



Episode 8-20 – One Door Closes

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Captain Kathryn Janeway, formerly of the USS Voyager, sighed heavily as she rearranged the ever-growing stack of PADDs around on her desk. She shook her auburn head slightly at the thought. Her desk? Not long ago, she was flying through unknown stars surrounded by her crew, her family, charting regions of space never before seen by human eyes. And now, here she was pushing papers behind a desk and waiting for the door chime to announce her scheduled visitor.

She tried to push the mental images of her ship and crew to the back of her mind and focus on the task at hand. Admiral Paris had sent her a rather unusual message this morning, informing her that he would be meeting with her within the hour. The strange part was that he was coming to her office, as opposed to calling her to his rather impressive and grandiose workplace.

Admiral Owen Paris' office had been designed and decorated, Janeway believed, to project an atmosphere of vaunted morality, rigid discipline, and prestigious career accomplishments. The very epitome of intimidation to a young cadet or fresh graduate of the academy, as she well remembered.

The admiral was very much aware of the effect his stately office had on others, and he used his home court advantage on a regular basis. So the fact that he'd requested to meet in Janeway's modest workplace was odd to say the least. She would assume that the very location of this meeting was chosen to suggest a social call, but the tone of Owen's voice, not to mention the rigid way he held his shoulders, suggested otherwise. No, she was fairly certain that this wasn't a personal visit.

She just hoped it wasn't bad news. They'd been through enough already.

Before she had time to contemplate it further, the door chime sounded. Her eyes flitted to the chronometer on her terminal. 0800 on the button. Admiral Paris was meticulously prompt, as usual. That fact incited a small smile from her. At least some things stayed the same. "Come in."

Admiral Paris was a tall man; at least, he was compared to the diminutive female captain standing behind her desk. He greeted her with a genial smile and extended his hand. "Captain Janeway, how are you this morning?"

She took the offered hand between her own and shook it firmly. "I'm well, sir, thank you. And yourself?"

"Fine. Just fine."

Janeway gestured to the chair beside him. "Won't you please have a seat?"

The admiral lowered his aging body into the less than comfortable chair and watched as Janeway moved over to the replicator and ordered herself a cup of black coffee. She inquired with a gesture of her hand if he wanted anything. "Coffee for me, too, please. But with cream and sugar. I'm not quite the iron gut that you are, Captain."

She chuckled softly. "My gut has nothing to do with it. It's purely an emotional addiction, I assure you. Coffee is my only vice, but I know it's far more a psychological thing than a physical need." She handed the admiral his cup and resumed her seat behind her desk. She sipped gently from her steaming mug, her blue eyes searching Paris' face over the rim of her cup. "That's why I was so determined to get my ship and crew home, you know? There isn't a single good coffeehouse in all of the Delta Quadrant."

Paris chuckled amicably, but his eyes displayed little genuine mirth. He made an attempt at small talk. "How are you settling in now that the trials are finally over?"

"Fine," she answered. "It's a big adjustment ... for all of us. We just need some time to adapt, that's all."

Her mind briefly wandered to the countless other times that she and her crew had been forced to adapt. From one scenario to another, thrown into the Delta Quadrant, faced with insurmountable odds of survival time and again, enemies composed of the things from which nightmares are made ... and their triumphant return into the Alpha Quadrant, bursting from the belly of a Borg sphere and taking all of Starfleet by surprise. Only to be violently plucked from their would-be-homecoming and dropped into the depths of Hell, where time and space were not as they'd known it, and they were forced to adapt yet again.

She tried to keep the bitter tinge from her voice. "If there's one thing the people of Voyager excel at, it's adapting to new circumstances."

"As you've proven time and again," he conceded.

Janeway studied her old friend and mentor carefully. It was obvious that something was weighing heavily on his mind, something odious if his slightly clenched fists were any indication. Deciding to cut to the chase, she put her cup down and folded her arms on her desk. "Why do I get the feeling that you're about to drop a bomb on me, Admiral?"

Blunt though it was, Owen Paris looked somewhat grateful for Janeway's segue into business matters, as though the formidable, seasoned admiral was uncertain how to proceed on his own. "You always were astute, Captain Janeway. Even as a cadet I could get nothing by you."

She grinned wryly. "I had an excellent teacher. You taught me to pay attention to detail and body language. Right now, yours is damned near shouting Don't Shoot the Messenger."

"Well, that may be a bit overly dramatic, but not far off the mark." His blue eyes met hers and he cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I've come bearing ... unpleasant news."

Unpleasant. That was a word that Kathryn Janeway hated, detested even. It was one of those words people of authority used to sugar coat and understate something that was nearly always far more distressing than mere unpleasantness. It was a euphemism she'd used herself in the past. And now here it was, staring her in the face.

She steeled herself for whatever unpleasantness was about to be divulged, and in a calm, controlled voice said simply, "I see."

Admiral Paris put his coffee cup down on her desk and straightened his tunic slightly. "Starfleet Command has reached a decision regarding the fate of Voyager."

Instantly, a million different scenarios swirled in Janeway's mind. She immediately envisioned everything from a complete overhaul and refit to the museum on the presidio that Admiral Janeway had spoken of. It took her only a microsecond to school her thoughts into submission and regain her professional composure. "I'm listening."

"I know how much that ship means to you, Kathryn."

Uh oh. He used her given name. Somehow, she knew that couldn't possibly be a good sign. She tried to will her rapidly rising pulse to stop thudding in her ears, even as she appeared outwardly calm. "It means a lot to all of us, Owen. It was our home for nearly a decade."

"I know, and it served you well." He met her gaze evenly, despite his own pounding heart. "Look, there is no easy way to say this, so I'll just be blunt."

"By all means."

"Voyager is being decommissioned, Captain."

Of all the scenarios her mind entertained, that was not one of them. She felt the admiral's words like a physical blow to her chest, knocking the wind from her lungs. Her voice, normally rich and resonant, came out as little more than a gruff whisper. "What?"

"I know it's quite a shock to you, it was to me as well. But the decision has been made. Voyager will be decommissioned, and there is nothing you or anyone else can do about it. I'm sorry, Kathryn. I really am."

At that moment, Kathryn Janeway felt more alone than she ever had in her entire life. After all they had been through, all they'd sacrificed - their triumphant return to Earth had been forever sullied by witch-hunts, trials and cruel separations from her people. And now that those issues were finally behind them, Starfleet had found yet another way to remind her exactly who's in control here.

She was too stunned to feel anger or indignation - yet -- and she found that the only emotion she could identify was a heavy-hearted longing for the one person who loved that ship as much as she did. She had to talk to Chakotay. More than ever before, she needed his quiet strength at her side. She knew without a doubt that she had to reach him before Voyager's decommission took place.

She schooled her features into an expression of controlled acceptance, even though she felt nothing similar to that at the time, and uttered the only word she could manage. "When?"

Admiral Paris looked genuinely remorseful as he delivered the final blow. "Before the month is out."

Professor Cheney seemed to have an unconscious habit of pacing before his class as he delivered his lecture. Perhaps the constant movement increased the blood flow to his brain. Or perhaps he was just a bit of a nervous type, unable to be still for any considerable length of time. Oddly enough, the pacing did nothing to diminish his message.

His deep, gravelly voice projected throughout the stadium seating -type classroom without the aid of a microphone. "One of the most basic duties of any Starfleet officer is not only to honor and respect the ethical beliefs of other cultures, but to attempt to understand them. That doesn't always mean you have to believe them personally. Nor does it mean you must always act upon them."

"You'll find that what one culture holds as ethical and moral standards, another finds vile, even unholy. There may be times that the Prime Directive prohibits you from conceding to the ethical guidelines of an alien culture. But that does not excuse you from your first obligation - which is to seek out and explore strange new worlds and new civilizations.

"So, cadets, your first and most important job as a Starfleet officer is to never stop learning, and never stop trying to understand the differences and similarities between other species and your own. That being said, let's begin today's lesson with ... "

Icheb listened attentively as his professor spoke. Much to his surprise, this class on Interspecies Ethics was rapidly becoming one of his favorite courses. Granted, it lacked the technical precision and scientific investigation offered by the rest of the curriculum here at Starfleet Academy. But it offered something that Icheb found almost as intellectually stimulating as discovering to how many decimal points he could calculate pi, a remarkable thing in itself, no doubt.

The class offered break-out sessions where open discussions and debates were not only accepted, but encouraged. The topic of Interspecies Ethics was, by itself, fraught with controversy. And it wasn't difficult to come up with a provocative viewpoint as the discussions unfolded, after all, ethics had been the basis of many a debate since civilized time on Earth began. Here in the 24th century, where the United Federation of Planets mixed countless cultures from hundreds of worlds, anything was possible and topics were endless.

Icheb found the opinions of his fellow cadets extremely insightful as to the nature of their personalities and mind-sets. He was surprised to find that in a class of less than fifty people, there were views ranging from the extremely open-minded to the notably prejudiced. It was ... fascinating.

Seated to Icheb's right was a young Vulcan woman named T'kara. He'd noticed her more than once since he arrived on campus. She often walked the same path to the Academy library as he did. He noted immediately that she was attractive, pleasing to the eye.

Unlike most of her people, she hadn't adopted the severe, short hair cut common to Vulcans. Instead, she wore her raven hair in a long braid that cascaded down her back, ending just below her waist. Her serious eyes were an alluring shade of green, complimenting the olive complexion of her flawless skin. Even her delicately pointed ears seemed airbrushed to perfection.

She projected an air of regal nobility, one born of knowledge and logic, not arrogance. And Icheb found that, fascinating as the topic was in class that day, his wandering eyes seemed to have a mind of their own and continually flitted back to T'kara.

Unfortunately for Icheb, he didn't notice his attention had strayed until he realized that there was an uneasy silence in the room. He looked up to find all eyes on him. Much to his own dismay, the former Borg felt his cheeks flush slightly under such scrutiny. It was a curious sensation, one he could live without.

"Cadet Icheb?" prodded Professor Cheney.

"Yes, sir?"

"Would you like me to repeat the question?" The older human man smiled at the young Brounalli patiently. "Apparently you didn't hear me the first time."

There goes that sensation in his cheeks again. "I apologize, Professor. My mind was ... elsewhere. Could you please restate your inquiry?"

"Certainly," he said genially. If he was offended by Icheb's inattentiveness, he didn't show it. "We were discussing the varying definition of ethics and how it means different things to different

cultures. Nearly all cultures have some type of code of ethics, even if those ethics aren't what we would normally consider ... well, ethical. I cited the Borg Collective for example. While most of us find the idea of a hive mind with the single, unified goal of assimilation daunting to say the least, that does not mean that the collective is without ethical guidelines. My question to you is this: Can you enlighten us, Cadet, as to the ethical beliefs of the Borg?"

Icheb felt the color that had previously flooded his cheeks drain from his face. He knew that Professor Cheney had not asked the question with any malicious intent. On the contrary, actually. It was, no doubt, his way of opening the floor for Icheb to share his considerable knowledge of the Borg with his classmates and future comrades in arms.

The knowledge would benefit everyone on an educational level, and as he was the only former drone in the room, it only made sense for the professor to ask him. It was perfectly logical ... but that didn't make it comfortable. Not by a long shot.

"Of course, sir." Icheb did a remarkable job of schooling the nervousness from his voice, even as he felt a reoccurrence of what the Doctor had once termed 'butterflies in his stomach'. He rose to his feet and prepared to answer the question to the best of his ability.

But before he got a chance to speak, he heard an unsolicited comment from the cadet seated two rows behind him. "This ought to be rich. A morality lesson from the drone," he snorted to his friend in the next seat. "Borg ethics - what an oxymoron!"

Icheb felt indignation rising inside his chest as several of the other students laughed, apparently enjoying his discomfort.

More than two years ago, he had been liberated from the Collective by Captain Janeway, and made part of the Voyager crew. On that ship, he was treated fairly and compassionately. His uniqueness was appreciated, not scorned. And his ideas were heard outright, not scoffed at behind his back. He was unaccustomed to such prejudice.

He had noticed some of the people of Earth looking at Seven of Nine and himself with something akin to hatred. But he'd paid little attention. Seven had told him that people often fear that which they do not understand. And their fears often prompted them to react with hatred. He'd come to understand it was simply ignorance.

But here, at Starfleet Academy - the foundation of a society that was supposed to be based on tolerance and claimed to embrace life, ALL life - such hatred was incomprehensible.

Icheb had always viewed Starfleet as the giant galactic melting pot, all are welcome, and he believed Starfleet philosophy to be impenetrable by such pettiness as racial hatred. His heart sank heavily in his chest as he was faced with the unfortunate reality that hatred knows no boundaries. Even at Starfleet Academy. Sadness flooded his dark eyes as yet another layer of his innocence was stripped away. And, not for the first time since he set foot on Earth, he was uncertain how to handle the situation.

"Are you sure he didn't say where he was going? Not even a hint?" Janeway stood before her vidscreen, hands on her hips, as she grilled her former chief engineer.

"I'm sorry, Captain," said B'Elanna. "I'd like to tell you where he is, but I honestly have no idea."

"But you two are such good friends."

B'Elanna Torres actually laughed. "That doesn't mean he checks in with me every time he's planning to leave his apartment. I'd love to help you out, Captain. But at this point, your guess is as good as mine. He could be anywhere."

Janeway ran a hand through her auburn hair in frustration. She'd contacted everyone she could think of, but to no avail. It was as if Chakotay had just disappeared into thin air. Where in the hell is he? She offered B'Elanna a weary smile. "Thanks anyway. I'll see you at the meeting."

"Speaking of the meeting," B'Elanna grinned coyly. "Care to give me a hint as to what it's all about?"

Janeway shook her head. "No, I wouldn't. It's not something I want to discuss over the comm."

That piqued the half Klingon's interest. "That important, huh?"

Janeway summoned all of her command discipline to keep the sadness in her heart from reaching her face. Now was not the time. "That's one way to describe it. I'd really prefer to do it in person, B'Elanna. Trust me on this one, okay?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I'll see you soon."

Before Janeway could end the transmission, B'Elanna added, "Oh, and Captain? About Chakotay?"

"Yes?"

"You might want to contact his sister," she said. "She may know where he is. They haven't always been close. But I think he's been keeping in touch with her since we returned."

"I hadn't even thought of that," said Janeway. Chakotay had never spoken of his sister. In fact, close friends as they were, Janeway didn't even know about her until about a year ago so it was easy to forget all about her.

"Well, it's worth a try anyway."

"Yes, it is. Thank you, B'Elanna." She ended the transmission, watching as Torres' pretty face faded from the screen. She'd never spoken to Chakotay's sister before and supposed now was as good a time as any.

It didn't take her long to track down Chakotay's mysterious sibling. Being a high-ranking Starfleet officer had its privileges after all. And its drawbacks, she thought wryly.

She felt a little odd contacting this woman, as if she were invading on Chakotay's privacy somehow. But she had to find him. He needed to know about what was about to happen to Voyager. And ... she needed him to help her deal with it. It wasn't really an emotional thing. After all, she was the captain and he was the first officer. It was a matter of duty. It was as simple as that.

Except ... she knew that couldn't be farther from the truth, and none of this was simple at all.

"Admit it, Kathryn. You miss him terribly," she muttered to herself as she punched in the comm frequency. The words were barely out of her mouth when the image of a woman filled her screen.

"Hello?" Her voice was rich and mellifluous, like dripping honey. She had the same olive complexion as her brother, and her long black hair hung loosely down her back in barely restrained curls. She looked at Janeway with dark brown eyes that seemed to hold the wisdom of

a hundred life times, the same look Chakotay had. She was definitely a feminine version of the man that Kathryn knew so well. "Can I help you?"

"Hello, Atraya. My name is Kathryn Janeway. I'm - "

"Captain Janeway," said Atraya. "You were my brother's CO, right?"

"Yes." She winced inwardly. You WERE my brother's CO. It was hard to wrap her mind around the fact that everything had changed, and those people were no longer her crew. "I was his captain... on Voyager."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain." She returned the smile. "He speaks well of you."

I wish I could say the same. "That's good to hear. And the pleasure is all mine." Her blue eyes moved casually across Atraya's face. "You resemble Chakotay a great deal."

Atraya laughed, a pleasant sound. "Physically perhaps. But that's where it ends. Psychologically and emotionally, we couldn't be more different." Then she flashed Janeway a very familiar dimpled smile. "Somehow I don't think you called to hear me compare Chakotay's psyche to mine. What can I do for you, Captain?"

Janeway folded her arms across her chest and leaned back in her chair. "I'm looking for your brother, actually. He seems to have vanished, and I was hoping you could tell me where to find him."

"He's off-world, I believe."

Janeway felt her stomach fall somewhere in the vicinity of her ankles. What if he didn't return in time? "Off-world? What makes you say that?"

"He borrowed my private shuttle a few days ago," she said. "He said he had a loose end to tie up, whatever that means."

"Do you know where he was headed?"

Atraya shook her dark head. "No, he offered no details, and I knew better than to ask. My only request was that he return my shuttle in one piece. I don't know if you're aware of this, Captain, but my brother has an uncanny tendency for destroying small spacecraft."

Janeway raised an eyebrow and chuckled. "Yes, I've noticed."

"I'm afraid I have no idea where he was going. But I can give you the comm frequency. You can send him a message." She smiled warmly. "It's not as good as producing my brother for you, but it's better than nothing."

Janeway returned the smile, taking an instant liking to this woman who so reminded her of Chakotay. "That would be wonderful, Atraya. I am in your debt."

She snorted and waved her hand dismissively. "Hardly. Just do me a favor."

Janeway nodded.

"Tell him I said to return my shuttle, and my brother, in one piece. I may not be a Starfleet captain, but I still know how to give orders."

With a laugh and a mock salute, Janeway said, "Aye, sir. I'll deliver your message." Let's just hope he gets it in time.

The small shuttlecraft landed with a soft thud, kicking up tiny dust devils in its wake. The hatch made a quiet hissing sound as it opened, releasing the shuttle's atmosphere to commingle with the gases of the atmosphere on the planet. 21% oxygen, 70% nitrogen, the rest mostly inert trace gases - just like Earth. Except that Earth was teeming with life, and this world was dead.

Chakotay emerged from the shuttle, his dark eyes traveling slowly over the terrain. Trebus - it looked nothing like it had when he was a boy. He'd chosen a landing site on the outskirts of where his people's village once stood. Of course, that was before Starfleet had betrayed them, before the Cardassians came. The peaceful little village stood no more. Nothing on Trebus was left standing. They made sure of that.

He moved slowly across the land, scanning the horizon as he walked. Where there had once been fields of wild grass and flowers, there now lay endless oceans of dry dust. The skies, once filled with the shrieks of birds of prey, were now silent and overcast. The land that had been so sacred and holy to his people had been desecrated and defiled.

Here in this place, life had been born, families created, songs sung, and stories told. And for a moment, Chakotay thought he could hear it. There, in the distant reaches of his mind, faint but still present, were the songs of the tribal children. They sung of peace and compassion, of Sky Spirits and blessings to the land.

The former starship commander closed his eyes in an effort to capture that moment in his mind - to visualize the singing. But the instant he did, the joyous singing turned to into something else.

The spiritual lyrics were gone, replaced by horrible wailing. It was his people - screaming as they were being slaughtered. Children crying as they were ripped from the arms of their dead or dying mothers. The men shouting warnings to their families to run, to get down before the next blast came and snatched them from this life.

Chakotay slapped his hands to the sides of his head, as if it were possible to cover his ears and block out the sounds that came from within his own mind. He took a few calming breaths and opened his eyes, forcing himself to see the reality before him. There were no Cardassians now, no screaming children or dying women. On Trebus, all was still. The only sound was Chakotay's own pulse slamming like a thousand galloping horses in his head.

"Calm yourself, Old Man," he said. "You came here to put things to rest, not stir up old ghosts."

With almost stoic composure, Chakotay walked through the remains of a shattered past. And despite his outwardly calm demeanor, the ghosts continued to scream in his mind. What do you mean you're leaving the tribe? You don't belong to that world, Chakotay.

"I know, father," he whispered. "But I didn't belong to this one either." And he meant it. Chakotay always felt ill at ease, out of place. He never really felt he belonged anywhere ... until Voyager.

Finally, he reached his destination. The site where his father's house used to be was now nothing more than rubble and dust, but he knew it instinctively regardless. He made his way through the rotted and dehydrated debris until he came to that area that was once the center of spiritual meditation and inner exploration, the habak.

He knelt down, resting his weight on his heels, and scooped up a handful of the earth. He let the fine, dry dirt run through his fingers and wondered for a brief, morbid moment how much of it was composed of the ashes and bones of his people, his family. "I should've been here. If not to protect them, then at least to die beside them."

In that moment, Chakotay was overcome with memories of times past. They boomeranged through his mind at hyper-light speed, ricocheting off of one another until they lost their individual resonance and become one large, jumbled thought.

He heard the voices of his people. The last time he saw any of them alive, he'd been disrespectful and heated. Then he'd left filled with anger and discontent. He couldn't understand why his tribe refused to embrace the 24th century. He thought himself above the simplicity of their way of life, and he made sure his father knew it. He left them with anger in his heart, and he never saw any of them again.

The guilt was heavy, like the hand of Satan himself reaching into his chest and squeezing his beating heart.

As the painful memory of his last visit to this home washed over him, Chakotay recalled with agonizing clarity exactly why he shed his Starfleet uniform and joined the Maquis in the first place.

He experienced that familiar fire in his belly as the old fury and rage came once again to the forefront. But this was not the reason he'd come to Trebus. He didn't come here to refuel his Maquis fire. Those days were gone and the battle was over. He came instead, to find peace within himself. It was time for his guilt and pain to be put to rest, along with his people.

With an almost physical effort, he managed to push the raging thoughts back into submission as he recalled the face of the one person in his life that made donning that uniform again even imaginable - Kathryn. Because of her, he'd worn his Starfleet uniform with great pride. Not because he'd believed in Starfleet, because he believed in her. She'd become his best friend and brought him the only peace he'd ever known.

So, if for no other reason than for her, he knew he must find a way to put the Angry Warrior to rest.

He pulled his medicine bundle from his backpack and spread it out on the ground. The fur was worn from its travels through the galaxy, a fact that only made it dearer to Chakotay. He laid the items out carefully before his folded legs. A black bird's wing, a stone from the river, and the Akoonah.

He closed his eyes and placed his right palm on the device, which lit up and whirred to life in response, generating a feeling of euphoria throughout his body. Before he'd even begun to utter the ritual prayer, his mind recreated the habak as it had been the last time he saw it.

In his mind's eye, he saw the walls covered with ancient writings describing the story of the First Father and the rising of the sky. The room was filled with ancient artifacts, figurines and spiritual talisman. He could even smell the faint aroma of burning sage...

"Akoochimoyah ..."

On the far edge of the village, the console in Atraya's shuttlecraft came to life. "Incoming transmission," droned the computer. Of course, there was no pilot to receive the message from Earth. He was deep in a vision quest, his conscious mind elsewhere and else when. The message, and the messenger, would just have to wait.

Admiral Owen Paris knew who was buzzing his office door even before he gave her permission to enter. He sighed and put away the report he was reading, as this particular visitor always required nothing less than everyone's undivided attention. "Come in, Kathryn."

The door slid open to reveal Janeway, hands on her hips and one eyebrow raised indignantly. "How did you know it was me?"

"I could smell the scent of coffee that always seems to precede your entrance into a room."

"Very funny," she said wryly.

"I try."

She stepped into the large office, a gentle grin spreading across her face as she noted the latest addition to Admiral Paris' picture wall. There in the center was a lovely image of Tom and B'Elanna, arms around each other as a smiling Miral sat between them. Her chubby baby cheeks were rosy red, and her tiny hands were together in front of her, as if she'd been clapping.

Despite her own internal pain at the moment, Janeway found her heart flooding with warmth at the sight of the laughing little family that she liked to think she had some small part in creating. And she was particularly happy to see the photo among all the others of the Paris clan. She knew that Tom and his father hadn't had what anyone would consider an easy path with their reunion. In fact, they'd had more than their share of hardships and difficulties. She was pleased to see they were working their way past them.

She ran a finger along the elegant frame. "What a beautiful picture of the Paris family." She tapped her chin with her finger thoughtfully. "But I wonder ..."

"Where it was taken?" the admiral supplied helpfully.

"No," she said. "Where's mine?"

"Good question," grinned Owen. "One I'm afraid I can't answer. You'll have to take that up with my lovely daughter-in-law. She's officially in charge of photo distribution."

"I see." She took the seat he offered in front of his desk. "Miral is getting so big. How is she doing?"

The admiral's cheeks positively glowed with pride the likes of which only a grandparent could possess. "Oh, she's wonderful!" he raved. "I'm telling you, she has to be the smartest infant I have ever seen in my life."

"I believe it," she said with something akin to a grandparent's pride in her own voice.

"Did you know she's already speaking?"

This prompted Janeway to raise both eyebrows. "Speaking?"

He nodded. "Yes. Just yesterday when I came into the kitchen, she opened her little arms and said, 'Da Da'."

Janeway used her considerable self-restraint to smother a grin. "You're saying she called you 'dada'?"

Paris sighed and looked at Janeway like she was the slow student in the class. "Not dada as in 'daddy'. It was dada as in 'granddaddy'."

Now she had to try hard not to laugh aloud. Was there a difference? Janeway, obviously the only rational adult in the room at the moment, knew that a baby Miral's age did a great deal of babbling, but not much, if any, actual speaking. But, if Admiral Owen Paris wanted to believe that his infant granddaughter was already addressing him as "Granddaddy", who was she to argue.

She smiled genially. "That's wonderful, sir. You must be very proud."

"Indeed, I am."

"Of course, it goes without saying that Miral would be intelligent. Look who her parents are, for one thing," Janeway said. "And she was born on Voyager."

Paris noticed his subordinate's eyes darken at the mention of her ship. Her jovial grin faded, and he knew she was struggling to keep the sadness she felt from showing on her face.

He may be a desk jockey now, but Owen Paris was an old space dog not so long ago. He knew what it felt like to lose a ship. It was akin to losing a child in many ways. Another feeling he knew all too well. He knew that Janeway was in a great deal of pain, despite her brave façade. And he warred between being the professionally detached admiral and the desire to comfort someone he still considered a friend.

His kind blue eyes searched her face carefully. "How are you doing, Kathryn?"

She shrugged, feigning indifference. "I'm not happy about what's about to take place. But I'll learn to live with it."

Owen kept his steady gaze on Janeway, willing her not to look away. "I think you're a lot more than just unhappy about it."

"With all due respect, sir, what difference does it make? Whether I cry and bang my head against the wall, or simply shut up and accept it, either way - the end result is the same. Voyager will be decommissioned whether I get emotional or not."

"That's true," he conceded. "But emotions have a way of existing regardless, don't they? You can't simply command them like you did your ship, Captain."

"No, I can't." She raised her chin defiantly. "But I can't allow them to command me, either."

"Look, Kathryn, I know this is extremely difficult for you. It would be for anyone in similar circumstances."

He folded his hands across his ample belly and regarded Janeway with a paternal gaze. "I can see you're going to push your pain way down deep inside yourself, that's just your way. It's an unhealthy habit you got from your father, and it's only intensified by all those pips on your collar. I understand that, and I won't push you to deal with your emotions. That's your business. But I want to make one thing perfectly clear. Regardless of the difficulties we've had since your return to Earth, I am still your old friend. If I can do anything to lessen your burden, all you have to do is ask."

Janeway arched an auburn eyebrow. "You mean that, sir?"

"Of course I mean it. I wouldn't have said it otherwise."

"Good," she said decidedly. "Because, pleasant as our visit has been, I actually came here for a reason. I came to make a request regarding Voyager."

Janeway would've sworn someone had called a Red Alert. In the instant she uttered that sentence, Admiral Paris' shields went up. His expression, only moments ago friendly and

compassionate, was now guarded, maybe even a little suspicious. She found herself wondering exactly what had taken place in the infamous meeting that had decided Voyager's fate. Funny how the entire ambiance of a meeting could change with a single sentence.

"A request?" he said evenly.

"Yes, one that I think is perfectly reasonable." She folded her hands in her lap. "I plan to officially request that my crew and I be the ones to fly Voyager on her last journey from here to Utopia Planitia."

Owen said nothing, but a dark shadow worked its way across his face.

"I want to command her one last time, Admiral. I don't think that's an unfair request."

"Kathryn, I think the best thing you can do now is just accept this. Don't stick your neck out there on this one. Let Starfleet handle it."

Her eyes widened quizzically. "Let Starfleet handle it? I thought I was part of Starfleet."

"Of course you are," he sighed. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean, exactly?"

"I'm simply trying to stop you from causing yourself unnecessary pain. You and your crew have been invited to Utopia Planitia to observe Voyager's docking. You'll be encouraged to make a speech at that time. Let it go at that."

She wasn't quite certain how to take that. All she knew for sure was that she could feel her anger rising in her belly. Her voice was low, but controlled as she spoke. "Let it go at that? Owen, you've known me for years. You've guided me, watched my career take shape through all its highs and lows. You know me, probably better than almost anyone in command. You know as sure as you're sitting there that I cannot simply 'let it go'. My crew deserves this."

He shook his head in frustration. "You know damned well that decisions are not made based on what someone does or does not deserve. They're made based on what is best for the Federation."

"How would my commanding Voyager from Earth to Utopia Planitia be in any way detrimental to the Federation?"

"I didn't say it would," he said, his voice rising slightly. He fixed his blue eyes on her firmly. "Don't make waves about this, Captain."

Janeway stood and leaned toward him, her palms pressed to the surface of his desk. "I'm not trying to make waves, Admiral. But with all due respect, I think I am entitled to this. I fought for nearly eight years to keep that ship in one piece, to keep my crew alive. And I insisted the entire time, against unimaginable odds, that we remain a Starfleet crew, true to the policies and values of the Federation.

"I passed up one opportunity after another for a speedy journey home to uphold those principles, and along the way people suffered and people died. And still I stood my ground, insisting that if we let go of our Starfleet morals, we stopped being human.

"After all that, when we finally did make it home, were we welcomed with open arms and recognized for our sacrifices? No. We were separated, families torn apart, and friends kept from the comfort of one another. And then we were tried before the courts, every debatable action or decision made along that journey brought into question and scrutinized. And still we are loyal.

"I made some bad decisions during my command. I admit that. I stood accountable for it before you and every one else from Starfleet Command. And now they're about to decommission my ship, a decision that no one even bothered to consult me on or ask my opinion. And still I say, 'Yes, sir' and comply with Command. And now, because I want to make a simple request, one that in no way endangers Starfleet or the Federation, I am MAKING WAVES?"

"I'm afraid I you'll have to explain it to me, Admiral, because I just don't understand. How would I be causing myself unnecessary pain by asking for this. Voyager is MY ship. I simply want to fly her to her resting place!"

Admiral Paris rose to his feet and slammed his fists on his desk. "Watch your tone with me, Captain. We may be old friends, but I was an admiral when you were still in pigtails! And Voyager is not YOUR ship. It belongs to the people of the Federation. Commanding her was your privilege, not your right. There are just some things you have to accept, and this is one of them. Your tenure on Voyager is over. Deal with it and move on, that's an order."

He paused, gathering his anger and regaining his composure. His tone softened slightly as he regarded her, the woman who had guided his wayward son to manhood in his absence, and not for the first time in recent days, his uniform was heavy on his shoulders.

"Don't make this request of me, Kathryn. These details have already been decided. You're only succeeding in putting us both in an awkward and painful position."

"I'm going to ask you flat out, Admiral. No more posturing or pulling rank. If you're going to deny us this one last dignity, you're going to have to do it to my face." She squared her shoulders, snapped her heels together, and pulled her body to rigid attention. "Permission to assemble my crew and command Voyager from Earth to Utopia Planitia, sir?"

Admiral Owen Paris, momentarily embroiled in a deep internal struggle between his emotions and his duty, hung his head slightly. Then, having reached the decision both he and Janeway knew he would all along; he looked his former student in the eyes and regretfully but firmly said, "Permission denied."

Before the laughter from his last snide comment had subsided, Cadet Tyler decided to add further witty commentary. "Yeah, the Borg are ethical, and I'm an admiral!"

Icheb turned to respond, but Professor Cheney beat him to it. "I beg your pardon, Cadet. Did you have a comment?"

The arrogant human's cheeks blushed visibly, for which Icheb was silently very grateful. At least he wasn't the only one. "No, sir!" Tyler barked obediently. "I have nothing to say, sir!"

"All evidence to the contrary," he said. "You had plenty to say a moment ago, Mr. Tyler. At least, I thought I heard you mutter something to Cadet Jessip. Perhaps I should ask him." He turned his attention to the other cadet, a young Bajoran man. "Well, Cadet? Did you hear what your friend had to say? Apparently, he prefers not to share it with the class."

"No, sir." Cadet Jessip shot a sideways glance at his cohort and then began a studious examination of his boots.

"Very interesting," muttered Cheney. "Perhaps you should report to the infirmary and have your hearing checked, Mr. Jessip." He glanced at the young Vulcan seated beside Icheb. "How about you, Cadet T'kara. Vulcan's have superior auditory skills. Perhaps you can put an old man out of his misery and tell me that I haven't started hearing voices in my head. Did you hear Cadet Tyler's comment?"

The Vulcan regarded her professor evenly. "Yes, sir, I did."

"Ah," grinned Cheney. "Then I'm not crazy. Thank you, T'kara. And what did our Mr. Tyler say, hmmm?"

T'kara cast a glance at Icheb and then raised an elegant eyebrow. "He made a derogatory comment directed at Cadet Icheb regarding Borg ethics, or his perception of a lack thereof."

The professor nodded as if that was the response he was expecting. "And ... what do you think? Do you agree with his assessment?"

T'kara didn't so much as cast a glance back at her outspoken colleague before she said, "No, I do not."

"Very interesting. And, on what do you base that opinion?"

"It is safe to presume that Cadet Tyler has little or no experience with the Borg Collective. Therefore, his assumptions are based on either hearsay or prejudices he has acquired vicariously through others, rather than on fact. Such assumptions are subject to error and misinterpretation.

"Also, the very nature of the Borg Collective would suggest that they do, in fact, have some type of ethical mandates. They simply may not be the kind of ethics to which humans are accustomed. The fact that they are different from those of the Federation, even disturbing to us on many levels, does not make them any less real or valid."

Seeming satisfied with her acumen, T'kara simply regarded her instructor with a very characteristic raised eyebrow.

Icheb felt an unexpected rush of affection and appreciation for T'kara. An unlikely ally in this situation. He made a mental note to thank her for her objectivity at a later time.

Cheney smiled approvingly. "A most logical viewpoint, Cadet T'kara. Thank you for sharing it." Then he opened his arms wide, as if inviting the entire class to jump in. "Anyone else have an opinion they're brave enough to share?"

Silence.

"I didn't think so. Very well," he said, once again pacing before the class. "Then you will listen to mine." He eyed the group thoughtfully, pausing a moment to gather his thoughts.

"What has occurred here today disturbs me. It disturbs me greatly. You see, though our Mr. Tyler may have thought he was being funny, his comments were prompted by hatred. Do you think that's a bit harsh? The word hatred? Perhaps Cadet Tyler doesn't actually hate Cadet Icheb individually. In fact, I'm willing to bet he hardly knows him. But he obviously harbors hatred for the Borg.

"Now, I can guess what you're all thinking. We have plenty of reason to hate the Borg, right? They assimilated countless millions, actions we find down right evil. I agree with that. However, Icheb here is no longer part of the Collective. He is a citizen of the Federation, and a student here at Starfleet Academy. In that sense, he is one of our own, yet you would suggest that he is less than you are, Cadet Tyler, merely because of his race. A race that he wasn't even born to, in fact.

"Icheb was a victim of the Borg as a child and he's since been liberated and worked to regain his individuality. We're supposed to be enlightened, aren't we? We sing about freedom and about a place for everyone. And yet here, in the very heart of Starfleet itself, you would victimize him again for the sake of a few laughs?"

"And the rest of you, those who laughed at his misfortune, are you superior to him as well simply because you happened to have been born whatever race or color you are? Look at him. He is a living, breathing person - just like you. It's one thing to hate the whole of a society in a vague sort of way, it's quite another to hate the individual who stands before you.

"Starfleet and the Federation are all about tolerance, Cadets. Tolerance for races that differ from your own. Tolerance for people with ideas that contradict or even oppose your own. This is a free society, and that means it has to be open and equal to all the people of the Federation. Anything less diminishes us all greatly.

"I realize that this is a learning period for you, and making mistakes is a necessary part of that process. So it is my hope that you will recognize your mistakes here today, and become better people because of them. Uniqueness like Icheb's is one of the beauties of the universe, and it affords you an opportunity to learn, to expand your mind ... if you're mature enough.

"Think about this as you're walking the Academy grounds today, a Starfleet uniform on your back. Every war that ever occurred on any world anywhere in the entire galaxy was started for one reason, and one reason alone. War happens because someone harbors hatred for someone else. Every atrocity, every violent act that takes place, is begun with simple hatred.

"You must find a way to rise above your primal fears and prejudices, ladies and gentlemen. That is what enlightenment is all about. If you can't do that - you have no business wearing that uniform."

Cheney cast a sobering glance on his pupils, allowing the silence to punctuate his words. Then he said simply, "Class dismissed."

As Icheb rose to leave the room, he met eyes with his professor, his gratitude evident on his young face. Cheney nodded gently in response. And in that moment, an understanding passed between the two. No matter what occurred from there on out, no matter what narrow-mindedness he would face, Professor Cheney understood him. Icheb had a friend at Starfleet Academy. And with a friend, even just one, a person could accomplish just about anything.

The scent in the room: a mixture of sliced lemons, smooth vermouth, and a hint of mustiness, wafted to his nose as he entered. He stood in the shadow of the doorway, taking the moment to languidly sweep his eyes across the place. It was just as he remembered it, from the dark, cherry wood bar to the crackling fire in the fireplace.

Sandrine's - the real one, not a holographic representation - it was a sight for sore eyes.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Thomas! It is so good to see you again, mon cher!"

It took less than a second for Tom Paris to locate the owner of that voice. He smiled impishly when his eyes located her diminutive form. Lush blonde hair piled provocatively on her head, high cheekbones and mischievous blue eyes, complimented by a seductive figure and thick French accent. His eyes twinkled merrily as he greeted her. "Hello, Sandrine."

She hurled herself into his arms and immediately covered his lips with hers in a kiss that was not quite appropriate for a married man. Especially one who was married to a half Klingon.

Paris lost himself in the kiss for the briefest of moments as the scents and sounds of the tavern, and the feel of Sandrine's soft lips on his took him back to another time, and another life. His journey down memory lane was a short one, however, as his wife of the present nudged him none too gently in the ribcage.

"Are French kisses the standard greeting around here, or are they just reserved for my husband?" B'Elanna folded her arms across her chest and glared at the blonde haired human who'd attached herself to her husband's mouth so readily.

Sandrine tore herself from Tom's lips and looked skeptically at B'Elanna, then at Paris. "Is zis true, Thomas? Is zis your amour?"

Tom smiled proudly and put an arm around B'Elanna. He pulled her close to him, partly because he loved to feel her at his side, but mostly to keep her from killing Sandrine with her bare hands.

"Sandrine, this is my wife, and the mother of my child, B'Elanna Torres."

Sandrine smiled cattily and took B'Elanna's hand between hers. "Salut, B'Elanna. It is an impressive woman that can capture the heart of Monsieur Paris. His eye - it is easy to catch, but his heart, zis is another story, non?"

"If you say so," B'Elanna said, returning the same catty smile. "I just couldn't get him to go away, so I finally gave in and had dinner with him. He's been stuck to me ever since."

Paris flashed them both a cheeky smile. "Best thing I ever did, too." He kissed B'Elanna lightly on the top of her head and hugged her to him.

"Wow, Paris," came the excited voice of Harry Kim. He clapped Tom on the shoulder as he brushed past him into the room. "This is incredible. You had this place down perfectly in your hologram. The colors, the smells, all of it. I must say, I am impressed."

Sandrine eyed her new patron conspicuously, drinking him in like fine champagne. She sauntered up to him and, with an unmistakably provocative air, slid a manicured fingernail along his biceps. "And, who is zis, Thomas?"

Harry grinned at the petite woman. She looked just the same as her holographic counterpart; right down to the stimulating, sheer attire she wore. "And you must be Sandrine."

She smiled seductively and offered her hand for a kiss. "Enchante."

Harry kissed her hand and bowed slightly at the waist. "My name is Harry Kim. I'm a friend of Tom's. It's a pleasure to meet you."

B'Elanna arched a dark eyebrow and grinned playfully. "Well, aren't you the quintessential gentleman today, Starfleet."

He smiled back at his old friend. "You know what they say, Maquis. When in Rome..."

"Always wear clean underwear because you never know when you'll end up in a toga?" Paris offered helpfully.

"You know, Paris, it's a good thing you're such a crackerjack pilot. I'd be worried about your wife and daughter if you had to make your living as a comedian," said Harry.

Paris clapped his friend on the shoulder. "That's why I keep you around, Harry. You always have an encouraging word or two."

The trio made their way into the tavern, which was already crowded with members of the former crew of the USS Voyager. There were still a few people unaccounted for, most notably the command team. Paris was about to ask his lovely wife if she'd heard from the ever-elusive Chakotay, when a gentle but persistent tapping on his shoulder made him turn around.

