



Episode 8-19 – Through the Fire

By: MaquisKat

The cool breeze coming up from the bay fluttered through strands of Seven's hair as she and the Doctor walked slowly down the streets of San Francisco. Though the walk was suggested as a way for her to relax, the unfamiliar surroundings did nothing to ease her discomfort at the recent takeover of her body by the Serniix intelligence. Though many would not understand it, this experience had been much more discomfoting for Seven than her memories of being a Borg. There, she had a voice; it was one voice among many, but it was still a voice. In this most recent incident, she had had no voice, no input. She had not been a part of what was going on around her and that was even more frightening to her than the thought of being part of the collective was to most humans. The illogical thought that she wished to be back at Starfleet Command; familiar enough by virtue of having stayed there since their return to Earth and in the similarity to the interior of Voyager, invaded her mind but she dismissed it. Knowing she was as safe here, amidst the busy shops of historical Chinatown as she was amongst the familiar spires of headquarters. Her mind continued to wander in this train of thought until the Doctor's familiar, exasperated

tone pulled her mind out of the introspective spiral she found herself in.

"Seven," he stopped and looked at her seriously, "I brought you out here so you could relax. From the way you look you're doing nothing of the sort."

"I am sorry, Doctor," Seven responded, forcing her voice into its normal tones, "I am finding it difficult to relax in these unfamiliar surroundings."

The Doctor sighed softly and put a comforting hand on Seven's shoulder, "Seven, I can assure you that there is no more trace of the Serniix personality left. Lieutenant Torres and I completely removed it from you."

Seven nodded, accepting the Doctor's words on a conscious level, but unable to shake the feelings of unease that are plagued her. "I am certain I will overcome this, Doctor. What I am feeling now is illogical..."

"And completely human, Seven." The Doctor turned to face her, standing on the sidewalk. "You've gone through yet another traumatic experience in a very short period of time. You're not used to dealing with your full range of human emotions and dealing with these experiences would shake a person completely comfortable with those emotions. I would like you to consider..." Just as he was about to finish, the shrill beep from his communicator interrupted and he tapped it abruptly. "EMH here."

The unfamiliar voice of some officious aide filled the air, but Seven did not hear the words it spoke, once again having become too involved in her own thoughts. A few moments later, the Doctor pulled her back to reality once more. "I'm afraid, I have to beam back to Headquarters immediately. Some small-minded, overly-bureaucratic admiral is requesting my presence. If you want you could beam back with me."

Seven shook her head, "I will be fine walking back on my own, Doctor. Thank you for the offer." Taking a deep breath, determined to confront her own unfounded anxiety, she stepped back from the Doctor. He nodded, tapping his communicator. "One to beam to Starfleet Medical."

The shimmering sparkle of the transport beam slowly engulfed his body, leaving only Seven on the sidewalk. She turned abruptly, with a minimum of wasted movement, and began the walk back to headquarters. Her attention focused on the scenery ahead of her, trying to use it to distract her from the troubling thoughts which clouded her mind, while she catalogued and enjoyed the sights and sounds of the shops around her. As she walked, she did not notice the different people staring at her or even the man that fell into step behind her. Or the next. Or the next. Uncomfortable, unfamiliar emotions crowded her mind, distracting her sufficiently, that as she made a stop at a sidewalk flower cart and inspected the various brightly colored bouquets wondering if they would cheer Captain Janeway's day, she did not notice the people encircling her.

Uncertain of what the Captain would appreciate the most she selected one at random, judging that the large yellow blooms would at least be visually pleasing. She turned to pay, only to find the cart, it's owner and herself surrounded by people, the crowd watching her with cold stares. The girl operating the cart took the proffered credit chip and ran it through the debit quickly, disturbed by the attention her customer had attracted, then moved down the street as the human wall opened to let her pass.

Seven turned as the wall of flesh, humans of every shape, age, race, and gender, locked her in the ring of their bodies, never speaking. Her heart began to pound as she stepped forward, hoping to move away from them. Instead, to her dismay they moved forward with her, pacing every step she made, their feet hitting the pavement rhythmically, a slow, steady beat, which surrounded her, filled her ears. Soon the beat was no longer their feet in her mind, but the deafening dripping of the water, the steady, relentless rhythm from the Cardassian ship. She stopped again, looking around wildly, feeling as though they were crowding her, crushing her. Her pulse throbbed in her ears as she broke free of the crowd, pushing her way past her passive captors, running over the cobblestone walkways back towards the safety of Starfleet Command.

Moments later, the only record of Seven's passing were the broken stalks and scattered petals of the sun-bright flowers lying forgotten on the sidewalk.

"So how are things going for you Harry?" Sam looked at him appraisingly as they walked down the steps from the main building at Starfleet Command.

"If I told you my feelings were mixed, would you be surprised?" Harry looked out at the skyline of San Francisco and found it wasn't quite as beautiful as he remembered.

"I think after what Starfleet did to Captain Janeway," Sam replied, "and how things are turning out for our crewmates, everyone from Voyager's having mixed feelings, Harry." She shook her head sadly. They both gazed off into the distance at the clouds rolling past in a now mostly-unfamiliar sky, still somewhat shell-shocked by how everything had turned out. After a moment Sam turned

back to Harry feeling the need to turn the subject to something positive once more. "You never answered my question, Harry." Sam looked at him again.

He looked thoughtful for the moment and then replied, "They're good Sam. It's great to be back with my parents."

"What about your fiancée ... Libby? Isn't that her name?" Sam watched and smiled as a slow blush crept over the lieutenant's face.

"Well it's not like either of us waited for the other, but there are possibilities to be explored." As Harry spoke, he could see Greskrendregk and Naomi approaching, waving to Sam. Harry tapped her shoulder and pointed towards them, her line of sight followed his hand and soon a bright smile played across her lips.

"Good luck with those possibilities, lieutenant." She called as she jogged down the steps and into the embrace of her daughter and husband. Naomi perched, seemingly precariously, on the shoulders of Greskrendregk, as they both engulfed Sam in a hug. Harry's smile became wider. He was certain that it was scenes like these that had made Captain Janeway fight so hard to get home, and he wished there could be more of them for all of the crew. As the happy family walked towards the San Francisco Bay, Harry drew himself from his thoughts.

"Here's hoping I don't need luck with those possibilities," Harry said to the empty air around him.

The courtroom was eerily silent as several of the former Maquis from Voyager filed into the room. A sense of disquiet filled Chakotay and B'Elanna as they looked at the select number of their compatriots who filled one side of the courtroom with them. Sudden changes to the proceedings had been announced only hours before they were set to go to the hearing. Instead of a formal trial setting before judges, they were being seen before a panel of three admirals and they were no longer being seen separately, but as a group. None of them could guess whether this was a positive turn of events for them or the beginning of the end.

All of them were shell-shocked. Even Chakotay, after having prepared with a lawyer since his debriefing with Hayes. His lawyer arrived late the night before to let him know that Starfleet had set aside the hearings and were instead moving forward with a group inquiry at which no lawyers would be present. Chakotay's lawyer had assured him that, should Starfleet decide to go once again move forward with more formal proceedings, he would be at his disposal. As he looked around at his friends and crewmates in attendance, he suspected that each of them had experienced a similar situation.

A chime sounded, announcing the arrival of the admiralty and leaving the former Maquis standing at attention with no more time to speculate on the situation. As the three senior officers filed into their seats behind the bench, Chakotay looked to B'Elanna, knowing her thoughts would be the same. Nechayev, Ross and Kunimoto. Things weren't good. He could practically feel whatever hopes the former Maquis had harbored at the change in proceedings shatter.

Nechayev tapped the bell, the subdued chime echoing through the room. "This inquiry is now called to order. We are here to determine the disposition of the Maquis apprehended by the Starship Voyager." A ring of distaste laced her words as she continued, "This tribunal will determine whether formal charges will be filed against them, in view of their service aboard Voyager in getting that ship and crew home. Be seated." She looked to Ross, then Kunimoto,

then settled back in her chair, her cold stare drilling holes into the former Maquis as she watched them take their seats.

