

AU version of Caretaker. A few important details altered. Not beta'd.

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She's The Captain

by Jot

"I'm not interested in your petty personnel issues, Commander."

"Captain, I have serious concerns about some of the crew. In particular..."

"The Chief is in charge down there. The engineering crew need to understand the chain of command. So fix them. That's your job, not mine." The Captain waved a hand in the direction of the Commander. "My job is recover some inept Vulcan who has probably already been murdered by the damned Maquis. Dismissed."

Commander Janeway seethed. She considered the *inept Vulcan* a dear friend and had only just found out that Tuvok taken the undercover mission when she was assigned to Voyager. Finding him had been her driving force and about the only thing to keep her on board. Because being first officer under Cavitt *sucked*. After being commanding officer of another vessel, albeit one as small as the *Al Batani*, having to answer to another captain again was hard work.

She had hoped that she would get the captaincy of Voyager, but it wasn't to be. She didn't have a problem accepting that; her years as a Starfleet officer taught patience.

What she did have a problem with was Cavitt. How someone of his caliber had attained the rank of captain and was somehow also rewarded with *Voyager*, the Starfleet's newest ship was something that boggled her mind.

Dealing with Cavitt was a nightmare. He was dictatorial and high handed. He had taken quite some convincing to include Tom Paris as an adviser. The meeting where the suggestion was discussed was revealing. Thankfully, Stadi had backed up Janeway's opinion that any extra information about navigating through the Badlands would be vital to the mission's success. The Captain had agreed finally with considerable bad grace, after arguing against it.

Janeway thought his opinions of Voyager's superiority in any situation to have the ring of hubris about them. After the meeting, she'd looked up Cavitt's service record and was staggered, and somewhat appalled, to find that he had less actual command experience than herself but had, reading between the lines, a father who was very good friends with the admiral in charge of placements.

The chief engineer that Cavitt had insisted on including was as belligerent as the captain, though perhaps even less talented and was already pissing off a whole section of highly competent officers. For the life of her, she couldn't understand why he had been assigned over Carey, who was extremely reliable, if not exceptional.

The idiot in Engineering was going to cause trouble, there was no doubt about it. It was going to be a long three weeks.

The Commander felt a headache coming on.

"Hold on to your hat, Mark. I've made a decision."

"If this is about the rugs..."

"This is my last command posting, Mark. I'm going back to the sciences and research."

Mark's expression went from smiling to serious concern. "Hey...Kath, what's wrong?"

"Honestly, if there's even the smallest chance that I'll turn into anything resembling Captain Cavitt or Owen Paris, I'll even take a demotion."

"Now I'm really worried. You were enjoying it so much. What's changed?"

Kathryn fiddled with her coffee cup and rubbed her eyes. "Mark, tell me honestly, have you met one person who's in the command track that wasn't an egomaniac with a god complex or even a tiny bit sociopathic? I just don't want to turn into anything like that and I don't want to lose you."

"Hey, Kath, come *on*. You're not losing me."

"But I *am* an egomaniac?" The pair shared a fond look at the attempt at humor. "I'm sick of always saying goodbye, Mark. And whoever told me that I would be able to study the stars while in a command role on a star ship was a lying bastard."

"That would be Owen Paris."

"Case in point."

"Kath..."

"I'm pretty serious about this, Mark. I love you, I don't want to keep *leaving* you. And let's not even start about my opinions regarding the Maquis and the Cardassians."

Mark nodded. No one would accuse Kathryn Janeway of being a Maquis sympathizer or question her loyalty but she did have some doubts and was certainly troubled by the Federation's, and indeed Starfleet's, treatment of the rebel group especially given her encounter with the Cardassians earlier in her career.

"We can talk about it when you get home, Kath. And then we can argue about your damned dog."

Janeway smiled broadly for the first time in the conversation and leaned towards the screen. "What did the vet say?"

"There's a 90% chance of rain, career change and puppies in seven weeks."

"She's pregnant?"

"Yes, and it's *not* my fault."

"Of course not. You just let her off the leash at the park, while discussing modal logic with Dr Zhung and she wandered off and got knocked up by that labradoodle that thinks he's Rin Tin Tin."

"So, we've established it's not my fault. That's a relief. And, hey, they should be very cute puppies."

They laughed together. Until her comm beeped. Regaining a serious expression, she winked at Mark, cleared her throat and answered.

"Janeway, here."

"Commander, your drug addict and the new ensign have arrived. Take care of it and keep them out of my way. Cavitt out."

She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

"Jesus, Kath. I see what you mean. You gonna be okay for three weeks?"

"Three weeks, tops. Then that's it and I ask for reassignment back to research. I can't wait."

"Me too. Well, I'd better let you get your drug addict." His smile faded and he spoke quietly. "Be careful out there, Kath. Be safe."

"I will. I love you, Mark. You know that, right?"

"I'm moderately attached to you, too, so like I said, *be careful* and come home to me."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye."

She stared at the Starfleet logo on the screen for a few moments after he had signed off. Finally shaking herself, she checked her appearance and left her quarters, tapping her comm badge as she walked purposefully down the corridor.

"Janeway to Rollins."

"Rollins here, Commander."

