

## The Glory Days Universe

This series takes place approximately five years after Voyager's return to the Alpha Quadrant. Rocky wrote the first story, "Glory Days," and I asked to play in her sandbox. One thing led to another and soon we had a series on our hands. Stories here are arranged in chronological order, but they can all stand on their own. Thanks for reading! —Rocky and Seema

**Do the Walls Come Down** (36k) Janeway and Paris meet for a cup of coffee four years after Voyager's return. *Written by Seema*

**Fire and Rain** B'Elanna Torres pays a visit to Tuvok. *Written by Rocky*

**Latitude** (52k) A layover at Utopia Planetia reawakens old memories and gives Tom the chance to catch up with Chakotay. *Written by Seema*

**Glory Days** Harry Kim and Tom Paris have a chance meeting at a Starbase. *Written by Rocky*

**Life in the Fast Lane** Seven has an appointment with the Doctor. *Written by Rocky*

**Hero** Janeway and Harry Kim cross paths on a diplomatic mission. *Written by Rocky*

**The Sweetest Days** (52k) Tom and B'Elanna have a post-midnight chat. *Written by Seema*

**Act of War** (105k) The situation in the Neutral Zone escalates as B'Elanna and Harry battle to save their ship. *Written by Seema*

**Empty Sky** (61k) Tom and the Doctor come to terms with what happened in the Neutral Zone. *Written by Rocky and Seema*

**Stand by Me** Tuvok travels from Vulcan to Earth. *Written by Rocky*

**Rocketman** (65k) Tom dictates a letter to Neelix. *Written by Seema*

**A Thousand Miles** Chakotay returns to Earth after a 6 month absence. *Written by Rocky*

**The Heart of the Matter** (72k) Chakotay and Seven are reunited after six months apart. *Written by Seema*

**So Many Things** Seven pays a visit to an old friend. *Written by Rocky*

**Home** A long-awaited meeting finally takes place. *Written by Seema and Rocky*

**Right in Front of You** (26k) Sometimes you have to lose it all to remember what's really important in life. *Written by Seema*

*From:* [http://seema.org/myfanfic/gd\\_index.htm](http://seema.org/myfanfic/gd_index.htm)

Join DQVoyages, a story-only mailing list, to receive the latest stories in the Glory Days universe hot off the press!

## Do the Walls Come Down

*Feedback:* Much appreciated at [seemag1@yahoo.com](mailto:seemag1@yahoo.com)

*Disclaimer:* Characters and places belong to Paramount. No profit or infringement intended.

*Author's Notes:* This belongs in Rocky's "Glory Days" universe and takes place about four years after Voyager returns home and one year before the events in "Glory Days." My gratitude to Rocky

*for allowing me to play in her sandbox and also for her thoughtful betas.*

Kathryn Janeway's boots clicked hollowly on the slick marble tiled floor as she made her way through the atrium to the receptionist's desk at the far end. It had been years since she had last been at the Miramar campus of Starfleet's flight school; she had attended a six-week session here during her third year at the Academy. These days, Miramar served as the training ground for the best and brightest of Starfleet's pilots; a level four certification with a passing score of 95 percent was the minimum requirement for entry.

As Janeway approached the receptionist's desk, she turned her head slightly to see a demo of the latest two-person combat craft Starfleet had introduced the previous year. Its sleek lines and rounded shape were alluring. Looking at the model, Janeway felt the familiar rush of space and the exhilaration of discovery briefly wash over her. Janeway swallowed hard as she quickened her pace towards the receptionist's desk.

The ensign seated behind the desk did not look up as she greeted Janeway with a curt, "Yes?"

"I'm looking for Tom Paris," Janeway said. "He's expecting me."

The ensign, her attention still focused on the computer console in front of her, said, "He's on the flight deck. Only level six security clearance and higher is allowed."

Janeway leaned forward, lowered her voice and said, "Oh I assure you that I have security six and higher, don't worry, Ensign. If you'll just point the way..."

The ensign finally looked up, blanching when she noticed the pips on Janeway's collar.

"I'm sorry, Admiral," the ensign said hastily. She stood up. "I'll take you out there myself."

"Thank you. I appreciate that," Janeway said.

The ensign did not speak as she led Janeway down a long corridor. Pictures of famous pilots lined the whitewashed walls, including innovators and pilots like Amelia Earhart, Chuck Yeager, Sally Ride, John Kelly and Zefram Cochrane. There were also portraits of some of the early starships captains who had truly made their mark on Starfleet, such as Jonathan Archer, Christopher Pike, Robert April, and James Kirk.

A double-glass door at the end of the hallway led out onto the flight deck. Under the ensign's watchful eye, Janeway tapped in her security clearance quickly and the doors opened. Janeway stepped out into the bright sun, blinking as her eyes adjusted. She scanned the people milling the flight deck and then immediately picked out Tom Paris; in his black leather jacket, black pants and aviator glasses, Tom stood out against the backdrop of the gray-clad cadets who surrounded him.

Tom's decision to leave Starfleet a year after Voyager's return to the Alpha Quadrant had come both as a surprise and a disappointment to Kathryn Janeway. Granted, Tom had never been as absorbed with the Starfleet culture as his father had been, but Janeway had still believed that the young man had had an element of loyalty to the organization, in spite of his checkered past. In addition, Starfleet had commuted Tom's sentence shortly after their arrival and had even offered him a promotion to lieutenant commander, which Tom had curtly turned down.

Janeway also had to admit that Tom's decision came as a personal disappointment; she had assumed that Tom had found himself on Voyager, that he had finally found a purpose for himself. She had also thought this new found motivation of Tom's would be his driving ambition once they returned to Earth; she had been disappointed to learn otherwise. It had taken her a few days, after Tom had broken the news to her, to understand why he had chosen to leave Starfleet.

"I have to find my own way," Tom had told her then. "One that is not defined by my father, by Starfleet or even by-" he had stopped there but Janeway filled in the blanks herself. She had given Tom a chance and he had made the best of his opportunities on Voyager; now she needed to step back and let him continue the rest of the way on his own.

Whatever else, Janeway had to admit that teaching flight at Miramar was probably the next best thing Tom could have hit on; this way, Tom was able to work with some of the best pilots Starfleet Academy produced.

From her vantage point, Janeway had a clear view of Tom, despite the fact she could only hear traces of his words over the occasional roar of engines which filled the air. Tom was gesturing enthusiastically, his students leaning in ever so slightly, as if hanging on to every word. The animated expression on Tom's face reminded Janeway of the young man's passion for all things concerning flight. Not to mention, Janeway thought with a grin, how many times Tom had turned that same energetic focus on her, trying to convince her that dangerous shuttle maneuvers were necessary or certain modifications needed to be made to improve helm efficiency.

After a few minutes, the cadets dispersed and Tom, noting Janeway, lifted his hand in acknowledgement as he jogged towards her. The few cadets who did happen to pass by snapped to attention and Janeway relieved them with a crisp, "At ease."

"Admiral!" Paris exclaimed.

"How are you, Tom?" Janeway asked.

"Good, good. You? I haven't seen you in quite a while."

"Too long," Janeway said. She squeezed Tom's arm lightly. "I'm glad you could fit your old captain into your busy schedule. I hear your classes are constantly enrolled to capacity, not to mention there is a list at least a kilometer long of cadets waiting to get in."

Tom had the grace to blush. "They want the maverick instructor, I suppose."

If there was one word to describe the Tom Paris Kathryn Janeway had met over a decade previously, 'maverick' would be the appropriate one. Now, she wasn't quite sure.

"Well, it's quite an honor to be considered one of the most sought after instructors in the flight school," Janeway said. "I was pleased to hear the news."

Tom brushed away this last comment with a casual flip of his hand and Janeway caught the hint; some things, she understood, never changed, and among those were Tom's penchant for self-deprecation.

"I'm glad to see you, Admiral," Tom said, changing the subject. "You didn't say in your note what brought you to Miramar though."

"A retreat." Janeway's lips curved up into a smile. "Apparently, the Admiralty can think better away from the fog of San Francisco. We had meetings all morning and now, we

have the afternoon off. Most of my colleagues are on the golf course, but I think I prefer spending my free time here."

Tom laughed. "Half meeting time and half golf, if I've heard correctly." He shook his head. "I guess when you're an admiral, it's a perk of the job."

"I'm sure, as you must have heard from your father. Speaking of Owen, I understand he is on a deep space mission."

Tom's face took on that guarded expression that always manifested itself any time his father was mentioned. Kathryn knew that Tom's relationship with Owen Paris was tenuous at best and hostile at worse. Yes, things had improved between the two in the last few years, especially with a granddaughter underfoot to break the tension. However, years of animosity and hurt could not simply be swept under the rug so easily.

"Yes," Tom said. "A new spatial phenomenon out in the Sale sector, which apparently only occurs once every three hundred years. A once in a lifetime opportunity, you might say, to collect the data."

"That sounds like it's right up his alley." Janeway nodded. "I'd love to catch up with him. I've just come back from a trip myself."

"Really?" Tom looked interested.

"A goodwill mission, you might say. Touring planets devastated in the Dominion War. Reconstruction is slow and will perhaps take several decades before certain worlds, including Cardassia, are restored to their pre-war state," Janeway said seriously. Her trip had been more of a sight-seeing excursion, checking on progress and offering assistance from the Federation, but she could not forget the damage wrought to the planets she had visited; many treasures, including ancient architectural wonders, had been destroyed and it bothered her greatly that some culture may have been irretrievably lost.

"So I hear," Tom said. He turned slowly as a sleek craft powered into the sky, the force of its take-off shaking the ground. "Would you like to go get some coffee? It's a little warm out here and we might be more comfortable inside. It's the mess, so I can't vouch for the quality. I don't have access to the private officers' mess. You need to be in Starfleet for that."

Janeway didn't miss the slight note of scorn in Tom's voice, but she let it pass. Despite Starfleet's pardon, she did wonder if the events of Caldik Prime and Tom's brief stint with the Maquis (not to mention Auckland), were still held against the young man.

"Sounds like an offer I can't pass up," Janeway said lightly. She followed Tom back into the building and into the hallway with all of the portraits. She shivered as she stared at the stoic faces immortalized in gold frames. Tom noticed her reaction.

"I feel like they're all staring at me," Tom said finally. He chuckled. "I know, I know, silly, but it's true. Apparently the ghost of Yulepe Franik roams this hall."

"Yulepe Franik?" Janeway asked. "Of the Franik Maneuver?"

Tom nodded. "The one and the same. Legend has it that the day he died, he was on the flight deck preparing for a new move. Slow burning plasma for a gradual entry into atmosphere," Tom said. "He never got a chance to test his theory. The vessel he was pilot-testing crashed within seconds after take-off. It happened so quickly, he wasn't able to initiate a beam-out."

“And so now he roams this hall,” Janeway said. “Well, every building in Starfleet needs to have a ghost story or two to its credit, right?”

“I think it’s standard procedure that nearly every building at HQ had a ghost or two of its own,” Tom said as they turned into the mess hall. The room was mostly empty, with the exception of a group of cadets sitting at the far end, absorbed in their various manuals and PADDs. “Replicator coffee or brewed? I warn you, one is not necessarily better than the other.”

“Warning noted,” Janeway said. “Brewed coffee. I’ve had enough of replicators, what about you?”

Tom nodded. “I won’t argue with that.”

Janeway poured herself a mug of coffee and then stepped aside for Tom to fill his mug. “How is B’Elanna?”

Tom didn’t look up. “Fine. She’s pregnant.”

“Congratulations!” Janeway exclaimed. She had to admit to being startled; it seemed only yesterday when she had held a newborn Miral in her arms.

“Thanks,” Tom said. He smiled, a little shyly Janeway thought. “It wasn’t a surprise, not this time.” He indicated a table by the window. “Shall we sit?”

“When is she due?”

“She has another four months to go,” Tom said. “We think.” He pulled out a chair for Janeway before sitting down opposite her. “You know how it is with a hybrid pregnancy.”

Janeway cupped her hands around the mug, the heat warming her suddenly cold hands. “Boy or girl?”

“Don’t know,” Tom said. “She won’t let me find out. I told her that no matter what, the sex would be a surprise to us. It was just a question when.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. We just want a healthy baby.”

“I’m really happy to hear this,” Janeway said sincerely. “Is she still working?”

“Yes. You know B’Elanna. She could be dying and still insist on going to work,” Tom said. He looked up. “She’s working as a civilian contractor to the Starfleet Corps of Engineering.” He paused. “I’m planning to transfer to the flight school in San Francisco.”

“Why?” Janeway was surprised. Taking a position at the Academy’s main flight school in San Francisco was a noticeable step down for Tom, not to mention more frustrating as the students wouldn’t be of the caliber Tom had probably become accustomed to at Miramar.

“I think I should be with B’Elanna,” Tom explained. “I know, I know, it’s only a forty-five minute transport one way and I could beam over in cases of emergency, but I would just feel better if I was actually in San Francisco.”

“Is there something wrong with the baby?” Janeway asked carefully.

“No, no,” Tom said. “But you never know. With hybrid pregnancies, you can never tell. With Miral, it was something simple—a deviated spine. And B’Elanna was so healthy during that pregnancy, but—” his voice trailed off. Instinctively, Janeway reached over to cover Tom’s hand with hers. “She’s working long hours, Admiral, and Miral barely gets to see either of us with the kind of schedule we have. I want to be with them.”

“That’s understandable,” Janeway said quietly, but she

wondered if Tom knew how much he was giving up by transferring.

Almost as if Tom had read her mind, he said, “After I left Starfleet, you know they gave me a choice. Miramar or Utopia Planetia.” He grinned. “All of the latest craft are tested on Mars, you know that.”

“Your dream job,” Janeway said softly.

“But I turned it down because—” he shrugged— “three hours is a long time to travel one way. As it is, I don’t get to see B’Elanna now, and I can’t help but worry about...” Tom’s voice drifted off. He stared into his mug and then cleared his throat. “I never worried this much on Voyager. And we had more to worry about then, didn’t we?”

Janeway nodded. She couldn’t help but wonder if there was more to Tom’s decision to leave Miramar than he was letting on.

“I never worried about me,” he said. “Not after B’Elanna and I married. But when Joe Carey was killed—” he stopped and Janeway clenched her fingers into a fist tightly under the table. Tom cleared his throat and then continued, “I was the senior officer on that away mission. I should have been the one—”

“Tom.”

“No.” The young man shook his head. “Grace Carey no longer has a husband. Her sons don’t have a father. It should have been me. Sometimes, I look at Miral and I feel so selfish for being here and for not thinking about Joe enough.”

“Tom.” Janeway’s voice was harsh, even to her own ears. She had not been close to Joe Carey, but she had sincerely mourned his death. Every command decision which led to the death of a member of the crew invariably led to weeks of despair alternating with second-guessing. And no matter how many times she had lost someone under her command, the pain of loss had never eased. “What happened there was not your fault.”

“Perhaps.” Tom sighed. “I wish I could convince myself of that.”

“I know.”

“I guess you’re wondering what this has to do with B’Elanna,” Tom went on. “It’s just strange. I feel—” he looked up— “at loose ends.”

Janeway’s head jerked back as she focused on that single phrase, “at loose ends.” Boredom, when it came to Tom Paris, was never a good thing as it usually drove him to reckless behavior. In another instance, Tom had endangered his own life by using the bioneural interface on the shuttle he had named ‘Alice.’ There was also the time he had helped the Moneans against her direct orders to the contrary and not to mention the incident when he had been accused of murdering the husband of a woman he had been friendly with. Voyager had at least given Tom a way to channel his restlessness into purpose; Janeway doubted whether he had such an outlet here in his ‘settled’ life and it worried her to consider what this meant for his relationship with his wife.

“In what way?” Janeway asked carefully. She watched the man in front of her closely, wondering if he was going to tell her now that his marriage was a mistake, that he resented the ties of family, that his career decisions were now based on wife and children.

“On Voyager, I didn’t have to worry so much,” Tom said

quietly. “I knew where B’Elanna was and what she was doing all of the time. If I thought she was working too hard, I could go to Engineering and get her. And the Doctor was always nearby. I guess that’s what I miss most about Voyager. Proximity.”

Janeway felt her throat tighten as she stared at the man who had so ably helmed Voyager for seven years. ‘Proximity’ was euphemism for something else, Janeway knew—for the family they had created aboard Voyager. And she knew—and understood—all too well what Tom did not say: that reentry had been difficult for all of them.

“I know it’s a step down,” Tom went on. “But I think it’ll be worth it. And maybe, after the baby is a year old or so, I’ll come back here.”

He sounded cavalier, but Janeway knew the truth: once Tom left Miramar, it would be years before he would be considered for a position here again. In addition, a position at Utopia Planetia would be out of the question without the stepping stone that was Miramar.

At the same time, Janeway could understand the difficulty of Tom’s decision; she had faced a similar situation three years ago when she had accepted the promotion to admiral, understanding that this would mean she would not have the chance to command her own vessel again. It would mean that she would be negotiating treaties, making diplomatic appearances, assuaging hurt feelings, and the like. No, there would be none of her famed ‘saber rattling’ tactics in the admiralty and Janeway hated to admit that yes, she occasionally did regret her decision to accept the promotion, but she also knew she would be deluding herself that Starfleet would have allowed her to stay if she had not accepted the promotion.

“I think you’re doing the right thing,” Janeway told him. She smiled, recalling the angry sarcastic young man she had offered a deal to in Auckland. “You know, Tom, it’s been just over a decade since we first met. You’ve come a long way since then. You really have.”

“I could say the same about you,” Tom said. He sounded sincere enough. “You’re an admiral now and I can’t think of anyone who deserves the honor more.”

“Thank you, Tom,” Janeway said quietly. She sipped her coffee, silently reflecting that horrible as this so-called java was, it wasn’t half as horrid as some of the brews she had resorted to drinking while in the Delta Quadrant. “The promotion surprised me as much as you.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually take the promotion,” Tom said. He paused. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

But Janeway was intrigued by his remark, wondering if he would finally put into the words that nameless restlessness which would occasionally drive her to distraction. She carefully set the mug back down on the table. “Why do you say that?”

Tom shrugged. “Sitting behind a desk isn’t your style.”

“I don’t just sit behind a desk, Tom.”

“No, you get to go on goodwill tours, and if Starfleet really wants to reward you, they may let you negotiate the odd treaty.” Tom stopped speaking abruptly. “Sorry. That was out of line.”

Janeway remained completely still, her fingers curling protectively around the mug handle. In an even voice, she said, “Perhaps you’re right. But this is the way it is now.” She

laid the emphasis on the last word. “There is value in that, Tom.”

“Yes, but don’t you miss—” Tom leaned forward— “the thrill of commanding your own starship?”

Janeway drew back slightly. No one had asked her that question; instead, Starfleet Command had piled accolades on her and acted as if they had done her a huge favor, relieving her of the burdens of command. It had never dawned on them, that despite the hardships of the DQ, she had, in retrospect, enjoyed every minute of it.

“I don’t think I could ever have a command experience like Voyager again,” Janeway said slowly. “Anything else would pale in comparison.”

“So instead you decide to take a step backwards? I know you got an extra pip, but all of your experience—I’m just surprised that Starfleet didn’t want to parlay that into something more significant than diplomatic trips to soothe bruised egos,” Tom said earnestly.

“It’s not like that, Tom,” Janeway said sharply, even as she acknowledged the truth behind Tom’s words. “Experience or no, there comes a time in every person’s life when they have to move on. And that time for me is now.”

Tom ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the table. “Speaking of moving on, it seems I never talk to anyone from Voyager anymore, except for Harry and even his notes are few and far between. I don’t think anyone has had a problem moving on.”

Janeway could hear the sadness in his voice. Yes, some people had moved on better than others. Harry, for example, had received a well-deserved promotion and was serving a tour of duty on the *Livingston*. The Doctor was teaching at the Academy and had recently endured some rather painful upgrades to his holomatrix but the results—enhanced database and improved multitasking abilities—had benefited the EMH greatly. Tuvok had returned to Vulcan, while Seven and Chakotay had yet to settle down in one place. In addition, Naomi apparently was doing well in school as was Icheb, who had entered Starfleet Academy two years earlier.

“Tom,” Janeway said quietly, “are you happy?”

Tom appeared startled at the question. “What?”

“Are you happy?” Janeway asked. She leaned forward, anticipating his response.

Tom considered and then nodded. “Yes.”

“And you would be, even if you left here and went to San Francisco?” she pressed.

“Yes.” The reply was strong and confident.

Janeway settled back in her seat. “Even though you know that San Francisco will never compare to Miramar?”

“Yes,” Tom said, an edge creeping into his voice.

Janeway pushed her empty coffee cup aside. “We give up a lot when we make certain decisions, Tom, in order to get something else. I know, it’s not necessarily what we think we deserve.” She smiled. “Or even what others think we deserve. But in the end, you have to be comfortable with the path you’ve chosen.”

Tom contemplated his fingers for a second before asking, “Do you think Starfleet promoted you because they didn’t know what to do with you?”

“That’s a strange question.” Janeway leaned back in her chair. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“You were a hero when we came home,” Tom stated. “Do you think that bothers the other admirals?”

“My colleagues, you mean?” Her voice echoed loudly in her ears. “It’s not like that, Tom.”

“Sometimes, people make comments about the fact that I was on Voyager,” Tom said slowly. “We missed the Dominion War, you see, and in a way, that’s unforgivable. It doesn’t matter that we faced our own dangers in the DQ, but more that we weren’t here. Suddenly, we were the heroes, the celebrated ones, and the officers who died during the War were all but forgotten when we came home.”

Without a trace of irony in her voice, Janeway replied, “I know.” She thought of the rumors she had heard, of the captains who had fought bravely against the Dominion, and yet had not received a promotion. How, Janeway wondered, could the two experiences possibly be compared?

Tom pushed his chair back. “It was good seeing you, Captain—” he paused, smiling slightly. “I mean, Admiral. A slight change in title, but still hard to get used to.”

Janeway bit her lip; she knew exactly what Tom meant.

“I’ve got to get back to prepare for my next class. You know these hotshot pilots. They are chomping at the bit to get off the ground,” Tom said.

Janeway nodded and then smiled as an unfocused memory of a young man pleading to be allowed to join in an alien race for peace came to mind. “That description reminds me of someone I once knew.”

Tom glanced at her curiously as she rose.

“For what it’s worth, Tom, I miss Voyager more than you could possibly know. I had the luck to command one of the finest crews in Starfleet and truth be told, no matter where Starfleet assigns me, they can’t take that experience away from me.” She felt her eyes misting, so she paused for a moment to clear her throat. Janeway considered reaching out to touch Tom, but held back for reasons she could not understand. “I’m proud of you.”

Tom swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

They stared at each other for another second before Janeway nodded in the direction of the door.

“I think you said you had a class to teach,” Janeway said. “I can find my own way out.”

“Are you sure?” Tom sounded reluctant to let her go. “You know admirals are never unaccompanied...”

“If I wanted to be ‘accompanied,’ I would have stayed on the golf course,” Janeway said. “I also wouldn’t want Miramar’s most popular instructor to be late for his class.” Janeway impulsively reached to squeeze Tom’s forearm. “Besides, I did a stint here years ago and I’d love to take a minute or two to relive old memories. Tell B’Elanna I said hello.” Impulsively, she added, “Everything is going to be fine.”

“I will. Thank you for stopping by. And—” Tom lowered his voice— “I never thanked you for all you did for me. I’m not very good with the ‘mushy’ stuff, but I want you to know that I am grateful. Please, come and see us soon. I know B’Elanna would want to visit with you.”

“I will.”

They walked to the door of the mess together and parted there. Janeway made her way back towards the corridor filled with the portraits. She paused for a moment, staring at the

great names in Starfleet history, before heading out into the bright sunlight.

## Fire and Rain

*Disclaimer: Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters are the property of Paramount. No copyright infringement is intended.*

*Author’s Note: Part of the “Glory Days” Universe, a look at our favorite characters in the post-Voyager era. Many thanks to Seema for her help, input and enthusiasm in turning this into a full-fledged series. Yes, that means there are more stories to come—from both of us.*

*Time frame: one year after “Do The Walls Come Down” (by Seema), shortly before “Glory Days”*

B’Elanna Torres hesitated on the doorstep and cursed herself for being a coward.

As far as the eye could see, everything surrounding her was red—the sands, the sky, even the dwelling she stood in front of, built of native stone. The heat rising off the desert was oppressive, despite the Klingon heritage which made her prefer higher temperatures than her Human husband found comfortable. On top of all that, the thin Vulcan air left her gasping. The relentless wind, occasionally dropping slightly but never subsiding completely, felt as though it were whipping every atom of moisture from her body. She took a deep breath which seemed to sear her lungs, and jabbed at the outside signal.

The door opened instantly. “Greetings, Lieutenant Torres,” said Tuvok.

The planned “hello” died on her lips, unuttered, as she was flustered by his unexpected mode of address. “I’m not a lieutenant anymore—I’m just a civilian contractor with the Starfleet Corps of Engineers,” she corrected him automatically, while at the same time trying to conceal her surprise at his attire. Though why she should have expected to see him in a uniform instead of the traditional robes he wore was on a par with him calling her by her rank. Neither one of them was in Starfleet anymore; somehow it was easier for her to accept it about herself than of him. Or Tom, for that matter.

He stepped aside to allow her entry into his home. “Of course, B’Elanna. I believe the expression is ‘old habits die hard’?”

She gave him an abashed smile; she hadn’t meant to sound so abrupt. “They certainly do,” she said, taking in the decor. It suited Tuvok, she thought with surprise. Though sparsely furnished, the clean white walls and sleek furniture had a welcoming ambiance to them. The temperature was noticeably cooler than it had been outside as well, for which she was very grateful.

He didn’t miss her reaction to his domicile. “May I offer you something to drink?”

She suddenly became aware that she was staring, rather rudely. Nervousness was no excuse for her lack of manners, she silently scolded herself. “Yes, please, some water would be very appreciated.”

As if on cue, a woman entered carrying a tray of tall glasses. “You may of course have water, but I believe you will find the reneen tea quite refreshing as well,” she said to B’Elanna.

Tuvok inclined his head. “My wife, T’Pel.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“As am I,” responded T’Pel. Her face was unlined, her bearing serene. “However, we met once before, at the Starfleet reception following Voyager’s return.”

“Did we?” B’Elanna racked her brain trying to remember. Many things about that time were a blur—there had been so much to take in, from the sheer wonder and excitement at finally being home, to apprehension over what was going to happen next. Most of her memories of that time were confused impressions of crowds staring at her everywhere she went, talking, laughing, asking endless questions—forever asking questions. It had been a relief when their ‘celebrity’ status faded, and eventually even Starfleet’s review boards had left them alone.

“You doubtless had other things on your mind at the time,” T’Pel said matter-of-factly as she sat down, her manner showing no hint of being insulted. She gestured to her guest. “Please take a seat. There is no need to remain standing.”

B’Elanna sat down on a chair that turned out to be more comfortable than it initially appeared and thirstily gulped her water. At her hostess’ expectant look, she then took a polite sip of the tea, not really wanting something hot right now. To her surprise, the tea sent a feeling of coolness through her in a way the water had not. She caught a hint of ginger and some other spices she couldn’t quite identify. She looked up to see T’Pel watching her. The Vulcan woman’s expression didn’t change, but it almost appeared as though she were smiling.

“I will bid you both good evening,” she said and rose gracefully to her feet.

“I don’t mean to drive you from your home,” B’Elanna said hastily.

“Not at all—I had plans to meet my daughter and daughter-in-law this evening.” T’Pel glanced questioningly at her husband. “What is the Terran expression?”

“Girl’s night out,” Tuvok supplied. “So you see, B’Elanna, your presence, far from being an imposition, has saved me from spending an evening alone.” He added, “I was most pleased when you called from the spaceport. It was fortuitous that your flight was delayed.”

‘Fortuitous’ hadn’t been B’Elanna’s first reaction to the development. She had been attending an engineering conference on Alphacent over the past week. At first she had relished getting away from San Francisco and the papers presented had been interesting. But as the days went by she found herself growing restless, impatient to be back home with her family. This was the first time she’d been away for such an extended period since before the baby was born. Joey was in good hands, she knew, as was Miral, but still...And it wasn’t just her children that she missed. Every time she’d spoken to Tom she’d felt a rising feeling of uneasiness, though he was obviously coping just fine. But there was something about the look in his eyes during an unguarded moment, a faint note in his voice, that made her wish to be home.

When she’d booked her flight, it hadn’t registered fully that her return transport had a brief layover on Vulcan. She’d filed the fact away as unimportant. Unimportant, that is, until she’d actually arrived, and the expected few hours had turned into a projected delay of 18 hours. She’d attempted to secure passage on another vessel leaving sooner, but there was none to be had. An ion storm in the system had essentially

grounded all traffic on or off the planet. Irritated, she realized she was stuck on Vulcan, at least till the next morning. Faced with an empty evening looming ahead, she’d obeyed a sudden impulse to call the one person on the planet that she knew.

She had been surprised when Tuvok responded to her out-of-the-blue call by immediately inviting her to his home, and now was surprised again by her reception. She’d been thinking of a quick, ‘kill some time’ type of conversation at a neutral setting. Instead she was being confronted with full Vulcan hospitality.

She watched as Tuvok and T’Pel exchanged a few quiet words, and then Tuvok extended two fingers of his hand. T’Pel pressed her own to them briefly—the Vulcan equivalent of a peck on the cheek, B’Elanna knew.

As soon as the door closed behind his wife, Tuvok turned to his guest. “Dinner will be ready shortly.”

All at once she became aware of a delicious aroma in the air. “You didn’t need to go to all this trouble,” B’Elanna protested. Her stomach chose that moment to rumble in a way that belied her words.

“It was no trouble at all,” he said.

He allowed her to help him carry the dishes to the table. They worked together well; she reflected on their past interactions in the Maquis as well on Voyager, how his presence always made her feel more relaxed. When she’d been going through a particularly rough period during the fifth year of their journey, Tuvok had been the one to help her find her calm center. Perhaps that was why she’d had the urge to seek him out now. There was also the undeniable fact that he was the longest married person she knew.

As it sometimes did at odd moments, her worries about Tom surfaced again, how much he’d given up for her sake. In particular, his decision of a year ago—turning down a plum assignment in order to stay closer to home—concerned her. That someone with his talent, his skills, could simply walk away from the golden opportunities that beckoned was incomprehensible. One day, she feared, Tom was going to discover just how far off the track his career had foundered; what if it was too late for him to recapture what he’d voluntarily given up?

She was also worried about the children and how he was coping with them—he had reassured her the last time they spoke, but she wondered how much to believe when Tom said that everything was ‘fine.’

She looked up to see Tuvok watching her. “Is the food to your liking, B’Elanna?”

“It’s wonderful,” she reassured him hastily, and took another mouthful of the vegetarian stew. It was quite good, she suddenly realized—she had just been too preoccupied to pay much attention to what she was eating. Though she usually preferred meat, the tangy dish—filled with vegetables she wasn’t familiar with—was more than satisfying.

“I know I am not in Mr. Neelix’s league when it comes to cooking,” Tuvok said. Was that a glint of humor in his eye?

B’Elanna said dryly, “No, you’re better.”

“Neelix did everything with equal measures of exuberance,” Tuvok remarked. “Including spicing his dishes.”

B’Elanna smiled, remembering the Talaxian’s exuberance. He had taken his role as ‘morale officer’ so seriously. With a pang, it occurred to her just how much she missed him. And

from subtle hints in Tuvok's manner, she guessed that he did as well.

They continued making small talk over the meal, sketching in what they were each doing now. Tuvok asked several pertinent questions about her work, and B'Elanna launched into a full description. "And so," she said, finishing up, "Some would say that giving up a commission in Starfleet was a bad idea, but with my work as a civilian contractor for the Starfleet Engineering Corps., I'm actually on the cutting edge of developing new technologies—more so than I would be on board a starship."

"There has been a virtual revolution in propulsion and warp drives, due in no small part to what Voyager brought back and you yourself worked on," Tuvok agreed.

She realized suddenly that she'd been monopolizing the conversation. "And what about you, Tuvok? What have you been doing with yourself these last few years?"

"I have been leading a quiet life," he answered. "For the first time in a long while, I have the leisure to read, to meditate, to tend to my orchids." B'Elanna remembered that there had been rumors around the time of Voyager's return that Tuvok had been suffering from an undisclosed illness. She studied him carefully. If he had, he had certainly recovered by now. In fact, she could not ever remember him looking so well. The faint line of worry he habitually had between his brows was gone. As if echoing her thoughts, he continued, "I have learned to prize quiet and reflection—as a child my mother had wondered if I would ever learn to be still and appreciate stillness," he added wryly.

She was sure that he was enjoying his new lifestyle, but... "Somehow, I hadn't thought of you leaving Starfleet," she said.

"I have already served for many years," Tuvok pointed out. "The equivalent of a lengthy career—even more so, if you count my first tour of duty aboard the *Excelsior* under Captain Hikaru Sulu."

"You left Starfleet after that initial posting?" she asked. She had only the haziest knowledge of his career, but it was a fact he had been only a lieutenant when Voyager was first lost in the Badlands. Based on an uninterrupted span of years of service, surely he would have achieved a higher rank previously.

"Yes, I left...but returned again some years later. In addition to other posts aboard starships, I served briefly as an instructor at the Academy, as well as a tactical advisor attached to HQ and the office of Admiral Finnegan, before being assigned to the *Billings*." He paused. "That was the first vessel upon which I served under Captain Janeway."

She perked up her ears at this as she realized another gap in her knowledge—the details of his past service with Janeway. "I remember a lot of us thought at the beginning that Voyager was her first command."

Tuvok shook his head. "Her first command was the *Billings*, as a brevet captain. It was a science survey vessel, as was the *Nobel* which followed. I was assigned to the *Billings* as its tactical officer."

B'Elanna listened, amused, as Tuvok filled her in on the details of Janeway's first command and the board of review which followed—and the circumstances that led to his assignment. "So Captain Janeway assumed you were put there to

keep her on the straight and narrow."

"Correct, though, that is arguably an impossible task." B'Elanna bit back a giggle at that all-too-accurate statement but quickly sobered as Tuvok added, "Perhaps not, but certainly there have been times when it was more difficult than others."

"I'm sure that Janeway always appreciated your help, especially in the Delta Quadrant years," B'Elanna said gently. She resisted the urge to take his hand and press it comfortingly. This is a Vulcan, and Vulcans don't like to be touched.

"They were most difficult," he said quietly. B'Elanna had a sudden recollection of Tuvok standing diffidently by the captain's side during encounters with a hostile alien race, ready to step in as needed, remembered too how the Vulcan always gave Janeway his unequivocal support whenever she was faced with a particularly difficult decision. With a faint note of emotion in his voice, he went on, "It was hardest of all for the captain, bearing as she did sole responsibility for our welfare. All I wanted was to assist her in any way I could."

Chakotay had said something very similar to her one time, about trying to make the captain's burden easier. B'Elanna shifted uneasily in her seat, not wanting to think about Voyager's first officer and his very complicated position within the command team. It brought back too many unpleasant memories. "Were you sure we'd make it back home?"

Tuvok was silent for a moment. "I knew that if anyone could do it, it would be the captain. Or else she would die trying."

B'Elanna heartily agreed. Sometimes she wondered if in fact that would have been what Janeway wanted most of all—to sacrifice herself for the sake of her ship and die content with the knowledge that she'd gotten her people home and would no longer have to struggle. With an effort, she crushed those thoughts with speech. "Have you heard from the Admiral lately?"

"Yes, I have."

"How is she doing?" B'Elanna asked, her voice just a little too casual. The last interaction, if you could call it that, she'd had with Janeway had been when Tom had met the Admiral for coffee almost a year ago. "I remember how surprised we all were when we heard about her promotion." She gave a shaky laugh. "I somehow can't see Janeway without a ship."

"Nor can I," Tuvok said quietly. He rose and began gathering up the dishes and utensils from the table.

B'Elanna got up as well, and made herself useful. She moved the last of the dirty dishes into the recycler and watched as Tuvok placed the small amount of leftover food in the stasis unit. Behind him, the sunset could be seen. Vulcan's sky was a faded orange, and her sister planet T'Khut was rising. A swollen crimson orb larger than Earth's moon, it was locked in synchronous orbit around Eradani 40, Vulcan's star. B'Elanna thought it had an ominous look; in the dying rays of the sun, the sands were dyed a darker shade of red, the color of Human blood.

His tasks completed, Tuvok ushered her back into the sitting room. B'Elanna knew she should take her leave, head back to the environs of the spaceport and try to find a room for the night, but she was strangely reluctant to go, and Tuvok appeared to be in no hurry for her to do so. It was comforting to sit here and relax in the twilight, listening to the sounds

of the ever-present wind.

The room slowly darkened, but Tuvok did not call for lights. He sat half-hidden in the shadows, his hands steepled together in a familiar pose. How many times had she sat with him like this in his quarters, learning to meditate, to control her aggressive feelings? All that was missing was the flickering of the firepot, but the unholy glow of T'Khut outside more than made up for it.

Their conversation veered back to the Torres-Paris family and more importantly, her work. Unlike their earlier conversation, this time B'Elanna found herself voicing her fears and hopes—thoughts she had never even mentioned to Tom.

“To the casual observer, it would appear that you have attained what you desire,” Tuvok said, presumably referring to her career.

“Yes, it should seem that way, shouldn't it?” she said, and her lips twisted in an ironic smile. “I'm looked on as one of the leading lights in the field, but I'm still painfully conscious of the fact that I never even finished the Academy. Very little of my knowledge came from formal education—unlike the engineers I work with on a daily basis.”

“But why should that matter?” Tuvok asked, quite logically. “Is your basic understanding any less than theirs?” At her quick shake of the head, he repeated, “Then why does this matter?”

“It shouldn't, and yet...” B'Elanna paused for a moment, trying to collect her thoughts. “For whatever reason, I'm still trying to fill in the gaps in my background. Just in case someone challenges me, to make sure that I really do have all the answers. That I do have the right to be there, even if behind my back they refer to me as ‘the former Maquis.’” She forestalled his next comment, “No, I don't know that they call me that—but that's how I feel.”

He made no answer, simply waited for her to continue.

Maybe it was the darkness that made it easier to confess how she was feeling. “Tom doesn't understand this,” she said in a rush. “He wonders why I feel I have to keep on striving. I think he sees this insecurity as a weakness.”

“Is it?”

“Maybe...don't get me wrong, most of the time I don't dwell on this, those little niggling doubts are pushed into the background, and at others...” her voice trailed off. A familiar wave of guilt rose over the long hours she put into her job, away from her young children. Was that part of the reason Tom had chosen to give up his career for the sake of his family? Was he oh-so-subtly reproaching her for not doing the same? “But Tom, well, Tom is a different story.” Hesitantly, she went on, “I sometimes wonder if perhaps he is resentful that my career is going somewhere whereas his has seemed to stagnate. Granted it was his choice to step off the fast-track, but I can't help but wonder if he is truly happy. He says he is, but I'm not so sure.”

“Are you happy?” A strange question coming from a Vulcan, but B'Elanna knew what Tuvok meant.

She considered. “I think I am. But then I think about the sacrifice that Tom has made for me and our family and I wonder if I should have accepted it.”

Tuvok said quietly, “Sometimes we have to allow the ones we love to do things for us, although it may not be what we ourselves would have chosen.” He added, “Accepting the gift

is often harder than making the offering.”

A sudden crash outside made her jump. She looked up in time to see a large tree branch strike the window. She became aware of a low moaning sound that hadn't been there before and wondered what it was. And then she knew—the wind was picking up. The windows rattled ominously. Just then, the room was illuminated in a sudden flash as lightning forked across the sky.

“We are in for a major storm,” Tuvok said, getting up to fasten the windows more securely. “I do not think it wise for you to attempt to return to the spaceport in this weather. You are welcome to spend the night with us.”

“I couldn't impose,” she protested.

“It is not an imposition. What time is your flight?”

“It's not till tomorrow morning,” she admitted. “I was going to look for a hotel.”

“You are welcome to stay,” he repeated.

“What about T'Pel?” she asked, struck by a sudden thought. “Aren't you concerned about her, being out in this storm?”

Tuvok raised his eyebrow. “My wife returned some time ago. Did you not hear the sound of the flutter?”

“No, I didn't,” she said. “I guess I didn't notice it above the roar of the wind.” She didn't mention that T'Pel hadn't come into the room, but doubtless the woman hadn't wished to disturb them. Perhaps Tuvok had communicated something to that effect along their bond. B'Elanna didn't know much about Vulcan mating practices, but did know that a bonded couple shared a mental link of some sort. The idea was at once fascinating, as well as more than a little frightening. To share your innermost thoughts with someone on a regular basis, as naturally as exchanging words—but with less ability to hide.

Tuvok was speaking again and she made an effort to pay attention. “So there is nothing improper in your remaining.” She forced a smile at his attempted levity.

They watched the storm in silence, and indeed any attempt at conversation would have been impossible. The wind howled and tore, and the fiery lightning stabbed repeatedly, arcing across the sky in flashes that lit up the darkness to brighter than day. The ferocity was immense, but here on the edge of the desert there was nothing but wide open spaces, nothing to be battered down and destroyed.

And then, as abruptly as it had gathered, the storm was spent, and it was quiet, the wind once more a muted presence on the edges of consciousness and hearing.

She thought once more about what Tuvok had said before the storm struck, about sacrifices and those who make them. Suddenly, she said, “If Janeway had kept her command, would all of us have been able to stay together? Would we all be happy?” Her voice cracked on the last word. She remembered how lost Harry Kim had been after their return, when he received his new orders—how he had felt at the prospect of serving under another captain. Ignoring the fact that some of Voyager's crew had by their own actions removed themselves from the ‘family circle’, she added, “I know that Tom would probably have signed up with her in a heartbeat.”

She expected Tuvok to tell her that her statement was illogical, to counter that it was Tom's own decision to give up Starfleet, for reasons that went beyond the simple fact that Voyager—the home and safe haven to all of them for seven

years—was no more. That there was no going back. That all of them had had their reasons for moving on, as did the captain herself.

But Tuvok said none of those things. Instead, he quietly responded, “As would I.”

She stared at him in surprise. For years she’d heard about the friendship between Tuvok and Janeway, but until this moment she had never really understood its depth, or just how much Tuvok cared about his former captain. And after all this time she was still surprised to detect the emotional undercurrent in him. Even though she knew better, she too had bought into the premise that Vulcans were incapable of feeling.

Tuvok made a quick gesture with his hand, and illumination filled the room. Her eyes watered at the sudden shift. When she was able, she looked at Tuvok once more. Whatever storm had stirred within him was gone, and outwardly he was as he always appeared—calm, imperturbable. Had she imagined what she’d seen? And then she looked closer, and saw that she had not.

“Would you care to visit my greenhouse?” he said.

The apparent non-sequitur left her baffled for a moment, and then she understood. His orchids. She exhaled deeply, welcoming the change in subject to something less intense. “Of course.” She forced a smile. “I’d like to see what you’ve been spending so much time on.”

He led her through a corridor in the opposite direction away from the kitchen. She had the impression of several doors on either side, which presumably led to the family’s sleeping quarters. He stopped before a particularly sturdy barrier and keyed in a quick series of commands. The heavy panel slid aside. He gestured for her to precede him.

As she stepped across the threshold, she was simultaneously aware of a delicate fragrance in the air as well as an increase in humidity. She stopped in delight, taking in the many low tables covered with greenery. In contrast to the harsh and barren landscape outside, this small room, its walls constructed of gently glowing panels, was teeming with life.

Tuvok stood before a pot which held an exquisite pale pink bloom. “This is my prize specimen,” he informed her.

“As in prize-winning?”

“It placed first in the regional horticultural show last week,” he said, a barely discernible note of pride in his voice.

“It’s lovely,” she exclaimed. At his nod, she reached out and lightly stroked the velvety petals.

The atmosphere in the greenhouse was peaceful. B’Elanna closed her eyes and breathed deeply of the scented air. She became aware of a gentle rain upon her face and glanced up at the ceiling, noting the condensation coils evenly spaced among the rafters, hearing their faint hum. She could understand why Tuvok found solace here. Suddenly envious, she wondered if any of the rest of them would be as fortunate.

As if he’d read her thoughts, he suddenly said, “Some decisions are made for the greater good, B’Elanna. However that is perceived at the time.”

She was startled, and then slowly, she nodded with understanding. “And some decisions are continually renewed.”

“As situations change, so do our responses adjust accordingly,” he agreed. “Even if it is as simple as choosing not to change—and keeping faith with the ones we love.”

B’Elanna exhaled deeply, feeling as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

*Afterword: details about Janeway’s and Tuvok’s early careers, and their pre-Voyager association, comes in equal parts from canon, “Mosaic” by Jeri Taylor, and the wonderful fanfic by m.c. moose.*

## Latitude

*Feedback: Much appreciated at seemag1@yahoo.com*

*Disclaimer: Paramount’s creation—I’m just picking up where they left off.*

*Note: This is another addition in the “Glory Days” universe and takes place between “Fire and Rain” and “Glory Days”, both stories written by Rocky.*

*Information regarding Tom’s pre-Maquis and pre-Voyager days is taken from “Pathways” by Jeri Taylor.*

*Thanks to Rocky for the excellent beta and for putting up with my nagging < g >.*

“Latitude between me and you  
You’re a straight line of distance  
A cold stretch of black across blue  
Latitude”

—Elton John & Bernie Taupin

Tom Paris’ fingers fanned out against the cool glass. He stared down at the docking ring directly below, watching a Bolian freighter lurch uncertainly towards the airlock. Ungainly and inelegant as those vessels were, Tom knew that in less than five seconds the freighter would glide smoothly into the embrace of the station’s docking clamps.

As a child, Tom had been endlessly fascinated by docking procedures as well as anything remotely connected to flight. He had once spent an entire afternoon here in this very observation room watching ships come and go; his father eventually had to drag him away kicking and screaming. Today, the observation room on Utopia Planetia was a welcome distraction as he waited for his connecting shuttle to Starbase 4, where he planned to attend a series of conferences on the latest advances in flight technology.

The Bolian freighter docked, its massive weight causing the station to shudder slightly—a movement that probably went unnoticed by the majority of the people thronging the decks of the station; the inertial dampeners, responsible for the rotation of the station, compensated. But Tom, his senses finely attuned to all things flight-related, noticed.

He turned his head slightly as a sleek little vessel swooped down gracefully from the upper pylons of Utopia Planetia’s docking station. For a tense moment, Tom felt light-headed.

He had once flown a ship like that. How proud he had been when he first slipped into the pilot’s seat and grasped the controls. He remembered that the ship had felt like a natural extension of his body and it had thrilled him to no end to be flying one of Starfleet’s most nimble spacecraft, not to mention one of the most technologically advanced.

That had been nearly fifteen years ago.

Caldik Prime.

It had been years since he had thought about that watershed event in his life. Oh yes, the first year on Voyager, everyone knew him for Caldik Prime. He had borne their disdain with an outward shielding of good humor and charm; inside, he had felt crippled and broken. Was this what it would be like for the next seventy years? he had wondered. Knowing how much both the Starfleet and Maquis factions aboard distrusted him, Tom feared that he would be a pariah on this ship.

Not that he blamed either side for their feelings towards him; if their positions had been reversed, Tom might have felt the same. He was aware that the Starfleet members held those who falsified reports—as he had, after Caldik Prime—in low regard, especially when said incident had resulted in the deaths of three cadets. In addition, his time with the Maquis had rendered him a traitor to the Federation. And the Maquis, well, they didn't have much use for a pilot who had bailed on them in his first crucial mission, not to mention the fact that now he was here on Voyager, looking to turn them in.

But things had slowly changed for him on Voyager. Under Janeway's tutelage, Tom had managed to regain his confidence. Thanks to the fact he had saved Chakotay's life on the Ocampan world, a cool truce had sprung up between the two men, a relief to Tom who had seriously thought that Chakotay would kill him when they first locked eyes on Voyager's bridge. Then there was Harry, who had offered his friendship unconditionally, and B'Elanna, who slowly came around and reciprocated his feelings for her. During the seven years Voyager spent in the Delta Quadrant, tensions between the Starfleet and Maquis crewmembers had eased into almost nothing. They became one crew with one mission and one captain.

Tom eyed the little ship again. Its form had been slightly updated in the last fifteen years. The nacelles were narrower, he noticed, and placed further up. The body of the ship was more rounded than before, the boxy backside having finally been redesigned. It had been an attractive ship before, but the redesign made it look more sleek and stylish. But at this very moment, Tom had no desire to fly it.

Too many memories, he thought. Ever since the official case on Caldik Prime had been closed, Tom had not spoken about Caldik Prime to anyone. Not even B'Elanna. She had not asked and he had not offered. In a way, he was grateful for her silence on the subject; he hadn't realized how much the incident still bothered him.

"Daddy!"

Tom turned automatically even though he knew very well his children were back in San Francisco with B'Elanna. Still, he couldn't help himself. A little boy, who looked to be about five years old, ran directly to the window, nearly knocking into Tom. The boy didn't even seem to notice Tom's presence as he clambered on top of the bench the station personnel had placed there especially for the convenience of small children. An apologetic-looking young man dressed in a Starfleet uniform followed. Tom noted the yellow turtleneck and the two pips on the man's collar.

"Look at all the ships, Daddy!" The little boy's voice pitched high with excitement. He pressed his fingers and face against the glass, his warm breath causing the windows to

fog. "Look!"

Tom moved to the side so the father could step in to stand next to his son.

"I'm sorry," the young man said to Tom. "Keep your voice down, Robbie. You don't want to bother the other people here."

"He's not bothering me," Tom said easily. He smiled. "On the contrary."

The lieutenant gave Tom the once over and then smiled in understanding. "You have children?"

"Two," Tom said. "A daughter who is five and thinks she's ten and a son who just turned one."

"Ah. This is Robbie's first visit to the observation dock. I'm afraid he's getting a little carried away."

"I remember the first time my father brought me here," Tom said. "I must have been about the same age as your son. The afternoon we spent here changed my life. I was determined to fly just like the hotshot Starfleet pilots." Tom smiled at the memory. He had been absolutely enthralled by the graceful little fighter jets that patrolled the outer perimeter of the station.

"You're in Starfleet?" The young man eyed Tom's civilian garb with curiosity.

"Not on active duty any more," Tom said. "I'm a flight instructor at the Academy. San Francisco campus. With a family, it's hard to find a posting that keeps you all together and I'm not necessarily sure that I want to raise my children on a starship. At one point, we didn't think we'd have a choice, but now that we do, I think it's better to keep them on terra firma as long as possible." He didn't mention that he could have had a position here on Planetia Utopia, but had decided to stay closer to home. The view in San Francisco wasn't as good as this one, but the other rewards more than made up for what he had given up.

"I can understand that. I got lucky. I'm stationed in San Francisco as well. Not the most exciting of assignments, but it allows me to get home in time for dinner with the family." The lieutenant stuck out his hand. "Stewart Dawson," he said. His eyes narrowed. "You look familiar. Have we met before?"

Tom shook his head. "I doubt it." He hesitated slightly; he had grown wary of strangers since Voyager had returned, since he was always suspicious of their motives. "Tom Paris."

Dawson's eyes lit up with recognition. "Paris. Tom Paris. I've heard that name somewhere."

Here it comes, Tom thought with slight irritation. Here is where they talk about Voyager, ask questions about the Borg and what it was like to serve under Captain Janeway. He braced himself for what he knew would be an onslaught of questions.

"You were on the Copernicus, weren't you?" Dawson asked.

Tom blinked. Now this was unexpected. "The Copernicus?"

"Under Captain Shipley."

Ah yes, the Copernicus. His one tour of duty before he had turned himself in over the events of Caldik Prime. The ship had been orbiting Betazed when Tom's guilt over Caldik Prime had caused him to break down, leaving him incapable of functioning, let alone carrying out his duties.

Yet *another* thing Tom hadn't thought about in years.

"Yes," Tom said. He was surprised at how strong his voice sounded.

"I was an ensign. Lower decks." Dawson made a face. "You arranged parties on the holodeck, didn't you?"

"That sounds about right," Tom said cautiously. The Copernicus, an Oberth-class ship, had carried a crew complement of about 80; it was possible his paths had crossed with Dawson's at least a couple times. "I hosted a couple parties, once or twice, I think." He kept his voice deliberately cool.

Robbie was tugging on his father's hand and Dawson turned back to his son, pointing out a detail on the ship Tom had been eyeing earlier. "See how the nacelles are close to the body of the ship? See how slim it is? That makes it fly better and go faster than the other ships."

The little boy clapped his hands. "How fast, Daddy?"

"This fast." Dawson grabbed Robbie and spun him around in the air. The little boy's feet flew out and Tom stepped quickly out of the way. Dawson put his giggling son back down before turning to face Tom. "If I recall correctly, you're a pilot, right?"

"Not anymore," Tom said curtly. His voice sounded foreign to him, faraway almost as if an echo.

"Weren't you...?" Dawson stopped suddenly, as if he had finally connected the dots, realizing that Tom was someone more than an ensign who hosted parties on the holodeck. "I remember now, you were the helmsman for beta shift..." Dawson stopped suddenly, as if he had finally connected the dots, realizing the circumstances that led to Tom's change in status. "Caldik Prime."

"Yes," Tom said warily.

"I remember now how shocked we all were when the news came out. I couldn't believe—" Dawson stopped suddenly, his expression changing slightly. "Is that why you're no longer in Starfleet?"

"No," Tom said. "As I mentioned before, my reasons for leaving active duty are purely personal."

