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Chakotay discovered that it wasn't too hard to follow Janeway's trail. She'd certainly made an impression wherever she went. He had no problems following her movements and everyone who remembered her seemed to have a story to tell.

So far, his favorite was the barkeep that remembered her because she'd beaten up a six foot tall Bandi because she found him terrorizing a much smaller and disabled patron a few streets away from the bar. She'd returned to the bar with the extremely grateful man. The man, coincidentally, was very well off and he informed the barman that Janeway was to have all the drinks she wanted on his tab, whenever she came into the bar. The only part of the story that didn't amuse Chakotay was how drunk the pair had got afterwards.

He had everything planned for when he finally contacted her. His whole strategy was mapped out and he was confident of success. All he had to do was find her and make his offer.

#

The following day's meeting with the Bolian was quick and, in less than ten minutes, Janeway received her instructions and fifty percent of her payment. This was definitely a lead. There was something decidedly suspect about her new blue friend and the way he operated. For the first time in months, Janeway felt like they were finally onto something.

Unfortunately, although she'd finally made contact, she realized that she still had to remain in character. This meant the inevitable trip to a bar, even at this early hour. She'd told Berjis that she would be leaving for Stablo III just after noon. That left plenty of time to get drunk.

Janeway decided that she would try an establishment that was a little more 'up-market' to ones she'd been habitually thrown out of over the past weeks. Yes, today she would try somewhere where she was unlikely to get punched for being short. One of the bigger hotels would be good. She glanced down at her attire and checked that she wasn't too casual. Thankfully, she was wearing what she'd unconsciously called her 'Maquis' gear. Leather pants and vest. Deciding that she would pass muster, she entered the first deluxe hotel she came across and made her way to the bar.

Bars never closed, even in high class hotels, thanks to the prevalence of space travel and the multitude of time zones from which patrons were coming or going. This particular bar adjoined the hotel restaurant and, from her vantage point on a stool at the end of the bar, she could see some of the guests eating.

The ambiance was mellow and the music was understated. It had been a while since she'd been in any establishment that didn't need to be cleaned out every morning by giant sonic hosing to remove the blood and grime.

She was sorely tempted to order a coffee. She could smell it brewing behind the counter, but realized it was vital to remain in character, so she ordered her customary double scotch. At least it was of much better quality than what she usually consumed and she sat quietly at the bar and sipped it, the only drinker at this time of planetary morning.

"Kathryn?"

The voice came from the person who had just sat next to her. She, of course, recognized him straight away. There was only one person's voice that had that instant affect on her.

“Chakotay?”

She turned and looked at him. He hadn't changed that much. Perhaps more tanned, which suited him and he looked even more handsome than she remembered. Damn him.

There was a silence that was broken by Janeway ordering another drink, which she felt she now needed. Chakotay, for his part, seemed to be at a total loss. He wasn't going to risk asking her about drinking again and finally started with a, hopefully, more neutral topic.

“Kathryn, I've missed you so much. How are you?”

“I'm fine. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you, actually. I just arrived about an hour ago. I was coming down for some breakfast.”

“Why are you looking for me?”

“I don't know how you can ask that question, Kathryn.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I was upset when you took off like that. We all were. We want you back. *I want you to come home.*”

Without prompting, Chakotay began to give her details of the crew that she desperately craved but dreaded at the same time. He bought her up to date with all the senior staff as well a handful of the higher profile crew. She wished he'd just stop and she noticed that he was now staring at her with a look that was a study of concentration. Janeway tried to blot out what he was saying, something about he and Seven not being together. This was becoming way too hard and she wondered what he'd do if she just ran out of the bar. Not being able to bring herself to do that, she decided to just listen to his voice, if not what he was saying.

A gentle hand on her arm bought her back and, finally making eye contact, Chakotay took a deep breath and continued. “Kathryn, I love you. I want to be with you. Come back. Please.”

Janeway stared at him.

“Well?”

This couldn't be happening. Chakotay had finally come to her and professed his love and hope that they could now be together. It was her secret fantasy.

His timing *sucked*.

Despite having at last made contact with the Tingalh and getting her first shipment with them less than thirty minutes before, she considered very seriously abandoning her mission and just kissing him.

Her soul desperately wanted to answer him in the affirmative. She wanted to scream ‘Yes!’ She visualized herself in his arms - kissing him, having candlelight dinners, making love, being held, waking up next to him every morning. She closed her eyes but the fantasies continued to tumble through her mind - sitting in front of a fire, eating his cooking, having his children, being with him forever.

Simply seeing him every day and feeling cherished was everything she'd hoped for during the last five years, or maybe longer if she was honest. He was finally here, with her, holding her hand, looking into her eyes with that goddamned sincere look of his.

"No."

"That's it? Just 'no'?"

"No. I'm sorry."

He was incredulous and almost angry with her.

"I think I deserve more of an answer."

Janeway just looked more obstinate. She wasn't sure she could trust herself if she risked speech.

"Please?"

She said nothing. Until she ordered another drink.

"I don't understand this self imposed exile, Kathryn."

Join the club, thought Janeway, but she remained silent, and stared into her glass. She couldn't look at him.

"What about your friends? What about your career? Don't you feel any sense of responsibility to them?"

At that point, she almost broke down and told him everything.

How much more of this could she stand? She had to make him go away. Now. This was torture.

"Look, if there's nothing else, Chakotay, I've got deliveries to make." She chugged down her scotch, for once grateful that it might make her numb in some way.

"I thought we were friends." Chakotay said softly, making one last attempt.

Janeway couldn't make eye contact with him. She was leaving her money on the bar and was obviously making to leave.

Chakotay's anger bubbled up again. He didn't know what he expected when he finally found her, but it certainly wasn't this. Or even this person. He couldn't see any of the Kathryn Janeway that he knew. "Well, go to hell, Kathryn." He turned and left her.

She stared after him, her face a mask of pain. "I'm already there, Chakotay." And she too, left the bar.

The Doctor thought Janeway was just a little too insouciant after telling him about meeting Chakotay in the bar. She had given him the updates on their friends that she could remember from what Chakotay had told her, but the Doctor couldn't help but think she was leaving out some details. It was clear that she didn't want to discuss the meeting, so he didn't push. He knew she would tell him sooner or later.

#

"Well, we're definitely in, but I'm not sure what good it's done us."

"They do seem to be able to keep most information very close to their chests."

"It's Berjis I don't trust."

"The only non-chatty Bolian in the galaxy."

"Exactly," Janeway stared at her glass of juice. "And I don't want to blow our cover by trying to get anything out of him."

The Doctor nodded in glum agreement.

"You've done a detailed scan of the latest shipment?"

"Yes." sighed the Doctor. "And it's the same as the last one. All fairly innocent, if not completely legal."

They had established early on that the cargo, though innocuous, was generally misrepresented. Mainly, they surmised, to avoid import duty on the various planets and colonies they had so far delivered cargo. Even so, they were getting to know customs and border guards quite well. Generally they were only given a cursory inspection but, these days, more often than not, they passed without one.