"Lieutenant, could you bring Ensign Kim and Mister Paris from the Transporter Room to my office, please?"

"On my way. Rollins out."

Once in her office, Janeway sorted through some PADDs on her desk trying to bring some order to the task list that Cavitt had set for her. She tried not to think about how short staffed they really were and determined to make the best of what she had been given. At the sound of the chime, she got up from her desk to greet the two newcomers.

"Gentlemen, welcome to Voyager."

"Thank you, sir."

"Mister Kim, at ease before you sprain something. Ensign, despite Starfleet protocol, I don't like being addressed as sir." She ignored Paris' smirk and silently hoped he wouldn't antagonize Cavitt

too much. As if.

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Ma'am is acceptable in a crunch, but I prefer Commander. We're getting ready to leave. Let me show you to the Bridge." She motioned with her hand and ushered them both towards the door. "Did you have any problems getting here, Mister Paris?"

"None at all, ma'am."

She managed not to roll her eyes and gave the still smirking Paris a look, but said nothing as they entered the Bridge.

"Captain, may I introduce Ensign Kim, our operations officer and Tom Paris?"

Cavitt didn't even look away from the view screen but merely made a small dismissive wave with his hand.

Trying not to react to Cavitt's rudeness, Janeway turned to Kim and gestured to her left.

"Ensign Kim, this is your station. Would you like to take over?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's not crunch time yet, Mister Kim. I'll let you know when."

"Lieutenant Stadi, lay in the course and clear our departure with operations. Let's get on with this." Cavitt ordered.

"Course entered, Ops has cleared us."

"Ready thrusters."

"Thrusters ready." Kim said in a clear voice, Janeway gave him a small reassuring smile.

"Initiate launching sequence."

"Sequence underway."

"Engage."

The week long trip to the Badlands seemed much longer to Janeway. The only good thing was that the captain stayed either in his quarters or Ready Room for almost the whole journey.

The real bright spot was catching up with Tom Paris, who she had known since she was a cadet. They'd met when she gone to some of his father's lectures, which Tom had also been ordered to attend, despite being a few years away from Academy age.

Although both 'Fleet brats, they couldn't have been more different. Kathryn very rarely saw her father and he didn't meddle in her Academy activities at all, whereas Admiral Paris had micro-managed Tom, despite him not even attending the Academy at that stage. The pair had struck up a friendship.

Whereas her fellow cadets thought Janeway too interested in her studies, Tom respected her because she was doing what *she* wanted, rather than what her family did. The pair spent a few hours reminiscing about some of their happier times together, usually during times when Tom's father was not on Earth. Tom was grateful of news of Janeway's family too, as she had taken him home to Indiana a few times when he wanted to escape his father.

They also shared some of their get-togethers with Stadi, who Tom obviously respected, as well as Harry Kim, who he'd befriended on DS9. Despite his reputation for bad behavior, Janeway found Tom an excellent judge of character and the four enjoyed a few hours in the Mess Hall several times during the journey to the Badlands.

"Captain, we're approaching the Badlands." Janeway called to Cavitt. The Captain entered the Bridge from the Ready Room and took his seat. "Captain on the Bridge".

"Plasma storms were measured at levels three and four." Rollins gaze never left his screen.

"Are we sure this is the right route?" Cavitt's tone was surly and almost annoyed. It also revealed to Janeway that he hadn't read the briefing materials. Only one week and five days until we will be on our way home, she reassured herself.

"The Cardassians gave us the last known heading of the Maquis ship, and we have charts of the plasma storm activity the day it disappeared. With a little help, we might be able to approximate its course." she explained.

"I'd guess they were trying to get to one of the M-class planetoids in the Terikof Belt." Paris said while he was looking over Stadi's shoulder at the helm.

"That's beyond the Moriya system." Cavitt was not impressed.

"The plasma storms would have forced them in this direction, sir." Rollins reported, still not looking up.

"Adjust our course to match." Janeway ordered, after waiting for Cavitt for a few seconds.

"Aye, Commander."

"The Cardassians claimed they forced the Maquis ship into a plasma storm where it was destroyed, but our probes haven't picked up any debris." Janeway added.

"A plasma storm might not leave any debris." Tom replied, sounding somewhat sad.

"We'd still be able to pick up a resonance trace from the warp core."

"Captain, I'm reading a coherent tetryon beam scanning us."

"Origin?"

"I'm not sure. There's also a displacement wave moving toward us."

"You're not sure?" Cavitt barked at Kim, finally paying attention to the happenings around him. "On screen."

"Analysis?" Janeway asked.

"It's some kind of polarized magnetic variation."

"Some kind?" Cavitt asked unhelpfully.

"We might be able to disperse it with a graviton particle field, Captain." Janeway said.

"Go ahead. Red alert. Move us away from it, Helm."

"New heading, four one mark one eight zero." Stadi replied.

"Initiating graviton field."

"The graviton field had no effect."

"Full impulse!" shouted the Captain. "Get us away from it!"

"The wave will intercept us in twelve seconds."

"Stadi, can we go to warp?"

"Not until we clear the plasma field, Commander."

"Five seconds."

"Brace for impact!"

"Three."

There was something wet on her cheek. If Mark had let Molly on to the bed again, they were going to have words.

