 'I believe its transmitter has been damaged or destroyed.'

Chakotay was still trying to make sense of the message. 'You said you knew this man. And he didn't just know you, he called you by your human name. He was Axum, wasn't he?'

'Yes,' said Seven. 'Based on the contents of his message, his ship has most likely been destroyed.'

Seven's calmness amid this possible tragedy was starting to anger Chakotay. 'He said he loved you! Don't you even *care?*'

'If he is no longer alive, my grief would do him no good. If he is alive, it would be misdirected.' *Damn her. Even when she infuriates me, she makes sense.* 'We should inform the captain immediately,' continued Seven.

'Don't bother,' said Chakotay. 'I've been trying to contact her for hours -- she's been unreachable ever since she went to see Tom's father.'

'Admiral Paris.'

'Yes. I don't know what this is about, and I don't like it.'

'If I cannot contact Captain Janeway, I should proceed with the diagnostic.' Seven started to leave. Chakotay, finally out of patience, grabbed her by the arm. The ex-drone did not resist, but turned around and glared at Chakotay in a way that delivered a clear message: *Release me or be assimilated.*

'I want to know what's going on, Seven,' he said. 'Your recent behavior has been very disturbing. I'm not the only one who's noticed -- Captain Janeway and the Doctor have both been wondering if you're all right. I want you to tell me why you're acting this way.'

'In what way am I acting?' asked Seven with a false-sounding innocence.

'In a word, unemotionally. You've seemed completely uninterested in the ship, your friends... everything since we left the Bubble.'

'I was unaware that unemotional behavior was considered disturbing,' said Seven pointedly.

Chakotay took the hint. 'I respect Tuvok, and his way of life is his own business. But you are not Tuvok. You're a human being, one who only recently regained the ability to feel the full range of emotions. You've spent the last five years distancing yourself from the Borg. This sudden reversal is out of character, which is enough to worry those who care about you. I'm your friend, I care about you, and I want to know what this is about!'

And then -- just like that -- Seven changed. Her arm went limp in Chakotay's hand. 'I'm sorry, Commander,' she said, sounding genuinely repentant. 'I have no wish to worry you or any of *Voyager's* crew. Perhaps I should ask the Doctor to examine me in case something has gone wrong.'

'I think that would be a good idea,' said Chakotay. He released her, and she left.

The first officer stood alone in Astrometrics, pondering this strange situation. Seven had indeed been acting oddly -- there could be no doubt about that. But what had brought on her change of heart a moment ago? At that point, Chakotay had felt exactly like he was talking to the 'old' Seven. If she'd faked that, she'd done a bang-up job.

*Maybe I'm making too much of this, thought Chakotay. I'm being too hard on Seven...I'm not considering how our return to Earth may have affected her. Besides, we were a couple so recently, and heaven knows I take relationships seriously. This is probably all in my head.* His mind more or less at ease, Chakotay left Astrometrics to go see how Tom and B'Elanna were doing.

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They were just his parents, but Harry couldn't help but feel a little nervous about seeing them again after so long. In many ways, he wasn't the same man who had left them eight years ago. A combination of the Delta Quadrant, Tom Paris, and more bizarre experiences than he could count with his shoes on had accelerated his maturation, much as the Borg did with their drones.

(Actually, there weren't really any parallels to what the Borg did. But a guy in Harry's line of work thought about the Borg a lot.) Overcoming his doubts, Harry climbed the stairs of the old porch and rang the door chime.

No answer. He tried again.

No answer. He tried again.

No answer. He --

'Mary, *get the door* for Criminy's sake! I'm in the shower!'

Harry smiled. Same old Dad.

The doorknob turned; the lock disengaged. The door of casa de Kim finally opened, revealing a middle-aged woman with an uncanny resemblance to Harry. She gaped in amazement. '*Harry!* It's you! You're back!'

Before Harry could react, she had pulled him into the house and was squeezing the living daylights out of him. The young lieutenant felt his lungs deflating dangerously fast. Mary Kim, hearing her son's desperate wheezes, finally released him. He gasped frantically for air. 'Oh, poor Harry!' she said. 'Your trip back to Earth must have been *terrible* -- look at the shape you're in! You go sit down in the living room, quick quick, and I'll get you some tea.' Harry was happy to oblige.