"I even checked this lot," the Doctor motioned towards the cargo bay "for concealed data files."

"Clever." Nodded Janeway. "Anything?"

"Sadly, no. Not even a basic file saying 'hello world'."

#

All the deliveries Janeway made were on the list of threatened planets within the Federation. In fact, in the two months she'd been contracting to the Tingalh she'd only been sent to those planets. As were most of the other ships that were working for them that she'd managed to contact. What was completely mystifying was the purpose of those deliveries. They paid premium prices to have the most mundane of items carried.

The Doctor continued to carefully examine their cargo but there was nothing that could be even remotely considered suspicious.

At every opportunity, Janeway had tried talking to the other contractors, but they all seemed to be just doing their jobs and happy for the handsome payments. The most unsettling thing was that some of her fellow couriers had disappeared. It took a while for her to notice that some faces weren't around anymore. No one seemed to think that it was strange that they were suddenly gone. But, she supposed, they could have merely found better contracts.

It was just so damned frustrating. There had to be a pattern here. What was it that set the Tingalh cargo apart from the other companies that operated in the area?

While the Doctor was scanning her cargo, she got herself on some other ships to have a look at what they were carrying. She'd been invited onto a couple but others she got on any way she could, including breaking and entering. All the visits had come to nothing. There was nothing in the cargo on any of the ships that could, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered dangerous or even be used in a negative way.

#

Janeway and the Doctor tried to read the large paper chart that Janeway had of the other Tingalh ships and the planets they serviced.

"It's not to scale obviously, but..."

The chart suddenly had a large, moving lump under it.

Janeway soldiered on, despite the distraction "...but, as you can see, above Indie, those three ships are no longer..."

The lump suddenly caused the map to make a small tent and then slide towards the edge of the bench."

Janeway reached under the map and removed the kitten, placing her gently on the floor.

"Anyway, apart from when we met six or seven of them a couple of weeks ago, it seems that everyone has been spread across the territories and beyond."

"Hmm," the Doctor looked closely at the map, "it's hardly uncommon for a freight company to send ships to various locations. I suppose..."

A ginger streak hit the table and slid across the other side, taking the chart with it.

They both peered over the edge to see the cat attack the large piece of paper before running off with her tail erect.

"Recklessness must be a red-headed thing." Quipped the Doctor, as he smoothed the slightly torn and creased paper back down.

"She sure brightens up the place." Agreed Janeway, as the red flash darted past them to a new hiding spot.

It was the first time since this mission had started that the Doctor had heard Janeway laugh and *mean* it.

#

Janeway paced out on the exercise machine, trying to mentally put together, for the thousandth time, the pieces of the Tingalh puzzle. As she picked up the pace to a brisk jog, she knew it was only a matter of time before their most recent crew member turned up.

As if on cue, the red blur that was Indiana, ran across the treadmill and behind a chair. It seemed to be the cat's favorite trick, to dart across the apparatus in front of Janeway and then hide. For the whole ten kilometers that Janeway would run. Anticipating the next feline fly-past was much more diverting than trying to figure out what Berjis was up to.

Just as Indiana decided to make her next foray, the Doctor walked in, causing the kitten to leap up and manage a 180 degree turn mid air and scuttle back to her hiding place behind the chair.

"Is that normal behavior for a cat?" asked the Doctor.

"No idea, but she's *your* cat, so maybe she's picking up any mental instability from you."

#

“Commander, how are you?”

Chakotay usually enjoyed his meetings with Lieutenant Smith, the protocol officer he liaised with while he wrote his book on Voyager’s Delta Quadrant experiences. His counselor had suggested he write down all his adventures, reasoning that if he was enjoying hearing about them, other people would as well.

At the ‘loss’ of their other main star, Starfleet had been only too happy to consent to his writing a book, especially as he’d taken on many of the speaking engagements and other public type appearances that, in the ordinary course of events, would’ve fallen to Voyager’s captain.

Chakotay shook Smith’s hand.

“I’m well, Jake, thank you. And please, I’ve told you before, call me Chakotay.”

The two men sat down to discuss the latest chapters of the book that Chakotay had submitted. So far, Starfleet had been very helpful and hadn’t objected to any of the content he’d included.

As they got to a section dealing with Janeway’s reactions and handling of a particularly bureaucratic and tedious culture they had encountered, Lieutenant Smith smiled as Chakotay described how Janeway had been so exasperated by how very *nice* the people had been. But they both laughed when Chakotay told him how Janeway had wished they had just phasered her instead of making her endure a six hour welcoming ceremony.

“They remind me of Admiral Hester,” said Smith “well, maybe... except he’s not very nice. *He’s* a total bore.” They both laughed. “I saw Captain Janeway encounter him after the gala. He was being particularly hard on her, especially under the circumstances, but she cut him down to size.” He smiled but then his expression sobered when he thought about how dreadful it must have been for the captain to come home and discover her family dead.

Chakotay was only too familiar with Janeway’s sharp tongue, but he was interested to hear about the exchange between her and Hester. One of the reasons he liked young Smith was that he still had the highest opinion of Janeway despite all the rumors and stories flying about Starfleet for the last few months. Chakotay thought he should introduce Harry Kim to Jake Smith.

Except Harry wasn’t really speaking to him, he thought with some discomfort. They’d bumped into each other a few days before and Harry had asked about Chakotay’s attempt to meet Janeway. Chakotay had been a little too frank about what he thought of Janeway’s behavior and the young man had taken a swing at him. Chakotay had been so shocked that he hadn’t had a chance to interrupt Harry who shared his fanciful theory about her being on a ‘secret mission’ before he’d stormed off, leaving his former commanding officer to pick himself off the ground. In retrospect, he was ashamed of what he had said both to Harry and Kathryn.

He roused himself to get more information from Lieutenant Smith.

“Really? What happened?”

“Well,” Smith had a quick scan of the area around them to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard. “Admiral Hester made a remark about her conduct being unbecoming and the Captain said...” Smith gave Chakotay a verbatim account. “I’ve got to say, when she said that bit about Starfleet promoting idiots, I thought Hester would have a stroke on the spot. I swear he went purple when she called him a martinet.” The young man sighed. “I wish I’d got the chance to meet her.” He added wistfully.

But Chakotay wasn't really listening now. He was stunned at what Smith had just told him. She'd said "*the man I love is having a relationship with someone who I've come to consider as my daughter*". He couldn't breathe. He had to get out of this office and out into the fresh air as quickly as possible.

After a few more minutes, Chakotay made an excuse and ended the meeting, telling Smith that he would give him a call when he had the next chapters near completion.

So many things were flashing into his mind now. All the things that Harry had said to him and that he'd been so sure about. He shook his head - how could he have believed that the person he'd known for seven years on Voyager, in so many circumstances, had become that broken woman. Stupid. He could slap himself. He had to get to Harry and talk more about his theories.

#

Chakotay called Harry and they met that evening at the Night Owl cafe. It seemed appropriate somehow. As they drank their coffees, Chakotay shared the story he'd heard from Smith. Harry confirmed what he'd said.

"I didn't tell you or Seven what she'd said, I'm sorry." The young man looked sheepish. "And I'm sorry I hit you."

"Harry, I understand. You knocked some sense into my head, I think."

"I've always known how she felt about you and I knew she'd be upset about you and Seven." Harry gave Chakotay a shy look over the rim of his coffee cup. "Anyway, I picked her up when she fell off the barstool and took her back to her quarters and called the Doctor." He leant forward and lowered his voice. "As I was leaving, I heard the Doc comm Admiral Burke."

Burke.

It all fell into place. Burke had kept her away from not only the crew, but more importantly, himself. The night of the gala, Burke had interrupted them and he'd had no real access to her, except for that awful meeting on the sidewalk. He had seemed to supervise all her briefings and had arranged all the counseling, not to mention getting her out of the brig.

The whole senior officer's debrief, which quarantined her from pretty much everyone in the crew, was obviously a way for her to establish a 'breakdown' while avoiding the close scrutiny of those people who knew her the best. His own debrief had been extended by days for the flimsiest reasons, to keep him away from her, he was now convinced. At no stage before docking at Utopia Planetia had there been any indication of anything other than a speedy debrief before everyone was cut loose. Janeway herself had even suggested the same.

"Whatever it is that bastard has her doing, it must be important for her to have sent you away when you went to Krosten II." Harry looked glum. "That must've just about killed her."

"God, Harry. I can't believe how I've let her down." Chakotay stared into his black coffee, which he'd been drinking almost exclusively since Janeway had left. "The things I said to her when I met her on Krosten were so harsh. I was so full of myself. So convinced that all I had to do was grace her with my presence and she'd follow me home. She'll never forgive me."

"Chakotay. If there are two people in the universe that the Captain will forgive anything, it's you and Seven."

Chakotay shook himself out of his self pity.

“How is Seven?”

“She’s doing much better. Once I shared my theories with her, she felt relieved. She’s just not sure what to do with the information.”

The pair discussed what they could, in practicality, do.

#

“Philip, I think this may be it.” Janeway had been staring at the chart for over an hour.

“He’s going to use the ships somehow?”

“Yes, look.” She pointed down at her chart. “These are our last known coordinates for the missing ships of the Tingalh fleet.” She leant back. “See a pattern?”

“Not exactly.” The Doctor’s brow was furrowed in concentration.

“These are the ships...” her hand gestured towards the scattered dots, “and here is the list of planets that have received threats from Mangala.” She got a piece of transparent film and overlaid it on the map. “Now look.”

“Oh my.”

“Yes, exactly.” Janeway folded her arms and stood back from the bench. “Not all the threatened planets have ships, but the remainders are probably decoys, I suspect, to make it harder to spot the relationships.”

“But none of them are warships. They don’t even have weapons.”

“Damned if I know. But I get the feeling that the answer is related to the ships somehow.” Janeway absently tossed a piece of rolled up paper off the table. She’d taught the cat to retrieve but it only worked with light things and watched as Indie batted the paper around for a while before picking it up and jumping back on the table for the next part of the game.

“We have to get this information to Starfleet.” He was still staring at the patterns of ships on the makeshift map.

“I’ll prepare a report now, but I still want to get a look inside the Yertoni. Just in case.”

The Yertoni was a large freighter and they knew that the whole crew was about to take leave on a nearby ‘recreation’ planet, which coincidentally was on the list of threatened planets. They had noticed that the Yertoni also had very specific shielding around the cargo bay. More than any other ship they had encountered.

“Kathryn, it’s too dangerous.”

“It’s a risk, sure. But if we can gather some more evidence for our theory.” The Doctor tried to interrupt but she pressed on. “And it’s still just a *theory* Philip. What if it’s a red herring? We can’t take the chance that resources will be diverted unnecessarily. We need more information.”

He recognized the mulish look on her face. He’d seen it countless times before.

"I want to see what's behind that shielding." She said over her shoulder as she went to prepare the report for Starfleet.

#

She returned an hour later and handed him the chip containing her report. It was nearly twenty hours before it was due to be transmitted and they couldn't do it in such close proximity to the other ship just in case they were being monitored.

"Who's on the ship now?"

"No one." The Doctor checked his readings "I've double checked and there's no signs of anyone aboard. Of course, we can't get readings for the cargo area." Unfortunately, this information didn't deter her.

"This is an opportunity too good to miss. I want a look inside. What's in the hold, do you think?"

"Kathryn, be careful, please. We've checked other vessels and found nothing. It's not worth..."

"Please, Philip, I'll be fine." She took a last mouthful of her tea. "We've never had a chance to check a ship this big." She put a phaser and tricorder on her belt. "Is everyone still on the surface?"

The planet, Helios, was sparsely populated but was the site for the most notorious and famous brothel in the system. In fact, except for the 'Lifestyle Center', there wasn't anything else on the planet at all.

"Yes, the crew arrived at the establishment," the Doctor made a noise of faint disapproval, "about fifteen minutes ago. They'll be there for two days, according to the booking details I intercepted."

"Excellent." said Janeway, "At least they'll be having more fun than me. Beam me over when you're ready."

"Energizing."

"See you soon." said Janeway, with a small wave as she disappeared.

#

Chakotay had almost given up trying to find Janeway. She'd been to at least fifteen planets in the last month. Yesterday, he'd left Artizar after finding out he'd only missed her by a matter of hours. He was practically at the point of just picking a random planet and waiting for her inevitable arrival. But, this morning he had the strong feeling that he was close and that it was important to find her, as soon as possible.

The barman he'd spoken to had rather suggestively indicated that he should try Helios. Chakotay had wanted to punch him when he'd lewdly intimated that he should just give her a few more hours head start because by that time she'd be well and truly drunk and Chakotay would have a 'better chance'.

Chakotay was nearly ill at the barman's opinion of Janeway. There was something not right with the whole situation, he couldn't believe anyone could change that dramatically. In fact, he didn't believe it now. It had to be all part of this insane mission he was now sure she was part of.

After a few hours, he was approaching Helios. Sure enough, there was the Bramble, orbiting the

planet, but close to a much larger ship.

He hailed the Bramble.

“Chakotay?”

“Hello, Doc. Is Kathryn there?” Chakotay hated to think that Kathryn was down on Helios, as the hideous barman had told him.

“Perhaps you’d better dock your ship, Chakotay.”

Something was wrong. He was now sure of it. There was something very odd in the Doctor’s demeanor.

Chakotay beamed to the Bramble’s ‘living room’.

“Doctor, good to see you, where’s Kathryn?”

“She’s not on board, Commander.” The Doctor seemed distracted and Chakotay could tell that the Doctor was struggling with a decision.

Chakotay’s attention was diverted by the sound of a squalling sound coming from the pilot’s area. A ginger cat was loudly and mournfully announcing to whomever would listen that she wasn’t happy.

“She’s been doing that since about ten minutes after Kathryn left.”

Finally, it appeared that the Doctor had made up his mind.

“I’m worried, Chakotay, and not just because of the cat. Kathryn beamed over to the other ship nearly *ten hours* ago.”

“Was she supposed to be meeting someone?”

The Doctor was obviously still not sure what to share and Chakotay watched him contemplate and then decide.

“She went on board to check the cargo. Without the knowledge of the crew.”

“Why?”

“We’re trying to determine if any of the contents of the ship could be used as a weapon.”

“I see.” And he really did see. The whole charade now revealed itself to him.

“Anyway, she beamed over there and within twenty minutes, all the life signs on the planet disappeared.” The Doctor looked worried. “I immediately tried to contact her but she’d moved to a heavily shielded part of the ship, although the communicators should still have functioned.”

“Where’s the crew of the ship?”

“I don’t know. When we arrived, I thought they’d beamed down to the planet but...” the Doctor looked solemn. “Chakotay, there should be at least several hundred life signs on that planet.”

“And Kathryn?”

"As I said, I lost contact with her not long after she beamed aboard."

"Can you get me over there?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts. And Doctor, if you've got some secret distress beacon," the Doctor looked surprised at this suggestion, "I suggest you activate it. Something's very wrong here."

"I agree." The Doctor passed Chakotay a phaser. "Standby for transport."

#

Janeway walked down the corridor and using the tricorder, tried to determine if she was heading towards the cargo bay.

The sudden insistent beeping of the instrument made her jump and she was shocked at the readings it was giving. There was a life form...no wait, *two* life forms on the Yertoni. One was Bolian, the other couldn't be determined. She turned around, deciding to make her way back to the bridge when the a voice behind her called out.

"*Kathryn*. What a lovely *surprise*. Please drop the phaser and the tricorder and then move this way." He lowered his voice but not the phaser rifle he was carrying.

She obeyed his instructions and then moved towards the Bolian.

"*Carefully*. With your hands behind your head."

"Look, I can explain," Janeway hoped she could come up with a good story. "I was just..." she'd drawn level with him. "It's all a misunder..."

He backhanded her hard across the face, causing her to stumble.

"Shut up, Kathryn." He motioned her to walk ahead after taking her communicator pin and throwing it over his shoulder. "And keep your hands behind your head."

As she walked through the ship, following Berjis's terse instructions, she realized, with dismay that they were moving into the area of the ship that the Bramble's scanners and transporters couldn't penetrate. By the time she began to wonder where they were going, Berjis told her to stop.

Janeway heard the chirp of a communicator.

"Merat, it was Janeway. She'd beamed over."

"Of *course*. Bring her in." The new voice was cold and hard and inexplicably made her think of...

Cardassians.

The door opened and Kathryn saw a tall Cardassian standing in the Yertoni's cargo bay, inspecting a smallish courier type vessel. It looked suspiciously like a fellow trader, Tzedek's ship, the *Dunia*, and it also looked like Merat was carrying a Cardassian pain device. He was holding it like a riding crop and sporadically moving it from under his arm to slap it against his palm.

Janeway cursed to herself. This was bad. *Very* bad.

"Look, I wasn't trying to steal anything." Janeway started, looking directly at the Cardassian, and hoping she sounded more convincing than scared. "I was on a recon. I was thinking of making Utaridi an offer on it, but I wanted to..."

The blow from Berjis caught her by surprise. He must have hit her with the phaser rifle he was carrying and it had caught her just below the shoulder.

"Shut *up*, Kathryn. I won't tell you again."

Janeway fell silent and clutched her arm close to her.

"I know *exactly* what she was doing, Berjis." The Cardassian's voice was smug, mocking.

"I think she's spying for Melek. They're always trying to horn in on our operation." Berjis sounded like he was trying to impress his boss. "I've had my eye on her for weeks."

Merat looked at Janeway. It was a hard, calculating stare. Then, it was obvious that he made a decision. Whatever it was, Janeway knew that it pleased him.

"Your presence here is a complication, Captain, not necessarily *unexpected*, and not as you humans would say 'a show stopper'." Merat turned to the Bolian. "Bring the others here *now*, Berjis. I will watch over our guest."

"Don't we want to keep monitoring and scanning, Merat? Her ship's just..."

"Her hologram can't do anything without her. I've got everything under control." The Cardassian was arrogant and it was clear that Berjis was more than a little scared of him. "Just do what I say. *Now*."

The Bolian scurried out to follow orders.

"I don't know what it is that you're doing, but I want no part of it. If you let me go, I'll just forget everything I've seen here," Janeway watched the Cardassian closely, "and everyone."

"It won't matter who you've seen, Captain." Janeway didn't like the way he kept calling her by rank. She couldn't imagine what could possibly be going on but she knew whatever it was, she was in serious trouble.

"Please, believe me. I'm not working for Melek."

"Oh Captain, I do believe you. You have never worked for Melek."

"Then why..."

"Please, don't insult my intelligence anymore, Captain."

He suddenly lashed out with the pain stick, except he used it as a club against her elbow. Janeway howled in shock and pain and dropped to her knees.

"Only a fool would think you were working for us. You're working for Starfleet." And with that pronouncement, he struck her other arm, hard, and she fell to the ground, helpless.

The pain was incredible and she sincerely hoped that she would pass out soon. She didn't want to be conscious for what she imagined was going to follow. The memory of her previous encounter with

Cardassians jumped, unwelcome, into her mind. No Justin and his Rangers to rescue her this time though.

"Allow me." he bent down and activated the transceiver in her arm. "We're going to have a little chat. I wouldn't want you to miss anything. Most important to get all the details recorded, don't you agree? I can keep it as a souvenir." His tone was sarcastic and then he sighed with contentment. "Let me explain...actually, it'll be nice to be able to share my brilliant plan with someone who can fully appreciate it in all its complexity. Your timing is excellent, I'm just about to put the final phase into place." He saw that she was only barely conscious. He walked to his desk and removed a hypospray. "A little stimulant, Captain. Something to keep you with me while I share a story with you. I do like an appreciative audience."

The affect was almost instantaneous, and there was no chance of her passing out now.

"As I was saying, Captain. I'm going to answer all those nagging little questions that you have about my plans. Everything will be revealed! More than you hoped for I'm sure." He was gloating now. "But before I do, let me just say that everything you've done will be for naught. You'll have all the details recorded," he gave her arm a nudge with his foot, causing another wave of pain to crash over her. "And all the loose ends tied up. But you won't be sharing it with anyone." He laughed. "No sadly, you'll be dead. Along with your family, I believe. Such a tragic story. So, how does it feel, Captain, to know that you were so close to the answer and yet, you failed? No one will even know what happened to you. You'll just disappear. All that sacrifice. *Dear me*. Seven years struggling to bring your ship home and then another six months in virtual exile and after all that, *you fail*." He put the device close to her arm and activated it. Despite her best efforts, Janeway screamed in agony.

"Fuck you." She managed through gritted teeth, almost hoping she could goad him into killing her.

"A total failure, Captain." He ignored her insult and continued to taunt her. "And because of your failure, let me tell you how many people are going to suffer and how they'll die..."

He adjusted the apparatus and pointed it at her and activated it. The pain was incredible and Janeway found herself incapable of movement or speech. She couldn't even scream. All she wanted to do was pass out, but whatever he'd done had incapacitated her but left her hyper-alert and more than aware of what was happening.

"But first, please just stay there while I deal with a few loose ends and then we'll continue our little chat."

The Bolian returned with two other crew. Merat shot Berjis first and managed to also kill one of the other men as they walked in the door. The third man, perhaps sensing that something was amiss, turned and ran before the second man had hit the ground.

"Please make yourself comfortable, Captain. I'll be back in a minute or two."

And with that, he followed his prey out the door.

Janeway tried with every fiber of her being to get up and escape, but her body just wouldn't cooperate. She was unable to move a leg, let alone get to her feet and run away.

It was a short time before Merat returned.

"Captain. How rude of me, I hope you were able to amuse yourself while I was busy with my ex-colleagues." He bent down and dragged the two bodies out into the corridor. "Now, where were

we?"

#

She had no idea how long he had been talking. It seemed like days. So far, he had detailed how he was going to use the ships and how many people were on each of the planets he planned to destroy.

"I'll be thinking of you when I cause the destruction of Earth. A planet, which will benefit all concerned, by disappearing." He delighted in watching Janeway react to this "Oh dear, didn't you figure that bit out? It's such a shame you won't be around to watch all your *remaining* friends die."

All through this mission, for some reason, Janeway had never thought that Earth was at risk. The thought that the majority of the Voyager crew were going to suffer again because of her failure, just added to her misery.

Merat was obviously insane. He'd explained his 'demands' and had shared with her that he knew they that none of them would be able to be met by the Federation or the Romulans. It was all part of his plan, he assured her. He rambled on and on about how 'his mission' would re-establish Cardassia's power. Sometimes he would get so carried away with his narrative that he'd almost forget that she was there, but something would bring him back to the present and he would again turn his attentions to her.

Janeway knew enough to realize that he could keep reviving her for hours. Unfortunately, he was very good at his job and she knew it wouldn't be long now before he'd broken her body and her mind.

#

There was something very wrong. Chakotay could sense it.

As he turned into another corridor, he spotted a man sprawled out across a doorway. He looked human and it appeared he'd been phasered. His heart lurched.

He was running now. No one stopped him. In fact, he saw no one else at all and the tricorder wasn't registering any life signs.

There were another two bodies outside a door at the end of this corridor. They were also victims of a phaser blasts and, as he bent down to check the bodies, a noise came through the door he'd just passed. Although it had been nearly eight years since he'd heard the sickening sound of a Cardassian pain device making contact with a victim, it was something that still gave him nightmares. The fact that there was no resulting scream indicated that whoever was on the receiving end was in trouble. Big trouble.

Backing up and standing quietly outside the door, he hoped he was wrong. He set his phaser for 'kill' and put his ear to the door and listened. A cold, hard male voice was all he could hear.

Chakotay burst into the room and without hesitation pointed his phaser at the Cardassian and fired. The Cardassian had made it easier for him by pointing a weapon in his direction. Not that he needed any incentive. Chakotay had every intention of killing him anyway.

Kathryn Janeway lay on the floor. It was clear that she'd been the victim of the Cardassian's 'ministrations'. What was not clear was whether she was still alive.

Chakotay dropped to the floor beside her, not sure where to touch her, but desperate to see if she was alive. She moaned when he felt her wrist looking for a pulse and he was almost overcome with relief, but also filled with anguish because he'd caused her pain.

He slapped his communicator, not taking his eyes from her. "Chakotay to the Doctor."

"Yes, Chakotay."

"I've found Kathryn and need an immediate transport."

"I'm sorry Chakotay, you'll have to move to another part of the ship. There is heavy shielding in your area."

"She's badly injured. I'm not sure that moving her is a good idea."

"I don't see that you've got any other choice."

"Right." He looked down at the now motionless form in front of him. "Transport us as soon as you can. She's in a bad way."

"Understood."

Chakotay pushed the phaser into his waistband and slipped his arms gently under her and lifted her. She moaned as soon as she was touched and he whispered over and over. "I'm sorry, Kathryn. Shhh... I'm sorry." He hated the fact that he was causing her pain.

"Ch-tay?"

"I'm here, sweetheart".

"Arm." She groaned. Her voice barely a whisper. "Arm."

"The doctor will take care of it soon. Just hold on." He tried to avoid moving her broken arms too much as he picked her up and made his way down the corridor as quickly and carefully as he could. "I'm sorry. We'll be back to the ship very soon. The Doctor will fix you up." He wasn't sure who he was reassuring.

"Arm..." it wasn't quite a scream of pain, but the noise she made tore at his soul. "Chip. Arm... Failed." She whispered in a sort of hoarse croak.

"It's okay, Kathryn. I'm sorry. We're nearly there."

"Arm... 'portant... Philip. Arm." He thought she'd lost consciousness but then she added, "Arm."

The familiar tingle of the transporter had never been so welcome.

"Put her over here, Chakotay."

Chakotay gently placed her on the bed in her quarters and the Doctor immediately started scanning her and administering some medications.

"I would suggest, Chakotay that you get us back to friendly space as soon as you can and make it a priority to find the closest Starfleet vessel." Chakotay looked into the Doctor's face and the hologram shook his head grimly. "I don't have the equipment needed here. You need to hurry."

"She said something about a chip and her arm." Chakotay looked down at Kathryn. Her eyes were closed but the indistinct groans indicated she was still conscious. "She said it over and over."

The Doctor scanned Janeway's arm. He looked shocked and immediately activated something on his tricorder and turned to move into the small area next to Janeway's bedroom they called her 'office'.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to send this information back to Starfleet."

"You're joking? What about Kathryn? You can't just leave her to send a message, damn you!"

"Chakotay, if this information is what I think it is, it is vital that it be transmitted as soon as possible." The Doctor looked at Chakotay. "If she dies, Chakotay, we can't let it be in vain."

"Die!? She can't die. Please, Doctor, she *can't die*."

"Get in touch with the closest vessel you can contact, Chakotay. Please." The Doctor turned and moved to the office where they kept the transmitter to Admiral Burke.

When Chakotay returned, the Doctor was with Janeway again. Chakotay was shocked by the way the Doctor was talking to her, whispering to her to hang on and keep fighting, telling her that Chakotay was here and that they were going home.

"Ah, here he is now."

"You're not going to believe this, but the closest vessel is a Romulan ship called the Siron. They're on their way at top speed and should be here within thirty minutes."

"I do believe it. I can't give you any details yet, I'm sorry, but I have no doubt that the Romulans will provide Kathryn with the very best of care."

"I'll take your word for it. Can I sit with her?"

"Of course, but first can I talk with you over here?"

Chakotay gave a worried glance in the direction of Janeway and then nodded. They moved into the bedroom and the look on the Doctor's face made Chakotay feel ill.

"I don't need to tell you what she's been through. I believe she has been periodically revived, using various stimulants that I can't identify, to allow the 'procedure' to continue for so long. I'm afraid she's gravely ill, Chakotay."

"But she's conscious?"

"Yes, but I don't believe she'll be able to speak for at least a day or two. Apart from the neurological damage..."

The Doctor didn't need to elaborate, Chakotay knew what he meant. Her voice would be affected because of the screaming. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. He was all too familiar with that particular symptom. Her speech had been barely a whisper when he'd found her and even then she'd only managed a few words.

"Will she be okay?"

"I hope so, but I honestly don't know. There's very little I can do. I'll try to mend some broken bones to relieve some of the pain but it won't be enough." He examined Chakotay. "Perhaps you should talk to her. I've done all I can. I know she'd be comforted just hearing your voice."

"Can't you give her something?"

"Chakotay, we haven't got a fully equipped sickbay here. I'm on board for company, not as a physician. The neurological and physical damage is severe and I have only limited diagnostic equipment available to me." He put his hand on Chakotay's shoulder. "We'll know and be able to do more when the Romulans arrive. Go to her Chakotay, she's missed you so much. Try and keep her calm though, if you can."

#

"Kathryn, if you can hear me, help will be here very soon. You just have to hang on for a little bit longer." He desperately wanted to hold her hand but the Doctor had told him that the pain would be too great. Instead he stroked his fingers gently across her forehead and down her cheek. The touch was almost more for his benefit than hers. "The Doctor has downloaded all the data, Kathryn. I'm not sure what it's all about, but I know it must be important. He wasn't able to tell me but I get the feeling that whatever it is, this was what you were looking for. So I guess it's all over. I'd really like you to come home now. I have a list of cafes in Tuscany where I want to take you when you get leave. Tuvok told me that you like Tuscany. But maybe we'll just go to Indiana first and let you get well and strong again. What do you think?"

There was no reaction that he could discern but he didn't think she was unconscious, her face still looked too tense.

"Harry knew." Chakotay tenderly wiped a tear from her face feeling them well in his own eyes. "Harry knew. When I returned from Krosten II, I was mightily pissed. I don't know why I was so angry on top of the disappointment." He softly brushed a wisp of hair away from her eyes. "I met up with him in San Francisco and I said something not very complementary about you," he paused slightly and then resumed, "and Harry hit me. Knocked me down on my butt."

Her eyes almost opened and he knew then she was able to hear him. Another tear leaked out. He continued his tale.

"Yes, Kathryn, our baby has grown up. Anyway, he then told me, not his *theory* Kathryn, it's what he *knew*. He said that Starfleet had somehow got their hooks into you in your grief over your family and had sent you on some kind of a crazy secret mission. His faith in you is total, Kathryn.

"I found out what you said to Admiral Hester. I hope you still love me Kathryn, because I've never stopped loving you. Maybe that's why I was so angry after Krosten. Anyway, when I thought about it, it all made sense. Everything. So I had to come see you again. Let you know somehow that I knew and that I'd wait for another answer. But by the time I got to your ship, you were on the Yertoni and when I spoke to the Doctor I was certain that something was very wrong. You know the rest."

Her eyes fluttered and Chakotay became aware that her breathing was becoming labored and called out for the Doctor.

The Doctor was already with them, taking readings.

"Perhaps you should check on the ETA of the Siron, Chakotay." Chakotay got the unspoken message loud and clear. They needed the ship to arrive *now*. As he rushed back to the controls to contact

them, he could hear the Doctor talking to Janeway, explaining calmly what he was doing and what was happening.

The Siron was only five minutes away from transporter range and Chakotay could have cried in relief. He went aft to let the Doctor know only to find a flurry of activity.

"She's gone into cardiac arrest. You need to help me."

He rushed to her side, panic rising like a tide inside him as the Doctor shoved an oxygen mask in his hand and indicated that he should hold it over her face. "The Siron will be in range in less than five minutes." Chakotay willed his own heart to keep beating as the Doctor worked feverishly on her.

"Let's hope that's soon enough."

At that moment they were contacted by the Siron's chief medical officer and the Doctor quickly briefed her on the situation.

"Understood Doctor. We'll be beaming you to our vessel as soon as we're in range. I've had the holo emitters double checked in sick bay. All the staff are standing by and ready."

"Thank you, Doctor Fveirrolh."

Interminable seconds ticked by until word came from the Siron that they were in range. The Doctor met Chakotay's eyes and nodded. "Energize."

#

"Hello, you."

Janeway's eyes blinked and finally remained open. She tried to focus on the person sitting next to her. She wasn't completely sure he was really there. Come to think of it, she wasn't entirely sure if she was even here, wherever 'here' was. What she could blearily make out of her surroundings didn't look familiar at all.

She closed her eyes for a few seconds and then looked at him to check. It sure looked like Chakotay but it seemed unlikely given that the last clear memory she'd had was that she was going to die. Perhaps she was dead. Oh god, if she was dead, then what was Chakotay doing here? Again closing her eyes, this time so that she didn't see yet another demonstration of her failure.

"Doctor?" Chakotay sounded worried.

"Kathryn, can you hear me?"

Wait a minute. She was prepared to believe that there may be an afterlife but, it seemed a stretch to accept that holograms, albeit sentient ones, would be included.

"Kathryn, you're safe now. It's Chakotay and the Doctor."

"She seems to be distressed or confused. It could be just a bit of disorientation from the medications. All her readings are fine, don't worry." That was definitely Philip's voice.

"Kathryn, open your eyes." Chakotay instructed. "We're all safe. You did it. You completed your mission successfully."

She risked another glance in the direction of the voices.

The smiling faces of Chakotay and the Doctor were looking down on her. A thousand questions popped into her head but for some reason she couldn't speak. Whether it was because she was too overcome or because she'd lost the ability, she wasn't sure. The Doctor answered one of the unasked queries.

"Good to see you, Kathryn. You had us worried for a while. I'm afraid your voice will be out of action for a day or two." He seemed a bit uncomfortable. "Stressed vocal chords."

When Janeway's hand waved around randomly, they could tell by the look of frustration on her face that it wasn't doing what she wished. The Doctor continued.

"You may also have a few motor skills issues for a short time. Nothing permanent, I promise you." He took her flailing hand and placed it in Chakotay's. "I'll leave you to check on your latest tests."

It was all too tiring and she again closed her eyes. When next she opened them, she realized that she must have been asleep, because Chakotay was gone.

"Ah, Kathryn. Lovely to have you with us again." The Doctor waved a tricorder over her and smiled with satisfaction. "How do you feel?"

Janeway didn't speak but managed to convey a great deal to him with a slight raise of one eyebrow.

"Hmm, I thought so. It will only be a minute or so and I'll finish my readings and get you something."

She closed her eyes again but opened them when she heard a strange voice.

"How is she this morning, Doctor Philip?"

"Your treatment has been wonderfully efficacious, Doctor. I'm so very grateful to you all."

Janeway squinted at the man talking to the Doctor. He *looked* Romulan. That seemed too fantastic to be true. She supposed he could be Vulcan but his voice seemed just a bit too *bubbly*. "Must be the drugs." Janeway thought to herself.

"Kathryn? There's someone here to meet you." The Doctor took the other man by the arm and guided him to Janeway's bedside. "Kathryn...Captain Kathryn Janeway, I am honored to introduce you to Doctor Fveirrolh, head physician of the Siron of the Romulan Empire."

"Captain, it's an honor to have been of service to you. Romulus owes you much."

Having very little idea what he was talking about and still having problems with her speech, Janeway smiled as best she could. The Romulan seemed delighted with this small gesture.

"Well, Captain, I know that you're very tired, so I will leave you in the very capable hands of your physician." Turning to the Doctor, he added, "Doctor, if you care to join us when the Captain gives you leave, we will be further discussing Ginervan virology. We would, of course, welcome your input." And with a gallant bow, he was gone.

"Rom...?" asked Janeway.

"You don't remember?" she shook her head slightly. "The Siron was the closest vessel available to help us after Chakotay got you out of the Yertoni." He gently pressed a hypospray to her neck, and

her headache dissipated. "We've been on board for nearly three days. They've been absolutely wonderful hosts and their care of you has been nothing short of superb."

"Thank..thm."

"Don't worry, Chakotay has made it perfectly clear to them how grateful we are. He's with the Captain now. Chakotay, I mean. The Romulans have been happy to help though. You are now an official Romulan hero."

"What?"

"Three of the planets on the list were Romulan and most of this crew have family or friends who live there."

"All safe?"

"Yes, all the disasters have been averted. We were able to get a definitive list from the recording." He closed his tricorder and smiled. "We're only a couple of days away from Earth. In a gesture of friendship, the Siron is bringing you all the way home. They won't admit it, of course, but they're very excited about the spirit of cooperation that exists between the Federation and the Empire. Not to mention the Cardassians and the Klingons. Everything's coming up roses thanks to one very brave and resourceful, Captain Janeway."

"Not me. *Team.*" She managed to grasp his hand. "Mean it."

#

"Did you want to know what will be happening once we get to Earth?"

Janeway shrugged. As yet, she wasn't speaking very much. It was hard to determine if this was because of her indifference with what was going on around her or because of her frustration with her language difficulties. Thankfully, the Doctor was confident that her speech would improve more quickly than her physical problems, but just the same, Chakotay longed to hear her voice and especially her laugh.

"Well, we'll be in orbit within a few days. You'll be transferred to Starfleet Medical initially but the Doctor thinks it'll only be a day or two before you're released. Maybe not even that long." He smiled and pushed a strand of hair that was obviously bothering her out of her eyes.

"Philip?"

"After making sure you're being properly taken care of, he'll be transferred to Research."

Chakotay could tell Janeway was troubled by this development. He was too. The reintegration of the Doctor with his original program was one thing, but there was still the outstanding issue of his mobile emitter and whether the Doctor would be granted full autonomy.

They sat in silence for some time until Chakotay spoke.

"Hopefully, we'll be seeing all our friends in a day or two. They're going to be delighted to have you back."

"Do you think so, Chakotay?" she looked uncertain about the prospect of meeting them.

"Kathryn, of course they'll be happy to see you. They've been worried, but never angry with you."

"Even after I lied to them?"

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

"Only Kathryn Janeway could be feeling guilty after saving millions of lives." That at least got a smile from her. "Anyway, let's talk about us." He gave her a mock serious look. "Now that we're all finally home, I can down to the serious business of wooing you."

"Wooing me?"

"Yep. I've got quite a few plans for when you're feeling better."

"Really?" he nodded. "Chakotay I don't think that extra wooing will be necessary. You've got the whole wooing thing covered."

"Yes, but I want to go all out. You know - dinner, dancing, picnics, late night strolls..."

"That's quite a list. Seems like we've done most of them already, though."

"But not done as official wooing. I'd like to start afresh."

"Sounds wonderful. Woo away. Although, I'm not really up to the dancing yet, but the picnics sound great."

Janeway laughed and Chakotay realized that it was the first time he'd heard her laugh since the day that Voyager had arrived back in the Alpha Quadrant.

#

The Romulan crew were surprisingly friendly. Apparently, their captain had shared with them the remarkable achievements of their passengers and Chakotay was surprised at how many felt it was their duty to thank them personally. He'd been the most accessible, with Janeway still confined to the Siron sickbay and he'd been asked, on their behalf, to forward their appreciation to Janeway.

Once Janeway was out of danger, the Doctor had been monopolized by the Romulan ship's medical staff, who were delighted when he'd consented to share some of his Delta Quadrant obtained medical knowledge.

Chakotay at first was concerned that the Doctor was sharing information that perhaps Starfleet would be unhappy with but Janeway waved his worries aside.

"He's under my command, and I've authorized it." She smiled as the Doctor could be seen explaining some technique to the spellbound group. "Apart from the lives saved, this mission has, in the words of Admiral Burke, done more to help relations between long time distant groups. Philip's tutorials can only further those ends. Or, at least, that's what I'll tell them when they court martial me." Janeway suddenly looked sad. "He's been so lonely and risked everything to come with me. It's still not clear whether he'll be able to be re-integrated."

Chakotay marveled at her words. So close to what the Doctor, *Philip*, had said about her. He thought she needed cheering up.

"Your kitten is the hit of the Romulan ship. I'm sure if Indiana didn't belong to you, they'd have just

phasered it.”

“She’s Philip’s cat.”

“He says she’s yours.”

And if on cue, the red blur ran into the sickbay and jumped onto Janeway’s bed. The cat was closely followed by a terrified crewman.

“My apologies Captain, Commander.” The young man was almost reverential in Janeway’s presence. He looked horrified that he’d in some way failed the honored Captain Janeway.

“Thank you for looking after our pet...I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

The young man’s eyes widened and he stuttered out.

“Qian, Captain.” He looked terrified.

“Well, I appreciate you looking after her. She’s a bit of a handful, Mister Qian. I’m very grateful.”

“I am your servant, Captain. My parents are engineers on Otaared. I owe you a great deal.”

“Mister Qian, I’m a soldier, like you. I was just doing my duty.”

#

As they approached Earth, Chakotay could see that, although Janeway was much improved, it was clear that she’d not escaped from Merat unscathed.

Her speech was still badly affected and her coordination was seriously compromised, especially her left side. Her left arm wasn’t working at all and walking was only possible with assistance. The Doctor had assured them both that full mobility would be regained but it might take a week or two.

Chakotay was concerned that she wasn’t happier to have everything resolved and to be going home.

“Kathryn, what’s wrong? I know the last few months have been hard but just look what you’ve achieved. And that’s on top of bringing your crew home from a 70,000 light year exile.”

“Even bringing Voyager home early came at a price.”

“You mean the loss of Admiral Janeway?”

She huffed out a bitter laugh.

“I meant my mother and sister.”

“How so?”

“Chakotay, they were killed in a Starfleet shuttle. If it hadn’t been for me, they’d be alive today.”

“I’m sorry Kathryn. I’m not following you. How was it your fault?”

“They were on their way to welcome us home. My mom didn’t have a shuttle and pilot on call if she wanted to do some shopping.” Her eyes were full of tears. “They died because of my actions.”

"No, they weren't."

"Chakotay..."

"They were on their way back from Utopia Planetia, Kathryn. They'd been at the commissioning of the USS Janeway, Starfleet's latest ship, named after your father. They didn't even know you'd got home. In fact, we weren't home when they crashed." He held her hand in his. "The crash happened about thirty minutes before we came through the hub."

Chakotay watched her as she processed this information. A range of emotions passed from moment to moment on her face. The tears were still falling but she didn't look as distressed as a minute or so.

"They named a ship after Daddy?" she sniffed.

"Hermes class. Extreme long range exploration. It was going to try and setup some better communications between the Alpha Quadrant and Voyager."

"No one ever mentioned it."

"It was to be surprise from what I can gather."

"I...it sure...but Burke..." Janeway lapsed into silence. "No wonder Admiral Janeway was so upset when she arrived on Voyager. I thought it must've only been about Joe Carey but it must've also been about Mom and Phoebe. She couldn't be sure that we'd get home in time." She closed her eyes. "It must've been like losing them twice."

#

After bidding a heartfelt thanks and goodbye to the Romulan captain and his medical staff, the three were beamed directly to Starfleet Medical.

Unfortunately, all hopes of a restful time for any of them were dashed as soon as they materialized.

Chakotay was whisked away for some kind of debriefing and the Doctor and Janeway were moved so quickly that Chakotay didn't have time to find out where they were going before they disappeared.

He was beyond surprised when, some hours later, he was found by B'Elanna, sitting in a waiting room, nursing a cold cup of tea.

"Chakotay, I've been looking for you everywhere. Are you all right?"

He was up and in her arms in an instant but didn't speak and B'Elanna just held his shuddering body to her. Finally, he regained control and gave her a hug.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you, but how did you know where we were? They're not even letting me see her, for some reason."

"Ah, that would be my fault. Sorry, it never occurred to me they wouldn't let you see her."

Chakotay didn't even pretend to understand. "What?"

B'Elanna smiled. "I'm in charge of the Captain's security. I've just been to where she's being checked over." Chakotay shook his head. Still not understanding. "Owen called me just after he

spoke to you. She's being released tonight and, as Owen said, who better than a Klingon to protect someone?" B'Elanna beamed at him, obviously delighted with her job. "Actually, I'm not so much security as a filter to keep her from being bothered by either the media or anyone else."

"She's being released tonight?"

"Yep, tonight. We're taking her home to Indiana. It's all arranged. I've already got the senior staff getting everything ready. Harry's making sure the house is cleaned and everything so it's ready for her to move in and be comfortable. I've put Seven in charge of the cat." She added with a certain amount of relish.

"She's going home soon?"

"Yes, very soon. In about an hour." She looked at him with worry. "Chakotay are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Sorry, B'E. It's all just a bit much to take in. What about the Doctor?"

"He's not coming with us. I've given the p'taQs at Research *very specific* instructions and more than a few threats of physical violence, if they screw up his program. I think he'll be fine." Her smile faltered. "They've gone a bit cagey about the mobile emitter. Owen's on the case though."

#

Chakotay could hear voices as he approached the corner in the long corridor. B'Elanna had given him directions to Kathryn's room.

"Absolutely amazing, Admiral. Quite frankly I thought she'd be killed, like the others, but we had to try. Janeway's done a..."

Admiral Burke rounded the corner and almost ran right into Chakotay.

"Excuse me..."

Chakotay took one look at him and his rage exploded. "You bastard!" He punched Burke in the face, and with an immense sense of satisfaction, sent him tumbling to the ground. Several Starfleet security officers suddenly materialized and restrained Chakotay, who initially tried to free his arms but then relaxed and stopped struggling.

"Release him. It's okay." The Admiral staggered to his feet, with the help of a young ensign. "As you were." Burke nodded at both the officers restraining Chakotay, and reluctantly they let him go, returning to their positions near the end of the corridor.

Burke turned to Chakotay as he straightened his clothing and gingerly touched his jaw. He turned to the other admiral he talking to. "Bert, I'll contact you in a few hours." The other man nodded and moved off, giving Chakotay a wary glance. Burke turned to Chakotay. "Commander, I didn't recognize you. Walk with me, please."

Chakotay didn't want to do anything this son of a bitch asked. He just wanted to pummel some remorse into the supercilious prig. "You sent her out to die, you callous bastard. The best officer Starfleet's produced in a generation and you were willing to *sacrifice* her like..."

"Commander, please. I had to try everything. We were desperate. Truly desperate. The Captain was

fully informed, nor was she ordered to take on the mission.”

“Please, spare me the platitudes. You let her believe her mother and sister died coming to meet Voyager, you didn’t even tell her the truth about that. You manipulated her from the outset. Don’t lie to me.”

“Commander, I did what I had to do. I know an apology would be an insult, but believe me, had there been any alternative available, I would’ve taken it.”

Chakotay just shook his head. He hadn’t been so angry with someone for a long time and he hated the feeling. He needed to get to Kathryn as soon as possible. Only by her side would he find the peace he craved. So, without further acknowledging Admiral Burke, he pushed passed him and made his way back down the corridor towards Kathryn’s room.

He found her asleep but was happy just to be able to keep watch over her. Glancing at the clock in her room, he realized that it was less than thirty minutes until they were to be transported to her home in Indiana.

Philip was making some updates to her chart as he entered the room.

“Ah, Chakotay. I, er, won’t be joining you.” The Doctor fussed with a padd that he was holding. “I’ve put all the instructions for Kathryn’s care for the next few days on this,” he handed the padd to Chakotay, “I’ll leave her in your capable hands.”

“Doctor, I mean, Philip, thank you so much for looking after Kathryn during the mission. I’m sorry that you aren’t coming home with us.”

“Admiral Burke has told me he will be making recommendations to Starfleet about allowing me access to my emitter.” their eyes met. