



Episode 8-4 - Fair-Weather Friends

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The Astrometrics lab was dimly lit and nearly deserted in the quiet hours of Voyager's artificial night. The banks of consoles were inactive but the room still had a hushed tense air permeating through it. Seven of Nine stood in front of the only activated console. It displayed scrolling data moving too fast for the human eye to process. Seven's optical implant absorbed the knowledge swiftly. She was once again reviewing the charts for the area of space surrounding the transwarp corridor. Her own assimilated knowledge of the hub and its corridors was unable to shed any light on their whereabouts. Difficult as she found it to comprehend, they were in an area of space that was not known to the Borg.

Seven did not like failure. And she keenly felt the failure of her attempts to identify their location. Coming as it did, swiftly on the heels of the dissolution of her relationship with Commander Chakotay, Seven felt an unusual impulse to prove

herself to her crewmates.

She halted the display, staring intently at an anomalous reading in the lines of calculations. The readings showed a discrepancy that was too minute to be noticed under normal conditions. Now, with the uncertainty of their position sharpening her awareness, the discrepancy took on a new meaning. Voyager had escaped the transwarp corridor not only through the visible rift, but also through the merest fracture in the time-space continuum. The dissolving and highly unstable transwarp network had widened the rift sufficiently for the two ships to slip through and had closed behind them as the network shifted again. The theory fit neatly with Icheb's findings about the static nature of the galaxy they were in, and Janeway's musings on a bubble universe.

Seven's vision blurred momentarily, the wavering fog of a tired and newly emotional mind overriding the control of her implants. It had been fifty-seven hours since her last regeneration cycle, too long for efficient functioning, but she was unwilling to let the data slip through her fingers.

She activated her communicator. "Seven of Nine to Ensign Kim."

She waited for a moment before she repeated the summons. A groggy voice answered her, thick with sleep. "Seven, what do you want? It's 0300 hours. I was asleep..." The voice ended on an upward wail.

"I require your assistance in Astrometrics."

"Can't it wait?" The voice at the other end of the communicator became a distant mumble. "My shift starts in four hours."

"I would prefer you to come now. I must regenerate and cannot wait for another four hours. I wish to show you my findings." Seven waited for the response.

"Uh... okay." Harry didn't sound too excited. There was the rustle of bedclothes, then Harry again, sounding a little more alert. "Give me five minutes. Kim out."

Four minutes and twenty-three seconds later Harry entered the lab. His uniform was rumpled and his hair was unkempt, but at least he appeared reasonably alert.

"Right, Seven. Tell me what has you dragging me out of bed when normal people are asleep." He peered at her a bit more closely. "You don't look so good either. Are you all right?"

"I will... suffice." Seven avoided looking directly at Harry, concentrating instead on the movements of her fingers on the console. "Pay close attention. These readings are navigational readings taken in the transwarp corridor when it started to destabilize. Voyager was flung out of the corridor during a shifting of the structure that opened a momentary rift out of normal space. I believe that we were pulled through it when we attempted to exit the visible gap. Observe these readings here. This represents the most accurate data we have on the transwarp corridor. The discrepancy between these two readings suggests the rift.

Harry squinted at the screen. "And if you correlate the readings from our sensors with the readings from the projected navigational charts, it would have been exactly as we got to this point that we took a wrong turn."

"Correct. Except that we didn't mean to exit this way; it was just a random factor in the rift that allowed us to pass through just as we were seeking an exit from the corridor."

Harry ran a hand through his spiky hair, rearranging it even further. "So, where are we?"

"I am unsure. But now that we have a starting point you and I might be able to ascertain our location. But if you factor in Icheb's findings on the static nature of this area we are in, it reinforces the theory that we are somehow outside of normal space."

"So we are nowhere. We just have to find a way back to somewhere." Harry sighed again. "Where is Icheb?"

"I sent him to get some rest. He was excessively fatigued."

"Lucky Icheb." Harry's mutter didn't pass unnoticed.

They worked in silence. Seven had never seen the need for polite banter, especially when there was work to be done.

An hour later, Harry sat heavily down in the chair. "All these calculations and we are no nearer to finding the one thing that does matter - a way out. The rift closed behind us; we haven't seen anything resembling another one since we've been here. We might as well be back in the Delta Quadrant for all the good that we've done tonight." He buried his head in his hands. "At times like these, Seven, I really wonder what is the point to all of this."

"We will find a way out. We got in, so it must be possible to leave as well."

"Yeah, maybe. But it's the irony of it all that upsets me the most. I could almost taste my mom's kimchi. And now we're worse off than we were in the Delta Quadrant. At least there we knew where we were and had communication with our loved ones."

Seven studied him. "You miss your family." It was a statement, not a question.

Harry looked up. "Of course. Seven, one day you will find someone you will miss if you are not able to be with them or even communicate with them. Someone who you care about so much that you are unhappy because you know they are worried about you."

"It is possible. I am finding this to be an unlikely scenario." Brief thoughts of Commander Chakotay passed through her mind. She was not 'missing him'; not in the way that Harry was describing. Her foremost feeling around the Commander now was discomfort. She quite simply was ill at ease in his presence. She knew he would not bother her while she worked, so she just had to avoid the neutral areas of the ship for a while longer. She could avoid most of them almost indefinitely, but the cargo bay was no longer a place of retreat for her.

There was another reason too that she was avoiding the cargo bay. It was the one place on the ship that she was most often alone. The crew seldom came there; the Captain, Icheb, Naomi and recently Chakotay were her most frequent visitors and they came rarely. Seven did not want to be alone right now. Without the distractions of her work or the crew, the terror she had experienced when she was a Cardassian prisoner resurfaced. She was not used to feeling fear and she lacked the emotional control and mental disciplines that most people develop to contain it. The Doctor had offered to help her deal with it, but she didn't know where to begin. Once again, she wished that the Doctor was able to reverse the procedure he had performed on her cortical node. She was uneasy at not being in control of herself. Emotions, she was fast learning, were unpredictable and could not be ordered or contained.

She was just so tired. She closed her eyes briefly and immediately the persistent sound of dripping water echoed in her head. She swayed slightly.

"Seven?" Harry took her arm and led her over to a chair. "Sit down. How long have you been working?"

"Thirty-two hours and eleven minutes."

"That's long enough. And you've only been back on board after... being on the Cardassian ship for a few days." Harry looked worriedly at the former drone. "Seven, I know you cope with most things in your own way, but being held prisoner must have

rattled even you." He hesitated briefly, then rushed on, "if I can help in any way... if you just need a friend to talk to, then I'd like to help."

"Thank you. The Doctor has offered his assistance too. But I will deal with this myself. In time, I believe that I will..." Seven's voice faded to a whisper.

Harry put his hand reassuringly on her shoulder. "The bad memories will gradually fade. You will forget."

Seven's eyes opened wide. "I'm not sure that I can, Ensign. I am finding it difficult to be alone with my thoughts." The insidious sound of dripping water filled her ears again, so real that she shook her head to clear them.

She was silent for a moment. "The Cardassian ship. It was not a recent design."

It was a statement, not a question, but Harry answered anyway. "No. It was a galor class vessel, commissioned approximately fifteen years ago. But they maintain they have only been in this area of space for a few months." Harry frowned. "It doesn't add up."

"Icheb postulates that this region is static in nature. It is possible that time is similarly static."

"Great." Harry sat down again and put his head in his hands. "So if or when we do get out, we're going to find everyone we know and love is dead from old age."

"Not necessarily true, Ensign. But it would explain why the Cardassians are adamant that only a few months have passed."

Harry's stomach gave a sudden growl. "That settles it; we've done enough. We'll go to the mess hall for an early breakfast. And we'll go to Captain Janeway after you have regenerated. A few hours won't make much difference. After we've eaten, if you like I'll escort you to the cargo bay and wait until your regeneration cycle has started. So that you won't be alone."

"Thank you, Ensign. That is very kind of you." She accepted his offered arm and they left for the mess hall.