"In deference to the fact that you and Ms. Torres were senior officers aboard Voyager," Kunimoto began, addressing Chakotay as he looked down at some papers resting before him on the bench, "you will be present for the entire duration of the inquiry. The other members of your crew will be allowed to attend on a rotational basis while not being questioned on their own cases."

"Thank you, sir" Chakotay responded automatically as he looked to B'Elanna. Nechayev was out for blood, and the fact that Kunimoto wouldn't look at them when he addressed them wasn't a good sign either. B'Elanna took a deep breath and shook her head at Chakotay, his own reactions echoing in her eyes. He had a bad feeling this was only going to get worse before it got better.

"If you are seriously looking at the actions of Commander Chakotay and his crew in service to Voyager," Janeway said, then pinched her nose once again before looking back at the view screen from which Kunimoto's assistant watched, looking particularly uninterested, "then it would stand to reason that you should welcome testimony from their commanding officer and the security chief of that vessel."

"Captain," the lieutenant began in a placating voice as he watched her pace from the other side of the screen, "we do have both your and Commander Tuvok's logs. The admirals have judged that they are all that is required for review."

Janeway leaned close to the screen, her hands braced on either side of her desk. "My logs are dry, general explanations of the events aboard Voyager. They do not properly convey the service that those men and women contributed to our getting home."

"I am certain you duly noted any extraordinary contributions by any member of your crew, captain," the lieutenant said. The emphasis on her rank seemed almost derogatory as he continued, "This is not a formal hearing, captain. There are no witnesses being called. I am certain that, should more formal proceedings be arranged, you will be called to testify. Good day, captain."

"Good day, lieutenant." Kathryn snapped the view screen off angrily. "You insubordinate, little..." She let her words trail off as she moved to the replicator to get herself a cup of coffee. She'd issue a formal reprimand against the lieutenant, but for all the good it would do, why should she even bother? This wasn't the Starfleet she remembered seeing when she came with her father to Starfleet Command. It didn't seem to be the Starfleet she remembered joining either.

A sudden flurry of sound drew her attention to the door. "Seven?" She saw the distressed former Borg in the doorway and set her cup aside.

She watched as Seven's panicked eyes focused on her, "Captain... I..." Janeway moved to the younger woman's side, and drew her to a chair, keeping her hand on the former drone's shoulder to reassure the young woman. Any discomfort she might have had disappeared as she saw her distress.

"What is it, Seven? What happened?" Janeway asked as she observed Seven closely. This definitely wasn't normal behavior for the former drone, but it didn't seem to be the same behavior

patterns that the Doctor and B'Elanna had dealt with previously either from what the Doctor had advised her of.

"The Doctor and I were out walking," Seven began, her voice uncharacteristically shaken at first, but it began to regain its normal tone and cadence as she spoke. "to help me relax from the events of the past week." She paused for a moment, then continued the familiarity of debriefing to the captain helping her state of mind. "He was called back to Starfleet Medical, but I opted to walk back rather than being transported with him. I was somewhat disturbed by the events of the past week and felt that walking could help clear my mind. I stopped to acquire some flowers for you." She lost some of her composure at that, and looked down at her hand, seemingly surprised that the flowers were gone. "I must have dropped them."

Surprised by the level of tension coming from Seven, Janeway crouched before her and put her hand on the younger woman's knee. "Don't worry about it, Seven." She smiled reassuringly at her one-time protégé. "Just tell me what happened next."

"When I looked up from selecting the flowers, I was surrounded by... people I didn't know." Seven stopped, the terror she felt almost overwhelming her again. As the sound of dripping water began to echo in her ears once more, Janeway's voice cuts through.

"Seven, stay with me. They were more than just curious if you're reacting like this."

Seven nodded slowly. "Yes," she confirmed. "They moved with me as I walked. They didn't attack me, but they would not allow me to move from the confines of the ring they had formed around me. I..." She paused once more to get a breath of air. "I couldn't move away from them, until I forced my way free... I pushed my way through them and ran here."

Shocked by the event that Seven had related, Janeway rocked back on her heels for a moment before standing and tapping her communicator. "Captain Janeway to Commander Tuvok."

Tuvok's disembodied voice filled the small office, "Tuvok here, captain. Is there a problem?"

"There's been an incident in the city involving Seven," Janeway began, gathering her thoughts for a moment before continuing, "She's fine but I need you to look into this for me. This is something I'd really prefer to discuss this in person though, Tuvok." The thought 'not on an open comm channel' came unbidden to her mind.

"Indeed." Tuvok's voice was calm, collected. With the sound of the familiar voice, Seven found herself calming further. "I will proceed to your office at once. Tuvok out."

Kathryn turned to face Seven once more, relieved to see that the former drone had calmed considerably. "Feeling better, Seven?"

"Yes, captain." She paused for a moment, realizing that the comfort of having her family with her is dispelling the majority of the panic she was feeling before, "Thank you."

Janeway smiled, then said, "My pleasure Seven. I'm glad I could be of use to someone." She watched Seven appraisingly for a few moments, then said, "Perhaps we should have the Doctor look you over anyway."

"That will not be necessary, captain," Seven stood up from the chair, only to be caught by Janeway's determined gaze. Seven found herself wanting to smile, but restrained herself and nodded, "Very well, captain. If you insist."

Janeway nodded and tapped her communicator, "Captain Janeway to the EMH."

"Doctor here, Captain. What can I do for you?" The EMH's voice filtered up from the diminutive metal pin.

"There's been an incident in the city with Seven, Doctor. She seems fine but I'd like you to check her out. She's here with me in my office." Janeway's tone took on more of her command presence as she spoke. The situation with Seven, though distressing, revitalized her with the possibility of a challenge she could resolve.

"Of course, Captain. I'll be right there. Doctor out."

Janeway turned her attention back to Seven. "Now what's this about buying me flowers?" She leaned back against her desk, looking at the former Borg with amusement and her crooked grin beaming at the fair-haired young woman. The atmosphere of the room lightens considerably even with the disquiet of the incident still hanging over them.

Seven's eyebrow arched and her mouth formed a small smile, "They are an appropriate gift to 'warm' a new abode. Though I am not certain how an inanimate object is meant to increase the temperature of the room. I am sorry I lost them. Their color was appealing, however, and it would do much to increase the aesthetic value of this room."

She almost found herself explaining the saying to Seven when she realized that Seven was teasing her with the misunderstanding. Pushing back her surprise at Seven's wit, Janeway's grin grew larger as she surveyed the room, "You're right, Seven. This place is a little dull, isn't it?" She looked back at Seven and shook her head. "I just haven't had the heart to decorate it yet. Wishful thinking that I will get out of here sooner, rather than later."

"Then perhaps you should decorate, captain." Seven offered. Janeway looked at her questioningly, "Lieutenant Kim has observed that, 'as soon as you get a place exactly as you want it, you have to move out'. I believe he was referring to his quarters."

"Perhaps you're right, Seven." Janeway felt regret rising at the moment Voyager was mentioned, even in such an indirect manner. How could she regret getting home? She forced it back and smiled once again, honestly enjoying her time with Seven. "Thank you for remembering your old captain with something to brighten this dreary place up. Even if they didn't make it here."

"You are more than my captain," Seven said. "I consider you my friend."

A burden she hadn't known was there lifted from Janeway's heart as she heard those words. The chime to her office door rang, drawing her attention away from responding to Seven. "That's probably Tuvok." Janeway said unnecessarily, then called out, "Come."

"Captain. Seven." Tuvok greeted both women. "The situation?"

Janeway nodded and moved behind her desk. "Seven was... Not attacked per se, but harassed in the city this afternoon." Seven briefly recounted the incident.