"Sorry," Dawson said. He shook his head. "I shouldn't have made that assumption."

"It's all right," Tom said, even though it really wasn't. He felt uneasy, light-headed, and more than anything, he wanted to escape. "It was a long time ago."

"It was an accident," Dawson said sympathetically. His tone of voice implied that he wanted to be Tom's new best friend. "And weren't you on—"

"Look, if you don't mind," Tom cut him off, "I'd rather not talk about it. And if you'll excuse me, I've got a shuttle to catch and my gate is on the other side of the station." It was a white lie, but Tom had to get away.

"Yes, of course, my apologies."

Tom left the observation deck and made his way down to the waiting area of the station. A quick check of the chronometer displayed prominently on the sleek metal walls showed that he had another three hours before his shuttle would leave for Starbase 4. A long time, Tom thought grimly as he slipped onto an empty stool at the counter in the LeMontet Grill and Bar, and once he arrived at the starbase, all he had to look forward to was a conference on the latest advances in helm and navigational technologies.

It occurred to him that he was missing Miral's first dance recital for a conference he didn't even want to go to.

"What's your pleasure?" The bartender was a sullen arachnid with dusky purple skin and black eyes. All of her eight bony wrists were occupied in preparing various beverages. A light purple fuzz covered all of her appendages; hair of the same hue cascaded from her narrow head.

"A beer," Tom said. "The real stuff, please, no synthahol." It was a rare request for him, but he felt jittery and needed something to calm his nerves.

"Sure, coming right up."

A long time.

The phrase rang in Tom's ears as his gaze focused on the rows of bottles lining the shelves directly behind the bartender. A long time since he had had something other than synthahol, a long time since he'd had this much time to himself, a long time away from B'Elanna and the kids, a long time since he'd been the man Dawson had thought he recognized.

The bartender put the beer down in front of him, slamming it hard enough that some of the foam bubbled over the side. Tom lifted it carefully, inhaling the yeasty aroma for a moment before taking his first sip.

"Is this seat taken?"

Tom turned at the sound of the familiar voice. The last person he had expected to see—

"Chakotay," Tom said slowly. He put the beer down, almost embarrassed; after all, Chakotay *was* the one who had recruited a drunken Tom Paris into the Maquis. "No, of course not. Have a seat."

Chakotay dropped his bag on the floor and snagged a stool. The bartender glanced at him with irritation.

"What will it be?" she asked.

"Coffee," Chakotay said. "Black, two sugars."

Tom arched an eyebrow and said nothing as he tried to remember when he had last seen Chakotay. He had a dim memory of a jam-packed nightclub about four years back. He, B'Elanna, Harry, Seven and Libby, all crowded around a table. They had come for a mini-Voyager reunion, to celebrate the one-year anniversary of their return and after the stiff formality of a Starfleet event, they had gone out to relax; after barely a year of distance, they had all curiously run out of things to say and B'Elanna had been eager to go home to relieve Miral's babysitter.

"I saw you coming into the bar. I was in the waiting area, but I don't think you heard me calling me, with all the noise out there," Chakotay said, interrupting Tom's thoughts. "How are you, Tom?"

"Good," Tom said easily. He had always been a terrific liar, one of his better talents. Or so he had once believed. "You?"

"Good."

This Tom could believe; the Chakotay sitting in front of him looked hale and hearty, his skin turned copper from hours in the sun. His hair had slightly more gray in it than Tom recalled, but it was apparent that life after Voyager was treating Chakotay well.

"And B'Elanna?"

Tom nodded. "She's doing well. Puts in long hours. I think she thinks if she ever stops working, the entire Starfleet Corps of Engineers will come to a grinding halt. How is Seven doing?"

"She's fine," Chakotay said. He looked a little ill at ease.

Not surprising, Tom thought, given how awkward it was to make conversation for two men who had never really been friends. Oh, they had put on a good front for Janeway's sake and then later, for B'Elanna, but for the most part, they had tolerated each other; there had been no illusions between them that they would keep in touch once Voyager had come home.

"What brings you to this part of the galaxy?" Tom asked finally. "Weren't you involved in some archaeology project out in the Lille sector? I think B'Elanna mentioned something along those lines not too long ago."

"We were there about two years ago. Right now, I'm on my way to Boston because of Seven," Chakotay said as the bartender brought his coffee. "She's accepted a position at MIT and I'm bringing the rest of her things."

"Seven? At MIT?"

"Yes, she's a professor there in the Astrometrics department. It's the perfect position for her," Chakotay said. "It gives her a chance to finally make use of her skills. She won't admit it, but I think she's gotten bored over the last five years, following me from archeological site to site. She's been more than patient with me since I know artifacts of the past don't necessarily interest her."

"No, I wouldn't think so," Tom said. "So you're moving to Boston?"

"Thinking about it," Chakotay said. He sipped his coffee. "Seven loves it. Even the weather, which I hear is gray and gloomy nine months out of twelve. And she's getting used to the construction; apparently it's been going on for four hundred years now. The 'Big Dig' is about as close as I'll probably get to an archeological assignment there." This last bit was said with long-suppressed Chakotay humor.

"I spent some time in Boston when I was at the Academy and we went there last year before the baby was born for some sightseeing," Tom said. "It is a great city. A lot of history. I think you would enjoy it."

"Perhaps," Chakotay said. "But there is something to be said about excavating your own site on a previously forgotten world and making your own deductions about what may or may not have happened there."

"In other words, you want to write history."

Chakotay's lips turned slightly upward. "You could put it that way."

"I'd think you'd already done that. On Voyager."

"Voyager was an unusual experience," Chakotay said. He put his coffee mug down, his gaze drifting away from Tom and towards the glass doors. Outside, they could see that lines were forming at a shuttle gate.

Tom stared incredulously at Voyager's former first officer. "Unusual' is one way of putting it."

Chakotay shrugged lightly. "I can't find the words to describe Voyager. It was the opportunity of a lifetime to serve with talented and dedicated men and women all united in one common goal."

"You sound like the admirals who welcomed us home," Tom said. Chakotay looked at him in surprise.

"And you sound bitter," Chakotay said.

Suddenly the mug of beer was very interesting. Tom contemplated the golden-hued brew for a moment and then

looked at Chakotay.

"No, I'm not," Tom said quietly. "I've got a great life."

"I've heard that before," Chakotay said. He turned slightly, pushing his coffee mug aside. "Remember Steth?"

Oh yes, Tom remembered Steth, the alien lifeform who had temporarily taken over his body and his life. He had done his best to forget that incident; afterward, he and B'Elanna never talked about it. Like so many other things, Steth was a long time ago.

"You told me the same thing then when I asked you what the problem was," Chakotay went on. "You were depressed, moody, bored, not quite the Tom Paris we'd all come to know and love." The last was a bit satirical, Tom knew, but he let it pass. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you're bored."

"Now you sound like B'Elanna."

"And I bet you never talk to her either about what's going on."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about." Suddenly Tom was angry. He had heard that note in Chakotay's voice one too many times; it wasn't quite a lecturing tone, but it did sound condescending. "Not that it's any of your business, but we have no problems with communicating. We're just under a little bit of stress right now. A new baby, new careers, readjusting to Earth—"

"Sorry," Chakotay said quickly, holding up his hand as if to stem the flow of Tom's words. "I didn't mean to insinuate that you and B'Elanna had problems."

Tom shrugged, his anger vanishing as quickly as it had come. "It's all right. I'm sorry for snapping at you. But for the record, we're fine." He didn't bother to mention that their schedules had been so crazy lately that they had barely spent much time together. He regarded Chakotay almost suspiciously. "Why am I doing all of the talking?"

Chakotay shrugged as he drained the last of his coffee. "You never talk enough. You just think you do."

"There you go again," Tom said irritably. "Making pronouncements from on high. I don't know why you think you know me so well."

"We served together for seven years."

"We weren't exactly friends, Chakotay."

The sentence hung between them and Tom immediately regretted his words.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly. Chakotay shook his head.

"It's all right," Chakotay said. He sighed. "I deserved that."

"No, you didn't. I'm—" Tom hesitated because he still felt a straight line of distance between himself and Chakotay— "I have a lot on my mind."

Chakotay appeared hesitant as he said, "Look, I don't mean to pry, but can I ask why?"

"Just old memories." Tom pushed away his empty beer glass and signaled for another one; he had had a full breakfast with B'Elanna before departing this morning and he could certainly handle it. "Things I hadn't thought about in a long time, things I thought I'd forgiven myself for."

"Caldik Prime?" Chakotay asked gently. Tom stared at Chakotay in surprise. There were many things in Tom's checkered past that could be considered unforgivable, Caldik Prime just being one of them.

"Yeah." Tom smiled wryly. "Good guess."

Chakotay shrugged. "You never talked about it, but I could see when the Caretaker first hurled us into the Delta Quadrant that what happened on Caldik Prime still bothered you. Almost as much as your stint with my Maquis cell. Of course—" Chakotay pressed his lips into a thin smile—"you didn't have much to be guilty about when it came to the Maquis, did you?"

"No," Tom said quietly. "\*You\* weren't the one I betrayed."

"It was a long time ago. You're a different person now."

"You never thought so. Not in seven years." Tom tried to stop the accusation before it came out, but there it was. Chakotay hadn't cared for his drinking, his womanizing, his often irreverent and sarcastic comments—the list went on and on; getting captured by the Feds and then helping Janeway track down Chakotay's Maquis cell only put the icing on the cake. Perhaps, Tom thought wryly, he \*couldn't\* handle a second beer. "Sorry."

"No, that was fair, and to an extent, you're right." Chakotay looked pensive. "You impressed me, Tom, with the way you stepped up to the task when Voyager needed you and Kath—Janeway had faith in you. If she could trust you, I could as well."

"Associative property," Tom said grimly. He pushed his beer away. His tongue had already been loosened too much for one day.

"You could say that," Chakotay said. "But you came a long way, Tom. The man you were then and the man you are now, it's not easy to compare the two. You've really made the most of out your second chance."

"And your second chance?" Tom asked hesitantly. To him, Chakotay was exactly the same he had been when Voyager had first started her quest to come home; there was very little difference in Chakotay, except that he had oddly enough fallen in love with Seven—the only other person on board other than Tuvok—who could match Chakotay in displaying absolutely no emotion. Tom had given up trying to explain the dynamic between Chakotay and Seven; he chalked up their mutual attraction to a pent-up passion that was released only behind closed doors. "How is that treating you?"

"It's not what I expected, but interesting all the same," Chakotay said. He launched into a recital of his latest archeological projects, including the discovery of ruins on Vega Five that were nearly twenty thousand years old. Chakotay planned to write up the findings in the following year for publication in the premier archeology magazine. "We spent a year on that site," he said. "But the desert finally got to Seven. The climate bothered her and we agreed that she shouldn't keep sublimating her own career path to mine, but should seek out other opportunities. When the offer from MIT came, I told her to go ahead and take it and she's a new person now." Chakotay glanced down at his fingers. "I won't lie. Adjusting to being apart hasn't been easy, but sometimes, you have to make difficult decisions."

"I agree," Tom said without irony. He waved his hand at the bartender as she took away his half-empty beer mug; he didn't need another one.

"And so, now it's my turn to go to Boston. I finished my last assignment, so until something new comes up, I'll be spending my time there. It'll be nice getting to know the

city a little bit better," Chakotay said as he accepted another coffee refill. "I'm looking forward to walking the Freedom Trail and visiting the USS Constitution."

Tom nodded at the mention of the old naval ship harbored in Boston. "Don't forget the aquarium," Tom said. He smiled. "Miral loved it when we took her there."

"And how is Miral?"

"Good," Tom said. "Growing fast. A protective big sister some days and other days, she wants to return Joey to where he came from."

"Joey..." Chakotay bit his lip. "B'Elanna told me in her last letter that you named him after Carey."

Tom nodded. "It seemed appropriate."

"Yes."

Tom changed the subject as quickly as he could, relieved that he didn't have to explain to Chakotay; his guilt over Joe Carey's death and his inability to prevent it still plagued him after all these years. "So what about you and Seven? Planning to tie the knot anytime soon?"

"Haven't talked about it."

"The two of you have been together for five years. That's a long time."

"We're taking our time," Chakotay said cautiously. "We have to figure out where we want to be, what we want to do before we can make any long term decisions."

"Don't wait too long," Tom said quietly. "Time flies so quickly. It seems just like yesterday when Janeway offered me a field commission on Voyager."

Chakotay's expression changed suddenly and Tom wondered what he had said. Was it the mention of Janeway? Not for the first time, Tom pondered exactly what the relationship was between the two individuals.

"Have you heard from the Admiral?" Chakotay asked finally, not meeting Tom's eye.

"Not recently. I did see her in Miramar a year back before I decided to leave and come back to San Francisco," Tom said. He reached for the bowl of honey peanuts the bartender had just slammed down in front of them. "According to my father, she's giving the admiralty a run for the money."

Chakotay smiled. "That sounds about right. I could never imagine Janeway behind a desk."

"Then you'll be happy to know she doesn't spend too much time in the office. Deep space diplomatic missions are her forte." Tom pushed the peanut bowl towards Chakotay.

"So I take it she doesn't spend much time on Earth?" Chakotay asked.

"I heard she bought a new house in Monterey not too long ago, but B'Elanna and I have yet to make a visit down there. Sounds like she's putting down roots." He paused and gave Chakotay a sidelong look. "I'm surprised you haven't talked to her."

"You know how it is. We get busy in our own lives and the distance between us doesn't help. Out of sight, out of mind, so to speak." Chakotay sighed. He sipped his coffee and put the mug down before continuing. "That's what I miss about Voyager. The people. Specifically, the senior staff."

It was the most sentimental statement Tom had ever heard Chakotay make. "Even me?"

Chakotay smiled. "Even you."

“But especially the Captain.” It was a flat statement and Tom cursed himself once again for his disrespect. Even though they were both out of uniform and Voyager was in the past, the delineating lines between first officer and helm officer still existed. So many boundaries had fallen over time, Tom thought, except for this one. And for the first time since his path had crossed with Chakotay’s over a decade ago, Tom wanted the man’s friendship and more importantly, respect.

“I won’t deny that Kathryn and I had a good working relationship,” Chakotay said flatly, his gaze fixed on the chronometer directly in front of them. “That’s not something you find everyday.”

“That’s it?” Tom asked incredulously. “That’s all you have to say?”

Chakotay shrugged. “Like I said, we worked well together.”

Tom stared down at a glowing neon sign on the wall in frustration. He had been so sure, so positive, that something *\*more\** had existed between the captain and her first officer. He had revised that opinion shortly after Chakotay had made his relationship with Seven public, but neither Tom nor B’Elanna had believed that Chakotay and Seven were meant to be together. In fact, B’Elanna had made a comment that the relationship was an attraction of opposites, how relieved Chakotay was to be needed and how eager Seven was to find someone who could fulfill her needs. They’re in love with images and ideals, B’Elanna had said, and the heart doesn’t work like that.

But here they were, five years later, to all appearances, still together and evidently happy.

“You should drop in and see Janeway sometime,” Tom suggested. “I know the Admiral would be happy to see you.”

“Perhaps. Depends how long I’m in Boston,” Chakotay said non-committedly.

“Have you thought about settling there for good?” Tom asked casually.

“We’ll see. Like I said before, I’m really just waiting for a new assignment to show up and perhaps we’ll get lucky and it’ll come during one of Seven’s breaks. There’s a new dig on Betazed that I’m interested in. Artifacts have been recovered that show the beginnings of telepathy. It’ll be the first documented example of such a complex evolutionary process. Or so we hope. I think it’s too much to ask given how sparse the evolutionary records already are on this ability, but I’m still intrigued by the possibilities.” Chakotay glanced at Tom. “It’ll be hard to pass up this opportunity if I am selected for the team.”

“I imagine you’ll do what’s best for the two of you,” Tom said. He shifted slightly on the stool. “After all, that’s what you excel at, looking out for other people’s interests.” The remark came out a little snidely, but Chakotay didn’t seem to take offense.

“Sometimes, you need a disinterested party,” Chakotay said. “People can’t always see what the best thing is for them.”

“I know you didn’t think I was the best thing for B’Elanna.”

Chakotay looked at Tom. “No, I didn’t. But could you blame me?”

Tom shook his head. “No, I suppose not. I didn’t make the best impression in the Maquis nor did I exactly have the best track record on Voyager.” He didn’t bother to mention his

behavior when he had been assigned to uncover a spy aboard Voyager; he knew he had given Chakotay plenty of grief during those days. “You certainly let me know when I crossed the line. I cursed you many times for the loss of replicator rations or holodeck time.” Though in truth, Chakotay had not been responsible for Tom’s major punishment—thirty days in the brig and lost of rank. Janeway had taken that matter into hand and Tom had been surprised, as Janeway had always tended to give him the benefit of the doubt, show him leniency.

“I know I was hard on you on Voyager, but it was because I knew what you were capable of. You didn’t disappoint me,” Chakotay said quietly. As he spoke, he shifted on his stool so he was looking directly at Tom.

Tom was stunned by the revelation. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Face it, Tom, we never had that kind of relationship. You always regarded me as a disciplinarian and I’m not quite sure that you always appreciated my friendship with B’Elanna.”

Tom chuckled. “No, sometimes I was pretty jealous that B’Elanna would come to you with her problems and not to me.” He sighed. “Sometimes, she was closer to you than she was to me. When she was trying out novel new ways to try and kill herself, *\*I\** should have been the one to see what was going on, *\*I\** should have been the one to pull her back.”

“But that had nothing to do with you, Tom,” Chakotay said gently. “It had everything to do with the Maquis, the bonds we formed, the losses we endured. I’m not sure that you were even the right person to help her.”

“But I should have seen it,” Tom insisted. He stared glumly into space, his vision temporarily blurring. “I was *\*right\** there, but still far away.” He looked at Chakotay. “I do a lot better these days, Chakotay, but you know B’Elanna.” He smiled. “She can be stubborn about some things, but being close to home has helped. I don’t regret leaving Miramar at all because it takes away the uncertainties that a long-distance relationship can bring.”

“You’ve done good,” Chakotay said. Tom smiled at the slang. So Chakotay *\*could\** loosen up every now and then. “I should have told you before. Not only in your professional life, but your personal life. B’Elanna may have come to me with her problems, but you were the one who made her happy. There’s something to be said for that.”

“And you,” Tom said quietly, “you were exactly what Janeway needed.”

Chakotay froze for a moment before answering. “I didn’t always get that feeling.”

“It must have been hard,” Tom said. He was being purposely ambiguous, knowing there were so many things ‘it’ could mean—the working relationship between Janeway and Chakotay and the more personal, intimate relationship that had to be put aside in deference to protocol. “But those were desperate times and decisions needed to be made quickly and without enough information. She was the captain and she made the decisions that she thought were the best for all of us. Even if it meant ignoring your advice.” At Chakotay’s surprised look, Tom nodded. “Yes, we did know of the arguments between the two of you, especially over the alliance with the Borg against Species 8472. It *\*was\** a small ship.”

Chakotay ran his fingers through his hair. “I thought you

were referring to something else,” he said quietly. The tone of his voice convinced Tom that Chakotay indeed was thinking of his personal relationship—or lack thereof—with Janeway. Tom shrugged.

“Nope,” Tom said. He quirked a smile. “Business, strictly business.”

“And in that case, I wouldn’t change any of it,” Chakotay said without irony. “But I’ll be honest, I did find it difficult sometimes to reason with her. Kathryn Janeway is a stubborn and determined woman. Sometimes, I felt incredibly close to her and other times—well, other times, she could have been in another galaxy, for all of the distance she put between us.” Chakotay’s fingers ran along the smooth porcelain of his empty coffee mug. “But she was still one of the best damned captains I ever served under and I learned a lot from her, even if I didn’t always agree with her methods. And so no, I don’t regret a single moment of it. Not now, and not then.” The reflective note in Chakotay’s voice caught Tom’s attention.

“Are you happy?” Tom asked softly. Chakotay stared at him.

“What?”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes, of course.”

Tom wasn’t convinced. “I mean, are you happy with the way things turned out, the way your life is now that we’re back in the Alpha Quadrant?”

Chakotay looked contemplative, his gaze focusing on the glass doors separating the bar from the crowds outside, waiting for their connecting flights. “I’m not sure the life I have now is the one I imagined myself having years ago,” Chakotay said finally. “But I have to make the best of it. Some things can’t be changed.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Tom said gently. “It depends on how badly we want them to. You may be pleasantly surprised.”

Chakotay shrugged, his expression non-committal as he looked at the chronometer. He slipped off the barstool, signaling to the bartender for his bill. “I’ve got to catch my shuttle.”

“Hey,” Tom said, grabbing the PADD as the bartender slid it over to Chakotay. “This one is on me.”

“Thanks.” Chakotay clasped his hand on Tom’s shoulder. “It was good seeing you again. I never did ask you. Are you coming or going? Travel-wise, I mean.”

“Going. I’m heading for a conference on Starbase 4.” Tom did his best to keep his disinterest for the conference out of his voice.

“When you get back, give my best to B’Elanna and the kids.”

“I will. And if you get a chance, drop in. I know B’Elanna would love to see you and you haven’t seen Joey yet either.”

“I’d love to,” Chakotay said quietly. “I’ve got a non-stop flight to Boston from here. Maybe on the way back, I’ll make arrangements to visit.”

“Yes, do that,” Tom said. “Keep in touch.”

Chakotay nodded as he heaved his bag onto his shoulder. “I will. Thanks for the company, Tom.”

Chakotay left the bar, quickly blending in with the crowds of people outside. Tom checked the chronometer again. He had another hour or so to burn. He quickly paid his tab and Chakotay’s and headed back to the observation deck.

When he glanced out the window, the sleek spacecraft—the one that brought back memories of a time long ago—was gone.

## Glory Days

*Disclaimer: Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters are the property of Paramount. If you think I’m making any money off this, perhaps you should be the one writing fiction.*

*Summary: Two old friends have a chance meeting at a starbase, leading them to reminisce and reflect on paths taken. Note: Despite the title, this isn’t a ‘songfic.’*

*Time Frame: Five years after Voyager’s return to the Alpha Quadrant.*

*Acknowledgments: Many thanks to Seema for the beta, and for allowing me to channel her bunny (“Look, Ma! No fangs!”)*

Lieutenant Commander Harry Kim glanced at the officious ensign trotting eagerly at his side and suppressed a sigh. It wasn’t so much anything Hoffman said or did—Harry didn’t even know the younger officer very well, despite the fact the man had served in his department for three months now. No, his annoyance stemmed from the fact that he was here at all, on Starbase 4 to attend a week-long scientific conference, when all he really wanted was to be back on board his ship, roaming the stars once more.

But the *Livingston* was in dry-dock, undergoing some necessary repairs after the damage she’d incurred in that last skirmish with the Ponzi raiders near the Romulan Neutral Zone. Most of the senior staff were taking advantage of their enforced leisure to fulfill the recent Starfleet continuing ed requirements. It made sense, Harry admitted, as in the past few years there had been a virtual revolution in warp field dynamics, much of it spurred by the various alien technologies Voyager itself had brought back. As in so many other disciplines, knowledge was advancing in leaps and bounds and it was crucial for the officers to keep abreast of all the new developments. Harry had studied the seminar database earlier, when he and Hoffman had first arrived, and had already noted several promising titles among the papers being given, as well as a number of speakers he knew he wanted to hear. However, marching now through the seemingly unending monochromatic corridors on the way to the lecture halls, he felt the last of his enthusiasm slipping away.

He halted abruptly. Directly in front of them, the passageway widened into a broad promenade-like area, whose upper and lower decks were lined with shops, numerous restaurants, and most promising of all, one or two bars.

He crossed over and was about to enter the closer of the two, when he heard Hoffman clear his throat nervously. Without turning around, Harry said, “Yes, Ensign.”

“Uh, sir, where are you going?”

Harry strove to keep the impatience out of his voice. “Where does it look like I’m going, Ensign?”

“But, sir, the conference session is due to begin—”

“At 1700. I’m aware of that, Mr. Hoffman. I’m also perfectly aware of the fact that it is presently only 1630, and it will take just an additional seven minutes to reach the lecture hall from our present position. We have more than enough

time to make a quick stop.” Harry could hear the ensign shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He waited.

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.”

Harry bit back another sigh and crossed the threshold into the dim interior of the establishment.

It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust after the brightness of the corridors outside. He took in the decor and smiled. Long, polished mahogany bar, pressed tin ceiling, dark textured walls, row upon row of glass bottles filled with exotic beverages from all over the quadrant...and a green, felt-topped pool table in the exact center. Just the sort of place Tom Paris would have liked. He smiled again, remembering Sandrine’s.

The clientele was a mixed bunch—some Starfleet uniforms, but plenty of civilians as well. Harry shouldered his way through the crowd and placed his order. He turned to Hoffman. “Synthale ok for you, Ensign?”

Hoffman nodded, clearly uncomfortable.

“At ease, Ensign,” Harry murmured softly.

“Before you sprain something,” put in a new voice.

Harry’s head shot up immediately. His gaze fell on a tall man in civvies, with thinning blond hair and a wide, impish grin. A moment later he was enveloped in a bear hug.

“Tom Paris!”

“In the flesh.”

Still smiling broadly, Harry looked at him wonderingly. “Of all the places in the quadrant—what brings you here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“The science conference—some new papers are being presented on advances in warp field dynamics,” Harry said, as Tom leaned over and caught the bartender’s eye. “And you?”

“The same. Well, helm and navigation.”

Harry heard a faint rustling at his side, and realized to his chagrin that he had forgotten all about Hoffman. “I’m sorry, Ensign Hoffman, this is Lieutenant Paris.”

“Former lieutenant,” Paris said depreciatingly. “I’m retired, remember?” Harry frowned; after all this time he’d never understood why Tom had chosen to resign his commission. If he were honest with himself, though, he would admit that it was probably his own fault; maybe if he hadn’t been so overt with his disappointment—and yes, feeling of betrayal—Tom would have explained his motives a bit more.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Hoffman said, shaking the hand offered him.

Tom picked up the bottle the barkeep placed in front of him. “I’ve got a table over in the corner. Would you two care to join me?”

Hoffman gave his commanding officer a long look. He didn’t say anything, but Harry could feel the disapproval inherent in that carefully obsequious expression, and suddenly he resented it. Who the hell was Hoffman, reminding him with his doleful gaze of duty and obligation? He was sick to death of duty, of always being the perfect officer. He picked up his glass, took a quick swallow and said, “You know what, Hoffman? Why don’t you go on ahead to the lecture hall, grab a couple of seats. I’ll be along in a few minutes.”

Tom looked faintly amused at the scene being enacted in front of him, but when he spoke, his voice was solicitous. “Really, Harry, if you’re in a hurry, I don’t want to keep you.”

“No, I’ve got time. No problem,” Harry said. He looked over his shoulder and said pointedly, “Thank you, Ensign.”

Hoffman nodded miserably, and then hurried out the door.

Harry watched him go. “God, was I ever that young, Tom?”

“Nope. You were younger,” Tom said, leading him to a small rickety table in the corner. With a flourish, he waved his friend into the nearer of the two chairs, away from the wall. “Still, you did the right thing, sending him packing. Can’t have your junior officers hanging out in bars full of disreputable types...”

“On a Federation starbase? What’s the worst that could happen to him?”

Tom didn’t look up from his careful filling of his own glass. “I don’t know, maybe getting fleeced by some unscrupulous Ferengi bartender?”

The two men shared a laugh as they lifted their glasses and lightly touched them together. “Cheers,” Harry said.

Tom took a long swallow. “Not bad for synthale—if you didn’t know better you’d think it was the real thing. So how’ve you been, Harry?”

“Can’t complain.” Harry took another sip of his drink, and then at Tom’s quick nod, topped it off from the bottle on the table. “Is B’Elanna here, too, I mean, on the Starbase?”

Tom shook his head. “No, she just got back last week from an engineering seminar on Alphacent. We agreed a long time ago that while the kids are still so young only one of us would be away at a time, if we could help it.”

“How are the kids? Keeping you busy?”

“Miral’s doing fine. She’s started school, nursery at any rate, which gets her out of the house, and more importantly, away from her baby brother for a few hours each day.”

Harry smiled faintly at the hint of exasperation in Tom’s voice. “Problem with sibling rivalry?”

Tom sighed. “She wasn’t so bad when he was just a newborn, but once he started crawling around and getting into her things—”

“I can imagine,” Harry said, with a laugh.

“Weren’t you an only child?” countered Tom. “What do you know about bossy and possessive older sisters?”

“That’s why it’s ‘imagine’, not ‘remember,’” Harry said. He leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table. “And you and B’Elanna, you’re happy?”

Tom reached out and moved the bottle closer to his side of the table, away from Harry’s left elbow which threatened to sweep it off the edge. “Of course. B’Elanna’s having a great time, working with the Starfleet Corps of Engineers as a civilian contractor. Mucking around in the bowels of warp cores, dreaming up and testing new gadgets. She’s in her element, couldn’t be happier.”

Harry said, with a smile that somehow didn’t reach his eyes, “Just like old times, then. All the advantages of trying to develop new engineering solutions—”

“Without having to simultaneously keep repairing old worn-out parts for the umpteenth time,” Tom agreed. “Or jury-rigging the system yet again to keep things running.”

“Better than old times, then,” Harry said lightly. “And you?”

“Playing with all the latest simulators, teaching the next generation of hot-shot pilots how to fly...” Tom shrugged and poured another shot into his glass. “What’s not to like?”

“Except that you used to be one of those hot-shot pilots, and the controls were attached to real ships, not simulators,”

Harry finished quietly.

There was silence for a moment. “Yeah, except for that.” Tom shifted in his seat. He glanced at his chrono, but didn’t say anything, obviously having decided he would let Harry worry about any missed sessions. “But at least one of us has made it into the big time—Lieutenant Commander.” He playfully flicked a finger at the new dark centered pip on his friend’s color, alongside the two gold ones. “Third promotion in as many years. You’re certainly making up for lost time.” Was there a slight hint of mockery in his words?

Harry stiffened, but strove to keep his voice neutral. “After being the ‘Eternal Ensign’ all those years in the Delta Quadrant, it’s about time.”

“Surely you’re not blaming Janeway for that,” Tom said, a note of surprise in his voice.

“No, I’m not. If the promotions schedule had continued as usual—and it would’ve really taken us the whole 70 years to get back—we would have arrived home with a shipload of captains.” Harry tossed off the contents of his glass. He wiped his mouth. “If not admirals.”

Tom laughed. “No, just captains. Janeway wouldn’t have promoted anyone above her own rank.”

“Who’s to say she wouldn’t have made herself an admiral?” Harry said, pouring himself another drink.

“I didn’t think she was that eager for the job, actually,” Tom said quietly.

Harry shrugged. “She certainly took it fast enough, once we got back and they offered it to her.”

Tom regarded him above the rim of his glass. “What else could she have done? She knew they weren’t going to give her another command. After all those years in the DQ, answering to no one but herself, she was too much of a maverick for them to want to worry about.” He sighed. “A pity. The brass never did know how to handle loose canons.”

Harry looked down at the glass in his hand. After all this time, he still remembered how it felt when he’d heard the news about Captain Janeway’s promotion. “So you’re saying they kicked her upstairs instead.”

“Exactly,” Tom said. “Rendered her harmless. And deprived themselves of one hell of a field commander at the same time.”

“Better than a court-martial, right?” Harry said with a laugh. As if that would have happened to the ‘Hero of the Delta Quadrant.’

“I wonder,” Tom said, his mouth tightening, apparently not finding the idea so amusing at all. “At least that way she’d have the chance to go down fighting, instead of being locked away in a gilded cage.”

Harry put his drink down, untasted. “Whatever. She didn’t have to accept that promotion, you know.”

“She did if she wanted to stay in Starfleet.”

“No, she didn’t,” Harry argued. “She could have resigned, found something else to do.”

Tom smiled sadly. “Harry, Harry, Harry. I can’t believe you’re saying that. After all those years of serving with her, seeing her on the bridge day after day, you can honestly say that?” He leaned back, tilted his chair up on its back legs, till he was braced against the wall. “You know as well as I do, that she couldn’t do that. No,” he mused. “She gave up so much in the name of duty, and responsibility,

I sometimes wondered if she had left herself anything else, anywhere else to go.”

Harry felt a sudden pang as the impact of Tom’s words washed over him, but he still said stubbornly, “No, I don’t see that. Sure, the last few years especially were hard on her, but she always gave it her best shot, never—”

“Never let us see how much it was killing her inside,” Tom finished softly. He sighed. “No, you wouldn’t have noticed, Harry. But I did.”

Harry regarded him through narrowed eyes. Where did Tom Paris get off, talking down to him like this, as if he needed to have things spelled out for him? He fought down a sudden urge to knock the other man’s chair over. “And what makes you so special?”

Tom gave him a faintly pitying look. “I never went into my career quite so starry-eyed.” Harry bristled at the implied criticism, but Tom continued, oblivious to his friend’s reaction. “I knew from my father just how much of a toll it took to serve in Starfleet. Not just on the officer, but on the people around him.” Abruptly, he lowered his chair until it was once more resting equally on all four legs. “And that was in the Alpha Quadrant. Out there, on the other side of the galaxy, it was a lot worse. She had virtually no support no backup, just a rag tag crew composed of young officers on their first or second tour of duty, combined with some hardened former terrorists, and the occasional alien recruit. And yet somehow, she managed to hold it all together.”

“Not just hold it together—look what she accomplished! Against all the odds!”

Again, the pitying look. “You won’t get any argument from me, Harry. I remember after we got back, all the grumbling in certain quarters, claiming this one or that one could have done better out there than Janeway, picking over every single decision she made, debating what was the ‘right’ thing to do instead of just acknowledging that she’d accomplished the impossible. They left her with no margin of error, expected her to be perfect, and gleefully pointed out the areas where she fell short of the almighty Starfleet regulations.”

Harry said slowly, “I didn’t hear any of that.” He took another swallow.

Tom shook his head. “No, you wouldn’t have. The complaints were never made public—in the eyes of the media she was the intrepid leader who got her ship home. End of story. And then the press eventually went on to the next big thing, the next captain anointed as savior, the newly minted heroes, the shiny new ships capable of doing things none of the previous ones had ever done before and would chase all our demons away. And the former heroes, the people past their prime, why, they’ve settled into quiet obscurity.”

“Some people, perhaps. But not all of us.” Harry stared at him belligerently. Just because Tom had chosen to walk away from Starfleet...

Tom’s hand shot forward, but he stopped before making contact. He waited, perhaps till he regained his control. “No, not all of us,” he said at last. “As I was saying, you’re certainly moving up in the world. And believe me, Harry, I know how much you deserve it.” He glanced at his chrono once more. “What time was that seminar you wanted to attend?”

Harry shifted uneasily in his seat as he fought down a stab of guilt. “It doesn’t matter. I wasn’t interested, not really.”

The thought came unbidden 'just another way of passing the time.' Aloud once more he said, "At any rate, I can always download the abstract later."

Tom picked up the bottle, and Harry saw with surprise that it was nearly empty. Tom signaled, and soon another bottle appeared before them. "I'm sure your ensign will be glad to give you his notes."

Both of them filled their glasses once more. The conversation had hit another lull, but neither of them seemed ready to make a move. Harry closed his eyes, feeling the effects of the synthale. He knew he should get going, that there were places he needed to be. But it was much easier to simply sit there, in the shadows, and let the occasional words come out freely, without concern for who might be listening, and how it would be interpreted. Such a relief...

Harry continued suddenly, as if there'd been no pause. "So did you hear about our latest run-in along the Neutral Zone, with those damn Ponzi?"

"You're talking about the *Livingston*, I presume." Here Tom smiled to himself, as though at a secret joke. "Yeah."

"Did you hear any details?"

"Other than the fact it resulted in your promotion? I heard that your ship got banged up pretty well," Tom said. "Made the lead story on the newsvids two nights running, though they never really explained what happened. What was it, an ambush?"

"Not exactly. Just in the sense we got caught with our pants down, big time."

"How so?"

"The captain was in his diplomat mode," Harry said, trying and failing to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "It was our assignment to quell the flying raids along the border; Starfleet doesn't want to give the Romulans any excuse for crossing beyond the Neutral Zone." He wondered if Tom, as a civilian, was aware that relations between the two powers had been deteriorating for some time, and it would be all too easy for the 'cold peace' between the Romulans and the Federation to turn into a hot war.

"I take it the Ponzi haven't been distinguishing between whose convoys and colonies they attack?" Tom asked.

"Not at all." Harry realized he was gripping the edge of the table so hard his knuckles were turning white. He forced himself to relax. "At any rate, Captain Johnson thought he could get the raiders to listen to reason, make them realize that it was only a matter of time till one side or the other decided to put an end to them one way or the other. So he called for a big meeting, with all the faction leaders."

"I take it he wasn't successful."

Harry snorted. "Not at all. Instead of sitting down to work out their differences, at least a few of the Ponzi vessels thought this would be a great time to try and eliminate the competition. And the *Livingston* got caught in the middle."

"So much for diplomacy." Tom lifted a hand and smoothed back his hair, or perhaps simply assuring himself that there was still plenty left. "It was a gamble, at best. You can't win them all."

"That's right, you can't win them all," Harry said, not even trying to keep the disgust out of his voice. "But what gets me is that he didn't have a plan B, you know, some sort of back up, in case the negotiations failed. He thought one

cruiser, in peace-keeping mode, just the show of force, would be enough."

Tom shrugged. "In other circumstances he might have been right."

"Maybe. But like Janeway used to say, successful diplomacy always includes a little saber rattling. And the show isn't worth much without some substance backing it up."

Tom smiled. "I remember. Unfortunately we had to put her little tenet into practice a little too often for comfort." He leaned forward, his smile fading. Abruptly, he asked, "Are you happy, Harry?"

Harry's lips twisted in a brief, ironic smile. "What's happy?"

Tom shook his head in bemusement. "You really want me to spell it out for you? Fine. I'll tell you about happy. B'Elanna is. I am too, most of the time, at any rate. But you...This isn't the first time I've asked you that." He looked down at the scarred surface of the table for a moment. "Remember—it was soon after we'd gotten back, no, we must have been back for a while because you were serving on the Challenger then, and had just gotten your first leave. You spent a weekend with me and B'Elanna, in that place we were renting across the Bay."

"And B'Elanna asked what it was like, serving on a ship that wasn't Voyager." Harry fell silent, remembering his reply, his confession that it was very strange indeed, and he wasn't sure he could make the adjustment. That it was strange to see someone else occupying the center seat. That every time Barker said, "Engage!" he heard another voice, a husky one with a quality that always made him think of smoky crystal, say, "Do it." Or how many times he'd been bending over his console and caught a glimpse of an auburn bun, a crimson uniform, out of the corner of his eye, only to see them replaced by a black buzz cut and goatee above broad shoulders clad in gray when the captain turned his way. The conversation from that long-ago leave echoed in his mind once more.

*"Harry, there's always something special about the first captain you serve under, he or she becomes a hero, especially to an impressionable young officer. Add in the circumstances we faced out in the DQ..."*

*"What about it?"*

*"Don't put her up on a pedestal, Harry. She was good, and she went to hell and back for us on more than one occasion. But it's over, that time is over, and everybody has moved on. She's moved on, I have, and so should you. Voyager came back, her captain got promoted, and her crew scattered to the winds. You've got a new ship now, a new captain—and you can't keep comparing every commanding officer you'll ever have to her for the rest of your life."*

*"I've heard this before," Harry said, shaking his head. "They say that's why no one should serve more than three consecutive tours of duty on the same vessel, under the same command crew. That it's important to be exposed to different styles, to different ways of thinking, of evaluating a situation."*

*"And they're right."*

*"But look at the Enterprise, Picard's people. How long have they been together?"*

*"Yeah, look at them," Tom retorted. "Stagnating in their careers, all of them. Is that what you want for yourself?"*

*“No, it’s not.” He hesitated. “But if Janeway were still captaining a vessel, I’d sign on with her in a second.”*

*“Then it’s a good thing she’s not. And Harry, don’t go comparing every move Barker or whoever else is sitting in the center seat to what we would have done back on Voyager, what Janeway or Chakotay would have said, how they would have reacted. Everybody’s got their own style. You serve your time and then you move on.”*

Harry shook his head to dispel the memory, and considered Tom’s earlier question about his ‘emotional temperature.’ “Yes, I’m happy. At least, I think I am. I mean, I’ve got what I always wanted, right? Promotions, plum postings on the newest and most advanced vessels boldly going—” he broke off at the look on Tom’s face.

“And yet?”

In a lower voice, he continued, “And yet, why do I feel so restless, as if there’s something I’m still looking for?”

Tom shrugged. “Human nature, I suppose. Look at the way we were on Voyager, always trying to get home. That became our whole purpose, our sole mission, and yet, when we finally got here—”

“We were happy then, Tom,” Harry said firmly. “We all were. Seeing our families again, the fuss everyone made over us, all the media attention—”

“And when the speeches were over, and the hoopla died down, when people came to grips with the fact that the wife or husband or lover they’d left had moved on without them, that their children had grown up and had lives of their own—what then, Harry? How long did that feeling of accomplishment last?”

Harry didn’t answer, but sat staring into the bottom of his empty glass. He thought of pouring another drink, but at that moment the synthale he’d already drunk burned fiercely in his chest. A wave of nausea rose in him and he turned his head away, and took a deep breath.

Tom was silent as well. He didn’t seem to notice his friend’s distress or perhaps he didn’t know what to say, perhaps fearing he’d already said too much. A loud babble of voices washed over them from the next table. Tom looked in that direction for a long moment, clearly lost in memories of his own. “Say, you ever hear from any of the others?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really. Last I heard, the Doc was at Starfleet Medical—”

“And Seven was in Boston,” Tom finished. “MIT, or one of those public universities.”

“MIT.”

“That was at least a year ago. Nothing more recent? Heard from anyone else? Ayala, maybe?”

Harry said, somewhat apologetically, “You and B’Elanna are the only ones I really keep in touch with. And...” He didn’t add what they both knew, that the aside from this chance meeting, it had been almost a year since they had last spoken.

Tom said quietly, as if to himself, “So even among ourselves we’ve faded into oblivion.”

Harry lifted his head, and stared at him challengingly. “That’s an area where we can at least do something about.”

“Is it?” Tom said quietly, a note of resignation in his voice. “Sometimes, it’s best to just let things die a natural death. Why prolong the inevitable? Voyager was a unique time and

place, and now it’s over. Maybe it’s best to just let those connections fade away.”

“Some things are worth holding on to,” Harry insisted. He reached over, picked up Tom’s hand and squeezed it, hard.

Tom looked down at their hands for a long moment, and suddenly he smiled. “Who am I to argue with a superior officer?”

Harry smiled back, and this time it reached his eyes. “I may outrank you, Tom Paris, but I don’t think I’ll ever find a better friend.”

## Life in the Fast Lane

*Disclaimer: Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters are the property of Paramount. No copyright infringement is intended.*

*Note: Another story in the “Glory Days” Universe, taking place between “Glory Days” and “Hero.” The complete chronology appears on my home page.*

*Acknowledgment: Many thanks to Seema for her usual excellent beta.*

The Betazoid receptionist smiled sympathetically and raised her voice so as to be heard over the classical music playing in the background. “I’m sorry, Ms. Hansen, but it looks like the doctor is running a little late.”

Seven had reached the same conclusion twenty minutes ago. She shifted impatiently in her chair; despite its plush upholstery, it was less comfortable than she’d anticipated when she first sat down. “Do you know how much longer he’ll be?”

The other woman’s smile didn’t waver. “He hasn’t checked in—which he would have, if he were anticipating a lengthy delay.” She hesitated, clearly aware of the patient’s importance. “Would you like me to try and find out what’s keeping him, or perhaps you would prefer to reschedule your appointment?”

Seven shook her head quickly. She had been fortunate this time slot had been available when she contacted the office earlier in the week; if she rescheduled, it could very well be several weeks until another opening occurred and would necessitate another trip from Boston. “No, that will not be necessary. I will continue to wait.” With a slight shrug, the receptionist turned back to her computer monitor and resumed her work.

After a few more minutes, Seven rose and went to the replicator on the far wall of the room. She hesitated over the beverage choices and then made a selection. Sipping her mineral water slowly, she returned to her seat. A padd lay on the adjacent table, but she had already ascertained that the articles it contained were at least six months old. She had finished all of the work she had brought to keep herself occupied on the trip even before her commuter shuttle had landed in San Francisco. As a result, she was bored and restless, an unusual state of affairs for her.

She took a deep breath, striving to remain calm. So far, the delay had proved to be no more than a minor inconvenience, she reminded herself. She had nothing else planned for the rest of the day, and if she were completely honest, she was not especially eager to return to Boston and her responsibilities there.

She looked around the elegantly appointed waiting room, noting again details such as the thick mauve carpet and the

framed pictures hanging on the wall. Instead of the holograms she'd expected, they were actually oil paintings on canvas. The one closest to her depicted a woman in medieval garb, oddly enough holding a naked infant on her lap. A small metal plate beneath the frame stated that it was a reproduction of Raphael's "Madonna and Child with a Book", but the names meant nothing to her.

Seven glanced at the painting again, curious as to why it had been selected to hang in this room. It was aesthetically pleasing, but she had long ago discovered that beauty was not the only reason artwork was valued. She moved closer to study the picture more carefully, noticing details she had missed on her earlier inspection. The pictured woman's expression was somewhat pensive as she gazed at the infant, whose face was turned up to its mother with a look of perfect trust. Seven frowned; for some reason she could not grasp, something about the scene was disturbingly familiar.

Seven abruptly turned away, just as the outer door opened and a familiar figure strode in, his immaculate white lab coat swirling behind him. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting—Admiral Ficus was going on and on about the budget and next year's appropriations for Starfleet Medical." He gave Seven an apologetic smile. "Apparently, the research budget is being slashed sharply for the coming fiscal year, though how they expect us to keep developing new therapies with increasingly limited funds is beyond me...or them, I suspect." Without giving Seven a chance to respond, he turned to his receptionist. "Lynette, what does my afternoon look like?"

Lynette tapped a few keys at her console. "Just the two o'clock appointment with Ms. Hansen. The rest of your day is clear, Dr. Graham."

"Good. Please see to it that we're not disturbed," Dr. Graham said as he ushered Seven into the next room. He smiled winningly at her when the door closed behind them. "It's good to see you again, Seven, or should I say Professor Hansen?"

"I am known as Annika now," she corrected him. "I decided to revert to my former designation when I accepted the position at MIT." The words came out more harshly than she had intended. "However, you may continue to refer to me as Seven." She paused, remembering Chakotay's surprise when she had asked him to call her Annika, even though it had initially been his suggestion. "I am aware that it is not an easy transition after associating a person with a particular name for so long."

"I know all about the difficulties inherent in name changes," Voyager's former EMH answered. "But in my case my associates can still feel quite comfortable referring to me as 'Doctor.'" He gestured toward an exam table and waited until Seven was sitting—somewhat awkwardly—on its edge. "Are you here for a general checkup, or is there anything in particular you wanted me to look at?"

Seven tilted her head upward at an angle. "My optical node has been hurting recently."

The Doctor passed his mediwand over the implant. "I'm not surprised—there is considerable irritation at the medial interface." He picked up a small instrument and made a rapid series of adjustments to the node. "How's that?"

Seven could feel the difference right away. "It is a little better, thank you."

"It will take a while for the inflammation to subside." He pressed a hypospray to her neck. "This should help speed up the process, as well as take care of any residual pain." He proceeded to check the rest of her cranial implants. "Everything else looks quite good. How long has the node been bothering you?"

"It began recently, as I said." At the Doctor's sharp look, she amended, "I first noticed a problem four months ago."

"What?" the Doctor said indignantly. "Seven, why did you wait so long to do something about it?"

"I assumed the problem was due to my ill-acclimation to the arid climate of the planet where Chakotay's last archeological site was located," Seven said, shuddering slightly as she remembered the swirling sand storms on Vega V. She did not understand the Doctor's reaction; it almost seemed as if he were angry with her. "I anticipated that once I relocated to Boston the problem would resolve itself."

"You can't go around making assumptions like that about your health," he scolded. "As it turns out, you were fortunate that it was a minor complaint, but it could easily have developed into something more serious."

"I will endeavor to be more careful in the future," she said, realizing it would be futile to argue. Chakotay was very solicitous about her health as well and had admonished her on more than one occasion that she needed to take better care of herself. In fact, she suspected her poor health was one of the reasons Chakotay had urged her to take the position at MIT.

"See to it that you do. While we're on the subject, when was the last time you had a complete physical? No, don't tell me—I'm not sure I want to hear the answer."

Seven resigned herself to the inevitable. "Would this be an opportune time for you to perform such an exam, Doctor?"

"There's no time like the present," he shot back. Still grumbling to himself, he waited until she was lying down and then activated the biobed.

Seven exhaled slowly as the diagnostic arch rose up from the sides of the bed and enveloped her. She had always found the arch very constricting, though in reality it was approximately the same width as her regeneration cubicle. She wondered if she were developing a mild case of claustrophobia. As a drone she had paid little if any attention to matters of personal comfort. As a fully Human individual, she was more than a little relieved she had been able to cut down her use of the cubicle to a single 18 hour session once every ten days, and not simply because it afforded her the opportunity to sleep in a bed the rest of the time.

"Neural activity good, blood chemistry a little off—when did you last eat? Not since breakfast? Yes, well, that would explain some of these readings. Blood pressure, good, weight—I see you've put on a few kilos, which is good; you were much too thin before..."

Seven let the Doctor's monologue wash over her, not paying much attention to what he was saying. She was dimly aware that he had switched from her state of health to the latest 'juicy' rumors floating around HQ. None of the names he mentioned was familiar, and as such held no interest for her. The Doctor had always had a tendency to gossip, she recalled, much to the annoyance of the Voyager crew—though some of them had been just as bad as he in that respect. Perhaps it had been unrealistic to expect anything to remain

secret in such a small and isolated community, but Seven had never understood the Human fascination with other people's activities or affairs and had resented becoming a topic of conversation on more than one occasion. It was precisely because of the ship's rumor mill that she had urged Chakotay to keep their budding relationship quiet as long as possible. He had agreed with alacrity, saying they would tell their friends when 'the time was right.'

The Doctor pressed a release and the arch receded. Seven sat up quickly and winced. Instinctively, she pressed a hand to her forehead.

"Easy does it," the Doctor said, moving to support her. "You may be experiencing some residual dizziness from the optical node, maybe even some double vision. It should clear up in a few minutes." He helped her to her feet and then turned away as Seven discreetly adjusted the conservative tailored gray suit she wore. She glanced at her reflection in the highly polished surface of a nearby console and automatically ran a hand over her hair to smooth it down.

She looked up to see the Doctor had finished transferring the results of her exam onto a data padd and was signing his name with a flourish.

"There you go—a clean bill of health!"

"Thank you." She took the proffered padd, her fingers brushing his. She felt a slight tingle when her skin made contact with the photonic field.

The Doctor cleared his throat. "You know, Seven, it's been a long time since we've seen each other—must be nearly four years. If you don't need to rush back to Boston right away, I'd like to do a little 'catching up.'"

"That would be agreeable," she said, suddenly reluctant to leave, and glad she had nowhere else she needed to be at the moment. They adjourned to his private office.

"Would you like something to drink or eat, Seven?" the Doctor asked, stepping back to allow her to enter ahead of him.

Seven shook her head. "I have no need of any refreshment at the moment." She glanced around the office, noting its similarity to the waiting room in terms of furnishings and decor. The paintings were different, of course. With a stab of surprise, she recognized the portrait of a woman with an enigmatic half-smile. It was by da Vinci; she remembered spending hours with Captain Janeway in the holoprogram simulating the master's workshop. She pushed the mental image away.

"You seem to be doing very well these days," she said, taking a seat on the leather couch. "I have been informed that you are doing high priority research in immunobioengineering. Doubtless it keeps you quite busy."

"Life in the fast lane," the Doctor agreed as he sat down beside her. At her puzzled look he explained, "It's a phrase I once picked up from Tom Paris. 'The fast lane' refers to a hectic schedule, though there's also a connection to early model ground-cars, I believe. At any rate, yes, I do spend most of my time engaged in medical research, although I am also teaching some advanced courses at Starfleet's medical school." He smiled. "And I still find time to see a few high priority patients, either the cases which have stumped the regular medical establishment, or VIPs such as yourself."

When Seven had called two days earlier, the receptionist

had initially said that Dr. Graham had no openings for a month. Surprisingly, an appointment had materialized as soon as Seven had identified herself. "Then I appreciate all the more your taking the time to see me on such short notice," she said.

The Doctor waved her words away. "But enough about me. What's this I've been hearing about you teaching?"

"I have an associate professorship and am teaching Introduction to Astrometrical Navigation and Computation as well as guiding some graduate students on projects dealing specifically with Delta Quadrant phenomena. My duties are relatively light, as the department head said he wished me to 'ease in gradually.'"

"Which means next semester will be a whole different story," said the Doctor with an air of experience. "Considering that MIT is on the cutting edge for astrometric computation these days, it sounds like you're in the 'fast lane' as well. How do you find the academic environment?"

"It is most pleasant. My colleagues are congenial and one or two have gone out of their way to be as helpful as possible."

"And Boston itself? Surely you haven't been spending all your time in a lab or classroom?"

"I have spent a great deal of my leisure time learning my way around the city. There are many areas of interest, including some well preserved historical sights." Seven was quiet for a moment, remembering how enthusiastic Chakotay had been about Old Boston when he first arrived two months ago.