But the bed was never this hard or felt like carpet under her face, and however enthusiastic Mark was in bed, she didn't think he'd ever hurt one of her ribs. And she was pretty sure at least one was badly bruised.

It only took a few moments before Janeway was almost fully aware and she noticed the smoke and the quiet along with the sharp pain in her chest. She tried to get up but was less than successful, instead just calling out through the haze that the environmental systems hadn't managed to clear up yet.

"Captain?" Silence. "Stadi?"

A small hissing sound and a snap was all the reply she received.

Shit.

There was a sound somewhere on the other side of the Bridge, someone was pushing something off themselves and swearing quietly. It sounded pretty good to Janeway.

"Ensign Kim?" she guessed and again attempted to sit up, this time managing to lean herself against a console, realizing that the ribs were cracked if not broken.

"Kathryn?"

"Tom? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just getting out from some crap from the ceiling. Are *you* all right?"

"Think so. I'm bit banged up but I'm on my feet. Sort of." She noticed someone face down a few feet away from her. Crawling over, she realized almost straight away it was Captain Cavitt. Shuffling up to his head, she felt his neck and closed her eyes. He was dead.

"Can you see anyone, Kathryn? What's with the enviro systems?" She heard him stumble. "*Jesus.*"

"Tom?"

"It's Stadi. She's dead."

The air was slowly clearing but Janeway still couldn't see Paris clearly as she pulled herself to her feet.

"Harry's alive. Looks like he might've just hit his head. He's coming around." Paris looked towards Janeway. "You've got a cut above your eye." He turned around and made his way back towards Ensign Kim.

Janeway wiped her face and made her way to the tactical console and helped Rollins to his feet. At his nod, she made her way back to the command area.

"Hull breach, deck fourteen. Comm lines to Engineering are down. Trying to re-establish." Harry's voice was a bit shaky but strong. Janeway was glad to hear it.

Paris appeared at her side with med kit dermal regenerator and wiped her face and fixed the cut with her barely even noticing him.

"Repair crews, seal off hull breach on deck fourteen."

"*Aye, Commander.*"

"Casualty reports coming in. Sickbay is not responding."

"Bridge to Sickbay. Doctor, can you hear me?"

"Commander, there's something out there."

"I need a better description than that, Mister Kim."

"I don't know. I'm reading... I'm not sure what I'm reading."

"Can you get the view screen operational?"

"I'm trying."

All eyes went to the screen. They appeared to be outside a huge array firing some kind of weapon.

"Commander, if these sensors are working, we're over seventy thousand light years from where we were. We're on the other side of the galaxy."

Janeway tried to make sense of all that was happening around her and resisted the urge to sit down, not sure that she'd be able to get up again.

"Is that the Maquis ship?" asked Paris, as he finished helping loading up a stretcher. Janeway wasn't even sure when the people had entered the Bridge.

"I'm not reading any life signs on it."

"What about on that... that structure?"

"Our sensors can't penetrate it, Commander."

"Any idea what those pulses are that are coming from it, Mister Kim?"

"Massive bursts of radiant energy. They seem to be directed toward a nearby G-type star system."

"Try hailing it."

"Engineering to Bridge. We have some severe damage down here. The Chief's dead. Possibility of a warp core breach."

"Secure all engineering systems. I'm on my way." Wrapping her arm around her ribs, she made her way towards the turbo lift.

"No response."

"Ensign, get down to Sickbay. See what's going on and get yourself checked out while you're there. Mister Rollins, the Bridge is yours."

"Aye, Commander."

"Harry, wait for me." Paris joined Kim and Janeway in the lift.

"Pressure?"

"It's working, Commander. Twenty five hundred kilopascals and holding."

There was a sigh of relief from all present.

"Paris to Janeway."

"Go ahead."

"Not good in Sickbay, Commander. The medical staff are all dead. The emergency hologram program has been activated though."

Before Janeway could process this next disaster another call came through.

"Bridge to Janeway. We're being scanned by the array, Commander. It's penetrated our shields."

"What kind of scan? Bridge? Janeway to Bridge, respond."

"Initiate emergency lock-off."

By the time she'd finished the command, there was no one left on board Voyager.

When Janeway regained consciousness, she was in Engineering. A part of her wasn't sure if what they'd experienced was real. She winced as she sat up and smiled in thanks to Carey who gave her a hand to stand up.

"Janeway to Bridge. Anybody there?"

"Yes, Commander. We're here."

"How long were we over there, Mister Rollins?"

There was a slight pause before his answer came through. *"Almost three days."*

"Three days?" With a confirming nod to Carey that he had things under control in Engineering, she made her way to the turbo lift.

"Commander, the Maquis ship is powering up its engines."

"Tractor them. All senior officers, report to the Bridge immediately."

"Paris to Janeway."

"Go ahead." Alone in the turbo lift, Janeway took the opportunity to lean on the wall and rub her eyes. As she arrived on the Bridge, she straightened up as much as her sore ribs would allow and walked purposefully to the command chair.

"Kim didn't come back with us, Commander. He must still be over there." Despite Tom's usual veneer of bravado, she could hear the concern in his voice.

"Acknowledged, Mister Paris. Computer, how many crewmen are unaccounted for?"