Voyager was proceeding at a steady warp 2 towards the star cluster identified as being similar to the markings Chakotay had found on the away mission. The assembled senior staff was quiet as Seven presented her and Harry's findings. Chakotay listened intently, Seven as he covertly regarded the rest of the staff. Although a part of him was despairing at their newly discovered predicament, he was already trying to think of ways around the situation. The bubble universe theory, although unproven, made sufficient sense that no one was discounting it. He regarded Kathryn cautiously. She was strangely quiet with none of the gusto and determination that normally characterized her during these meetings. She sat unmoving in her chair, her face a mask. Unreadable and unreachable. Chakotay felt the familiar twinge of anger at her actions deep in his gut. Seven years working together and the wagons were still circling around the old issue of trust.

"Do it," she was saying, and Chakotay brought himself abruptly back to the meeting.

B'Elanna nodded. "I can divert power to enhance the shield generator," she was saying. "If the dilithium we picked up on the last away mission can be sufficiently refined in time, then we will have sufficient energy to power the ship for at least a month."

"Barring crises," interjected Tom.

"Count on it lasting a week then," muttered Harry, not quietly enough. Chakotay sent him a warning glance. Not here, Harry, please, it said. Harry subsided.

"Captain, if I could have extra personnel to work on the shield grid, and all available power re-routed there, it would help us get the grid functioning back at peak capacity sooner. And I want to shut down the holodecks until we've isolated the power drain. The extra power can then be re-routed to Engineering."

Janeway waved a hand at her. "Do it," she said. Her eyes drifted back to the viewport and her face was half-hidden by the battered coffee mug that she favored.

Seven's explanation of where they were - or where they weren't - Chakotay amended himself, had rattled a lot of people. He had been hoping for something more concrete than this. Seven, Icheb, and Harry had spent all of their available time over the past few days working on their position but it seemed that they were still a long way from certain. With a start, he realized that he had barely seen Seven recently. He examined his feelings closely, surprised to find that the knowledge didn't bring him the stab of grief that he expected. Even his anxiety about her condition when she was returned to Voyager from the

Cardassian ship was merely the concern he would feel for any crew member who had undergone a difficult experience. He felt a twinge of shame. He should have been there to support her when she returned. He wondered, not for the first time if Kathryn was right - would he have gone off on a hair-brained scheme to rescue her had he known? He just didn't know. Chakotay sighed to himself and pushed his personal thoughts to one side and concentrated once again on the meeting.

Tom was talking, asking if the Captain wished to proceed on the course set to the distant star cluster.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Paris? Would you repeat that please?" Kathryn seemed as distracted as he was.

Tom repeated his request. "I asked if we are maintaining our current course, Captain."

"Yes, no change necessary there, Mr. Paris. Just try to keep us away from the Sernaix until we are ready to meet with them again on our terms."

"I require all currently unassigned personnel to be made available for the Astrometrics lab." Seven spoke up coolly. "Even the least able will be useful to run basic calculations under close supervision."

"Do it." Janeway was definitely preoccupied.

"Captain..." B'Elanna spoke up, clearly perturbed at having staff snatched away from her.

"Dismissed." Janeway stood. "Lieutenant, whatever you need to say can wait until next time." She turned away towards the viewport, coffee in hand.

B'Elanna hesitated, clearly wanting to say more, but sensing the undercurrents, she left with Tom. Chakotay waited until all the staff had left. Confronting Kathryn was the last thing he felt like doing now, especially after her frosty treatment of him over the past few days. Her offhand manner wasn't helping the already fragile atmosphere on board.

The door closed behind Seven's upright back and he turned towards her. "Captain." His tone was cool but firm.

"I said dismissed, Commander." She didn't turn from her position.

He closed the distance between them. "Captain. It is my duty to point out a couple of things here. You drafted unassigned crewmen to Engineering to assist B'Elanna, then five minutes later reassigned them to Seven. Both departments need all the help they can get right now, but putting them at loggerheads with each other won't solve anything."

"Are you once again telling me how to run my ship, Commander?" She wouldn't look at him. Her face was visible in the reflection of the viewport and he could see her set jaw.

"No. You should know me better than that, Kathryn." Deliberately he used her name. "Part of my job is to sort out personnel assignments. I want to be clear on how you stand."

She turned to face him. "Oh, I am very clear. Maybe I am the only person on this ship who is."

He waited for her to elaborate, but instead she turned away again. "Do whatever you feel necessary, Commander. You're the First Officer, a fact you apparently feel the need to remind me of. So do your job."

Her voice was flat and cold. He could feel her hostility and undercurrents of something else, something indefinable. He stared at her, his emotions roiling at her offhand treatment of him. He wanted to shout at her, rage that it was he who had been played for a fool, once again played for the sucker, he thought savagely. But her stiff shoulders deterred him. However it had got there, there was a barrier between them that had grown since their abrupt departure from the Alpha Quadrant. And she was right. He was the First Officer.

"Aye, Captain." He stood waiting for some acknowledgement from her, but the burnished head didn't move. He left.

Crewman Chell was at the back of the pantry, PADD in hand. Not for the first time, he wondered about Neelix's supply inventory, if indeed you could call it that. Neelix, bless his little cotton socks, made the word 'haphazard' seem as orderly as the Borg collective.

The rough ride through the transwarp corridor had taken its toll on all parts of the ship, including the pantry. Chell had been allocated to an engineering repair team for the first few hectic days and it was only now that he was able to turn his attention to the mess in the pantry.

He sighed. Mess was an understatement. It looked like several dozen crewmen had had a food fight. Bags of dry goods had burst and spread over the floor, white powdery footprints tracked all over the kitchen as people had wandered in and out, fending for themselves in their brief breaks away from essential repairs. Several barrels were tipped over, one weeping a watery substance with a foul odor. He wondered how to start reconciling the nauseous looking mix in front of him with Neelix's disorganized inventory.

He sat on an unopened barrel and started to catalog the immediate things that caught his eye. He was concentrating and was caught unawares when small footsteps crept up behind him. The touch of a hand on his shoulder sent him leaping into the air from a sitting position, catching his head on a shelf and sending several kilograms of dried trega - Delta Quadrant oatmeal - tumbling down on top of him.

"I'm sorry." He turned around towards the voice to see Naomi Wildman standing there, her hand over her mouth. He wasn't sure if she was fighting giggles or was horrified at what she had done, so he hastened to reassure her that he was unhurt.

"No damage," he said as he rubbed his head. "It takes more than an old shelf to keep a Bolian down."

Naomi giggled. "Sorry," she said again. "I thought you heard me come in."

Chell gestured ruefully to the chaos around them. "There's enough sound proofing in this lot to drown the approach of a herd of Klingons."

Naomi's eyes opened very wide. "Is it really a herd of Klingons?" she asked.

"No." Chell tried to cover his tracks. "It's not. Forget I said that, Naomi. And please don't tell B'Elanna. Now, what can I do for you? Are you hungry?"

"Not really." Naomi wandered around, picking things up and putting them down again. "I guess I just came here out of habit. I used to come and talk to Neelix when he worked in the pantry."

Chell made a quick decision. "You could talk to me," he suggested. "I could use an assistant with this, especially one who is familiar with Neelix's inventory system."

Naomi giggled again. "What system? He always told me he didn't need one."

Chell winked at her. "That's for certain," he said. "Now, suppose you sit over there on that barrel with this PADD and enter in the items that I call out to you?"

"Okay." Naomi hopped up onto the barrel. "What do you suppose I'm sitting on?"

"Well..." Chell looked thoughtful for a moment. "I would guess, that it's... no, it couldn't possibly be."

"What?" Naomi looked intrigued. "What do you think it is?"

"No." Chell shook his head decisively. "Neelix wouldn't have put such an item near the door where it was the first thing that he could reach. It couldn't possibly be..."

"Leola root!" they chorused together.

Naomi entered it on the PADD. Chell worked tirelessly away calling out the various items and making silly rhyming jokes for the names of the items. He just hoped he would be able to decipher Naomi's list afterwards. As they worked through the stores his concern about the low levels of supplies grew. They had been on the verge of re-provisioning when they left the Delta Quadrant and there had been no time to consider it in the turmoil of events since. The last away team had found nothing in the way of edible foodstuffs.

The time passed quickly for both of them and Chell was surprised to find it was time for him to start the midday meal. "Thank you for your help, Naomi." He winked at her. "Couldn't have done it without you."

Naomi climbed down from the barrel. "Can I come back and help again sometime?"

"Sure. Anytime you like. I have to go and cook for the mob now. We're having Twilight Zone Tortellini."

"Sounds good. I have to go too." Naomi waited, hands behind her back until Chell entered the kitchen. She looked around cautiously to make sure she wasn't being observed before she picked her way through the now ordered sacks and barrels. Carefully she scooped out a double handful of trega, which she slipped into the pocket of her smock. She waved to Chell as she quickly left, and skipped out into the corridor.

Chakotay entered the ready room, quietly determined to see this through. He had barely seen Kathryn since the senior staff meeting. She was seen passing through the bridge on her way to the ready room or occasionally pacing the corridors. She hadn't conferred with him directly about their position. To Chakotay, it seemed like she was in denial; that if she ignored the whole situation maybe it would go away. He could understand that she was hurting once again. To be so close to home that the globe filled their viewscreens only to end up adrift, spirits knows where, was certainly a major blow for anyone. Kathryn Janeway, he knew, would take it harder than most. But right now the crew needed their Captain. Decisions had to be made and the Captain should make them. And should make them visibly, so that the crew would be reassured.

Kathryn was sitting at her desk studying her terminal. She barely looked up as he came to a stop in front of her desk.

"What is it, Commander?" Her tone was distant and unapproachable, as if she had already decided to deny his request before he had even made it.

He cut straight to the heart of the matter. In happier times he would have sat down, helped himself to tea from the replicator and shared some pleasantries with his friend; but this captain, remote and cold, didn't seem to need or want that.

"The crew should be told where we are."

"We don't know where we are." Her voice was flat; she might have been reciting Starfleet protocols by the lack of inflection in her tone.

"Then that's what they should be told." Chakotay refused to let himself fidget. He would have liked to sit down and discuss this properly, but that didn't appear to be an option.

"What can we tell them?" Her flash of anger was unexpected. " 'Good morning crew, this is your Captain speaking. I'm here to tell you that we don't know where we are or how the hell we're going to get back. Carry on the good work. Janeway out.' Is that what you want me to say, Commander?"

"Something like that, preferably without the sarcasm, is exactly what you should say. You can't leave people in the dark, Captain. Whatever your personal feelings are right now, you need to keep us, your crew, informed. Particularly the senior staff." He leaned forward, placing his hands flat on the desk, forcing her to look at him. "Especially me. Your First Officer, in case you've forgotten."

She returned her gaze to her terminal. "Fine. You feel so strongly about it, you can make the announcement. Is that all?" Her fingers started working on the keypad again.

"No, that's not all. Supplies. Food. We're running low. Chell inventoried our stores yesterday. We need to re-provision very soon."

"Tell the crew to eat less when you make your announcement." She waved a hand in dismissal. "Now, if that is really all?"

Chakotay closed his eyes for a moment acknowledging defeat. There was plenty he needed to talk about; he had a mental list that was repeating in his head like a ticker tape. But now was obviously not the time. He tamped down anger he felt; the right time never seemed to occur when Kathryn was in this mood. He turned on his heel and left.

Rather than put off a task that he dreaded, he went straight to his office and closed the door. He needed to make the announcement. Without giving himself time to reconsider, he thumbed open the comm link.

"All hands, this is Commander Chakotay. As most of you are aware, our stay in the Alpha Quadrant was brief. We struck a Borg subspace mine as we went to warp and were thrown back into the destabilizing transwarp corridor, along with two other Starfleet vessels, the Himalaya and the Pleiades. We cannot ascertain our exact position, but we are working to determine our precise location. I am sorry to have to tell you that the Himalaya was destroyed, but we have survivors from the Pleiades on board. The Captain and I ask that you continue with the exemplary performance that we have come to expect from you all over the past seven years. We will continue to update you as more information becomes

available. Chakotay out." He closed the link. Not perfect, but it was the best he could come up with right now. He hoped that the crew would not be too disheartened now that the true uncertainty of their position was known.

He stood, meaning to leave for the bridge when his door chime stopped him. "Enter." He sat back down behind his desk.

Vorik stepped into the room, his dark Vulcan face as composed as ever. "Commander. I am sorry to bother you, but the Captain did not respond to my request for assistance."

Chakotay felt vague stirrings of alarm at the precise words. If Vorik was describing the Captain in typical understated Vulcan way as 'non-responsive', that probably meant she hadn't even acknowledged Vorik's presence in her ready room. He steepled his fingers. "Go on." His demeanor indicated that he was giving his full attention to the problem.

"Sir, the warp drive is draining power at an unusually high rate. We are unable to trace the power leak. Normally I would summon Lieutenant Torres, but she is still on light duties following the birth of her child. The Captain..."

Chakotay cut off his words before Vorik could outline the Captain's apathy to the problem. "Ensign, new mother or not, Lieutenant Torres is still the chief of engineering. Her brain and reasoning were not affected by Miral's birth. I suggest you page her; she can probably offer you some suggestions over the link without even setting foot in engineering."

"I understand. Thank you, Sir." Vorik half turned. "Permission to return to engineering."

"Granted. Thank you, Vorik. If you have any further engineering problems, Lieutenant Torres should still be the first person you consult."

Chakotay stood as Vorik turned to leave, but his reprieve was short lived. As soon as the door opened Mortimer Harren stormed in, pushing Vorik into the doorframe as he did so. Harren shook with suppressed emotion; words tumbled from him in waves and ran over each other in his urgency to be heard.

"Commander, this is not good enough." Spittle flew from his blue lips to splatter the pile of PADDs on Chakotay's desk. "Have you any idea what she has done now? This is my life she is destroying. Again. My life, ripped away from me for a second time, by her hand. My work, my life, my theories. Have you any idea how close I am to demolishing Schlezholt's theory of multiple big bangs. How will I be recognized for my contribution if she insists on stranding us in the far corners of the galaxy...."

Chakotay held up a hand. He had been afraid of this sort of reaction from the more volatile members of the crew. He just hadn't expected it to be so immediate. "Harren..."

Harren's eyes were wild and unfocussed; he took no notice of the interruption, but merely continued in his impassioned tirade. Chakotay steeled himself to ignore the despair and hopelessness in Harren's voice. Only by focussing on the anger in the crewman's tone was he able to stop the rant. "Harren. Control yourself man."

Harren paused briefly, but the diatribe continued and even expanded to include perceived petty acts by the Captain against the crew.

"Harren." Chakotay shouted the word. "If you don't stop now I'm calling security. They will take you to the brig and you will spend the next three days cooling your heels there and composing your official apology. Do you understand me?"

Harren's eyes returned to focus on the blue-gray walls of the office. His face lost some of its pallor. He took a deep breath. "Sir. I'm sorry, Sir. It's just that..." He drew a shuddering breath and stopped, seemingly unwilling to continue.

Chakotay ordered a glass of water from the replicator and thrust it at Harren. "Here, drink this. Take a minute to compose yourself."

He waited while the younger man sipped the water, the rigid set of his shoulders returning to their normal slumped position. Too much time huddled over a console on deck fifteen, thought Chakotay. He made a mental note to ensure that Harren was included on Tuvok's next physical training program, if ever there was time for such routine matters again.

Swiftly he tamped down his own insidious line of negative emotion.

"Listen to me." Chakotay kept his tone deliberately harsh and authoritative. He could not allow the natural anger of the crew at their situation to turn against the Captain. "I will overlook this outburst on this occasion. It is understandable that you are angry, but I want you to channel your energy into a more positive approach. Volunteer for additional duties. There are many places right now that could use an extra pair of capable hands like yours. Make a positive contribution to our situation, Harren. I don't want to hear you talking like this again. Do you understand me?"

Harren nodded once, jerkily. His eyes were fixed on his boots, and he mumbled something.

"I didn't hear you. Repeat that please." Chakotay's tone brooked no argument.

"I said, 'Sorry, Sir'."

Chakotay had his doubts that those were the mumbled words, but he let it pass. "You may go, Crewman. I expect to see your name down for some of the additional volunteer repair teams. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Dismissed." For the second time in fifteen minutes, Chakotay dismissed a crewman more harshly than he would have liked.

He sighed and turned to the replicator, ordering a cup of green tea. He heard the door close behind Harren and turned back to his desk expecting to see a blessedly empty office. Instead, Harry Kim stood there.