*"What do you mean you haven't been on the Freedom Trail yet? It's a lovely walk through historical Boston, passing by the graves of Samuel Adams and other founding fathers, as well as the Old Statehouse, the Old North Church—that's where Paul Revere hung the lanterns— and right nearby is the site of the Boston Massacre..."*

*"I do not have quite the same enthusiasm for history as you do, Chakotay."*

*"Then it's a good thing you're the mathematician, and I'm the archaeologist." He laughed and pulled her into his arms. "I'll have to see what I can do to bring you around to my way of thinking."*

"Considering that Boston is one of the oldest cities in North America, you'd expect to find much of historical interest. I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." The Doctor squeezed her hand briefly. Once again she felt a familiar tingle. "I'm not surprised it didn't take you long to become acclimated to your surroundings."

"No, it did not."

Silence fell. After an awkward moment or two, the Doctor said, "Was there something else you needed, Seven? Anything else I can do for you?"

"No, not really." Seven suspected this was her cue to leave; she was still not quite adept at reading others' body language. Reluctantly, she stood, reminding herself that the Doctor surely had other pressing matters to attend to and had spared her all the time he could already.

The Doctor had not moved, however. "I'm not trying to get rid of you, Seven!" he laughed.

"I don't want to keep you from your research—"

"Nonsense. You heard Lynette—I've got nothing on tap for the rest of the day. I can certainly spare some time to visit with an old friend."

She sat down again with alacrity, glad she didn't have to leave just yet. For his part, he seemed genuinely pleased that she was staying.

The Doctor continued, "You know I'm always happy to see you, of course, but I confess to being more than a little curious that you found it necessary to come all the way out to San Francisco for something so minor. A regular physician with a background in optic cybernetics would have done just as well, though of course I am the acknowledged expert on Borg implants and their proper maintenance." He gave her a sidelong glance. "Unless it's my scintillating wit that you really miss, and the medical problem is just an excuse to see me."

She forced a smile.

"Well, no need to be embarrassed, as you're not the only one who feels that way!" the Doctor said cheerfully. "Tom and B'Elanna bring the children by every now and then, and Admiral Janeway was here just the other day. You'd think I was the only physician in San Francisco from the way they all act—"

Seven started involuntarily. "Cap—the Admiral was here?"

"That's right. She was due to leave shortly for the Romulan Neutral Zone, I believe, some diplomatic mission. There are all sorts of rumors flying around HQ—" he paused abruptly, causing Seven to wonder if he had ceased speaking because he felt she wouldn't be interested in the specifics or because it was a matter of Federation security. "At any rate, the Admiral was due for her annual physical. She's made it clear on more than one occasion that she doesn't like medical staff and doctors, but if she's going to have anyone 'poking and prodding' her she prefers it to be me."

"Do you see her often?" For some reason the words seemed to stick in Seven's throat.

"Not that often, but we do run into each other every now and then at HQ. When the Admiral is Earthside, that is, which doesn't happen very much these days. But Admiral Janeway always makes a point of grabbing a few minutes at the end of a checkup as well." He tapped his fingers reflexively against his armrest. "Let me see, when was she last here? I think it was last Thursday. Yes, that's right, shortly before lunch. Her ship was leaving the next morning."

Seven said, "I haven't seen the Admiral since Voyager's return, if you don't count the few minutes at the one year anniversary reception." She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice, remembering how Janeway had barely acknowledged her presence before turning to speak to someone else. "Even then, the Admiral was always surrounded by officials and reporters."

The Doctor attempted to hide his astonishment. "I agree that it was hard to get a word in at the reception, but surely afterwards you had the opportunity to spend some time together, at least talk for a bit?"

"No." A wave of anger swept over Seven, together with rising feelings of loneliness and abandonment, as she recalled the many times on board Voyager that Janeway had warmly assured her that her adjustment on Earth wouldn't be so bad, that she would be happy to personally help her get settled, even show her Indiana.

Seven had taken the words at face value, had always assumed that Janeway would be there to help her when the time

came. But somehow, the two of them seemed to have drifted apart, even before the return home. Seven had thought the estrangement had begun around the same time as her relationship with Chakotay became public knowledge, but after further reflection realized there was already a distance between them by that point. That Janeway had started to pull away from her much earlier, as the captain became caught up more and more in the journey and its difficulties, single-minded in her obsession to see the ship and crew safely back in the Alpha Quadrant. Now, sitting in the Doctor's office in the Starfleet Medical Complex, Seven suddenly wondered if perhaps that was part of the reason she had moved closer to Chakotay in the first place, to fill the void left by Janeway's withdrawal. Her reverie was interrupted when the Doctor said, "You've got to understand, Seven, that Admiral Janeway is very busy these days, they're all very busy now, and there was so much to deal with upon Voyager's return. The Maquis situation, Janeway's own review board hearings—"

"I am aware of all that," Seven said coldly. "But the Captain had promised to look out for me, help in any way possible when we returned to Earth. She did not."

The Doctor was quiet for a moment, as if he were considering what to say. "Possibly the Captain saw that you were in good hands and didn't need her."

I still needed her. But Seven did not say the words out loud. Instead, with an effort, she said, "You are correct—there was a lot going on at the time of our return, and everyone had a lot to deal with all at once." She swallowed and went on, "Chakotay was also very involved with the resolution of the Maquis situation. He then went to visit Dorvan to try to uncover any remnants of his home, gather whatever news he could about his family's whereabouts. Almost immediately afterwards, he undertook the first of many archeological expeditions." She felt a rush of warmth, remembering how Chakotay had always made room for her in his life, the way he'd assumed they would be together as a matter of course. Not like—

"Ah, yes, Chakotay's expeditions. And you always went along with him, regardless of where he was headed or what it was doing to you," the Doctor said. From his tone, he was clearly drawing his own conclusions, and Seven dreaded what he would say next. But all he said was, "And now it's your turn—after all these years of traipsing along after him on alien worlds, you finally have the chance to further your own career, explore your own interests."

"It was not like that," Seven protested. "I did not mind accompanying Chakotay. It gave me the opportunity to adjust to the Alpha Quadrant at a more leisurely pace, to get used to being part of a community larger than Voyager without becoming overwhelmed. He never tried to hold me back. He was most supportive when MIT contacted me and urged me to accept their offer."

"I never thought otherwise, Seven," the Doctor said immediately. "I didn't mean to sound so critical of your and Chakotay's choices. What I meant was—" he paused. "Never mind. Tell me some more about your 'new life.' It must agree with you—I've never seen you look better."

Seven started to speak and then fell silent. She was thinking about how, since coming to Boston, for the first time in her life she had been on her own, with no Collective of any sort to fall back on. And how after the first shock had worn off,

she found a solitary life rather pleasant. There was no one to impose their own ideas on her, or offer veiled criticisms of her choices. For the first time, she had been free to truly live as an individual.

The Doctor's voice broke into her thoughts once more. "I imagine it's been very difficult being apart from Chakotay, but I thought he recently finished his latest project. Is that right?" Seven was a little surprised at the extent of the Doctor's knowledge; it appeared that he had excellent sources of information. "In fact," the Doctor continued, "I'm a little surprised he's not here with you. It would have been nice to see him. But I suppose he had other errands to do in the Bay Area."

Seven shook her head. "No, he did not accompany me to San Francisco." She refrained from mentioning she hadn't told Chakotay where she was going. If she had, she knew he would have insisted on coming along on this visit. But for some reason she couldn't explain, she hadn't wanted him there.

"Chakotay remained in Boston?" A look of acute embarrassment passed over the Doctor's face. "I'm sorry, then I really shouldn't keep you, you must be eager to get back home."

"Chakotay is not expecting me until later this evening. If you have further matters to discuss, we can do so without inconveniencing him," Seven said. She forced down the wave of guilt she felt over how good it felt to be away from Boston—and from Chakotay—for a brief time.

The Doctor settled back in his seat, his relief obvious. It occurred to Seven for all his breezy manner, in many ways he must be just as lonely as she was, as baffled at finding a place where he truly belonged as much as they both had on Voyager.

The Doctor eagerly resumed the conversation, still curious to hear details of her life. "I don't mean to pry, but I had wondered if you and Chakotay have discussed starting a family yet."

Seven could feel her face tightening. "No," she said quietly. "We have not."

The Doctor hastily tried to cover his faux pas. "I had assumed that now you're both settled in the same place, that would be the logical next step. Unless you want to wait another year or two before taking a leave from the university—"

Seven surprised herself by saying, "I'm not sure how long Chakotay will be staying."

The Doctor opened his mouth and then closed it, one of the few times she had ever seen him at a loss for words.

"In Boston, I mean. This is just a temporary stop between expeditions. We had agreed from the outset that I would be here working, while he would be spending the majority of his time at various archeological sites off-world. It would be difficult to have a family under those circumstances."

"I see." The Doctor thrust his hands in the pockets of his coat. "Well, it sounds like you've got it all figured out."

Silence fell once more. Seven was suddenly reminded of other silent moments in the last two months since Chakotay's arrival. After the initial joy of their reunion, she realized she didn't have much to say to him. They weren't co-workers anymore, like they'd been on Voyager, or even at the archeological sites. He wasn't really part of her world anymore. But he was always so thoughtful, so polite, always helpful

and willing to discuss any topic with her—except for what he was really feeling. Sometimes she felt like she was living with a stranger; at times there was an expression on his face that made her wonder what he saw when he looked at her.

"Seven," the Doctor said gently, "Are you happy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that—are you happy?"

"I am...content."

"That's not good enough, Seven," he said sadly. She looked at him sharply, suddenly wondering if he was referring to her or to himself.

She hadn't really thought about the Doctor much over the past few years, she realized. Or even the last two days, except for focusing on what he could do for her. She hadn't considered his needs, his feelings, in the slightest. Just like another time, a scant two weeks before Voyager's return...

*"Don't tell me you never noticed, Seven!" Tom Paris said incredulously.*

*"Noticed what?"*

*"The Doctor's got a major thing for you." At her blank look, Tom added, "He's in love with you, Seven."*

*"You are mistaken," Seven said. "The Doctor and I are friends, nothing more."*

*"Maybe so, but I know he'd like to be a lot more than just a friend, if you'd only give him a chance."*

*She dismissed Tom's words with no further thought. The whole concept was ridiculous. The Doctor cared for her, she knew, but it was a pale shadow compared to what she and Chakotay had.*

All at once Seven wondered if she was being selfish, if it would be fair to unburden herself to the Doctor, knowing how he had once felt about her.

As if reading her mind, the Doctor took her hand in his and said, "If you'd rather not talk about Chakotay with me, I understand. But I want you to understand, Seven, that you're my friend and I care about you very much. If there's anything I can do to help you, please let me."

She looked into his deep brown eyes, filled with his concern—and love—for her. An image of air and light, she thought, but no matter what his body was composed of, she could never think of him as anything less real, less human, than she herself was. She wouldn't hurt him for the world, but it would hurt him worse if she withdrew now. And she couldn't deny how good it felt to be with him and confide in him. Slowly, haltingly, she confessed some of her doubts and fears where Chakotay was concerned, and how she wondered where and how they would find a place together, where they could both be truly happy.

A number of emotions played across the Doctor's face as he listened to her recital, but when he spoke his voice was very calm. "The only words of wisdom I can offer you, Seven, is that you have to follow your own path, discover where it is that you belong. Not just something imposed on you by others, but where you truly feel comfortable." He reached out and gently wiped the tear streaking down her face. "And at the same time, you have to keep up the connections that make you feel 'grounded', not lose touch with the people you care about, who mean a lot to you."

Seven thought again of Captain—no, Admiral Janeway. That had been her mistake, withdrawing from those who loved

her. Janeway had failed her, but she would not betray the faith the Admiral had shown in her.

“Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate what you’ve done for me today.”

He forced a smile. “As I said, I’m the expert when it comes to Borg implants.”

Seven leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. His arms went round her for a moment, then he released her and stepped back. “What is the time?” she asked.

“It’s nearly seventeen hundred.”

Where had the hours gone? “I must leave if I’m going to catch my shuttle back to Boston,” she said, regretfully. “With the time zone difference, it will be close to 2200 hours before I get home and I have an early lecture tomorrow morning.”

“Of course,” he said. “It was good seeing you, Seven.”

She picked up her bag, deposited the data padd inside, and started for the door. At the threshold she paused, and looked back to see his smile. “Seven?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t wait too long until your next check-up.”

## Hero

*Disclaimer: Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters are the property of Paramount. No copyright infringement is intended.*

*Note: Part of the “Glory Days” Universe, taking place a few months after the events of the story with that name. The complete list of stories to date (in chronological order) can be found at my site.*

*Acknowledgments: many thanks to Seema for the beta and for her help in shaping this series. Dialogue from “The Disease” courtesy of Jim Wright’s Delta Blue Reviews.*

Harry Kim stopped outside the VIP quarters and pressed the door chime before he realized it was past twenty three hundred hours. Beta shift had just ended—which explained why he was still up, roaming the *Livingston*’s corridors—but it was conceivable the Admiral had already retired for the night. He took a step back, mentally kicking himself for his eagerness, when he heard a familiar voice call from the other side of the door.

“Come in.”

He lost no time in doing just that; the grin of anticipation that had begun at the sound of her husky tones blossomed into a full-fledged smile when he caught sight of her. “Admiral Janeway!”

She rose from her seat immediately and crossed the room in a few quick strides, her hands outstretched. “Harry, it’s so good to see you!” She caught his upper arms, gave them a good squeeze, and then stepped back. “Or should I say, ‘Lieutenant Commander Kim.’” She nodded at the pips on his collar. “Impressive. But not at all unexpected.”

He gave a self-deprecating wave of his hand, though inwardly he was pleased. After all these years, he didn’t need her approval, but he found it very gratifying all the same. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to greet you in the transporter room when you arrived earlier.”

“Captain Johnson was an adequate substitute,” Janeway said, her eyes twinkling. “But it would have been nice if

you’d been there as well. Still, I’m hardly one to complain—I know duty always comes first.”

“Business before pleasure. Who do you think I learned that from?” he said, laughing. Was it his imagination, or did her smile waver for a second?

“It’s official business that’s responsible for my presence on the *Livingston*, after all,” Janeway said. She gestured toward the replicator. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’ll have some agas juice, thanks.” Moments later, he accepted the gently steaming cup from her and watched while she picked up her own mug. He caught the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. He smiled again to himself. It was good to know that some things would never change.

Harry took a seat on the sofa and glanced approvingly around the room, noting the furnishings and works of art were somewhat above Starfleet’s usual standards. “I see they’re treating you all right.”

“Deluxe accommodations,” she agreed. “Almost too much so.” She took a sip of coffee and closed her eyes briefly. He wondered if she was thinking of the more spartan cabins aboard *Voyager*.

“No more than you deserve,” he said.

“Perhaps they’re trying to make up for the somewhat arduous demands of this mission,” Janeway said wryly. She picked up a data padd next to her and frowned. “From the preliminary reports, it appears it’s only a matter of time until we have a full-blown crisis on our hands.”

Harry agreed wholeheartedly. The situation with the Ponzi was becoming critical. Their continued raids along both sides of the Romulan Neutral Zone—and the subsequent reprisals—were endangering a very fragile peace between the two superpowers, not to mention wreaking havoc in the lives of the Federation colonists in the vicinity. The *Livingston*’s captain had already tried—and failed abysmally, in Harry’s opinion—to contain the situation on his own. “That’s why Starfleet sent their best diplomat to handle it.”

“Not their best,” Janeway swiftly corrected him.

“No need to be so modest, Admiral,” Harry protested. “No one else currently in Starfleet has been involved in as many First Contacts as you, nor conducted negotiations with even a fraction of the species you have. And we both know that you’ve dealt with groups just like the Ponzi raiders in the past.”

The corners of her mouth went down. “No two diplomatic situations are exactly the same, Harry. There are always enough differences to ‘keep it interesting,’ shall we say. And I’m still not entirely sure we’ve got the full picture of what’s really going on.”

“With all due respect, Admiral, the *Livingston* has been on patrol in this sector for the past six months, and I think we’ve got a pretty good idea of the situation,” Harry felt compelled to remind her. “We’ve seen the results of the raids, talked to the survivors. We’ve made formal protests to the Ponzi government. Captain Johnson even tried to get together with a few of the faction leaders who are involved in carrying out the raids and appeal to their better natures.” His lip curled in disgust. “I admit, that one was a complete fiasco.” He knew that Janeway would never have made such a mistake.

To his surprise, she didn’t directly comment on the failure of the previous initiative. “All the more reason to suspect

that there are aspects of which we are unaware.”

“Such as....” his voice trailed off questioningly, though he really didn’t expect her to disclose sensitive details to a junior officer.

The Admiral was silent for a long moment. “Up to now, the focus has been on the raids themselves, based upon the assumption that the Ponzi aren’t aware of the broader ramifications of their actions. But what if that’s their real goal?”

“Deliberately trying to disrupt the treaty?” he said in disbelief. “What would they have to gain from an outbreak of hostilities between the Federation and the Romulan Empire?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Harry?” she asked with just a hint of impatience. “While both powers are otherwise occupied, the Ponzi would be able to expand their illicit yet highly profitable trade in the region, without fear of intervention.”

“Risk a major war, just to cover up their activities?”

“Why not?” Janeway shrugged. “There’s ample precedent. Just look at the increased scope of the Orion Syndicate affairs during the Dominion War.”

He sat back in his chair and considered her words. As had so often been the case when he served under her, he was amazed at the way she somehow always managed to see a side to an issue that had been consistently overlooked by everyone else. “If that’s the case, what can you hope to accomplish? Other than engage in a little ‘saber rattling’ of our own?”

“That remains to be seen,” she said somewhat cryptically, and laid her padd aside. “But enough about business. How have you been, Harry?”

“All right, I suppose.” He took another sip of his drink. “And you?”

“Starfleet Command certainly keeps me hopping. Would you believe this is my third mission in as many months?” Janeway shook her head in bemusement. “I recently bought a place in Monterey, but I’m beginning to wonder if I’m ever going to have the leisure to enjoy it. Or even be around long enough to finally finish unpacking.”

He tried and failed to envision her content with staying in one place for very long, much less settling down permanently. Privately, he suspected she much preferred being on the go to sitting behind a desk. “Well, even Admirals have to take leave sometime, right?” He hesitated before adding in a teasing tone, “Or is it you just can’t resist the lure of space?”

“I do miss the sound of the warp engines, the feel of a faintly vibrating deck beneath my feet,” she admitted. She gave a somewhat forced-sounding laugh. “Then again, most admirals hate to travel, so I get to indulge my penchant for being in space. It works out pretty well, all in all.”

“It would be even easier if you were still had your own starship,” he couldn’t help but say.

Janeway’s voice was even, but somehow devoid of the warmth that had colored it earlier. “That was never a consideration.”

His next question died on his lips at the look on her face. Maybe Tom had been right, he thought, remembering their conversation on Starbase Four a few months earlier. Maybe Janeway hadn’t had a choice in the matter of her promotion. With an effort, he switched to safer subjects. “So, have you heard from any of the others lately?”

She gave a quick shake of her head. “Aside from a brief talk with the Doctor at the end of my last physical, no, I haven’t

been in touch with many people. I want Tom and B’Elanna to bring the kids for a weekend, but that will have to wait till my schedule permits.” She sighed. “I would also like to get out to Vulcan one of these days.”

He couldn’t help but notice the omissions in the ‘family circle’, but decided not to react. “I just saw Tom recently, at a science conference. It was while the *Livingston* was undergoing some major repairs.”

She smiled. “That’s nice. I’m sure the two of you had a good time together.” Her voice took on a teasing note. “Tell me, did you manage to make it to any of the sessions?”

Harry laughed, recalling how Tom had dragged him off to a holonovel workshop in memory of their ‘Captain Proton’ days. “You know us too well. But seriously, I managed to attend most of my scheduled sessions.”

“That’s a relief.”

Silence fell. He looked at her again, noticing this time the increased amount of gray in her hair, the fine lines that had appeared around her eyes. With a start, he realized it had been more than four years since the last time he’d seen her—the first anniversary of Voyager’s return. There had been too many people, and too much noise, to have a chance for more than superficial conversation in the banquet hall. He and Libby had slipped out early, along with Tom and B’Elanna, Chakotay and Seven, and finished off the evening in more congenial surroundings.

Her thoughts must have gone along the same track, because she suddenly asked, “How is Libby?”

He shrugged. “Fine, I guess. I haven’t spoken with her for a few years.”

A puzzled look swept across her face, then abruptly vanished as understanding dawned. “I’m sorry. I thought the two of you—”

Harry nodded. “We did get back together again, about a year after Voyager was home. But it didn’t last very long.” He paused for a moment and then continued, “It only took a few months for us to realize that we’d each changed a lot in the years apart, become different people than the ones who had fallen in love before.”

She exhaled sharply, and he remembered that she, too, had left behind a fiancé when Voyager left for the Badlands. But unlike Libby, there had never been any pretense of waiting. Janeway had received word of her lover’s marriage during the fourth year of the journey. Harry remembered how odd he’d thought it at the time—the first communication from the Alpha Quadrant, and all her fiancé could think to say to her was that he’d moved on? But perhaps Janeway had preferred it that way; she had never been one to shy away from unpleasant realities, seemed to prefer confronting her problems head-on rather than shy away from them.

“You certainly have come up in the world since those days, Harry,” she said, lifting her coffee mug to him in salute. “I always knew you had it in you.”

“Did you?” He was surprised by the accusatory way in which the words came out.

“Of course.”

“Then why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“What do you mean?” Janeway seemed genuinely puzzled, and then her glance rested on his collar. “If you’re talking

about promotions, I very well couldn't keep to a regular promotion schedule as if we were still in the Alpha Quadrant."

He didn't mention Tuvok's promotion to lieutenant commander, or her reinstatement of Tom's rank to lieutenant after he'd served his penance, though on each occasion Harry had wondered why he wasn't included as well. Hadn't he served well and hard? Proved his worthiness? Aloud, he said, "That's not what I meant. You never expressed much confidence in me."

"That's not true," she objected immediately. "As an ensign, you headed up Ops. Not very common for someone fresh out of the Academy." She paused. "I know that when we returned, one of the areas the Admiralty expressed concern over was the assignment of certain personnel beyond their level of ability, particularly some of the Maquis. You would not believe the number of times I had to justify making B'Elanna my chief engineer over Joe Carey." Her mouth twisted slightly at the mention of the man who had died just a few scant months before they'd made it home. "But that was never an issue where you were concerned, Harry."

And if there had been a Maquis more qualified than he? Harry couldn't bring himself to ask the question.

Janeway continued, "I expressed my confidence in you a number of times. For example, you were in charge of the bridge for an entire shift on a fairly regular basis."

"Gamma shift—in the middle of the night. Not much trouble I could get into then," he said with just a trace of sarcasm.

"I don't suppose our enemies were aware that it was night time," she reminded him tartly, "and they should refrain from attacks except during Alpha Shift."

He switched gears rapidly. "And what about commanding away missions?"

"You had your share of those, too."

Harry flushed as he remembered the first time he'd been in charge of a mission. He had been so proud of himself—until he'd overheard Chakotay make a disparaging remark to Janeway about his ability to handle the responsibility without calling in for confirmation every two minutes. Harry had just been following standard away team mission protocols, checking with a superior officer when the mission parameters had suddenly expanded. All very proper and according to the book. But apparently Chakotay—and the captain—had taken this to mean a lack of initiative on his part.

From the expression on her face now, it was clear that she was remembering that time as well and that his feelings of hurt and betrayal had telegraphed themselves to her.

She leaned forward and took both his hands firmly in hers. "Harry, I never doubted your initiative. You proved yourself, time and time again. When the Hirogen took over the ship, forcing us to play out their sick scenarios of the hunt in a variety of settings, you were the one who enabled us to break free, you were the one who saved us."

"Yeah, I got to play the hero for a change." He tried and failed to keep the bitterness from his voice.

Janeway shook her head. "Harry, how can you doubt how I felt about your abilities, how much I valued you as an officer?"

"Because you never told me," he said, his voice shaking despite his best efforts. He pulled away from her. "Because by your actions it was clear you didn't expect much of me, other than to be the good little obedient boy, the green ensign

I was when I first came aboard. You made it very plain what you thought of me the time you ranked me out over disobeying your orders over the Varro."

"The Varro," she said, with more than a hint of steel in her voice, "were a highly xenophobic race. We helped repair the warp engines on their generational ship—I might point out it took some doing to get them to accept any assistance from us in the first place—and you blatantly disregarded their cultural taboos by becoming romantically involved with one of their crew. What was her name—Tal? Yes, that was it. Even when I ordered you to stay away from Tal, you didn't listen." She took a deep breath and tried to smile. "I was more than halfway convinced at the time you were under suffering from an alien possession, because it just wasn't like you."

*"Captain, I am not sick! I didn't disobey your orders because I'm under some alien influence. I disobeyed your orders because Tal and I are in love, and it's not right for you to keep us apart!"*

*"Listen to yourself! You don't sound anything like the Harry Kim I know."*

*"I have served on this ship for five years and said, 'yes, ma'am' to every one of your orders! But not this time!"*

*"You're willing to risk your rank—your career—over this?"*

*It took him a few seconds to find the words. "Have you ever been in love, Captain?"*

*"Your point?" she said coldly.*

*"Did your skin ever flush when you were near another person? Did your stomach ever feel like someone—hollowed it out with a knife when you were apart? Did your throat ever swell when you realized it was over?" He forced himself to go on. "Seven of Nine told me love's like a disease. Well, maybe it is—pheromones, endorphins, chemicals in our blood, changing our responses physical discomfort—but any way you look at it, it's still love!"*

*The stern captain's mask relaxed fractionally. "For the sake of argument, let's say you're right. Your feelings for Tal are no different than mine for—what? The man I was engaged to marry? Well, I lost him—and you're going to lose Tal. You know that. What the Doctor is offering you is a way to ease the pain!"*

*Harry met her implacable gaze without flinching. "That man you were going to marry—if you could have just taken a hypospray to make yourself stop loving him—so that it didn't hurt so much when you were away from him. Would you have done that?"*

From the look on Janeway's face, Harry knew she was remembering as well. "I know I was out of line with my comments, but when you told me that you expected Tom Paris to act this way, but not me, well, I guess I just..." His voice trailed off when he realized she wasn't listening.

"You weren't out of line," she whispered, more to herself than to him. She stopped. "Well, you were bordering on insubordination with some of those statements, but you were definitely on to something." She rose and walked to the viewport, then suddenly swung around to face him. "Harry, I tried to tell you then that I expected more of you. Because you were the 'golden boy' who had never put a foot wrong before. You were the perfect officer in every way, and I just didn't understand why you were suddenly so willing to throw it all away, everything you'd worked so hard to achieve."

“The truth is, Harry...I think about you differently than the rest of the crew—which isn’t to suggest that I don’t care deeply about each of them, but—you came to me fresh out of the Academy, wide-eyed with excitement about your first deep space assignment. From that first day, I’ve always felt more protective of you than the others.”

But Harry hadn’t wanted her coddling—or her protection. All he’d wanted was for her to view him with respect for his accomplishments, to acknowledge that he had grown up some and changed since the early days of Voyager’s journey. By the time of the encounter with the Varro, he’d already seen too much to ever be that inexperienced young officer ever again. With a pang, he wondered if that was still how she thought of him now.

“Why me, Admiral?” He realized she wouldn’t understand what he meant. “Why didn’t you treat anyone else that way?”

“Like Tom Paris?” Janeway shook her head. “Harry, you and Tom were coming from entirely different circumstances.” She didn’t elaborate further, but he knew what she was thinking: the raw, untried ensign was worlds removed from the jaded ex-convict. But there was one way in which she had treated them the same—she had given both of them her trust, a chance to prove themselves.

“I always envied Tom,” he confessed, looking down at his hands clenched tightly in his lap. “He was everything I wished I could be. Experienced, confident, handsome...and expected to be a little bad, a little dangerous. Not like plain strait-laced Harry. And Tom had it all, by the end—his lieutenant’s pip and his glamorous piloting job, and a wife and a baby.”

Janeway moved closer to him and laid her hand on his shoulder. “Tom paid a terrible price for his successes, Harry,” she said softly. “No matter what you might think, it was never easy for him. And more than once he came too close to losing everything he’d gained.”

“Well, he gave it up voluntarily in the end, didn’t he?” Harry retorted. He added hastily, “Not B’Elanna or their children—his Starfleet career. He was a hotshot pilot, and after our return home, after Starfleet cleared him and the Maquis, he could have had anything he wanted, any spot in the Fleet. But instead he gave it all up.”

Janeway smiled sadly. “He made certain sacrifices for his family, Harry. And he doesn’t regret those choices.”

“Call it what you will, it just proves that nice guys finish last.” Harry refused to be comforted.

“Tom is where he wants to be, Harry,” she said with a sigh. “That’s a rare gift. Even if he ‘settled’ for something less than you or someone else might have thought he could have had. He’s happy. Leave it at that.”

“Are you happy?” The question hung in the air between them, and for a moment Harry was afraid he’d gone too far. She quickly averted her gaze, perhaps afraid of giving away too much.

“What you were saying before, Harry, about love...” her voice trailed off. Then, squaring her shoulders, she looked him straight in the eye. “You were right, you know, about it being worth the pain.” She gave him a somewhat contrite look. “I wanted to apologize to you after we left the Varro, especially when I saw how much you were suffering.”

“It was my choice,” Harry said, and sighed deeply. “I could have gone to the Doctor for treatment if I’d wanted. You

strongly urged me to do so, in fact.”

“But you chose to bear the pain instead.” She pulled back from him a little, gave him a searching glance.

He rose to his feet and straightened his jacket, looking away from her as he did so. “There’s a touch of the martyr complex in all of us, I suppose,” he said.

“I suppose so,” she said with just a hint of irony. “But the point is, you chose to carry your pain around with you as a reminder. That some things—even if we know we’re going to lose them, even if they hurt like hell when we’ve lost them—still they’re worth it, for the good while it lasted. You were right, Harry—some things are worth it.”

Something made him look up just then and he caught sight of the most extraordinary expression on her face. He had never seen her so vulnerable. No, Kathryn Janeway had always been a tower of strength to those around her, able to surmount every difficulty. Even if it killed her. But now—the loneliness in her voice, an echo of the crushing burdens she’d once carried—Did she wish she had them still in place of the emptiness she had now?

“Oh, Admiral,” he said helplessly, and took a step toward her, wishing there was something he could do, something he could say.

“It’s all right, Harry,” she said tiredly. “It doesn’t really matter anymore.”

They were silent for a long moment. When he looked at her again, he saw her face was in repose once more. Once again, he saw before him the image of a woman who had clearly come to terms with herself, and her life.

The sharp chirrup of a communicator interrupted. “Commander Kim, please report to the bridge.” It was followed a second later by another. “Admiral Janeway, please report to the bridge.” Just then the red alert klaxon began to sound.

Janeway reflexively straightened her uniform and headed toward the door. “Come on, Harry,” she said in a steady voice. “It’s showtime.”

## The Sweetest Days

*Feedback: Much appreciated at seemag1@yahoo.com*

*Disclaimers: Most of the nouns belong to Paramount; the verbs, adjectives and adverbs are mine.*

*Author’s Notes: Yet another entry in the “Glory Days” universe. This one takes place immediately after the events in Rocky’s “Hero.” The other stories in the “Glory Days” universe can be found here.*

*Many thanks to Rocky for the beta.*

The house was dark when Tom Paris disembarked from the cab. He glanced up at the second floor bay window, hoping to see a light. But it was well after 0200 hours; B’Elanna surely must have called it a night by now.

“Thanks.” Tom handed the cab driver some credits to cover the trip from the San Francisco’s main shuttlebay to the house, plus a little extra for the tip. “Is that enough?” The cab trip itself had only taken a few minutes from door to door; if it hadn’t been for the late hour, Tom would have chosen to walk.

The cab driver nodded. “Have a good night, sir.”

Tom turned and walked up the five stairs leading to the bright red door. He hadn't been particularly fond of that color when he, B'Elanna and Miral had first moved into the townhouse four years ago, but Miral had been captivated by it and so he had never repainted it. Quickly, Tom tapped in his entry code and the door clicked open. Inside, he dropped his duffle bag on the floor as he shrugged out of his jacket.

"Computer, lights, dim," he said softly. Several of the recessed ceiling lights turned on, illuminating his path. As Tom stumbled past the living room, he was grateful he hadn't tried to make his way in the dark; the children's toys littered the floor. He could see that someone—B'Elanna most probably—had made a half-hearted effort to put most of the toys into the wooden box bought specifically for that purpose. No doubt, one of the children had managed to yank some of the toys out again when B'Elanna's back was turned.

As he headed into the kitchen for a glass of water, he could see that the dining room table was spread with PADDs and tablets of paper. Lately, B'Elanna had taken to doing many of her calculations the old-fashioned way. She preferred it, she had said when questioned, because it was the best way for her to arrange her thoughts when working through complex engineering problems.

Tom helped himself to a glass of water and then picked up a PADD that had been mistakenly left by the sink; the display revealed cartoon figures of dinosaurs with brief, one-syllabic blurbs below. No doubt Miral's latest dinnertime reading, Tom thought as he replaced his glass in the sink. As he turned to check the newest drawings posted on the fridge, his foot hit a metallic object.

"Ouch!" He leaned down to pick up a bright red old-fashioned fire engine that had once belonged to Miral but these days, Joey had confiscated it for his own use. Shaking his head, Tom put the fire engine on the kitchen counter.

He went back into the living room and grabbed his duffle bag; chances were, with the way schedules were these days, it would remain there on the floor along with the toys for at least a week before someone felt the need to move it. Not for the first time, Tom wondered when he and B'Elanna had gotten so busy.

When he had first transferred from the flight school at Miramar to the San Francisco campus, he had thought that the move would mean more time with B'Elanna and Miral, and later, baby Joey. But instead, he found himself constantly on the move, whether it was taking his students out on flight runs near Mars or his own self-development courses that were required by Starfleet Academy for all of its instructors. Somehow, those courses were never offered in San Francisco or even on Earth. Invariably, he headed off to some distant world or starbase for the additional training. It wouldn't be so bad if he could take the family with him, but B'Elanna was neck-deep with work on the new Mars starship prototype and couldn't get the time off. The Starfleet Corps of Engineers was currently working 24/7 with no respite in sight, thanks to the brewing conflict in the Neutral Zone.

This latest trip had been for flight training on Riga III and while it had been fun flying the latest 'toys' in Starfleet's arsenal, Tom had been keenly aware that his reflexes were not as quick as some of the younger pilots, that his instinct to take risks had been dulled by domesticity and responsibility. By

far, Tom had been one of the oldest pilots in the group and at first, some of the young hotshots had looked at him derisively, bestowing upon him a rather unflattering nickname. Tom had heard a couple of them wondering out-loud whether "Pops" could keep up and Tom was pleased that not only had he kept up, he also had a few moves he passed on to the younger generation.

Tom made his way up the stairs quietly. The first door he passed on his right led into Miral's bedroom. He peeked in, smiling to himself as he watched his little girl sleeping. She was nestled beneath her pink comforter, surrounded by various stuffed animals; Tom wondered how there was even room for Miral on the bed, given the amount of toys she had chosen to take to sleep with her. He carefully picked his way through the dolls and coloring books scattered on the floor to lean over Miral to give her a light kiss on the cheek. On his way out, Tom nearly tripped over yet another toy. He groaned under his breath as he leaned against the wall for support. The great toy clean up would begin in the morning, he decided as he hobbled back out into the hall.

"Stop right there." B'Elanna's voice was firm and calm.

"It's me, B'Elanna," Tom said wearily. "Computer, lights."

The lights flashed on, revealing B'Elanna standing at the end of the hall, a bathrobe over her nightgown and a ceremonial bat'leth in hand.

"Tom?" she asked in a voice that was a mixture of bewilderment and suspicion. Her hair was slightly mussed and her eyes had that familiar sleepy look in them. "What are you doing here?"

"Last I checked, I lived here," Tom said. He eyed the bat'leth in her hand. "How about putting that down so I can show you just how glad I am to be home?"

B'Elanna obliged as Tom met her halfway. He pressed his lips to hers, to her cheek, and neck.

"I've missed you," he breathed, his hand gently cupping the left side of her jaw. B'Elanna stepped back, amused. "You were only gone for a week and we talked every day."

"It seemed like an eternity," Tom said. "Do you know what it's like to spend seven days with those kids?" He shook his head, remembering some of the young, cocky pilots who had been in the flight school with him. Just fresh out of the Academy, fired up with determination born during the Dominion War, these 'kids' reminded Tom what he'd been like at that age. He had joined some of them one night at the only bar on the starbase, but the conversation—mostly revolving around sexual exploits and exaggerated tales of bravado—had only served to remind Tom how far removed he was from that part of his life.

B'Elanna hooked her arm through his. "No, but I'm sure you'll tell me. It can't be any worse than the zoo we have here."

Tom twisted slightly to plant a light kiss on the top of her head. "I love this zoo, B'Elanna. Trust me. It's better here."

B'Elanna shook her head. "You wouldn't say that if you'd been here this week. It's been absolutely crazy. \*Your\* children have been running me ragged this week."

"What about Jennifer?" Tom asked, referring to the nanny who took care of the kids during the day while they were at work. "You could have asked her to stay late the whole week and help with dinner and the other chores."

B'Elanna shook her head and Tom knew immediately that that had been the wrong thing to say. As it was, B'Elanna hated that her job with the Starfleet Corps of Engineers pulled her away from the family for long hours and even when she did manage to break off early, she had to bring additional work with her to keep up with the frenetic pace.

"No," B'Elanna said. "I can do it, Tom."

"I know you can, but you do look tired." Tom stared at his wife critically, taking in every detail. It amazed him, even after nine years together, just how wonderful it was to come home to this woman. The pre-Voyager Tom Paris wouldn't have even considered a life of monogamy; marriage had seemed nothing less than monotonous in those days. "What did they do that was so horrible?"

"Miral decided she wanted to be a zebra," B'Elanna said. "So she drew black stripes across her arms, legs, and stomach with permanent black marker. Don't be surprised when you see her in the morning. It'll probably be a few more days before it all comes off."

"A zebra?" Tom grinned. "That sounds pretty mild."

B'Elanna glared at him. "And this evening, your son decided that he wanted to go outside after dinner. Somehow, he managed to slip out the backdoor. I was absolutely furious by the time I found him."

"Didn't you lock the door?"

"I did, but I think he figured out the doorcode from me. You know how he watches everything we do and when I was trying to get the marker stains off Miral, he must have climbed up on the table to reach the door keypad." B'Elanna sighed. "Anyway, I found him in the carport, trying to open the flitter door, but he couldn't reach the handle. He screamed all the way back into the house." She smiled. "I think we have a flyboy in the making."

"Sounds like you had it rough," Tom said sympathetically. "I'm here now so you're no longer outnumbered, and then this weekend, we'll leave the kids at my parents' and we'll go out to Yosemite or Lake Tahoe. How does that sound?" He kissed her cheek again, his arms wrapping around her. "Just the two of us." His lips made their way down her jaw, her neck...

"Mmm... sounds wonderful," B'Elanna murmured against his cheek. "But hold that thought. I've got Joey in the bedroom with me."

"Problems?" Tom asked in concern as he pulled away.

"Just the usual. He and Miral were at it all day and then he got so wound up, he refused to go to sleep." B'Elanna ran a hand through her hair. "I know it's a horrible precedent, but I was absolutely at my wit's end. So I brought him into our bed. That seemed to calm him down." B'Elanna smiled at Tom. "I think he missed you. They both did." She took Tom by the hand and led him into the bedroom. "Look at him. Doesn't he look deceptively peaceful?"

Tom had to admit that in sleep, his son looked angelic. Dark curls flopped against his ridged forehead and his long lashes were highlighted against his soft pale skin. Joey was dressed in a blue sleeper with feet, one chubby fist in his mouth, the other on his stomach.

"I'll put him back in his crib," Tom said softly. He lifted Joey up carefully and the baby stirred slightly, his eyes opening to narrow slits.

"Daddy?" Joey muttered before settling into his father's arms, his eyes closing sleepily.

"Come on, Sport. Time to sleep in your own bed," Tom said. "I'll be back in a minute, B'Elanna."

They had moved the rocking chair Tom had replicated for B'Elanna after Miral's birth into Joey's room and Tom settled down for a few minutes to spend some quality time with his son. He loved the feeling of a baby in his arms. At fifteen months, Joey was generally a happy baby, prone to fits of laughter. He clearly adored his sister and it frustrated him to no end that he couldn't manage to do some of the same things Miral could. Tom tightened his arms around the baby; he had everything he needed right here, he thought as he rocked back and forth. Finally, Tom felt it was safe to put the baby into the crib.

When he returned to the bedroom, he found that B'Elanna had already dumped his clothes into the recycler.

"I could have done that," Tom said reproachfully. "You should get some rest. I was really hoping to slip in and not wake you."

B'Elanna glared at him. "Then you shouldn't have stomped down the hall like a herd of targs." Her lips turned up at the corners. "But I would have hoped you'd wake me up anyway." She shoved the empty duffel bag into the closet and then reclaimed the bat'leth from the hall. "You should have called to let me know you'd changed your plans to come today instead of tomorrow evening. I would have met you at the station."

"Sorry," Tom said. He watched as B'Elanna carefully replaced the bat'leth on the wall facing their bed. This was the same bat'leth that Kohlar had gifted to them before Miral's birth and their little girl never tired of the story of how her father had fought not only for her mother's honor, but for hers as well. "I decided to leave the flight training right after the last session and I was on stand-by for the entire trip. I had no idea what time I'd get here. And by the time I reached Utopia Planetia, I knew it would be too late for you to come out with the kids."

"You must have been really eager to get home if you took the chance to come stand-by," B'Elanna said, referring to the long waits and complicated routings that usually ensued when one decided to travel standby. She wrapped her arms around Tom. "Tell the truth, are you happy to be home or would you rather have spent more time with your fellow flyboys on Riga?"

Tom laughed. "No, I am happy," he said. "I thought I would go crazy if I had to spend another day on Riga. Not only was the food bad, but the instructors were nothing to write home about." His lips curved up as he eyed B'Elanna lasciviously. "And the company wasn't so hot either." He leaned in for another kiss. She returned his kiss with equal intensity until Tom gently but reluctantly disengaged from her embrace; after hours of traveling in crowded transports, he desperately needed a shower. "So all in all, home never seemed sweeter than it does at this very moment."

"The training sessions went that well, huh?" B'Elanna asked. She followed Tom into the bathroom, sitting down on the edge of the tub to watch as he brushed his teeth. "I did notice that you were curiously tight-lipped about the classes when we talked."

"It was all right. The usual brush-up on the latest equipment, the standard flight formations and drilling in the offensive and defensive combat maneuvers," Tom said. He quickly stripped down to boxer shorts and then grabbed a towel from the linen closet. "A lot of brilliance and talent." He stared at himself critically in the bathroom mirror, observing the new lines at the corner of his eyes. With a sigh, he ran his fingers along his hairline, noting the newest strands of gray just above his right temple. Yet another reminder that he was no longer young, a feeling that had been reinforced at the training camp. However, he was pleased to note as he surveyed himself in the mirror in a rare moment of arrogance, that he had still managed to maintain good muscle tone. "Most of them are fresh out of the Academy with grandiose plans, just itching for action. There was a lot of tough talk about the current situation with the Romulans and I didn't have much to contribute in that area. Not to mention, most of them have only been out of the Academy for a couple years, I really didn't have a lot in common with them so in the end, I didn't spend much time with them outside of the regular training sessions."

"Tell me you didn't stay in your quarters when you weren't in front of a navigation console," B'Elanna said as she got up to let Tom have access to the shower.

"Computer, run shower water at 40 degrees Celsius, full pressure," Tom requested. He stepped into the shower, loving the feel of water against his skin. The showers on Riga had had weak pressure at best and after seven years of sonic showers on Voyager, Tom truly appreciated water for the indulgence that it was. "In answer to your question, B'Elanna, I did go out with the guys one evening and realized that I would be happier in my quarters. Besides, it gave me some time to catch up on reading the latest trade publications. There was a nice article on the Mars, by the way." The Mars was the new starship design B'Elanna was working on. The sleek vessels were designed specifically for combat and would carry a crew complement of nearly 100. "The reviewer gave a glowing account of the new shield harmonics. Said it was one of the most beautifully designed ships ever and a worthy successor to the Defiant class."

"I could have told you that," B'Elanna said, a trace of arrogance slipping into her voice. She leaned back against the marble counter top, her arms crossed against her chest. "Did you meet anyone while you were there?"

"B'Elanna," Tom groaned. B'Elanna had never been the jealous type when it came to other women, saving that particular emotion for other hobbies of his, such as the holodeck or flying. "No." He turned off the water. "I can't believe you'd even ask such a question."

"I meant someone like Harry or Chakotay. Someone from \*Voyager\* since you have such a knack of running into people," B'Elanna said. She grinned as Tom emerged from the shower. Playfully, she tossed his towel at him and he caught it in his left hand. "Or is there someone else I should know about?"

Tom laughed, relieved. In a previous trip to Starbase Four, to attend a science conference, he had run into Chakotay on the way over and then had met Harry at the actual conference. B'Elanna had been envious, to say the very least. It had been just over a year since she'd seen Harry and several more

since she had spent time with Chakotay. While both men had recently made promises to stop by, neither one had actually carried through.

On the other hand, B'Elanna had spent a night at Tuvok's home on Vulcan and she had told Tom that anxious as she had been about spending time with Tuvok, she'd found the visit a surprisingly calming experience. She'd even gone so far as to suggest that Tom make the trip out to Vulcan one day to spend time with Tuvok; so far, Tom hadn't found the time to do so, but the idea actually did appeal to him.

"No, not this time but I did get a call from Harry while I was on Riga," Tom said as he put on a blue t-shirt and shorts in preparation for bed. "Apparently, Janeway has been on board on his ship, the *Livingston*, trying to negotiate a ceasefire with the Ponzi. She's been there for two weeks already."

"How is the Admiral doing? I feel like it's been so long since we've seen or talked to her," B'Elanna said as she discarded her robe on the back of a chair; it slid off and pooled in a pile of white terrycloth on the floor. "She keeps inviting us down to her new place in Monterey but she's never around long enough for us to actually visit for the weekend." She slipped under the covers, rolling onto her side to make room for Tom.

"Harry says he hasn't seen much of Janeway since the day she came aboard," Tom said. He took one last look in the mirror before joining B'Elanna. "According to Harry, she occasionally attends the morning senior staff briefings, but for the most part, spends the day in meetings with the various delegates." Tom remembered how Harry had voiced a concern over whether Janeway was getting enough rest, that the few times he'd seen her, she'd looked tired but determined. At one point in their conversation, Harry had wondered aloud whether the vaunted 'Janeway magic' would work this time. Of course the fact that Janeway would push herself to the brink of exhaustion to hammer out a peace treaty didn't surprise Tom; he'd seen that behavior from her more times than he could count while they were in the Delta Quadrant. "But treaties like this aren't made over night and Janeway must have known that going in," Tom continued. "Think how long the *Livingston* has been out there trying to broker some kind of agreement so obviously there's a lot of ground to cover."

"Some people at work mentioned the other day that this was a last-ditch attempt at peace for the simple reason that the Romulans are getting fed up with Starfleet," B'Elanna said, as she shifted beneath the covers, trying to get comfortable. "The Ponzi have been raiding settlements on both sides of the Neutral Zone and the Romulans claim that they have been patient long enough. The sentiment is that it won't be long before the Romulans take matters into their own hands. As it is, they haven't been happy with the Federation for the last couple years." B'Elanna turned her head slightly to look at Tom. "It's always been an uneasy alliance at best and I have no doubt that the Romulans are just looking for any excuse to cross over the Neutral Zone."

"They're not the only ones spoiling for a fight." Tom remembered that some of the younger pilots at the training school were actually advocating a confrontation with the Romulans; they wanted to put their skills to use. These were young men and women who had come of age at the end of the Dominion War and now they wanted a greater challenge than

Carefully scripted simulations or war games. Tom had had to bite his tongue to avoid sharing his personal 'war stories' with them. Given the age difference, Tom hadn't wanted to come across as preachy, but at the same time, he'd been very tempted to point out that war wasn't glamorous, that lives were irrevocably changed, leaving scars that would never completely heal. The reality of war, however, was not one that could be explained; it could only be experienced for the true horror to be known. "You should have seen how eager the pilots at flight school were."

"Well, they might get their wish. If the diplomatic efforts fail, it will be war," B'Elanna said. She propped herself up on one arm so that she was facing Tom. "And you know that the Romulans can almost match the Federation in terms of firepower, given that the post-war Federation reconstruction continues to this day. Starfleet simply doesn't have the battleships it had before the Dominion War. And given that the Romulans entered the Dominion War far later in the conflict, they didn't suffer as many casualties as the Federation did, and so now they outnumber us in terms of trained personnel."

"In other words, you're throwing the battle to the Romulans already," Tom said. He frowned. "I don't think I like the sound of that, B'Elanna."

"Nor do I, given that \*my\* ships will be among the first on the front lines."

"Do you \*really\* think there will be a war?" Tom asked. While he had kept up with the headlines during his time on Riga, he had been far too occupied with other matters to really absorb the latest developments. His conversation with Harry had covered the Neutral Zone conflict in only the broadest of strokes, namely in reference to Admiral Janeway, and the two men had kept mostly to personal topics.

"Kahless, I hope not. I honestly don't know, but I have confidence in Admiral Janeway," B'Elanna said with a slight smile. "But I have to consider the possibility, that despite her best efforts, there could be another war. The talking heads on the Federation News Service have different theories as to the scope of the conflict, if it should happen, but the Dominion War clearly proved that these wars are never localized to one region of space."

Tom looked at B'Elanna, seeing the anxiety in her eyes. "It won't come to that. Admiral Janeway won't let it," he said confidently, recalling that this wasn't the first time that they had put their lives into Kathryn Janeway's hands.

"I know, I know." B'Elanna put her hand on Tom's chest. "But what if, Tom? We've got to start thinking now, planning for that possibility."

"Hey, you sound like the war is going to happen tomorrow and that we'll be on the front line. This isn't Voyager, B'Elanna," Tom said softly. "If there is a war, there's no doubt we have skills we can contribute to the effort, but we won't be on the front line. Not this time."

"Well, given that San Francisco was actually a target during the Dominion War, I wouldn't be so confident of that. The reconstruction makes it possible to forget that the Breen launched an attack here, but you know just as well as I do that there are no safe places when it comes to a war." B'Elanna took a deep breath. "I can't go to Yosemite or Lake Tahoe with you this weekend, Tom, as much as I'd like to. We're on 24-hour call because Starfleet has ordered that the Mars-

class ships be ready for launch in two weeks. We're talking a complete ramp-up here."

Tom let out a low whistle. "That's quick. Are you going to make that deadline?"

B'Elanna nodded. "We've been working around the clock and the only reason I'm not at the lab now is because you were away and I wanted to be home with the kids. But I'm afraid that the killer schedule will have to resume again starting tomorrow." She made a face. "Not being ready is \*not\* an option, as per the latest order from Starfleet Command. If hostilities do actually break out, it's a safe bet that the three new Mars-class ships that have already been completed will be among the first dispatched to the front lines. They're the best and newest ships in the fleet right now. But it also means that my team is going to have to work straight through until all three of the ships have been completely outfitted and then, we'll be onboard when the ships makes their first mini-shakedown cruise."

Tom stared at B'Elanna. "That's second thing you've said tonight I'm not sure I like the sound of."

"Don't worry, the ship is perfectly safe. It's been taken out twice already for short jaunts to Jupiter and back." She smiled and Tom got the feeling that she was deliberately sidestepping his real concern. "In a way, this ship is much safer than Voyager ever was after we'd have a run-in or two with the Kazon or the Borg." Humor underlined B'Elanna's tone, but Tom couldn't help but pick up on the ominous meaning behind her words.

"A trial launch is not what I'm worrying about," Tom said sharply. "There is no way Starfleet will be able to train enough engineers to keep those ships running at maximum efficiency if a war breaks out within the next couple of weeks. Will they want you to be onboard \*if\* the ships are actually sent into battle?"

"I don't know, Tom. It's a good possibility. The team has already been split into three units for that very reason." B'Elanna took a deep breath. "And I'm leading the Beta team. Which means, if the orders come, we'll be assigned to the Minuteman, which is what the prototype I'm working on will be commissioned as."

"And you were going to tell me this \*when\*?" Tom stared at her.

B'Elanna sighed. "I'm sorry, Tom. I only found out two days ago and I didn't want to tell you over the comm. I thought it would be better if we actually sat down to talk about it. Besides, I needed to get used to the idea myself." B'Elanna rested her hand on Tom's chest. "I wasn't trying to keep this from you. I just wanted to be sure of what was going on."

"So, if the Romulans officially cross the Neutral Zone, we're technically at war," Tom said slowly, "and Starfleet has already ordered the ship \*you\* have been working on for the last five years to the frontlines. And you right along with it."

"That's a pretty good synopsis of the current situation," B'Elanna said wryly. "And don't forget, there's a good possibility that they may call up reserve pilots like you." B'Elanna's voice was soft. "Like I was saying, we have to face the reality of what might happen."

Tom pulled B'Elanna towards him so that her head was resting on his chest. "And here I thought life after Voyager

was going to be dull.”