"Indeed," Tuvok considers the facts for a moment, "It would seem that the recent problems with the Borg and leftover tensions from incidents such as Wolf 359 have fueled this incident. If that is the case, it would be illogical to assume that this will be an isolated occurrence."

Janeway nodded and her voice became harsh, her anger that Starfleet would not have warned them becoming readily apparent. "It's also illogical to assume that Starfleet Security would have known nothing about this."

"Indeed." Tuvok's eyebrow arched as he nodded his concurrence.

Janeway began to pace, the situation on Earth and with Starfleet becoming more intolerable by the minute. "Tuvok, you and I will go to Starfleet Security. They may not want to give us information and I may no longer have much authority around here, but certainly between you and I we can start an investigation into this." She finally settled her gaze out on the city through her window.

"Perhaps, captain, it would be prudent if I escorted Seven of Nine back to her quarters." Tuvok's words rolled from his lips, as the feeling of déjà vu passed into his consciousness and Janeway turned back to face him.

"Prudent won't make a difference here, Tuvok," Janeway shook her head. "As long as she's within the confines of headquarters she'll be fine." Janeway turned her gaze back out towards San Francisco proper. When the feeling of déjà vu had passed, the rest of the conversation moved into the realm of the unknown once more. "Besides, the Doctor will be here any moment to check Seven over."

"Interesting."

Janeway turned to look at Tuvok, her pacing broken by the non sequitur. When she looked at him, his expression was one of curiosity. "What's interesting Tuvok?"

"A moment ago, I lived the moment that I saw while in the Areythan caves." Tuvok's eyebrow quirked. "It was an interesting experience."

Janeway opens her mouth about to speak again when the door chime rings. Frustration playing in her voice as she calls, "Come."

"I'm sorry I took so long, captain, but every time I try to leave the medical complex, it seems that yet another admiral wants to interview me, poke me, or prod me." He flipped open his tricorder and walked over to Seven.

Janeway's frustration faded and she grinned, "Now you know how I feel whenever it's time for my yearly medical Doctor."

"Yes, well whereas your medical is necessary," the hologram calibrated the tricorder a bit further, then continued, "this isn't. Preliminary scans show Seven is fine, physically, and all her implants are working within normal parameters. However, I'd like to take a few more scans, just to be sure that I'm right, considering recent events."

"Of course, Doctor." Janeway nodded "Let me know if you find anything." She turned her attention to Seven. "I'll leave you in the Doctor's capable hands." She straightened her uniform and indicated Tuvok should follow her as they exited her office.

The Doctor finished the scans and closed the tricorder. "You're fine," he said. "As I expected. Still no sign of the personality that had taken you over."

"Of course," Seven nodded her acceptance, then moved to look out the window of Janeway's office, surveying the city with an even gaze.

The Doctor stood still for a moment. While he could set aside the uneasiness that he had felt with her since his disclosure of his feelings and her dismissal of those feelings when her life had been in danger, he found it once again overwhelming. He watched her standing in silence. He knew, having been her confidant and mentor for some time, that she was still distressed about what had happened in the city when he left her. For a moment he was undecided as to what he should do, but with determination he moved to her side, looking out the window with her. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Seven didn't answer for a moment, and then slowly the story began to come out. As she explained the incident, she found this time was easier than the other times before, though she was uncertain whether it was because she had explained it twice before or because of who was listening. As she finishes, she felt the Doctor's comforting hand on her shoulder. "What I do not understand, Doctor, is why this should bother me so much. They were unarmed. Essentially harmless. They did not attack or speak. They simply surrounded me and stared at me. It would not have concerned me before."

"Before, your emotions were inhibited Seven. Most humans would react the way you did." He turned to face her. "You can't expect to react the same way you always have. As I was saying before the admiral called me away, perhaps you should see a counselor to help you learn to deal with your emotions, Seven. They are new to you and since you had the inhibitor disengaged you've had more than enough upsets to disturb someone used to dealing with their emotions."

Seven nodded slowly. "Perhaps," She said, then looked at the Doctor, once again finding comfort in the easy familiarity of confiding in him, her mentor. "When they stared at me... I felt less than human. I felt as though I was a monster."

The Doctor nodded, "I can't say I know exactly how you felt, Seven, but I feel something similar every time one of these admirals pokes or prods me. I feel as though I am an object, a tool." He looked off into the distance as though caught in memory. "At first, even I thought of myself that way. Everyone did, including the captain. Only Kes saw me as something more, and she made me see myself as something more, and then she made the captain see it, too." He smiled fondly and a bit wistfully at the memory.

"I have never seen you as an object, Doctor." Seven's voice was quieter now as she spoke, deciding to broach a subject that had been left too long, "but when you offered me your help, exploring my new emotions... I had already dismissed you as an option."

The Doctor could feel his heart breaking once again. How many more times would he allow himself to be hurt like this? Then Seven's voice broke through the pain as she continued to speak. "Not because I did not have feelings for you. On the contrary, you are ... one of my closest friends. If things did not turn out well, I wished to be able to turn to you for your advice. I valued you too much to risk that." The Doctor could almost hear the captain's voice as she spoke. In his blind adherence to protocol, encouraging the captain to hold fast to it, he had never considered what Seven might be learning by example. He had helped to hoist himself on his own petard. Seven paused briefly before continuing, "Aside from that, the other factor in my decision to not include you as a candidate was that I felt I should explore this aspect of my humanity with another human. Not because you are any less real to me, but because I myself am not entirely human. I thought I would be able to become more human by learning from another."

With effort the Doctor reigned in his own emotions to offer the same support he always had to Seven. "And did that help?" he asked.

"It did not." Seven answered simply.

The Doctor felt he had to ask, even though he knew the answer wouldn't be one he liked. "And now?"

"I am no longer actively looking to explore that aspect of my humanity. I believe I should adjust to my emotions being so... exposed before I try to become involved in any more relationships of that nature." Seven finished then turned to the Doctor. He could feel her looking for his acceptance, his approval.

With an silent sigh, understanding now more than ever how she saw him and finding a certain acceptance for it in himself, he nodded, "Probably a very good idea, Seven." He paused then continued, "Would you like me to walk you to your quarters?"

"Thank you, Doctor. Your company would be appreciated." Seven answered.

The Doctor led her into the corridor, and he looked at her once more and felt the old feelings of friendship rising once more, "Perhaps, Seven, you would care to start singing with me again."

"Slow down Harry," Tom laughed and sat back on the couch, bouncing Miral on his knee. "Let me get this straight. Your ex-fiancée."

Harry nodded, "Libby."

Tom shook his head and grinned, "Right, Libby. She looked you up last night and you had a what..."

"Three-hour comm conversation." Harry didn't seem to notice the laughter sitting just under the surface of his friend's demeanor.

Tom whistled, "Sounds like she's interested my friend. So what did you do?"

"I'm not an idiot, Tom. I invited her to dinner." Harry looked at his old friend indignantly.

"Well that's a start," the pilot settled his daughter on the couch and started tickling her belly. "So do you know where you're taking her?"

Harry looked panicked once more, "Not a clue."

"Harry, Harry, Harry... Some things never change do they?" Harry glared at Tom, despite the giggling baby squirming on the couch.

"I came here for more than your jokes, Tom." Harry's voice was terse. "I'm out of practice. I haven't been on Earth for seven years. I have no idea what music is in, what styles of dance, what clothes..."

"If you haven't noticed I'm not exactly in practice anymore either." Tom smirked, "But I have a few contacts. Let me make a few calls and I'll find you a reservation somewhere nice. Being an admiral's son still has its advantages, sometimes. Stay away from dancing and music until the second date, when you've had a chance to get caught up." Tom thinks for a moment. "Encourage

her to talk. Women love that and it'll be an easy way to get caught up on what's went on for the last seven years." He looked at Harry appraisingly. "As far as clothes go... Stick to your uniform. Ladies love a man in uniform." He paused one more time, "And bring her flowers, Harry. Flowers never go out of style."