"Harry." Chakotay kept his tone friendly; Harry wasn't one to run scared and if he had a problem, then the chances were it was genuine. He studied the Ensign closely; Harry

looked tired, his hair stood up in jagged tufts and his uniform was rumpled. Chakotay wondered how long he had been on duty.

"I'm sorry, Commander. Do you mind if I sit down? I'm extremely tired. I was going off duty for some rest when this came up and I need to get it sorted out before it becomes a bigger problem."

"Sure." Chakotay gestured to the chair, but Harry was already slumping down into it. He put his head in his hands briefly before lifting his face to look at Chakotay.

"Some tea?" Chakotay turned back to the replicator, already sure of Harry's answer.

"Please. Some of that green tea you're drinking would be good."

Chakotay waited patiently while Harry cradled the cup, taking a sip of the fragrant liquid while he composed his thoughts.

"It's about the power management," said Harry eventually. "Vorik has re-routed some of the extra power that was assigned to Astrometrics to engineering. I understand they have a problem with a power leak right now, but with all due respect, we need that power more in Astrometrics. Sure we need to get the warp core operating at peak efficiency, but I think it's more important to keep working on pinpointing our position. It's not much good being able to travel at warp if we have no idea exactly what's out there. I would like the power allocated back to Astrometrics. Seven agrees with me. In fact, I left Seven confronting Vorik about the logic of his arguments."

"We need the warp core operating at peak efficiency as soon as possible, Harry." Chakotay kept his tone reasonable. "We've been under attack since we've been here and we need a way of beating a swift retreat should it become necessary. But," he could see Harry opening his mouth to argue and he wanted to stave off another confrontation, "I agree with you that once this crisis is over, Astrometrics is the main priority. Give the engineering team time. I'm sure B'Elanna will work her customary miracle and you won't be down in resources for long. The same goes for personnel; we can allocate you the extra crewmen once the engineering situation is back under control."

Harry seemed like he was going to argue, then he shrugged. "All right. I'll go and pacify Seven. I don't suppose you care to come and calm her down for me? She listens better to you than me. And she seems strangely emotional about the subject. That's not like her at all."

Chakotay's first instinct was to refuse; he rather thought that Seven would listen to him less these days. He thought again that he had hardly seen her since she broke off their relationship. Maybe this would be a good opportunity to show her that their professional relationship was undamaged. Harry's comment about her emotional volatility unnerved him. Apart from himself and the Doctor, he didn't think anyone was aware of the changes to her cortical node that allowed her to experience the full range of the emotional spectrum. Outside of their brief relationship, she had had little experience at dealing with the unfamiliar nuances of human expression. She may need an outside stabilizing influence for a while.

"All right. I'll come down with you now and talk to her." He clapped Harry on the back. "Then you are off-duty for the next twelve hours."

"Thank you." Harry's heartfelt sigh of relief was drowned out by the swish of the doors.

Kathryn dimmed the lights in the ready room to thirty percent. The harsh glare of their normal setting hurt her eyes and the twilight effect echoed her mood. She moved to stand by the viewport cradling her cold mug of coffee. She stared out at the slow moving stars without really seeing them. Normally, the feeling of movement, the excitement of the journey, and the knowledge that they were slowly moving towards home, would cheer her. More than once, the star trails and Voyager's stately movement through the galaxy had given her hope and optimism when she was at a low moment. Now though, the sight of unfamiliar stars left her cold.

She took a mouthful of the inky coffee without tasting it. They were lost again. She had failed again. The acrid taste of defeat was in her mouth, warring with the bitter dregs of Klingon coffee. She knew that Chakotay was expecting her to stride onto the bridge at any moment, issuing orders right and left, lifting the crew with her fire and with an answer for every question, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She couldn't bear to look into their eyes and have them say to her, "It's all right, Captain. It wasn't your fault. We understand." She didn't want their pity.

She could imagine Harry's puppy dog eyes as he turned his back once again on his family to work shoulder to shoulder with Seven in Astrometrics. She could envisage Chakotay's unswerving support and it just made her angry. The unreasonable anger she felt at his ease of falling in love mingled with her own fear of being left totally alone, as the people she counted as her best friends turned to each other. Fine. She could work alone. She would be alone. Fair-weather friends. The loneliest friends.

Briefly her disturbing dream from the other night flitted through her mind. She remembered the stiff and unwieldy dress she had worn and the conflicting emotions of the dream. She pushed it out of her head. She had enough to think about; the gray fog of melancholia already clouded her thinking enough without adding other distractions.

The stars moved slowly past; or was it the ship moving past the stars? Suddenly, even the simple contradiction seemed too much. Kathryn Janeway stood in solitary contemplation of the unfairness of it all and shut off from her surroundings to let her meandering thoughts spin out into the stars around her.

Chell dished out his latest creation in the mess hall. He worried that the crew wouldn't like the simple grain dish, which relied heavily on the sacks of a barley-like grain he had found at the back of the pantry. Neelix had found the grain too bland for his tastes and his attempts to spice the dishes he created had failed; the grain retained its original subtle, grassy flavor. Chell found the taste and texture appealing and had used it to create a simple risotto-like dish that incorporated many of the dried roots and fungi that were in the stores.

Out of the corner of his eye Chell could see the half-empty storeroom. Since he had catalogued the supplies and restored a bit of order to Neelix's chaos, the full extent of the low stocks was painfully clear. They had little fresh food now. The airponics bay continued to supply fresh greens, but it was woefully insufficient for the total needs of the crew. Chell had calculated the amount of grain needed for the evening meal and had reduced the amount by a quarter. He had decided to start his own rationing.

The crew had loved the Ribald Risa Risotto. Chell wondered if he should have thrown in some of the copious amount of leola root still in the storeroom, but if he did that then some one would surely have commented. Since he had been in charge of catering, leola root hadn't appeared on the menu in any way, shape, or form.

He looked in the pot. Only a few helpings remained, and there were still nearly twenty people to feed. He glanced up to see the rather portly Ensign Albertson in front of him, plate proffered for seconds.

"Sorry, Marty. There's no more tonight." Chell's worry over the food supplies escalated. If everyone continued to eat like it was their last meal then they would be down to emergency rations in a couple of weeks.

"Go on with you, Chell." Marty nudged him companionably. "I'm sure you've got another pot of this stuff hidden away somewhere. It tastes great."

"Well it's all you are getting," Chell snapped in reflex. "It will do you good to cut down a bit. We are all going to have to tighten our belts a few notches if we don't find supplies soon."

"Sorry I asked." Marty moved off huffily with his empty plate and returned to sit with Mortimer Harren.

Chell noticed a few crewmen glancing towards the storeroom. He moved to close the door, naggingly aware that worry and doubt now showed openly on a few more faces than previously.

Harren returned to deck fifteen after his break. His meeting with Commander Chakotay and the Commander's evasiveness had confirmed what he already half suspected: that Voyager's abrupt return to uncharted space was not a simple random act of chance but a carefully executed maneuver by Starfleet designed to keep a small fraction of potential troublemakers out of the Alpha Quadrant. He was unsure whether Starfleet's main concern was the Maquis, the evolved and sentient hologram that was the Doctor, or Janeway herself. Although he suspected she was one of the main instigators of the maneuver, it was likely that she was coerced in some way - either to save her own sorry skin or those of her associates and her inner coterie. For a heady moment he considered the notion that he himself was in some way implicated; that Starfleet would go to any extremes to prevent the publishing of his thesis demolishing Schlezholt's theory. But he reluctantly abandoned that notion. After all, he had been sending his work back in the data streams to Earth for some months now. There was already sufficient evidence in trusted hands to complete the denouncement, even if he was not able to do it himself.

He strode down the gratings of deck fifteen, deep in thought and nearly ran down Billy Telfer who had popped out of his quarters like a rabbit from a warren.

"Mort! Sorry, I didn't see you." Billy eyed Harren cautiously. The last time Billy had seen him, Harren had been storming off with his grievances to Commander Chakotay and hadn't been in the most rational frame of mind.

Harren looked quickly up and down the corridor then pushed Billy back into his quarters.

Billy looked apprehensive. "How did it go with the Commander?" he asked. "Did he listen to you?"

"No." Harren snarled the word. "He's too blindly loyal to her."

"Who?" In spite of his apprehension, Billy was intrigued. "The Captain?"

"Yes. Maybe he's one of the people she's protecting. After all, he is Maquis."