“I wish,” B’Elanna said. She cuddled closer, her arm around Tom’s chest. “I had lunch with your father yesterday and he seemed pretty calm. He really believes Janeway can pull off another diplomatic coup. I believe his exact words were along the lines of ‘If Kathryn can’t do it, no one can.’ That’s a pretty strong endorsement, Tom.”

Tom nodded. His father had been a huge advocate of sending Janeway to the Neutral Zone to try her hand, for a very simple reason: Janeway was nothing if not tenacious. When it came to making alliances and treaties honed by her years in the Delta Quadrant, she was second to none. Of course, circumstances there had often left her no other choice but to practice some of her famed ‘saber rattling.’ Now the question was whether or not it was good enough to keep the Romulans on their side of the Neutral Zone. As it was, there had been several reports of skirmishes in the last few days. Harry had been cagey about the details, but some of his guarded comments had led Tom to believe that the *Livingston* had been involved. It was also common knowledge that both Starfleet and the Romulans were already massing ships along their respective sides of the Neutral Zone.

“Unfortunately though, Janeway isn’t the only one involved in these negotiations, even if she’s leading up the delegation,” Tom said. He sighed, thinking of the consequences of failure. “If there’s a war, then patriotism dictates that I ought to reenlist, see if I can’t get a posting on the frontline. If things do heat up, Starfleet will need its best pilots out there...” his voice drifted off, as he thought of the young hotshots full of bravado. They were good, he knew, but real combat experience had made Tom Paris better. Real wars didn’t follow the careful guidelines of simulations and Tom’s experience in the DQ had honed his anticipation and instinctively, he knew what maneuvers would work and what wouldn’t. These kinds of skills couldn’t be taught in a classroom.

“No, I agree. I can’t see you staying home while the rest of us get to go play with the Romulans,” B’Elanna said softly.

“I know what we’ve said in the past, about one of us staying with the kids, but if war does break out, we’re going to have to reconsider. Starfleet isn’t going to excuse one of their best engineers just when things get interesting, and frankly, I don’t think I could just sit on the sidelines during any hostilities.” He quirked a grin. “It could be like old times again. You in Engineering, me at the helm.”

“If hostilities do break out,” B’Elanna said, “we shouldn’t be on the same ship.”

“So much for nostalgia,” Tom said with a hint of sadness. He and B’Elanna had made a wonderful team on Voyager, their skills complementing each other perfectly. But he also knew that they had other responsibilities now. If it did come to war, they would have to leave the children with his parents and Tom wasn’t quite sure how he would explain war to Miral in the first place. His daughter would not understand how the intricacies of a conflict that Tom himself was still having trouble comprehending.

They were quiet for a moment and Tom had no doubt that B’Elanna was envisioning sitting down with their children as well to explain why she had to leave. He crossed his fingers. B’Elanna saw the movement.

“That’s going to be the hardest part,” she said. “Being

apart, and not knowing. The uncertainty of it all. In the DQ, I’d gotten use to the idea of raising Miral on Voyager because we had no other choice.”

\*Not\* having Miral hadn’t been a choice for them. Tom barely remembered discussing whether the pregnancy was even a good idea after they had gotten over the initial surprise; if Samantha Wildman could safely raise a child on Voyager, why couldn’t they? He and B’Elanna had also been apprehensive of their chances at having another opportunity; the odds for human-Klingon conception were against them and they knew that they didn’t want to take the risk of not being able to conceive a child in the future.

“I’d almost forgotten what it meant to be safe,” B’Elanna mused. “Somehow, we managed to make it out of every battle with nothing more than minor injuries. But others, like Joe Carey or Lyndsey Ballard, weren’t so lucky.” Her voice cracked slightly at the mention of two of their friends who hadn’t made it home. Tom knew that B’Elanna still missed Joe Carey; over their seven years in the DQ, they had developed an excellent working relationship and a solid friendship. “We led a charmed life, Tom, and we have been so lucky.”

Tom agreed. If he stopped long enough to think about it, it was a miracle that they had even survived their seven years in the Delta Quadrant. The Hirogen had nearly killed them all with their ‘hunting’ scenarios, the Borg had developed an unhealthy fascination with Voyager, the Kazon gave them a good run for their money, and Species 8472 had nearly brought them to their knees. In comparison, the Romulans seemed almost tame. Even so, Tom thought, it would be foolish to underestimate the strength of the Romulans.

B’Elanna held his hand, her fingers weaving in with his. “Tom, I’m scared.” It was an uncommon sentiment for B’Elanna to utter; he hadn’t seen her this vulnerable in years, not since they had first found out that she was pregnant with Miral.

“I know. I’m afraid too.” Tom’s hand tightened around B’Elanna’s. It felt good to actually say the words out loud.

“I’ve been thinking about it for the last two days,” she said. “About what would happen if my engineering team was chosen to go out there-”

“Shhh...” Tom pressed a finger to B’Elanna’s lips, cutting her off. “Don’t think about it.” A defense mechanism, he knew. He had a sudden vision of Voyager under attack, of the wires and consoles sparking, of warp core overloads, of the messhall filled with casualties...

“I wish I could put it out of my mind,” B’Elanna said, her voice sounding scratchy. “You know how the saying goes, hope for the best, but prepare for the worst?” She shook her head. “I never thought this hard about anything on Voyager. Things just \*happened\* and we didn’t have time to think about what was going on. The anticipation of war is almost worse than a surprise attack. In a way, it’s much more frightening than anything we’ve faced before.”

“I know. I feel exactly the same way.” When they were on Voyager, fear had meant nothing to any of them. Yes, there had been hard times, difficult situations, but somehow, they had managed to persevere. Perhaps it was because in the Delta Quadrant, they never had to think; they just had to do. The odds then were so overwhelmingly against them they never took anything for granted but here, in their new settled

life in San Francisco, it was very different. Their security, the foundation of their life together, could very well be destroyed by a war.

“We’re just going to have to take it one day at a time,” Tom said quietly. “We both know that Janeway will do the best she can out there. And we just have to trust in her. Like we did on *Voyager*.” He kissed B’Elanna’s forehead lightly. “Come on, B’Elanna, it’s late. Let’s go to sleep.”

She obliged, letting him pull her down next to him. Tom wrapped his arm around B’Elanna.

“Computer, turn off lights,” Tom said. Despite his exhaustion, Tom found it difficult to fall asleep. He hadn’t really considered the personal impact of the war on his family. Yes, he had heard the other pilots talking about it—some of them bragging what they would do to the Romulans if push came to shove—at the flight school, but Tom had paid little heed to what the actual consequences would mean. If there was a war, he had speculated that it would be far away and it wouldn’t affect them. He sighed deeply, doing his best to push away his fears. He imagined that the Federation had probably given Janeway a lot of leeway to negotiate; no one wanted another war. After all, it had only been eight years since the devastation of the Dominion War.

In his restlessness, Tom grew acutely aware of the sounds in the room. The ticking of the chronometer, the faint hum of the air conditioning system. His gaze swept across the bedroom, finally settling on the most recent family portrait they had taken just a month ago. He was sitting, Miral leaning against his knee and B’Elanna was seated next to him, Joey in her lap. He stared at the portrait for so long, his vision blurred, and finally he looked down at B’Elanna. She had curled against him, her eyes closed. Carefully, Tom brushed hair away from her face and leaned down to kiss her. B’Elanna stirred.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you,” she muttered, her eyes still closed.

Tom shifted his weight so that he could pull B’Elanna closer to him. The warmth of her body next to him comforted him, assured him that he was home. What was that ancient expression? Home was where the heart was?

“You’ve had a long day and it looks like you’re going to have even longer ones in the next two weeks,” Tom said, trying to inject some humor into his voice.

“You have to go to work tomorrow too,” B’Elanna mumbled against his chest.

“Don’t remind me,” Tom groaned. He had nearly forgotten and truth be told, he really wasn’t looking forward to working with the cocky, flamboyant cadets, not after spending the last week with recent Starfleet graduates. Not for the first time, it occurred to Tom that he was growing increasingly weary with his job as a flight instructor at the Academy. “You know, a life outside of Starfleet looks pretty appealing now. Maybe after all this war talk has died down, I can explore other options. Like holoprogramming.”

B’Elanna lifted her head, looking slightly more awake. “You’re not serious, are you? No, don’t tell me. I can only handle one crisis a night.”

Tom chuckled and pulled her close. “Don’t worry, B’Elanna. I wasn’t planning to make any major changes tomorrow. It’s just something I’ve been thinking about.” He

sighed. “I imagine we’re going to have to put a lot of things on hold for the time being until we know the situation for certain.”

“I agree,” B’Elanna said. She shifted slightly so that she was curled up against him. Tom pressed his lips against the top of her head, breathing in the sweet smell of her shampoo. “I guess the important thing is to appreciate what we have here and now.”

“Yes.” Tom certainly didn’t envy Kathryn Janeway at this moment. How many other people had dreams that would be shattered by yet another war? It was a heavy burden for one woman to carry it alone and Tom knew that Janeway would be well aware of the great responsibility she had been entrusted with. “I guess we’ll have to take it one day at a time.” He cleared his throat and pressed his lips to B’Elanna’s ear. “You know, B’Elanna, you never said you missed me while I was gone.”

“I didn’t?” B’Elanna asked innocently.

“No.” Tom put on his best ‘injured’ expression. “You act like I wasn’t gone at all.” He had tried that same act on B’Elanna after he, Tuvok and the EMH had been stranded for two months on a desert planet. After a little cajoling, she had admitted that even though only two days had passed for her, she had considered the possibility that they might not be able to find bring him and the others home. “Not even a little bit?”

“No, I missed you, Tom. I did. And I’m happy you decided to come home early.” B’Elanna reached for him, her arms drawing him close. “My mistake for not saying so earlier.” She pressed her lips to his throat before raising her head slightly. “Can I make it up to you?”

“An offer like that, how can I say no?”

## Act of War

*Author’s note: This story is part of the “Glory Days” universe and takes place approximately one month after the events in “The Sweetest Days” by yours truly. My gratitude to Rocky for allowing me to play in her sandbox and also for her wonderful beta of this story. Feedback welcomed at seemag1@yahoo.com*

*Warning: This story features violence and/or drastic events that may be disturbing to some readers.*

“Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The carriage held but just ourselves  
And immortality.”

—Emily Dickinson

As B’Elanna Torres regained consciousness, she realized she was lying on the floor. Smoke stung her eyes and nostrils as she struggled into a sitting position. Klaxons echoed loudly through the smoky corridors of the USS Minuteman. It had been years since B’Elanna had heard that particular sound and frankly, she hadn’t missed it in the slightest.

B’Elanna leaned back against the wall, her eyes focusing on the safety doors that had permanently sealed Engineering off from the rest of the ship. She had been on her way to the Bridge when the first torpedo had slammed into the

Minuteman. Once she'd regained her balance, B'Elanna had returned to Engineering, knowing she'd be of more use there than on the Bridge. She'd barely reached her station when the second torpedo hit, causing a hull breach on deck five. The third torpedo, which impacted only moments later, badly damaged the primary plasma routing conduits on the Minuteman, including the rear ducts.

B'Elanna had immediately grasped the seriousness of the situation as she'd scanned the preliminary damage reports. The overheated plasma in the ducts meant not only was radiation leaking throughout the ship, but also that the warp core was in danger of immediate implosion. As a rule, Starfleet engineers ejected the warp core only as a measure of last resort but in this particular instance, B'Elanna had seen no alternative; warp core failure was imminent and her 'quick fixes' would not hold long enough to get the Minuteman to space dock.

She had given her people exactly sixty seconds to evacuate Engineering and after entering the proper authorization codes, she had begun the ejection sequence. She'd given herself just thirty seconds to get out of Engineering, rolling beneath the closing safety doors with barely a few centimeters to spare.

B'Elanna glanced once again at the safety doors and tapped her comm badge, hailing the captain to let him know that the warp core had been successfully ejected. The comlink crackled with static, but B'Elanna managed to get the salient points across. She then returned her attention to the engineers congregating in the corridor. Some were standing, others sitting and a couple appeared to be seriously injured. A few looked absolutely terrified and B'Elanna was once again reminded how young some of these engineers were and that many of them were on their first tour of duty.

"Did everyone make it out in time?" B'Elanna asked, coughing slightly as she tried to clear her throat.

"Everyone who could did," a voice responded. B'Elanna's vision blurred slightly and she felt nauseated as she turned slightly to look at the speaker. Elton Bernie, ensign, Engineering track, first tour of duty. "We didn't leave anyone behind, Commander. Not anyone who could be saved, that is."

B'Elanna decided she would ask for a casualty report later.

"Good." B'Elanna struggled to stand. "All right, people. We've got work to do." Her head spun as she leaned against the wall. She was also aware of a pain—a very sharp one—in her right leg. She had a dim memory of being thrown across Engineering during the initial attack and banging her knee against a steel cabinet. "We've practiced the emergency drills before. You know where to go and you know what to do. Split up into teams of two and three." Her throat was so dry it was difficult to project the confidence she \*knew\* her team needed to hear from her. She licked her lips before continuing to speak. "We need to enforce the lower decks. The hull integrity—" her voice trailed off as she saw a vaguely familiar figure approaching her through the smoke.

She took a step forward, almost in disbelief.

"You look like hell, Maquis," Harry Kim said as he stood in front of B'Elanna. She swayed slightly as she reached for him, wondering if he was real. He wrapped his arm around her waist, steadying her. The solid feel of Harry's arm supporting

her assured B'Elanna that she wasn't hallucinating.

"I could say the same about you," B'Elanna retorted as she took a quick look at her friend. His uniform was dusty, smudges of ash streaked across his face and his hair was standing on end. "It starts out as just another day on the Neutral Zone and then all hell breaks loose. What happened?"

"Another misunderstanding, you might say."

"Must have been one hell of a misunderstanding," B'Elanna said, recalling the explosions that had torn through the ship. "Let me guess, the Romulans?"

"Yup, for which you can thank the Ponzi," Harry said, referring to the raiders that were the cause of the recent troubles between the Federation and the Romulans.

B'Elanna groaned. "What did they do \*now\*?"

"The usual. The Ponzi were up to their old tricks and we figured we'd better warn them off before the Romulans decided to take matters into their own hands. But there appears to have been a miscalculation in the trajectory when the Amherst actually fired. The torpedo ended up crossing the Neutral Zone and hitting a Romulan freighter. Or at least, the Romulans \*claim\* it's a freighter." Harry shook his head in disbelief. "The Romulans decided to retaliate. They disabled the Amherst pretty quickly and then when the Minuteman came to the rescue, we received an equally warm Romulan welcome as well. Thanks to their new dispersion technologies, our shields didn't stand a chance. Not to mention, their warbirds outnumber our ships. That second explosion you heard—"

"Was the hull breach on deck five," B'Elanna finished off the sentence. Each Romulan missile had been aimed perfectly, just enough to cause serious damage to the Minuteman, but not enough to destroy the ship. And hopefully the Romulans had finished their target practice for the day; B'Elanna knew that the ship would not survive another torpedo. She took a deep breath. "On deck five... did—did everyone...?"

Harry shook his head. "Five crewmen were lost. They were sucked out when hull integrity collapsed. They—" Harry looked at B'Elanna, a pained expression crossing his face—"were doing their best to reinforce the shielding."

All of B'Elanna's engineers had been with her in Engineering. The people on deck five had been regular crewmen, the ones who performed routine maintenance. While they had had the skills to manually reinforce integrity, they wouldn't have had the speed or smoothness of the highly trained engineers. But in a battle situation like this, it was impossible to second guess who would have been better equipped to handle the crisis.

"All right," B'Elanna said, resolutely pushing away any thought of the crewmen who were irretrievably lost. She coughed slightly. "I'd better get to work. If this ship is going to stay space worthy for any amount of time, I need to reinforce the force fields, not to mention, reroute major systems." She glanced over her shoulder at the heavy doors sealing off Engineering. "But I'll have to attempt it from a Jefferies tube, not from here."

"You may find it difficult to get to a clear junction," Harry said. "Debris is blocking the way to the turbolifts on this deck. And even if we could get there, the turbolifts gave out on deck nine. I had to hike down the last two decks to get here. Are you up for it, B'Elanna?" His glance darted down

to the tear in the leg of her uniform.

B'Elanna set her jaw. "It's just a bruise. Let's go."

As per her orders, the other engineers had already dispersed, the more critically wounded to sickbay, and the others to various tasks around the ship. "Tasks" was the understatement of the year, B'Elanna thought sardonically; the work in front of them was more Herculean than not. It was only then she looked at Harry, at the three pips on his collar.

"What are you doing here?" she asked abruptly. "You should be aboard the *Livingston*, not here. And if I recall correctly, the *Livingston* is at least two hours from our current position."

"Admiral Janeway had a few things to discuss with Captain Phillips in person," Harry answered. His arm was steady around B'Elanna's shoulders as he helped her move forward. "And she asked me to accompany her. It was a last minute request or I would have let you know ahead of time that we were coming. We shuttled over about an hour ago. We'd just made ourselves comfortable on the Bridge when the Amherst fired off the warning shot. You might say that we had the best seats in the house to witness the Romulans' latest burst of pyrotechnics." B'Elanna stumbled, wincing with pain. Harry grabbed her arm and she leaned heavily against him, grateful for the support. "Careful there," he said.

B'Elanna nodded as she managed to sidestep some debris in the hall. She took quick shallow breaths in a futile attempt to avoid inhaling the fumes, which were slowly filling the corridor. Dust sprinkled down on them.

"I heard the preliminary damage report you relayed to Phillips on the Bridge after the first torpedo hit," Harry went on, "and given how dire the situation sounded, I thought I'd come down and give you a hand. It'll be just like old times, right, B'Elanna?"

B'Elanna tried to smile as they came to a four-way junction in the corridor. Teams of medical personnel were making their way through; one medic had stopped to administer first aid to a lieutenant who was curled up in obvious pain on the floor. Harry spoke briefly to one of the nurses and managed to procure a hypospray.

"Here you go," Harry said as he pressed the hypospray against B'Elanna's neck. "This should help with the pain, but I'm afraid we're going to have to wait in line for anything more substantial."

B'Elanna, already feeling much better, nodded. The injured lieutenant had several life-threatening injuries and was obviously in much more need of medical attention than B'Elanna.

"Thanks," B'Elanna said. She handed the hypospray back and the two continued their way down the corridor. They were halfway to the Jefferies tube when B'Elanna stopped.

"Give me a second," B'Elanna said as she turned to the panel directly in front of her. She traced her finger over the schematics of the Minuteman as she studied some of the more important junctions; about half of them had collapsed and some were filled with toxic fumes, debris or were exposed to space, thus rendering them unreachable. Thankfully, life support systems were still functioning but the transporters had been rendered inoperable. She glanced up at Harry. "What's your assessment, Harry?"

"All you need is a little bit of spit, string and chewing

gum," Harry said confidently, referring to the oft mentioned "fix" for Voyager's many repairs. "In other words, nothing I don't think you and your engineers can't handle. At any rate, if you just enforce hull integrity as you were saying before and bring the shields back online, I believe we can hold out for a few more hours."

"I was hoping you'd say that. I was thinking exactly the same thing," B'Elanna said, mentally prioritizing repairs. "We can make repairs from here." She pointed to Jefferies tube twelve, section A9. This was a major conduit and one from which life support and other major systems could be accessed. If nothing else, B'Elanna was determined to reroute systems to the Bridge and surrounding areas. It would give the crew a safe place to wait for help, "safe" being purely relative. "Let's go."

Harry turned the corner, pulling off the panel of the adjoining Jefferies tube. They were on deck seven. Five floors to get to where they wanted to be. He stepped aside to let B'Elanna crawl in first. She groaned, as piercing pain shot through her leg.

"Are you going to make it, B'Elanna?"

"I'm fine." She gingerly shifted her weight, gritting her teeth. Her Klingon physiology made it possible for her to bear more pain than a human, but that still didn't negate the fact that her leg hurt like hell. She bit back another moan. "Really, Harry, I'm fine."

"Not from where I'm standing."

"Then move," B'Elanna snapped. She inched her way forward. She stopped when she saw one of her engineers struggling to yank a panel off the wall. As the engineer leaned forward, wires sparked, and the man yelped in pain.

"Are you all right?" B'Elanna asked as she reached him. The lieutenant, Drei Roberts, nodded as he ruefully stuck his fingers in his mouth.

"I'll be fine, Commander," he responded. He pointed at the intricate circuitry in front of him. "I'm manually redirecting power reserves to compensate for the decompression on deck five."

B'Elanna quickly checked his work over. "Looks good to me, Lieutenant."

"Thanks. Where are you heading?"

B'Elanna glanced back at Harry before responding. "Deck twelve."

"That's quite a way from here, Commander," Roberts said. "And not at all easy going. There's a lot of smoke, radiation and debris. Not to mention, about half of the tubes have collapsed on the upper decks. I barely got out of one tube before it came tumbling down."

"Thanks for the warning," B'Elanna said. "But I think we're going to have to chance it." The lieutenant shifted his position so that B'Elanna and Harry could crawl past him. It was slow going and the metal grill lining the bottom of the tubes were arduous on the knees. She stopped briefly to check if Harry was following her; sure enough, he was right behind her.

A loud crash—and then a scream—echoed through the Jefferies tube. B'Elanna paused. The sound came from behind them. A look back at Harry confirmed that the collapse indeed had happened in the section where Lieutenant Roberts had been working.

"We'd better hurry," B'Elanna said, trying to sound calm as she fought the urge to turn back and check up on Roberts. The collapse of the Jefferies tube confirmed B'Elanna's deepest fears: the two hull breaches had seriously compromised structural integrity and without the warp core, the Minuteman would be unable to get to help on its own. She assumed that the other three ships patrolling the Neutral Zone would probably have their hands full with dealing with Ponzi antics and Romulans rage; it could be hours before rescue vessels arrived. She stopped crawling as a thought occurred to her. "Harry, did the Amherst cross into the Neutral Zone to warn off the Ponzi?"

"Why are you asking?"

"Because I need to know." She was breathing heavily now. No longer in fine physical form, the way she had been on Voyager; her exercise regimen these days had been reduced to chasing two active children around the house. "And because you said we went in after the Amherst when the Romulans fired on it. In that case, \*we're\* also in the Neutral Zone, and if a rescue ship crosses over, that gives the Romulans yet another reason to fire upon us and the Minuteman \*can't\* take another hit." She licked her parched lips, wishing desperately for a glass of water.

"I doubt that the Romulans are keen to destroy the Minuteman. It'd suit their purposes better to capture the ship and salvage the technology on the ship for themselves. The Mars class vessels are the most technologically advanced in Starfleet. Not to mention, with sixty or so prisoners of war, including an admiral of considerable stature, the Romulans would have plenty of leverage to negotiate terms with the Federation."

"Does that mean—Is the peace process officially dead?" B'Elanna asked. She coughed, her throat feeling increasingly raw. "Are we at war now?"

"The Romulans' attack on the Amherst and the Minuteman could be constituted an act of war, yes," Harry said cautiously.

"Even though the Amherst fired first?"

"It's a matter of interpretation," Harry said. "No doubt the Romulans consider the destruction of their 'freighter' an official declaration of war by the Federation, but our stance is that it was a mistake."

"A stupid and potentially deadly mistake," B'Elanna said. She resumed crawling. "We all know how jumpy the Romulans are and how much they're itching for a showdown with the Federation. What the hell was Captain Brandon thinking, firing off a warning shot at the Ponzi so close to the Neutral Zone in the first place? Why not just open hailing channels?"

"The Ponzi aren't exactly receptive to what we have to say. If they were, we wouldn't have this 'conflict' in the first place," Harry said wryly. "You can be sure when this is all over, HQ will have a full investigation into the trajectory miscalculation."

"And the Admiral? What was her response?"

"One word. 'Damn.'" Harry's voice, a mixture of humor and respect, was a perfect imitation of Janeway. "To say Janeway is furious would be an understatement. All of her hard work over the last two months gone to pot in just a matter of minutes. You can be sure that there will be hell to pay when Janeway finally gets her hands on the captain of

the Amherst."

B'Elanna reached the main junction. Relieved to finally be able to stand upright, she took a moment to catch her breath and then to contemplate the ladder reaching up to the upper decks of the Minuteman. Dimly, B'Elanna wondered how much time had passed since they first entered the Jefferies tube and whether trying to reach the main systems routing conduit was the best option open to them.

\*You never gave up on Voyager, B'Elanna, don't start now.\*

The ship shuddered violently just as B'Elanna reached for the bottom rung of the ladder. She held on, her knuckles whitening from the effort. Below them, they could hear creaking and somewhere, the echo of metal striking metal was evidence enough that yet another part of the ship's infrastructure had collapsed. The lights in the shaft flickered. Finally, the ship stopped shaking and B'Elanna turned to look at Harry.

"Not another hit, just the aftershocks," Harry said, sounding relieved. He considered. "But I wouldn't be surprised if we just lost a major computer system or two."

"Great," B'Elanna said, knowing that Harry was probably right. She stared up at the endless ladder. "All right. Start climbing, Starfleet."

"Anything you say, Maquis," Harry said. He grinned. "But technically, I outrank you. I've been a lieutenant commander far longer than you have."

B'Elanna looked down at Harry, glaring at him in mock fury. True, she had only received her pips the day before the Minuteman had left spacedock, when Captain Philips had granted her a temporary field commission. The actual rank was determined by her previous service on board Voyager. Her thoughts drifted to Tom, who had attended the quick ceremony, and how afterwards, they'd gone out to dinner, just the two of them. She had shipped out the next morning at 0500 hours, and Tom had insisted on coming to see her off, despite the early hour. B'Elanna bit her lip as she continued to climb. \*Don't think about that now. Just one hand after another, one rung at a time.\*

"But when it comes to engineering, of course you know better," Harry said.

"Good save, Starfleet." B'Elanna choked as they continued to climb. The smell of smoke was stronger as they went higher; there had to be a fire nearby and she wondered dimly if the fire suppression systems had finally failed; that particular circuitry had been hardwired through environmental controls, which had been showing signs of strains during her quick check outside of Engineering. "Just another deck to go, Harry."

"Right behind you, B'Elanna."

She pulled herself into the conduit, moving over so Harry could plop down next to her. The grid on the wall showed that they were in section A7. Only two more sections to go. Piece of cake, B'Elanna thought, borrowing an expression she'd heard Tom use so often. The ship shuddered again, throwing them up against the curved wall of the tube. When B'Elanna opened her eyes, she saw Harry bleeding.

"Harry," she said in distress, reaching out to touch him.

"It's all right. I'm fine." He put a hand to his forehead and his fingers came away sticky and red.

"You don't look fine to me," B'Elanna said. She ripped a

strip of material off the cuffs of her pants and used it to dab at Harry's forehead. She was relieved to see that the cut itself wasn't too deep, but she was concerned about the possibility of a concussion. "Harry—"

"You take care of yourself, B'Elanna," Harry barked. "That's an order."

B'Elanna stared at him. "Harry—"

"Keep going, B'Elanna. We're running out of time."

Knowing he was right, B'Elanna nodded and turned back, crawling as quickly as she could. Time was running out, she knew. She could hear Harry behind her, his breathing labored. At one point, she could hear him retching.

They finally reached the section of the Jefferies tube that contained the control panel for the main support systems. Environmental controls, life support, primary diagnostics and other major functions ran through this particular workstation. Feeling relieved to finally be doing something, B'Elanna ran a quick scan of the ship's major systems. Next to her, Harry was breathing deeply, a sheen of perspiration across his forehead, his eyes half-closed. She tried not to look at him, his earlier outburst still ringing in her ears.

"We've lost life support in two out of thirteen decks so far beginning at deck three," B'Elanna said as she quickly rerouted the necessary power couplings. "And we're about to lose it in two more. At least it's going sequentially and not intermittently. But you were right about that last aftershock. It took out at least two or three major routing junctions." She sighed. "We're going to have to start cutting power deck by deck if we're going to get through this in one piece." She could see from the readouts that force fields had been erected all over the ship to compensate for the hull breaches and weakening structural integrity. B'Elanna felt a swell pride for her engineers; most of them might be young and new to Starfleet, but they had done an excellent job under particularly grueling circumstances; it was a marvel that the Minuteman had managed to stay space-worthy after sustaining three hits from the Romulans. "I'll do it from here. You better get going, Harry. See if you can make it to Sickbay and get that cut looked at."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"This isn't the time to play hero, Harry. You need to get out of here."

Harry shook his head. "You need me, B'Elanna. You can't do this alone."

"It's just a push of a few buttons and then I promise, I'm going to leave."

"And who is going to help you out when you discontinue life support from this deck? You're not going to have much time to get out of here before the oxygen runs out."

B'Elanna didn't answer him; she was staring at the LCD screen in front of her. The dancing red dots had captured her attention. The backup generators were still holding for the moment but B'Elanna noticed that an entire section on deck six had gone completely black.

"I'm not going anywhere," Harry continued, oblivious to what B'Elanna was looking at. "If nothing else, Tom's going to kill me if he found out I left you behind with a bad leg."

"Don't be stupid, Starfleet." But truth be told, B'Elanna was glad Harry planned on staying; much as she didn't want to admit it, she would definitely need his help once she discontinued life support. On the other hand, she eyed Harry's

head wound with trepidation. Who was going to help whom here? She decided she didn't want to think about it.

The ship shuddered again, the floor beneath them slightly buckling. Visible seams appeared as bolts snapped free from their moldings. A few meters away, a sheet of metal paneling popped free from the wall, landing on the floor with a dull clank.

"Move!" B'Elanna screamed, pushing Harry to the side just before a section of the Jefferies tube collapsed only a few centimeters from where Harry had been sitting. Dust filled the tube. B'Elanna wiped a hand across her eyes, trying to clear her vision. Her head was pounding worse than before now and she felt dizzy.

"I owe you one," Harry gasped.

"I guess that takes care of the decision of who's staying," B'Elanna said wryly. "Might as well make yourself comfortable, Harry. We may be here for a while." She nudged at the steel beam blocking their path; it was intractable.

Harry grimaced, but said nothing. They heard another loud crack and in the distance, a scream. B'Elanna stiffened.

"I've lost my nerve for this kind of thing," she said, more to herself than to Harry. She had been doing her best to keep focused; on Voyager, she had often found herself in situations worse than this, but this *\*wasn't\** the Delta Quadrant. She had never imagined that the Romulans would actually *\*fire\** upon a Federation ship; she had always assumed that all of the pugnacious talk between the Romulans and the Federation was exactly that—just talk. And now the Romulans had the perfect opportunity to show off their new weaponry to the Federation. A show of force, but one B'Elanna was starting to realize, had very real consequences. The Minuteman was a sitting duck without shields and without weapons. It seemed peculiar that the Romulans hadn't come back to finish off the job. Another missile or two would be all it would take to completely destroy the ship. Even if they could get to the escape pods from here, B'Elanna knew that the small craft would be easy pickings for the Romulans warbirds.

*\*We should be dead.\** B'Elanna's stomach lurched. She swallowed, the bitter taste of bile stinging her already sore throat. She mentally calculated the stresses on the ship, knowing what had collapsed so far, she knew that there was no guarantee that this tube would hold up for much longer. The next major junction was ten sections away, but there was no telling what they would find when they got there.

"What do you think?" B'Elanna asked quietly as she glanced to her right. The way was still clear. "Want to chance staying and finishing the job or take off now?"

Harry followed her look. "What's your assessment?"

"Good news or bad news?"

Harry shrugged.

"The force fields holding the ship together will give out sooner, rather than later, and given the recent collapses, my guess is that the fields are already failing," B'Elanna said. "You know that just as well as I do. That's the bad news. The good news is that it appears the Bridge didn't sustain as much damage as the rest of the ship."

"I see."

"As I was proposing before, if we turn off life support to all decks except for one, we may be able to keep our people safe there," B'Elanna said. She took a deep breath. "Every

additional deck is a drain on resources and this ship needs all the juice it can get if it has any hope of staying together until help arrives.”

“Right,” Harry said. He knit his fingers together as he stared at the panel in front of B’Elanna. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

B’Elanna hit her communicator. “Torres to Phillips.”

“Phillips here.” The signal was scratchy at best and B’Elanna suspected that the comm system would be the next one to give out; it was one of the few systems on board that lacked redundancy features outside of deck one where the Bridge was located. “Where are you, B’Elanna?”

“Jefferies tube 12, section A9. I’m rerouting all life support to the Bridge and surrounding areas. I’d suggest evacuations to deck one now if they haven’t already begun.”

“Security is already taking care of it,” Phillips replied. His voice was faded, as if carrying over a great distance. “When will you get here?”

“We’re going to do our best, Captain,” B’Elanna said, glancing at Harry. “But we’re blocked in at the moment and it may take some doing to get out of here.”

“Understood.” There was a scratchy silence and then Phillips continued, “Admiral Janeway is negotiating with the Romulans now, trying to resolve this situation, B’Elanna. They seem—” Phillips were cut off as the comlink crackled with static. The ship lurched wildly, causing Harry and B’Elanna to slip down the tube. Wires sparked and the smell of burning plastics filled the Jefferies tube. B’Elanna clawed frantically at the metal grating on the floor of the tube, trying to gain some purchase with her fingers. Every muscle in her body ached as she struggled to keep from slipping further. The ship lolled and then banked abruptly to the right before ceasing to move. B’Elanna’s head throbbed as she pulled herself back into her previous position. She glanced at Harry; his face was ashen.

“What was that?” B’Elanna asked. She gulped, fighting the urge to throw up. “Another aftershock?”

“That was a bad one,” Harry said. He tapped his communicator. “Kim to Janeway.” No response. Harry tried again as B’Elanna turned to look at her flickering LCD.

“It’s no use,” she said. “The comm system is down on this deck.” She swallowed, trying to wet her parched throat, as she surveyed the rest of the diagnostic. Deck six was now completely dark. “But it looks like the Bridge made it through,” she said in relief, pressing her finger against the flickering dot that represented the Bridge. “Many of the key systems there, including life support, are still operable.”

“That’s good news,” Harry said. “It means Janeway can continue her negotiations.”

B’Elanna nodded as she slumped against the rounded wall. She was uncommonly exhausted and sleepy; perhaps it was an effect of the smoke, now snaking its way through the Jefferies tubes. \*Stay awake, B’Elanna, stay awake!\*

“B’Elanna!” Harry gripped her shoulder.

“You don’t happen to have another hypospray anywhere on you, do you?” B’Elanna asked. She rubbed her aching wrist and then gingerly touched the injured knee. It was definitely more than just a bruise. Only a sprain, if she was lucky, but she suspected, from the increasing intensity of the pain,

that the knee injury was much, much worse. She turned her attention back to the diagnostic. “How’s your head, Harry?”

“I’ll live,” he said through gritted teeth. He was lying on his back, his arms across his chest. A thin line of blood trickled out the edge of his mouth. “Don’t worry about me. Just do what you have to.” After a second, he rolled onto his stomach and crawled to sit next to her.

“I’m glad to hear it because I don’t want to have to drag your sorry ass through these corridors,” B’Elanna said, her tone as light as she could possibly make it. She ran another scan. Force fields were still holding, but she could see now that the comm system was failing throughout the ship. She estimated that within twenty minutes, shipboard communications would be restricted to the Bridge, best-case scenario. “After all, you’re the higher ranking officer.” She inched over, giving Harry more room to look at the control panel. Harry’s fingers ran lightly over the keys, not exerting enough pressure to press any of them. “Put those shiny new pips to work, Harry.”

Harry didn’t respond immediately to her joking. He was staring at the screen, evidently transfixed by the diagnostics that revealed the ship’s dying sections.

“Harry?” B’Elanna asked. “Are you all right?” She fully expected him to reply that he was fine; it might not be the truth, but that \*was\* the routine, wasn’t it? But this time, Harry shook his head.

“I’m thinking about Captain Phillips,” he said finally. “And Admiral Janeway. About what they must be going through.”

Instinctively, B’Elanna knew Harry was referring to those who had been killed—including the crewmen who had been sucked out into space in their efforts to hold the ship together. She wondered about her engineers, the ones who had gone to the lower decks; surely they would know by now to evacuate. Surely...

“As much as I want a command of my own, I’m not sure \*this\* is what I want. I’m not necessarily sure I could \*order\* my crew to make sacrifices. As for me, I can do whatever it takes. That doesn’t bother me. It’s asking someone else to do it, that’s the problem.”

“That’s understandable. But remember, Starfleet officers take an oath when they enter service to give up their lives in the line of duty if it should come to that.” B’Elanna’s thoughts inadvertently went back to Engineering. They’d told her everyone had gotten out, but was that the truth? Or were they just saying that to make her feel better? I should have stayed behind and double-checked, B’Elanna thought, sudden regret stabbing at her. How the hell could she have just turned and run like that without first making sure that all of her people were out?

“I envy how calm the Captain always seems,” Harry said. He put his hand on top of B’Elanna’s. His palm was cool, clammy, to the touch. “If our positions were reversed, I’m not so sure that I could project that same confidence.”

“But you did when the Hirogen took over Voyager and turned it into a bloody playground. We owe our lives to you and your nerves of steel.”

“That was different. I had no choice.”

“A commanding officer never has a choice either.” B’Elanna leaned forward to tap another few buttons. Yet

another deck went dark. A few more and she would cut off life support to their current position. "You do what you have to and then you evaluate the consequences later."

"Would you consider command?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "No, Harry." She bit her lip. "Remember, my field commission is temporary. Once I'm out of here, I'm going back to civilian contracting."

Harry put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. "For what it's worth, I know Tom would be very proud of you right at this moment."

B'Elanna didn't answer him. Instead, she pushed another button. Deck seven went dark. Already, she was starting to feel cold; she had left her uniform jacket behind in Engineering where she'd shrugged it off in the heat and intensity of the crucial minutes following the attack. In a few minutes, it would be colder still.

"We make a good team, don't we?" Harry asked.

"The best," B'Elanna said. A crash to their left signified that yet another section of the Jefferies tube had collapsed, thus sealing off any possibility of escape. Desperately, B'Elanna continued, "Remember that time—I think it was during our sixth year in the Delta Quadrant—when you and I went to look for dilithium in the Delta Flyer? You ejected, but I crashed." B'Elanna took a deep breath, regretting it almost immediately; the air was acrid and foul-smelling. "I honestly thought I was doomed to spend the rest of my days on that planet spinning stories about 'shining Voyager, far from home' in order to earn my bread. But then you came along and rescued me."

"You were doing pretty well on your own, if I remember correctly. You certainly managed to charm Kelis into doing your bidding, not to mention, you averted a war."

"Yes, but if you hadn't shown up, I'd probably still be there, hiding out in the Delta Flyer with Kelis the poet as my only company."

"I doubt it. You would have found a way to repair the Flyer and you would have come home to Voyager. You always come up with solutions, B'Elanna. It's always been a matter of time with you."

B'Elanna shrugged, wrapping her arms around herself. Harry saw the movement.

"Are you cold?" he asked in concern.

"A little," she admitted. Somehow, in the small space, Harry managed to remove his jacket. He handed it to B'Elanna.

"Here."

"I can't take that, Harry. I'm sure you feel the cold as well."

"Not as much as you do and it's going to get a lot colder in here," Harry said. "Go on, take it."

B'Elanna took the jacket and put it on. "Thanks."

"No problem. Tom has told me about the fights you two had about the ambient temperature in your quarters."

B'Elanna looked at Harry in annoyance. "I thought we were talking about what a great team we make."

"Right," Harry said. He leaned back, closing his eyes. "I just need a minute, B'Elanna."

That didn't surprise B'Elanna; the smoke was getting thicker and it was getting harder to think clearly under these

circumstances. She glanced to the right, wondering if she could somehow begin to clear the debris blocking them in.

"Don't fall asleep on me, Harry," B'Elanna said fiercely. "You've got a head injury so you've got to stay awake. That's an order."

"You can't order me around anymore, Maquis. Remember? I outrank you." His speech was slow, the words slightly slurred.

"A well-deserved promotion," B'Elanna said desperately in an attempt to keep Harry's attention focused on her. She leaned forward to tap another button. Deck nine was now completely dark. "I see a glorious future for you, Harry. One day, we'll be calling you captain. Maybe even admiral." She turned her head to look at Harry, smiling. "Admiral Kim. It has a nice ring to it, don't you agree?"

"Yes. Sounds pretty good to me." Harry lolled his head slightly to the side. "And I'm pretty damn lucky; I got lessons in diplomacy from the best in the business. Can't ask for anything more than to be able to follow Kathryn Janeway around for two months."

"You'll make a terrific captain," B'Elanna said. She reached over and clasped Harry's hand in her own. "And when it comes to making the difficult decisions, I know you'll be able to do it. With compassion and integrity. All those things that I've always admired about you, Harry." She smiled slightly. "When you make admiral, I hope you'll still take the time to talk to us little people."

"I don't forget my friends, B'Elanna."

"No, but we \*have\* drifted apart." B'Elanna pressed her lips together as she pressed another button. Deck ten no longer had life support. "It's understandable. We've all got our own lives. You and Janeway work as if everything in Starfleet depends upon you. Chakotay and Seven, they're always off to their next great adventure. I can hardly keep track of the two of them. The Doctor has his medical research and the courses he teaches at the Academy. And Tuvok, he's got a full and rewarding life on Vulcan. I know it's not intentional, this distance that has grown between us all, but I regret it. Staying on Voyager for seventy years, that wouldn't have been so bad now, would it have been?"

"No," Harry said finally. "Not if it meant we would all still be together. But you, B'Elanna, you've got a great life. A really great life."

B'Elanna concentrated on the panel in front of her; there was nothing left to monitor but she felt better \*pretending\* that she was focusing on something other than the wistful expression on Harry's face.

"You've got it all," Harry said. His fingers instinctively went to the pips on his collar, fingering them absentmindedly as he spoke. "Family, kids, a job you love... and someone who loves you."

"Yeah, I've got it all—but that just means so much more to lose." The words slipped out before B'Elanna could catch herself. She inhaled deeply, focusing her gaze once more on the brightly flashing panel in front of her.

"I live in two rooms on a starship," Harry continued, seemingly not having heard B'Elanna. "My entire life is regimented by Starfleet and every night, I come home to empty quarters. Would it have been different if we had stayed in the DQ? I don't know. It could be awfully lonely out there

sometimes, despite having each other. I'm still lonely now." Harry gave a brief, humorless laugh. "At least here in the AQ, I got a promotion."

"It sounds like you got what you always dreamed of on Voyager," B'Elanna said softly, "but it doesn't make you happy."

"It's a different kind of 'happy.'"

"What will it take, Harry? To get you to where you want to be?"

Harry pressed his lips together, grimacing. "I don't know the answer to that question. I wish I did. And now I'm afraid it may be too late."

"Don't think like that. You're going to have a really great life when we get out of here," B'Elanna said vehemently. "I'm sorry it didn't work out with Libby, but there will be someone else. A great guy like you, how can it be otherwise?"

"Well, you know how it goes. Libby wanted to have a life, I wanted a career," Harry said. He didn't sound bitter, merely reflective. "And we'd both changed so much over seven years. You can't force two people to fit together, no matter how much you both want the relationship to work out. At least we both came to that realization at the same time and without recriminations. And we still managed to preserve our friendship. That counts for something."

"It counts for a lot," B'Elanna said wistfully. "At the end of the day, a job is simply a job and it's the people whom you come home to when the work day is finished who make it all worthwhile. That's what I miss most about Voyager. During the difficult adjustment period, when the Maquis and Starfleet had to learn to be one crew instead of two separate groups, we still managed to have respect for each other and over time, that grew into something more. I never imagined that I would find people I cared about so deeply nor did I expect for them to feel the same about me." B'Elanna sighed. "That kind of camaraderie is missing from the Minuteman. Maybe it's because we've only been together for a month, but I don't feel that same spark, that same vitality."

"Yeah," Harry said feelingly. "The *Livingston* is the same way. I've made a few friends, but nothing like the friendship I had with you and Tom on Voyager."

"Stop using the past tense, Harry," B'Elanna said sharply. "We're *\*still\** friends."

"Of course."

She shivered. It was getting terribly cold and she was having a hard time keeping her teeth from chattering. Harry pulled B'Elanna close, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

"Stay with me, Maquis," he said softly.

"I'm not going anywhere, don't worry."

"We *\*are\** going to get out of here." He sighed. "And to answer your earlier question, yes, the Minuteman did cross into the Neutral Zone when it came to the aid of the Amherst. The Amherst's navigational systems were disabled when the Romulans first retaliated and it somehow drifted into the Neutral Zone and we followed. Janeway was convinced that she could persuade the Romulans that the destruction of their 'freighter' was a mistake, but they were less than pleased when the Minuteman crossed over to rescue the Amherst."

"And that's when the Romulans took aim at us?" B'Elanna groaned as she shifted her position.

"Yup."

B'Elanna imagined the Starfleet Admiralty arguing over what would be done now with the crippled Minuteman. There weren't that many options. Leave the Minuteman and Amherst in the Neutral Zone and hope the two ships would somehow limp back to Federation territory on their own power? The Neutral Zone was only one light year wide, but without a warp core, there was no way the Minuteman could cover the distance to Federation territory, which left the second option: send another ship in after them and risk yet another confrontation with the Romulans. There was a third alternative: sacrifice both the Amherst and the Minuteman in order to avoid further hostilities with the Romulans. And then of course, the outcome that was looking more and more inevitable: that the faulty systems on the Minuteman would eventually cause the ship to explode. By the concerned expression on Harry's face, B'Elanna guessed that he had probably been musing through the intricacies of the dilemma as well.

"You're the command track officer," B'Elanna muttered. She was finding it hard to focus her thoughts and her vision was blurring, whether from smoke or from something else, she didn't know. "What would you do? Take the risk and rescue the Minuteman, let the ship figure out her own course of action, or perhaps sacrifice sixty people in the name of peace?"

Harry leaned back, considering. "Neither."

"Hmmm?"

"Like I said, I learned from the best. There's always another option. Janeway taught me that."

"And that would be?"

"Pull both ships out of the Neutral Zone so that it can be recovered without further stirring up the Romulans."

"That would require—"

"Amplifying a tractor beam to extend over the Neutral Zone and pull the Minuteman and the Amherst to safety," Harry said promptly. "At minimum power requirements and velocity, of course."

B'Elanna raised an eyebrow. "Don't look now, Harry, but I think you just made a command decision."

"The *Livingston's* tractor beam could be modified," Harry said, his pitch rising with excitement. "And it *\*is\** the closest ship to us."

"Makes perfect sense to me." B'Elanna leaned forward as she watched another deck disappear from the small viewscreen. "Say good-night to deck eleven, Harry." The next deck was theirs—deck twelve.

Harry squeezed B'Elanna's hand. "We're getting out of here, B'Elanna," he said, this time sounding confident.

"I know." She looked at him seriously. "I intend to make sure we do." She glanced to her side; she had no idea what lay on the other side of the pile of metal, but she sure as hell was going to find out; there was no reason to just sit around waiting to be rescued.

She was feeling light-headed, almost giddy, but somehow, she managed to pull herself over to the debris pile at the end of the tube. She pushed at the contorted metal, slicing her hand in the process. She yelped in pain and then gave the debris another shove. Harry was by her side, trying to wiggle the largest piece free.

"All we need is a small opening," Harry muttered. He

leaned backwards, supporting himself on the palms of his hands as he pushed against the pile with his boots; the thick soles of his Starfleet-issue boots gave him protection against the twisted metal. B'Elanna ripped the cuff off Harry's jacket, using the material to bind her injured hand. "I feel a little give. Right here." He pointed and B'Elanna nodded. She yanked at the metal, but it barely budged. Harry grabbed B'Elanna's toolkit and brought out the small hypospanner. B'Elanna understood what he was doing and moved out of the way as the instrument crackled and sparked against the cool metal.

It was slow going and B'Elanna knew that there was no way that they would be able to cut through an entire beam with a tool meant to weld small pieces of circuitry together. She rummaged through her toolkit, finally coming up with a phase link coupler. Its sharp blade lacked the heat of the hypospanner, but it still had a cutting edge. At any rate, they had nothing to lose. They could stay here, hoping for rescue or they could do their best to cut themselves out.

The ship lolled to the side. Harry, closest to the metal debris, fell against it. He groaned. Somewhere, B'Elanna thought she heard someone scream.

"Today is *\*not\** a good day to die," B'Elanna said out-loud. Next to her, Harry grunted in agreement as he continued to work. The metal moved slightly, creating a small gap, just large enough to put an arm through. B'Elanna wiggled so that she could look through it. The tube was clear on the other side. She coughed and then looked at Harry.

"You okay, Starfleet?" she asked.

He nodded. "Like you said, today is *\*not\** a good day to die."

Together, they pulled at the main beam that supported the debris. The hole grew a little larger. B'Elanna kicked at it again with her good leg, wrenching her ankle in the process. She groaned as she leaned back against the wall, exhausted from her efforts. She heard Harry breathing heavily next to her.

"Can we take a break? I just need a minute," she said, fighting to catch her breath. The air was growing increasingly thick with acrid fumes and each breath caused her chest to constrict.

"No problem."

B'Elanna's eyes itched from the smoke. She rubbed them to no avail. "I hate feeling so... helpless."

"I know. I feel the same." Harry sounded tired and B'Elanna roused herself. This wasn't the time to let fatigue get the better of them.

"I never congratulated you on your promotion," Harry said, his words slurring more now.

"It's no big deal. It's just temporary."

"Can I convince you to stay in Starfleet for good?"

The lights flickered once again and B'Elanna realized that all power systems were minutes away from complete failure. She clenched her teeth and tried not to think about it. She was already so cold and increasingly fatigued. Perhaps she would simply close her eyes...

"B'Elanna?" Harry asked urgently. He shook her gently. B'Elanna shook off his arm, more out of annoyance at herself for her momentary weakness. "What about it?"

"I can't say that the idea of working on a starship again doesn't appeal to me," B'Elanna admitted. She pushed against the metal debris once again with her good hand, but it was unyielding and she no longer had the strength to exert more pressure. "I enjoy a good challenge every now and then, but this, this might be a little too much excitement for me."

"Starfleet could use good engineers like you."

"You sound like a recruiter," B'Elanna said, a hint of amusement slipping into her voice. At that moment the lights went out, leaving them in pitch blackness. B'Elanna reached out, her hand touching Harry's sleeve. "But I'm afraid my days on a starship are over." She shifted her position and Harry put his arm around her, drawing her close. His skin was cold and clammy to the touch. "Harry?"

"I'm here," he said. After a moment he said, "I'm glad you're here, B'Elanna."

"Don't give up on me, Harry."

"I'm not giving up," he said, "but I *\*am\** glad that you're here and I admit to having a selfish reason to asking you to stay on as an engineer."

"I know, Harry," she said quietly, understanding what he didn't verbalize. She ruffled his hair lightly with her fingers. "It *\*would\** be nice for all of us to serve together again like we did on Voyager, but things have changed and we've all moved on with our lives. But—" she smiled, even though she knew Harry wouldn't be able to see it— "if there was a reset button, and I got to do it all over again, yes I would certainly want to join Starfleet again as an engineer."

"If there *\*was\** a reset button, is there anything you'd change?" Harry asked.

B'Elanna bit her lip. So many things had been hard in her life. On Voyager, she had finally found acceptance, and more importantly, she had formed relationships that she knew she could depend on for life. Of course, she still had work to do on her relationship with her father and she wanted, one day, to visit her mother's grave on Qo'Nos. "No," she said. "I wouldn't change anything. Not a single moment, attractive as it might sound sometimes. You?"

Harry was quiet for several seconds before responding. "If given the option, maybe. But I know I would never give up Voyager. Yes, it was seven years I lost, but what I found on Voyager means more to me than an extra one or two pips."

At that moment, the ship shuddered violently. B'Elanna gulped as she heard a loud explosion somewhere below them. A crash echoed through the Jefferies tube as debris clanked against the metal tubes. And then, another explosion. Given the heat radiating through the Jefferies tube, B'Elanna knew this one had been nearby.

"I agree," she said hoarsely, coughing as thick smoke filled the tube. Her eyes grew heavy and suddenly, she felt calm, almost serene. She leaned over awkwardly, hugging Harry with one arm.

"When we get out of here, Harry, don't be a stranger. Promise me. That's an order."

"I promise," Harry said. B'Elanna leaned against him, her fingers curling around his, as the ship dissolved around them.

## Empty Sky

*Authors' notes: Takes place immediately after the events in "Act of War." Feedback welcomed at roq@iname.com and seemag1@yahoo.com*

*Disclaimer: Characters and places belong to Paramount. Unfortunately.*

The Starfleet Academy Flight School was located at the southern end of the campus. Just beyond the gleaming, three-story glass-and-duranium structure were the landing strips for the sleek training crafts. Manicured green lawn surrounded the building, and it was obvious to any observers, even one as preoccupied as the former Voyager EMH, that the flight program was one that was richly endowed by alumni and other benefactors.

The Doctor hurriedly disembarked from his shuttle cab, barely pausing long enough to hand over the appropriate number of credits, and took the stairs to the main doors two at a time. Through the glass, he could see the lobby, well-appointed with comfortable sofas and wall portraits of famous captains and pilots. Two large monitors, at the moment tuned to the Federation News Service channel, were positioned near the main seating area. A group of students were clustered in front of the screens, watching with rapt attention. The Doctor barely missed bumping into a passing cadet, too intent on the day's developments to pay much attention to his surroundings. Muttering an apology, he made a beeline to the directory of instructors on the wall. He found what he was looking for almost immediately. Thomas Eugene Paris, office 132A. He set off down the corridor.

As the Doctor passed the seating area, the words "Breaking News" flashed in red text across the monitors. An anchorwoman, a serious expression on her face, said, "We now have official confirmation of the destruction of two Federation ships in the area of the Romulan Neutral Zone, the Amherst and the Minuteman." The anchorwoman turned to look at the gentleman sitting next to her. "If I understand correctly, Russ, these two ships are Mars-class, the most technologically advanced vessels in the 'Fleet. Doesn't it seem incredible to you that the Romulans could pick these ships off so easily?"

The Doctor hesitated, torn between staying and hearing more, or meeting with his former colleague as soon as possible. The urgency of his mission won out, however, and he continued on his way. A group of cadets still dressed in flight gear approached from the opposite direction, talking and laughing carelessly. The Doctor glared at them; what right had they to be so relaxed and happy when the Federation was on the brink of war? No, he immediately corrected himself—it was no longer the brink; fear had become reality, in more ways than one.

He turned the corner. The identifying numbers on the wall panels inched upward as he quickened his step down the hall. 126, 128, 130...132A was towards the end of the long corridor. Even as he approached, the door to office 132A swung open. A cadet was just leaving, several PADDs tucked under his arm and a distraught expression on his face. The Doctor moved aside to let him pass and then pressed the door signal.

"Come in."

The Doctor stepped across the threshold with alacrity.

"Hello, Mr. Paris."

Tom rose from his seat, surprise evident in his features. "Doc—"

"I came as soon as I heard—" the Doctor began, unable to contain himself.

"Heard?" Tom interrupted. "What are you talking about?"

"The Minuteman, of course!" the Doctor said, favoring Tom with a puzzled look of his own. His hand, which he'd held out in an automatic gesture of greeting—or sympathy—dropped to his side. Didn't Tom \*know\* what had happened in the Neutral Zone?

"Yes, of course," Tom said. He shuffled some papers on his desk. "You'll have to excuse me. I just had to break some bad news to one of my students. He won't be passing the flight module this term; it was a devastating blow for him."

The Doctor nodded, though he was more than a little taken aback so see Tom so wrapped up in work-related issues. "Is—is this a good time for you? I don't want to interrupt anything if you are busy."

"I don't have any classes this afternoon, or any scheduled appointments with students either," Tom said. He cleared his throat as he tapped in a series of commands on his computer. The Doctor stared in bewilderment. He didn't know what he had been expecting when he had decided to drop everything and rush to see Tom, but he certainly hadn't anticipated Tom's cool and stiff demeanor. "And for what it's worth—" Tom lifted his head to stare at the Doctor— "I appreciate you coming to see me. It's been a—difficult morning and I could use a friend."

The Doctor nodded, relieved that yes, Tom was aware of the deadly events which had taken place earlier that day in the Neutral Zone. It was one thing to come and offer comfort to a friend, it was something else entirely to have to be the one to break the news. Even though he'd come a long way with his bedside manner since his program had first been activated, the Doctor wasn't always comfortable with delivering bad tidings. It was even worse when the news concerned people he cared for deeply. "Wasn't the Minuteman—wasn't that B'Elanna's ship?"

"Yes, it was," Tom said quietly. He sat back down in his chair and picked up a PADD from the desk, studying it for a second before looking back at the Doctor. "My father confirmed the news just a couple of hours ago." He tossed the PADD carelessly aside; it hit the edge of the desk and slipped to the floor. Tom didn't appear to notice.

"I was in a staff meeting when we heard the news, that there had been weapons fire along the Neutral Zone," the Doctor said excitedly, hoping to elicit some type of reaction from Tom. This stoic demeanor was unnerving to say the least. "Admiral Ng—she's the Deputy Commander for Sector Defense—excused herself right away, but then someone else said surely the new Mars class vessels were involved and given B'Elanna's extensive work on those ships, I knew that she must have been there." The realization that B'Elanna was in the line of fire had momentarily stunned the Doctor as he had pondered the implications of the news. He had excused himself from the meeting as soon as etiquette permitted. And now the Doctor pulled himself up short as a thought occurred to him. "What are you doing here?" he asked, frowning.

Tom's attention remained focused on the work spread out before him. "I had a class to teach. The cadets' Level IV flight certifications were scheduled for this morning, and I didn't want to delay that test. Preparing for this exam is stressful enough as it is under ordinary circumstances; no reason to prolong the agony." He paused, taking a second to glance up at the Doctor. "I thought it was best to continue the class as planned."

The Doctor sat down heavily in one of the 'visitor chairs' without being invited to do so. "But your wife—I called your home and whoever answered told me you were out. I thought for sure you were over at HQ, but when I tried to track you down over there, they said they hadn't seen you! I took a chance that you might be here."

"You must have talked to Jenni, our babysitter," Tom said flatly. "At any rate, I don't think it really matters where I am, does it?"

"It certainly does!"

Tom smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "The news is still the same, regardless of my physical location. 'There was an exchange of fire in the Neutral Zone and casualties are assumed to be high.'"

"That's what they were saying more than an hour ago! There could be new developments now!" the Doctor exclaimed. He reached over and turned on the desk comm unit, tuning it to the Federation News Service. "There, you see?"

Onscreen, footage played of a ship exploding in space. Minuscule blips came flying outward from the center of a huge fiery ball; they could have been debris or escape pods or both. Several Romulan warbirds were seen advancing in an attack formation. As the images repeated, a voice-over narrated: "Apparently acting on the provocation of at least one Starfleet ship crossing into the Neutral Zone, the Romulans opened fire. The Amherst was completely destroyed, and a second ship, the Minuteman, sustained severe damage and was forced to eject its warp core before it exploded as well."

Tom reached over and flicked the comm unit off. "I've heard and seen enough, thanks."

"New information is being reported as it comes in," the Doctor said, turning the screen on once more. "We have to know what's going on."

Tom took another look at the perky brunette anchorwoman, Katie Cook, who was saying something about the presence of Ponzi raiders in the vicinity, and shook his head. "I've heard about all I can take for right now, Doc. If you don't mind—" he turned off the comm once again. "My father has promised to give me any important updates as they become available and frankly, I'd prefer to hear the news from him than anyone else."

"Or maybe you'd prefer not to hear anything at all." The words came out in a more accusatory tone than the Doctor had intended, but he was beyond caring. In an angry motion, he turned the comm unit back on, issuing a direct challenge to the other man.

"That's a little harsh, isn't it?" Tom said. His knuckles whitened around the stylus he gripped.

"Is it?" the Doctor shot back. "It seems to me—by your hiding here in your office, by avoiding any news—that you're pretending there's nothing wrong!"

Tom took a deep breath. "Now that's unfair. I'm not

'hiding' and I resent your implication that I'm some kind of coward because I'm sitting here trying to be productive. In case it's slipped your mind, I have a job to do. You know as well as I do that B'Elanna wouldn't want me to neglect my duties." He attempted a more conciliatory tone. "Sitting around and watching the news for the latest developments won't change what has already happened, Doc. Like it or not, there's nothing we can do now but wait. And if I choose to 'wait' by working, then that's my choice."

The Doctor's gaze shifted to the shelf behind Tom's desk. Just above the shelf was a wide window, affording a panoramic view of the landing strips beyond and then the gray-blue hills of Marin. The sky that day was gray, the air hazy, but the Doctor suspected on a clear day, Tom had a beautiful view of the churning slate-colored waters of the Bay. In the distance, he could see the graceful arc of a fighter jet as it rose into the sky, disappearing from view within seconds.

His gaze shifted downward, to the holographic photos crowding the shelf—photos of Tom with B'Elanna, and of their children, along with pictures of various members of the Voyager crew. The Doctor recognized the one of the entire senior staff as having been taken at the reception commemorating the one year anniversary of their return home. There was even a shot of 'Captain Proton' and 'Buster Kincaid', both grinning hugely as they stood next to their 'space rocket.' Outwardly, Tom Paris didn't share much of his feelings—something that had driven the Doctor crazy on more than one occasion when they had shared Sickbay shifts on Voyager—but it was obvious from the proliferation of photos that Tom had no problem displaying symbols of what really mattered to him.

"I'm sorry," the Doctor said, feeling guilt sweep over him. "I didn't mean to imply—"

Tom interrupted. "Look, Doc, let's just drop it, all right? I appreciate your concern, but the truth of the matter is that when I go home tonight, I've got one hell of a daunting task waiting for me. I'm going to have to explain to my children why their mother isn't coming home. So don't presume to judge me."

The Doctor nodded slowly. With sudden clarity, he thought of the two Paris children, and the cheerful havoc they had wreaked in his office when he'd given them their most recent check-up just a few months previously.

*Within the space of just a few minutes, Miral had managed to spill her juice all over the main diagnostic computer console, and Joey had upset a row of tissue cultures and disabled the Doctor's mediwand, and one of them—he couldn't recall who—had gotten hold of the osteoregenerator. Fortunately it hadn't been fully charged.*

*B'Elanna knelt on the floor, an arm around each of her children, as she said in a gentle yet firm tone, "Miral, it's okay. You didn't mean to short out the relays, and by the looks of them they probably needed to be replaced sooner rather than later anyway." The Doctor gave her an outraged look, but B'Elanna smiled slightly and shook her head at him. "And I promise, if the office replicator doesn't have any more apple juice, we'll stop and get some on the way home. Joey..." here B'Elanna fell silent, apparently at a loss for words. The Doctor agreed wholeheartedly. What *\*did\** you say to a ram-bunctious toddler who felt compelled to take apart every piece*

of equipment he came across? "Joey," B'Elanna said finally, "you know it's not nice to touch someone else's toys without permission."

The Doctor fought back a grin as he picked up Joey and placed him firmly on the biobed. "Now then, young man, if you sit still long enough for me to check you, I promise to show you something \*really\* 'neat' before you go." He winked at B'Elanna over the boy's curly head.

Later, as B'Elanna glanced around once more to make sure she had all of their possessions in her large shoulder bag prior to leaving, the Doctor smiled. "I'm always amazed at how patient you are with those children, B'Elanna, no matter what they do. You're a wonderful mother."

Instead of thanking him for the compliment, however, B'Elanna laughed till tears came to her eyes. "Patient? Me? Have you forgotten who you're talking to?"

"I admit that I didn't always think you had it in you," the Doctor observed dryly. "But seeing is believing."

B'Elanna scooped up a sulky Joey, positioning him on her hip, and then took Miral's hand. "Trust me, Doctor, this was one of those days when I would cheerfully give these kids away to the lowest bidder. As much as I love them, there are times I'd just love to escape from it all." She smiled at him. "See you in a few months, Doctor."

The Doctor nodded as he started the clean-up process. "I'll look forward to it, B'Elanna," he said sincerely. But Joey had been crying and the Doctor couldn't be sure that B'Elanna had actually heard him.

"What about escape pods?" the Doctor said suddenly. "Even if the ships were destroyed, surely there are some survivors? Once the battle's over—"

Tom didn't react to the hopeful note in the Doctor's voice. Instead he shook his head and said, "Initial reports say that escape pods were launched from the Amherst prior to its warp core breach, but none from the—" he broke off abruptly.

Onscreen, Katie Cook said, "We have confirmation that a total of five Starfleet vessels were in the area of the Neutral Zone at the time of the attack, including the *Livingston*. Admiral Kathryn Janeway has been on board the *Livingston* for the past two months, engaging in shuttle diplomacy with the Romulans, hoping to avert exactly this type of situation."

"Sorry to interrupt, Katie," her partner said, "but we're now receiving word that Admiral Janeway had transferred over to the Minuteman shortly before the attack."

"My God," the Doctor said, staring at the screen. He looked up to meet Tom's eyes. "The Admiral was there, too? Then she's also..." his voice trailed off in disbelief.

Tom nodded slowly, almost unwillingly. "My father heard rumors that both Janeway and Harry Kim were both onboard the Minuteman when it was attacked. Apparently, Janeway had some matters to discuss with Captain Phillips. I think her plan had something to do with offering humanitarian aid to the Ponzi as a way to stop their raids on Romulan colonies and she felt it was best to discuss it in person rather than over channels which could be intercepted by both the Ponzi and the Romulans."

The Doctor turned his attention back to the comm unit. He hadn't even considered that Janeway and Harry would be in the Neutral Zone; his first thoughts had gone immediately to B'Elanna. He gripped the armrests of his chair tightly as

he listened to the Federation News' anchorwoman continued speaking in a voice tinged with urgency.

"There has been no confirmation, repeat, no confirmation that the Admiral returned to the *Livingston* prior to the attack. A message from Captain Johnson to Starfleet, received at 0700 PDT, states that Admiral Janeway and at least one other member of the *Livingston* crew shuttled over to the Minuteman and had not been heard from since," Katie Cook reported. "Meanwhile, the *U.S.S. Constantinople*, on patrol in a nearby sector, has been dispatched to the area along with the *Pasteur*, a medical support vessel. A Vulcan Science Academy vessel, the *Sarek*, is also en route."

The Doctor gazed out the window, speculatively eyeing a shuttle coming in for a landing in the quad beyond, and came to a decision—one that had been fermenting since he'd first heard the news; now he knew it was the only option. "This waiting is intolerable. Come on." He came around the desk and pulled at Tom's arm.

"What are you doing?" Tom yanked his arm free of the Doctor's grip.

"We have to get out there!" the Doctor said impatiently. Surely he didn't need to explain this? "With your connections, you can get us on a ship that will take us to the Neutral Zone."

Tom stared at the Doctor. "Are you \*crazy\*? Connections or not, it would take an *Intrepid* class ship a little under a week at maximum warp to get there. And when we would finally arrive, just what do you think you'll do?"

"Do? I'm a doctor, and you are a skilled field medic, Mr. Paris." Ordinarily, the Doctor would not have praised Tom's medical skills to his face. But it went without saying that this was no ordinary time, and he needed to persuade Tom as quickly as possible. "They're probably swamped with casualties, and any trained medical personnel in the area will be in short supply." He paused, but could not quite keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Though I hardly expected that you of all people would need an \*excuse\* to head out there."

Tom's head reared back as the insult hit home. "I can't say that I wouldn't prefer to be there," he said heatedly, "but I also have to be realistic. You heard them—medical ships in the area have already been dispatched. They'll get there more quickly than we possibly could and do more good in that respect." Tom took another deep breath, and his expression grew pensive. "The Minuteman has been reduced to a debris field covering nearly a thousand square kilometers. I—I don't think I could look."

The Doctor stared at Tom in dismay. What happened to the impulsive young pilot from *Voyager*? The man who didn't hesitate to rush in when someone he cared about was in danger? "This is no time to get emotional, Mr. Paris! My medical database contains over 5 million possible treatments, with contingency options and adaptive programs. I am an expert at triage situations. I have information from 2,000 medical references and the experience of 47 physicians, wrapped up in 80 million gigaquads of computer data! I have to be there!"

The next thing he knew, Tom had grabbed him and slammed him against the wall. "Didn't you hear me? There is \*nothing\* left of the Minuteman or the Amherst! Who the hell do you expect to triage anyway? Genetic remnants?" Tom's voice grew increasingly louder. "And yes, maybe you

do have the experience of '47 physicians wrapped up in 80 million gigaquads of computer data', but that doesn't change the fact that there is \*no one\* alive to triage." Tom released the Doctor and turned away, his fists still clenched at his sides, his shoulders shaking. "I'm sorry, Doc, but I don't see the point of traveling all that distance."

"But there \*is\* a point! The reporters just said escape pods had been released," the Doctor insisted frantically. "There's got to be someone still alive—they can't all be gone! Those Mars-class ship carried 60 people each. That's 120 people! But if I don't get out there, their chances of survival will be that much less! Every second we waste here arguing is time that could be more profitably spent saving lives!"

Tom didn't answer. He remained standing, his back to the Doctor, as he hunched over his desk, seemingly very interested in the scattered PADDs. The Doctor took a deep breath, instinctively rubbing the back of his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but his attention was drawn back to Katie Cook of the Federation News Service; she was speaking directly to the camera now as the words "Conflict in the Neutral Zone" flashed in red at the bottom of the screen.

"Recapping our top story, a battle was fought in the vicinity of the Romulan Neutral Zone early this morning. We have received confirmation that a Starfleet vessel, the Amherst, fired the first shot, hitting a Romulan freighter. At this time, there is no indication of why the Amherst fired, or what role the Ponzi may have played in that action. There's a lot of confusion here still, Russ, as we're getting spurts of raw information from the main Starfleet feed, some of it conflicting."

"The fact that a major communications array was damaged in the battle isn't helping any on that score, Katie. The later reports are sketchy at best. But we do know that the Amherst and Minuteman were destroyed—there's no question of that. Captain Johnson of the *Livingston* reported the destruction before the array failed. We also know that there were a total of five Starfleet vessels were involved in the battle, the *Livingston*—"

A quiet voice by his side made the Doctor jump. "The escape pods were launched from the \*Amherst\*, not the Minuteman. There is no evidence that anyone left the Minuteman between the time it was attacked and when it exploded. You're hoping for a miracle that didn't happen." Tom clenched his fists. The Doctor glanced at Tom, startled; so caught up in the recap himself, he had been unaware that Tom had been paying attention to the newscast as well. "And the three remaining ships from the battle have their own medical staffs and sickbays," Tom continued. He took a deep breath, obviously trying to compose himself. "I think it's terrific you want to help out, but I honestly don't see what you can do that the people already out there can't."

Peripherally, the Doctor was aware of footage of a ship ejecting its warp core, and the ensuing explosion, being replayed for perhaps the tenth time in the last hour. As before, Romulan warbirds were seen moving in an attack formation. But this time, there were additional images of other Starfleet vessels taking hits. The name *Livingston* was visible on the side of one ship as it inexplicably moved closer to the attacking vessels and locked a tractor beam on what appeared to be pieces of wreckage.

The images—and what they \*meant\*—were seared deeply

into the Doctor's mind. He cleared his throat, hoping to explain to Tom that watching those images over and over again was like reliving the deaths of his friends, the people who had meant the most to him. But unless he saw the wreckage for himself—not sterile news vids—the Doctor had to believe that the people he cared about could still be saved.

"Don't you see? I \*have\* to be there! I \*have\* to..." the Doctor slumped forward. "They can't be gone, not B'Elanna, or the captain or Harry." He bowed his head in defeat. "It's my job to take care of them, to make sure that they're all right. I can't lose them. I can't." He'd come too close to that once before...

*B'Elanna and Janeway, both unconscious, lay on adjacent biobeds. Their Borg prosthetic devices and implants stood out in stark contrast to their unnatural pallor. Tuvok was in another section of Sickbay, behind a security forcefield. For some reason, the neural inhibitor all three of them had been injected with prior to their beaming over to the Borg cube hadn't been as effective in preventing the assimilation process in his case.*

*His voice sounding unusually loud in his own ears, the Doctor said, "Well, let's get started. Their vital signs are as stable as they're going to be. No sense in delaying any further." A medical assistant moved forward with a tray of instruments and the EMH began the process of removing the captain's cranial implants. It was a slow and painstaking process. One false step, and she would die. The Doctor didn't flinch; he \*knew\* he was capable of saving her. Of saving them all.*

Tom put his hand on the Doctor's shoulder. "Believe me, \*I\* understand." He smiled, but his eyes were suspiciously bright. "You asked why I came to work instead of staying home or going to HQ. The truth is, I \*need\* to be busy. The chances are very good that my wife, along with two of my closest friends, died out there and I'm not ready to face life without her yet. It's easier to guide my cadets through their flight maneuvers than it is to wonder how things are going to be without B'Elanna. There will be plenty of time for that in the days, months, years to come." His voice cracked slightly at the end.

The Doctor looked at Tom's hand, then up at his face, and it was as though he was seeing him, \*really\* seeing him, for the first time. He had been so intent on pushing his own concerns to the forefront that he had been unable to even contemplate what this must be like for Tom. "I'm sorry. I've been terribly selfish, not even thinking about what you must be going through." The Doctor resolutely pushed away all thoughts of those who had been onboard the Minuteman on this fateful day. "I don't know how you have the strength to stand there and carry on."

Tom shrugged, but it was beginning to be evident just how much it cost him to appear calm. "Strength has nothing to do with it. We both knew and understood the risks before B'Elanna went out there." He pressed his lips into a thin smile. "We spoke last night, you know—she wanted to say goodnight to the kids. She told me her engineers were coming along fine and that she was proud of them. She also said that she felt the situation in the Neutral Zone was easing a little and she hoped to be home soon." Tom inhaled. "She doesn't get a chance to call every night, but she always tries. Joey, he was too sleepy to talk to her last night, but Miral, she couldn't stop chattering about the pony she had seen on a field trip

to the farm and B'Elanna promised to take her again when she came home. It was getting late and so I told B'Elanna I'd talk to her tomorrow evening—um, that would be tonight. I guess it'll hit me then. When I sit down at the comm unit to talk to her, and she won't answer." Tom looked down at his hands. "I keep replaying our conversation over and over in my head. I wish I had known that this was the \*last\* time we would ever talk because then I would have said more, told her more than what I'd done all day. I hope—I think I told B'Elanna I love her, but I'm having a hard time remembering clearly now."

The Doctor nodded, but said nothing. Tom Paris seemed intent on his own thoughts and the Doctor instinctively understood that perhaps Tom needed a few seconds to himself. Instead, the Doctor focused his attention back to Katie Cook and the Federation News Service feed.

"The Romulans appear to have moved off for now—at least there doesn't seem to be any more exchange of weapons fire—and rescue operations are proceeding unfettered. We still have no indication as to why the Romulans called off their attack. The *Livingston*, Ticonderoga and Concord have all sustained varying amounts of damage. It is unknown if the Ticonderoga has full warp capability. Complete casualty reports from all five vessels will not be available until the rescue operations have been underway for at least another hour, possibly longer. But there are rumors starting to trickle in that the number of survivors may be greater than originally thought."

Almost to himself, Tom said, "The last time I saw Harry was about half a year ago, at a conference. You should have seen him, Doc—you'd have hardly recognized him. Lieutenant Commander Harry Kim, on the fast track to command. A far cry from the green ensign he was when I first met him all those years ago on Deep Space Nine, when Voyager was first setting out. Though we always knew he had it in him—remember how the two of you almost single-handedly took back our ship from the Hirogen?" Tom ran his hand over his face tiredly. "It just doesn't seem right, does it, to have come all the way back from the Delta Quadrant, only to lose them now."

The Doctor did not know what to say. He reflected privately that Tom was no stranger to tragedy, had had a lot of losses in his life. The EMH, too, remembered a young man from Voyager's earliest days, one who was cocky and abrasive as a way of protecting himself from being hurt, and who was reckless precisely because he had nothing further to lose, no one to care about.

How much had changed since then—and Janeway had been the catalyst, giving them all a chance to show her what they were capable of. Tom, B'Elanna, Harry—and himself. He thought of how the captain had allowed, even encouraged him, to exceed the original parameters of his programming. Oh, they'd butted heads on more than one occasion. Janeway had never hesitated to dress him down when he deserved it, but by the same token, she had been an experienced enough leader—and a big enough person—to admit when she was in the wrong.

Tom's voice broke in to the Doctor's reverie. "We've lost Harry before, but somehow we've always managed to get him back. Until now." Tom bit his lip. "And as for Janeway, this is what she would have wanted, to go out fighting." He in-

haled sharply. "B'Elanna and I had ten great years together. I can't believe how lucky I was—and still am—to have been with her."

"Yes, you've been very lucky, Tom," the Doctor said softly. "The two of you had something very special. If only—I just wish that there was some way—"

The door to the office opened suddenly. Tom jerked his head up in surprise as the Doctor twisted around to see who the visitor was. Admiral Owen Paris stood in the doorway, a PADD clutched in his hand.

Tom blanched at his father's appearance. The Doctor felt a tingle of anxiety as well. He couldn't help but feel the senior Paris's coming in person did not bode well, a premonition reinforced by Admiral Paris's decidedly somber expression as he entered the room.

"Dad?" Tom said, his apprehension etched clearly across his face.

Admiral Paris's eyes flicked over at the Doctor for a moment, then he turned his attention back to his son. "I came as soon as we had official confirmation—I wanted to tell you this myself."

Tom took a step forward. Gone was the attempted nonchalance, the efforts to keep his emotions in check. Raw fear showed on his face as he said, "Oh God, B'Elanna, it's true then. She's—" Tom paused, his lower lip quivering slightly.

The Doctor swallowed hard. Confirmation, he thought. Just as they had feared, there was no one left to save. Irrationally, he felt as if he had personally failed B'Elanna, Harry and Janeway.

"Dad—" Tom's voice cracked. "Go ahead. Tell me."

"I'm having trouble believing it myself." The Admiral started to hold out the PADD, but opened his arms instead. "It's a miracle, Son. About a dozen survivors were rescued from the Minuteman just minutes before it exploded. B'Elanna was one of them. She's coming home, Tom."

Tom stared in disbelief. "B'Elanna? Coming home?"

The Admiral nodded. "She should arrive in a few days."

The Doctor could not bring himself to turn away at first as Tom collapsed against his father's shoulder. But after a few moments, he quietly slipped out the door to give them some privacy.

## Stand By Me

*Janeway & Tuvok*

*Disclaimer: Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters are the property of Paramount. No copyright infringement is intended.*

*Author's Note: Part of the Glory Days Universe. This story takes place 2 weeks after the events of "Act of War" by Seema, and "Empty Sky" by Seema and yours truly. It is recommended you read those first.*

*Many thanks to Seema for her excellent beta, and for her vision and help in shaping this series.*

*Warning: This story features violence and/or drastic events that may be disturbing to some readers.*

The door to the ship's observation deck opened. Tuvok turned from his solitary contemplation of the stars as Admiral Janeway entered. She slowly made her way toward him, leaning heavily on a duranium cane, her face set in grim lines.

Tuvok made no move to assist her, knowing how much the Admiral valued her independence—and how it would gall her to rely on others.

Janeway awkwardly lowered herself into a nearby chair. Her breathing rate was accelerated, her face flushed. She shifted her position, trying to get comfortable, and winced slightly as she did so. Fixing him with a baleful gaze, she lifted her hand in warning. “Don’t say a word.”

Tuvok raised an eyebrow, but remained silent.

“I mean it—not one word about how I’m not supposed to be out of bed, that I should be resting. I know my body isn’t entirely healed, and that by all rights I should still be in that hospital on Vulcan.”

“Since you have presented the case for me,” Tuvok said mildly, “I clearly do not need to say anything further.”

She shot a look at him, as if gauging how much sarcasm was behind his words. “Don’t play the innocent with me, Tuvok—I know you’re on this ship in the capacity of my keeper, to ensure I stay out of trouble.”

“That would be an unenviable, if not impossible task,” he said, “but fortunately I am not acting as your ‘keeper.’ I am merely traveling with you, as I too wish to return to Earth.”

“So we can both attend the memorial service,” Janeway acknowledged quietly, all irritation dissipating from her voice. A spasm of pain washed over her features; Tuvok knew it had nothing to do with any physical discomfort she was experiencing. “I can’t believe he’s really gone.”

“Indeed,” he said, watching her closely for any outward signs of emotional distress. She had not cried when he first broke the news of Harry Kim’s death to her; as far as he knew, she had not shed any tears since. For a person who normally felt things so deeply, her control troubled him.

Tuvok himself had not been unaffected by the loss of a former colleague—and a friend. Immediately upon being notified of the events in the Neutral Zone, he had performed the ritual of *kayl m’aleh* in the privacy of his own home—a rite of closure, and of farewell—before hurrying to the hospital complex in ShiKahr. The needs of the living took priority, but that did not mean the dead were any less important.

And now he was less than 72 hours away from Earth, where another ceremony would take place, this time in the company of the deceased’s friends and family. Unbidden, an image of Harry Kim rose in his mind—the eager young ensign on Voyager’s bridge. The Ops and Tactical stations had been situated near each other; over the years Tuvok had become familiar with Harry’s habits and mannerisms, the smooth rhythms of his hands, the frown of concentration as he performed his duties. And always his boundless enthusiasm.

Perhaps he had been wrong about the tears; Janeway passed her hand over her eyes. “Would it have been too much to ask for Harry to have survived too?” she asked with more than a hint of bitterness. “After being pulled from the wreckage of the Minuteman just minutes before it exploded—why was he rescued only to die shortly afterwards?”

“His injuries were too severe,” Tuvok said, aware of how inadequate his answer was, but not knowing what else to say. Of the dozen individuals—out of a crew complement of 60—who had been beamed to safety by the *Livingston*, two had been pronounced dead upon arrival. Three others, including Harry Kim, had died before receiving any medical treatment, their

status having initially been deemed ‘less critical’ during a hurried triage. It was not entirely the fault of the doctors—the medical staff of the *Livingston* had already been overwhelmed by the sheer number of casualties sustained in the battle; neither of the other ships, the *Concord* or the *Ticonderoga*, had fared any better. But Tuvok did not repeat this out loud, not wanting to add to the guilt Janeway must be feeling.

Janeway gave a short, humorless laugh. “I suppose we’d already used up our quota of miracles?”

“Some might say it was nothing short of a miracle that you and B’Elanna Torres—as well as the other five crewmen—survived when so many others perished,” Tuvok pointed out.

Her expression softened. “Yes, thank God B’Elanna survived, even though she...” Janeway’s voice trailed off and then her lips tightened. “Why didn’t the doctors put Harry in stasis, until he could be transferred to another ship, instead of just leaving him alone to die?” she demanded.

Tuvok turned to face her squarely. “Stasis tubes, along with other medical supplies, were in short supply. Only the most critical cases were consigned to them—those whose injuries were clearly beyond the capacity of the ship’s sickbay, even if it were operating under optimal conditions.”

She was silent for a long moment. “I know, Tuvok.” She closed her eyes wearily. “Just like I know I was given the last stasis tube the *Livingston* had available.”

Tuvok leaned forward and said urgently, “It was a question of need, Admiral.” Was she under the impression that her life had been saved at the expense of someone else? That it was because of her rank? “You must believe that there was no other consideration involved.” He waited until she slowly nodded, then added, “And even a stasis chamber does not necessarily guarantee survival.”

*Tuvok waited patiently while the Vulcan Healer, T’Mol, finished making an adjustment to one of the consoles next to the Admiral’s bedside, and then watched while she pressed a hypodermic to the patient’s neck. “Has there been any change in her condition?”*

*T’Mol did not look up from her task. “Admiral Janeway is beginning to respond to the treatment. Her cardiovascular system is now functioning within normal parameters. However, there is residual damage to her neurological system. This was not an entirely unforeseen possibility, though it is still unfortunate.”*

*“Are you saying that she may not recover?” Tuvok was careful to keep his voice level, though inside he felt a current of alarm.*

*“The long-term prognosis is still unclear. As you are aware, the Admiral’s injuries were nearly fatal.” T’Mol’s eyes met his. “There is no question that she would have died within minutes had the physicians on the *Livingston* not had the foresight to place her in stasis until she could be transferred to our facilities here in ShiKahr. But even stasis is not a panacea; though the body’s metabolic activities are halted, any circulating toxins—released at the moment of injury—are still present. Once the patient is ‘revived’, the rate of cellular decay is vastly accelerated. That is what has occurred in the Admiral’s case. We are endeavoring to repair the damage, but the rate of progress is slow.”*

*Tuvok bowed his head. “I see.”*

*T’Mol paused by the door. “The Admiral may regain con-*

sciousness sometime in the next 24 hours. We will have a better understanding then of what to expect in terms of recovery." She left quietly, her movements unhurried.

Tuvok sat down once more by Janeway's bedside, arranging his crumpled robes as best he could and settled down to wait. He had hardly stirred at all for the past three days, ever since the Admiral had first arrived at the hospital complex on Vulcan. A total of ten days had passed since the battle in the Neutral Zone; the Admiral had spent seven of those in stasis. Even now, her hold on life was still tenuous at best.

Tuvok glanced at Janeway's pale, wan face, at her dark-lashed eyes which remained closed. Her chest rose and fell with regularity under the thin silvery sheet, assisted by the mechanical ventilator hissing softly near the head of her bed. A monitor opposite emitted a series of muted beeps and then quieted once more.

Tuvok reached out and gently smoothed her hair back from her forehead. Her skin felt cold to his touch, cold even for a Human. With a repressed sigh, he brought his hands together, closed his eyes, and began to meditate.

"I've been going over the battle again and again in my mind," Janeway said now, staring out the main viewport. A silvery-blue nebula was spread out before them, obscuring many of the stars. "What I should have done differently. After Captain Phillips was killed, I ordered the crew of the Minuteman to abandon ship. But by then there was so much debris, so many blocked passageways, it was virtually impossible for them to get to the escape pods. The ship had become a death trap. If only I had known—I should have overridden Phillips and ordered everyone out much sooner."

"Even if the crew had abandoned ship earlier, there is no certainty they would have survived," Tuvok said. "As you are undoubtedly aware, the Amherst managed to launch their pods, but many of them were caught in the backwash when their ship exploded. Other escape pods were destroyed by the Romulans; fewer than one in five were recovered by the Starfleet 'search and recovery' vessels." He waited for her reaction, but she was quiet. He hastened to reassure her. "Regardless, it was Captain Phillips' decision, not yours. He believed the ship could still be salvaged, until the very end. Before his death, your only priority was negotiating with the Romulan commander—trying to stop the battle, not command a starship."

"Yes, negotiations." She grimaced. "After two months' worth of effort—empty talk, as it turned out to be—to avoid ending up in that precise situation, we still had an outbreak of hostilities."

Tuvok shook his head. "You were making excellent progress, Admiral. The Romulans had finally agreed—in principle—to allow Starfleet to deal with the Ponzi, instead of continuing to take matters into their own hands. It was not your fault that events conspired against you that last day."

Janeway exhaled slowly. "No, I suppose not. Though doubtless now that all the excitement has died down, Starfleet is going to launch a very thorough investigation." She fell silent. Tuvok wondered if she were thinking about how the whole thing had begun.

For months, tensions had been escalating between the Federation and the Romulans over the issue of the Ponzi indiscriminately attacking colonies along both sides of the Neutral

Zone. The Romulans' insistence on personally dealing with the raiders had brought the fragile peace with the Federation close to the breaking point. The current crisis had been precipitated when the Amherst, one of the ships on patrol in the vicinity, had fired a warning shot at a Ponzi ship. Somehow, a Romulan freighter was struck instead. Claiming a deliberate provocation, the Romulans had promptly retaliated; the Amherst was disabled, as was the Minuteman who had moved in to assist. Further complicating the issue had been the fact that the Amherst and Minuteman had crossed into the Neutral Zone. Before the battle ended, both ships had been destroyed. The three other Starfleet ships in the vicinity had sustained severe damage as well.

"I would be surprised if the investigation has not begun already." Tuvok stood. "Would you like something to drink?" he asked. At her quick nod, he went over to the replicator and moments later, handed her a steaming cup.

Janeway took a sip and then made a face. "That's not coffee."

"You are correct, Admiral. It is a non-caffeinated herbal tea." As she started to object, he continued, "The Healers were quite firm that you should avoid all caffeinated beverages during your recovery period."

"Then it's a good thing I'm no longer on Vulcan—even if I am on a Vulcan ship. Hopefully Starfleet Medical treats its patients in a less draconian fashion," Janeway said, putting the cup down on an adjacent table with a look of distaste. "Though the Doctor will no doubt have restrictions of his own for me to follow—he promised as much when I spoke to him before my release from the hospital." She forced a smile. "He can be very stubborn, you know."

"Indeed. Though no more stubborn than you are."

"Meaning?"

"Your refusal to leave the bridge of the Minuteman while you believed there was still a chance—however remote—you could solve the crisis," Tuvok said, leaning forward. "Even though you were injured when the console next to you exploded—killing Captain Phillips and severely incapacitating his first officer—you still clung to your post while ordering the others to safety." If Tuvok had been Human, he suspected he would have been unable to say those words so calmly. Even after many years of serving with Kathryn Janeway, he still found her almost cavalier disregard for her own personal safety most disquieting.

"Yes, and I'd do it again in a minute if the situation were the same," Janeway shot back. "You know as well as I do what was at stake."

Surprised, he raised his eyes to meet her defiant gaze. "Your willingness to sacrifice your own life in the pursuit of peace did appear to make a favorable impression on the Romulan Commander," Tuvok conceded. "It may have also contributed to your ultimate success in convincing him to stand down."

"I just hope Admiral Nechayev doesn't screw things up now that she's taken over the task of negotiations," Janeway muttered under her breath, adding sardonically, "So it was a happy ending after all."

Tuvok frowned. "There are no happy endings in history, only crisis points that pass," he said, quoting an ancient Ter-ran writer. "But for now, it does appear that war with the Romulans has been averted, and the situation with the Ponzi

raiders dealt with as well.” He took a sip of his own tea, which had grown cold in the meantime. “It was also fortuitous that near the end of the battle the *Livingston* was able to move in close enough to the Minuteman to beam out any life signs they could detect. At least a few more lives were saved that way.” Including hers.

She did not answer right away. “But so many still died, Tuvok,” Janeway said at last, her voice breaking. “So many who had the rest of their lives ahead of them.” The expression on her face was identical to the way she had looked when she had heard the news the first time.

*Janeway’s eyes fluttered open and she took a long shuddering breath. “Commander?” she called, in a weak voice. Her fingers plucked at the bedsheet, as if seeking something—or someone.*

*Tuvok was at her side in a second. “I am here, Admiral.” He moved in closer so he was in her field of vision.*

*Her eyes focused on his face in bewilderment. “Tuvok? Where is—where am I? What happened?”*

*“You are in the ShiKahr medical complex on Vulcan, Admiral. You were injured...” He attempted to fill her in on the situation as succinctly as possible, but she interrupted.*

*“The Romulans—”*

*“War has been averted, Admiral,” Tuvok reassured her. “You succeeded in your mission.”*

*Janeway struggled to sit up. “But the ship, the Minuteman—”*

*Tuvok exchanged glances with the Healer as they attempted to get her to lie back down. “Admiral, you must rest—”*

*“No! I have to know!” Feeble though she was, urgency lent strength to her movements. “Tell me—what happened to the Minuteman?”*

*“It was destroyed,” Tuvok said reluctantly.*

*Janeway stopped struggling at once. With a terrible certainty, he knew what was coming, though he wished he could forestall any further questions on her part.*

*“Any survivors?” Janeway asked, a note of hope—or was it desperation?—in her voice.*

*“Only a few,” he said, quickly adding, “B’Elanna was one of them.”*

*She swallowed. “And Harry?”*

*“Admiral—Kathryn, I am sorry.”*

*Her face contorted and for a moment he thought she was going to burst into sobs or screams. But all she did was close her eyes and turn her face toward the wall.*

Watching her now, Tuvok reminded himself that she was a strong woman. She would recover from this blow, just like her body would recover from the physical wounds she had sustained. But the eyes that met his were still full of pain.

“There’s no getting away from it, is there, Tuvok?” she said, a note of defeat in her voice.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Janeway sighed. “It’s just like it was in the Delta Quadrant.”

He was beginning to understand. “Are you referring to the responsibility for the lives of those under your command?” At her terse nod, he said, “Of course it is, Admiral. That would be true of any command, be it a ship in deep space, or a station in a well-traveled sector.”

She waved his words away impatiently. “That’s not what I meant. I meant once more having to play the role of savior, presenting the outward image of infallibility, all the while knowing that so many lives hang in the balance based on what I do or say.” Her shoulders slumped and even with his acute hearing, he had to strain to catch her next words. “The fear of playing God, deciding who lives and who dies—it’s something I still can’t get away from, even after all these years.”

Tuvok shifted in his seat. “I do not deny that it is an often uncomfortable position to be in,” he said sternly, “but you do bring a great deal of the onus on yourself, Admiral.”

Janeway looked up, startled. “Excuse me?”

“You hold yourself to impossibly high standards, when in fact you are not perfect and have made a number of mistakes in every command you have held.”

A wave of anger crossed her face and then she relaxed with a visible effort. “I can always count on you, Tuvok, to help me retain my sense of perspective,” she said dryly.

He refused to allow her to sidetrack him. What he needed to say to her was long overdue. “You have made a consistent habit of this, Kathryn, and of making things much harder than they need to be. Your penchant for self-sacrifice, for isolating yourself from those closest to you, are just a few examples of this behavior. You tell yourself you are doing it for the good of those under your command, yet the reality is that they would be better served by a commander who understood and accepted her own limitations.” She opened her mouth to object, but he pressed on. “Not only your crew would benefit. You cannot deny that you are lonely—that your life consists of Starfleet and your work, nothing else. You lack inner peace.”

Janeway didn’t dispute the issue. Instead, she gave a slight smile. “You’re right, Tuvok.” She sighed again, her eyes once more on the stars outside. “I don’t have any peace, not really, except for what I feel sometimes when I’m out in space. Delta Quadrant, or Alpha—it doesn’t seem to make much of a difference. But this is what I know. And after so long, I can’t even imagine what it would be like to leave this all behind, truly start over, as you have.” She gave him a sidelong glance. “But I do envy you, for the peace you’ve obviously found.”

Tuvok thought of his present-day life—the long silent hours spent in meditation on the edge of the desert, interspersed with the time needed to care for and nurture his orchids. Each day was very much like the one before, with the certainty that tomorrow would be more of the same. So different from *Voyager*, where it was virtually impossible to predict what would happen in the next hour, let alone the next day; nothing certain except the steely determination with which his captain would face the unknown, coupled with his own resolve to remain by her side no matter what.

He maneuvered his chair so he was once more in her direct line of vision. “To find something you must first acknowledge that you are seeking it. And may I remind you that inner peace, even for a Vulcan, is hard-won.”

“I didn’t mean to sound condescending or to belittle your choices in any way,” Janeway said swiftly. “But what has obviously worked for you—”

“I understood what you meant, Kathryn.” Tuvok refrained from mentioning that he would not take offense in any event, as that was an overt emotional response. “Just as you under-

stand that no choice is without regrets—nor is any decision irrevocable. It is one thing to bemoan loneliness and another matter entirely to refuse to accept it as an inevitable or permanent condition.” He paused, considering his next words. “That is the way you used to meet challenges. This one should be treated no differently.”

Janeway shook her head. “It’s not the same thing, Tuvok.” A few strands of hair escaped from the knot at the nape of her neck; she pushed at them absently. “I did what I had to do, because I had no other choice.”

“There are always alternatives,” Tuvok objected. “When stripped of its emotional overtones, every choice can be viewed the same way—an individual always ends up doing what he wants, what he considers to be the more palatable option open to him. Or to avoid something he fears. It is skirting the truth to simply say, ‘but I had no choice.’” He exhaled sharply. “Kathryn, for as long as I have known you, you have never hesitated to go your own way, forge a new path when necessary. You have also never been one to shy away from harsh realities.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You certainly don’t believe in mincing words, do you?”

“It is my belief you need a friend who will be honest with you more than you need a sycophant,” Tuvok said simply.

“That’s true,” she admitted. “I have enough of those at HQ.” She hesitated, then took his hand in hers. “I’ve missed you, Tuvok, your wise counsel.” Her lips quirked. “You’ve never been afraid to tell me what you think I need to hear, and you’ve always been there for me when I need a friend. We go back a long way, you and I. Even before the Delta Quadrant. But I don’t know how I would have survived those years on Voyager without you.”

He did not remove his hand, finding comfort of his own in her touch. “It has always been an honor and a privilege to be your friend, Kathryn. I cherish our relationship.” It was his turn to hesitate. “But I am not the only person you turned to for help on Voyager.”

A series of emotions rapidly played across her face, too quickly for him to identify. Tuvok had not meant to make her uncomfortable, but this was something else he felt she needed to hear.

An awkward silence fell as she let go of his hand.

Janeway rubbed her face wearily. He noticed again the fine lines around her eyes and mouth. He suspected that they would not go away any time soon, even with rest and returning health.

“Are you in pain, Kathryn?” he said softly.

“It’s probably time for another dose of pain meds,” she said. “At any rate, I said I would return to Sickbay by 1600. What time is it now?”

Tuvok glanced at his chronometer. “It is 1555.”

“Then it’s definitely time.”

She picked up her cane and caught hold of the armrest of the chair, bracing herself in preparation of rising. Tuvok caught her arm gently beneath the elbow and helped her to her feet. She stiffened, and then relaxed against him. Neither one of them said anything further.

They left the room together, with him supporting her all the way.

## Rocketman

*Feedback: Much appreciated at seemag1@yahoo.com*

*Disclaimer: Paramount’s creation—I’m just picking up where they left off.*

*Author’s notes: Part of the “Glory Days” series. Follows immediately after the events of “Act of War”, and “Empty Sky”—it’s best to read those stories first as this one relies heavily on those. Many thanks to Rocky for the beta.*

When a friend is lost, the mind is split in half,  
Divided between memory of the past and fear of the future.

Harry Kim, Ensign. Only a boy when fate took you  
from the arms of blue-green Earth.

—From the sixth season episode, “Muse”

Tom Paris swore under his breath as he tripped over the box in the dark. He stopped himself just in time for calling for illumination; B’Elanna was sleeping just a few meters away, though with the amount of medication in her system, he doubted if even a herd of targs could wake her. He righted himself, his hand scraping against the plastic cover of the crate. He took a deep breath. Harry’s things. He’d tripped over Harry’s things.

He looked over his shoulder at the biobed to see if his stumbling in the dark had disturbed B’Elanna. He wasn’t sure if he felt relief or disappointment—or a mixture of both—that B’Elanna didn’t stir. And if it hadn’t been for the cortical monitor affixed to her forehead and the screen just off to the side keeping check on her vital conditions, Tom would have sworn that his wife was simply sleeping.

Deciding not to take the chance of making more noise by stumbling in the dark, Tom called in a low voice, “Computer, lights. Twenty percent.”

Tom turned to look back at the box, or rather boxes clustered in the corner of the room. He had managed to fit the sum of Harry Kim’s life into six standard Starfleet-issue crates. Everything except for the uniforms. He’d left them—all but a single dress uniform—in Harry’s closet back on the *Livingston*; the dress uniform would be used for Harry’s funeral, scheduled to take place just a few days from now in San Francisco. Staring at the boxes now, Tom wondered whether he’d made a mistake in leaving Harry’s uniforms behind for the *Livingston*’s crew to dispose of? Maybe Harry’s parents would want those uniforms, all nine of them. But it was too late to return to the *Livingston* now; the starship, crippled over a week ago in the Neutral Zone ‘conflict’—as Starfleet brass now referred to the sudden outbreak of hostilities between the Federation and the Romulans—was now on its way to Utopia Planetia for much-needed repairs and he and B’Elanna had transferred to the Pasteur just eight hours previously, bound for Earth.

Tom sat on one of the boxes. He was tired and he knew he should get some rest. He had spent a week traveling from San Francisco to the Neutral Zone, arriving on the *Livingston* just the day before. He’d only had about twelve hours on the *Livingston*—just enough time to check on B’Elanna, conference with her doctors and then to collect Harry’s belongings for

transport before the scheduled rendezvous with the Pasteur this morning. He was grateful that the medical staff on the Pasteur had been kind enough to give them private quarters, rather than consigning them to a corner of Sickbay. Of course, they'd had to bring the medical equipment with them and the doctors emphasized that even though B'Elanna's status had been upgraded from critical to stable, if her condition changed at any time, they would have to readmit her to Sickbay for the duration of the trip back to San Francisco.

Despite the comfort of their own private cabin, sleep didn't come easy for Tom; he'd tossed and turned for the last hour on the recliner next to her biobed until finally, he'd gotten up to check on B'Elanna more closely; given his proximity to her bed, he knew he would be able to hear her if she called out. She hadn't reacted when he'd touched her clammy hand or when he'd smoothed away her hair from her forehead. But her breathing was even and her pulse steady; this much he had to be satisfied with.

Tom glanced turned to look at the array of boxes next to him. He'd spent about three hours in Harry's quarters on the *Livingston*, grabbing everything he could see, everything that could possibly be meaningful to the Kim family. At first, he had rushed in his packing, grabbing random items and then, remembering how Harry was, Tom had forced himself to slow down and methodically pack the remainder of his friend's belongings.

Tom took a deep breath and rose. His foot still ached from where he'd banged it against the box. It was then he recalled the small case of holochips he had found on Harry's desk. Where \*had\* he put it? Tom couldn't begin to explain it, but at that moment, it was supremely important to him that he find the holochips. Urgently, Tom started rifling through the boxes, finally locating the case in the fourth container. He held it in his hands, caressing it lightly. Tom inhaled sharply and then removed the holochip he wanted.

Tom quickly changed out of his blue pajamas into loose-fitting pants and a t-shirt. As an afterthought, he pulled on a pair of loafers, deciding to forgo socks for the time being. After a quick check on B'Elanna, he left the guest quarters. Down the corridors he went, barely aware of the Pasteur's crew passing him by. Finally, he found the holodeck and luckily, at this late hour, it was available.

Tom opened the case and selected one chip and plugged it in. As the doors opened, he found himself in the monochromatic world of Captain Proton.

"Oh Harry," Tom whispered. He bit his lip as he took a look around. Everything was exactly as he remembered it, from the boxy computers to the hard, wooden furniture and the garish flashing lights. Tom pulled out a wooden chair and sat down at the desk. He wondered how long it would be for Chaotica to make an appearance, or even Queen Arachnia. "Computer, do not start program until I say so."

"Affirmative."

Tom leaned back in the chair. The room was so empty, so cavernous, without—without Harry. Shakily, Tom got to his feet. He wanted to talk to someone, anyone. But B'Elanna had been drifting in and out of consciousness for days now and he also didn't think she was in the shape to talk about Harry's death.

Harry's death.

Tom's heart skipped a beat. He remembered the utter relief he'd felt when his father had broken the news that B'Elanna had survived the battle in the Neutral Zone. However, only a minute later, Owen Paris had revealed that Kathryn Janeway was so grievously injured that she'd had to be put into stasis during the transport to the medical facilities on Vulcan. Tom had started to relax then, just a little bit; Vulcan had some of the best doctors on the Federation and he knew Janeway was in the best possible hands. The sorrowful expression on his father's face, however, had told Tom that there was more bad news to come—news, that Tom in a thousand years, would never have the time to get used to. Owen Paris had delivered the crushing news of Harry's death but Tom hadn't been able to absorb the news properly as in the next breath, Owen informed Tom that passage had been booked for him on a fast transport to the Neutral Zone.

"I thought you said B'Elanna would be here in a few days," Tom had said. He had placed his palm flat on the top of desk for support. "I thought you said she was fine." The volume of Tom's voice had risen slightly.

"Yes, I did, but I was sure you'd want to be with her, so I took the liberty of making the arrangements for you," Owen had said. When pressed for more information, Owen had been evasive—at best—with the details of B'Elanna's status. The only additional information Owen had offered was, "She's in critical condition and the doctors say that the next ten days are crucial."

Tom had stared at his father in disbelief. "The next ten days are crucial?" Tom had asked. He'd run his hand through his hair, trying to hide his shaking hands. "What does that mean? That's not the same thing as 'fine', Dad."

"You're a medic," Owen had said softly. "You know that that means." In a rare demonstration of physical affection, Owen had placed his hand gently on Tom's shoulder. "I think you should go out there, Tom."

Tom had nodded, slowly comprehending his father's words. B'Elanna may have survived the initial battle but she wasn't out of the woods yet. And from the dire tone his father's voice had taken on, Tom suspected that the doctors were pessimistic on her chances for recovery either.

"I called in some favors, son," Owen had told Tom. "At the moment, non-essential personnel are not allowed in areas surrounding the Neutral Zone, at least not until the situation calms down, but a good friend of mine, Admiral Necheyev, is heading out there now to resume negotiations with the Romulans. She has agreed you can travel on her ship. You leave in a few hours. Don't worry about the children. Your mother and I will be happy to take care of them. You need to get to B'Elanna."

Numbly, Tom had agreed. He had moved almost mechanically, informing the flight school's secretary that he would be out for at least a couple of weeks and that a substitute instructor would be needed to take over his classes; luckily, he had planned well in advance and the substitute would be easily able to follow the course syllabus already written up. Tom's mother had assured him that she would pack for the children's stay with them; it was one thing Tom didn't need to worry about. He decided to tell Miral and Joey that he was going on a trip to go get Mama and that he would be back in a few weeks. Neither child had seemed terribly up-

set at the prospect of his departure; they both adored their grandparents and were overjoyed at the prospect of staying with Owen and Marta Paris for a few weeks.

The call from the grief-stricken Kims had come just an hour before he'd departed from San Francisco; could Tom bring Harry's personal items back to San Francisco since 'non-essential' personnel were banned from traveling to the Neutral Zone? They'd also informed Tom then that they had petitioned against a 'burial' in space, wanting instead for Harry's body to be brought to San Francisco. The petition had been granted and they wanted Tom to bring Harry back to them. Tom had agreed, but his throat had constricted as he did so.

"We want to see him one more time," Mary Kim had told Tom tearfully.

"I understand," Tom had replied mechanically. He'd only met John and Mary Kim a few times before, most recently at a party celebrating Harry's assignment to the *Livingston*. But Tom's brief encounters with the Kims had shown just how much their lives revolved around their only child. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Kim. I can't even begin to put into words—" he had stopped there, suddenly imagining their positions reversed and that it was Miral or Joey who had died. The lump in Tom's throat had prevented him speaking.

"You were Harry's best friend," John Kim had interrupted. "Since we cannot go ourselves to the *Livingston*, we feel so relieved that it is you who will bring Harry's things for us and not some stranger. It makes it... easier."

"I understand," Tom had said again, finding it hard to say anything else. He was grieving for Harry as well, but he knew that it had to be a million times worse for Harry's parents; they'd lost their son once before to the Delta Quadrant and now, a scant six years later, they'd lost him again—this time forever. "Mr. and Mrs. Kim, I'm so sorry. I—" he'd stopped there, once again at a loss for words. And then he'd simply said, "I'll bring Harry's things for you."

Now, as Tom wandered around the holodeck, his throat tightened again. Here he had played Captain Proton and Harry had been his loyal sidekick, Buster Kincaid. The last time they'd 'played' in this scenario on Voyager had been the week before Miral's birth. The Delaney sisters had participated and they had even managed to talk Seven into joining them as well. And that last time, Neelix had been there and had managed to wheedle his way into playing the part of an evil overlord. The casting had been incongruous, to say the least, but Neelix had enjoyed himself greatly.

A few days later, Neelix had chosen to leave Voyager, to start a new life with Dexa and Brax—the Talaxian woman and her son with whom he'd formed instant bonds when Voyager had unexpectedly discovered a colony of Talaxians. If I'd only known that that was the last time, Tom thought a little sadly. But at the same time, he'd been happy that Neelix had found happiness with Dexa and Brax; Tom had always been aware that Neelix continued to miss Kes and hadn't had a serious relationship since Kes' departure—the brief and tragic affair with Talli on the Mari planet notwithstanding. Tom ran his fingers over the computer. Once he'd admired the blinking lights, the knobs and levers; he had always enjoyed the more manual controls than the automated computer wizardry and he'd incorporated that same 'rudimentary engineering'—B'Elanna called it—into the Delta Flyer. Neelix had been

fascinated, to say the least, with the primitive Captain Proton setting and Tom could still remember him cackling—as an evil overlord should, Neelix had insisted.

It occurred to Tom that someone would have to tell Neelix about what had happened. He took a deep breath. Janeway was in no condition to deliver the news—if she even knew what had happened. Tuvok was on Vulcan and Tom knew that if even if Janeway weren't on Vulcan, Tuvok would already be at her side—no matter the distance. Tom also hadn't heard from Chakotay or Seven in months. B'Elanna had been close to Neelix but Tom knew that she wouldn't be up to talking about Harry to the Talaxian—or anything else, for that matter. Which left the task of informing Neelix to him.

Tom pondered; should he wait? After all, the message wouldn't be transmitted to Neelix until after they returned to Earth and even so, it would take several days for it to reach Neelix after it was sent as well. Tom took another long look around the holodeck, feeling lonely and hollow inside. He wanted—no, \*needed\*—someone to talk to. On Voyager, there had been no counselors to help them through the difficult times, but they'd been able to comfort each other and share in each other's pain. At the moment, Tom Paris felt very, very alone. It wouldn't be the same as having Neelix here in the room with him, but Tom knew that Neelix was a wonderful listener; in fact, Tom had managed to have entire conversations with the Talaxian without Neelix ever saying a word. And those talks had always ended up with Tom feeling much, much better.

"Computer, begin recording. Audio and visual both." Tom eyed the chair. Should he sit for this? How long did it take to convey bad news anyway? Better yet, how to start a message like this? He chose to remain standing. "It's Tom." He laughed, almost shakily. "Guess you figured that out by now, huh?" He cleared his throat. It seemed impersonal to come right out and say that Harry was dead, had died in the line of duty, and his funeral would be next week. Tom twisted his hands together. Damn it, this was \*Janeway's\* job, not his; commanding officers bore the brunt of relaying bad news, not helm officers. He paused then, realizing that unconsciously he still thought of himself on Voyager, of Janeway still being his commanding officer. Tom felt an irrational burst of anger at being placed in this position, but then pushed it away; it would do no good to blame Janeway or anyone else for what had happened in the Neutral Zone. He decided then that he wouldn't sit down—he had too much nervous energy to burn and somehow, walking made him think more lucidly.

"I wish you were here, Neelix," Tom continued. "You'd know what to do. You'd know what to say." He shook his head as he rounded the computer and climbed a step towards the time machine. "My problem is, I'm not sure how to start or what to say. It would be different if you were sitting right here with me. It's easier, you know, to talk to a person than to record a message. I'm just going to talk, okay, Neelix? I may edit later, I may not. I'm not really sure. I hope you understand." Tom took a deep breath, pausing a second to let the emotion clear from his voice before continuing on.

"You always had the right words, Neelix. I always envied that." Tom wiped his hand against his face. "And I feel terrible now because I never responded to your last note. The one you sent six or seven months ago. You had good news to

report, that you and Dexa were expecting a baby. I imagine he or she is here by now.” Tom paused. “Also, congratulations on establishing a new trade route. It sounds to me like you’ve really done well for yourself. I hope you’re happy and well-established in your life now. It certainly sounds like you are.” Tom sat heavily in the wooden chair. There was no way to gently cushion the news; he had to come out and say it directly. “I wish I wasn’t sending bad news, Neelix, I really wish I wasn’t. As you might guess from this message’s signature, I’m talking to you from aboard a medical ship, the *Pasteur*. I’m here because B’Elanna is very ill from injuries sustained during a battle in the Neutral Zone and Harry—” he swallowed hard— “Harry is dead. He died in the line of duty in that same battle.”

Tom paused. The battle in the Neutral Zone had erupted without warning; until that moment, all signs had pointed to a successful resolution in the conflict between the Romulans and the Ponzi raiders who insisted on preying on both Federation and Romulan colonies on either side of the Neutral Zone. From what little B’Elanna had been able to tell him and the information he’d gathered from reports his father had supplied him with, Tom surmised that the captain of the Federation starship *Amherst* had been a little trigger-happy and had decided to fire a warning shot at a Ponzi ship; the misguided missile had slammed into a Romulan freighter instead, causing the Romulans to fire back at the *Amherst*.

“It escalated from there. B’Elanna’s ship—the *Minuteman*—responded to the *Amherst*’s distress call. I’m sure B’Elanna mentioned the *Minuteman* to you; she was one of the chief engineers responsible for the design specs of the new Mars-class ships. Harry shouldn’t have even been there. He was assigned to the *Livingston* and he and Janeway beamed over to the *Minuteman* perhaps an hour at most before hostilities broke out.” Tom cleared his throat. The reports had indicated severe damage to the *Minuteman* due to the Romulans’ new weapons’ technology and B’Elanna had been forced to eject the warp core, which had been leaking massive amounts of radiation. Somewhere along the line, Harry had shown up to assist B’Elanna and the other engineers in trying to salvage the ship.

“Harry was injured in one of the Jefferies tubes. He and B’Elanna were trapped there, trying to reroute critical systems in order to erect force fields and keep the *Minuteman* space worthy until help arrived. It should have been a safe place to wait, but the battle wasn’t over. The aftershock of the *Amherst*’s destruction caused a massive shockwave and Harry was thrown up against the wall,” Tom said. He cleared his throat before continuing. “He sustained severe head trauma. However, it was a ‘slow bleeder’ so he managed to keep consciousness but B’Elanna was concerned for him. He told B’Elanna that it wasn’t serious when she insisted he go to Sickbay and when they were beamed to the *Livingston*, he insisted that she get treatment before him. She was having trouble breathing, but you know B’Elanna—” Tom shook his head— “she was adamant about Harry. Only the doctors’ intervention caused her to accept medical help before Harry; they said she was suffering from pulmonary distress.” Tom took a deep breath. He had visualized this scene in his mind many times, thinking on how chaotic the *Livingston*’s sickbay must have been. “Harry died an hour later. Quietly and—”

Tom cleared his throat— “alone.”

Tom had talked to the doctors when he’d first arrived aboard the *Livingston*. They’d found Harry Kim sitting in a chair, leaning against the wall, his eyes half-closed, his expression relaxed. No pain, the doctors had told Tom, he just slipped away, quietly and peacefully.

“It sounds like negligence, Neelix, but it really wasn’t. The *Livingston*’s sickbay was in chaos. They didn’t have enough medical personnel or equipment to treat the injured. You know how it is in a hostile situation. Events move so quickly, you make decisions without thinking them through clearly and you just hope that you’ve done the right thing. Harry insisted he felt fine and it was obvious to everyone that B’Elanna needed surgery immediately or she would die. And while she was in surgery, Harry sat down to wait.” Tom paused. “The doctors insist that he felt nothing, but it still haunts me, that he died alone and I can’t stop thinking about.” Tom rose from his seat, his heart beating rapidly as he twisted his hands together. “I sometimes wonder if that’s a lie we tell the survivors, that the victim felt nothing because it eases the loss for us.” Tom stopped. “But I can’t believe it, that he was there, that he was within inches of help and still...” Tom shook his head. “But that’s such a ‘Harry’ thing to do, you know? Playing the hero? Wanting to be the one to take care of his friends?”

Tom swallowed hard and then continued his pacing. “I just came from the *Livingston*, his ship, where he should have been all along, Neelix. Or rather, I arrived earlier this morning. I had to pack Harry’s things for his parents. No, that makes it sound like I didn’t want to do it. I did want to do it. I thought it would be easy. After all, it’s just \*things\*, right? Inanimate objects? How hard could it be?” Tom stopped. “His quarters were perfect, as always. You know how Harry was. All hospital corners. Everything in its place, not a speck of dust anywhere.”

It had been eerie in those first few minutes. He’d stood in the middle of Harry’s quarters, unable to even think of where to start. Despite Harry’s neatness and organization, Tom had been overwhelmed by the task in front of him. The fact that B’Elanna would wake in a couple hours and she’d need him as well as only having a few hours to get the task done propelled Tom into action. He’d moved mechanically, first wrapping up the personal items on the desk and then moving to the closet to fold away the uniforms. At the bottom of the closet, he’d found Harry’s footlocker.

Hunching down, Tom had popped it open. He’d found Harry’s personal letters there, and in a small box, holoiimages. Tom had stopped then, his fingers clutching the edge of the box as he’d stared at the memories Harry had carefully preserved. In typically Harry fashion, each one had been carefully labeled with stardate and the names of the individuals in the pictures. There had been several of Tom and Harry together, including one of them dressed up to ‘play’ in the Captain Proton scenario. Tom swallowed hard; he had the exact same picture in his office back at the Academy. He carefully replaced the picture in the box, placing it aside for Harry’s parents.

“Harry had his saxophone and clarinet both on board the *Livingston*. I wanted to ask someone if he played still but I couldn’t find anyone to ask. But I’m sure, if there weren’t

already a quartet on board the *Livingston*, he would have formed one himself. You know Harry. He loved to play those instruments,” Tom said. His throat was starting to feel hoarse. “It really bothered me when I saw the saxophone and clarinet cases. It hit me then, that I’d never hear Harry perform again and how I never told him on *Voyager* that I appreciated his music. I think it was in that moment the reality of what had happened became real for me.” Tom shook his head. “The trip on Admiral Necheyev’s ship to rendezvous with the *Livingston* was nerve-wracking. I was comfortable, physically comfortable, that is. I had a stateroom, the type they assign to visiting diplomats. Despite the luxury, I couldn’t relax for a second. I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sleep, and I couldn’t sit still. I was so worried about B’Elanna—they, the doctors—wouldn’t tell me exactly what had happened to her, and they were equally reticent about the Admiral Janeway’s condition. I’ve never been so frightened in my life, Neelix. It’s a long time to be alone with your thoughts. A very, very long time. Memories blur, recollections fade, and I was frantic, trying to remember everything about Harry, and all the things we experienced together, all the times—good and bad—that we shared.” Tom remembered the utter panic he’d felt when he’d realized he was already starting to forget Harry’s mannerisms, things Harry had said. It had bothered Tom greatly because, after all, he’d just met Harry in a chance encounter the previous year at Starbase 4. “Somewhere between Earth and the *Livingston*, I decided that it couldn’t be true. It was all just a big mistake. Harry wasn’t dead. He couldn’t be, because selfish as it sounds, I had too much to say to him and there was so much that he still needed to do.”

Tom’s hands shook and all of his emotions welled up in his throat once again. He wasn’t the type to cry, but he felt closer to a meltdown than ever before; even Caldik Prime had not had this same kind of intensity. Back then he’d thought that the loss of his friends, due to his negligence, had been the worst thing that could have ever happened to him. But he’d managed to numb that pain and somehow push it behind him so that it didn’t hurt as much. This time, it was different. Harry had been his best friend—someone who had accepted Tom unconditionally.

“Even though my father had told me about Harry, I didn’t really understand what it meant. I know that must sound crazy because really, what’s there to understand? If someone is dead, they’re dead. It’s pretty straight-forward, but in my mind, it wasn’t something I could comprehend,” Tom said. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. “How could it be real? Harry had his entire life in front of him and his career was finally going in the direction he wanted it to be. The last time I saw him, he was—” Tom paused, looking for the right words. Harry had been his usual responsible self, wanting to get back to the science conference, but Tom had urged him, for old time’s sake, for another go in the Captain Proton scenario. Now Tom was intensely grateful that he had forced the issue.

“The first time I met Harry, we were on Deep Space Nine, at Quark’s. He was striking a deal with the Ferengi bartender and was being taken for a ride, by the looks of it.” Tom chuckled briefly at the memory. “I don’t know what it was about Harry that made me want to step in, because, as you know, back then, I could be just as mercenary and cold-

hearted as a Ferengi if I wanted to be. But I did and from then on, I always thought of Harry as someone I needed to look out for. Perhaps as a way to redeem myself, or maybe it was because of the unconditional way Harry accepted me and my past, even when Commander Cavit and Dr. Fitzgerald warned him against me.” Tom smiled wryly—a bit inappropriately as well. “You never had the displeasure of meeting these two gentlemen, Neelix, but they didn’t care for me as they’d made up their minds about me and weren’t inclined to change them. Unfortunately, they had the capacity to influence the rest of the crew, except for Harry. He told them that he was capable of choosing his own friends. It was such a contrast from the way the rest of *Voyager*’s crew treated me.”

Tom was on a roll now. He could feel the words coming out more easily. “I always thought of Harry as my sidekick, you know? Buster Kincaid to my Captain Proton?” Tom gestured to his surroundings, knowing that Neelix would recognize the program. “But when we were in the Aquitiri prison, it was different. When he first arrived in the prison, I immediately took responsibility for him. I was convinced that Harry wouldn’t be able to survive the prison without me. After all, \*he’d\* never been to prison before. Hell, I’d never been to a prison like this one either; New Zealand was a luxury resort compared to this one.” Tom shook his head at the memory. It had taken months for the ghosts of the Aquitarian prison to stop haunting his dreams; still, on occasion, he’d wake in a cold sweat, wondering if someone had plans to slit his throat so they could steal his boots.

“But things changed after I got stabbed and I was weak from blood loss and fever. Harry took care of me and even then I wasn’t sure Harry could take care of himself, let alone me. I urged him to save himself, not to think of me at all if he could find a way out.” Tom laid a hand on the back of the wooden chair. “But Harry wouldn’t think of it. We saw the worst of people when we were there and I’m convinced that if Harry hadn’t stepped in, hadn’t claimed me for his own—” here Tom paused to chuckle, remembering Harry’s exclamation of “This man is mine!” — “I wouldn’t have lived through the experience. I’ll never forget the force with which he told those pressing for him to kill me that nobody would touch me; I was his friend. After that, I looked at Harry a little differently. Not just as a good buddy, someone to kill time with, to play on the holodeck with, but someone who was genuinely going to be there through good times and bad. I knew I would be able to depend on him, that his loyalty went far deeper than I ever imagined.”

Tom looked around the room. He remembered spending long hours on the Captain Proton scenario; he’d made it a point to create a new holoprogram every year to share with the crew, along with the Sandrine’s program he’d brought with him aboard *Voyager*. The resort program he’d created had been popular enough—he still had fond memories of B’Elanna in her ‘tropical’ sundress—but he knew he had hit pay dirt when he’d stumbled across the Captain Proton stories. Many of his fellow crewmembers including the Delaney twins and Seven had joined him and Harry here, enjoying the campy and vampish feel of the program. On one rare occasion, Janeway had been conscripted into the part of Queen Arachnia, under duress, the Captain had insisted, but Tom had silently noted that it looked as if Janeway \*was\* indeed

enjoying herself. B'Elanna, on the other hand, had never cared much for the Captain Proton program. She'd deemed the program silly (she hadn't had much love for Fair Haven either), but Tom pointed out that silliness was the precise reason why Captain Proton was so popular. It gave the crew a chance to fight an enemy—Chaotica, for instance—that they knew, without doubt, that they could defeat. And Harry had never mentioned it directly, but Tom knew that Harry enjoyed flirting with Constance Goodheart, whether 'she' be the holographic version or the one who was occasionally played by a female member of the crew.

"Harry always fell for the wrong girl," Tom said, his voice lightening as he recalled Harry's 'romantic' escapades. His friend's disastrous luck with women—a group that included a hologram, the 'wrong twin,' an alien, a dead crewman, a saboteur—had amused Tom greatly and when they'd returned to Earth, Tom, in domestic bliss, had been relieved to learn that Harry had resumed his relationship with Libby. Perhaps, Tom had thought at the time, all of those other 'affairs'—including Tal, the alien woman who had 'infected' Harry—had been simply a way of forgetting the woman he'd really loved. But the relationship with Libby lasted less than a year after Voyager's return. Harry's only statement on the matter was that he and Libby would always care for each other deeply; they were both different people now and they needed to move on with their lives and he would always wish Libby well. "But he seemed happy enough with the decision. Harry had his mind set on command track. I'm pretty sure he was aiming for the admiralty. I believe he was emulating Janeway; he admired her greatly and wanted nothing more than her approval. It bothered him that she never promoted him in the DQ and I'm sure a part of him wondered if he truly measured up to her standards. That's another thing I would want to tell Harry. That I really think he could have done it, would have done it. I really believe he would have made a hell of a captain. He was smart, ambitious, resourceful—all good traits in a Starfleet officer. But more importantly, he was genuine, sincere, caring. He didn't play politics like others did and he didn't always take the easy way out. He was a fine officer, Neelix, but more importantly, he was a fine man."

Tom closed his eyes. He was starting to feel sleepy and his voice was growing hoarse from talking. "I should probably tell you a little about Janeway and B'Elanna. I know you must be worried about them as well. My father informed me that Janeway had been placed in stasis for transport to Vulcan as her condition was serious. The last bit of intelligence says that she is currently expected to recover from her injuries." Tom stopped, thinking of the bit of information he'd received shortly before boarding the transport to rendezvous with the *Livingston*. Despite massive injuries, Janeway had remained in control on the Bridge of the Minuteman in its final minutes, continuing to negotiate with the Romulans for a ceasefire. He'd also learned the captain of the Minuteman, John Phillips, had been confident that the ship could be saved, that Janeway would be able to successfully convince the Romulans to stop their attacks; as such, no order had been given to evacuate the ship. The order had come later—from Janeway—after Captain Phillips had been killed. By then, it had been too late. Portions of the ship had been

impassable and those who had survived the initial blasts, like Harry and B'Elanna, were blocked from reaching the escape pods. Others had perished from smoke inhalation and still more had succumbed to severe radiation poisoning.

"B'Elanna is very ill, Neelix." Tom gave in to his fatigue and sat down. The hard wooden chair gave him the support he so desperately needed and for that reason, he was able to disregard the discomfort. "Radiation poisoning, much of it due to exposure during the warp core meltdown. You know B'Elanna. She was in Engineering until the very last minute, trying to erect a force field around the warp core. She was the last one out after ejecting the core. Another stubborn officer—I always said she and Janeway had a lot in common." Tom pressed his lips into a thin line. "And that was before she and Harry were doing their best to hold the ship together from a main junction in the Jefferies tube which was a smart move to make on their part. They didn't know though that it was also an area with a severe concentration of radiation fallout." Tom shook his head in disbelief. The doctors had given him a readout of their estimation of what the radiation levels in Engineering and the Jefferies tubes had been—10 gray—and knowing that, Tom had been shocked that B'Elanna had even survived the exposure. The doctors had credited B'Elanna's Klingon physique, the redundant organs, for making it possible for her to survive when so many others had perished.

"The doctors are cautiously optimistic about B'Elanna's chances. They say if she makes it past the six-week mark, we're out of the woods. I don't have to tell you, Neelix, about radiation poisoning, about how most people die within two to four weeks when they've been hit with a lethal dose of that magnitude. But B'Elanna's strong and she's going to make it." He said this last bit with a burst of confidence; the doctors' reports had been initially pessimistic but more recently, they had changed their tune to 'cautiously optimistic.'

Tom rose, feeling he could no longer keep his exhaustion at bay; perhaps moving around would give him the energy necessary to finish his letter to Neelix. How long had he been here anyway? He cleared his throat. "I've got to go check on her, Neelix. She's so weak now, dehydrated, nauseated, and in a lot of pain. It's hard to see her like this, Neelix, and not know what to do for her. The doctors say we have to wait and see; conventional treatments for radiation sickness didn't work for B'Elanna, possibly due to the fact she's been exposed to so much radiation over the past ten to twelve years that the medications have simply lost their potency." Tom sighed. He knew B'Elanna appreciated his presence by her bedside, but at the same time, he knew she resented her dependence on him as well. "You know as well as I do that B'Elanna hates being coddled and she'll want to go back to the way things used to be. She'll want to work long hours again at the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. But somehow, I'm going to have to convince her that things are going to have to change because we can't anticipate what the long-term effects of radiation poisoning will be. I know she won't want to slow down, that's not B'Elanna's way, but I'm afraid for the near future, that that's the way it's going to be." He stopped. "I'm worried about her emotional state as well, Neelix. She knows about Harry and to say she's devastated would be putting it lightly."

Tom had been furious when he'd learned that the doctors onboard the *Livingston* had told B'Elanna about Harry. He'd

been hoping to tell her himself, knowing that B'Elanna would take Harry's death hard. She hadn't talked much about Harry in the two days they'd been together and this worried Tom; B'Elanna had a way of repressing her feelings when she was upset. She'd come a long way from acting out her emotions in suicidal holodeck programs. He'd already decided, when they got back to San Francisco, he'd make an appointment for B'Elanna to see a counselor. She'd fight him, he knew, but he'd be firm about it. So many times on Voyager they'd needed someone desperately to help them, and now that they had the best counselors in Starfleet available to them, Tom was determined to take advantage of their services.

"Maybe it's better that B'Elanna is aware of what happened to Harry, I don't know. I was just concerned that it would slow her recovery, but I have to have faith in her." Without thinking, Tom quirked a smile. "You know B'Elanna. There's no challenge she can't overcome once she puts her mind to it. And you know something else? I'm counting on it."

Tom headed to the door. "I wish you were here, Neelix. Not just because I know you'd be the perfect one to help us figure out what's going on, but also because you're a good friend." Tom took a deep breath. "And God knows, we could all use a good friend. It's only recently that I'm starting to appreciate what we all had together on Voyager and how easily it can be lost. I want you to know, Neelix, even though you're far away, you're not forgotten. You still occupy a place in our hearts." Tom's lips turned upwards and his tone lightened slightly. "After all, if it hadn't been for you, Neelix, B'Elanna and I would have never gotten married. So, we owe you. A lot. Take care, Neelix. I'll contact you again, hopefully under better circumstances." Tom gently touched the metallic surface of a large, boxy computer mainframe. "Computer end recording and transmit to personal database of Tom Paris, authorization alpha zeta five." Tom took one last, lingering look around the Captain Proton set. Instinctively, he knew that he would never return to this program. "Goodbye, old friend. Computer, end program."

"What is it?" Dexa stood behind Neelix, her eyes focused on the fading image of Tom Paris. She was holding a very sleepy baby in her arms. "Is something wrong?"

Neelix inhaled deeply before turning to Dexa. The initial joy of receiving a message from Tom Paris had dissipated once he realized what the message contained. "It's about Harry Kim."

Dexa's hand tightened on Neelix's shoulder. "Bad news? It sounded like it."

"The very worst kind." Neelix pressed the 'rewind' button; he wanted to watch the vid one more time. Tom's message had been a little repetitious, a little rambling, but that was understandable, given the circumstances the message had been recorded under. It would take several more viewings before Tom's words actually sunk in. "Harry was killed in action." It sounded strange to actually say the words out-loud.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dexa said softly. Dexa hadn't known Harry that well, but Neelix had told her plenty of stories and he knew that her words were heartfelt and sincere. She leaned down to kiss Neelix lightly on the cheek. "Brax and I'll be in the nursery with Alixia." Neelix reached up

to gently touch the now sleeping baby in Dexa's arms on the head.

"Thank you," Neelix said, grateful that Dexa had sensed his need to be alone to absorb the news. He *was* lucky, Neelix thought, and he *was* happy with the life he had now, comfortable with the decision he'd made not to continue on to the Alpha Quadrant with Voyager. But still, at times like this, his heart ached for his friends and he was reminded again just how much he missed them all. He cleared his throat. As hard as it had been for Tom Paris to dictate the bad news, Neelix knew it would be equally difficult to respond to Tom; Tom had given him too much credit when he had said that Neelix always 'had the right words.' Some things simply couldn't be put into words, Neelix knew. Taking a deep breath, Neelix began to compose a response to Tom.

## A Thousand Miles

*Disclaimer: Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters are the property of Paramount. No copyright infringement is intended.*

*Another entry in the "Glory Days" series, following "Rocketman" by Seema. It is suggested you read that story first.*

*Warning: this story contains graphic imagery which some viewers may find disturbing.*

*Many thanks to Seema for her excellent beta.*

The eight row houses on the quiet street were identical—except for the bright red door adorning the third one from the left. Chakotay smiled despite himself. Tom had said he couldn't miss the house, and now Chakotay understood why.

The red provided a welcome counterpoint to the dreary fall day, its vibrant color undiminished by the steadily falling rain. After the warmth of Betazed's southern continent—where he'd spent the past six months—he wasn't used to the chill of San Francisco. Then again, he thought wryly, Boston would probably be even colder. Chakotay turned up his collar and quickened his pace.

A young blonde woman whom he did not know opened the door. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the Paris residence—"

"Oh, you must be Chakotay!" she said, her gaze going immediately to his tattoo. "Tom mentioned you'd be coming by today. I'm Jenni, by the way." Ushering him in, she continued, "Tom isn't here, of course. He dropped Miral off at preschool on his way to work. But B'Elanna and Joey are in the family room."

A loud crash emanated from the room in question, just as Chakotay paused on the threshold and set down his bag in the hall.

Jenni stepped aside to let him enter. "Company's here!" she announced.

A small towheaded boy looked up from the mess of blocks on the floor. "Who's that?"

"Good question. How about I let him introduce himself to you?" Jenni said.

Chakotay smiled and knelt down beside him. "My name is Chakotay. And what's yours?"

"Joey," the boy said and stuck a thumb in his mouth while he contemplated the stranger.

"This is a friend of Mama's," B'Elanna said. Chakotay hadn't noticed her sitting on the couch in the corner of the room, half in the shadows. He rose to his feet at once and came over to her. To his surprise, she made no attempt to rise from her place.

"B'Elanna!" he said warmly, and leaning forward, kissed her cheek.

"Hello, stranger," she said. She was half sitting, half reclining, a colorful afghan draped over her legs. "Long time no see."

"That's what happens when you're off-world for half a year," Chakotay said. "You did hear that I went to Betazed for a new project."

"That's what you said in your taped message, the one you sent when you left last spring."

"I had a very tight connection between the flight from Boston and the transport to Betazed," Chakotay said apologetically, and then wondered what he was apologizing for. "I said I'd make sure to stop by on the return trip." He gave her a smile. "And here I am."

"Yes, here you are." There was no answering smile on her face. Chakotay studied her more closely, and was struck by how thin she looked. Her cheekbones and brow ridges stood out starkly from the pallor of her face; the cableknit green sweater she wore looked too big for her.

Jenni cleared her throat. "Can I get you anything to eat or drink, Chakotay? B'Elanna?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine," Chakotay said. B'Elanna merely shook her head.

"I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything," Jenni said and left.

Chakotay sat down in the rocking chair near the couch. "How are you doing, B'Elanna?" he asked quietly.

"Fine," she said and quickly changed the subject, almost as if she were annoyed at the question. "How is Seven?"

"She's fine, too," he said automatically, while thinking of Seven and her most recent message—the one asking him to come home, a most atypical request. Seven knew that the dig on Betazed was scheduled to take at least another year, that this was a crucial point in the project and that even a two week absence could be costly. "Of course, I haven't been back to Boston since April and have been out of the loop with what's happening." For some reason he found himself adding, "Before leaving for Betazed, I'd been in the city with her for several months."

B'Elanna nodded. "Tom told me he he'd met you at Utopia Planitia, when you were first on your way to Boston. It sounds like the two of you had a good conversation. I know Tom was pleased to see you."

An image rose in Chakotay's mind with sudden clarity, of himself and Tom Paris sitting at a bar on the station.

*Tom smiled, the same insolent smile—almost a smirk—which never failed to rub Chakotay the wrong way. "Why am I doing all of the talking?"*

*Chakotay shrugged as he drained the last of his coffee. "You never talk enough. You just think you do."*

*"There you go again," Tom said irritably. "Making pronouncements from on high. I don't know why you think you know me so well."*

*"We served together for seven years."*

*"We weren't exactly friends, Chakotay."*

*Chakotay looked up sharply, but there was nothing snide in Tom's tone. Just a simple matter-of-fact statement—which made it sting all the more.*

"That must have been about a year ago," Chakotay said after an awkward pause. "I was heading for Earth, but Tom was on his way to a conference, on some starbase, I believe."

B'Elanna said, almost to herself, "That's where Tom last saw Harry." A shadow crossed her face.

Chakotay was about to ask about Harry Kim, what he was doing lately, what ship he was stationed on, but was momentarily distracted by another loud crash. Joey's block tower had collapsed.

"No!" Joey yelled. "Stupid!"

B'Elanna sighed. "Joey, honey, come here." Chakotay watched as the toddler, his lower lip quivering ominously, climbed into his mother's lap.

"It's OK, Joey, calm down," she said. "You can make another tower."

"Not the same!"

"No, it won't be the same, but you can make it better," Chakotay offered. "I'll help you, if you like." But Joey buried his face against his mother's shoulder and sobbed. Chakotay couldn't help but wonder why B'Elanna didn't get down on the floor to help rebuild the tower. He realized then that he hadn't seen her move very much at all since he'd arrived.

Raising her voice to be heard over Joey's howls, B'Elanna said, "Normally Joey would be in playgroup this morning, but he's been sick—double ear infection—and he has to be fever-free for a full day before going back." She rubbed Joey's back, trying to soothe him.

"So today's the convalescence day?" Chakotay asked with a smile.

Another odd look passed over B'Elanna's face, but she didn't answer him. Instead, she addressed Joey once more, "All better now?"

Joey gave one last snuffle but then was distracted by the discovery of a toy shuttle on the window sill nearby. He picked it up and began humming loudly to himself, obviously piloting his ship through outer space.

Chakotay smiled. "He looks a lot like Tom, doesn't he?"

B'Elanna nodded. "Yes, he does."

Chakotay glanced around the cluttered yet cheerful room and caught sight of some family holographs on the mantel. He went over to inspect them more closely. A large formal portrait of a little girl with dark curls, astride a pony, stood in front. "Miral, on the other hand, looks more like you. She always did, even when she was just a baby."

"Her forehead ridges are more pronounced than Joey's, and her hair is dark like mine," B'Elanna conceded. "Aside from that, it's hard to say."

"You could always compare with some of your baby pictures."

"If I had any, I suppose I could," B'Elanna said shortly.

Chakotay sighed inwardly. Even though B'Elanna's mother had died while Voyager was still in the Delta Quadrant—before a reconciliation could be effected—he'd been sure in the years since the return B'Elanna had at least made contact with her maternal family or her estranged father. But apparently this was not the case. Which was a pity, in his

opinion; having endured the loss of his own world and family, Chakotay knew how precious these ties were.

Joey's shuttle was clearly involved in an imaginary space battle; the humming of the 'engines' had changed to sounds obviously meant to represent weapons fire. He jumped up and down on the couch cushions, waving his arms in ever-increasing arcs in the air.

B'Elanna shifted her position, wincing slightly as she did so, until she was facing her visitor more fully. "So tell me, Chakotay, how is your project coming along?"

The sound of the shuttle's 'weapons fire' grew louder.

"It's great," Chakotay said. "You know what we're working on, don't you?"

"Not really—" B'Elanna broke off as Joey, balanced precariously on the back of the couch, fell forward. His head struck her squarely in her side. She drew a quick intake of breath, a pained expression on her face. Joey burst into noisy tears. "How many times have I told you no jumping on the furniture!" she scolded sharply and thrust him away.

Jenni immediately rushed in from the other room. "I'll take him, B'Elanna."

Chakotay watched as the younger woman lifted the crying child and carried him to the kitchen. "You know what, Joey?" he heard Jenni say. "I think it's time for a snack. Would you like a cookie and some juice?" The closing door drowned out whatever reply Joey made.

Chakotay bent down to pick up the fallen shuttle, then turned back to B'Elanna, startled by how harsh she'd been with the boy. Joey was just a toddler, after all. Chakotay knew B'Elanna could often be impatient, but her relationship with her children was different. Or so he'd thought. He opened his mouth, but left the words unsaid as he noted again how exhausted she appeared to be, became aware of the huge circles under her eyes. There was something going on; he became more convinced of it with every passing minute he spent in her presence.

He cleared his throat. "I was surprised when Tom mentioned you'd be home this morning, I thought for sure you'd be at work." He paused. "And it's not just because of Joey, is it? Your housekeeper, Jenni, could take care of him."

"Jenni started out as the children's nanny," B'Elanna said, not looking at him. "It's only recently that Tom asked her if she'd mind doing some light housekeeping as well."

"You haven't answered my question," Chakotay reminded her. "B'Elanna, why are you home?"

B'Elanna grimaced. "I'm still on medical leave, Chakotay."

"Medical leave?" he asked. Suddenly the pieces clicked into place. "You've been ill, haven't you?"

"You could put it that way," B'Elanna said flatly.

"Do you mind—can I ask?"

"You haven't heard the news, Chakotay?" she said incredulously. "About the Romulan Neutral Zone and what happened there? About Harry?"

Chakotay got a strange feeling in his gut, almost like a premonition, when she said Harry's name. But it was most likely just his guilt speaking, guilt for not having kept up with had been going on in his friends' lives over the past few years.

"I'm not in Starfleet anymore, B'Elanna," he said, a bit more sharply than he intended. "You can scarcely expect me

to keep track of everyone's assignments...a border skirmish here, an incident there. The Alpha Quadrant's a big place."

"Border skirmish? That's a hell of a way of putting it!" B'Elanna snapped. She began speaking rapidly, her voice a harsh rasp. "There was a battle, Chakotay—with the Romulans."

"But the treaty—"

"The treaty with the Federation stated the Romulans retained the right to self-defense, and to secure borders—and to act when those borders were threatened. Which is what they did." She made a peculiar sound, as if she was gasping for breath. "You can thank the Ponzi raiders for the breakdown in Federation-Romulan relations."

Chakotay shook his head impatiently. What she said sounded vaguely familiar, now that he thought of it, but he didn't know any specific details. "I've been on a dig in the middle of the Great Betazed Desert for the past six months, B'Elanna," he said.

"And you didn't have any access to news reports?"

"Yes, we did—every couple of weeks when we trekked into town to pick up supplies—but that doesn't mean I had the time to track down each and every mention—"

"You should have made it your business!" she said heatedly, jabbing her finger in the air for emphasis. "Did it occur to you that a number of your friends were still affiliated in some way with Starfleet, and would have been affected by or involved in any 'border skirmishes'?" She paused to struggle for breath. "But then again, you haven't had much time for any of us for a while, have you?"

Chakotay stirred in his seat. "That's not fair."

"Isn't it? Well, sorry if it makes you feel 'uncomfortable.'" Her eyes met his, tears of rage visible. "What the hell happened, Chakotay? It didn't use to be this way. We were a family once—all of us, you, me, Tom, Tuvok, the captain...but lately you seem to have opted out." A sob escaped her. "Even the little day-to-day stuff. Like the fact that this is the first time you've ever seen Joey, the first time you've ever come to visit even though you promised Tom last year that you would?"

"Maybe someone should have contacted me, to ensure I didn't miss the big things at least," Chakotay retorted. He hesitated, aware he was treading on shaky ground. "Be reasonable, B'Elanna—even if I have been spending the past few months on Betazed, I'm not a mind reader. Obviously you were in the thick of things—but if you personally were too busy to call me, someone else could have done it." B'Elanna stared at him blankly. He added, with a flash of anger of his own, "Like Admiral Janeway, for example."

B'Elanna's lips twisted. "Very funny, Chakotay. You always did have a warped sense of humor."

It was his turn to stare. Granted he and Janeway had drifted apart toward the end of Voyager's journey—even before the return and even before he became romantically involved with Seven—but surely the Admiral could have put aside any personal considerations long enough to contact him, especially if it concerned B'Elanna.

He thought back to B'Elanna's earlier words about the 'family'—he wasn't happy with what had happened between himself and Janeway, but truth be told, he was not the only one at fault. "Why is that such a strange suggestion? Or

doesn't this work both ways, B'Elanna, that someone else could reach out to me instead of the other way around?"

"Damn it, Chakotay, this isn't about you!" Her voice rose precipitously. "Don't you understand? It's about the people you allegedly care for, or at least did once upon a time. People being hurt and killed—" She broke into a long drawn out cough, her shoulders heaving with the effort. Finally, she lay back against the cushions, utterly spent.

Chakotay took a step toward her, horrified to see the bright red froth on her lips. She waved him away, a handkerchief pressed against her mouth, unable to speak. He strode to the kitchen, nearly tripping over a toy on the floor on his way to the sink. Joey and Jenni were nowhere in sight. Chakotay hurried back to the other room and silently handed B'Elanna a glass of water.

She took it somewhat clumsily, a few drops spilling, and drank. "Thank you," she whispered hoarsely. He took the empty glass from her trembling fingers.

He waited until her breathing seemed to return to normal. "How are you, B'Elanna?" he asked again. "Really."

"I was badly hurt," she said at last, noticeably more weary than she'd been before. "Radiation, toxic gases—all the things you get with an unstable warp core. Even before the ship was destroyed." She coughed again, bringing up more blood. "They told me later I would have died were it not for the redundant Klingon organs." She tried to smile. "I suppose I should be grateful." In a corner of his mind he remembered how it had taken a long time for her to come to terms with her mixed heritage—if indeed she ever truly had.

"But you're still experiencing some lingering health problems?" he probed gently.

She nodded. "Shortness of breath, prone to infections, scarred lungs, reduced stamina...among other things."

He felt like kicking himself for his earlier flip comments about a 'border skirmish.' "You're right. I suppose I should have been paying closer attention to what was going on in the Neutral Zone, just as a well-informed citizen of the Federation," he admitted ruefully. "And if I had, I would have caught the names, realized that you were involved."

She nodded grudgingly. "Or if you'd been in closer contact with any of us before this," she pointed out, "you'd have known that I was on board the Minuteman, that Harry and the Admiral were assigned to the *Livingston*—"

"The Admiral?" he interrupted. "Do you mean Kath—Admiral Janeway was there, too?"

"She's the one who negotiated the cease-fire, had been working for months to find a peaceful settlement with the Romulans," B'Elanna answered, giving him a searching look. "And she's the one who pulled us back from the brink of full-scale war between the Empire and the Federation, though it damn near cost her her life to do so—"

Kathryn in the midst of a battle, putting her life on the line for something she believed in, thinking that no sacrifice was too great—yes, he could believe it. "Is she—" his throat was suddenly very dry. "Is she all right?"

B'Elanna nodded quickly. "Yes, she is, or at least the Doctor predicts she will be. She was seriously wounded, burns over a major portion of her body, internal injuries, broken bones. She was a real mess when they finally beamed her away, but she refused to go until she was sure she had been

successful."

He exhaled sharply, feeling the tightness in his chest ease slightly. "That's good to hear."

Then she told him about Harry.

A wave of nausea rose up in Chakotay. He could taste the bile in the back of his throat as he pictured Harry Kim, all shining enthusiasm and potential, gone forever. He hardly heard what B'Elanna was saying, until her final words penetrated the fog in his brain. "It should have been me, Chakotay, it should have been me."

He started to protest. "No, B'Elanna, you don't mean that—you've got young children, a family—"

"And Harry didn't have anything important to live for?" she shot back bitterly. After a moment she added, almost to herself, "Tom doesn't like to hear me say that, either, even though he went through something similar when Joe Carey was killed."

Chakotay nodded, remembering the incident as clearly as if it were yesterday. Ironically, Voyager's return was only a few months in the future, though none of them had known it at the time. An away mission gone wrong—and an innocent man who paid the price. Tom had blamed himself, though it hadn't been his fault.

Chakotay bit back a sigh. As if he needed further proof, pain and suffering—and survivor's guilt—were not confined to the Delta Quadrant. He glanced at B'Elanna, trying to gauge her emotional state, wondering how she was dealing with the aftermath of her experience. Not very well, he assumed, if the pain in her eyes was anything to go by.

"The counselor says it's important to acknowledge and air these feelings," B'Elanna said softly. "These angry impulses I sometimes get. It's all perfectly normal, as long as I recognize what they stem from. But it's hard on the kids, because they don't understand. And hard on Tom as well, though he doesn't complain. Sometimes I hate myself for what I'm doing to them, doing to him." She interpreted his look correctly. "Of course I'm getting some professional help, Chakotay. Kahless knows, all of us could probably use years of therapy to deal with all the crap we endured out there in the Delta Quadrant. And are still enduring..."

Chakotay moved closer to her and took her hand in his, gave it a comforting squeeze. She was silent for a long moment, her eyes fixed on the view outside the window. The rain had stopped for the time being, but it was still very gray and dim outside, the fog giving an indistinct, hazy look to the nearby houses, their sharp outlines blurred.

"It was just like old times," she said at last. "Those last few hours on the Minuteman with Harry. I wasn't even expecting to see him—he was supposed to be on the *Livingston*. But he'd come over with the Admiral. I was so glad to see him—I knew if he was working beside me, I'd be able to pull off what I needed to do. We were trying to stabilize the ship's systems, but the damage was too great." Chakotay made a soothing noise, but B'Elanna wasn't listening. "At the end, when the *Livingston*'s transporter beam locked onto us, I thought I was dying. The walls were dissolving around us, but I could still feel Harry's hand in mine. And one of the last things I remember thinking was, if I'm going to die, at least I'm not alone. I've always hated being alone." Her breathing turned ragged, degenerating into another coughing spell. "And that's the last

thing I remember. I was unconscious when we materialized in the *Livingston's* sickbay, didn't wake up till after surgery. And by then Harry was gone." She paused. "I never got the chance to say goodbye to him."

"B'Elanna, I—"

Her gaze fell on the floor, at the untidy pile of blocks littering the carpet. "The memorial service was two weeks later. Tom came out to the NZ to meet me; I think his father must have called in some favors to arrange transport so quickly. I didn't know it at the time, but he also packed up Harry's things. John Kim asked him to—and to bring Harry home."

Chakotay did some swift calculations, working out the days in his mind. "It wasn't that long ago, then."

"No, just a few weeks ago."

It had to be painful for B'Elanna to recount this, Chakotay knew, but at the same time he believed it was good for her to get it all out, to talk about it as much as possible. Despite the fact she was undergoing professional counseling, it was also important for her to say these things to someone with whom she shared a personal connection. And Chakotay admitted that he himself needed to hear these details, as if by that act he could vicariously participate in the final farewell.

"The memorial service, it was probably very 'Starfleet' in nature?" he asked quietly.

"No, actually, it wasn't." B'Elanna took a deep breath. "Yes, there were lots of current and former officers there, people who'd served with Harry, or gone to the Academy with him. But there were also so many other people as well, friends he'd had growing up, who'd gone to school with him, former neighbors. It was amazing to see how many lives he'd touched."

"That was Harry," Chakotay said fondly. "Everybody's friend."

"That's what John Kim said. That no one who met Harry was left unaffected by his smile, by his charm. Not to mention his kindness and generosity." She exhaled slowly. "I can't even begin to imagine what it was like for Harry's parents."

Chakotay nodded. Having lost their only son once to the Delta Quadrant, then to have him miraculously returned to them only to lose him again, this time permanently...He crushed the thoughts with speech. "Who else spoke?"

"Just Admiral Janeway. I don't know how she was able to be there, let alone get up and speak. She and Tuvok had just arrived from the hospital complex on Vulcan the day before—the Doctor was hovering around her the whole time. It was obvious how difficult this was for her physically."

That had never stopped Janeway before. Chakotay recalled too many incidents—involving the Kazon or the Hirogen or the Borg—in which she'd ignored her own safety or well-being in order to carry out her duties as she interpreted them. Aloud, Chakotay said, "It was appropriate for her to give the eulogy, as she was his first commanding officer."

"And of all the captains he served under, she was definitely the one who knew him best," B'Elanna agreed, "but she didn't eulogize him, not exactly. She just spoke very briefly about how she was honored to have served with him, how she hoped she and everyone else there could continue to live up to the faith Harry placed in them." B'Elanna fell silent, and pulling her hand away, rubbed her eyes quickly, but not before he saw the tears glistening on her cheek.

Chakotay reflected on Janeway's words. He sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, B'Elanna."

"For what?"

"I should have been there."

"Yes, you should have," she said, but she forced a smile that took some of the sting from her words. "The only thing that got me through that day was having the 'family' around. Even though the only reason we were together was because we were saying goodbye to one of our own."

Chakotay knew what she meant, how much the feeling of belonging, of being accepted, was important to her. That was what Voyager had given to her, given to all of them, regardless of whether they had started out as Starfleet or Maquis.

It appeared that B'Elanna's thoughts were running along the same lines as his. "Harry was one of my first friends on Voyager, but you were my oldest friend—no, my best friend, the one whom I knew the longest, the one I always turned to when things got rough. I always looked up to you, Chakotay, ever since you rescued me all those years ago when the freighter I was serving on was taken over by the Cardassians."

"As I recall, you had the situation pretty well in hand yourself, even before we got there," Chakotay said with a small smile. "How many soldiers did you take down?"

*The cargo bay of the freighter was deserted, except for the two Cardassian soldiers lying unconscious near a stack of tumbled crates. Chakotay was relieved to see the precious phaser rifles were still there, untouched.*

*He saw a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye and fired. The blast scored the opposite wall. "Show yourself!" he called.*

*There was no answer. Chakotay held his breath, and heard a faint scabbling sound behind another row of containers. He carefully eased toward the source of the noise. He unfastened a clip from his belt and tossed it a few feet behind the spot where he thought his unseen quarry was waiting. His patience was rewarded when a figure leaped out of hiding, a smuggled rifle raised to use as a club. He instinctively ducked the blow and caught his assailant around the waist, crashing them both to the floor. He rolled to his side as the other went for his jugular, barely warding off the biting, snarling Fury—and then he caught sight of her face. To his surprise it was a young half-Klingon woman—with an air of vulnerability about her, despite her fierce demeanor.*

*She seemed equally astonished to see him. "You're not a Cardassian!"*

*"No, I'm not," he agreed. "Does that change your mind about wanting to rip my throat out?"*

"I was awfully glad to see you anyway." B'Elanna pushed her tumbled hair out of her eyes. "You should know, I joined the Maquis not because I believed in your cause, but because I believed in you. When you offered to let me stay, to become a member of your cell, I thought, 'here's someone I can trust, someone I can follow to the ends of the galaxy.'"

Chakotay looked up, surprised. He'd always thought of B'Elanna as a younger sister but something in her tone made him think she had wanted something more from him, those many years ago. "The 'ends of the galaxy', eh? That's a strangely prescient turn of phrase," he began, trying to make a joke, and then stopped. "B'Elanna, what you just said, did you mean—"

“Yes,” she said simply, not attempting to deny it or deliberately misunderstanding him. “Of course I fell for you. All of your wonderful qualities, your acceptance of me for who and what I was...” Her voice trailed off. “From the look on your face, I can’t tell if you’re flattered or insulted.”

He shook his head. “Neither, just a little surprised.” He hesitated. “B’Elanna, why didn’t you ever tell me how you felt?”

“Because you were always ‘taken’, never free,” she answered right away. “There was Seska in the Maquis, then once we got on Voyager there was always Janeway.” She paused. “And I gradually realized that my feelings for you were just a crush, an idealization.”

“And you fell in love with Tom,” Chakotay said and then added, “Despite yourself.”

“Oh, yes,” B’Elanna wryly agreed.

“The signs were there pretty early on,” Chakotay said. “The way you always worked so well together. Like the time you were captured by the Vidiians or that incident with the Nyrians. In each case, the two of you managed to get out of an unpleasant situation.” He smiled, despite himself. “I wasn’t sure about Tom at first—”

“I know the history between the two of you,” B’Elanna interrupted.

“—And I was ostensibly afraid Tom would let you down in some way, hurt you,” Chakotay finished. “But I see now that Tom has been good for you, that he always has.”

“He’s one of the best things that ever happened to me,” she said quietly. “You should see how patient he is with me these days, how loving. I don’t know what my life would be like without him.”

Chakotay gently lifted B’Elanna’s chin so she was looking him in the eye. “It’s good that Tom won’t have to envision a life without you now, either.”

She didn’t flinch. “I know. And I do appreciate everything I’ve got.”

Chakotay relaxed then, for the first time since B’Elanna had broken the news to him about the events in the Neutral Zone. She would be all right. And as her body healed, so would her spirit. All she needed was the love and comfort from those she cared about, and those who cared for her.

“And what about you, Chakotay?” B’Elanna asked. Once again, he had the sensation that her question meant more than what it appeared on the surface. Myriad thoughts rushed through his mind—of old dreams and ambitions, as well as crushing losses. He wondered how they’d gotten to this point, traveling so far from where it had all begun.

“What do you mean?” he asked cautiously.

“I was wondering how much longer you’re going to stick around.”

He hesitated. “I thought I’d catch a shuttle out to Boston this afternoon.” He caught the disappointed look on her face.

“I suppose Seven is expecting you,” she said wistfully.

He made a sudden decision. “Yes, she is, but I can stay a while longer, if you like.”

“No, I don’t want to keep you—”

“It’s all right,” Chakotay said firmly. “We still have a lot of catching up to do.” He had a fleeting thought of Seven, wondered again at the reason for her summons. He forced

a chuckle. “I don’t know if Seven would even notice my being there, not right away at least. She’s recently started a new project with one of her fellow faculty members—from her descriptions it sounds like she’s practically living in the lab, staying there till all hours every night.”

B’Elanna smiled. “Then why don’t you stay for dinner? I know Tom would love to see you.”

“Then it’s settled,” Chakotay said, and impulsively pulled her into a gentle hug.

Her arms went round him tightly, and he heard her say. “It’s felt like you were a thousand miles away, Chakotay. I’m so very glad you’re back.”

“So am I, B’Elanna,” he said. “So am I.”

## The Heart of the Matter

*Author’s Note: This is part of the “Glory Days” series and follows directly on the heels of Rocky’s “In A Thousand Miles.” It’s recommended that story be read first. My thanks to the ‘Perpetual Chatters’ for answering grammar and “what’s the word again?” questions. My gratitude and a Purple Heart to Rocky for her excellent beta—she really, really deserves it < g >. (Ask Rocky what she was most concerned about, go ahead, ask < g >).*

*Disclaimer: Characters and places belong to Paramount. Unfortunately.*

Chakotay bent his head against the winter wind as he crossed Canal Street. He was running late for dinner but the sheer strength of the wind made it impossible for him to quicken his stride. It was snowing lightly, the flakes melting as they hit the pavement. The weather forecasters had predicted about 15 to 18 centimeters of accumulation beginning around ten o’clock that night. A weather advisory bulletin had been issued for the North Shore. Despite the presence of weather control systems, Bostonians insisted on authenticity in their weather; hence snow and sub-freezing temperatures. Gritting his teeth against the cold, Chakotay thought that the issue of accuracy in climate control needed to be readdressed.

The restaurant was on his right as he turned onto Hanover Street. He had promised to meet Seven for dinner at six-thirty. It was now just after seven o’clock. He imagined that Seven was already waiting for him and mentally, he began to rehearse excuses for his tardiness. The truth was, he was already over a day late in arriving, as B’Elanna Torres had invited him to stay the night to visit with Tom and their children; it was an invitation he felt he couldn’t turn down. The next morning, he’d continued chatting with B’Elanna and had ended up missing the mid-morning San Francisco-Boston shuttle, and had been forced to take the crowded two o’clock shuttle, which had deposited him in Boston just after six. That had given him just enough time to have his bags sent to their brownstone in Cambridge and then taken the mag-lev train to North Station. As he hurried towards the restaurant—Familia Giorgio—he realized he should have called Seven before leaving San Francisco to let her know that he would be late for their dinner date.

He had been surprised when Seven had suggested last night that they meet at the restaurant—a favorite of theirs—that night, instead of at their home. In fact, he was rather disappointed. He’d been looking forward to a home-cooked meal;

Seven's cooking was unparalleled. Not to mention, that they had been apart for the last six months—he on Betazed working on what was arguably one of the most intriguing digs of his career and Seven here in Boston, teaching classes at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But then, Chakotay thought, Seven's behavior \*had\* been odd for the last month or so. When he'd first gone away, last April, her letters to him, faithfully posted every Friday, had been a detailed recital of her week's events and recent developments in her research. There had been little content of a personal nature included in her letters and Chakotay had found himself longing for more than just the new algorithms Seven had written; along with telling her of the latest news from the dig site, Chakotay tried to infuse a more personal touch in his notes, reiterating in each one how much he missed her. But more recently, Seven's letters had been more frequent and he sometimes would arrive in Rocma—the nearest town to his dig site, but still a good 90 or so kilometers away—to find two or three messages waiting for him. While these letters still included commentary on Seven's daily activities, the tone had become more emotional; she wanted him to come back to Boston.

Chakotay had been forced to call in many favors to get nearly three weeks of leave he felt necessary; after all, the trip from Betazed to Earth was nearly two days in itself. At first he had been reluctant to return. It wasn't that he didn't miss her or that he didn't want to see her—he had finally settled into a routine in the Great Betazed desert and his team was making great strides in their work. He couldn't figure out what was wrong with Seven—she'd handled their previous separation beautifully; she'd come ahead to Boston while he'd remained behind on Vega V to finish up the dig. Chakotay sensed that Seven was disappointed when he'd finally joined her in Boston last year, as she'd seemed to gain a true sense of self during their four months apart. In a way, he had imagined that she had welcomed his departure to Betazed as much as he had; they both had agreed that he was merely spinning his wheels in Boston and the dig on Betazed would give him the opportunity to put his skills and knowledge to use.

But returning to Earth had been the right decision, Chakotay knew. He quickened his pace as he saw the illuminated sign for the restaurant. It had been good to catch up with Tom and B'Elanna and to play with their children. He'd been reluctant to leave San Francisco in a way since he wasn't quite sure what Seven had in store for him.

Chakotay stomped his feet on the welcome mat as he entered the restaurant; mud fell off his boots. As he unwound his scarf and removed his gloves, he scanned the dining room for Seven. When he'd been in Boston, they'd eaten at this restaurant every Thursday, having fallen in love with the serene ambiance of the restaurant. As such, their consistency had earned them a 'reserved' table by the bay window which looked out onto Hanover Street. Another look around and Chakotay was concerned; Seven wasn't there. He frowned. Lateness and Seven were two things that simply didn't go together. Chakotay wondered if he had made a mistake, that perhaps he hadn't heard Seven clearly over the squeals of the Paris children.

"Mr. Chakotay!" the head waiter—Paolo—exclaimed as he scurried forward to greet Chakotay. "We have not seen you here for a long time!"

Chakotay managed a smile. "Hello, Paolo. It's good to see you."

"Professor Hansen called this morning," Paolo said, "and told me you would be having dinner here tonight. I took the liberty and have prepared your usual table for you."

Chakotay nodded, reassured that he had indeed been correct to come directly here and not go home. "Thank you. I appreciate that. We both do." Without waiting, Chakotay headed towards the indicated table. As he sat down, Paolo pouring water. "Has Professor Hansen called?"

"Not since she made the reservation this morning."

Chakotay nodded. According to his watch, it was now close to twenty past seven. He turned to look out the window. A couple passed by, hand in hand, their heads tipped towards each other. A few more passersby walked briskly in the bitter wind.

"Would you like the house Merlot, Mr. Chakotay?" Paolo, still hovering nearby, asked.

"That'll be fine, thank you." He resolved to wait another ten to fifteen minutes and then he'd call Seven at the university. Still looking out the window, Chakotay contemplated his visit with the Parises. The news of Harry's death had been an utter shock, as had been B'Elanna's physical condition. He'd been aghast to learn just how close to death Kathryn Janeway had come during the horrific 'skirmish' in the Neutral Zone. Moreover, he could not push away the guilt he felt, having had no idea of what had been going on. He had tried to explain to B'Elanna that his dig had been kilometers from the nearest town, that he had made trips every other Sunday to Rocma to pick up supplies and mail; his knowledge of current events, other than what Seven and his sister had shared with him, had been limited.

Now, sitting here, Chakotay wondered if Seven knew what had happened to their 'family.' After all, she and Harry had been good friends on Voyager, though after their return, she'd lost touch with him.

As they—as a couple—had lost touch with all of the people whom they'd held dear on Voyager.

It hadn't been on purpose; their careers had simply taken them in different directions and after so many years on Voyager, they had all found new opportunities. The last time Chakotay and Seven had spent time with their Voyager friends had been at the one year reunion of their return. After the gala event, at which Janeway had delivered a speech, he, Seven, Tom and B'Elanna, and Harry and Libby, had gone to a blues nightclub. It had been difficult to talk there and B'Elanna had seemed antsy about leaving Miral with a sitter for so long. Seven had been disturbed by the loud music and before long, they had all left the club, going their separate ways. Chakotay had never imagined that that night would be the last time he would ever see Harry Kim.

"I apologize for my lateness."

Chakotay looked up, startled. Seven stood there, a bit uncertainly, staring down at him.

"Seven," he said in relief. He rose. "I was worried—"

"I apologize," she said again. "I was delayed at school. One of my experiments—" she seemed flustered, in a very unSeven-like manner. He cut her off with a passionate kiss. For a moment, she was stiff in his arms, but then relaxed, her arms wrapping around his neck.

"I missed you," Chakotay said finally as he pulled away.

"And I missed you as well," Seven said, reluctantly releasing his hand. She unwrapped her scarf and unbuttoned her black wool coat, revealing gray pants and a red turtleneck top. In the last year she'd been in Boston, Seven had been growing increasingly more fashionable. Her hair, instead of being pulled back into a severe bun, was clipped into a barrette at the nape of her neck. He noticed, with some surprise, that she was wearing pearl studs in her ears.

"You look—" Chakotay stopped. He cleared his throat. He hadn't realized just how much he had missed her. "You look beautiful, Seven."

Her cheeks flushed pink—whether from the cold or from the compliment, Chakotay couldn't tell. "Thank you for coming," she said softly.

"How could I not?" Chakotay asked. He pulled Seven's chair out for her and then sat down opposite of her. "I was worried about you, Seven. One week you're talking about how well your research project is doing and the strides you're making and the next week all you can say is that you want me to come home."

Seven covered his hand with hers. He noticed that her nails were painted a light shade of pink.

"I did not realize that our separation would be so difficult," she said frankly. She paused to look up as Paolo placed a glass of red wine in front of Chakotay. "Hello, Paolo."

"Professor Hansen, it's good to see you here again. It has been too long."

"Thank you, Paolo. And—" she tipped her head slightly to the side— "I believe it has been six months and seven days since we last saw each other."

"You have a good memory," Paolo said admiringly.

Chakotay couldn't help but smile. A 'good' memory didn't even begin to cover it.

"I will have a glass of the house Merlot as well," Seven said, ordering her usual. "And—" she glanced briefly at Chakotay— "we will have the bruschetta as an appetizer."

"Very well." Paolo departed.

Chakotay leaned forward. "What's going on, Seven? You told me that you would be able to work more efficiently after I was gone as you would have no 'constraints' on your time. You even said that you would be so busy that you wouldn't even miss me." He tried to smile at this last comment. He failed miserably. Even though he knew that Seven had been trying to reassure him that she was fine with their separation, her comments *\*had\** hurt. Especially since *\*he\** had missed her. The days on the dig were hard and the conditions in their tents were uncomfortable. When Seven had been with him on previous digs, her presence had taken the edge off the long brutal days in the sun, not to mention given him companionship.

"I was mistaken," Seven said and Chakotay knew how much effort it must take for Seven to admit that she was wrong about *\*anything\**. "These last few months without you have been a difficult adjustment. I was disappointed when you informed me you would be spending an extra day in San Francisco."

Chakotay felt a slight tinge of guilt. He'd assumed that Seven would be busy at work, wouldn't miss him, so when dinner with Tom and B'Elanna had run long, he'd felt no

guilt over accepting their invitation to spend the night. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

"But you are here now. And I imagine you had a great deal to talk about with the Parises." Seven took a deep breath. "B'Elanna must have informed you of the death of Harry Kim."

"Yes, she did," Chakotay said softly. He stared at the pastoral mural behind Seven, trying to gather his thoughts. After all they had endured in the Delta Quadrant, all of their narrow escapes, had it been only to lose it all when they had finally come home?

Seven knit her hands together. "I did not find out until several weeks after the funeral. The Doctor informed me." Was it his imagination or were Seven's eyes actually watering? She tilted her head towards the window. "I was aware peripherally of the conflict in the Neutral Zone but I—" she paused. "It occurred when I was off-planet at that science conference." Chakotay nodded, recalling that Seven had presented her initial research findings for the first time at that conference. "I unfortunately did not pay attention to the Federation News while I was away as I was extremely busy." Seven looked at Chakotay. "I regret not attending Harry's funeral."

"I do too. You should have told me earlier, as soon as you found out," Chakotay said. "I would have come, right away."

Seven pressed her lips into a straight line. "I considered it but then felt it better to tell you in person. I was—" she paused— "concerned for you. You were without close friends. I felt it would be difficult for you to handle the news alone." He wondered then if this was why Seven had summoned him home, to tell him about Harry. At any rate, he appreciated her consideration.

He saw Seven biting her lip and wondered where she had picked up that particular mannerism up from. At any rate, it was obvious that she was grieving for her friend. "B'Elanna mentioned she hadn't heard from you," he said.

"I considered calling many times after I learned what had happened," Seven said. She took a sip of her wine. "But I was unsure of what to say. As time passed, it became even harder."

"You could call now," Chakotay said gently. "I know B'Elanna would appreciate it." He thought of the tongue-lashing B'Elanna had given him the previous day. "It's better late than never. And if you're still feeling uncomfortable, we can call together."

Seven looked relieved. "That is acceptable."

Chakotay shook his head as he once again tried to push away his regret and guilt. "I still can't believe that Harry is gone."

They sat in silence until Paolo brought the appetizer and Seven's wine. They both ordered their usual—ravioli for Seven and eggplant parmesan for Chakotay.

"Is that why you wanted me to come home, Seven? To tell me about Harry?" Chakotay asked.

"In part, but there is another reason as well. A colleague of mine has mentioned that there will be an opening on the Archaeology faculty at Amherst College next August," Seven said. "One of the professors will be leaving to pursue another position on Bajor then and the College is actively seeking a replacement."

“Hmmm,” Chakotay said non-committedly, wondering why Seven was telling him this.

“Amherst College has an excellent liberal arts program,” Seven went on. “And the caliber of the students is very high. It would be a pleasant academic environment.”

“I’ve heard good things about the school,” Chakotay admitted. He’d been in the Amherst area the previous January exploring an opportunity to teach at the University of Massachusetts. He had enjoyed the small New England feel of the town and if the offer of leading the expedition on Betazed hadn’t come up, he would have certainly taken the University up on its offer of a position in their Anthropology & Archaeology department.

“Perhaps you would enjoy teaching at Amherst College?” Seven asked delicately, as she sipped her wine. She glanced at Chakotay. “By shuttle, the commute is very brief from Boston.”

“Seven,” Chakotay said, trying to conceal his surprise, “what are you saying? Do you *want* me to find a position here in Massachusetts?”

Seven bit her lip, another uncharacteristic gesture. It occurred to Chakotay that in the last six months, Seven’s behavior had become less Borglike and more Human. “I believe that your taking this position would solve our problem. You would be able to pursue archeology—”

“But in a classroom, Seven, not in the field!” The words were out before Chakotay had thought them through. He sighed. “I’m sorry, Seven. I didn’t mean to snap at you.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m just tired, on edge.” He sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” she said. “Pursuing archaeology academically is not the same as practical application.” She turned to look out the window, resting her chin on her hand. “It is similar to examining spatial phenomena in space itself versus in a research lab. My colleague, Ethan—Dr. McNeill—disagrees with me. But he has never been in space himself. I have attempted to convince him that direct observation is a thrill unlike any other.” Seven turned her attention back to Chakotay. He smiled at her.

“It sounds as though you miss that sort of thing yourself.”

“I would enjoy returning to a starship once again if the opportunity presented itself.”

Chakotay didn’t bother to point out that if Seven was assigned as a science officer to a Starfleet vessel, once again he’d be tagging along as nothing more than her trailing ‘spouse.’ But he pushed the thought away, reminding himself that for four years, Seven had dealt with desert conditions on Vega V so that he could fulfill his ambitions of digging up and cataloging the relics of ancient cultures. That lifestyle hadn’t been easy for her then even though he understood that every relationship required some sort of sacrifice.

“It won’t feel the same as Voyager,” he said quietly. He sighed. Until his visit with B’Elanna, Chakotay hadn’t realized just how much he missed Voyager and all of the people who had formed his ‘family’ in the Delta Quadrant. After taking his leave of Tom and B’Elanna, Chakotay had mentally resolved to renew his friendships with all of them again. He certainly didn’t want a funeral to be the only reason that brought them together anymore.

Seven nodded. “I understand. Our experience on Voy-

ager was unique. Captain Janeway provided extraordinary leadership in a difficult situation.” She looked at Chakotay expectantly.

“Yes, she most certainly did,” he admitted. He regretted not having time to stop and see Kathryn while he was in San Francisco, but B’Elanna had informed him that the Admiral was still in the hospital. Perhaps, he thought, he would call her later in the week; he was sure Seven would wish to speak to Janeway as well. “And now that I think about it, under the right conditions, I wouldn’t mind spending some time on a starship again.”

“However, such an opportunity does not exist at this moment.” Seven eyed him speculatively. “But perhaps you will consider taking a position at Amherst College.”

Chakotay took a deep breath. “So you want me to stay here, is that it?”

Paolo chose that moment to bring their entrees. Chakotay, however, didn’t touch his immediately, choosing instead to focus his attention on Seven. It was obvious that she had something on her mind and Chakotay wished that she would simply be direct about what she wanted. But he also knew that when it came to the ‘up close and personal’ issues, she tended to shy away from what was really bothering her.

“I believe it would be better in the long term for us to avoid prolonged separations. It is only logical that people who have committed to a relationship should remain together.”

“You will get no argument from me. If we could both find a project that would benefit both of us so that we could be together, I would jump at the chance. But that hasn’t happened,” Chakotay said. He paused. When they had first begun their relationship aboard Voyager, they hadn’t really had an idea of what they would do when they came back to Earth. Chakotay had jokingly told Seven that he intended to be within transporter range of her. For four years, that had been in the case. It was only in the last year or so that their competing careers had come into play. “You do understand that I’m committed to the dig for at least another year? We discussed this before I took the job. At the time, you were fine with it.”

Seven carefully sliced a piece of ravioli in half before answering. “As I previously mentioned, I was mistaken. My feelings have changed over the last six months. It is not efficient for us to maintain separate residences.”

“You could come to Betazed. Professors are allowed to take sabbaticals for research purposes. I’m sure there would be plenty for you to do there, if you’d like,” Chakotay said as he carefully cut his eggplant into little pieces. Even as he said the words, he knew it was a bad idea. The dust and sand that a dig invariably spawned were bad for Seven’s implants. Seven, however, seemed to be giving the idea serious consideration.

“Perhaps in December, when the university closes for the winter holidays,” Seven said. “I believe we have four weeks without classes or other student-related obligations. That would be ample time to make the trip and perhaps examine the opportunities available to me.”

“Yes, that sounds good to me. Betazed has many universities and research facilities that are just as good as MIT if not better,” Chakotay said. He mentally calculated. It was now late October; surely Seven could hold out for another two months? “I don’t want to make any promises and I want

to be realistic about the situation, Seven. I'm not sure I can get out of my contract. At the very least, I'd have to find a substitute to lead up the site survey and then train that individual in site specific procedures. That would take several months at least, if done properly."

"I understand," she said. She speared a piece of ravioli rather violently. "You must keep your obligations."

There was something in her voice that made Chakotay sit up. He carefully wiped his lips with a napkin. "Seven, is something else wrong? More than you simply wanting me here in Boston?"

She shook her head. "No, there is nothing wrong."

"Other than the fact you miss me?" he pressed. "Come on, Seven. It's me, you can tell me what's going on. If there's something wrong, we can work it out. You just have to tell me what's on your mind. I can't possibly guess."

Seven lifted her head, her eyes slightly misty as she met Chakotay's gaze. "I feel more secure when you are present."

Chakotay knew it was as close to an admission of loneliness Seven would ever make. In the past, they had discussed briefly their plans for the future and had mutually agreed to put off marriage and family until they had their careers set. He wondered now if this what Seven was getting at, that she finally wanted to settle down. He reached out, touching her cheek lightly with his fingers. Her skin was still cool to the touch.

Seven carefully folded her napkin. "When you are not present, I do not feel safe. It is disconcerting." She looked at him. "I do not feel this way when you are here." It was an emotional appeal and not one Chakotay could ignore. Not without a considering expenditure of guilt and lately, he'd been feeling enough of that. He'd already pushed away so many he cared about; he couldn't do that to Seven, not when she so obviously needed him.

"All right," he said quietly. "I will talk to the dig coordinators. I will ask them if there's anyway to release me from my contract if I am able to find someone else who is willing to supervise the site." Finding a replacement wouldn't be hard, Chakotay knew; the Betazed dig was a plum assignment and many qualified researchers would jump at the chance to work on it. "I'll talk to your friend at Amherst College and if it works out, I'll plan to come back permanently next August. I know it's ten months away, but that's the best I can do, Seven. How does that sound to you?"

"That is acceptable." Seven looked vastly relieved. "That's an acceptable solution."

Chakotay bit his lip and concentrated on his dinner, trying to swallow his disappointment. The dig on Betazed was crucial to his career but this woman was important to him as well. But the truth was, she had followed him, living his life for years, and now it was his turn to let her do what she wanted. And if she was willing to settle down, well, then he would have to make the decision to return to Boston.

Paolo stopped by. "How is it everything?"

"Excellent as always," Chakotay told the waiter. Paolo beamed. As he walked away, Chakotay leaned forward. "I missed this," Chakotay said, gesturing to the remains of his dinner. "It's very easy to get tired of field rations and freeze-dried food."

Seven grimaced, as if remembering some of the less palat-

able meals they'd had, both aboard Voyager and also on dig sites.

"I guess I was spoiled having you out there with me," Chakotay continued. Seven had often cooked elaborate dinners, no mean feat given the rustic conditions they had lived under. Seven had usually managed to rustle up some of the natural flora to supplement their meals. Only on one of their sites had they been given a small shelter that had included, among other things, a kitchen and running water. "I missed your cooking this time around."

Seven offered him a half-hearted smile.

They finished their dinners quickly and then headed out into the cold. The snow was falling more quickly now, the briefest traces of accumulation developing on the ground and the temperature had dropped a few degrees since earlier in the evening.

"I apologize. I had difficulty finding a spot for the flitter," Seven said. "It is at Government Center."

Chakotay nodded. About a fifteen minute walk but at least the wind had calmed down slightly. As they walked arm in arm through the streets of Boston, Seven updated him on the status of her project and Chakotay described his latest find for her, putting it into its proper historical context.

"In a way this is Betazed's equivalent of the Rosetta stone—" he stopped as he noticed that Seven had slowed down and was looking curiously at the softly lit window of a jewelry store. "What is it, Seven?" He followed her gaze. "The gold chain with a pearl pendant?"

She didn't respond, but Chakotay knew he'd guessed correctly.

"Do you want to go inside and take a closer look?" Chakotay asked as he watched Seven eye the set. It didn't escape his notice how her gaze drifted towards the engagement rings. Seven glanced at him.

"It is a novelty item."

"But it is a pretty set," Chakotay said. He considered. "I think it'll look nice on you, Seven. And—" he touched her ear lobe gently—"it would match your earrings nicely."

Seven pulled away slightly. "I do not require jewelry."

"Jewelry isn't something you require," Chakotay said. "Jewelry can simply be appreciated for its aesthetic value, as personal adornment, like your earrings. You obviously agree with that idea or you wouldn't have bought them."

"I did not—" Seven stopped, mid-sentence.

He took a deep breath, his hand tightening around hers. "It's a way of remembering me," he said. He leaned closer to her. "And when you'd wear it, you would know that I was thinking of you when I bought it."

"You mean you wish to give me jewelry to remind me of you." Seven looked at him, her eyes unusually bright.

Chakotay nodded. "So? What do you say?"

But Seven remained in place. "Jewelry has a romantic purpose to it? It is not simply for decorative purposes?"

"Yes," Chakotay said. "But some cultures value the 'decorative' aspect as well, and in some ancient societies, decorations represented a degree of caring for an individual. And in other societies, such as ours—" he glanced at Seven—"it can be an expression of love and affection for another. It is customary, for instance, for a man to give his wife or girlfriend

jewelry for birthdays or anniversaries. Or on other celebratory occasions. And sometimes, for absolutely no reason at all.”

“I see.” Seven glanced once more at the window. This time, Chakotay was unable to decipher her expression. It wasn’t quite longing, but something else entirely. He didn’t know why, but he suddenly felt uncomfortable. “It is an elegant and efficient design.”

“Or you could just say it was ‘beautiful,’” Chakotay said gently. “And one, I think, that would suit you.”

“Perhaps.” Seven tugged impatiently at his arm.

“You don’t want to look at it more closely?”

“It is not necessary.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” There was an unusual edge to her voice.

Chakotay shrugged. Perhaps he would come back another day to purchase the set for Seven. It was obvious that she had taken a liking to it, but perhaps was too embarrassed to indulge in such frivolity. Seven linked her arm through his again as they continued through Quincy Market. This time, Seven seemed intent on not stopping. Chakotay increased his pace to keep up with her, finally catching Seven by the elbow.

“Hey!” he exclaimed.

“It is cold,” she said by way of explanation.

With a pang, Chakotay remembered the temperate climate on Betazed. The average temperature was around twenty-six degrees Celsius, a great deal warmer than the -4 currently in Boston. And since the dig site was located in a valley, there was often a nice breeze cooling off the workers.

“Right,” Chakotay said, resolutely pushing all thoughts of Betazed out of his mind. He quickened his step to match Seven’s. Within minutes, they’d reached the parking garage where Seven had left the flitter. As they waited for the turbolift, Chakotay noted that it was getting progressively colder. He rubbed his hands together and then reached over to clasp Seven’s leather-covered hands between his. She shivered, drawing closer to him. He couldn’t help but say, “It never gets this cold at the dig site.”

Seven looked pained at the remark. “Then you are happy there?”

Chakotay bit his lip. “Yes,” he said finally. “I am.”

“I see.” The turbolift doors opened and Seven marched in ahead of him.

“And you? Is MIT turning out to be everything you want it to be?” Chakotay asked as he stood next to her.

“It was difficult at first adjusting,” Seven said. Her lips turned up slightly. “As you know, I found some of their methods inefficient, but I have found Ethan—Dr. McNeill—to be particularly helpful in my research. He has been instrumental in helping me develop my thesis.” Seven pressed the button that would take them to the seventh floor.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Chakotay said. He had met Ethan McNeill once before and had found the man to be socially awkward, but extremely intelligent. And he had seemed very accepting of Seven and for this, Chakotay had been grateful; some of Seven’s fellow faculty members had been unhappy with the prospect of a former Borg drone joining the prestigious staff at MIT. “And I’m happy to hear you’ve made good progress with it.”

Seven nodded. “The university granted me all-night privileges at the lab which enabled me to accomplish more. However, I will not work late while you are here. I cleared my schedule in anticipation of your arrival.”

Chakotay smiled. “Thank you.” The turbolift doors opened and Seven linked her arm through his once again as they crossed the cement towards their flitter.

“Perhaps we can visit the lab tomorrow afternoon,” she said. “I can demonstrate my experiment to you then.”

Chakotay held back a grin. Seven’s work had always sounded abstract to him and he had never quite gotten a handle on the subject she was researching—something about developing a sensor grid capable of detecting alpha particle emissions? A demonstration—while not exactly romantic—would definitely improve his understanding. “Sounds good to me.”

As they approached the flitter, Seven gently disentangled herself from Chakotay.

“I’ll drive,” she told him firmly.

At home, Chakotay was relieved to see his bags had made it safely and that the doorman had placed them in the bedroom. He decided he would unpack in the morning; it was late and he was tired as it was.

“It’s good to be back,” he said sincerely as he took a look around, appreciating all of the little conveniences that were not available on the dig site. As always, the apartment was immaculate; Seven was a perfect housekeeper, with nothing out of place.

He noticed a picture of the two of them posing in front of the Paul Revere house was prominently displayed in the living room. His arm was around Seven and they were both smiling as they faced the photographer. He remembered the day they’d taken that picture; it had been shortly after his arrival in Boston over a year ago and Seven had been anxious to show him her newly adopted home. And she had wanted him to like it as much as she did and so she had been anxious to introduce him to the history of the city, knowing how much he would appreciate it, despite having little to no interest in it herself. They had ignored the ribbon of chill running through the air that day and had spent the entire day walking the Freedom Trail, hand in hand, ending it in the North End with a delicious dinner at the Familia Giorgio Restaurant.

“That’s new,” he said, indicating the portrait.

“Do you like it?” Seven asked a bit shyly as she approached him. “I had it framed approximately three weeks ago. I believe it has a certain aesthetic value that would be pleasing to you.”

Chakotay cleared his throat. Sentimental gestures like this were completely unlike Seven.

“I love it,” he said honestly. He drew Seven closer to him, his fingers caressing her smooth hair. Seven leaned against him, her cheek against his chest. It felt good to have her so close to him again. He held her for a minute before bending slightly to kiss the top of her head. “Have I mentioned that it feels good to be home?”

She tipped her head back as he bent to kiss her. After a second, she took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom. As she pulled him down onto the bed with her, he forgot everything—Betazed, Boston, Amherst College, Voyager, guilt, regret, everything; only the two of them existed

in that moment.

Later, Seven sat on the edge of the bed, drawing on her robe. Her golden hair contrasted against the navy blue material.

“Come back to bed,” Chakotay muttered, reaching to cup her hip with his palm. She leaned over and caressed his cheek.

“You require rest,” she said quietly. “I will return shortly.”

“I’ll be waiting,” he said teasingly. “Don’t take too long.” She smiled back, obviously understanding his meaning.

“I will return shortly.”

Despite his good intentions of staying awake, Chakotay’s eyes grew heavy and soon, he was gently snoring. He didn’t feel Seven slip in next to him. Nor was he aware of her arm draped over him, her body spooned against his.

When he woke with a gasp, his chest was tight, the white sheets tangled around his legs. He took a deep breath, and knew, without turning, that Seven was awake as well.

“Did you experience a nightmare?” she asked in concern.

Chakotay tried to think. Nothing in particular came to mind, only a feeling of darkness and suffocation. “No, I don’t think so.” He turned his head to look at her. “Are you having trouble sleeping?” He considered. Was it her night to regenerate and she was only staying with him to be polite? Seven turned to face him, a concerned expression on her face.

“I have been reconsidering our situation,” she said slowly.

“I thought it was decided.” Chakotay propped himself up on one elbow. “I’m going to look into coming back to Boston for good.” He tried not to sound impatient or irritated with her. “We’ve been over this, Seven.”

“Perhaps it was unfair of me to ask you to stay.”

Chakotay willed himself to remain calm. Her sudden shift was highly irritating.

“It is easier for me to come with you.”

“You were unhappy when you were with me on previous expeditions. The conditions on the site are not good for your implants. That hasn’t changed,” Chakotay said quietly. “Would it be any different this time?” He rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. “Would it be any easier for you to adjust?”

“I do not know.”

The room was unusually quiet and Chakotay tried to think of something to say; Seven was looking at him expectantly.

“What do you prefer?” Seven asked. “It is your decision.”

He glanced over his shoulder to stare at her. She looked lovely, her golden hair spread against her pale blue pillow.

“I don’t know,” he said. His throat felt tight. Seven’s lips pressed together into a thin line but she said nothing. The quiet echoed loudly in his ears; never had the room felt this still before. He leaned over to kiss her, first on the cheek, then on the lips. “I wish I did, but I don’t. Can we talk about it in the morning?”

She looked as if she wanted to discuss the issue now, but instead, she nodded.

“You should get some rest,” Seven said softly. “You have had a long day.”

He lay back down, curling around his body around hers, his hand resting lightly on her stomach. She slept, but he was unable to follow suit. He lay there until morning came, listening to the silence.

## So Many Things

*Janeway & Seven*

*Disclaimer: Star Trek Voyager and all of its characters are the property of Paramount. No copyright infringement is intended.*

*Author’s Note: this story takes place four months after “The Heart of the Matter” by Seema in the Glory Days Universe. Many thanks to Seema for her usual wonderful beta.*

The physical therapist smiled encouragingly at her patient. “That wraps up our session for today, Kathryn. How do you feel?”

“Honestly?” Janeway grimaced and rubbed her tingling right shoulder. “Like I’ve gone a few rounds with a Nausicaan.” She glanced up at the petite Human. “No offense, Ellen.”

Ellen laughed. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Just remember, though, it was your idea to do that extra set of exercises at the end.” She rose and began placing her equipment in her bag. “Rehab is an arduous process, but you’re coming along nicely.”

“I wish I shared your optimism.” Janeway took a deep breath. “I thought I’d be back to normal by now. It’s been months since I was injured, and yet I’m no closer to being fit for active duty—” Her voice drifted off.

Ellen studied the wall panel display of Janeway’s biosigns. An identical set of readings, Janeway knew, was visible at the nurses’ station down the corridor. “Determination is an important part of your recovery, Kathryn, but even so it’s going to take a lot of time—and patience. Don’t try to rush things. You’ve been here at the Center for less than two weeks, after spending five months at Starfleet Medical. Your doctors and I are very satisfied with the progress you’ve made so far, and you should be as well.”

Janeway nodded, though not entirely convinced. “Thanks, Ellen.”

“T’Kol will be here this afternoon to take you to the pool for hydrotherapy, and I’ll see you again on Tuesday. Get some rest now, Kathryn.” Ellen added with a smile, “That’s an order.”

After Ellen left, Janeway made her way to the one comfortable chair in the room and sank into it gratefully. The residential apartments in the rehabilitation complex were small; Janeway’s living quarters consisted of just two sparsely furnished rooms. She sighed as she thought of her spacious new house in Monterey, the home that she had yet to spend much time in. No sooner had she moved in the previous year than she had been sent on a series of important diplomatic missions on behalf of Starfleet and the Federation, culminating in her final posting to the Neutral Zone to resolve the budding crisis with the Romulans. That mission had not ended in disaster, she reminded herself firmly. War had been averted, after all—at the cost of a few dozen lives lost like Harry Kim’s, or put on hold indefinitely, such as her own.

She gazed out the window at the gray winter day. The icy rain earlier that morning had ceased, but the skies were still overcast. All the better to match her mood.

It had taken a long time to get to the point she was at now—made longer by the numerous ‘setbacks’ she’d suffered since the memorial service in August. The Doctor wasn’t sure

if the series of strokes had been caused by something specific she'd done—like overexerting herself—or were simply one of those things that couldn't be explained. All Janeway knew was how frustrating it all had been. Here it was the beginning of January, and she was still struggling with control of the muscles in her right arm and leg, still having trouble with all fine motor movements and experiencing occasional uncontrolled tremors—all signs of long-term neural damage. Her stamina was practically non-existent; this morning's twenty minute therapy session with Ellen had left her feeling completely spent. And in a great deal of pain as well.

Janeway took another sip from her water bottle, debating whether or not she wanted something hot to drink before showering. She thought longingly of coffee, but caffeine was still on her 'prohibited' list. With a sigh, she settled for herbal tea instead.

The door signal chimed just as she was about to head for the bedroom.

"Enter," she called, wondering who it could be. She'd had very few regular visitors ever since Tuvok had returned to Vulcan. The Doctor made a point of checking on her at least once a day—a practice he'd begun while she was still hospitalized and which he saw no reason to change in the ten days she'd been in the Center—but he usually came in the evenings. And Tom had stopped by just yesterday afternoon with B'Elanna—who had herself been going through some rough times, but was now doing much better, Janeway was grateful to see.

Her gaze fell on the table where Miral's and Joey's latest artwork lay—young children weren't permitted to visit, so Tom tried to make up for it with a steady supply of finger-paintings and drawings—then shifted back to the door as the signal sounded once more. She raised her voice. "I said, come in!" Perhaps the annunciator wasn't working. Impatiently, she went over and opened the door herself, then gaped in surprise at the young woman who stood there.

"Hello, Admiral."

"Seven." Janeway hastily moved aside to allow her to enter. "Please, come in." She eyed Seven's immaculate appearance—the smoothly coifed hair, the elegant pale green outfit and pearl earrings—and was suddenly conscious of her own sloppy sweatsuit and matted hair gathered back carelessly into a ponytail. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, it has," Seven said, taking a few tentative steps into the room. "We have not spoken since the party commemorating the one year anniversary of Voyager's return."

Janeway stiffened involuntarily at the mention of that evening. She remembered being surrounded by reporters and officials, when all she'd really wanted was to spend time with her former crew. When she'd finally shaken free of her 'entourage', none of the senior staff were still in attendance. She'd heard later that the Parises, Harry and his girlfriend, and Seven and Chakotay had decided to relocate to a jazz club for a more private reunion, and she'd been hurt that they hadn't thought to include her.

"Please, sit down," Janeway said quickly and gestured toward the chairs. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you, I do not require anything at this time," Seven said. However, instead of sitting down, she glanced at the empty tea cup on the table and headed purposefully for

the replicator. Moments later, she placed a fresh pot of herbal tea in front of Janeway, along with another cup. "This was the last item ordered from the replicator," she said by way of explanation. "I assumed you would want some more."

"Thank you," Janeway said, not sure if she felt offended at Seven taking the initiative like this, when she was merely a guest. Suddenly Janeway wondered if Seven assumed she was enfeebled or otherwise too incapacitated to serve herself. She bristled at the implication. "But that was hardly necessary."

"I meant no offense," Seven said quietly.

Janeway exhaled. "None taken. Thank you." She concentrated on lifting the pot with her left hand and pouring carefully, for herself as well as Seven. To her relief, she didn't spill any of the tea. She sat down in the recliner, feeling only slightly guilty at leaving the straight backed chair for Seven. "What brings you to San Francisco?"

Seven hesitated. "As you remarked, it has been a very long time since we have spoken. We have drifted apart, which is unfortunate."

Janeway looked up to meet Seven's eyes. Something in the younger woman's expression made Janeway assume that whatever had brought Seven here today had to do with Harry's death.

Even though Janeway had been caught up in a haze of grief and physical pain at the time, it had still dimly registered that neither Seven nor Chakotay had been present at the funeral. To Janeway, their absence was inexcusable. Her stance hadn't softened in the nearly five months since. Just last month the topic had come up again in conversation.

"You'll never guess who called me the other day," B'Elanna said as she settled herself carefully in the visitor's chair near the head of the biobed. "Seven." She coughed—not the deep racking cough she'd had the last time she'd visited—and waited for a reaction.

Janeway shifted uncomfortably against her pillows and winced. "A little late, wouldn't you say?" she said scathingly. "How long has it been?"

"Seven was very apologetic for not having called earlier," B'Elanna said quietly. "You know, I felt sorry for her. It couldn't have been easy for her to do this."

Janeway wasn't feeling particularly inclined to feel any sympathy for Seven's ordeal. "Did she offer any excuses why neither of them bothered to show up?"

"They were off-world at the time—both of them. They honestly didn't know—well, maybe they had heard reports about a battle in the Neutral Zone, but nothing specifically about Harry—until the Doctor remembered to call her a few weeks later. You know how busy he was."

Janeway let B'Elanna's comment about the Doctor slide; she was well aware what had occupied the Doctor's time. She chose instead to focus on the first part of the statement. "I find it hard to believe that they had no idea what was going on."

B'Elanna shrugged. "It happens. I suppose in retrospect someone should have made a point of calling them before the service, just to make sure they knew about it. Maybe they wouldn't have been able to make it, but at least they'd have been able to send a condolence message."

"And just who should have contacted them?" Janeway asked. She broke off, thinking bitter thoughts about that

period—of Tom, making the painful journey to the Neutral Zone to escort an ill B'Elanna home and bring back his best friend's body, Tuvok keeping an uneasy vigil by her own unconscious form on Vulcan. The Doctor, hovering anxiously over the survivors, doing everything in his power to restore them to health.

"Tom sent a message to Neelix from the Livingston," B'Elanna said after a long moment. "While we were on our way back home. I was unconscious for most of the trip and didn't know about it until he told me later. I don't know why he didn't send one to Chakotay at the same time." She stopped, perhaps remembering how Tom and Chakotay had never been particularly close friends, not the same degree of closeness he and Neelix had shared. "But maybe he just couldn't face going through it again."

"Maybe." Janeway closed her eyes, wishing the dull ache in her all-but-useless arm would go away. "I suppose Tom also assumed—if he thought about it for more than fleeting moments—that everyone would have heard the news through other channels. That battle had ramifications for every citizen of the Federation, if not the entire Alpha Quadrant."

"It was major news for us," B'Elanna said, leaning forward intently, "because we were directly involved. But to the rest of the Federation it was important for a day or two, and then once the dust settled—war was averted, after all—anything concerning the Romulan Neutral Zone was superseded by the next news cycle, the next big event." She paused. "The mining disaster on Rigel XII happened just a few days later, you know, followed by the news of the capture of the top members of the Orion Syndicate a week after that."

Or maybe it just didn't matter to them. Janeway thought again of Chakotay's air of indifference—bordering on actual coldness—the last time they had met, at the one year anniversary. And the way Seven had avoided looking her in the eye. "I can't believe you're sitting there making excuses for them." She couldn't help adding, with a slight edge to her voice, "But I suppose your counseling sessions have something to do with that."

"You might consider trying it yourself," B'Elanna shot back. "It would do you a lot of good."

Janeway was silent, suddenly too weary to argue.

"You know I'm probably right, even if you don't want to admit it," B'Elanna said. She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Of course, that still didn't stop me from practically biting Chakotay's head off when he finally showed up on our doorstep in September."

"What brings you here, Seven?" Janeway asked once again.

"I'm on my way back to Boston. I just returned from Betazed and I have a few hours more before my shuttle leaves," Seven said. Her gaze darted around the room, taking in the bland institutional decor, the ubiquitous medical equipment and monitors, and came to rest on Janeway with a look akin to pity. Janeway flushed, embarrassed to be at such a disadvantage.

"You were just passing through, then?" So the visit was an impulsive, spur-of-the-moment action, not planned in advance. Which was surprising, as it was so unlike Seven. In the past, the former Borg always calculated everything to a science. But as Janeway reminded herself, people had a way of moving on, of changing, and it was unrealistic to expect

Seven to have remained exactly as she had been all those years ago when Janeway first knew her. Especially, as Seven had pointed out already, it had been so long since the two of them had spoken.

Unconsciously echoing her former captain's thoughts, Seven said, "You and I have been apart for many years now, Admiral, separated by distance, both physical and otherwise. I came because I realized it is time for someone to take the first step to heal the breach between us."

"Past time," Janeway agreed, expecting an apology about missing the funeral to be forthcoming. But once again Seven surprised her.

"I do not know precisely what caused you to withdraw from me all those years ago on Voyager. But I do know how betrayed I felt at your abandonment of me."

Janeway stared at her. "I abandoned you?" She picked up her cup and stared into its depths, willing herself to remain calm, despite the unjustified accusation. If there had been any abandonment—or betrayal—it had been the other way around.

"Precisely." Seven's voice never wavered. "Ever since you separated me from the Borg Collective, I looked up to you, depended on you to help me adjust to living among Humans once more. You promised to always be there for me, but in the final year of our journey, you...changed. You sequestered yourself in your Ready Room for hours on end, you became focused on the journey home to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. And I was not the only one who was the victim of your withdrawal. You pulled away from the entire senior staff, taking your meals alone, spending your leisure time by yourself in the holodeck, seeming to prefer the company of holograms to real people. You were never around anymore outside of duty shifts, not accessible or approachable for problems or times of need."

"I'm sick and tired of having to defend my actions, Seven, and I don't need to justify myself to you," Janeway said heatedly. "I did the best I could out there in the Delta Quadrant. You have no idea of the pressures I was under. I'm sorry if my behavior didn't fit in with your ideas of what I should have been doing or if you felt slighted that you were not my number one priority. I had other things to worry about instead of your eternal 'rediscovery of your humanity.'" She couldn't resist adding, "Despite any 'neglect' on my part—my 'selfish' need for some private time—you certainly didn't seem to be lacking for people eager to help you."

Janeway defiantly raised her cup to her lips. But to her dismay, her hands began to shake violently. The cup slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor with a dull thud. Surprisingly, it didn't shatter, but the liquid spread over the carpet in a dark pool. It would doubtless leave a stain.

Seven, her face inscrutable, knelt down and retrieved the cup. She placed it on the table. "It is undamaged."

Janeway took a deep breath, willing her muscles to obey her. After several agonized seconds, the trembling ceased. "It doesn't matter."

"But it does," Seven said, still staring at the cup. "As I recall, this is your 'lucky teacup' that you had in your Ready Room on Voyager."

Under other circumstances, Janeway would have snorted. 'Lucky teacup', indeed. A phrase floated through her mind,

part of an old song Tom had quoted just yesterday. “If it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have no luck at all.” Aloud, she said, “Your memory—even for trivial things—has always been impressive.”

“I recall every detail from my years aboard Voyager,” Seven said earnestly, leaning forward as if to give her words greater emphasis. “Even things whose significance escaped me at the time, or events I did not comprehend until long afterwards.”

Janeway picked up a napkin from the table and dabbed at the wet spot on the front of her shirt. Still looking down, she said, “It sounds like you’re referring to something specific.”

“It took me a long time to realize that you once harbored feelings for Chakotay.” Seven waited until Janeway’s eyes met hers. “I need to ask you this, Admiral—was I responsible for coming between the two of you?”

Where did this come from? Janeway hid her surprise. “I admit the Commander and I had a major disagreement around the time of Voyager’s first Borg encounter,” she said with a calm she did not feel. “He didn’t approve of my plan to form an alliance with the Collective against Species 8472.”

“I am not referring to a command disagreement, but something of a more personal nature.”

Janeway was silent for a moment. “There was nothing for you to come between.”

Seven looked puzzled. “But Chakotay’s feelings for you—he never went into much detail about it, but from the little he told me about New Earth—”

Janeway looked up as the shadow fell across the patch of dirt she was working on. “Back so soon, Chakotay?”

“Soon? I’ve been gone for hours, Kathryn.” His voice took on a teasing tone. “Nice to know you missed me while I was away.”

Laughing, she replied, “I’ll have you know I’ve been hard at work! While you were enjoying a nice leisurely walk down to the river, I’ve been planting the garden.” She proudly pointed to her labors. “Talaxian tomatoes—they should be producing fruit in approximately six weeks.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” he said, smiling at her in a way that made her heart turn over.

She glanced down at her arms, muddied to the elbow, then at the sun sinking toward the horizon. “I didn’t realize how late it was. I’m just going to wash up a bit before dinner.”

“There’s no hurry, Kathryn.” He caught her hand in his. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”

“If there was anything, Seven, it was over before it had a chance to ever really begin.” Even as Janeway said the words, however, a part of her tried to understand why that was so.

Admittedly, in the early years of the journey, there were a number of factors working against them—Chakotay’s involvement with and subsequent betrayal by Seska, the fact that Janeway had left a fiancé behind in the Alpha Quadrant. But Seska had died in the violent aftermath of the Kazon takeover of the ship at the end of their second year in the Delta Quadrant, and less than two years later, Voyager had made contact with their loved ones back home. Janeway had discovered that Mark had mourned her and then moved on with his life, and she was now free. She had even admitted as much to Chakotay—that she had nothing standing in her way any longer. So why hadn’t anything happened?

With a sudden rush of clarity, Janeway realized that she had been afraid. She’d had a poor track record as far as relationships were concerned; she’d lost two fiancés, albeit for different reasons. And if an attempted personal relationship with her first officer hadn’t worked out, it could have had adverse effects on their professional interactions, possibly even jeopardized the well-being of the ship.

There had been other reasons as well—the mounting pressures of getting home took their toll over the years, leaving her hardened and wary. Somewhere along the way, she’d feared she’d lost the ability of opening up to someone else to the extent that a successful relationship required. Perhaps Chakotay had sensed this. She knew he’d been resentful at the sheer amount of time she’d devoted to Seven, had clearly felt her new protégée had eaten into the hours she had previously spent with him, maybe even thought she was purposely trying to avoid him.

Whatever the cause, the timing had never been right for the two of them—not during the journey itself and certainly not since the return when even their friendship had eroded.

“I had no claim on Chakotay, Seven,” Janeway said. She ran her hand through her hair distractedly. “I admit I was surprised to hear you were involved, but only because the two of you had never seemed particularly close prior to this—as colleagues or friends.” She summoned a smile. “You always seemed much closer to the Doctor—and Harry.”

Seven bit her lip. “Harry Kim was my first friend aboard Voyager, the first person, other than you, to show any interest in me.” Her eyes were suddenly very bright as she whispered, “I deeply regret that I never had the chance to say goodbye to him.”

Despite herself, Janeway was moved by the obvious grief in Seven’s voice, remembered too her own conversation with Harry when she’d first come aboard the Livingston at the start of the mission in the Neutral Zone. “A lot of us feel the same way.”

“But you were with him shortly before the battle. You were still colleagues, your paths crossed on a regular basis.” Seven was quiet for a moment. “It had been years since I last spoke to him—or almost anyone else from Voyager.”

Was Seven looking for absolution, or a chance to atone? “I’m sorry you’re feeling regret right now, Seven,” Janeway said, more harshly than she intended. “But you chose not to be involved with the Voyager ‘family’, to drift away, and this is a consequence of that decision.”

“You are correct,” Seven said, raising her chin. “But knowing that does not make it any easier to bear.”

“No, no it doesn’t,” Janeway said, ashamed of her earlier outburst. What was the greater crime after all—withdrawing from those she loved while still on Voyager, or drifting away after the return? She sighed. “Regret is a singularly useless emotion, Seven. Nothing can change the past.”

“I agree that we cannot change anything in the past,” Seven said, “but I still hope that you and I can settle our differences in the present.”

“There’s nothing to settle—”

“There is still a gulf between us,” Seven insisted. “It is not simply due to the fact that we have not spoken for many years. Our problems began earlier, while we were still aboard Voyager.” She paused. “I am asking you again, was it because

of Chakotay? It never seemed as though you approved of our relationship.”

“As I told you before, I was surprised neither of you told me. That was all,” Janeway said, looking away. “A romantic relationship—I didn’t think you were ready for something like that. You were so young and inexperienced.” She added quickly, “But obviously I was wrong. After all, you’re still together after all these years.”

There was a nearly imperceptible pause before Seven said, “Chakotay is currently involved in a long-term archaeological expedition on Betazed.”

“So you’re working on Betazed as well?” Janeway asked. If that were the case, she wondered why Seven had returned to Earth.

“No, I am teaching and doing research at MIT. It is the break between the academic semesters now; I took the opportunity to travel to see him.”

“It’s good that you were able to spend your vacation together. I imagine it must be difficult being apart for long stretches.”

“Yes, it has been very difficult.” Seven fingered a pearl pendant as she spoke.

Janeway hadn’t noticed the slender gold chain earlier. It appeared to be the same design as Seven’s earrings. The jewelry—a symbol of personal adornment—surprised Janeway; it suddenly occurred to her how far Seven had come in the years since she had been separated from the Collective. For all intents and purposes, Seven was truly Human now; there was little if anything ‘Borg’ about her. Janeway wouldn’t have laid odds on this even a few years earlier. Chakotay had been very good for Seven, after all, she admitted. He had clearly done far more for her than Janeway ever could have.

Before she could say anything along those lines, however, Seven added, “It is not the same as when we were together on Voyager, or even when I accompanied him to various dig sites during our first years back in the Alpha Quadrant.” She let the pendant drop; it was once more lying mostly hidden in the folds of her sweater. “Chakotay has his work, and I have mine.”

“What is it you’re researching?” Janeway asked curiously. “Something in the field of astrometrics, I presume.”

“I am working on developing a sensor grid capable of detecting alpha particle emissions.”

Janeway raised an eyebrow. “Interesting.”

“It is something I had been considering for some time, but not seriously as there are numerous problems concerning the practical applications of the theory. However, one of my colleagues made a few suggestions that helped immeasurably, and even offered to work with me.” Seven launched into an enthusiastic and detailed technical account.

“That innovation is simple but at the same time exceedingly clever,” Janeway said, genuinely impressed, when Seven had finished. “Your colleague must be a genius to have thought of that.”

“Ethan—Dr. McNeill—is most perceptive,” Seven agreed. “Ever since his breakthrough, we have been making steady progress. This past summer I presented a paper at the biannual astrometric conference on Regulus IV, based on some of our preliminary data. It was very well received. Unfor-

tunately, Ethan was unable to accompany me, but he was pleased our findings were met with such enthusiasm.”

Janeway couldn’t help but notice the sparkle in Seven’s eyes when she mentioned Ethan McNeill—a sparkle that had been conspicuously absent when she had been speaking about Chakotay. “It sounds like a very successful collaboration, then,” she said neutrally.

“Yes, it is an extremely satisfying and successful relationship.”

“And I take it that Ethan has become a good friend as well as a colleague.”

“Yes. He has been very kind and helpful to me in many respects.”

“Do you have many friends at the university?”

“A small number. For the most part, however, my social activities consist of an occasional dinner or concert with Ethan.” A faint blush stole into Seven’s cheeks. “He was concerned that I was lonely when Chakotay left Boston last spring.”

If Janeway didn’t know better, she would have assumed Ethan would like to be more than just a ‘friend’ to Seven. Or perhaps he did, and Seven simply wasn’t aware of his intentions. She was devoted to Chakotay, wasn’t she? To all appearances, the two of them had a very strong and committed relationship. They had been together for so long—

Seven’s voice abruptly broke into Janeway’s reverie. “May I ask you something, Admiral?”

“Of course.” Janeway waited, but there was nothing forthcoming. She wondered why Seven seemed so hesitant.

“It is not an easy question. It concerns a sensitive topic.”

Janeway almost laughed. More sensitive than any of the other topics Seven had brought up during the course of this visit? “What is it, Seven?” she asked gently.

“I was wondering how it is possible to stop loving someone, to realize one day that you no longer feel the same way about a person you once cared deeply for.”

For an instant, Janeway was back in the cabin on New Earth. In her mind, she could hear Chakotay telling her the end of the ‘Angry Warrior’ legend, that he would always be by her side. And then the image changed, became her quarters on Voyager the night before they attempted the slipstream drive. “Are you with me?” she’s asked him. His reply had been, “Always.”

But always was not forever.

Aloud, Janeway said, “When we’re in love, Seven, we never can imagine that it could end, that there would be a time or place in which we would no longer feel the way we do now. But we can’t know what will happen in the future. People continuously grow and change, and sometimes they just grow apart. It’s no one’s fault, it just happens.” She smiled sadly. “But knowing that doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

Seven nodded, her expression pensive. No, Janeway thought, studying her more carefully—not sad but resigned. As if Seven only needed to have it put into words to confirm what she already knew deep inside. Hesitantly, afraid of being rebuffed, Janeway laid her good hand comfortingly on the younger woman’s arm.

Seven’s eyes met hers. “You spoke of two people growing apart—I want you to know, Admiral, that you have always been important to me. You were the closest thing I had to a mother.” Her voice cracked; she cleared her throat and went

on, “I never really realized at the time how much I depended on you, or how much of a burden I was to you. And I want you to know how sorry I am.”

Janeway shook her head, feeling tears threatening. “It’s all right, Seven. There’s no need to apologize. I did what I had to do.”

“Was everything you did for me only out of a sense of duty, of obligation?” Seven asked in a pained voice. “Wasn’t there anything more—some feeling for me?”

“I felt compassion over your circumstances—” Janeway began.

“Only pity? Nothing more?” Seven interrupted.

“Seven, I went to hell and back for you on more than one occasion,” Janeway reminded her tartly. “If that doesn’t tell you something about how much you mattered to me, then nothing I can say right now can possibly change your mind.”

Even as she was speaking, Janeway realized that Seven’s action in coming to see her today, being the one to make the first move, spoke volumes about what Seven truly felt about her, how much she mattered to the younger woman. And she realized as well that she could no longer keep holding Seven at arms’ length, holding on to her anger to the detriment of them both. The time was long past for assigning blame; it was time for reconciliation.

“I can’t make any guarantees,” Janeway said haltingly, “but perhaps it’s finally time for the two of us to see if we can forge a relationship as true equals—and as friends.”

Seven smiled through her tears. “I would like that very much, Admiral.”

“My name is Kathryn,” Janeway corrected her, with a slight shake of her head.

“Kathryn,” Seven said, and clasped Janeway’s hand with her own, holding tightly as if she would never let go.

## Home

*Janeway & Chakotay*

*Disclaimer: Characters and places belong to Paramount. We just feel the need to fix a thing or two or three and promise to put everyone back in better condition than we found them.*

*Authors’ note: Another entry in the Glory Days Universe, taking place 8 months after the events of “So Many Things” by Rocky.*

There were days, lonely days  
When the world wouldn’t throw me a crumb  
But I kept on believing  
That this day would come

—Don Henley

She was standing on the deck behind the house, a lithe figure in flowing black gazing out to sea. He noted, with more than an academic interest, that her hair was loose, blowing in the wind. It was also longer than he remembered, dipping just past her shoulders, but still retaining its shiny, auburn hue.

He smiled to himself; the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. His throat felt suddenly dry as it occurred to him that perhaps he should have called first.

“Kathryn!” he called. A beat passed and then she turned slowly. For a moment, they just stared at each other. To Chakotay’s immense relief, Kathryn did not seem startled by his sudden appearance.

“Hello, Chakotay,” Kathryn said calmly. “It’s good to see you. What brings you out here?”

“You did invite me,” he said with a smile. “Though you probably didn’t expect me to take you up on your offer so soon.” Or at all, he added to himself.