In the comfortable old chair which had always been his favorite, Harry looked around the room. *It's amazing how little this place has changed*, he thought. *I guess you can go home again*. It surprised him to realize how easily he was falling back into considering this old house his home. What about *Voyager*? These thoughts reminded Harry of something Chakotay had once said: 'Home is wherever you happen to be.' Come to think of it, he and Libby had had yet another home for a while, and Harry realized he would probably still think of it that way if he were back there. Maybe there wasn't a one-to-one correspondence between people and homes...maybe the same person could be at home in many places.

Harry's mother returned with three cups of tea. She set one in front of Harry, another at her husband's usual spot, and the third on her side table. Harry gratefully sipped the drink -- his mother used replicators for most food, but always served natural tea. 'Is it all right, dear?' she asked.

Harry was surprised to realize that it wasn't. Something seemed odd. 'I'm not sure,' he said. 'It tastes great, but...there's a funny edge to the taste. Did you put in anything extra?'

'Just your usual milk.'

*That* was it! 'I get it now! Sorry, mom -- that took me by surprise because I've gotten used to drinking it black. We didn't have a lot of extras on *Voyager*.'

Ms. Kim winced in sympathy. 'I'm so sorry, Harry. You must have had such a horrible time on that ship.'

'Well, it was no walk in the park...but after a while, it wasn't so bad. At least I was with good people.'

'Oh yes, like that delightful Mr. Paris you told us about! How's he doing?'

'Oh, Tom's fine. He's become a real family man -- settled down with his wife and daughter. He's never been happier.'

'And this Torres girl -- did you ever get the nerve to ask her out?'

Harry was flabbergasted. '*What?* B'Elanna and I are friends, nothing more!'

'Oh.' Ms. Kim looked surprised. 'It's just that you talked about her so much in your early logs....'

'She was one of the first friends I made on the ship. I guess I brought her up pretty often.' Suddenly it hit Harry -- 'HEY! *You read my logs?*'

'Well, *Voyager's* database was recorded by Starfleet Communications when--'

'But that database is classified information! It's only available to officers above the rank of Lieutenant Commander -- even *I* can't access it!'

'Well, they did say no when I talked to them the first time. But then later I was having lunch with Ms. Barclay -- you remember Ms. Barclay -- and she told me her son worked at Starfleet Communications. And so I said, 'Could you put in a good word with him for me?' and she said 'Of course, Mary! Anything for an old classmate,' and then she did just that. So the next day I woke up and there was my authorization code for the database! So of course I went right down to Communications and had a look around, and what should I find but your personal logs? Then I --'

'All right, all right!' Harry sighed uselessly. 'You read them *all*?'

'No, no. I've been reading one a day to remind myself of you. Just yesterday I came across the one about those funny lizard men who were hiding on the ship.' Relief flooded Harry. With luck, he would find a way to protect those files before she got to Stardate 52628 or so....

'*Harry!* John Kim had finally arrived and was just as delighted to see his son as Mary had been. He lifted Harry a good two feet off the ground. 'Look how tall you've grown! And is that *two more rank pips* on your collar?'

Harry looked down. 'Er, no...the second one is just a cookie crumb. I'll wipe it--'

'*Lieutenant Commander Harry Kim!* I'm so proud of you, son! Just wait till Pat Westing hears about *this!* Harry sighed...Mr. Westing was his father's lifelong nemesis. Trying to correct him at this point was a hopeless cause. 'Thanks, dad,' he said in resignation.

John sat down and took a sip of his tea. 'So, Harry -- tell us about your trip.'

'Well...it was long. Very long. But it mostly went well. I got along with the rest of the crew, and my duties weren't too demanding.'

'Ah yes, your duties.' John thought. 'Hrm...what exactly *do* you do, anyway?'

Harry was about to tackle that one when a triplet of beeps interrupted the conversation. Mary tapped the console next to her chair. 'News report,' she explained. 'Something important just happened.'

The family's picture window became a gigantic viewscreen. *Wow*, thought Harry -- *that's cutting-edge*. They must have set this up after I left. The screen resolved into the image of a gray-haired man, wearing a Starfleet uniform and a grim countenance. 'Good afternoon, citizens of the Federation. This is Fleet Admiral Gregory Quinn. It is my unfortunate duty to inform you of a disastrous event.'

The screen displayed an object Harry knew very well. 'The MIDAS Array, Starfleet's most advanced long-distance communications transmitter and receiver, was destroyed one hour ago. The last sensor logs we received from the array were these.'

A staticky video clip filled the screen. In front of the array, a peaceful stretch of space was ruptured by dozens of transwarp conduits. Out of the conduits flew Borg cubes -- all of which were attacking one small ship of a different shape entirely.