"Was Maquis," said Billy, "just like a lot of people on this ship."

"Well, something's afoot. It certainly wasn't a random string of coincidences that landed us out in the armpit of the galaxy for a second time. Listen..." Harren poured out his theory into Billy's ear, a twisted idea that grew and evolved as he thought of other damning evidence against the Captain.

"No. I don't believe that." Billy was stout in his loyalty. "She's worked harder than anyone at getting us home. Why would she sabotage it now?"

Harren stopped in his outpourings and his eyes became crafty. "Fine." He shrugged and headed for the door. "You don't have to believe me. But others will and they won't be as afraid of action as you are." He left without another word, leaving Billy staring at the door stammering excuses.

Harren's words crept insidiously through the lower decks. People became bolder; the mutterings of hostility grew louder, winding their way through the corridors and junctures of anonymity. For the first time in seven years people sought him out, asking him in careful words if it was true: Were they pushed out here deliberately by Starfleet? Some of the boldest were surprisingly not the Maquis but the enlisted Starfleet personnel. The Maquis wondered quietly if they were being protected in some way, but the lower decks Starfleet crew didn't have any such crumbs for consolation. Still, people were careful, mouthing the correct response of shocked denial if anyone was indiscreet enough to ask if they believed the rumors. But at night, in the quiet of their own thoughts and the vague sense of insecurity that nighttime always brings, people wondered.

Chakotay re-entered the bridge nearly five hours after he left it. He felt tired and sticky, and badly craved a few minutes solitude and a cup of tea. He had succeeded in directing personnel assignments, not only for Engineering and Astrometrics, but also to give Chell some much-needed assistance in the mess hall. He had deliberately assigned Mortimer Harren to one of the engineering teams, much to B'Elanna's disgust. Chakotay

recognized the signs of someone with too much time on their hands and too many unvented thoughts in their head. He had kept an eye on Harren while appearing to be busy with his own diagnostic and observed the brooding silence and sullen manner.

The bridge was quiet. It was gamma shift and the few crew at their stations were occupied running routine sweeps. Harry Kim lounged in the big chair. He looked more refreshed than he had the last time Chakotay had seen him. Chakotay looked around for Tuvok. Although they weren't at yellow alert, their recent encounters with the Sernaix were still fresh enough in his mind that he felt the more experienced officer should be in command.

"Harry. Where's Tuvok?" Chakotay gestured for Harry to precede him into his office.

"Tuvok has gone to his quarters. I said I would stand this shift. Is there a problem, sir?" Harry looked slightly apprehensive. "It's been quiet; Tuvok needed the rest..."

"It's okay, Harry. I said you were off duty though for twelve hours. You must have had, what, four hours sleep? I was just expecting to see Tuvok, not you." Chakotay realized he had let his doubts show. Harry had done a sterling job, as always. "How are you feeling now?"

"I had enough sleep. I woke up feeling fine, so I went to relieve Tuvok. I know he says he needs less rest than us mere humans, but even he was getting to his limits. I can finish this shift then I do have twelve hours off."

"See that you take them."

"I will. The holodecks may be off-limits until we figure out the engineering power drain, but poker games don't use much energy."

"If Tom's playing, the sudden transfer of rations when he wins could be a huge drain on the main computer." Chakotay clapped Harry on the shoulder to let him know he was doing well. "Anything to report? I was just about to get some rest myself."

"Nothing that can't wait. The Captain left her ready room fifteen minutes ago, heading for her quarters."

Chakotay thought that was a good sign. If Kathryn had been working in her ready room for all this time, then hopefully she was pulling herself out of the apathetic slump she seemed to have fallen into. "That's good," he said. "Did she pass on anything useful?"

"No," Harry hesitated for a second. "She just passed through the bridge without saying anything. The computer gave her whereabouts as her quarters when I checked a few minutes later. I thought she was going to Engineering as they had been paging her, but she didn't go there."

"I'll check in with her on my way to my quarters."

"If anything comes up tonight, I'll page you." Harry turned to leave, "Get some rest, Commander. You don't look so hot either."

"I will. But Harry, make sure you page the Captain first as usual if anything is amiss. She will want to know."

"Right." Harry looked away, and Chakotay wondered just what it was he wasn't saying. Suddenly he was tired, the adrenaline from the day drained away, leaving him weary and longing for the quiet space of his quarters. There seemed to be too many unspoken subtexts today. Kathryn, Harren, Seven, the uneasy atmosphere in Engineering, and now Harry.

Open, honest Harry, the worst bluffer on the ship seemed to be withholding something too. He knew he would have to once again set aside his own priorities and try and find out what was bothering Kathryn. She was the last person he wanted to talk to now. The specter of mistrust and angry words still hovered between them and he wasn't sure he could be as patient with her as he needed to be.

"I'll be off then, Harry. Call me if you need me."

"Sleep well, Commander."

Chakotay left the bridge for the officer's quarters. He knew Kathryn would be awake; he just hoped he had the tact to deal with her right now.

Chakotay rang the chime on the Captain's quarters. He was just deciding that she must be asleep after all when the door slid open. He walked in and his eyes adjusted slowly to the dim lighting after the glare of the brightly lit corridor. At first he didn't see Kathryn, then she moved slightly in the shadows and he saw that she was standing to one side of the viewport holding something. She was still dressed in uniform and appeared pensive as she studied the object in her hand. Her quarters were a mess. Although Kathryn was far from obsessive and her quarters usually had a comfortable, lived-in feel about them, the disorganized discarding of clothing, PADDs and coffee mugs seemed out of character. One of her plants had tipped over and was spilling dry earth onto the carpet. The plant itself seemed wilted, like its owner. Uncared for.

Unbidden images rose in Chakotay's mind of the Captain in the black area of space they had called the Void, an area of space they had traversed over two years ago in the Delta Quadrant. In the Void there were no stars, no planets; the normal cinemascope through the viewport was replaced by an unending inky blackness. She had taken it hard, withdrawing into herself to a painful degree and cutting herself off from all contact. Chakotay hadn't been able to reach her then although he had tried to tempt her out with a variety of different amusements, small crises, and social events.

Two years ago they were friends. He didn't know what had happened to their friendship in these past weeks, but he wasn't sure he could summon up the understanding she needed from him to travel that route a second time.

"Captain."

She stepped forward out of the shifting half-light and he saw that she held a holoimage cube in her hands. He recognized it; it held images of her parents, sister Phoebe, and Molly her dog. Images of home. The cube was worn. He had often seen her caress it

briefly in happier times, a promise of all that was waiting for her when they reached Earth. Mutely she held the cube out to him and he could see her eyes were suspiciously bright.

He kept his hands tightly clenched by his sides. "Looking at pictures won't get us home any sooner, Captain." Even to his own ears the words sounded harsh and unfeeling. He heard her take a swift, sharp breath and knew he had struck a nerve. "Harry's taking gamma shift after only four hours of sleep. Tuvok has retired to his quarters after nearly twenty hours on duty. Most of the senior staff are working around the clock. They are trying anything constructive to find our way back. They are not moping in their quarters gazing at photographs after spending all day in their ready room avoiding everyone."

"Commander," her voice could freeze the warp core, "you are out of line."

"Yes, I am, aren't I, Kathryn." He stressed her name. "But the ship needs her Captain. We all need you." His voice softened momentarily, concern for his friend overriding his anger at her apathy, "please. Don't do this to yourself." His hand wavered momentarily from his side as if he was going to touch her cheek, but he controlled it.

"If everyone is working so hard, why are you wasting your time here? I'm sure there is somewhere, or someone, on this ship that needs you more than I do." Her voice dropped a level. "I suggest you go there." She turned away from him, back to the somber dark beside the viewport.

Once again, he stood looking at her hunched shoulders wishing he could take back his harsh words. But they still hung in the air between them, another brick in the wall that was swiftly forming between the command team.

In times of uncertainty, people often cling together. While Voyager's crew was not exactly clinging, Chell noticed that they certainly congregated more in public places - like the mess hall. It made his job harder. He had to clean up around gaggles of chattering crewmen, but he could certainly understand why they didn't want to be alone with their thoughts right now. He cheerfully worked around them as best he could, often slipping into a seat to join a conversation.

The late lunch hour was always busy. Chell noticed a gathering of crewmen, mainly from the lower decks, although he spotted Sam Wildman, Ayala, and a few of the engineering staff. Tom Paris hovered on the edge of the group, as if he wanted to hear what was being said, but didn't want to join the conversation. The focus of the group was Mortimer Harren. Intrigued by the air of furtive secrecy surrounding them, Chell edged closer.

Harren was speaking in a low voice, his words pitched just loud enough to reach those around him. "... of course she knew we would be thrown out of the Alpha Quadrant," he was saying, "she plotted the course after all, one that led us directly back into the transwarp corridor."

"She didn't know it was that unstable," pointed out one of the engineering staff.

"It was a reasonable assumption," countered Harren. "After all, Voyager had just caused its destruction. It was hardly the shuttle route to Deep Space Nine any more."

"You're forgetting something, Mort." Tom spoke up, edging closer to the group as he did so. "I was on the bridge, in fact I was at the helm. I know it was just bad luck that threw us back into the corridor. We hit a subspace mine. The Captain couldn't have planned that."

Mortimer turned pale gleaming eyes on the helmsman. "We all know you are only on the bridge because you like the view, how much attention were you paying to the course?"

"Enough." Tom was short in his reply. "The Captain didn't have navigational control at that moment, I did. And believe me, I didn't plan to run over that sucker. Our course was for Earth - away from the corridor."

"But who gave you the coordinates?"

"The Captain of course, but..."

"There you have it people." Mortimer tapped a finger on the table. "It all comes down to the Captain. She has her reasons for not wanting Voyager to return to the Alpha Quadrant. Now, she is not acting alone in this, she is Starfleet's puppet, has been all the way; no one can dispute that. So she, acting on orders from Starfleet, deliberately puts us back into the destabilizing corridor and we end up here. Have any of you seen the Captain around lately? She's been harder to find than a dabo girl on Vulcan. She can't bring herself to look us in the eye. That's why you aren't seeing her."

"She's been in her ready room for most of the bridge shifts," said Tom loyally. "She and the Commander are working as hard as anyone else to try and find out exactly where we are."

"She knows exactly where we are. Just as I do." Mortimer's softly spoken comment had every ear straining to hear what he said. "The difference is, I will tell you. The Captain won't. Because she doesn't want you to know and certainly doesn't want anyone to find a way back."

"Is there a way back?" Sam Wildman voiced the unspoken thought in many of the listeners.

"Of course. No part of space is an island."

"How long will it take us?" Sam's voice had a catch in it.

"Well, that depends on the crew." To Chell's ears his voice sounded conniving. "Because if it's up to the Captain, it will be never. Now, if the crew were to play a more, how shall I put it, assertive role, well, we could be home next week."

There was a muted gasp from around the table. "Where... where are we?" Ayala looked caught between wanting to know and digging himself deeper into a sticky situation. "Do you really know, Mort?"

"Of course. Some of you know I have devoted my life to disproving Schlezholt's theory of multiple big bangs." There were a few nods around the table. Tom rolled his eyes. Maybe Mort could guess where they were, but he wasn't going to believe it based on his infamous theory.

"Well, if you count Schlezholt's theory as disproven then the model that makes most sense in a universe with no boundaries, and no singularity. Following quantum mechanics, no particle has a single history in space-time - they all follow every possible path - and you know as well as I do that space-time isn't perfectly smooth. I think we've got caught in a ripple where the universe is following a different space-time history to ours. We're out of temporal sync with the rest of the universe."

There was a moment of silence, then a babble of voices rose around the table.

"But what about..."

"What if..."

"Schlezholt's theory hasn't been disproven..."

"Are you saying that the Captain is..."

"Wait." Harren lifted a hand, and reluctantly the voices ceased. As a theory it was flawed, but it was the closest thing to sense anyone had offered them in the last few weeks. "That's where I think we are, and I'm sure the Captain knows it too. She, after all, knows her science nearly as well as I do," a grudging respect colored Harren's voice momentarily, "and Starfleet must know as well. This is after all, their plan to keep us from returning."

"No. Sorry, Mort, but I don't believe that either." Tom pushed his way further into the group. "What you are doing here is dangerous. We need to stick together and support the Captain, not undermine her position. She has worked harder than anyone to get us home these last seven years. I don't believe she would throw it away now."

"Really? How loyal of you. I guess working on the bridge has colored your perceptions. I can list many instances over the last seven years when it seems that the last thing on the good Captain's mind was getting her ship back to Earth."

Chell opened his mouth to ask for examples, but shut it abruptly when he realized that the group was abruptly dispersing around him. A couple of the crew wandered off to the other side of the mess hall. Chell saw why; Commander Chakotay had appeared and was conferring with Tom. Nobody, it seemed, was willing to continue the discussion in Chakotay's presence. Mort hadn't mentioned him. Even if you swallowed Mort's theory the Commander's position was unclear.

Chell moved back to the pantry. He needed to start preparing the evening meal. He pulled out the ingredients needed for his Cardassia Prime Rib. Really, supplies were low. He hesitated a moment before moving to the untouched barrels of leola root. Just a little would bulk out the evening meal considerably. He was beginning to appreciate why

Neelix seemed to love the stuff; it certainly stretched the other ingredients a lot further. He hoped no one would complain too much.

His eyes were caught by a rearrangement in his supplies. He peered closer. Yes, someone had definitely been into the sack of trega. There was a small pile of the spilled grains on the edge of the shelf and the top of the sack was untied. This was the second time he had noticed it since he had tidied the supplies. So not only were supplies low, but he also had to worry about crew pilfering. He resolved to keep an eye on it.

He hadn't heard back from the Captain or Commander about his report on the dwindling supplies. He thought he would go and try and find out what they intended doing about it. There was no time like the present either. If he found out that they would be restocking soon then he could leave leola root out of the evening meal. He vacillated briefly; normally he would go to the Captain. But although he didn't actually believe Mort's theories in their entirety, he had enough lingering doubts that he thought the Commander would be the better choice. And it was certainly true that the Captain was rarely seen these days, she probably wouldn't want to see him. His mind made up; Chell left the kitchen in search of the Commander.

Naomi watched him leave from her table in the mess hall. She had been playing kadis kot with Icheb, but it wasn't much fun, he kept beating her. Icheb had returned to Astrometrics and for the moment she was alone. She cast a furtive glance around; no one was paying any attention to her. She rose and slipped into the kitchen, entering the pantry. The trega was on the top shelf. She pulled the barrel of leola root over to the shelf and climbed up on top of it so that she could reach it. Even so, it was a stretch. Standing on tiptoes, she could just get her hand into the sack. She took a couple of handfuls and slipped them into the pocket of her smock. Grains of trega spilled over the shelf and down onto the floor. She left quickly, forgetting to move the barrel back to its original position.

At times, Chakotay felt that his life traveled in large, endless circles. Right now, the circles seemed smaller. Problem-solve, sleep, work, eat, and fight with Kathryn compromised his daily routine. Kathryn was still out of touch and the longer she stayed away, the harder it was for him to work through his own negative emotions sufficiently to provide her with the support she needed. Mixed in too, was a simmering anger at her cavalier comments about not trusting him. She had certainly picked a fine time to tell him. He wondered why she was letting him make all the day-to-day decisions for the ship if she didn't trust him. He was trying to keep her informed, but she seemed quite genuinely to not care.

Chell's concern over the supplies had worried him too. Finding somewhere to take on supplies was now as urgent as the on-going repairs. Scans hadn't revealed anything remotely promising. Chell had even used leola root in the previous evening's meal, a sure sign that they were scraping the bottom of the barrel, literally and metaphorically. The addition hadn't gone unnoticed by the crew, and there had been several loud complaints. The crew seemed uneasy. Chakotay considered himself a good barometer of human emotions and the vibes he was picking up from some of the crew, in particular the lower deck crewmen who were not involved in the decision making process, had him

vaguely worried. It seemed that anger and mistrust spread far more easily than positive thoughts.

He resolved once again to try and speak to Kathryn. He was disgusted with himself for letting his anger control him the last time they had spoken, but at least he seemed to have touched her, if only briefly. The computer gave her whereabouts as her quarters. He knew she spent most of the day in her ready room, slipping in there like a phantom from the outer corridor to avoid crossing the bridge. That too worried him. If she was not able to face the bridge crew, her closest colleagues, then the guilt and sadness he knew she must be feeling must be immense. Concern for his friend pushed aside his antagonism for a moment. He had always been there for her in the past. They had weathered storms as fierce as this before. They would survive. They had to. He couldn't envisage Voyager without her captain.