He turned and looked down into the smiling, yet somehow sad face of Kathryn Janeway. She gave his shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "This is wonderful, Tom. Thank you for arranging it for me. I owe you one."

"My pleasure, Captain," he said gallantly. "And I'd allow you to make it up to me by thoroughly whipping you in a game of pool, but - "

Janeway's blue eyes widened as she realized the pool table was conspicuously missing from the room. Tables and chairs were now occupying the place where the proud and famed pool table once stood. "You got Sandrine to move the pool table? You are a smooth one, Mr. Paris." She smiled appreciatively at her former pilot. "If I'd had half your charm with the admiralty, there may not have been a trial in the first place."

He smiled affectionately at her, wondering to himself how she could possibly be so unaware of her affect on people. She was one of the most captivating women he had ever met, and - given his colorful past - that was really saying something. "Don't sell yourself short, Captain. You're rather bewitching yourself. You're charm is probably the only reason we even lived to see this place again."

She laughed off the compliment, but Paris knew she was affected by it. "I don't know about that," she chuckled. "I'd say we owe a great deal of our welfare to your unconventional piloting skills."

Paris beamed at the comment.

"Careful, Captain," cautioned B'Elanna playfully. "There's barely enough space in this bar as it is. If his ego gets any more inflated, we may have to hold this little meeting outside in the street."

They shared a laugh at Tom's expense, but Torres couldn't help but notice the way Janeway's attention seemed distracted as her eyes swept across the room. She took the older woman gently by the arm. "Come on, let me buy you a drink."

Janeway smiled warmly at her. "Thanks, I could use one."

The two women took a seat at the bar and ordered their drinks. B'Elanna leaned in closer to Janeway. "Any word from Chakotay?"

Kathryn shook her head. "No. I spoke to his sister. She told me that he borrowed her private shuttle and she suspects he's off-world somewhere."

B'Elanna's brow furrowed, making her cranial ridges slightly more pronounced. "Off-world? Where?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Apparently he didn't say. She gave me the comm frequency and I sent him a message. But he didn't respond."

B'Elanna looked concerned. "Maybe he's out of range."

Janeway sighed sadly. "I hope not. He'll never forgive himself if he misses this."

B'Elanna's eyebrows rose quizzically. "Misses what? What's going on, Captain?"

Janeway seemed a little startled that she let a hint of foreboding come out of her mouth. She was dreading having to tell these people what was about to happen to their ship, their home for so many years. But they had a right to know, and she had never been one to shirk from her responsibilities, no matter how unpleasant.

She sipped at her chardonnay and then rested an arm around B'Elanna's shoulders. "You'll know soon enough, B'Elanna. For now, just share a drink with your old captain, hmm?"

"You got it," said B'Elanna. She raised her glass and met Janeway's eyes. "To Voyager."

"Yes," Janeway said sadly. "To Voyager."

On the other side of the room, the Doctor leaned back slightly in his chair and watched his former captain with an investigator's eye. He noted the slightly tense way she held her shoulders, the subtle but undeniable way she periodically massaged the bridge of her nose - the way she always did when she was trying to stave off an approaching headache.

He discerned the slight raise of her chin, not quite enough to be considered defiance, but with a just hint of barely contained rebelliousness. She carried the posture he'd seen her display numerous times when she was about to do something she wished she didn't have to do.

She was definitely harboring unpleasant news. He knew her body language as well as he knew the back of his holographic hand. He glanced at Seven and Tuvok, who were seated at the table with him. "I know that expression." He nodded toward Janeway. "She's about to be the bearer of bad tidings."

Seven, who didn't appear to notice the comical fact that she was, as many jokes began, seated in a bar with a hologram and a Vulcan, regarded him with her customary detached expression. "On what facts do you base that assumption, Doctor?"

"It's obvious," he said somewhat indignantly. "It's written all over her face."

Seven, who was certain that her optical implant would've detected any inscription on the captain's epidermis, merely looked confused. But Tuvok nodded slightly. "The doctor's exaggerated metaphors notwithstanding, Captain Janeway does appear to be ... somewhat agitated."

The doctor's high forehead wrinkled in astonishment. "Somewhat agitated? She looks like her skin is the only thing keeping her from flying in every direction at once." He regarded Tuvok haughtily. "I will never understand the Vulcan tendency for understatement."

"Obviously," said Tuvok, a hint of wry humor lacing his stoicism.

"I fail to see what purpose this speculation serves," said Seven. "Perhaps we should simply ask the captain why she has called us here."

"I do not believe that will be necessary, Seven," said Tuvok. He nodded toward Janeway, who was taking her place in front of the room. "I believe Captain Janeway is about to speak."

A hush fell over the room as Kathryn Janeway stood before her former crew. Her eyes swept the room slowly, taking in each and every face that she knew so well. She swallowed back the emotional lump that started to grow in her throat, even as her mind catalogued the faces of those who were unaccounted for. Those who hadn't made it all the way home. Images of those she'd lost flitted unbidden through her mind.

Kes, her sweet, elfin face and musical voice forever burned into Janeway's mind. Neelix, who'd stayed behind to become a husband and a father, she missed him terribly. And then there were the faces of those who'd died under her command. Dalby, Ballard, Hogan, Stadi ... she could go on and on. She felt each of those losses keenly when they occurred, and she felt them just as keenly today.

The rest of them, Starfleet and civilian alike, were present and accounted for. All except for the one person she really needed at that moment. Chakotay's absence was palpable, and she knew the rest of them felt it almost as strongly as she did. She did her best to push her thoughts of him to the back of her mind, and just hoped that, wherever he was, he would find his way home soon.

She smiled softly as she regarded her people. Such loyalty, such determination. They'd stood by her for nearly eight years. And now, even after they'd been relieved of any responsibility or obligation to her, they came without question when she called them. Never in her wildest imagination could she have dreamed of such a steadfast and devoted crew.

"It's so good to see you all again," she said, a gentle grin tugging at her lips. "I want to thank you for coming here today. I know we're spread out all over the quadrant, from Vulcan to Betazed. And yet, we still find the means and the time to assemble when we need each other. That's more than any captain could ever hope for."

She cleared her throat and forced herself to get to the heart of the matter. "Unfortunately, this is more than a just a social gathering. I have news from Starfleet Command that concerns each and every one of you, and I wanted you to hear it from me personally. You deserve no less.

"As you all know, our return to the Alpha Quadrant hasn't been entirely what we may have expected. The war with the Dominion, among other things, has brought about significant changes in the Federation, and we found the quadrant somewhat different than we left it."

She saw Paris nod and knew he was suppressing a sarcastic chuckle. No doubt they were all feeling similar derision. The wounds from their treatment by Starfleet were deep, and would not heal quickly. And she knew she was about to inflict another one. No matter how delicately she tried to word it, this news was going to sting, and sting terribly.

"Some of the events that have occurred since our return have been difficult to understand, and in some cases, even more difficult to accept. But we've remained strong as a group. That is our greatest advantage - our ability to rely on and derive strength from each other. It is my hope that that will not change now, or ever.

"What I am about to tell you will no doubt come as a shock to you, as it did to me. But you need to know." She looked at the faces of her senior officers, silently cursing Starfleet for putting her in this position, and wishing again for the presence of Chakotay's wise gaze and quiet strength.

But Janeway was a realist, not a dreamer. And she knew that all the agonizing in the world wouldn't change the facts. And all the wishing in the universe wouldn't bring Chakotay to her side. She was going to have to do this on her own. She was, after all, the captain.

She squared her shoulders, and raised her chin defiantly, as if she were about to face the Borg Queen or stare down the barrel of a phaser cannon. What she was about to say required the same amount of courage.

In his seat at the far end of the room, the doctor shot a quick glance at Tuvok. "There goes that chin in the air. Yes, I'd say 'somewhat agitated' certainly describes the captain now, don't you agree, Commander?"

Tuvok merely arched a dark eyebrow, and then returned his attention to Janeway.

Despite the firm set of her jaw and rigid posture, not one person in the room could miss the sad cast that fell like a shadow over Janeway's pretty face. "Starfleet has reached a decision about the ship." To her credit, her voice wavered only slightly as she said the words aloud.

"Voyager is being decommissioned."

A shocked silence permeated the room, as the former crew of the famous starship recoiled from the pouring of salt in their collective wound. The eerie quiet was followed almost immediately by a mixture of sounds that ranged from angry protests and cries of disbelief, to choked sobs and the quiet shedding of tears.

"That's horrible! Why do they want to do that?" said Harry.

Samantha Wildman wiped a tear from her cheek. "Naomi was born on that ship. It's where she took her first steps, said her first words ... "

"I fail to see the logic in disassembling a ship that is still serviceable," said Vorik.

"Yeah," added Celes. "Especially when you consider how many ships we lost in the war. You'd think Starfleet would be taking any space worthy ship they could get their hands on."

"They can't do this!" shouted Ayala. "We have to find a way to stop them!"

The emotional reactions were as varied and unique as her people, and all of them tore at Janeway's battle scarred heart until she found herself struggling to breathe. As the grumbling grew louder and threatened to become mob mentality, she regained her composure and brought her hands up in front of her.

"Let's not lose control here, people," she said, her voice taking on the familiar command tone that had kept this motley group reined in for nearly a decade. "I know this bit of information is ... disconcerting to say the least. But let's not lose perspective."

"Not lose perspective?" said Mortimer Herron. "Captain, they're going to take our ship apart! What is there to keep in perspective here?"

Janeway suppressed a smile. She remembered a time, not too long ago, when Mr. Herron didn't give a damn about any of them, least of all the ship. They'd made remarkable leaps both individually and as a group during their journey. And it was at that moment that Janeway realized ...

That's what mattered.

Voyager, much as Janeway loved her, was only a ship, a man made structure. What made their journey so special, so memorable, was the people. No matter what happened to the ship that carried them across the galaxy, they still had each other. That was all that counted. And that realization infused her with strength, strength she would need to get through the ceremony to come.

"There's much to keep in perspective, Mr. Herron," she said gently. "Look around you. At this very moment, you're surrounded by your former crewmates, by your friends. I remember when you told me that you had no need or desire for friendship. Seems a lifetime ago, doesn't it?"

Herron paused, seeming to think about it for a moment. Then he nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am, it does."

"And yet here you are. A valued member of this group ... of this family." She looked pointedly around the room at the faces of her people. "Because that's what we are. We are a family."

"Guess that makes you the ugly step child, Harry," teased Paris. Tom's offhand levity lightened the mood immediately and Janeway was grateful. Tom Paris had a way of bringing humor into even the most dire situation, and at the moment it was just what this group needed.