Harry blinked a couple of times, realizing his friend had managed to answer most of his questions for the date without even having been asked. "Thanks Tom... You've never lost it, have you?"

"Nope, just put it in the closet with all the other stuff I don't need anymore." Tom shook his head. "I'm glad it's you, my friend, and not me. I don't miss the dating game."

Harry looks at Tom incredulously, "Come on, Tom. You can't be serious. 'Ladies' man of Voyager." Harry grins and teases. "You even had a shot with the captain if you'd pushed."

"And get in the big guy's way? Do I look like I have a death wish?" Tom laughed, then turned serious, "No Harry, honestly. I may have looked like I enjoyed it, but being a ladies' man isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Harry shook his head, unable to get over how much his friend has changed, yet stayed the same. "If B'Elanna were here, we could find Miral a babysitter and make it a double date. I think I'd feel better if I knew I had you two covering my backs."

"Come on Harry, it's a date. Not an away team on a Borg sphere." Tom joked, but it fell flat.

Harry felt as though he should kick himself. "They'll get off, Tom. Even Starfleet can't totally ignore everything they did to get us home. At worst, they should see the time on Voyager as time served."

"I don't know, Harry." Tom picked Miral up and held her closer to his chest. "I hope you're right, but after what they did to Captain Janeway... What my father stood by and let them force onto Captain Janeway..." He shook his head and cradled his daughter rocking her gently. "I'm not holding my breath, Harry."

They sat in silence for a few moments before Harry spoke up once again, hoping to lighten the mood and change the subject, knowing nothing he would be able to say would comfort or reassure his friend. "So other than those basics, how do I go about impressing Libby again?"

"Harry you were engaged to the girl... Surely you should know what to do to impress her." Tom looked at his friend in amusement, dumbfounded by his question.

"We're both different people than we were then, Tom," Harry shrugs, "I really don't know her very well anymore."

Tom ran his hand through his hair as he carried the now-sleeping Miral to her bassinet, which stood in a quiet corner of the living room. "All right, Harry... Let's start with the basics. Tell me what you do know about her and maybe I can come up with something."

Harry nods and thinks for a moment, "Well she's an only child. Her mother is a marine biologist; her father is in Starfleet, he teaches at the Academy. We met one day when she brought something to one of his classes I happened to be attending. Her favorite uncle was in Starfleet too, but he was on board the Crazy Horse at Wolf 359. She was lost with all hands..."

"Harry, slow down... Let's go back to how you met." Tom sat down and waited for his friend to get to the information he could actually use.

Nechayev moved the PADD in front of her as the Commander Darrow of the Judge Advocate General Corps office finished explaining into the record an incident during the 'Maquis Rebellion' that the Liberty was alleged to have taken part in. Chakotay knew what would happen next, it was almost like a carefully staged play, except the look on Nechayev's face indicated that what Admiral Ross was doing wasn't part of the game.

"After removing forty crates of standard rations, two crates of phase link inducers, and two crates of isolinear chips from the Mariposa's hold. The Maquis ship abandoned the cargo vessel on the Federation side of the treated region of space." Darrow finished.

Ross rubbed his forehead, then looked at Darrow, "Son, do you have any proof that this action was carried out by the Liberty?"

"It was the same class of ship, sir." Darrow commented, seemingly frustrated with the Admiral's question, "According to the information we were able to gather..."

"I have this information in front of me now, do I not?" Ross asked, his voice becoming slightly impatient.

"Yes, sir." Darrow answers as Ross looked down at the PADD in front of him, then picked it up and read for a moment.

Setting it back down, "Son, I don't see anything in this information that gives me conclusive proof it was the Liberty. Or for that matter, that it was absolutely Maquis. This could have been a pirate for the information you've given us."

Darrow looked at Ross as if he was mad. Nechayev shook her head and struck the bell in front of her. "A half hour recess will be called for lunch." She glared angrily at Ross then walked away from the bench.

B'Elanna looked at Chakotay and whispered as they were led from the courtroom to a waiting room/lounge, "Do you remember if we were involved in any of those incidents Chakotay?"

"Honestly? No," Chakotay shook his head, "What they've brought up so far were standard raids. I honestly couldn't say if any of those incidents were us or not. It's not surprising that they're bringing up all these Maquis actions, what makes me more curious is why is Ross is picking apart their testimony?"

B'Elanna grins, "And to think we used to curse him as every other kind of fool. What do you think his game is Chakotay?"

"No game, Ms. Torres." Ross smiled at her and nodded to both of them as he approached them, "I hope I'm not interrupting but I'd like to speak with Chakotay." Nodding to B'Elanna, Chakotay followed Ross to a small room to the side of the lounge. "Please sit down, we can be candid in here." Ross sat down and leaned back, looking at Chakotay evenly. "I'm certain you've got questions about what the hell is going on out there, and I think you deserve to know the answers."

Chakotay nodded cautiously. "Yes, sir."

Raising his hand, Ross looks straight at Chakotay, "I understand. I haven't given you any reason to trust me and the way Starfleet has treated you and your captain since you brought Voyager home... If I was you I'd be wondering why I ever came back."

"I have to admit that thought has crossed my mind, but it wasn't my decision to make. It was Captain Janeway's," Chakotay admitted wryly.

"And you stood behind her one hundred percent," Ross stands and paces, "I wish I could tell you that Starfleet was standing behind the crew of Voyager one hundred percent, but I can't. First you should understand... The change of proceedings is a public relations maneuver and I was assigned to the panel to give it the appearance of fairness. Since your captain's trial, the trial of the Equinox crew, well quite frankly the public is becoming tired of the negative news. Voyager should have been a reason to celebrate and it's turned into a massive trial. They're getting tired of the witch-hunt. So Starfleet wanted the public to be absolutely convinced your people deserved what they got. The Dominion War is still fresh in the public's mind and you're the first Maquis they've heard of since your movement was wiped out. Quite frankly, a lot of people think you should be lauded as heroes not tried as criminals."

Chakotay watches Ross as he speaks, appraising the man and his character. "What do you think should be done with us, admiral?"

Ross turned to face Chakotay, "I don't approve of what you did as Maquis. Especially resigning from the fleet to take up arms there." He paused, looking thoughtful. "But I can understand it to an extent and you served Voyager faithfully for seven years. The war took a lot out of the Federation; I was there in the thick of it, commander. Now we should be concentrating on healing. Trying your Maquis will be opening old wounds." He sat down once more, "I say, let sleeping dogs lie. It's time to move away from this."

"That's what you're trying to do out there." Chakotay motioned towards the courtroom.

Ross nods, "But it isn't easy, and it wasn't part of the game plan as I am sure you can tell by the look on Nechayev's face. I don't know Kunimoto's outlook on this. He's as tight lipped as an Aldeberan shellmouth. But I know Nechayev. If it were up to her you'd be hanging from the tallest yardarm we could erect. She didn't like Maquis and she's got a particular axe to grind with anyone who dropped out of the fleet to join them."

Knowing how bad the situation really was, Chakotay expected to feel worse about things, but somehow Admiral Ross gave him some hope that some of the Starfleet that Kathryn had believed in still existed. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me until I've gotten you out of this mess." Ross leaned across the table and shook his hand, "I can't make any guarantees, but I am trying."

Chakotay nodded. It was more than they had expected.

"So then I realized that my co-pilot had set up a bomb on the Delta Flyer and I had to figure out a way to warn Tom and B'Elanna. So I used Morse code..." Harry was grinning ear to ear as he related the tale. Dinner was wonderful and Libby seemed fascinated by his stories from Voyager.

"Morse code?" Libby was smiling too, leaning forward, her chin in her hands. She was so beautiful. Harry couldn't believe it and swore she'd gotten more so since he was away.

"It's an ancient mode of communication from the twentieth century. We'd used it in our Captain Proton hologram. Tom is a twentieth century buff." Harry wondered if he was rambling but as Libby didn't seem to mind neither did he. "So I managed to get a message to B'Elanna and Tom. They piloted the ship to a Nebula that would contain the explosion and ejected their warp core."