"One. Ensign Harry Kim."

"Hail the Maquis ship."

Chakotay's face appeared on the view screen. Janeway addressed him with her hands behind her back.

"Captain Chakotay? Kathryn Janeway from USS Voyager. We're missing a crewman and I'm hoping he got transferred to your ship by mistake."

Chakotay regarded her with obvious suspicion.

"You're awfully polite for a 'Fleeter."

"Part of the new charm offensive. How am I doing?"

Chakotay allowed her the smallest of smiles at her reply, but remained wary.

"He's not on the Val Jean." He seemed to consider something for a second and then spoke again.

"Actually, Captain..." he seemed to notice her pips, *"Commander, my chief engineer B'Elanna Torres*

wasn't returned to our ship. She's not on yours?"

"No, I'm sorry, Captain. May I suggest we join forces to find them? Would you be prepared to beam over so we can discuss our next move? I will personally vouch for your safety on Voyager."

Chakotay looked to Tuvok for his opinion. The Vulcan gave a slight nod.

"I'll come over with a couple of my crew."

"We'll beam you straight to the Bridge in about two minutes."

"Acknowledged."

"The Maquis are powering down their engines, dropping their shields, ma'am." Rollins reported.

"Energizing."

Three men materialized close to Ensign Kim's station. Janeway rose from her seat to greet them just as the turbo lift doors opened and deposited Tom Paris onto the Bridge.

Janeway waved the security officer back to his position and approached the three Maquis.

"Good to see you, Tuvok."

Tuvok turned to Chakotay. "I must inform you that I was assigned to infiltrate your crew, sir."

"Were you going to deliver us into their waiting hands, Vulcan?" Chakotay nodded towards Janeway.

"My mission was to accumulate information on Maquis activities, and then deliver you into their waiting hands. That is correct." Tuvok stepped to stand at Janeway's shoulder.

Chakotay muttered under his breath and then spotted Paris as he entered the Bridge.

"You're in good company, Tuvok."

"Good to see you too, Chakotay," Tom drawled.

"Did you betray us for a free drink? What was your price this time?" Chakotay stepped menacingly toward Paris, who didn't step back.

"Captain, I'm sorry but I can't allow you to harm Mister Paris." Janeway stepped in between the two men. "I signed him out from prison and I won't get my deposit back if you kill him."

Her tone was pleasant enough but there was something in her voice that made Chakotay eyes flicker back from Paris to her.

"Also, I promised his mother," she added and then with less humor. "And he's a member of my crew, so I expect him to be treated with respect."

The two men continued to stare at each other over her shoulder.

"I suggest we have more *important* issues to address, gentlemen. We have two missing crew members to locate and then get home. Don't you agree?"

Tuvok almost seemed unaware of the tension between the two officers and reported to Janeway.

"Based on my initial reconnaissance, Commander, I am convinced we are dealing with a single entity in the array. I would suggest he scanned our computers in order to select a comfortable holographic environment. In effect, a waiting room to pacify us prior to biometric assessment."

"An examination?" Paris asked with some distaste.

"It is the most logical explanation. Why else would he have released us unharmed?"

"Not *all* of us were." Paris replied.

"Okay, break out the compression phaser rifles. Meet us in Transporter Room Two. We're going back. We'll divide into teams. Mister Tuvok, while Chakotay and I are looking for Torres and Kim, your job is to find out as much about this array as you can. It brought us here. We have to assume it can send us home." She turned to Chakotay. "Agreed?"

Chakotay indicated he agreed with the plan. Janeway nodded back to him. "Mister Rollins, maintain red alert. Keep us on constant transporter locks."

"Commander, I'd like to go with you."

"Mister Paris, If this has something to do with what Chakotay said..."

"It doesn't. I'd just...I'd hate to see anything happen to Harry."

Janeway looked steadily at him and then came to her decision. "Come on."

A short time later, two groups met up on the array after completing their searches. Janeway was vaguely impressed that Tuvok made good enough time to be in uniform and then shook herself to concentrate on more important concerns.

"There are no humanoid lifeforms indicated, Commander. Kim and Torres are not within tricorder range. They may not be on the array."

Chakotay noticed the figure of an old man with a banjo at the side of the house.

"He can tell us where they are."

As Tuvok and Ayala moved off to further investigate, Janeway ordered, "Maintain your comm link. I don't want to lose anyone else." She then hurried to catch up to Chakotay.

The banjo player wasn't happy to see them.

"Oh, why have you come back? You don't have what I need."

"I don't know what you need and frankly I don't care. I just want our people back and I want us all to be sent home." Janeway was sore, angry and now loathed banjo music.

"Oh, well now. Aren't you contentious for a minor bipedal species?"

"This minor bipedal species doesn't take kindly to being abducted."

"Oh, it was necessary," the old man said, trying to dismiss them.

Chakotay, perhaps realizing the Janeway was getting nowhere tried a more conciliatory tone.

"Where are our people?"

"They are no longer here."

"What have you done to them?" Janeway asked, trying to stay as calm as Chakotay.

"You don't have what I need. They might. No, you'll have to leave them."

"We won't do that." Chakotay said, softly.