'I know that ship,' muttered Harry darkly.

The cubes continued their attack until the smaller vessel lost attitude control. It spiraled straight into the array and the image went blank. Fleet Admiral Quinn reappeared on the screen. 'Starfleet is studying this information to determine whether or not we have been the victims of a deliberate attack by the Borg Collective. At this time we are asking all citizens not to jump to conclusions. There is no proof that the Borg were targeting us; until we have more information, it is too soon to make judgments. Please remain calm.' The admiral disappeared.

'Son....' began John Kim, but he trailed off.

'This is bad,' said Harry. 'This is very bad. I have to talk to Captain Janeway.' He tapped his comm badge. 'Kim to Janeway. Please respond.' No answer. 'Kim to *Voyager*. Who's up there?'

'Harry, this is Chakotay. I saw it too. I'm contacting the others; we're meeting in T'Plana Hath Park in ten minutes.'

'Understood, sir. I'll beam over right away.'

'Sorry to interrupt the reunion. Chakotay out.'

Harry hugged each of his parents. 'I'll be back soon. Don't you worry.' Then, standing in the center of the room, he contacted *Voyager's* transporter operator for a quick beamout. Yet again, John and Mary Kim watched their son disappear.

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'...at which point Captain Janeway was able to warn her in time, and Seven successfully evaded the falling projectile.'

'You mean the bathtub.'

'Yes.'

Alistair Warhol was having trouble keeping a straight face. 'Mr. Tuvok...are you *sure* you're being entirely honest with us?'

'I am Vulcan, Admiral. Further, I have sworn an oath to Starfleet. I would never break that oath by lying to a superior officer.'

'Very well. As strange as this sounds, I've heard stranger stories.' *Most of them from Ben Sisko*, he added in his head. 'I take it you had no further contact with these Jectarisians?'

'Jectors. No. We broke off communications and left orbit.'

'It's hard to believe that their *government* would sanction an assassination attempt on one of your crew. What did they stand to gain? And why Seven?'

'We do not know. The Borg have not yet discovered Jectaris, nor have the Jectors discovered them, so their anger cannot be racial. Nor can it be gender-based, for the Jectors had no such problems with the captain.'

'Ah yes, that was another part of your log. What exactly did you say they did with Captain Janeway?'

'They transported her and Commander Chakotay to an enclosed room. We believe it was a prison, for the room was very small, although not uncomfortable, and their clothes apparently did not make the transport with them.'

That had been in the log, but Warhol had needed to hear it from Tuvok himself to believe it. 'All right, let me get this straight. *Voyager* sent down an away team to negotiate with these Jectors. As soon as you landed, the captain and first officer were trapped in a small room *naked?*

'Yes.'

'And then, while you and Seven were looking for them, the aliens tried to kill her with a *bathtub?*

'Yes.'

'This is completely insane! What in God's name did they hope to accomplish?'

'Unknown. However, I have theorized that their religion was somehow involved. The bathtub is an important symbol in that religion, associated with the chief male deity.'

'Disturbing. You know, I don't want to talk about this anymore. We'll finish this debriefing tomorrow, same time. You're dismissed.'

'Aye, sir.' Tuvok stood and walked out, likewise grateful to be leaving that subject behind. *Voyager's* encounter with the Jectors had taxed his logic to the limit. He stepped into the nearby transporter and beamed himself to T'Plana Hath Park, where Chakotay had called a meeting of the senior officers.

When he reappeared, the Vulcan spotted Lieutenants Kim and Torres already there, at some distance. He began to walk towards them. 'Tuvok!' came a shout from behind him; he turned and saw, to his mild annoyance, Tom Paris running to catch up.

'I have got to tell you about this,' said Tom. 'Remember Jimmy Burgess?'

Tuvok thought. 'Yes. He was a fellow Maquis aboard the *Liberty* until three months before our abduction.'

'Right. Well, I just ran a little check, and it turns out there was a lot more to that guy than we thought. First of all, he was an undercover Starfleet officer, just like you.'

'I know,' said Tuvok. 'I was his replacement.'

Paris blinked. 'Then why were you both on board at the same time for a month?'

'For the switch to occur all at once would have been too conspicuous. We left a month in between to allay Chakotay's suspicion.' Too late, Tuvok caught himself calling Chakotay by name, as he had on the *Liberty*.

'Of course. Well, anyway, he got back to Starfleet. He was a Commander when he started that mission, so he'd made Rear Admiral by the time we reached Borg space. But guess what happened *then*?'

'What happened?'

'Come on, guess.' Tuvok glared at Paris slightly. He gave in. 'Okay, okay. But you're no fun. Anyway, get this -- he was a shapeshifter!'

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. 'For how long?'

'They don't know. Their best guess is that the shapeshifter replaced him just a few weeks after he left our ship. After that, he managed to avoid detection right up until the war started -- when they started running blood checks on everyone at Starfleet Headquarters. He couldn't come up with a good enough excuse in time. But they found out later that this shapeshifter had managed to get *200 kiloquads* of sensitive information out to the Gamma Quadrant.'

'Impressive.' In fact, Tuvok *was* impressed. Commander Burgess had always struck Tuvok as an astute and wary man; the shapeshifter who had replaced him must have done an excellent job, both in the initial capture and in passing for Burgess.

'I thought so,' agreed Paris. At last they had reached Harry and B'Elanna, both of whom were looking intently at a PADD.

'Tom, Tuvok. Glad you're here. Take a look at this,' said Harry, showing them the PADD. It was a list of events in the last few months which were related to this latest Borg attack. Tuvok immediately raised both eyebrows; Paris took a moment longer to take in the information, but reacted with equal astonishment. 'My God,' he said -- 'there have been six Borg attacks in the past two months alone!'

'Correction, Mr. Paris: not merely Borg attacks,' specified Tuvok. 'These were Borg ships attacking *other Borg ships*, and chancing in some cases to damage Starfleet equipment in the process. The only common element is that all the attacks took place within range of Federation sensors.'

'And as far as we know,' added B'Elanna, 'there have been hundreds of others *outside* our range.'

'Precisely. We may be looking at nothing more or less than a Borg civil war.' The thought chilled all four officers.



'The question,' said a voice, 'is why.' They turned to see Chakotay standing behind them. 'Sorry I'm late -- I was showing Fleet Admiral Quinn the evidence Seven and I found.'

'What evidence?' asked B'Elanna.

'We were talking with Neelix at the time of the attack. Before we lost the connection, we heard a Borg distress call -- from Axum.'

'The Unimatrix Zero drone?' asked Lieutenant Kim. *See you soon, Harry...*

'Yes. We don't quite know what to make of all this just yet, but every bit of information helps.'

'What about Neelix?' asked Tom. 'We haven't lost the connection for good, have we?'

'I spoke to Reg about that. Apparently there's no reason the array can't be rebuilt, but it'll be a technical challenge to get its sending frequency perfectly matched with the original so that Neelix's receiver will still work. He also says that he doesn't know when we'll be able to do it -- as you can imagine, communication with our ambassador in the Delta Quadrant is not a priority for Starfleet when this sort of thing is going on.' He gestured at the PADD.

'Great,' said Tom. 'One lousy week after all this time out of touch with him, and now we lose it again for who knows how long?'

Chakotay was about to agree when his comm badge beeped. 'Janeway to Chakotay. Where are you?'

'Chakotay here!' he replied instantly. 'I'm in San Francisco -- where are *you*?'

'No time. Hold on while I get a lock...there we go. Energize!' Before the others could react, Chakotay vanished in a flash of blue.

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'Kathryn! What's going on?' Chakotay had rematerialized in a darkened transporter room; from the looks of things, he was somewhere in Starfleet Headquarters.

'I brought you here with Admiral Paris' help,' answered Captain Janeway. 'It'll only be a few minutes before we have to get you out of here, so let me explain quickly. I'm about to be court-martialed.'

Chakotay was stunned. '*What?* Who's doing this, and why haven't they gone through channels?'

'The Borg.'

Pieces started fitting together in Chakotay's head, but the puzzle wasn't complete. 'We've heard about these random Borg attacks....'

Janeway shook her head vigorously. 'Not attacks. The Borg have no interest in us -- it's each other they want.'

'Then they're in a civil war.' *Just as Tuvok suspected.*

'Yes. Starfleet doesn't know for sure, but they have a theory. You remember Admiral Janeway's virus?'

'Who can forget?'

'It was programmed to destroy the Queen and the Unicomplex. It also had a backup routine which we hoped was capable of destroying the entire Collective. It was based on a geometric shape that was impossible to interpret from any one perspective.'

That sounded familiar. 'So what happened?'

'It worked. The Collective was wiped out, across the board.'

'Then who --'

'*Except* the drones from Unimatrix Zero.'

That was the last piece. 'Of course! We'd disconnected them from the hive mind -- they had no way of getting the virus!'