"And after this they got married?" Libby shook her head in wonder.

Harry nodded and grinned some more, "They seem to have this thing about near death experiences and warp core ejections."

Libby laughed and so did Harry after a moment. For the first time since coming home, he truly felt he was at home. With Libby. Nothing seemed as bad as it had earlier in the day. Sure, he was still worried about his friends and upset with what Starfleet did to Captain Janeway, but now that he had a bright spot on his horizon things were looking up.

"I should tell you about the time Seven of Nine," Harry began, but stopped himself when a dark look crossed Libby's face and her personal communicator beeped. "You'll have to excuse me Harry, I have to take this call."

"Sure, no problem." Harry stood and pulled Libby's chair out for her. She smiled and moved off to a secluded spot in the restaurant. Activating the comm. unit, she looked frustrated, "This had better be important," she said, "I'm out."

"So Starfleet has started an investigation into our activities since the incident this afternoon. I wouldn't worry too much about it; we have people on the inside. It won't go to far." Libby paused as she listened to her caller.

"If they won't limit that thing's movements then we'll be forced to do it ourselves. I have several interested parties, who are happy to contain it for us as long as we do the dirty work of extracting it ourselves. I think that's our next move."

The person on the other end of the comm. unit said something negative, and Libby's eyes flashed, "Of course it's risky, but it's worth it to protect our family and friends from that menace. Start making the arrangements. Containment and extraction is our next, best option." She paused as the person on the line said something else. "All right, I'll come in. I'll be there ASAP. I'm off." She shut off the communicator and moved back to the table.

Harry stood and started to pull out her chair. Libby shook her head, "Sorry Harry. Something came up. Dinner was lovely and the conversation was great, but I really do have to go." She reached into her purse, pulling out a small piece of yellow paper, on which she wrote down her personal comm. number. Pressing it into his hand, she pulled him into her, kissing him passionately before releasing him. "Call me, okay?"

Harry nodded, somewhat stunned by her kiss, and watched as Libby made her way out of the crowded restaurant.

"Owen," Kathryn began. She'd pleaded for the last hour with Owen Paris, to find a way to get into the Maquis inquiry, but it seemed like her pleas were falling on deaf ears.

"Kathryn, you have to step back from this. You aren't in any position to help them and your interference will only make things worse. If I get involved, Nechayev will see right through it and will assume that I am doing it on your behalf. It will only make things worse for you and for them."

Kathryn felt her patience snap. This man had been her friend, a father figure once her own father had died for years. Now she imagined she knew some of what Tom had felt like all those years ago. "And for yourself, you mean. Can't afford to be seen associating with the scapegoat captain, now can you Owen? Besides, what do the Maquis mean to you?"

"Kathryn Janeway." Owen barked, "For the moment I am going to chalk that up to the stress you've been under. In case you'd forgotten, my daughter-in-law is among those Maquis and I sure as hell do care what happens to her. I don't want my son unhappy, Kathryn, contrary to popular belief, and he will be unhappy if she doesn't come home in a few days. I have as much to lose here as you do, if not more."

"Owen, I'm sorry... I..." Kathryn pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. She knew her frustration had made her lash out at one of her dearest friends and now felt the guilt rising into her stomach.

Owen shook his head, "No, Kathryn... Don't get that way. Like I said, it's the stress. You have to let go a little. Have some faith, I know it's hard and so far everything has gone against you and your crew, but Tom got off. You can't control everything." He sees the frustration playing in her face and relents somewhat. "Look, I can't do much, but I'm keeping my ear to the ground about this inquiry anyway. If I hear anything, I'll let you know. Now get out of that office, go home, go to bed and get some rest. You won't do them any good if you work yourself to death."

"Thank you, Owen. Good night." She reached up and disconnected the comm. channel, but instantly started going through her contacts to find someone else to call.

An exasperated sigh drew her attention away from the screen and to her door, "I told Mom you were on the comm. Don't you ever stop working? It's after midnight, you know. Mom's tired of keeping your dinner warm for you." Phoebe leaned against the doorframe, her dark hair framing her face.

"Phoebes," Kathryn grinned and moved from her desk, meeting her sister halfway and hugging her tightly. "I didn't know you were back on Earth."

"Just got in this morning, called Mom and she said you were supposed to be coming for dinner tonight, so I should come too. Did you find out somehow, and were just trying to avoid me?" Phoebe grinned.

Kathryn rolls her eyes and moves back to her desk, "No. It's just that some of my crew are still being held. Their inquiry has been going on and I'm trying to help them. Other things came up today so I didn't get as much accomplished as I had hoped." She started scanning the screen looking for anyone she knew that might be able to help her. "I'm sorry Phoebes. Apologize to Mom for me but I just really don't feel up to eating."

A hand came down and shut off her view screen. "Come on Kath... Anyone who is your friend, won't be after you call them at this time of night." With surprising strength she hauled Janeway out from behind her desk. She sputtered, but Phoebe just continued, "I mean it. Home, dinner and then if you still can't sleep we'll drink coffee all night and you can fill me in. You need to get out of this office... Or if you're going to live here, at least let me decorate."

Seven moved about Icheb's room anxiously as she listened to him. She found it difficult to concentrate. As she looked out the window once more, darkness had long since cloaked the city and she knew she should leave soon and allow her young friend to get his rest, but the thought of being alone made her stomach tighten.

"So I am going to take all my first level science and engineering courses in the first semester, rather than spreading them between the first and second. This will allow me to get to my core subjects in the second and perhaps I will be able to graduate a semester early." Icheb looked over the course calendars excitedly, making notes in a PADD and trying to arrange his schedule.

Seven turns and looks at him, her eyebrow arching, "That will not leave you with much time for socialization with your classmates or more recreational classes."

"Recreational classes won't help me graduate, Seven." Icheb looked up at her puzzled. She was the last person he expected to be against his plan.

Seven notes his look of surprise and continues, "When I first came aboard Voyager, I thought socialization was irrelevant. However in my time among the crew," she pauses for a moment, "our family, I have found that socialization often leads to better interaction with your crewmates and better teamwork. Many of my initial problems with the crew were because I could not relate to Lieutenant Torres, Lieutenant Kim and many of the others. The people I did socialize with -- the captain, Commander Tuvok, the Doctor -- these people I could work with much more efficiently."

"So you're saying that I should take my classes in the normal progression?" Icheb found that what Seven was saying made more sense than he'd expected. He hadn't thought there was any use to the less rigorous studies scheduled for first year, or the optional physical courses, but he found that he could understand Seven's logic.

"In Starfleet, it is essential that you be able to work with your fellow crewmembers. You will learn to do that in your time at the academy. Those courses are there for that reason." Seven offered, "However you must make your own decisions in this matter."

"Thank you, Seven," Icheb smiled and pressed the reset key on his PADD, bringing up the default schedule once more and hitting the submit key.

Seven looked out the window once more, "It is late and I should be returning to my quarters."

"All right Seven," Icheb nodded to her, "Perhaps we could meet for lunch tomorrow."

"I would like that," Seven nodded and moved to the door, "Good night, Icheb."

"Good night," Icheb called as she moved from his quarters and descended the stairs.

She stopped for a moment in the lobby, feeling a sort of dread welling up inside her, but she dismissed it and stepped out into the night. It was warm, with a light but cold breeze coming up from the bay, filling the air with the salt scent of the sea. She moved down the lighted path quickly, intending to get back to her quarters as quickly as she can. She rounded a corner, into a darker section of path. She could feel her heart pounding though there was no reason to fear. A flash of movement in her peripheral vision caught her attention and she looked towards it. There was nothing there. She turned back to the path and several dark figures stood in front of her. Her mouth went dry, as fear gripped her body. The pulsing beat of her heart was replaced by the

steady drip of water in her ears. She opened her mouth to scream but was silenced by the hiss of a hypospray on her neck.