"We are their commanding officers. We are entrusted with their safety. They are our responsibility. That may be a concept you don't understand."

"Oh, no, I do understand, but I have no choice. There just is not enough time left."

"Left for what?" Janeway had a bad feeling about that statement.

"I must honor a debt that can never be repaid, but my search has not been going well."

Janeway tried the softer approach. "Tell us what you're looking for. Maybe we can help you find it."

"You? I've searched the galaxy with methods beyond your comprehension. No, there's nothing you can do."

"You've taken us seventy thousand light years from our home. We have no way back unless you send us, and we won't leave without the others." Janeway's plea seemed to affect the old man but then he reached the end of his patience with them.

"But sending you back is terribly complicated. Don't you understand? I don't have time. Not enough time!"

With an angry wave of his arm, Janeway was back on the bridge of Voyager and made her way wearily to the Ready Room.

Acting captain's log, stardate 48315.6. We've traced the energy pulses from the array to the fifth planet of the neighboring system and believe they may have been used in some fashion to transport Kim and Torres to the planet's surface.

As she finished the log entry, she moved around the desk and picked up yet another PADD with yet another report on repairs or scans. She rubbed her eyes and tried not to feel too overwhelmed. She winced as she turned and caused her injured ribs to complain about the movement. The door chimed and she bid the visitor to enter.

Looking up, she was grateful to see Tuvok. She felt she needed his rock-like stability at the moment.

"Commander, I've observed something peculiar about the pulses. They're getting faster."

Janeway thought to herself that one more issue to solve was the last thing she needed or wanted.

"Faster?"

"The interval between each pulse has decreased by point four seven seconds since we arrived. I can offer no explanation."

"That's only one of the mysteries we're dealing with, Mister Tuvok. Take a look at this." Janeway motioned towards the screen on the desk. "It's virtually a desert. Not one ocean, not one river. It has all the basic characteristics of an M-class planet except there are no nucleogenic particles in the atmosphere."

Tuvok looked as perplexed as a Vulcan was capable. "That would mean the planet is incapable of producing rain."

"I've studied thousands of M-class planets. I've never seen an atmosphere without nucleogenics. There must have been some kind of extraordinary environmental disaster. As soon as repairs are complete, we'll set a course for the fifth planet."

"*Captain*, you require sleep." Tuvok stressed the title. Janeway looked at him with dismay.

"Kim's mother called me just after he left her. Delightful woman. He's her only son. He'd left his clarinet behind. She wanted to know if she had time to send it. I had to tell her no. Did you know he played clarinet in the Juilliard Youth Symphony?"

"I did not have the opportunity to meet Mister Kim."

"I barely knew him. I never seem to have the chance to get to know any of them. I have to...I have to take more time to do that. It's a fine crew and we've got to get them home."

"*Bridge to Janeway.*"

"Go ahead Mr Rollins." replied wearily.

"*Commander, we've detected a debris field and a small vessel. The vessel has one humanoid life form.*"

"On my way. Janeway out."

"Ensign Simmons tells me that you've bonded with our visitor, Neelix."

"He has a very challenging personality."

"Sounds like it. Adele gave me a full report on your encounter." Janeway allowed herself to smile for the first time since they'd arrived in the Badlands. Ensign Adele Simmons, who had stepped up to be Voyager's transporter operator, gave a succinct and entertaining description of the meeting. Janeway was as grateful for the mental image of Tuvok and Neelix hugging as she was that the young ensign had taken the initiative to jump in to the position without waiting for an order. Before she left, she got a promise from Simmons that she would report any further such gems.

Tuvok's expression didn't change, but Janeway could tell he was somewhat exasperated with the little alien. "He has, however, offered to take an away team down to the planet to investigate possible tunnels."

Janeway considered this offer. "Let's give it a try. We should include Captain Chakotay in the team."

"Agreed. I shall inform him."

"Thank you, Tuvok."

Although they had managed to escape the Kazon settlement, Janeway was less than impressed with Neelix's ethics but couldn't help but feel that she was starting to like him, despite his rather obvious lack of reliability and excess of hyperbole.

Luckily, Neelix's friend Kes seemed a lot more genuine than he did. When she told them about the openings in the surface that allowed her to leave the underground city, Janeway thought it worth the risk of beaming down and trying to make their way in.

The Maquis captain agreed, in his calm manner, but Janeway could tell he was very worried about his officer. She could relate to that.

They first met some friends of Kes who seemed to some kind of outcast or breakaway group. Janeway sincerely hoped this wouldn't complicate anything.

However, once their party was inside the huge underground city, it seemed that the inhabitants were more concerned with the energy blasts from the array, which were getting faster, than they were with strangers wandering through their area.

"Tom, you take Neelix and Kes and see if you can find Kim and Torres in the tunnels, in case they've already tried to make it to the surface." She looked towards Chakotay and Tuvok to see if they had any objections. Chakotay gave her a brief nod. "Chakotay, Tuvok and I will try to find some official or someone who may know their whereabouts."

The parties split up, but it was only a short time later that Voyager reported that the blasts from the array now seemed to be attempting to close the energy apertures that had previously been created. Time was running out to get to the surface.