'Exactly. What's more, most of them had used the same trick as Korok -- namely, uploading the individuality virus into their cubes' vinculi, liberating all other drones in those cubes.'

'Then considering how many drones were in Unimatrix Zero, hundreds of ships must have survived.'

'Thousands. Starfleet's guess is 14600 -- that's classified information. Nowhere near the size of the original Collective, but far more than even the Dominion can handle.'

'But why the civil war?'

'That part's sketchier. Starfleet doesn't have a clue, but I've got a theory. Think about it, Chakotay -- so much power in the hands of individuals. They didn't have to pay the price of assimilation because *they were already Borg*. Don't you think that might have tempted some of the former drones? Perhaps enough to set up a faction in favor of using that power to carry out the Borg agenda of 'pacification'?'

'It's possible. Then who would be fighting them?' Chakotay answered his own question: 'Axum. He was the closest they had to a leader, and we know he's not the kind of person who would succumb to that temptation.'

'That's my best guess. If the sides are about evenly matched, this war may take a *long* time to complete. And remember, it's being fought at transwarp. Finding your opponent is half the battle, and that means fights will be erupting over an enormous range.'

'As far as the borders of Federation space.'

'Maybe farther -- we don't know. But whatever is really going on, you'd better believe it's got Starfleet scared stiff. There are admirals trying to quell panic, trying to come up with a battle plan...trying to find someone to blame. And I'm their sacrificial anode.'

'But why? It's thanks to you that the Borg at large are no longer a threat!'

'But it's also thanks to me that *these* Borg have survived. I was the one who liberated them. Besides, I committed plenty of questionable actions in the Delta Quadrant. I don't regret a single one, and none in itself would be enough to get me under this kind of attack, but they're going to use every weapon they have to punish me for this offense. And that means they'll dig up everything on my record.'

'Do you think you'll win?'

Janeway sighed. 'God only knows.'

'I'll help you. I knew a lawyer at the Academy who --'

'No. You can't get involved -- this is still classified. I just wanted you to know what's going on. Tell the senior officers, but make sure no one else hears about this.'

'They'll worry about you, Kathryn.'

Janeway smiled ruefully. 'They'll have their own worries in the next few weeks. I doubt that their debriefings will be easy. For one thing, they're being conducted by Admiral Warhol, the head of the internal investigations group -- *and* this witch-hunt against me.'

Chakotay winced. 'I'll talk to Tuvok about it. His debriefing has already started.'

'Quick!' Janeway pulled Chakotay back to the transporter pad. 'Time's up -- we've got to get you out of here.' Reluctantly, the first officer stepped onto the pad. 'Good luck, Kathryn,' he said.

She smiled at him. 'And to you.' The words echoed through his head as he rematerialized in San Francisco.

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Janeway watched Chakotay disappear, then programmed the transporter to send her back to her assigned quarters. A few moments later, her wrist chronometer beeped -- the signal that the detection grid was back online. She and Admiral Paris had only been able to arrange a short gap in the grid; time had been of the essence.

As a rule, Janeway preferred not to cut it so close. But these were not normal circumstances.

*This is it, she thought. All those years in the Delta Quadrant...all those battles, all those judgment calls, all those last-minute tactics, all that rule-bending...this is when I answer for it. This is my judgment day.*

Janeway tried to remind herself that she had no regrets. *I kept my promise.* I got my crew home. But the words felt less convincing than they ever had. Janeway began to wonder if she had truly expected to accomplish her mission. The crew's return to Earth had never been in question for her, but had she really pictured herself making it back with them? Or had she expected the price of *Voyager's* homecoming to be her life?

*In a way, it was,* she reflected. The thought made her uncomfortable...in retrospect, Admiral Janeway had been almost eager to sacrifice herself, and Captain Janeway had been all too willing to let her. There were rationalizations, certainly -- getting *Voyager* home early had doubtless saved lives, and both Janeways would have been in very awkward positions if the ship

had remained in the Delta Quadrant -- but what were these things compared to the guaranteed loss of a human life? Did she really have some sort of martyrdom complex?

Well, if so, she was getting her 'wish.' Through the ministrations of this Admiral Warhol, her court-martial had been accelerated and would probably be conducted by others hostile to her. Ironically, Warhol himself no longer needed to be personally involved -- he might not even be present for the trial. He'd only needed to knock over the first domino; now he could watch the others fall.

She'd needed to see Chakotay, and she had. Now there was nothing more she could do. With a sigh of frustration, Janeway headed to bed...tomorrow would be a long day.