They had run into each other a few weeks earlier in Boston. Seven was delivering a major paper at the Astrometric Conference sponsored by MIT. Chakotay had been surprised to see Kathryn in attendance. At the reception afterwards, he’d made his way over to her.

*Chakotay approached the small bar in the corner of the room. The dark rich paneling, the mirrored backdrop, the brass fixtures—all of it served to add to the elegance of the ballroom. He wasn’t so much interested in something to drink as he was in the woman standing next to the bar, her back to him.*

*“I see you’ve retained your interest in astrometric phenomena,” Chakotay said quietly.*

*Kathryn stiffened visibly at the sound of his voice, but when she turned around, her features were composed. The captain’s mask, he thought. After all these years, he could scarcely expect anything else.*

*“Yes, I have,” she said evenly. Her gaze went over him quickly; he knew she noted the changes that six years of sun and wind and sand had wrought in him—the new lines and creases in his face, the extra weight he’d added, the gray over his temples. She had changed as well, looking immeasurably older from the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes to the faint droop of her lips. He knew she’d had some tough times over the past year, both physically and emotionally. She’d weathered it well, though—just as he knew she would.*

*“Do you make it a habit to attend many conferences?” Chakotay asked. He signaled to the bartender, ordered a gin and tonic. He glanced over at Kathryn, noted that her glass was still half-full with an amber-hued beverage.*

*“Not as many as I’d like. But I promised Seven I’d try to make it here today. I know how much this presentation means to her.”*

*Chakotay recovered quickly from his surprise at her casual mention of Seven’s name. He hadn’t been aware that the two women had had a reconciliation, but he was happy they had. “Yes, this presentation is very important to her and it looks like her work has been well-received. This will do wonders for her career.” He couldn’t help the note of pride that slipped into his voice.*

*Kathryn nodded, and then smiled at something over his shoulder. He turned slightly and saw who she was looking at. Seven, still standing next to the podium at the front of the room, was engaged in animated conversation with several other scientists. At her side, Ethan McNeill stood beaming, radiating equal parts of enthusiasm and pride as he participated in the discussion but clearly allowing Seven to take center stage. “It’s so good to see her so settled and happy,”*

Kathryn said, her sincerity evident.

"Yes," Chakotay said non-committedly. His own feelings regarding that tableau were a bit more complicated; he and Seven had things they needed to take care of later. He turned his attention back to his former captain.

An awkward silence fell between Kathryn and Chakotay.

"It's been a long time since we've seen each other, let alone spoken," Kathryn said at last, a bit hesitantly. "I was wondering, perhaps we could get together for coffee later?" Her lips turned up slightly. "I'm sure there's a decent coffee shop somewhere in the greater Boston area."

"Several," Chakotay said with an answering smile. When he'd been here the previous year, he and Seven had frequented many of the coffee shops in the area, usually for breakfast. It had been a comfortable routine, one he hadn't realized he'd appreciated until it was gone. "But I'm afraid I—" He glanced towards Seven once more.

"Of course," Kathryn said at once. "You doubtless have plans already." She followed his gaze, a slight frown puckering her forehead.

Chakotay wondered how much Kathryn knew about the current situation between himself and Seven, how much Seven had confided in her. If the two of them were truly friends again—"It's just that I've been away for so long," he said apologetically. "This is my first trip back from Betazed in nearly a year—"

"I understand," Kathryn said, her hand raised to forestall any further explanation on his part. "I've got to be getting back to San Francisco anyway." She paused. "If you're ever in the neighborhood, I've got a place in Monterey, right on the water. There's a direct shuttle that leaves San Francisco every hour and lets you off about two or three kilometers from my place. You're welcome to stop by any time."

"Thanks," he said, appreciating the olive branch Kathryn held out to him. She wasn't the type to come out and apologize directly, but he understood that this was her way of telling him that things between them were back to normal. Or as close to 'normal' as they could possibly be. "I may just do that."

Back in the present, Chakotay joined her at the railing, breathing in the crisp saline-scented air. "I hope I'm not bothering you. I know I should have called first, but I..." his voice trailed off.

"No," Kathryn said immediately. Her expression softened as she looked at him. "It's always good to see an old friend, and God knows, old friends are few and far between these days."

Chakotay let out a sigh. He had passed the first hurdle. "Nice piece of real estate," he said. He glanced around. "Beautiful view." He pointed towards the vast expanse of blue-gray water sparkling in the late summer sun. "Tom made it sound like you'd buried yourself in the middle of nowhere. But I wouldn't call this 'nowhere.'"

Kathryn grinned as her gaze swept over the house, the blue-hued hills just to the east, and the ocean behind her.

"It can be quiet out here," she admitted. "Sometimes a little too much so." She paused. "I mean it when I say I'm glad to see you, Chakotay. It's been so long." He heard the wistful note in her voice.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. He cleared his throat and stared down at the red cedar planks of the deck floor. So

much had happened since they'd last seen each other—really seen each other; the few minutes at the MIT reception had been so brief as to be insignificant.

Chakotay wasn't quite sure where to start. He knew he owed Kathryn an apology; he'd never visited her in the hospital when she was clinging desperately to life, had not called in the months that followed. And most unforgivably, he hadn't attended the funeral, hadn't even known that Harry was dead. "I don't know what to say, Kathryn." He looked up then, his eyes meeting hers squarely. "Except that I should have done this months ago."

"No need for apologies," Kathryn said firmly. "It's in the past." She swung around to face him. "Of course, if you'd come to me, oh, half a year ago, then my reaction would have been quite different. I won't deny that I was angry with you, Chakotay. I know we had some...issues between us, stemming from the end of our time on Voyager. But I still expected to see you or at least hear from you. And until a few weeks ago I hadn't, not one single word—" She took a deep breath. "How long has it been?"

Seven years since the return, but six years since they had last laid eyes on each other. It had been at the gala dinner marking the one year anniversary. At that time, Kathryn had been newly promoted to admiral and Starfleet had made it clear that a former terrorist would not be allowed back into its ranks. Even a celebrated hero like Chakotay. At the affair, Kathryn had been surrounded by well-wishers and Chakotay, along with Seven, Harry, B'Elanna and Tom, had escaped the stiff formality to relax in a jazz club. Chakotay had thought about inviting Kathryn to join them, but he'd been unable to break through the crush of people around her; he'd promised himself he'd call her the next day. But even the best intentions, Chakotay found, never come to fruition on their own.

"A very long time," Chakotay said. "You—you look good." Especially considering what she'd been through in the past year. He resisted the urge to touch her hand, her face, just to assure himself that she was really all right. He swallowed hard. "Have you returned to active duty yet?"

Kathryn laughed mirthlessly. "If you can call it that. No more deep space jaunts for me; I've been assigned to 'desk duty' ever since I came back from medical leave in the spring."

He tried to think if she'd been in uniform at the conference in Boston, but couldn't remember. Whatever she had been wearing, it hadn't made an impression on him. What he did know was that she had looked nothing like she did now.

Clouds scurried overhead, dimming the late afternoon sunshine. The wind whipped around her, causing her to shiver slightly.

"Come inside, Chakotay." Without waiting for an answer, she strode ahead, with the quick light footsteps he remembered so well. "It's getting chilly out here."

He followed her into the house. Inside, the furnishings were simple and modular in design—black and white, with the occasional splash of vibrant red. A step down led into the sunken living room and Kathryn slipped off her shoes as she curled onto the sofa. Chakotay sat opposite her.

"Not what I would have imagined your place to look like," Chakotay said, gesturing towards the angular furniture. "I would have thought overstuffed sofas, antiques..." He glanced

to the side, noting the empty bookshelves and the cartons pushed up against the wall.

Kathryn smiled. "I know, it is a bit 'modern', isn't it? I bought the place—fully furnished—from a 'Fleet family heading out on a permanent assignment in Deep Space. I'm not surprised that they didn't want to take any of this with them." Her mouth turned down at the corners. "Due to 'extenuating circumstances,' I haven't had a chance to redecorate."

"Or even unpack?"

She looked at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. "You mean the boxes?" She laughed. "The Paris family is coming for the weekend. Considering the havoc their last visit wrought, I decided to put away the breakable or fragile objects before they get here."

Chakotay grinned. "I know what you mean—Joey can be a real handful." The last time he'd seen Joey Paris, the little boy had been—in Tom's words—'unusually active', but Chakotay suspected that the three-year old still kept his parents hopping with his antics. "I hear he keeps trying to fly the flitter on his own. Takes after his father in that sense."

"He's just naturally bright and curious," Kathryn said, coming quickly to the defense of Joey Paris. "Or so I kept telling myself after he attempted to dismantle my comm console."

He could well imagine that scene but decided not to comment. "At any rate, the 'modern' decor is nice. It suits you, it really does."

"Thank you." She looked at him meaningfully. "It reminds me of Voyager in a way."

This, Chakotay had to admit, was true. He ran his hand lightly over the smoothly polished veneer of the coffee table before turning to look towards the floor to ceiling windows, which offered a spectacular view of the ocean. He had a sudden vision of what it must look like at night, a black velvet expanse with a scattering of stars.

Chakotay turned away from the window. "Well, maybe now you'll finally be able to make whatever changes you like."

"I hope so," she said in a low voice; it seemed as though she were speaking more to herself than to him. "I've had this place for well over a year now, if you can believe it. But somehow, with one thing and another, I haven't really had the chance to do anything with it, let alone spend a lot of time here."

"That's an understatement," Chakotay said, recalling how Kathryn had been dispatched to the Neutral Zone to negotiate with the Romulans over the Ponzi raiders about a year and a half ago. Just when it seemed like months of 'shuttle diplomacy' were starting to pay off, a disastrous miscommunication had led to a battle. Kathryn and B'Elanna Torres had been seriously injured—and Harry Kim had been killed. Chakotay had been on Betazed during that time and while he had been peripherally aware of what had happened, he'd never thought to make the connections, realized that people he cared about had been involved. It was only later, on an unrelated trip to Earth, that B'Elanna had filled him in.

Time and distance—he stirred uncomfortably as he remembered the details of that visit the previous fall. Other than a quick stopover by B'Elanna and Tom, he'd spent all of his time—less than two weeks—in Boston with Seven. On his way back to the spaceport he'd tried calling the hospital to

speak to Kathryn but she'd been unavailable. There had been no time to try again, and he had let matters slide. Again.

Chakotay took a deep breath. "It's been quite an eventful year."

"You can say that again," Kathryn said. She shook her head. "So much for thinking that life back in the Alpha Quadrant would be tame or boring." She toyed absently with one of the couch pillows, running her fingers over the smooth fabric. "You know, there were times I was convinced that the Admiralty kept giving me assignments in the far reaches of the galaxy just to keep me out of what's left of their hair, to ensure I'd stay out of trouble. But I seem to have a knack for bringing it on myself anyway."

"About the Admiralty not appreciating you, you know that's not true."

"I don't?" Kathryn looked pensive. "Sometimes, I'm never quite sure of how much is real and what's imagined."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Kathryn sighed as she got up from her seat. "Anything to drink? I'm having coffee myself."

"Coffee is fine," Chakotay said.

"I gave up on the replicator a long time ago," Kathryn said. She nodded in the direction of the kitchen. "My sister thought I was insane for wanting such a large kitchen, but I like the space. I've had it with confined places."

"I know that feeling," Chakotay said, thinking back to the wide open expanses of the Great Betazed Desert, the feeling of freedom—and peace—he'd found there.

*Even as he stood there, he knew he would remember that day for all the wrong reasons. The weather conditions were ideal for a December day anywhere, let alone in an alien desert—a faded blue sky, a warm muted wind and for once, no sandstorms. Under other circumstances, it would have been the perfect day. But the tent that had served as his home for the last eight months was stifling and claustrophobic.*

*"So I guess that's it," Chakotay said quietly to Seven. It was the last day of her visit to Betazed—and he knew deep down that it would be the last time they'd ever be together like this. Her fair hair lay on her shoulders and she was dressed in loose-fitting khaki pants and a dark red shirt. He focused his gaze on her necklace—the one he'd given her—and wished there was some way of preventing what was coming next.*

*"It would appear so," Seven said. She sounded curiously unemotional—more like the Seven of Nine of nearly a decade before than the woman who'd been his lover for the past six years. He wondered if she was pretending, putting up a good front. A part of him was selfish enough to hope that she was—that inside she was as disappointed and hurt as he was. "Unless you are willing to give up the dig, and return to Boston and take up a position in academia."*

*"No, I'm not." Chakotay's voice sounded harsh, even to his own ears. He looked up in time to see the look of pain that passed across Seven's face.*

*"I did not think you would," Seven said. Her tone was regretful, but resigned. "Nor am I willing to give up the life I have built for myself in Boston."*

*"I'm sorry," he said, fighting the urge to take her in his arms. "I didn't want it to end this way."*

*“Nor did I.” Chakotay thought he saw a tear glistening on her lashes. She blinked, and it was gone. “I still love you, Chakotay. The years we had together—”*

*“They were pretty special, weren’t they?” He sighed. He resisted the urge to tell her that nothing had really changed in how he felt about her, that he still loved her and always would. But he knew that saying it would make an already difficult situation that much worse. It would be better this way, to let her get on that transport back to Earth and let distance take care of the emotions. He cleared his throat. “But we’re just too different, Seven, we want different things in life. And it wouldn’t be fair to hold on to this long past the time it—” he paused, thinking— “I don’t want to hold you back. You should be free to find something else, someone else to be with, who can make you happy.” An image of Ethan McNeill flashed unbidden through his mind, making the last statement enormously difficult to say. But to his surprise, once the words were out, he felt a curious sense of relief.*

*Seven came over to him then, put her arms around him, leaning her head against his shoulder. He held her for a long moment, stroking her hair, inhaling the sweet floral scent of her perfume. In that moment, she felt perfect—they felt perfect—and then the illusion was shattered when she moved away. “As should you, Chakotay. You have too much to give, too much love, for you to be alone.”*

*He didn’t know how to react to her unexpected statement. “I’ll be back on Earth in August, for your conference,” he said awkwardly.*

*“Chakotay—”*

*“No, I will. I promise,” he insisted, reluctant to let it end this way. Not here, not now, not on a day when the sky was a delicate blue and the air outside felt so full of promise.*

*She bit her lip and glanced towards her bags.*

*“I’ll see you to the transport,” Chakotay said swiftly. He reached for the heavier of the two bags. Seven’s hand on his forearm was gentle.*

*“Perhaps,” she said, “for now, this should be good-bye.”*

*So he called for another member of the dig crew to take Seven to the transport station. He decided not to watch her go. Instead, on that beautiful day, he had sat on the edge of his bed, his hand on the spot where Seven had been just the night before. Chakotay didn’t know how long he sat there. At some point, he pulled on his hat and went out into the sun.*

Chakotay followed Kathryn across the black and white floor tiles. In the kitchen, Kathryn appeared perfectly natural, moving fluidly from cabinet to sink as she filled the red tea kettle with water.

“So no more replicators?” he teased. A distant memory of a dinner table with burned roast and potatoes came to mind. Yet another example of good intentions gone bad, Chakotay thought.

“Not without B’Elanna here to repair them,” Kathryn said. She indicated the kettle. “Old fashioned, traditionalist, call it what you will, but I’ve yet to go wrong.”

He leaned against the counter, noting the array of cookbooks lined up against the wall. “Well, if worse comes to worse, B’Elanna is coming this weekend, right?” He watched as Kathryn removed a container of brownies from the stasis unit and poured hot water into the coffee maker. “How are she and Tom doing?”

“They’re good,” Kathryn said. She took two mugs out of the cupboard. “Though I think it’s been a month or so since I’ve seen them.”

It had been considerably longer than that for Chakotay and he couldn’t help but think of how B’Elanna had looked the last time he’d seen her. ‘Well’ was not the word he would have used, nor had their conversation been particularly pleasant, especially at the beginning.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Chakotay said. “I was worried about how they were coping with everything. Even before this whole business, Tom just seemed...” He stopped, looking for the right word to describe the man who had once been Voyager’s chief helm officer. He’d run into Tom a couple of years ago, in a dimly lit bar at Utopia Planitia. Chakotay had been going to Boston for the first time, and Tom was heading out to a conference on Starbase Four. To Chakotay, Tom had seemed curiously tight-lipped, almost deflated. And that was before he lost his best friend and nearly lost his wife. Last fall, when he’d visited them, Tom had seemed exhausted, worried, upset—all perfectly normal considering what had happened. But for some reason, Chakotay kept going back to that meeting that had taken place nearly two years earlier.

He was aware that his relationship with Tom had always been just slightly warmer than cordial, and that might have had something to do with Tom’s distance. However, there was something else just below the surface—an emotion, or lack thereof—which had caught Chakotay’s attention.

“Tom seemed how?” Kathryn carefully poured coffee into two mugs, both branded with the Starfleet logo. “Chakotay?”

“Empty,” Chakotay said finally.

“He’s been through a lot, Chakotay.” She paused. “We all have.”

Chakotay took the mug Kathryn handed him. He sniffed appreciatively at the warm beverage. “You know, sometimes I do prefer the Traditionalist way of doing things,” Chakotay said. He took his first sip. Yes, the coffee definitely tasted better than the replicated variety.

Kathryn leaned back against the kitchen counter and closed her eyes as she deeply inhaled the aroma of the fresh brew. “Sometimes simplicity has its advantages.”

He caught the tone in her voice at once, realized that she was talking about something more than a replicator-less kitchen. “It doesn’t always have to be complicated, Kathryn.”

“Doesn’t it?” Kathryn took a sip. “Sometimes I wonder if any other way is possible.”

“You answered that question yourself earlier—sometimes you bring it on yourself.” He shifted his position against the counter.

Kathryn’s lips tightened. “It’s not the same thing. That’s not what I meant.”

“But you know it’s true.”

She put her mug down and turned to face him. “Chakotay, why don’t you just say what’s on your mind? You didn’t come all this way to beat around the bush.”

“No, I didn’t.” He put his mug down as well. “And it’s definitely time—past time—for the two of us to finally clear the air, say some things we should have said long ago.” His heart was beating furiously as he said the words; his mouth felt dry, as he watched Kathryn. Her expression didn’t change.

"You're right, it is," she said evenly. From her demeanor it was clear that she expected him to start. For all her calm tone, he couldn't help but notice her hands, balled into fists, were planted firmly on her hips. Chakotay had seen that look, that posture, before. It never boded well. She demanded, "Well?"

How many times had the two of them faced off like this in the past? He'd long ago lost count of the number of arguments they'd had on board Voyager—over command issues, possible courses of action. They'd disagreed on major issues like how flexible the ship, with its combined crews of Starfleet and Maquis, should be in adhering to standard Federation protocols. Or the way he'd felt she tended to shut him out of major decisions, barely listening to his opinions before acting on her own counsel anyway. Or her insistence on separating the personal from the professional in their interactions and then crossing that line herself, turning what was a command disagreement into an issue of personal betrayal. Until finally the distance between them was so great that he'd despaired of ever finding common ground again.

No, a confrontation was not what he wanted now.

He took a step back, both figuratively and literally, and held up his hands. "I'm sorry. I didn't come here to attack you. I don't want to fight, Kathryn. I just want to talk. I didn't mean to give you the wrong impression, to put you on the defensive. That wasn't my intention at all." From the look on her face, he couldn't tell if she was disappointed or relieved.

After a long moment, Kathryn took a deep breath. "Neither do I." Her clenched fists slowly relaxed. She fingered the folds of her skirt nervously, then forced a smile. "This seems to be a pattern I've fallen into lately—haven't seen someone for a long time and then the first thing I know, we're arguing, bringing up old grievances and making accusations over who's to blame for what."

"I know the feeling," he said wryly, thinking again of the last time he'd seen B'Elanna. He'd anticipated a good conversation with an old friend and instead had found himself lambasted by B'Elanna. He'd been taken by surprise with B'Elanna's sharpness, but later, had to admit that she had been right. On more than one count. "I've had a few of those difficult conversations myself recently."

"I can imagine," Kathryn said and Chakotay wondered if B'Elanna had told her about his visit. "I think that the time for recriminations has long passed." She smiled wryly. "My therapist told me that anger slows the healing process. So let's consider bygones to be exactly that, all right?"

Chakotay smiled. "I think I can agree to that."

Kathryn nodded. "Come sit down at the table. There's no reason to stand." She grabbed two small plates and put them on the table. "And have a brownie."

There was nothing like a brownie to break the tension and these were uncommonly good; moist, chewy and flavorful.

"These are excellent," Chakotay said sincerely.

Kathryn beamed and Chakotay was startled; he'd forgotten the intensity of Kathryn's smile. "Thank you. It's my mother's recipe, actually."

Taking another bite, Chakotay said, "I just realized that you were probably expecting someone and I'm most likely in the way." At her questioning looking, Chakotay continued, "When I showed up this afternoon, I mean." He gestured at

her dress. "Unless that's normally the way you look when you're just lounging around the house."

"No, it's not," she said with an amused look. "But to answer your question, yes, I did have company earlier. Mark was here—you remember Mark Johnson?"

Her former fiancé. Chakotay nodded, aware of a sudden wave of disappointment. "I see."

"He was here with his wife and their son," Kathryn went on, as if he hadn't spoken at all. "In a single afternoon, I had a snapshot of what my life could have been like."

She didn't have to finish the sentence for him to know what she was thinking: If circumstances had worked out otherwise. He couldn't help but remember, though, that Kathryn and Mark had been together for a very long time, even before the mission to the Badlands—and had seemed content to leave things the way they were. "Do you really believe that?"

Kathryn picked up the coffeepot and refilled her cup, then paused and looked at him questioningly. He nodded and watched as she filled his as well. "I'd like to think so," she said at last. "I'd like to think that the time would have come when I'd have been ready to settle down, ready to give up my career and place someone else's needs before my own."

"Would it have to come to that?" Chakotay asked, recalling with a pang of sadness the choice he himself had made. "That you'd have to make a choice?"

Kathryn nodded slowly. "You should know the answer to that, Chakotay, better than anyone. The responsibilities of being a captain, the duty to one's ship—they always have to come first, ahead of anyone or anything else. Pretending otherwise isn't fair to anyone—not the crew, not your lover and most of all not to yourself."

He instinctively reached out for her hand and gave it a squeeze. No, Kathryn Janeway was never one to believe in half-measures. For her, it was always all or nothing.

"Somehow I can't envision you as a housewife," Chakotay said, trying to lighten the mood. He had a sudden vision of Kathryn in Traditionalist garb, her hair pulled back from her face, mopping the kitchen floor; he stifled a smile at the incongruous image. "Or any career that didn't have you on the bridge of a starship."

"If you'd asked me, I'd always have said the same thing," Kathryn agreed. She looked down at their hands and carefully moved hers away. "But it was good seeing Mark, it really was. He looks happy and I admit, a part of me was envious of how he interacted with his family, how they obviously felt about each other." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm truly glad that Mark was able to put his life back together." Kathryn looked at Chakotay. "Especially since he told me that he never thought he'd feel that way again after he'd 'lost' me."

"Are you?" The words slipped out almost of their own volition.

"Am I what?"

"Happy."

"Yes, I am," Kathryn said, and then stopped and rolled her eyes. "You know, if I say it enough, I can almost believe it." She held up her hand. "Don't get me wrong, Chakotay, I am happy. As happy as I possibly can be. I've had the great adventure of my life, which is a lot more than most people can say. I'm not sure what the future holds, but in my heart I know that nothing can possibly top those years on Voyager."

Chakotay's jaw clenched. "Yes, those years were wonderful, Kathryn. But they're over and done with. In the past. You still have the rest of your life ahead of you. Do you really want to spend it looking back at your glory days while writing off any chance of achieving anything else, of *living*?"

"And who says I'm not?" Kathryn asked sardonically. "*Living*, that is."

Chakotay shrugged. "It's just the impression I get, that's all. That you're still pulling away from those you care about, that you dwell too much on what was instead of what is."

"That's a pretty bold statement from someone whom I haven't seen in nearly six years."

"Perhaps," Chakotay said calmly, "but it doesn't change what I see in you, Kathryn. You're not the same person you used to be and I really think—" he paused here, wondering if he'd gone too far. A part of him couldn't forget that he had once reported to Kathryn Janeway, had been subservient to her in all things. She hadn't always considered his opinion to be worth much when they were on *Voyager* and he wondered if that had changed.

"What would you have me do that would be meaningful?" Kathryn shot back, before Chakotay had a chance to finish his sentence. "Perhaps take on the Borg next? In case you haven't noticed—"

"That's not what I was saying, Kathryn. You misunderstood."

"Hmph, then maybe you should clarify what you meant to say." Kathryn pushed her chair back, the legs scrapping loudly against the tiled floor.

This wasn't how Chakotay had hoped to broach the subject, but now that it had been raised, he wasn't going to shy away from it. "I just think it's a terrible waste that you're sacrificing—that you're content to sit back and let life continue to pass you by." As if in a dream, he remembered other words spoken long ago: *Are you willing to sacrifice any chance of happiness in the present, for the sake of a nebulous future?*

From the shaken look on her face, Chakotay knew she was remembering as well. "That's not what I'm doing."

"Isn't it? You'd rather sit here and bemoan the fact that you could have had a life filled with love instead of the emptiness you've got now. You talk about choices, but the fact is you passed up several oppor—" He stopped and sighed. "Sorry. But I can't just—if only you hadn't always been so afraid to open up and let someone else in!"

Her voice was very cold, but still warmer than her eyes. "You always wanted me to be something I wasn't, something I couldn't be."

"You didn't even want to try!" Chakotay exclaimed, then caught himself, regretting the flash of temper immediately.

Kathryn shook her head. "That's not fair, Chakotay. You know—you knew the circumstances we were in. There was no way, there was never any way."

"Because you didn't want there to be," he said gently. "Even though you'd never backed down from any other challenge. Only this one." Chakotay looked down at his plates; crumbs from the brownies spotted the white porcelain. "And so I thought maybe I had misinterpreted you, that perhaps what I—" he paused again, once more finding himself at a loss for words "—what I felt wasn't valid or reciprocated."

Kathryn's eyes widened, then misted slightly. She bowed

her head, as if afraid of what her expression might reveal. "It's all moot now," she said at last. "You got tired of waiting and moved on." There was a hint of bitterness in her tone.

"Yes, I did eventually move on." Chakotay didn't bother pointing out that seven years was a long time to wait for someone; even Mark Johnson hadn't waited that long. "I had an opportunity at happiness and I couldn't say no to it, not without trying first. That's the difference between us, Kathryn. I was willing to accept love when it was offered to me," Chakotay said with a calm he did not feel. He glanced at Kathryn. "Were you surprised?"

"What surprised me was your choice of partner." Kathryn raised her head. "You and Seven had never struck me as being close before you—" Kathryn stopped short "—or even particularly friendly."

This much was true, Chakotay admitted. Most of his interactions with Seven in the beginning had been those of a first officer disciplining an errant crew member or related to her duties in Engineering or Astrometrics. However, in the last few months on *Voyager*, especially after they were briefly stranded on a planet together, Chakotay had found himself drawn to Seven. She'd been warm where Kathryn had been cool. He had never imagined that their casual friendship would develop into something more lasting.

"But apparently you found some common interests," Kathryn said now, interrupting his thoughts.

The sardonic edge in Kathryn's voice stung. There was no question of what she meant by 'common interests'. "Maybe you weren't only surprised, but jealous. At the time, I wouldn't have thought it, but from what you're saying now, I can't help but think that maybe you were a little bit so," Chakotay said. "For all your lip service about wanting me to move on, deep down you really didn't mean it."

Kathryn bit her lip. "Maybe you're right," she admitted. "I guess I didn't really expect you to do it. And yes, it hurt more because it was Seven, of all people. If you'd fallen in love with an alien princess, or some civilian once we made it back home—but you chose someone on *Voyager*, specifically the one person—other than you—I felt closest to. It felt like a deliberate slap aimed at me." She gave a brief laugh and shook her head in bemusement. "I must have some monumental ego, assuming that it was because of me the two of you got together."

Chakotay absently traced the logo on the side of the mug. "Perhaps you weren't as far off the truth as you think," he said slowly. "I think one of the reasons Seven and I drew closer together initially was because we each felt you'd rejected us." He saw the look of consternation on her face, but she made no attempt to deny the truth of his statement. "You were shutting yourself off from everyone, Kathryn, so hell-bent on getting the crew home that you forgot about the individuals you were actually fighting for. You were so cold and distant, and I know how hurt Seven was. I walked in on her once, in the Astrometrics lab; she was on the verge of tears because you'd just shrugged her off. And I could sympathize, because I knew what it felt like. I invited her to spend some time with me on the holodeck that evening, to cheer her up. And that was how it all began." Chakotay was silent for a long moment, thinking of the early days of his relationship with Seven. She had been curiously eager, ready to please, and

looking for company. It had been a long time since someone had considered him attractive and Chakotay had been flattered by the attention. "The two of you are so much alike, you know—both bright and strong and giving off the aura of being self-sufficient. But at the same time, she was also so vulnerable, so desperately alone."

"You always did need to be needed," Kathryn said evenly. "I should have guessed that was a contributing factor."

"Well, you never needed me, did you?" he said, surprising himself with the bitterness in his voice. "You made it perfectly clear at the start that you could go it alone. The Spirits know, you even seemed happier when you did." He repeated, "You never needed me, Kathryn."

"You're wrong," she protested. "I did need you, but I didn't know how to let you know without looking weak. And that was something I couldn't afford. What would have happened to the ship, to the crew, to any of us, if I'd buckled under pressure?"

Chakotay shook his head sadly. "It isn't an admission of weakness to admit you need someone, Kathryn. No matter what you needed, I was right there to help you if only you would have let me." He gazed into her eyes, seeing himself reflected in their depths. "Remember the legend of the angry warrior, Kathryn? That wasn't just a story; I meant every word." *And he swore to always be by her side.*

"I—I couldn't be sure." He had to strain to hear to catch her next words. "And I was afraid of being rejected."

"So instead you put yourself into a position where you could never be hurt." He grimaced.

"That was the idea," she sighed, and ran her hand over her hair. "Not that I consciously planned any of this."

"I'm sure you didn't." He cupped her chin gently and raised her face till she was looking at him. "I never meant to hurt you, Kathryn."

"You're not to blame, Chakotay. It's my own fault, like you said. I brought this on myself." She sighed again. "And like something else you said, we certainly had a lot of air to clear." She laughed self-consciously. "Several years' worth of baggage, or so it seems." She paused and then continued in a determinedly cheerful voice. "So tell me what you've been up to. I know you've been on Betazed for most of the past two years. Is the dig finished? What will you be doing now?"

"The first major phase I'd signed on for is over." He hesitated as he shifted his position. "I'm not quite sure what I want to do now. I suppose I can always go back to Betazed but...I don't know. When I made my plans to return to Earth several months ago, well, let's just say that circumstances were a bit different then."

"You mean with Seven."

"Yes. She wanted me to stay here permanently, and I was seriously considering it. Or thought I was. But now..." his voice trailed off; he wasn't quite sure how to break the news to her.

Kathryn saved him the trouble. "I know about Ethan," she said gently.

Chakotay exhaled sharply. "Ethan is only a part of it. Over the past several years, we just gradually began losing our connection with each other. It was much simpler when we were together in the same place following the same pursuits, either on board Voyager or the early years since we came

back and she accompanied me on my field work. But I didn't realize at the time that she was following my dream, not hers. And that I was holding her back. Once I realized that, I knew things had to change and I encouraged her to apply to MIT. I just never imagined that that would be the beginning of the end."

"I'm sorry," Kathryn said, her sincerity evident. She paused. "Are you absolutely certain it's over?"

"Yes." Chakotay stood abruptly and went to the window. It faced east; the view was of the blue-gray hills instead of the bay. "Last winter Seven came to Betazed on her break between semesters. And I think both of us realized it then, though neither of us wanted to say it out loud. Finally, just before she left—You know how direct Seven can be at times." He gave her a rueful smile. "But now that I think about it, the signs were there even earlier. We'd grown apart the last couple of years—and I'm not just talking about physical proximity. It was better to end it then. And at least this way, our parting is amicable. Hopefully we can still be friends."

"You will be, if you both want it," Kathryn assured him. "And if you're willing to make the effort." She had a rueful smile of her own. "Connections don't keep up on their own."

"No, they don't." Chakotay moved back to the table. He stopped in front of his chair, but didn't sit down. "You were talking about Voyager earlier, Kathryn, how we'd never approach something like that again. In a way you're right. I'm not talking about the adventure, or the exploits or any of the fascinating discoveries we'd made—"

"—or the epic battles," she cut in with only a slight trace of irony. "Outnumbered by our foes—"

"No, not the battles either." He refused to get sidetracked. "The most important thing was the people. We had something special there."

She nodded and then glanced down at his hands gripping the back of the chair tightly, the knuckles turning white. "Yes, it was. We were a family, in every sense of the word."

"I didn't think we'd drift apart so quickly," Chakotay said. "Somehow, I thought our ties would be stronger, that we would be able to withstand time and distance."

Kathryn stared at him. "Are you talking about the crew?" she asked softly. "Or you and me?"

"Both," Chakotay said, unable to keep the wistful note out of his voice. "But you and me mostly." He hesitated. "Do you think it would have been different?" he asked. "If we had stayed out there...?"

Kathryn considered for a long moment. "No," she said at last. "I don't think anything would have changed." She eyed him directly. "And as we said before, you chose to move on, to fall in love with Seven." Kathryn sighed. "Regardless of anything I might have been feeling inside I wouldn't have come between you."

Chakotay let his hands drop to his sides. "I guess that's what I needed to know." He took a deep breath. "Well, we've spoken about my plans. What about you?"

Kathryn stood as well. She picked up the mugs and plates and placed them neatly in the sink. Her back was to him as she said, "As I mentioned, I've returned to active duty status."

"That's right, you did." He watched as she washed the dishes quickly by hand. He picked up a towel and dried them,

placing the dishes on the countertop. "Have you been back in space since, uh, since—?"

"Since the battle in the Neutral Zone?" Kathryn finished the sentence for him. "Yes, but only a few brief trips and not very far. And not for anything major." She fell silent for a moment. "But even without everything that happened, I was beginning to wonder if there really were any challenges left for me any more. I'm not sure that Starfleet has much left to offer me and I'm not entirely sure whether there's still a place for me in that organization."

He stopped in the act of opening the cabinet and turned to her in surprise. "Are you thinking of retiring from Starfleet?"

"Yes," Kathryn said shortly, and reached across him to put the dishes away.

Chakotay caught her arm without thinking. "I never thought I'd hear you say that." He looked down at the way he was gripping her and flushed.

She made no effort to pull away from him. "In the past year I've discovered that yes, I can survive away from Starfleet, from duty." Her eyes met his. "Even though my 'hiatus' wasn't exactly voluntary. But the key thing is, Chakotay, after I was more or less recovered physically, I enjoyed my time off. You told me that I needed to focus on living, and without Starfleet, I found I could do exactly that." Her eyes shone. "I've walked for hours on the beach, Chakotay, breathing in the salt air, feeling the sand between my toes, the wind in my hair. I've been reading some of my favorite classics once again, learning to cook—" she smiled. "—and it's been a wonderful experience. I'm not sure I'm ready to sit behind a desk and read diplomatic briefs for hours again."

Chakotay relaxed his hold and forced a smile. "What do you think you'd do then—take up holoprogramming instead, perhaps?"

She laughed and patted his arm affectionately, just as she used to in the old days. "You must have been talking to Tom recently."

"B'Elanna, actually. She's the one who told me that Tom had decided to change careers," Chakotay said. The news had come as a surprise to Chakotay; he'd always figured that Tom Paris would be restless without flying, but the last letter from B'Elanna indicated that Tom was doing very well. In addition, the career change had allowed Tom to spend more time with his children, something Tom had wanted all along. Now, Chakotay frowned. "Seriously, Kathryn, what did you have in mind?"

"I don't really know," she said. "It's not like I've thought this completely through. Just a growing feeling I've had, that's all."

"I see."

"I would like to go into research again," Kathryn said, shutting the cabinet door.

"Anything in particular?" Chakotay asked, moving so he was in her line of vision once more.

"There are a number of areas I'm interested in," Kathryn said contemplatively. "There are probably several institutions that would be glad to have me on staff for the sake of my name recognition alone, but I was thinking...Chakotay, do you remember the alien communication array we discovered in the fourth year of our journey?" Her voice took on a note of breathless excitement—a tone he remembered, had always

appreciated, from their time on Voyager.

He recalled the incident she was referring to all too well; sending the Doctor's holographic matrix through the array had been their first contact with the Alpha Quadrant since the Caretaker had swept them from the Badlands. "The one the Hirogen claimed and weren't especially happy to see us using?"

Kathryn nodded impatiently. "The one powered by a microsingularity, that our sensors indicated was thousands of years old."

"You found it fascinating, as I recall." Chakotay nodded. "You'd like to investigate something like that?"

"Yes." Kathryn looked thoughtful. "I suppose I could find out if anybody is doing research in that direction. Perhaps the Cochrane Institute on Alpha Century, or the Norpin Colony in connection with the Dyson Sphere—" She looked at him expectantly. "What do you think?"

"It sounds like a very good idea," Chakotay said, taking her hand in his. He smiled. "You've always been the rational, level-headed one, whereas I always tend to lead with my heart instead of my head."

"It's not a bad way to be," Kathryn said, with a warm smile. "You've always had good instincts."

Chakotay pressed her hands gently. "There's just one thing, Kathryn."

"Yes?" she said, concerned.

"This house," he said, gesturing around them. "Projects such as the ones you've been mentioning are usually on-site and of a lengthy duration. You've finally found a home for yourself after all this time—would you be willing to give it up?"

Kathryn leaned her head against his shoulder. "Chakotay," she said, her voice slightly muffled. "If there's one thing I've learned over the past several years, it's that home is not a place, but being with the people you love."

His arms tightened around her and he closed his eyes.

And this love  
Is like nothing I have ever known  
Take my hand, love  
I'm taking you home

—Don Henley ("Taking You Home")

## Right in Front of You

*Disclaimer: Unfortunately, the characters still belong to Paramount.*

*Acknowledgement: Thank you to DangerMom for graciously allowing me to use her idea of children riding targs in this story. Thank you to Rocky for her wonderful beta reading.*

*Authors' note: This is the last story in the Glory Days universe. We hope you've enjoyed the ride as much as we've enjoyed writing it. Thank you for all of your wonderful comments and support over the last year. We appreciate it greatly. Thanks again.*

*This story takes place two months after the events in "Home" by Seema and Rocky.*

B'Elanna Torres smoothed the front of her silky red nightgown and took another look in the mirror. The nightgown

clung to her in all the right places, dipping low between her breasts, and then skimming just above her knees. She'd bought the nightgown just before she had shipped out to the Neutral Zone on the Minuteman. As such, she had never worn it, and had just pulled it out from her drawer while packing for this trip.

She took one last look in the mirror. The truth was, she'd been overly conscious about her appearance in the months following the battle in the Neutral Zone. Intuitively, she knew Tom hadn't cared that all of her hair had fallen out, that she'd lost so much weight that her bones had jutted out to the point that she had needed cushions to buffet her ailing body. But that was all in the past now and B'Elanna felt like her own self once again. Only the occasional breathlessness due to her scarred lungs remained as a physical remainder of that nightmare.

Carefully, B'Elanna opened the door and stepped out into the bedroom. The carpet was soft beneath her feet. Her relatives here on Qo'noS had offered their hospitality for the duration of the visit, but B'Elanna and Tom had chosen to rent a small house—furnished with all Terran comforts—instead. B'Elanna's rationale was, despite wanting to spend time with relatives and getting to know them again, she also wanted somewhere she could go to escape from them. While she was growing more comfortable with her Klingon heritage, 24 hours worth of exposure was more intense than she wanted to handle. Tom didn't protest; B'Elanna knew he had been dreading the harsh decor of Klingon homes, such as the lack of cushioning on beds and chairs.

"Tom?"

No answer.

Puzzled, she walked—barefoot—across the carpeted floor to the balcony.

"Tom?" She leaned over the railing peering at the garden below, her eyes straining in the darkness of the Qo'noS sky. She'd forgotten, after all of these years, just how black night on Qo'noS really was. Not to mention, just how \*hot\* the summer nights were. "Are you down there?"

She heard the scrape of the lawn chair and a second later, Tom was looking back up at her.

"You called?" he asked.

"I was wondering where you were," she said. "I thought you said you'd be waiting for me."

"Sorry." Tom held up a PADD. "I thought I'd download some of our mail while you were showering and it was a beautiful night, so I thought I'd read outdoors. I'm on my way up."

B'Elanna nodded and went back into the bedroom, closing the balcony doors behind her. She took another look in the mirror, feeling a little silly at her momentary attack of vanity. But then again, she reminded herself, after all she'd been through in the last eighteen months, she had every right to indulge herself.

"Hey," Tom said apologetically as he entered the bedroom. "Sorry about that."

"It's all right. I took longer getting ready than I thought I would," B'Elanna said, eyeing her husband, waiting for a reaction to her outfit.

"Hmmm. I checked on the kids. They're sleeping." Tom dropped the PADD on the dresser, stretching. "The Day of

Honor festivities really wore them out."

"I forgot how much fun the Day of Honor is for children," B'Elanna said. She moved closer to Tom, wrapping her arms around him. "Thank you for agreeing to come here. I know it's not Risa."

"I'm having a good time, B'Elanna. I really am." Tom grimaced. "Though, I admit to not being that fond of heart of targ. Especially one that was still beating..."

B'Elanna smiled. She hadn't been entirely fond of the heart of targ either, but the children had been fascinated by it. In addition, her relatives had mentioned many, many times how \*young\* the targ had been—a true delicacy—and hence, an explicit honor bestowed upon her family. For that, B'Elanna had been truly grateful. She'd been uncertain of her reception here on Qo'noS and she was relieved by the warm welcome they had received by her mother's brother and his wife.

"I know how much you wanted to go to Risa," B'Elanna persisted. It was Tom's idea to go on vacation, a second honeymoon, he had said. The last year had been hard as B'Elanna had recovered from injuries sustained in the conflict between the Romulans and the Federation. Not only that, the death of Harry Kim had been a devastating blow for all of them. They needed to get away, Tom had argued. He had proposed the indulgence of Risa at first, but B'Elanna had asked to vacation on Qo'noS instead.

"It's not exactly romantic, I know," she had said apologetically. "But I want—no, I need to—go." She had been unable to explain the urgency underlying her request, knowing only that after nearly twenty years, it was time to reassert her connection to her mother and by extension, to Klingon culture. She supposed that her newly awakened longing for all things Klingon was due to the fact she'd come so close to death, come so close to losing everything and everyone she loved. "It would mean a lot to me, Tom."

Tom had agreed readily; he'd always had an interest in Klingon culture, sometimes, much to B'Elanna's amusement, his desire to learn more about Klingon tradition and religion exceeded hers. They had also made arrangements, on their way back, to stop on Vulcan, to visit Tuvok and his family. B'Elanna had explained that she had felt very much at peace while visiting Vulcan two years previously; Tom had thrown up his hands in mock exasperation.

"It's \*your\* vacation," he had said genially. "Whatever you want."

B'Elanna had then suggested that they bring Jenni and the children along on the trip as well. At this, Tom's expression had turned slightly sour.

"It's a second \*honeymoon\*, B'Elanna, not a family vacation," Tom had said. But he'd given in easily enough. He had understood B'Elanna's desire to make-up for lost time with her children. Now that she was well enough to play with them and take care of them herself, B'Elanna was determined to do so. Bringing Jenni along had been a compromise, allowing them to spend time with the children but also private time with each other.

Their arrival on Qo'noS had coincided with the Day of Honor festivities. B'Elanna had been taken aback, shocked that she was no longer as in tune with the Klingon calendar as she once had been. But the children, Joey and Miral, had enjoyed every moment of the activity-packed day, from riding

on a targ—a little \*too\* spirited, in B'Elanna's opinion—to feasting on the bloody heart of that very same animal. And through her children's eyes, B'Elanna had been able to capture some of the joy she herself had never been able to feel for the holiday. As an adult, on Voyager, she had attempted—at Tom's urging—to celebrate the Day of Honor; however, the holodeck program based on the ritualistic aspects of the holiday had not provided much entertainment value as she'd battled one Klingon warrior after another. B'Elanna had been unable to grasp exactly what the honor was in \*that\*.

“You looked like you were enjoying yourself. Even Jenni seems to be having a great time. Who would have guessed that she would find the man of her dreams right here on Qo'noS?” Tom asked in amusement now. They'd both been surprised when their fiercely independent housekeeper/nanny had been smitten with a San Francisco-based reporter who had come to Qo'noS to cover the Day of Honor festivities. Right after the children had been put to bed, Jenni had taken off with Robert to check out some of the late night attractions. Now Tom yawned. “I know how the kids feel, though. I'm really tired.”

“Hmm,” B'Elanna said, trying to hide her disappointment. She sat down on the bed, folding her legs beneath her. “Al-ready?”

“B'Elanna, we were traveling for several days with two very active children and then we ran around from place to place all day today.” Tom looked at her with gentle exasperation. “I'm beat.”

“You sure you don't have a little bit of energy?” she teased. Tom glanced at her wearily.

“What do you have in mind?”

“How about you come here” —she patted the bed lightly— “and share the mail with me. Anything interesting?”

Tom grabbed the PADD and flopped down next to B'Elanna. She curled up next to him, wrapping her arm around his torso, her lips pressing against his cheek. Letters were the absolute last thing on B'Elanna's mind as Tom's arm draped carelessly around her.

“We got a letter from the Admiral, among others,” Tom said. B'Elanna lifted her head in anticipation. It had been at least a couple of months since they'd last heard from Janeway; they had taken a family trip down to Monterey to visit Janeway in her lovely new house on the beach.

*While the kids played in the sand (with Miral occasionally venturing into the frigid waters with a protective Tom hovering nearby), B'Elanna and Janeway sat in lawn chairs, watching and catching up. It been a pleasant enough visit, made sweeter by Tom's observation that Janeway seemed—finally—at peace.*

*“You know how keenly she felt the distance between herself and Chakotay and Seven,” B'Elanna said on the way back to San Francisco. She glanced into the back of the flitter, checking on the sleeping children. “I'm happy to see she's finally reconciled with both of them.”*

*“She did seem a lot happier,” Tom agreed. He lifted his hand from the controls and placed it over B'Elanna's. “I don't think I've seen the Admiral in such a good mood in a long time. Did she say anything specifically to you about it?”*

*B'Elanna glanced at Tom. He was teasing, smiling. He'd always been overly interested in other people's lives, B'Elanna*

*knew.*

*“Did I press her for information, you mean? No, I didn't. She just said that she had a nice visit with Chakotay last weekend and that he stayed for dinner and then left for San Francisco that same evening.” She looked at Tom meaningfully. “Does that answer your question?”*

*“Oh,” Tom said, obviously disappointed. “I was sure there was something more.”*

*B'Elanna leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “You're so cute when you're trying to play matchmaker. Since you're so interested, maybe the next time we visit, \*you\* can be the one to press for more details.” She smiled sweetly, but Tom grimaced.*

“And what does Janeway say?” B'Elanna asked now.

“She's taken a leave of absence from Starfleet.”

“What?” B'Elanna shrieked. And then, remembering the sleeping children down the hall, she lowered her voice, “What?”

“Apparently, she thinks it's time to take a break,” Tom said, “and she's joining Chakotay on Betazed.”

B'Elanna narrowed her eyes. “Joining Chakotay on Betazed?”

“She stresses it's in a purely scientific capacity,” Tom said. He showed the PADD to B'Elanna. “Apparently there's a group that's working on the feasibility of creating and harnessing microsingularities at the University of Betazed.” Tom stifled a yawn and then continued reading. “The head of the Physics department there, Anne Duncan, is the sister of Phillip Haskel, who's heading up the research arm of the excavation project in the Great Betazed Desert on the southern continent.”

“Well, what do you know?” B'Elanna asked. B'Elanna had always had trouble figuring out exactly the nature of the relationship between Janeway and Chakotay. In recent years, she'd been aware of the strain between the two and she could see that the fault lay with both individuals. “I guess it's obvious that things worked out between them better than we previously thought. She certainly gave no hint of leaving Starfleet or going to Betazed during our visit. This must be a very recent development.” B'Elanna took the opportunity to run her fingers through Tom's hair. He didn't seem to notice.

“I'm sure they'll be fine,” Tom replied absentmindedly. “And she doesn't imply anything more than \*friendship\* in the letter, but if you read between the lines...” Tom glanced at B'Elanna.

“Still the hopeless romantic, aren't you?” B'Elanna asked as she nudged even closer to Tom, her hand now resting suggestively on his upper thigh.

Tom, however, turned his attention back to the PADD. “Worse comes to worse, Janeway can always change her mind and return to Starfleet. At any rate, the Admiral is very much looking forward to a change of pace.” Tom yawned. Desperate, B'Elanna nudged him with her leg.

“What else does the Admiral say?” she asked silkily as she reached to kiss Tom lightly on the neck.

“She says that she went to Boston to visit Seven last weekend and reviewed Seven's latest research.” Tom's voice was heavy with sleep. “Janeway notes here that Seven's research was widely acclaimed by many of the brightest scientific minds

in audience.” Tom shifted position. “And it seems that Seven is engaged to—” Tom frowned— “an Ethan McNeill.”

“Ah, a fellow professor at MIT,” B’Elanna said. Tom looked at her in surprise.

“You know him?”

“Seven mentioned him once in passing.”

Tom looked slightly miffed. “You never told me!”

“Sorry, I didn’t think it was important at the time,” B’Elanna said hastily. She draped one leg over his, her hand still stroking his thigh. “What else?”

“Hmmm... there’s something here from Neelix.”

“And what does he say?”

“Apparently baby Alixia is not such a baby anymore. She’s walking and talking. Neelix sounds very proud.” He glanced at B’Elanna. “I’m trying to imagine Neelix as a father. If he’s anything like was with Naomi...” Tom’s voice trailed off.

She smiled. “I think Neelix is probably a great father. Just like you are.” B’Elanna squeezed Tom’s hand. “The two of you are a lot alike, Tom. You both have big hearts and a capacity for love.” Tom tightened his arm around her, pulling her close. B’Elanna rested her hand on his chest. “On Voyager, I think it was easy to pull away from those we cared about the most, pretend we really didn’t care for one reason or another.” She lifted her head a little to look Tom in the eye. “We drifted apart when we needed each other the most.”

“Not us,” Tom reminded her gently.

“Not towards the end, but there were times when we did. When you pushed me away, when I resisted you. When we needed each other the most, we weren’t always there for each other, not like we are now,” B’Elanna said, her voice dropping in volume. “But as a crew, we were all there for each other.” She paused, remembering the one exception. Janeway’s withdrawal from the rest of her crew had been hurtful to all of them, but especially to Chakotay and Seven—the people with whom Janeway had the closest relationship. “But something changed in those last few months and it got worse when we actually returned to the Alpha Quadrant.” B’Elanna glanced at Tom pensively. “I think we were so interested in our own lives that we didn’t think of what the consequences of distance \*would\* be. I can’t help but think now if we could do it all over again, if we had only known how it would all play out, I wonder—”

“Are you thinking about Harry?”

“How did you know?”

“Just a feeling.” Tom stroked her hair idly. “Harry was where he wanted to be, doing what he wanted. That’s what we have to remember. And—” Tom’s voice cracked and B’Elanna knew that he was remembering the sobering ceremony which had taken place a few months previously in which Harry Kim had been posthumously honored and promoted to full commander. “And as for the rest of us—” Tom shook his head— “we came so close to losing it all.”

“Yeah.” B’Elanna swallowed hard, remembering how she had quickly lost touch with the others after their return; she’d been so caught up in her new life as wife and mother. But later, she’d been keenly aware of the void left by those whom she’d considered her closest friends, to the point that she had berated Chakotay for being completely unaware of what had happened to her, to Janeway, to Harry Kim, in the Neutral Zone. His lack of knowledge had shown her just how far apart

they had all drifted from each other. “Maybe it’ll be different now that we’ve all reconnected.”

“I intend to make sure that is,” Tom said. “As a matter of fact, I think we have a perfect opportunity for a Voyager reunion.” B’Elanna looked at him with interest. Tom tapped the PADD. “Janeway writes that the Doctor has been honored for some of his medical advances, most specifically for his work with nanoprobe. He’s been recognized as one of the premiere scientists in that field. He’ll be given his award at a conference in Seattle in two months and Janeway suggests that we all attend.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” B’Elanna said.

“Not to mention, it’s also a way of reconnecting once again with the people whom we care about the most,” Tom said with feelingly. He leaned over to kiss the top of B’Elanna’s head. “I think sometimes, you have to come close to losing it all before you finally figure out what’s most important.”

His comment jolted a distant—but precious—memory from the back of B’Elanna’s mind. “You do know remember what the significance of today is, don’t you?” she asked softly.

“The Day of Honor?” Tom looked perplexed. “Of course.”

“More than that,” B’Elanna said hoarsely. “More important than the Day of Honor.” She curled her fingers around his. “The first time I realized that I needed to stop pushing you away, the day you and I were so close to death... that’s what it took, Tom, for me to tell you how I truly felt about you.” Her voice cracked at the end of the statement.

Tom’s eyes widened in realization. “I’m an idiot,” he said softly. He looked at her closely, perhaps for the first time since he’d entered the room. His lips turned upwards in a lascivious grin. “Sometimes, what you’re looking for is right in front of you.” His fingers trailed down B’Elanna’s arm. “You just need to figure out what it’s what you want and make sure you never let go again.”

B’Elanna agreed completely as she surrendered to him.

THE END