Janeway was hugely relieved to get Tom's call notifying them that they had found the missing two and she ordered them to keep moving toward the surface and her group would catch up.

Not wanting to waste any time, they broke into a jog and made their way to the tunnel Tom had mentioned. Her ribs complained bitterly about the jerky treatment, but she couldn't slow down until they were on the surface.

The scaffolds and steps leading up were ancient and largely decrepit. Sections were failing as they made their way to Tom's position and falling back to the ground below.

They had pretty much made it to the top when the stairs started to collapse. Janeway grabbed Tuvok as he was hit from some falling debris just as Chakotay partially fell through part of the structure. She had never been so glad to see Tom Paris in her life.

"Tom, can you help Chakotay please?"

"No problem, Kathryn," he whispered and then spoke clearer. "Follow the tunnel to the left and you'll find the access to the top."

Janeway struggled with Tuvok and was grateful to see Neelix waiting to help get them up to ground level. She felt Tuvok shake himself and he straightened.

"Thank you, I am well now." Janeway dropped her hold on his arm. "Perhaps we should lift you up to the surface and you could assist us when we lift Captain Chakotay when Mr Paris joins us."

It sounded painful, but Janeway agreed. Pulling Chakotay up as the three pushed him was more than painful but had to be done. She wasn't going to lose anyone if she could possibly manage it.

They beamed straight to Sick Bay from the planet's surface.

The EMH had no bedside manner, but he did seem to be an efficient physician. Janeway watched as the hologram treated Kim and Torres and was greatly relieved when it announced that both were well and could now be released from Sick Bay.

"Bridge to Janeway."

"Go ahead, Mr Rollins."

"Commander, two Kazon ships are approaching the array."

"Set a course. I'm on my way."

Chakotay approached her. "We should get back to our ship."

"Of course." she offered her hand, which he took. "Good luck. Thanks for your help."

"You too."

Torres and Chakotay made their way back to the Transporter Room. Kim and Janeway returned to the Bridge.

"Bring the weapons systems online." Janeway ordered as the doors of the turbolift opened, immediately studying the view screen.

Tuvok confirmed that the phasers and torpedo systems were operational within seconds.

"Red alert."

As the Voyager and the Maquis ships approached the Array, they were hailed by the lead Kazon ship.

Janeway attempted to negotiate with Jabin, the Kazon ship's commander, but was cut off. She was determined to access the Array and convince the Caretaker to send them home but the Kazon wanted the technology for themselves and expressed their displeasure with her plan by opening fire.

After getting the help of the Maquis to fend off the Kazon, Janeway and Tuvok beamed down to the Array. They confirmed that the Caretaker was dying and was using the last of his power to protect the Ocampo. Although the Caretaker's plan was to destroy the Array, a direct hit during the battle outside disabled the auto-destruct just as the Caretaker died.

Beaming back to Voyager, Janeway didn't even notice the Maquis officers on the Bridge.

While preparing the weapon to destroy the Array, she tried to reason with the Kazon and advised them to get to a safe distance.

Later, Janeway would be heartened by Chakotay's defense of her authority to one on his crew, the

only bright spot on a horrible decision - to strand Voyager and the surviving crew's of two ships 70 years from home.

But after giving the order to destroy the Array and then to leave the area at best possible speed, Janeway retired to her office to freshen up. And throw up. She was sitting at her desk with her head in her hands when the computer announced Tuvok at her door.

The pair sat in silence for a moment as Janeway tried to regain her composure.

"Tuvok, I'm not sure I can do this," Janeway looked at her friend. "I don't think I can captain this ship. My god, *and* get it 70,000 light years to home."

Tuvok regarded her closely.

"Commander, it is my opinion that you are not only the most suitable but you are the *only* person in a position to succeed."

"Perhaps you should take over."

"In the Alpha Quadrant that may be a logical decision. However, we are not in the Alpha Quadrant. This situation requires someone with skills and qualities only you possess." He held up his hand to stop her interrupting. "Those skills would include scientific and engineering disciplines and, of course, command and tactical experience." A slight rise of his eyebrow halted her next attempt at speech. "But above these, in this situation, this crew is going to need someone to lead and inspire them. I believe the human term is 'people skills'. I sincerely believe we will only succeed in our journey to the Alpha Quadrant with you as Captain."

Janeway put her head in her hands again. "So, no pressure, then?"

"On the contrary, it will be a great deal of pressure."

Despite the situation, Janeway looked up at Tuvok with a mixture of dismay and amusement.

"What about Captain Chakotay? He's Starfleet trained and has been through command school too?"

"The Captain is qualified and has experience," Tuvok conceded and then paused and considered his argument. "However, he would struggle to attain the support of the Starfleet crew, in addition to keeping the Maquis crew in order. He would, however, make an excellent First Officer."

Janeway wondered if Vulcans even *understood* subtlety.

Having concluded his arguments, Tuvok waited patiently as she again dropped her head into her hands and silently worked through the problem. Some minutes later, she sat up straight and took a deep breath.

"Okay, I'll give it a try."

"No." Tuvok's tone was stern and she almost flinched. "You must not try. You must *be* the captain. The crew need certainty and so do you. And the crew will not benefit from the leadership of an exhausted captain."

"You're right as usual. I've missed your counsel, Tuvok."

The security officer escorted Chakotay from the shuttle bay to the door of what he initially assumed was the Captain's Ready Room. As the door opened and admitted him after Janeway had dismissed the escort, he realized it was most likely the First Officer's office. He grimaced at the amount of PADDs on Janeway's desk. She certainly had her work cut out for her.

The door closed behind the security officer and left them alone, which he found surprising but before he had time to reflect on it, Janeway got down to business.

"I'm sorry your ship was destroyed, Captain. Your crew is, of course, welcome to stay on board Voyager. Or, if you would prefer, we could find you a suitable planet and I will try to arrange it as soon as I can. I'm truly sorry that I don't have more options for you."

"We're not your prisoners?"

Janeway gave him a crooked smile. "We're 70,000 light years from the Alpha Quadrant, and Captain, I've read your file. It's the Cardassians who are your enemy, not me or my crew."

"I don't think Starfleet would agree with you."

"They can court martial me when I get back." She shrugged a shoulder and winced as her sore ribs protested. "Frankly, they're the least of my concerns for the foreseeable future."

"You're not like any Starfleet captain I've met before."

Her face lit up at his comment. "That's truly the best news I've had in weeks." Janeway looked him in the eye. "I'd really like you and your crew to remain onboard Voyager." She moved in her chair as if trying to get comfortable. "I won't lie to you, Captain. Without your crew, or at least some of them, we'll be badly short handed. Your skills and assistance could make the difference between us getting home or not." Chakotay looked about to interrupt but she continued. "But, if you all do stay on board, my one request would be you become part of my crew, that is, be a Starfleet crew. I could also really use someone such as yourself as first officer."

Chakotay stared at her. Whatever he had been expecting from this discussion, it certainly hadn't been this. He could find no evidence of duplicity in her demeanor and he also couldn't fault her logic. Although the Intrepid class of ship was new, he knew that the optimal crew was more than their combined crews and certainly more than the surviving Starfleeters. That she would even contemplate this action was staggering.

"If you're concerned that your crew wouldn't be treated fairly, I can assure you that I will make every effort to fully integrate them. Between you and me, I'm a little short on experienced officers, so I'm hoping you've got some people you could recommend for field commissions." She leaned forward and clasped her hands in front of her. "But, of course, I don't expect your answer now. Please feel free to return to your crew and discuss it with them. I would ask you to, if you can, report back with their and your answer as soon as you can, so I can begin planning properly."

Chakotay stood up straight too. "I'll have your answer within a few hours, sir."

"Excellent. Thank you." Janeway stood as Chakotay turned to leave. "Oh, and Captain, may I ask you a favor?"

Chakotay turned back to her and smiled. "*Another* one?"

Janeway returned the smile and shrugged and tried not to wince as her ribs protested the movement once more. "Well, as we're getting along so well."

"Sure."

"Please don't call me 'sir'. I truly hate it." Chakotay took a breath to answer, but she interrupted again. "Of course, 'ma'am' is even worse."

"I'll have your answer as soon as I can, *Commander*."

"See, we're going to be great friends. I know it."

A few hours later, Chakotay made his way to the Cargo Bay Three. There seemed to be no restriction on any of the Maquis movements, not that many had ventured outside the area they were congregating at the moment. It was more than a little weird. A very helpful Harry Kim had told him where the Commander would be. It seemed like a strange place but he'd stopped making the list of strange occurrences over a week ago.

The doors opened and he saw her right away. She was standing erect with her hands behind her back regarding quite a few burial pods. He noticed her tense as she realized she wasn't alone.

"Forgive the interruption, Commander, but I've been looking for you."

"How can I help you, Captain?"

"Are you sure I'm not interrupting? We can do this later." He noticed her swipe at her eyes.

"I was just...I guess, saying goodbye to some friends. Mentally preparing the memorial service."

"I *am* sorry for your loss. I completely understand." He understood only too well and couldn't resent her grief.

She nodded and looked at him expectantly. She was now all business and she showed no trace of the distress that was only too plain a few moments ago.

"I wanted to let you know that we accept your offer and are prepared to become part of your crew."

"That *is* good news, thank you, Captain," she seemed to relax a little. "And my other request?"

"Are you sure you want me as your first officer?"

"Absolutely. Would you like to hear my reasons?"

"Actually, yes."

"Your crew will make up a significant percentage of the whole crew and it makes sense to have an advocate on the senior staff. But much more importantly, you undoubtedly have all the skills I will need to help me - you've got invaluable command and tactical experience." She turned and faced him squarely. "But, also I need someone I can talk to about crew matters and someone who will be prepared to take me to task if I get too pig headed."

"Pig headed?"

"I have been known to be a little obstinate," she admitted with a small shrug.

Chakotay smiled and mentally worked through all the reasons it was a bad idea for him to accept.

"I can work with obstinate. I accept."

Her head dropped with relief.

"Thank you, Captain..."

"Commander," he corrected.

She gave him a brilliant smile. "*Commander*. I have great hopes that we'll be a good team. Welcome to Voyager."

She offered her hand and he shook it.

"Would you mind if we work out duties after I've finalized the memorial details?"

"Of course, Captain."