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*The stone faced guards silently led her through the hallways. When they reached the court-martial room, Admiral Warhol was standing outside waiting. He stared at her, his expression colder than stone, and she felt herself frozen in place. Moments passed...and then Warhol smiled a sneering smile of victory. His gaze followed her, chilled her, as the guards ushered her in.*

*Remember, she told herself as they led her to her seat, you're not guilty. This is not really about you. The words sounded hollow in her head, but she did her best to believe them. She had to.*

*'All rise,' announced a guard. At the front of the courtroom, Judge Advocate General Phillipa Louvois entered and walked slowly to the bench. This was Starfleet's most experienced court-martial judge, and she knew that Louvois was her best chance for a fair trial. But then the judge turned -- and the chill of Warhol's glare was replaced with the heat of righteous anger. What's going on? she thought, mentally panicking. Has she bought into this witch-hunt too? Do I have no allies at all?*

*She turned to look at the spectators. Admiral Paris was there but avoided her gaze. Admiral Hayes gave her a stern glance. And -- was that Tuvok behind him? And Chakotay and Seven? Why wouldn't they look at her? I'm alone--*

Janeway woke suddenly. The same dream again...third time in one night. It wasn't hard to understand, of course, but the repetition reminded her of that unpleasant Inryeth encounter. And that made her wonder how much of the dream might be a premonition...or a warning. Her scientific discipline rejected the notion immediately, but something about it deeply concerned her.

She lay back down. Maybe she could still get some sleep before morning....

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## Epilogue

*'As Fleet Admiral Quinn announced earlier today, the MIDAS array -- Starfleet's revolutionary long-range comm system -- has been destroyed. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for the action, but the array was able to record a short sensor image before its destruction.'*

*The clip shown earlier in the day reappeared. Axum's octahedron shuddered under the pressure of countless torpedoes and cutting beams. At last it flew straight at the 'camera,' blacking out its view as the MIDAS array began its final moments of life.*

*News anchor Suellen Bartlett reappeared on the screen, her expression grim. 'While there is no concrete evidence yet to support theories about the apparent attack, the clip seems to indicate Borg involvement. If so, this incident would be the seventh Borg firefight detected by the Federation in the last two months.'*

*Bartlett brightened somewhat. 'On a happier note: today, after nearly eight years away from home, the starship U. S. S. Voyager reached Earth. Since their first communication from the Delta Quadrant on Stardate 51501.4, Voyager and her crew have inspired the entire Federation with their story of courage and determination. Captain Kathryn Janeway, the leader of this historic journey, was not available for comment...nor were any other bridge officers....' (Bartlett's tone grew increasingly annoyed) '....but we do have a few words from Mary Kim, mother of the ship's operations officer.' The anchor was still smiling, but those familiar with her broadcasts could easily see how frustrated she was at the quality of guests available.*

*'Hello, everyone. My son and his friends had a very long trip--'*

*The screen went blank as the man watching it grew tired of Federation news. He decided instead to replay an audio clip he had recorded earlier.*

*'Alert! Alert! Vessel Zero-Zero-Zero under heavy fire! Our weapons are ineffective! We need reinforcements NOW!' Vessel Zero-Zero-Zero: the most important ship of its fleet. With a very important passenger.*

*'We've sustained damage to 74% of our outer hull. Our regeneration alcoves are inoperative. We have lost 459 crew. We cannot survive any more of this!' The man listened with greater and greater pleasure. 'Only one of our transwarp coils is functional! We cannot escape! The enemy cubes are attempting to drive us into the Federation array in this sector -- if they succeed, it will be destroyed!' Perceptive, thought the listener.*

*'All second-division forces, regroup in Grid One-Four-Four-Seven!' A blind, of course. Axum had known that others could detect the message. Also, he never spoke of his people as drones -- even under this kind of pressure. Whatever happens, the Constructive must be stopped! Continue the fight if I do not survive! Annika! I love you!'*

*The audio clip ended. With a feeling of deep satisfaction, its listener walked to the viewport and watched the moving colors of transwarp.*

*The man knew who Annika was, but such matters held little interest for him. What mattered was power. What mattered was expansion. Revenge was only a means to those ends, but one he particularly relished. Today he had taken revenge on his greatest enemy, the individual who had wronged him more than any other. In doing so, he had cleared one of the last obstacles between himself and ultimate control. The others -- Korok, Parvenu, the Complex -- would fall in short order. There could be no stopping him now.*

*He was only one man in one cube in one fleet in a legion...but he did not feel small. Not for a moment.*

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