She let him in without leaving the table. She was recording her logs, he rather guessed from the image frozen on the screen that they were personal rather than official.

"What do you want this time, Commander?" Her tone was civil, but tired, as if she really didn't want to hear the answer.

He sat down uninvited in the chair opposite her. "Kathryn..." he caught the flash of annoyance in her eyes and changed the name. "Captain, I'm trying my hardest here, but I could use some help."

"Tuvok is there. Ask him." She looked back to the screen.

"Tuvok can't help with this, Captain. The crew needs you. Needs to see that you are there, working alongside them. Please, don't desert us now. We need all the help we can get with this. I don't think we can do it without you."

His buried resentment resurfaced when he noticed that she was barely listening to him. Her attention was concentrated back on the screen. He reached out and turned the console off.

"What did you do that for?" Her surprise appeared genuine.

"You weren't listening to me. How else can I get your attention?"

"Fine." She snapped the word. "I'm listening. Say what you've come to say and then go."

He stood, placing his palms flat on the desk between them. He leaned over, into her space, so that they were face to face. His tone was almost conversational. "Then listen to this, Captain. I don't know what the hell is wrong with you. I know you well enough to understand what you are going through. You're feeling guilty, angry, depressed, and blaming yourself for getting us stuck a second time. Fine. Those are human reactions. But the ship needs her Captain. You were always so devoted to duty, putting the Captain above Kathryn. Well, I didn't always agree that you should, but now I do. Put your damned devotion to duty ahead of yourself on this occasion and get back on that bridge where you belong."

Kathryn gaped at him for a moment. He watched emotions flit across her face like blown clouds over the moon. For a few brief heartbeats he thought he had reached her. He expected her to smile, stand, tell him he was right, and then leave with him back to the bridge to stand united, shoulder to shoulder once more. Then her face changed once again, resuming the blank mask of indifference and he knew he had lost. They couldn't go on like this. Each time he tried and failed the tension and mistrust between them escalated. Not for the first time he wished that Kes was still on board. Kes had been able to reach the Captain, often when no one else could. The Ocampa's gentle knowing ways and intuitive wisdom, far beyond her years had made her the confidant of many of the crew. She and Kathryn had been friends, maybe Kes would have been able to reach her now, when he was failing. He wished for a moment that Kes was there for him to talk to as well. What would she have done in this position?

Kathryn seemed to shrink into her chair. For a minute he saw her as others, people who didn't know her indomitable spirit, would see her: a small, tired, middle-aged woman, face worn and haggard, eyes listless, hair dull and stringy. He leaned closer to her. "Kathryn, please. Come back to me, to us. I need my friend as well as my captain."

She looked away. "Your friend? I don't know where she's gone, Chakotay. I would like a friend right now, but I don't know. There's so much distrust between us."

"Talk to Seven if you don't want to talk to me. Or the Doctor."

"Seven?" Something indefinable showed briefly in her eyes and she gave a tired laugh. It sounded forced. "I don't think so."

"The Doctor then."

"Maybe." She turned away from him and activated the console again. "If that is all, Commander?"

It was clearly a dismissal. He turned and left without another word.

Chakotay entered the mess hall for dinner. He wasn't particularly hungry, especially as he had the feeling that Chell would have used some leola root in the meal, but he wanted the crew to see at least part of the command team going about business as usual. The mess hall was nearly full. He hesitated, tray in hand, wondering who to sit with. Harry and Seven were conferring at one end of the hall and he started in their direction, keen to hear what progress they had made on their location.

The knot of crewmen at the center table caught his eye. They were talking quietly together, the huddled shoulders telling him far more than he wanted to know. When he made out Mortimer Harren in the center of the group he made up his mind. Switching course, he made for the center table. Tom was on the edge of the group, looking uncomfortable.

Chakotay sat down two seats from Tom, sandwiched between two crewmen. He nodded to the group, very aware of the sudden silence.

"How's it going here?" He addressed the comment to the group in general before turning to Tom. "I'm glad you're here, Tom, I wanted to talk to you about a replacement for Neelix."

Tom looked puzzled, but nodded.

"Not in the mess hall," Chakotay took a forkful of food, trying to demonstrate an enthusiasm he didn't feel, "Crewman Chell is doing a wonderful job. I was thinking more of morale officer."

"Ah," Tom was used to thinking on his feet and caught on quickly. "Do you think we need one?"

"Maybe." Chakotay chewed pensively. The bitter taste of leola root nearly made him gag; he had forgotten how terrible the stuff was after having a few weeks free of it. "It is certainly hard on everyone right now. We were so close. People must be feeling angry, cheated. I know I am."

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Mortimer Harren. Harren was listening intently; his face still set in belligerent lines.

Chakotay continued, "It would be very easy to try and lay blame for our situation, but that isn't the right thing to do." He shrugged. "I mean, who is the easy target in all of this?" He continued without waiting for an answer. "The Captain is. I wouldn't be surprised if there are crew on board who are laying the blame on her doorstep. Maybe if I didn't know her as well as I do and didn't know exactly what it has cost her, emotionally, professionally, and personally to bring this ship as far as she has, well, maybe I would wonder exactly what her part was in all of this too."

He had their attention now. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Chell listening from the kitchen. "That's why I'm wondering if we need a morale officer, Tom."

Tom nodded, slightly sheepishly.

"We can't afford to let morale on this ship slip, now of all times. Now we really need to behave like the family we are and stick together. The Captain has built a strong family unit on board. I know I can trust you all not to let her down, not now when she needs you." Chakotay looked up and fixed his gaze on Ayala, one of his old Maquis crew. He held Ayala's gaze until the man gave an almost imperceptible nod. He could see the uncomfortable shifting of other crew around him and he turned his gaze to Sam Wildman.

"We have to pull together as much now as we did in the Delta Quadrant." Sam fidgeted and broke from his gaze, but he continued to regard her until she flushed red and nodded.

"I know rumors are circulating," Chakotay continued, "A morale officer would be able to defuse those rumors, expose them for the scaremongering they are." For the first time he looked directly at Mortimer Harren. "They are untrue. The Captain wants this crew to return home more than anyone. I don't want any of you to forget that. She needs your

understanding now, not your condemnation. All of you. She has supported all of you when you needed it most; now you can repay her."

He paused, aware of Tom's silent support. "Would you agree with that, Mort?"

The silence stretched. "Mort?" Chakotay prompted him. "I know the Captain has taken a personal interest in your well-being on this ship. Wouldn't you agree that she deserves the same consideration?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Harren mumbled the answer into his plate, then straightened and looked Chakotay full in the face. "Yeah, I do. If you'll excuse me, Commander..." He stood, took his plate to the recycler and left the room.

"Maybe Mort would be your new Morale Officer."

Chakotay turned to the crewman who had spoken. "Maybe," he said, "but it needs all of us to work on this." He swallowed the last of his meal and stood. "If you'll excuse me, I have to get back to the bridge."

Tom caught up with him as he left the mess hall and the two of them caught the same turbolift to the bridge.

"How did you know?" Tom asked the question quietly. "I've been listening to Harren's mutiny build steam now for a couple of days. He was convincing." He laughed self-consciously, "I half believed him myself."

"I watch people," said Chakotay, "I know this crew. Harren's an unhappy person and his personality means he has fewer outlets than most. He's also too intelligent for his own good. He can manipulate people."

"Yeah, well, count me as one of the manipulated." Tom looked ill at ease. "But what he said about the Captain avoiding people... hell, it made sense." He ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. "Sorry. I should have trusted my own judgement more."

Chakotay clapped his shoulder. "Your judgement is sound, Tom. In fact, you can be my eyes and ears in this. I think that's the last we'll hear of this insurgence, but just in case, I'd like you to keep a weather eye out for Harren. Let me know if you think he's still likely to cause problems."

"I will. Thanks, Chakotay."

The lift stopped at the bridge and the officers exited. "Chakotay, about the Captain..."

"Not now, Tom. She'll be fine. They are just rumors you know."

"I know, but..."