"And Commander, we'll need to add the Val Jean losses to the service. I would appreciate their names and perhaps some personal details about them. I'm hoping we can..."

He was taken by surprise by her again. He wasn't expecting a Starfleet officer to want to include Maquis losses in their ceremony.

"No."

"No?" She looked dismayed.

"As First Officer, I should prepare the arrangements. I know that you're probably snowed under with tasks just waiting for you to return to the Bridge. And you have to clear your stuff out of my office."

"You'll have just as many tasks, if not more to do than me."

"And it's my job to make sure you've got enough time to concentrate on issues that are the most important to the ship." She opened her mouth to speak and he held up his hand. "The memorial is important, but it truly falls under First Officer duties. You're not First Officer now, *Captain*."

Janeway stood very still and regarded her new first officer steadily. Finally, she nodded.

"Thank you, Commander."

Tom made his way to the Ready Room, wondering the whole way what Kathryn was going to do with him. Or how he would survive the next few weeks. Or hours.

Janeway looked up as he entered. Her expression gave away nothing.

"I've got a favor to ask you, Tom."

"Anything."

"I need a good pilot at the helm if we're to get home."

"Well, I've hardly seen anyone in action yet, but...wait, *me?*"

She held out a small, yet all too familiar, box to him.

"I'm prepared to offer you a field commission of lieutenant to go with it."

"Jesus, Kathryn. Are you *sure?*"

"Yes. But Tom, I need you to take that chip off your shoulder and help us get Voyager home. I need you to be the trusted and *trustworthy* member of my senior staff that we both know you can be. Your father is a life time away but this crew is here and right now, *I'll* need your help to get them home."

His head dropped and he took the box from her but remained silent for a few seconds before he straightened up to attention and answered.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll do my best."

"Thank you, Mister Paris. I know you will. Please take your station."

"Yes, ma'am," he made to leave and then turned back to her. "Ah, Captain," Only Tom would notice the small wince on her face at the title, "about the Maquis and me..."

"I've got great news about the *ex-Maquis*, Tom." Janeway into a more informal tone. "They've agreed to join our crew and Chakotay has even agreed to be my first officer."

"*Really?*"

"You'll be happy to know that I've spoken to Commander Chakotay about you," Tom's eyebrows rose in reaction to this bit of news, "and he agreed to let bygones be bygones and has assured me of your personal safety."

"*Really?*"

Janeway laughed. "He's doing me a personal favor because you saved his butt on the planet and even he acknowledged that bumping off his crew is not a long term strategy that'll pay off. So, you should be fine," she winked at him. "More or less."

"Okay. But if anything happens to me, it's all your fault."

She sobered and her appearance once again became serious. "It will be, Tom. And I'm going to do my best to get the whole crew home and keep you all safe."

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that." He smiled at her. "You're going to be great, Kathryn. You'll get us home."

"Thanks, Tom. And unless you get to your station within two minutes, you're on report."

"We're alone in an uncharted part of the galaxy. We have already made some friends here, and some enemies. We have no idea of the dangers we're going to face, but one thing is clear. Both crews are going to have to work together if we're to survive. That's why Commander Chakotay and I have

agreed that this should be one crew. A Starfleet crew. And as the only Starfleet vessel assigned to the Delta Quadrant, we'll continue to follow our directive to seek out new worlds and explore space. But our primary goal is clear. Even at maximum speeds, it would take seventy five years to reach the Federation, but I'm not willing to settle for that. There's another entity like the Caretaker out there somewhere who has the ability to get us there a lot faster. We'll be looking for her, and we'll be looking for wormholes, spatial rifts, or new technologies to help us. Somewhere along this journey, we'll find a way back. Mister Paris, set a course for home."

"Aye, Captain"

Janeway nodded to Chakotay and Tuvok and was about to sit in the command chair. Before she sat down, Chakotay spoke up.

"If I'm not mistaken, Captain, we're clear of imminent danger, it's well passed the end of your shift and you still haven't been to Sickbay to have those ribs fixed."

Janeway looked at him through narrowed eyes and did everything in her power not to wince in pain as she sat down.

"You're going to be a *perfect* first officer, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes." Chakotay smiled at her. "You're still here?"

"Are you sure I won't be able to bully you? At *all*?"

Chakotay merely crossed his arms and looked at her with a bemused expression.

"Oh, great. I couldn't pick someone who was a push over. Oh, no, I had to pick someone *competent*. What was I thinking? Damn."

The muffled laughs of some of the other crew present, both Starfleet and Maquis, comforted her. Despite their desperate situation, the banter between herself and Chakotay seemed to be cutting through some tension. She was incredibly grateful for his presence and it seemed like Tuvok was absolutely correct about him being the perfect choice for her executive officer.

"I can't be bribed either, so perhaps it would be best if you left now." Chakotay added. "And got something to eat as well."

He offered her his hand and helped her to her stand up, holding on to her hand long enough to get her steady on her feet.

"Apparently, it's the end of my shift. You have the Bridge, Commander."

Nodding to Chakotay on the way to the turbolift their gaze met. She left the Bridge feeling more confident about working with the so-called Maquis rebel who was now her First Officer.

"I have the Bridge, aye, Captain."

End

March 2016