"Voyager means a great many things to all of us," said Janeway. "But I think it's important to remember that the times we had on that ship will be with us always." She tapped her hand to her heart. "Right here, inside of us. Nothing can change that. Not even a decommission."

"Well, look at it this way," said Torres. "At least we'll get to fly her one last time."

Sadness once again darkened Janeway's face. This was the part she was dreading the most. "Actually ... we will not be the crew to pilot the ship from Earth to Utopia Planitia."

Paris' humor was already forgotten, and the grumbling began anew. "Wait a minute, folks," said Janeway, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the clamor. "Hear me out."

She waited patiently for them to quiet down, and then she continued. "I know this news is upsetting to all of us. It's hard to imagine why Starfleet would want to disassemble a ship that served us so well. But the bottom line is, none of that matters.

"What matters is that we pull together as a family. It's important that we are united, now more than ever. I was as angry and disappointed when I learned this news as you are right now, and I understand how you all feel. But raging against the wind won't change anything.

"Voyager is just a ship. It was the crew that made her so remarkable. I requested that we be allowed to fly her on her final journey, and that request was denied. I don't pretend to understand the reasons behind it. But as I said, it makes no difference.

"This is going to happen, and nothing we do will change it. However, we've been invited to Utopia Planitia to watch Voyager's approach, and to take part in a small ceremony in her honor. We've been invited to see her out, and I think we owe her that much."

Janeway looked around the room, making eye contact with as many of them as she could. Her voice crackled with emotion as she spoke. "I can't give you orders anymore, all I can do is ask for your cooperation. It means a great deal to me that we pull together on this. I want to see all of you at Utopia Planitia. Let's give Voyager the tribute she deserves.

"Let Voyager go out with as much dignity as she came in with. I can't order you to do this, as I'm no longer your captain. So I'm asking you as your friend."

There was complete silence in the room for what seemed like an eternity as the former crewmates looked from one to another. And then Harry Kim stood up, his broad shoulders pulled back and his head held high. He looked at Janeway pointedly. "With all due respect, ma'am, I don't give a damn what Starfleet says. I think I speak for most everyone when I say that you will always be our captain. You don't need a ship in order to have a loyal crew who loves you, Captain. You have that no matter what."

"He's right," said the doctor, also on his feet. "We don't follow you because you order it. We follow you because we believe in you."

Tom Paris stood beside his friend. "That's true, Captain. We believe in you, and you taught us how to believe in ourselves. If you want us at your side for this, then there's nowhere in the galaxy that we'd rather be."

Janeway watched in absolute surprise as her entire crew rose to their feet. Glasses were raised and the same toast echoed through out the room. "To the captain."

The tears swelled up in Janeway's eyes, and a tidal wave of grateful affection swelled in her chest. The muscle in her jaw twitched slightly as she struggled to refrain from weeping openly in front of her crew. She wasn't sure what she'd done to deserve these people, but she loved each and every one of them dearly.

Her voice was barely above a whisper when lifted her glass and said, "To the family!"

"To the family!" they echoed.

Kathryn Janeway couldn't have been more overcome with warmth as her tearful eyes swept the room. She was, at that moment, more grateful than she'd even been in her life. Her only regret was that Chakotay wasn't there to share in it with her.

The sounds were familiar. He'd heard them hundreds of times before. He knew even before he opened his eyes where he was. His secret place. It was a small clearing near the stream where the water pooled briefly on its lazy path down the riverbed. It was shrouded in trees, making it the perfect hideaway for a young boy who was often fraught with rebellious desires and feelings of unrest.

Chakotay knew this place almost as well as he knew his quarters on Voyager. He knew the curve of each bough of the trees, the texture and colors of the earth beneath his feet, even the rocks. He knew the smells and sounds. They were medicinal to him, like balm for his aching spirit. He knew this spot almost as well as he knew himself for he visited it nearly every time he went on a vision quest. His subconscious usually brought him to this place, so he'd come to expect it.

This time was different, however. Something was missing.

The snake.

Chakotay craned his neck and examined the area patiently, especially the rock in the middle of the sunny spot. But the yellow and green serpent was nowhere to be seen. A vision quest without his animal guide? He wasn't sure it was possible.

Chakotay had always had a somewhat irrational fear of slithering reptiles, snakes in particular. He'd been disappointed on his first trip to the habak to meet his spirit guide.

While Chakotay knew that one's animal guide is simply a spiritual advisor, and not a reflection of the individual, he'd still expected to find a powerful animal waiting to greet him. A sinewy predator perhaps, like a cheetah or even a lion. Or, at the very least, a graceful animal like a buck or even a spider. But a snake? The very thought sent a chill up his spine.

But, to his own surprise, Chakotay had grown incredibly fond of his slinking animal guide. The snake had proven to be an invaluable guide for Chakotay's contrary soul. She knew exactly when to push him, and when to allow him to come along in his own time. And now that she wasn't slithering around his feet, he found he missed her.

He found himself growing angry. He hadn't come all this way to be alone on his journey. Now, maybe more than ever, he needed her counsel, or at the very least her listening ear. And she was nowhere to be found.

"Hello?" he called.

Silence was his only answer.

"Where are you?" He moved away from his secret hideaway and made his way through the forest trees as he continued to call for his spirit guide. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

He saw no one. No sign of the snake, or of any other animals for that matter. He wrinkled his brow in confusion. It made no sense. He turned to head back to the clearing - and then he smelled something. He sniffed deeply and smelled it again. A scent that didn't belong in the forest. A scent not made by nature alone.

And then he saw it. A thin line rising above the trees. Smoke.

He moved toward it with the speed and grace of a jungle cat, pushing trees and greenery out of his path as he went, until finally - huffing and puffing - he came to the source. But despite the rising smoke, there was no roaring forest fire.

It was a small campfire, crackling and burning in a small man made fire pit surrounded by carefully arranged rocks. And there, sitting on an overturned log warming his hands by the fire, was a man.

He was older than Chakotay, his once raven hair streaked with gray. His dark eyes were fixed firmly on the glowing embers before him, and he did not look up as this uninvited guest came barreling into his territory. His face was wise and kind, and above his left eye he wore the tribal tattoo of the Sky Spirits. It was a face Chakotay knew well.

Chakotay swallowed hard, willing his voice not to crack. "Father?"

Kolopak looked up from the fire, an expression of ever-lasting patience on his shadowed face. "You're out of breath, Chakotay. What were you running from?"

"I was running to find the source of the fire."

Kolopak nodded as if that was the answer he was expecting. "That could be dangerous. Perhaps you don't remember the ways of the tribe. You should never approach a raging fire alone. But then, you were never one for following rules."

Chakotay's head was spinning. This wasn't the first time he'd seen his father in a vision quest. But it was the first time in many years, and he found it somewhat overwhelming. His feet seemed to be frozen in place, his legs unwilling to move.

"I called out," he said. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you."

Chakotay raised his hands in frustration. "Then why didn't you answer?"

Kolopak was completely unruffled by his son's aggravation. "Because you weren't calling for me." He smiled ever so slightly. "Were you?"

"I didn't know you were here. How could I call for you?"

Kolopak slid over, making room for Chakotay on the log. "You're troubled. Come sit with me, my son, and tell me what's got you so distressed."

Chakotay took the offered seat without hesitation. He could think of nothing he wanted more at that moment than to sit next to his father by the fire. "I've returned to Trebus, father."

Kolopak's eyebrows rose. "Why, Chakotay?"

He shrugged. "The way my people perished, it haunts me still. I thought that maybe if I returned here - "

"Ah," said Kolopak. "You've come to say goodbye. You thought that if you came to the place where it occurred, you could put your ghosts to rest."

"Yes."

He patted his son's leg affectionately. "Your intentions are as pure as your heart. Unfortunately, they are also as misguided."

Chakotay shook his head. "I don't understand."

Kolopak stoked the fire as he spoke. "Trebis is just a place, Chakotay."

"It was a place you loved. You worshiped the land, even thought of it as Holy. How can you say it's just a place?"

"No." Kolopak shook his gray head, but did not take his eyes off the fire. "I gave thanks to the land. That's not the same thing."

Chakotay shook his head. Even now some of his father's beliefs eluded him. "What did you mean when you said my intentions are misguided?"

"You seek to put an end to the nightmares, to the screaming inside your mind, yes?"

"Yes, I still haven't found peace. Not completely. I need closure."

"No, my son. You need absolution."

Chakotay regarded his father quizzically. "Absolution?"

"Yes, it's forgiveness you seek, not resolution."

"Forgiveness for what?"

Kolopak's dark eyes wandered over Chakotay's face, a searching gaze that penetrated into his very soul. "You must face your guilt, Chakotay. You carry remorse and hatred in your heart. You must let it go. Only then will the demons stop screaming."

"I harbor hatred for no one, father."

The older man shook his head sadly. "It is a terrible thing to lie to others. But it's unforgivable to lie to yourself." He looked sorrowfully at his son. "It is human nature to hate those who've brought pain upon you. But you must work through it, face it and then let it go. If you refuse to acknowledge it, and blindly let it grow in your heart, it soon takes over."

Kolopak rose to his feet and put another log on the fire. "You're an old spirit, Chakotay. You've seen much in your life, more than most souls see in a dozen life cycles. You're very wise beneath all your discontent. You must look past your self-blame. It's time for you to fulfill your potential."

Now Chakotay's brow furrowed. "My potential? What exactly is my potential?"

"You wear your guilt around your neck like an anchor. It holds you back. It keeps you from seeking that which your heart desires most because you're too rooted in the past."

"I have good reason to feel guilty, father," Chakotay said, his voice rising slightly despite his efforts to contain his emotions. "The last time I saw you alive, I rejected everything you stood for. I swore not to be like you, and I left with anger inside me."

"Yes," said his father calmly. "And you learned from that, didn't you? You became a better man for the lessons you learned from that day, and you stood firm for what you believed in."

"No," he shouted, rising to his feet. "I was exactly what you always said I was. I was a contrary! I didn't rise against you and the tribe because of what I believed in. I did it to be rebellious, to prove I could. I wanted to be different from you!"

"All young people want that, Chakotay."

"Do all young people walk away from their families?" He began to pace before the fire as his emotions collided inside his head. "I walked away, father! And then I never saw you again. I should've been here. I should've protected you! All of you!"

"No!" Kolopak's timbre rose in proportion to his son's. "It was a horrible thing, but it was our time. You couldn't have protected us from the Cardassians, even if you'd been here."

"Then I should have died with you!"

"What purpose would that have served? You're here because you have work to do, my son. Your job in this life is not yet complete."

Chakotay stopped pacing and faced his father. "What do you mean?"

"There are people who need you, depend on you." Kolopak took his son gently by the shoulders. "You mean a great deal to someone, Chakotay. Someone who needs you far more than the tribe ever did. She's among the living, and so are you. You must be there for her, embrace life with her."

Chakotay knew immediately who his father was referring to. He was suddenly awash with an immense sense of longing, and knew instantly that the feelings were not his own. He was somehow sensing her emotions, and they threatened to overwhelm him. Her name came unbidden to his lips. "Kathryn?"

His father shook him gently, bringing his attention back to the moment. "Trebis is dead, Chakotay. And so am I. Let your guilt go. Let us go. You can't change what happened. You can only go on with your life, and remember that we are with you always in spirit. We don't want your guilt, Chakotay. We want only your happiness.

"There is nothing left for you on this world. It's time for you to say goodbye and never return. It was not your fault. Leave this place, and leave your remorse behind as you go."

Chakotay embraced the man who'd given him life, not once, but twice. "Thank you, father."

Kolopak patted him firmly on the back. "Go to her, my son. She needs you at her side. You can do nothing for us. But you can do everything for her."

Chakotay's eyes snapped open, and the images of the fire and his father vanished. He found himself seated in the same spot on the dust and ash of Trebus, his medicine bundle still unfolded before him.

Already, the details of his journey were beginning to fade. His father's message, however, he remembered with perfect clarity. He was amazed to find that his guilt was already receding. In its place was one persistent thought. Kathryn needs me. At that moment, nothing else mattered.

He scooped up his medicine bundle and headed for the shuttle. He stopped before opening the hatch and took one last look around. He knew he would not return to this world, the place of death for his people. There was no need to come back. They were no longer there. He carried them with him in his heart.

He smiled softly to himself as he slipped into the shuttle. "Goodbye, father," he whispered. And then he paused for a moment to listen carefully. The demons were no longer screaming.

Janeway stepped off the shuttlecraft, trepidation weighing heavily on her heart. She was not looking forward to the moments that lie ahead. She'd faced any number of challenges over the

past decade. But somehow, she knew this one would be more difficult than anything that preceded it.

Lost in her own thoughts, she didn't see the familiar figure that stood waiting for her as she disembarked. Consequently, she stared a bit when he spoke.

"Captain Janeway, welcome to Utopia Planitia. I'll be pleased to be your personal escort."

She looked up into the handsome face of Harry Kim. A huge smile spread across her face at the sight of him. Kathryn Janeway cared deeply for every single member of her crew. But she'd always had a certain soft spot for Harry. And a friendly face was a welcome sight, given the circumstances.

"Hello, Lieutenant," she grinned. "Delightful to see you again. Do you escort every high ranking officer, or am I just special?"

"The word special doesn't do you justice, ma'am." He offered her his arm and led her down the corridor.

"Well, thank you. But flattery really isn't necessary. I'm not your boss anymore, Harry."

"True," he said. "But I wouldn't waste time on flattery with you anyway. It didn't even work when you were my boss."

She chuckled and straightened his collar playfully. "That's because you didn't wear this new dress uniform on the ship. If you had, I may have been forced to review my feelings about flattery. You look rather handsome, Mr. Kim."

Harry beamed like a schoolboy. "Thank you, Captain. You wear the new uniform pretty well yourself. But actually, much as I love flattering the captain, I'm here in an official capacity."

Janeway raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Harry stopped walking and regarded Janeway with a Cheshire cat smile. "This is my new assignment."

"Here, at Utopia Planitia?" Janeway said with surprise.

Harry nodded, his dark hair falling onto his forehead. "That's right. I'm going to be working on the new prototype."

Now Janeway was the one grinning. Ever the scientist, the very prospect piqued her curiosity. "Is that so?" She tapped him teasingly on the chest, a mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes. "Any chance you'd give your favorite captain a sneak peak?"

"Absolutely. I knew you'd have it no other way." He gestured to the starboard corridor. "Right this way."

The two chatted amicably as they journeyed to down the corridor, and Janeway found she was taking great comfort in Harry's presence. She made a mental note to thank him for his kindness before the day was through.

Engrossed in conversation, Janeway didn't even notice the figure approaching as they rounded a corner. She smacked head long into the backside of a tall woman, sending them both tumbling to the floor. Janeway let out a very uncaptain-like Umph.

"I'm sorry," Janeway grunted as Harry pulled her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

The blonde woman stood and turned to face them, a look of silent indignation on her face. "I am undamaged."

"Seven?" Janeway and Harry said in unison.

She nodded regally. "Captain, Lieutenant. It is gratifying to see you both again."

"It's good to see you, too," said Harry.

Janeway rested a hand on Seven's shoulder. "I apologize for knocking you over, Seven. I didn't even see you."

"Apology accepted."

Janeway smiled softly at the young woman, thoughts of her recent ordeal playing through her mind. She'd endured such unspeakable hatred, the very thought caused Janeway's heart to ache. "I've been meaning to contact you. You've been through a great deal since our return to the Alpha Quadrant. How are you doing?"

Seven averted her eyes only briefly. She possessed every ounce of her customary strength and emotional detachment as she said, "I am ... recovering efficiently."

"I'm glad to hear it," answered Janeway.

Harry watched Seven quietly during the exchange. He was amazed at how balanced and in control she seemed, especially after everything that had happened to her. He remembered with painful clarity the uncharacteristic vulnerability on Seven's ashen face as he released her from her restraints. It was a striking contrast to the strong, apparently centered woman who stood before him now.

He marveled at her resiliency. But at the same time, he wondered how much of it was an act merely for their benefit. Seven's Borg upbringing had taught her nothing of Human emotion, and Harry knew it was a concept that she struggled with still.

He touched her lightly on the elbow. "I'm glad to see you looking well. But I hope you know that if you need anything, anything at all, you can come to me."

She regarded him with something akin to fondness for a brief moment, and then nodded in acknowledgement. "I wanted to thank you, Lieutenant, for your assistance with my ... situation. Your help was greatly appreciated. I shall not forget your kindness, or your discretion."

Harry failed to suppress a boyish grin. That was high praise coming from Seven. "My pleasure. For once, it was Buster Kincaid to the rescue."

To Harry's surprise, Seven actually smiled slightly. "What would Captain Proton say?"

Janeway watched the interplay between her two former crewmen with a quizzical interest, but said nothing. She was happy to see that Seven felt a certain closeness with her crewmates. Sometimes all a person needed was one true friend, and the world was a tolerable place.

"We're going to take a peek at the new prototype," said Harry. "Care to join us?"

Seven seemed to consider the offer for a moment. Then she nodded. "I will accompany you."

It was a short walk to the bay containing the prototype ship. Even in its early stages, Janeway thought it was beautiful. Though she doubted any ship, no matter how fancy, could ever rival her Voyager. Each battle scar only made her more beautiful.

Ever since she was a small child she'd been seduced by the sleek lines of a Starfleet ship. The shining silver hull plates, the glowing blue nacelles standing proudly on each side, they were all very aesthetically pleasing. But the Intrepid Class ship - it was just incomparable to anything else. It was unique in its design and she'd been honored to command it.

Seven of Nine listened as Harry enthusiastically gave them a rundown of the finer points of this new vessel. He was as animated as they'd ever seen him as he extolled the ship's virtues to his friends, and Seven found herself wondering what it would be like to take such pride in one's work, to become so enlivened by mere involvement in a task.

Janeway only listened with half an ear, her eyes traveling curiously and carefully over the embryonic starship. She watched as a team of engineers and technicians assembled a large object and began to install it in the area that would eventually be engineering.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked at it. She recognized the equipment immediately. She was sure of it.

It was Borg transwarp technology.

Commander Tuvok stood by the large window on the observation deck and watched as his former crewmates filtered in. They came in groups, most of them accompanied by family members or friends. He himself arrived with T'Pol at his side. It wasn't that he needed her there for emotional support, as was the case with his Human cohorts. After all, she'd served as ship's counselor for a time, so her presence was simply logical.

Tuvok noted the melancholy air that permeated the room and he knew his associates were grieving over the impending decommission of Voyager. There was a time when he could not understand the Human tendency to feel a sense of devotion, even love, for an inanimate object. Captain Janeway's fidelity to her ship was, at one time, quite perplexing to him.

However, during the final months of his tenure on Voyager, he'd become ... accustomed to the distinct sounds and sights aboard the ship. Now that they were no longer a part of his daily life, he found he yearned for them.

He understood why his colleagues felt downtrodden today. Even if he would never admit it aloud, he shared in their sadness ... as much as a Vulcan could anyway.

He acknowledged the approaching form of Tom Paris with a nod, and then nodded yet again as he saw B'Elanna Torres following behind. She held their infant daughter in her arms, and Tuvok silently noted how strongly the girl resembled her mother.

"Hey, Tuvok," said Tom. He flashed a charming smile at Tuvok's attractive wife. "T'Pol, it's good to see you again."

The Vulcan woman nodded regally. "And you."

B'Elanna shifted Miral from one hip to the other and nodded toward a group of young female crewmen from stellar cartography. They were hugging each other and weeping, almost as if they were attending a funeral service.

"Some people are taking this awfully hard, don't you think?" she said.

"Yeah," Paris shrugged. "But it's understandable. That ship was all we had for eight years. Makes sense that some people would have a hard time letting go."

"Nonetheless," intoned Tuvok, "They must. They have no choice in the matter."

Tom regarded Tuvok curiously. "This must all seem pretty illogical to you, huh, Tuvok? All this grieving for a silly starship? Must seem pretty ridiculous to someone who doesn't experience emotion."

"On the contrary," he replied evenly. "Vulcans are disciplined. We learn at a very young age to control our emotions. We suppress them, however, that doesn't mean we do not experience them on some level. Do not mistake control for absence, Mr. Paris. I am not immune to the effects of these events."

B'Elanna leaned in close to her husband and whispered in his ear. "Guess he told you."

Tom, looking appropriately contrite, merely said, "Guess I didn't realize - "

"Most off-worlders don't, Mr. Paris," said T'Pol.

"Ah, look," said B'Elanna. "There's the captain." She nodded to Janeway, who was circling the room, greeting each of them individually as she always did at ship's functions. Except Chakotay normally accompanied her, today she was alone.

B'Elanna flashed a friendly smile at the Vulcan couple and then kissed Miral's chubby hand. "Come on, sweetheart. Let's go see Captain Janeway. Something tells me she wants to pinch your cheeks."