"The Starship Excalibur was engaged by four Maquis vessels, after the Captain demanded that they cease and desist and allow his crew to board them." Darrow stood as he read from the summary of the official log of the Excalibur. "The Liberty was one of the four ships."

Chakotay and B'Elanna looked at each other and winced. So far Admiral Ross had been better than most defense attorneys. He had managed to pick apart Starfleet's evidence and found holes in every argument. B'Elanna had almost started laughing from the look on Nechayev's face as he had managed to poke holes in even their intelligence reports, but had managed to contain herself without so much as a word from Chakotay. The only thing that had stood was Tuvok's own reports, and during the time period he had been on board they had only engaged Cardassian targets. This last bit of evidence though... They both knew they were there and Starfleet knew it had been the Liberty. It looked like they finally had them.

"So the Liberty was there." Admiral Ross looked at Darrow, "Do we know who was on board?"

Darrow looked confused, "On board, sir?"

"On board," Ross repeated. "Do we know who their commanding officer was at the time? Their crew compliment?" Ross shook his head and ignored the waves of cold that seemed to be emanating from Admiral Nechayev.

"I would assume that Chakotay..." Darrow started but Ross raised his hand.

"Do you have proof that the Maquis who served aboard Voyager were the Maquis serving aboard the Liberty at that time?" Ross watched, as Darrow seemed to slump in frustration.

"No, sir," Darrow started, "If we accepted the Cardassian's offer of the use of their intelligence reports as gathered by Obsidian Order Operative Seska Maren."

Ross shook his head, "Those records would be suspect. We know that the Cardassians want their pound of flesh." He looked at Kunimoto who nodded his agreement, then at Nechayev who grudgingly nodded as well. "The only intelligence reports we will be accepting are our own."

Chakotay looked at B'Elanna incredulously. She looked back at him with a similar expression. They couldn't have asked for a better ally than Admiral Ross. Chakotay looked back at the other members of the crew and knew they were beginning to have hope. He had to admit he was too. Still Tuvok's reports were damning in and of themselves and they still hadn't brought anything that happened on Voyager into the proceedings. This more than anything served to dampen his outlook on the outcome of the inquiry.

"So your telling me that no logs from Voyager have yet to be admitted as evidence?" Janeway sat at her desk and watched the lieutenant on the screen look at his records. "What has been entered into evidence?" She sipped at her coffee and found she wasn't nearly as frustrated as she had been yesterday. Either the fact that she was working on something useful in investigating Seven's problems was helping or she was growing a thicker skin for bureaucracy. She wasn't sure which it was but at least she didn't feel like screaming.

"Unfortunately, ma'am, what has been admitted into evidence is classified. However, I can tell you that Voyager's logs have not been entered into the record." He paused and looks at Janeway. "With all due respect, ma'am, I don't see their relevance to the deliberations. They don't change what the Maquis did."

Janeway felt her ire rising and decided that this was getting her nowhere. "Thank you, lieutenant. Good day." She snapped off her screen and turned to look out the window. She saw the reflection of the Doctor, coming into her office before he can speak and she turned to face him.

"What happened Doctor?" Janeway could see his distress as she turned to face him.

"Seven and I were going to meet this morning for breakfast. She didn't turn up, so I attempted to contact her via communicator. She was unreachable. I checked to see where she had been and the last person to have seen her was Icheb late last night. She was going to walk back to her quarters."

Janeway nodded, putting a comforting hand on the Doctor's shoulder. "We'll find her, Doctor." She said with more confidence than she felt. The sinking feeling in her stomach was coming back in full force as her anxiety over both Seven and the Maquis compounded on each other. She forced herself into action, knowing that was the only way for her to overcome these feelings, "Janeway to Tuvok."

"Tuvok here, Captain. I have nothing to report as of yet on our investigation." His exceedingly calm voice filled the room.

"Unfortunately Tuvok, I have something to report to you. Seven has gone missing. Advise Starfleet Security and get one of our own to assist you." She stops for a moment and looks at the Doctor, "Lieutenant Kim would be a good choice. I don't think he's been reassigned yet."

"Of course, captain. I will keep you advised of our progress."

Janeway squeezed the Doctor's shoulder again for a moment. "She'll be fine." She heard her own voice and wondered if she was saying it more for her benefit or his.

Seven slowly became aware of her surroundings. Cement walls, covered in old advertising on two sides, crumbled wall blocking the corridor behind her and an open tunnel in front of her. Testing her restraints against her Borg enhanced strength, she found that both the chair she was bound to and the restraints that bound her to it were more than sufficient to hold her.

"It's awake," one of her captors said, walking around to look at her. He was a tall man with a dark complexion and dark eyes. "And trying to get free. Don't bother, Borg, we have friends who made certain that we could hold you once we had you."

Seven met her captor's gaze steadily, "What do you intend to do with me?"

Another man, this one a blonde with a stocky build moved around into her field of vision. "We intend to remove you from where you can hurt normal people, Borg."

"Why do you continue to refer to me as a Borg? I am an individual." Seven said as she watched her captors intently. Though they would speak to her, they would not come too close. She looked into their faces and could see their fear. It was that fear that hurt, now. As they looked at her, she

found herself drawn back to when she first came aboard Voyager. The fear and suspicion that had hung around her crewmates when they looked at her. She closed her eyes, remembering how Captain Janeway stood by her through that time, to the point of defying her closest friend aboard the ship. When she reopened her eyes and looked at these men, she realized how much of a gift that was. "I am not a Borg any longer. I am one of their victims as well. Both of my parents were assimilated at the same time as I was. I only exist now as an individual because Captain Janeway rescued me."

A loud clapping sound echoes in the room. "Well done Borg. Did your Borg collaborating Captain teach you that speech?" Seven turned towards the noise and a woman with dark eyes and hair steps from the darkness of the corridor ahead of her. "She got off far too easily, but you won't." Seven couldn't see fear in this woman's eyes. Only hatred. "So, Borg, did you try to stop the assimilation of any species you encountered?"

"No, I--" Seven begins but is cut off.

"Would you have assimilated Voyager if the Queen had ordered you to when you first came aboard?" She circled Seven's chair like a vulture, watching the former Borg try to answer.

"Yes, I would, but--" Again Seven is cut off.

"Did you once force Borg who had escaped the collective to return to the Borg even though they told you they didn't want to?" The woman's question caught Seven off-guard. She would have needed access to Voyager's logs to know of that incident.

"Yes, but how--" Seven replied, only to be cut off again, this time by a hypospray against her neck. "You see gentlemen. By it's own admission, it's guilty of all of our charges."

The others nod in agreement as the woman stares at the unconscious Borg. "You'll pay for what your kind did to my uncle."

"I don't understand this, commander," Harry shook his head as they walked along Venice Beach. "We've been all over the city. The sensors at command only picked up the signatures from Icheb's implants and the extra Borg implants Starfleet confiscated from Voyager. Unless they have her in a shielded area..."

"Which would imply Starfleet complicity in this action," Tuvok answered, "while with recent events that is not a possibility that should be ruled out, there are other possibilities we have yet to exhaust."

Harry looked at Tuvok in shock, amazed that the Vulcan would admit that Starfleet Security might have something to do with Seven's disappearance. "All right, what are the other possibilities?" Harry asked rhetorically, stopping and thinking for a moment.

"They could have moved her out of the city," Tuvok offered as he contemplated the situation.

Harry nodded, "In which case we need to borrow a starship's sensors, we'll get a clearer reading from orbit." He pauses, "The other way they could be shielding her is if they took her underground, but with all the possible places they could be hiding her..." Harry looked at Tuvok and shook his head.

"Indeed," Tuvok met Harry's gaze. "I would suggest that we get to work, lieutenant."

"I would say these excerpts I've read from Captain Janeway's logs seem to sum up the extraordinary service that the Maquis made in defense of Voyager and in the objective to get her home." Ross set the PADD down on the bench before him. "I know we all had the logs to read, but I felt that some of these events bore closer examination and commentary from the men and women who lived through them."

Chakotay shook his head. Ross was treading a fine line. His 'defense' of Voyager's Maquis was not going to earn him any friends in Starfleet, but it had earned him the respect of each of the ex-Maquis. From the look on B'Elanna's face, he could swear that she was ready to name her and Tom's next child after William Ross. With Nechayev, it was the final nail in the coffin. She wasn't even bothering to hide the animosity she felt for Ross anymore.

"With that, we will retire to chambers for deliberations." Nechayev didn't bother to even look at the Maquis. Instead she nodded at Darrow and leads the other two Admiral's out.

"Escort the Maquis back to their quarters," Darrow didn't bother to hide his disdain for the former Voyager crewmen.

Once out of the courtroom, B'Elanna looks at Chakotay. "So, what do you think of our odds?"

"If Ross has his way, pretty good." Chakotay admitted, "I wouldn't completely put the possibility of prison time out of your mind though. Even though he managed to poke holes in most of their evidence, Tuvok's reports still stand."

Ayala moved up to walk along side Chakotay. "Still not as much as there could have been. With only Tuvok's reports, the most we can be charged with is belonging to a terrorist organization. Ross managed to provide reasonable doubt with everything else.

"Did you see Nechayev's face? B'Elanna continued. "I thought she was going to have a heart attack when he started reading from Janeway's logs." she shook her head, "No wonder that man is friends with Chancellor Martok."

Chakotay nodded, for the first time since coming home there might actually be a bright spot on the horizon.

Stepping through the doors of his quarters, Harry leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. They hadn't found any leads on Seven's whereabouts and he was worried. They had even managed to get the Hood, which was in Earth orbit, to run scans, none of which found anything. That left three possibilities. The first that the terrorists had managed to get Seven off of Earth; both he and Tuvok found that unlikely. The second, that she was being held underground somewhere, which seemed the most likely, as Harry didn't want to consider the third.

Pushing himself away from the wall, he moved toward the washroom, his hand falling on the bright yellow piece of paper, Libby had provided her comm. link number on. Harry winced. He had intended to call Libby today but with the panic about Seven, he hadn't gotten around to it. "Damn it." He looked at the paper, holding it in his hand for a moment, and then slowly turned the paper

over. On the back is an advertisement for an underground museum. One that includes the safer tunnels of the old Venice Beach subway system.

He set the flyer down, and moved away from it. Then something surfaced from the back of his consciousness, the dark look when he mentioned Seven's name. For a moment, he dismissed the hunch, but couldn't put it aside. "It's a place to start." He told himself, then tapped his communicator. "Lieutenant Kim to Commander Tuvok."

"Tuvok here."

"I think I know where Seven might be."

The comm. beeped in Janeway's office. Setting aside the report, that she had been pretending to read while worries about Seven of Nine and the last of her crew that were in custody filled her mind, she flicked on the screen. "Owen." She felt her stomach twist in anxiety as she looked at the face of her old friend, searching it for any sign of what his news might be.

"Now Kathryn, you didn't hear it from me, but the tribunal is currently in deliberations." His hand came up, signaling her to silence before she could start a barrage of questions. "I don't know what their decision even might be. All I know is that they are currently in chambers."

Janeway smiled, knowing now for good or ill, there was nothing left to do but wait. "Thanks for letting me know, Owen."

"I'll talk to you later, Kathryn." Owen nodded and the channel closed, leaving the Starfleet emblem on the screen. Janeway turned to the window, doubts filling her head. Was this worse than the future the Admiral had sought to prevent? Seven captive to some terrorist faction on Earth, Chakotay facing charges. Remembering the Admiral's tired, bitter expression and seeing her own in the reflection from the window, was it really all that different? Would she end up the same woman: alone, bitter? This time hating Starfleet as well? This time, though, she wouldn't be an admiral, she'd be trapped as a captain.

This time instead of lauding them as heroes, Starfleet was persecuting them as criminals. She had to remind herself for a moment of the twenty three lives they had saved. "Where there's life, there's hope." She said to no one in particular. What had happened to the Starfleet that she had joined? She barely recognized it. Lieutenants who were barely civil to the point of insubordination, Admirals who seemed to be looking to blame the Maquis for being right about the Cardassians and finding scapegoats to sway popular opinion, and worst of all they had dragged her down into the mire with them. Accepting a plea bargain, even when she knew it was wrong. It was easier than going to prison, but since when did Kathryn Janeway take the easy way out? Did they drag her into the mire or did she allow herself to be dragged?

"Commander Tuvok to Captain Janeway." Janeway started from her reverie as her combadge chirped.

"Janeway here, go ahead Tuvok."

"Lieutenant Kim has had a revelation to where he believes Seven of Nine might be." Tuvok's calm voice advised her through the din of her own thoughts.

Janeway smiled a little, "So you're playing Harry's hunch are you?"

"Indeed, though it is also a logical location."

"Fair enough, Tuvok. Keep me advised."

"Of course, captain. Tuvok out." Kathryn breathed a sigh of relief even though they hadn't found Seven yet. She had faith in Tuvok and Harry. Now if she could find that faith in the Admiral's making the decisions about Chakotay and her crew.

The Maquis were led back to the hearing room, all of them looking from one to the other. The deliberations hadn't taken long: only four hours, leaving Chakotay and the others wondering if this was good news or not. After a moment, the chime sounds announcing the Admirals and they all stand, their gazes turning to one another wondering if the next time they saw each other would be at the New Zealand Penal Colony.

"You may all be seated," Nechayev's expression was carefully neutral. Chakotay grinned.

Nechayev nodded to Ross and he stood with a grin. "It is the considered opinion of this tribunal in light of the years of service to Starfleet and the Starship Voyager that there is no need for a formal trial to be held." He paused for a moment, then continued, "However, in light of the previous criminal actions of the Maquis crewmembers of Voyager there must be some consequences. Because of this, for the first nine months of Voyager's journey you will be considered prisoners and will receive no benefits from that time. However for the remaining six years and three months, from the beginning of the Dominion War, you are to be treated as draftees. You will receive back benefits and credits commensurate to your rank for that time until now. As of today, you are honorably discharged and released from service. In light of your criminal records you are barred from re-enlistment without Presidential pardon." Ross nodded and a round of cheers went up from the crewmen behind Chakotay. B'Elanna was instantly pulled into the crowd as Chakotay watched Nechayev leave. She only spared him a short look, her gaze cold and hard as she looked at him. Ross moved down from the bench and motioned Chakotay to join him.

"So how does it feel to be a free man?" Ross nodded in acknowledgement to Kunimoto and led Chakotay out of the room.

Chakotay shook his head, "Of all the decisions that could have been made, I wasn't expecting that one. So it doesn't seem quite real to me yet."

Ross smiled, "Well it was a political decision more than a legal one. About half the admiralty wants to hang the Maquis, the other half wants to treat you as heroes. Add to that that public opinion is sliding against Starfleet with all of the trials... Turning the biggest feel-good story in years, Voyager, into the biggest witch-hunt since we found out about the Founder infiltrators wasn't the smartest move they ever made. Then, to the public, the Cardassians are the enemy. Everyone remembers the war. So anyone who fought them are heroes. Deserved or not." Turns and looks at Chakotay. "In light of all that and the fact that an old admiral with one year in JAG before joining Command could tear holes in their evidence that you could fly a Galaxy class through. Well, even Nechayev may not have liked the decision, but she knew it was the only one we could make. Pat you on the back and toss you the hell out of fleet."

"Thank you, sir." Chakotay reached out his hand to the Admiral.

Ross took it without hesitation, "Good luck to you. I'm only sorry that Starfleet has changed so much that they can't see the potential they're throwing away."

The ground crunched beneath their feet as they walked through the abandoned section of the collapsed tunnels, further out from the ones in use by the museum. Harry adjusted his tricorder once more as he moved along when it started beeping. "Commander, I have Seven," he said.

Tuvok approached him and nodded. "It would appear that they are in that direction." Turning their wrist lights toward the direction indicated on the device's diminutive screen, they followed the beeping of the tricorder, trusting it to lead them to Seven.

"I don't want to wait for your friends to come get this thing." Seven couldn't see the speaker as he was somewhere behind her. "I know what the Borg did to my family. She should pay." There were rumblings all around her as others joined in with the speaker's sentiment. She could feel the pounding in her ears, her stomach twisting and slowly the dripping water sound filled her ears once more.

The woman who had 'questioned' her earlier appeared from the shadows once again. "Fine, you want your pound of flesh, take it, but if you want her to really suffer for what her kind did to our families then you'll wait until we can turn her over to my contacts. They'll confine her and make her suffer for a very long time. Then we don't have to worry about her final disposition either."

Tuvok and Harry rounded the corner, moving as quickly as they dared in the ill-lit passages before them. A light at the head of corridor told them they were almost there. They moved quicker, hearing voices talking about the 'thing' paying. As they emerged from darkness, Harry saw his worst nightmare. Libby standing menacingly over the restrained Seven, pronouncing sentence on her.

"LIBBY!" Harry yelled. All his feelings of anger and unease returned in an instant and focused on his former fiancée. He trained his phaser on the crowd of people. "Move away from Seven... All of you." His gaze fixed on Seven for the moment. "Are you alright, Seven."

"I am fine, Harry." Seven answered, her panic settling as her friends moved toward her. Harry looked to Tuvok, who was already signaling Starfleet Security.

"You don't understand, Harry. She's a Borg. Things like her killed my uncle." Libby pleaded with him to understand, her eyes bright with anger, sorrow and a hundred different emotions.

"You're wrong," Harry replied adamantly. "Seven is not a Borg. She's a victim of the Borg. She's a survivor of the most horrifying experience you could ever have. She's one of the bravest women I have ever met, learning to be an individual after being assimilated as a child. And more importantly, she is more human than any of you right now." Harry turned away from Libby as Starfleet Security arrived. He crouched down, keying in an override sequence on the binders and watching as they fell loose. He looked up at Seven. "We should get you to the Doctor. More for his comfort than yours probably. He's been worried sick." Harry smiled at Seven and she found herself smiling back, despite the circumstances.

He helped her up, looking to Tuvok, who dismissed them with a nod. Harry stayed close to her as they walked from the cavern, making certain he was there if she faltered in her step. She turned to him. "You were incorrect." Harry looked to Seven, uncertain what she meant by that. "My captors." She paused for a moment, repressing a shudder until she felt his hand on her shoulder. "They were being all too human."

Harry nodded sadly, "I know."

A driving beat filled the room that the Maquis had acquired to celebrate their release. Some were dancing, some were eating and most were drinking. "So is anyone actually sorry they won't be serving in the fleet again?" Geron asked over the din.

Chakotay and B'Elanna held their peace, but Ayala spoke up. "Serving with Janeway, isn't serving with Starfleet. They've proved that since we got home."

"Well you had to know that when Starfleet was stupid enough to use Janeway as a scapegoat." B'Elanna added, unable to hold her peace any longer. A roar of approval came from the crowd at that, and Chakotay shook his head in mock disapproval at B'Elanna.

A laugh came from the crowd at Chakotay's reaction and Ayala added, "Just when the captain and our 'Fleeters had me convinced that Starfleet didn't mean stupid all the time."

Pride fills Chakotay's heart as he listens to their people talk about the captain with such care. There was an air of sorrow in the room as they speak of her, knowing that she will most likely never command a Starship again, yet each of them feeling there was no one more worthy to command.

"Someone heard Mom was available to cuddle again," Tom's voice caught everyone's attention as he stepped through the doorway and made a b-line towards B'Elanna.

She met him halfway, pulling him into her arms and sharing a passionate kiss, before claiming Miral from his arms. "Stop hogging my little girl, flyboy." B'Elanna looked down into her daughter's smiling face, then up into Tom's, her eyes filling with tears. "It's real. We're free."

Tom nodded and everyone crowded around them. "Give me the baby, B'Elanna." Ayala called out, "And give your husband that reunion he's been waiting for."

"She can't do that in public, Mike." Tom grinned as B'Elanna cuffed him across the head.

Scowling at Tom, she handed the baby to Michael. "They don't care what we do. They just want to hold the baby, you P'taq."

Chakotay laughed as everyone's focus changed to the baby. He stopped for a moment to rub her little forehead ridges. "For luck," he said as B'Elanna looked at him oddly, then shook her head and tried to swat at him. He moved out of the crowd, watching the happy group talking and joking for a few moments before slipping out the door.

Harry watched as the Doctor fussed over Seven before declaring her fit. She slid off the biobed, starting to move toward the door and to Harry. She paused, then turned back to the Doctor.

"I have considered what you said about seeing a counselor, Doctor." She looked down at her hands for a moment, "Your advice is sound. Perhaps you could make an appointment for me."

The Doctor smiled and nodded, "I'll be happy to do that, Seven."

Seven turned back toward the door and Harry fell into step with her. They walked some distance down the standard Starfleet corridors before she stopped and spoke. "Thank you for your assistance today, Harry. I realize how difficult it must have been for you, considering..."

"It's all right, Seven. Nothing here on Earth has been the same as I remembered it." He looked down toward the ground. "I really shouldn't have expected Libby to be, either." He looked at Seven and was surprised when she gently cupped his chin with her hand, and he felt the soft press of her lips on his cheek.

At his shocked expression after she released him, Seven smiled, "A kiss on the cheek. I believe it is an appropriate expression of gratitude." She turned and continued her walk down the corridor, leaving Harry watching her as she went.

Janeway shot up from her chair. She had bid Owen a hasty farewell and shut off the viewscreen in almost the same instant that he had told her the news. The Maquis were free. Ayala and Geron were free. B'Elanna was free. Chakotay was free. Finally, something had gone right and now all she had to do was head for the lounge that her crew had appropriated for their celebration and join them.

It hadn't gone perfectly, of course. Starfleet had discharged them from service and barred them from re-enlisting due to their criminal record. That really didn't surprise her or upset her as much as she had thought it would. It might later, when the thrill that they were free had faded but at this moment all that mattered was that they were free.

It only took seconds for her to cross from her desk to the door, and less than a millisecond for the door to open. She nearly stepped out into the chest of Admiral Thalian. The Andorian regarded her with a somewhat bemused look. "I'm sorry admiral, I was just going out. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Actually, yes, captain," The admiral spoke with the odd accent and syllibant whisper of his race, "I need to speak with you most urgently on the report about the phase pulse variance of unstable wormholes."

Janeway felt her heart sink. She looked at the admiral trying to gauge how serious this was to him. One look into his face told her to him it was that serious. 'The party will be going all night, Kathryn. Get this off of your plate as quickly as you can and then join everyone at the celebration.' Her mind supplied as she stepped back and motioned for him to come in. "Of course, admiral. Do come in..."

The public space dock was almost deserted at this hour as Chakotay approached the small transport his sister had loaned him. Nowhere near as majestic as Voyager, or as noble as the

Liberty, but she was spaceworthy and, for now, she was his. Keying in the sequence to the lock, he entered the small vessel and looked it over. Small and old, but clean and well cared for. She'd do.

He stowed his bag, and moved to the pilot's seat. Strapping himself in, he ran his pre-launch checks quickly. "Spacedock, this is the Griffin. Requesting permission to depart." Chakotay said, activating the vessel's communications system.

"Acknowledged, Griffin. Pre-launch checks are nominal. Your astrogation course is plotted and confirmed for the most direct route to Trebus. Maximum allowable speed, warp five, confirm?"

Chakotay smiled at that, he'd almost forgotten about the speed limit that was still imposed on some older vessels in the Alpha Quadrant. "Confirmed, Space Dock."

"You are cleared for launch. Have a good trip, Griffin."

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