"She's fine. You and I both have to believe that. Now, you have a helm waiting for you if I'm not mistaken."

"Right." Tom watched the First Officer take his position in the center of the bridge. He hoped that Janeway appreciated the man's loyalty.

Chell was down on his hands and knees cleaning behind the stovetop. It was incredible how food had a habit of reaching the most unlikely places. He peeled a wilted leaf from the side of the bench and swept the assorted crumbs into the corner. He heard soft footsteps enter the kitchen and started to climb to his feet to greet whomever it was. The footsteps hesitated and then moved off in the direction of the pantry. Chell realized that the crewman wouldn't have noticed him there, tucked down behind the bench. He wondered if this was the person who had been pilfering his supplies. No one normally went into the pantry; he always made sure that there was food available on the bench tops for those wanting a snack when the kitchen was closed. He waited quietly for another minute, then rose and walked with quiet tread to the pantry.

Naomi Wildman stood on tiptoes on the heavy barrel of leola root that she had dragged over to the shelves. Steadying herself with one hand, she scooped trega out of the tilted sack.

Chell grinned. "So you're the person with the fondness for trega!"

"Oh!" Naomi stood guiltily, her hand still in the sack.

"It's okay. I won't tell on you." Chell leaned against the doorframe. "Want to tell me why you like the raw grain so much?"

Naomi climbed down. "I guess I couldn't keep him a secret for much longer anyway." She put her hand in her large smock pocket and carefully brought out something. Chell caught a glimpse of brown fur, long whiskers, and a twitching nose. Naomi cupped her hand around it, keeping it close to her body.

"Look." She opened her hand carefully and Chell saw an alert little animal sitting there. It raised itself onto its hind legs and sniffed the air curiously.

"A rat!" Chell was startled. The creature couldn't actually be a rat, there were a few small differences - its nose was longer, the body rounder, the tail furry - but the similarity was definitely there.

"Yes, well, sorta." Naomi grinned conspiratorially. "I found him running down the corridor two weeks ago. I think he came on board with some of the supplies we beamed over. I caught him and I've been keeping him in a box in my room. Not even Mom knows, you're the first person I've told."

"He seems tame." Chell extended a cautious finger to the rodent who sniffed it experimentally, then sat up on Naomi's palm and started to wash himself.

"So that's where my trega has been going to." Chell was thinking aloud. "I wonder what else he likes?"

"I don't know, that's all I've tried."

Chell looked around, "Well, he's a Delta Quadrant native so he probably likes leola root." He picked a small piece out of the barrel and offered it to the rat.

The animal took the root daintily between his forepaws and nibbled. In a short time the root was gone and he was sniffing around for more.

"Well, I guess there's someone on board who'll eat leola root," said Chell. "At this rate, he'll be out of leola root in, oh, maybe eighty years!"

"What have we here?" Chell looked up to see Chakotay looking down at the two of them.

Chakotay crouched down. "A rat!"

"Well, sorta," Naomi looked worried. "I found him. He's my pet now. He's tame, here..." She tipped the rat into the Commander's surprised hands.

Chakotay gingerly stroked the top of his head with a finger. "How did he get on board?"

"I think he came in with some supplies," said Naomi. "I found him a couple of weeks ago."

"That explains how he got past the sensors," Chakotay was thinking aloud, "There was a malfunctioning sensor that day - he must have been in the sack that was scanned by the faulty sensor so it didn't pick up his life sign."

"Can I keep him? Please, Commander, please?"

Chakotay scratched his chin. "Take him to the Doctor. If the Doctor agrees that he poses no threat then he can stay. But you have to replicate him a proper cage. A large, secure one. Does he have a name?"

"I've been calling him Ratty." Naomi accepted her pet back from Chakotay. "You know, after the holoprogram."

"Ah, 'Wind in the Willows'. That was one of my favorites too, although I always liked Toad. Take him to the Doctor now, Naomi. I'd like to be sure he's harmless. And if the Doctor approves him, then you need to prepare a report for Tuvok, alerting him to our newest crewperson. Include a recommendation that he scan for others on board. We don't need a colony of them."

"Crewrat." Naomi giggled. Slipping Ratty into the pocket of her smock she threw her arms around Chakotay's neck for a brief moment. "Thank you," she whispered, then was gone, slipping out like the wind to find the Doctor.

Chakotay lifted an amused eyebrow. "Well, I guess it's a good sign that the rats aren't deserting the sinking ship. Although spirits knows what the Captain will say about all of this."

He stood and turned to go. "Chell, I actually came to tell you that Harry has detected a promising looking M Class planet on long range sensors. We've altered course in that direction. I think you will be able to re-provision very soon. You're doing a great job here.

Your cooking is a wonder for crew morale." He winked at Chell and left.

Once again, Chakotay found himself waiting outside the door of the ready room. Kathryn was in there, but she hadn't been seen for over four hours, when she had handed the bridge over to him and disappeared. At least she was appearing at the start of her shifts. She called for him to enter.

"Captain. I've got a few things that I need to bring to your attention." He stood loosely inside the door, willing himself to remain calm.

"If they are in your reports, Commander, then I'll get to them eventually."

He was heartened to notice that although the pile of PADDs was so enormous that it threatened to topple onto the floor, at least she appeared to be reading them. The console still displayed what looked like a personal log.

"You should hear this." He moved further into the room and took a seat opposite her. "You probably don't want to, but I'm going to tell you anyway. In the last twenty-four hours, I've solved staffing problems, averted a mutiny, solved the food supply crisis, and allowed a rat to stay on board."

He saw her interest was sparked. "Did you say a rat?" Her voice was rusty, as if she hadn't used it much lately.

It wasn't the interest he had hoped for, but it was as start. "Maybe we should start with the mutiny. Lower decks rumbling. Mortimer Harren was spreading rumors that our present predicament was a predetermined Starfleet plot to strand us once again."

Kathryn's face shuttered once more. "I'm sure a lot of people are thinking that. I know it's all my fault, I don't need reminders. I should have checked our course more carefully, scanned the region better before we went to warp."

"Guilt is a cruel master." He said the words a little fiercer than he intended. "I know that too. And it's a luxury. We haven't got time for it."

She looked away from him. "Maybe." Her voice was flat, "but it can't be pushed aside as easily as you are suggesting. How did you deflect the mutiny?"

"I talked them out of it." Chakotay gave a hollow laugh. "I can't even get through to you but I reached thirty belligerent crewmen. I talked about trust, loyalty, our Voyager family, and how we all need each other to survive. Maybe I should give you the same speech."

"I'm sure you handled it as you thought best, Commander."

"I did. I'm sure you would have dealt with it differently, but until you stop hibernating in here you are going to have to live with my decisions. Which means you have to trust me."

The silence stretched between them, filled with misunderstanding, tension and more than a little sadness.

"Trust. A good question. I don't know who I can trust right now."

"You can trust me." He knew she wouldn't come around yet; there was too much animosity between them to allow that to happen, but somehow they had to try.

"Maybe. You're the best option I've got right now." She gave him the ghost of her old smile. "Dismissed, Commander."

He left, seeing her turn once again to her console.

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 55024.7

The Commander has just told me about a mutiny he averted. I'm not surprised. In the crew's place I think I would be considering the same thing. Who wants to serve under a Captain that has stranded them not once, but twice? Even though logically, I know this second time wasn't by my conscious decision, nonetheless it was my fault. I should have taken more care with our course, scanners would have detected the subspace mine, I should have been able to avoid it.

We have eleven people from the crew of the Pleiades on board. Eleven survivors from a crew of forty-seven. The Himalaya was completely destroyed with all hands. When Admiral Janeway came back from the future to help Voyager return home earlier than had been done in her timeline, part of her reasoning was to save the lives of twenty-two crewmen who would be killed during the remainder of the journey. How ironic. In trying to save twenty-two, I'm now responsible for the deaths of nearly eighty.

Chakotay tells me guilt is a luxury. He's right of course, but right now I still can't face the crew. I don't think I can look them in the face and give them orders, knowing that my orders have already caused so much suffering.

And Chakotay himself. We haven't been this much at odds with each other since the incident with the Equinox. A divided command team won't help us work our way out of this; somehow we have to put aside our personal issues and doubts about the other and work effectively together again. I will try; I hope we will succeed.

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