Torres made her way through the rapidly growing crowd, smiling and responding to the numerous greetings and inquires about Miral's growth from various crewmembers. When she finally reached Janeway, she found her conversing genially with the Doctor.

The EMH beamed more than a hologram ought when he caught sight of B'Elanna and Miral coming through the crowd. "And there is my little God-daughter now." He held out his arms to receive the little girl, and B'Elanna happily obliged. Miral seemed to get heavier every day, and her aching arms welcomed the reprieve.

"Hello, B'Elanna," said Janeway. "Where's your other half?"

B'Elanna smirked. "Over there discussing emotions with Tuvok."

Janeway's brow furrowed. "Brave man."

"You know what they say," said the EMH. "There's a fine line between being brave and just being a fool."

"Yeah," chuckled Torres. "And he walks that line every day."

Miral giggled joyfully as the Doctor tickled her tummy. Janeway supposed that most people would find the sight of a hologram cuddling a baby a bit odd. But to her, it was the most natural thing in the world. This hologram was, after all, sentient and capable of great love and emotion. I think, therefore I am.

"Would you mind keeping an eye on her for a minute, Doc? I'd like to speak to the captain."

The Doctor grinned ridiculously at the baby, never taking his eyes off her. "Not at all. We'll be just fine, won't we, Miral? Yes, we will."

B'Elanna had the urge to make some sarcastic remark about how a baby can instantly reduce a room of mature adults into a gibbering group of circus clowns, but she knew that she fit rather nicely into that category herself, and so she resisted. Instead, she simply thanked him and then took Janeway by the arm and led her away.

"Still no word from Chakotay?" she asked.

"Not a peep," Janeway replied. "I don't even know if he got my messages."

B'Elanna shook her head sadly. "He's going to kick himself for missing this. I know him well enough to say that he would definitely want to be here."

"Yes," said Janeway. "I agree. And I know I would certainly feel better if he were here. His presence is a comfort to the crew."

B'Elanna eyed her former captain carefully. Was that longing she saw in Janeway's face? She almost looked like she was pining for him. Could it be? "I think his presence is a comfort to the captain as well," she ventured.

Janeway said nothing. She simply rested a hand on B'Elanna's shoulder and smiled sadly. But B'Elanna wasn't ready to let it go just yet. "What's going on between you two, Captain?"

Janeway tried to school her features into a neutral expression and opened her mouth to formulate some noncommittal answer. Fortunately for her, they were interrupted before she got the chance to speak.

Janeway felt a persistent tugging on the elbow of her uniform at the same moment she heard the soft voice. "Captain?"

She looked down into the preteen face of Naomi Wildman. Janeway's eyes widened as she regarded the girl who'd once cuddled on her lap and demanded to hear story after story about space and commanding a starship. She seemed to mature every day, thanks to her K'tarian genes.

Her once round and childish face had begun to slim down, drawing more attention to her high cheekbones and large, luminous eyes. Her long, pale red hair was curled attractively around her face, giving her a less juvenile appearance. She was growing into a beautiful woman right before their eyes.

"Hello, Naomi," Janeway beamed, pulling the girl into an embrace. "You look so pretty today!"

"Thank you," Naomi said, smiling at the compliment from her biggest role model.

B'Elanna looked around expectantly. "Where's your mother?"

Naomi pointed toward the large windows. "She's over there with Susan Nicolletti. She's been crying a lot. I guess she's taking this whole thing pretty hard."

Janeway leaned down, bringing her face closer to Naomi's. "And what about you? How are you taking it?"

Naomi shrugged, trying her best to appear nonchalant about the whole thing. But her round eyes watered up instantly despite herself. "I'm okay. It's just that ... Voyager was the only home I knew for most of my life. It's weird to think that I won't be able to go back there again sometime." Her voice cracked as the tears betrayed her and slipped down her cheeks. "I'm really going to miss it, that's all."

Janeway pulled the girl into her arms a second time, her own eyes flooding with tears. "We all are, Naomi. We all are."

On the far side of the observation deck, Icheb stood alone, scanning the crowd. Finally he spotted his target. Seven of Nine was standing near the door, her eyes skimming the crowd casually. He made his way through the mass of Voyager kin.

"Seven," he said in greeting.

She nodded in response. "It is pleasant to see you, Icheb."

"It's good to see you as well. How are you?"

"I am in good health," she said. "And you? How are your studies progressing at Starfleet Academy?"

Being a former Borg drone, Seven was perfectly capable of multi-tasking. It was for that reason that she was able to listen to Icheb's report on his scholastic activities, comprehending every single word, while she also observed the crowd.

She nodded in the appropriate places as Icheb spoke. But her attention was primarily focused on two individuals on the other side of the beverage table. She studied them carefully. She didn't recognize them as either members of the Voyager crew or associates thereof. Who were they?

They were both male, apparently Human. They wore civilian clothing rather than Starfleet uniforms, and then seemed to slink around the room, almost lurking in the shadows yet acting incredibly casual at the same time. Somehow, she sensed they didn't belong here, but she found their presence more curious than threatening.

She thought about informing Captain Janeway, but then dismissed her suspicions. Her recent ordeal was apparently making her overly wary. They were probably just a crewman's family members or friends whom she hadn't met yet, so she dismissed them as irrelevant and returned her focus to Icheb.

After about 30 minutes of hugging, laughing, and even crying with her former crew and their families, a young ensign informed Janeway that Voyager would be arriving soon, and that if she wished to make any formal remarks, now would be the time.

She stood in the center of the large observation windows and faced the crowd. In the time-honored tradition for quieting a room, Janeway tapped her glass lightly with a spoon. "If I could have your attention, please ... "

The room grew quiet as everyone settled into place and turned their attention to the captain. She smiled affectionately at them and tucked a stray lock of auburn hair behind her ear.

She skimmed the room one more time, hoping against hope to catch sight of her former first officer. Oh, Chakotay! You're missing it. Where are you? Time was up. She'd just have to do it without him.

"Eight years ago, many of you boarded a new ship for a two week mission into the Bad Lands. We had no idea that it would be nearly a decade before we set foot in the Alpha Quadrant again."

She smiled at B'Elanna. "Nor did we know that the very people we were sent to apprehend would become part of our crew, and part of our lives."

Her gaze shifted to Seven of Nine. "We picked up other new crewmembers along the way and intergraded them into our patchwork quilt family and they too became part of our lives."

"Voyager grew to be much more than just a starship. She became a community. She became our home. Friends were made, love was found, and new lives were born. We said goodbye to old friends, and welcomed new ones. We saw things that no one from our home worlds had ever seen before, and met countless new species. And all the while, we were learning about ourselves, about our immense capabilities and talents."

"Each and every one of you showed more courage than I could have imagined. And you never gave up, no matter how grim things looked sometimes. You persevered, and you stood together. You never stopped believing that we'd make it home, not even when your doubts threatened to overwhelm you."

Janeway wiped a tear from her eye and tried to swallow the lump that was growing in her throat. "I'd always believed that part of my job as a captain was to guide my crew, to teach and instruct them. But until our journey on Voyager, I had no idea that part of my job was to learn from my crew as well.

"I watched as you put your differences and prejudices aside and learned to work together. You turned animosity into efficiency, and hatred into friendship. Most people only speak of tolerance and compassion, but you lived it, made it into something real.

"And in the process, you taught me about devotion and loyalty. And you taught me that a Starfleet captain who desires to learn about nobility and unity need look no further than the faces of her own crew.

"We're here to say goodbye to Voyager today. But I hope you'll all always remember that the incredible moments we had along our journey were not a result of the ship. They were a result of the incredible people who brought her to life.

"Our careers and families are taking us in a multitude of directions, and we no longer see each other every day. But as you go about your new lives, please take this knowledge with you.

"You were the most incredible crew any captain could ever hope for, and I am a better person for knowing you. When you leave here today, you do so with my admiration, and my thanks."

Janeway blinked back her tears and lifted her glass. "May we never forget."

The room resounded with thunderous applause, and many of the senior officers rushed forward to embrace the captain that had brought them home. Around the room, people were embracing, some chocking back their tears, and others weeping openly.

An unfamiliar voice wafted through the overhead comm system. "May I have your attention, please. If you'll direct your attention to the observation windows located on the far wall, the USS Voyager is on approach and will be docking momentarily."

Janeway's heart dropped into her boots. The moment was upon them, and she found that her hands were trembling despite her attempts to control them.

She turned to the window just in time to see Voyager's slow approach to the docking bay. The battered but beautiful starship was still sleek and elegant, despite all she'd been through and all she'd seen, and she moved with her customary grace as she eased into the bay.

A tear escaped Janeway's eye and rolled freely down her cheek, but she didn't care. That ship had kept them alive for the past eight years. At the very least, she'd earned a tear or two from her captain.

She felt a supportive hand on the small of her back, and turned to see the tearful face of Tom Paris. She knew his pain must be as intense as her own, and wondered if he was, at that very moment, resenting the unknown pilot who was tapping his console at the helm and working the controls that Paris knew like no other pilot ever could.

But she saw no bitterness in Tom's handsome face. Only quiet sadness and even a bit of reverence for the ship that had whisked him away from his old ghosts and given him a new life.

Janeway was about to lean into Tom's embrace and allow herself that one small comfort when she felt a sudden urge to turn toward the door. It was agonizing to tear her eyes from the image of her ship, but she was compelled to turn around.

She spun on her heel and faced the door just in time to see a familiar figure burst through the corridor. Janeway actually rubbed her eyes, convinced they were playing tricks on her. But when she opened them, she saw the figure again.

Chakotay stood in the doorway, panting as if he'd been running, one hand holding onto the doorframe as he braced himself.

Janeway's jaw dropped to the deck. She felt the tears once again flood her eyes and blur her vision. "Chakotay," she whispered.

"I'll be damned," said Tom beside her.

Chakotay's dark eyes skimmed the room frantically, searching for Kathryn in the crowd. And then he spotted her. Their eyes locked for a brief moment, and everything in the room seemed to stand still.

Janeway's emotions collided inside her head, and she found it difficult to breathe. At that moment, she knew nothing of propriety or appearances. She cared nothing about making a scene or attracting attention. She knew only that Chakotay had found his way home just when she needed him the most.

For the first time in years, Kathryn Janeway followed her heart. She ran toward the door, toward Chakotay. He opened his arms to her. There lay comfort. There lay solace.

Without thought or regard for anyone or anything, Kathryn threw herself into Chakotay's embrace. He wrapped his strong arms around her and held her tightly against his chest. She wrapped her arms around his neck and he buried his face in her hair. "I'm here, Kathryn," he whispered. "I'm here."

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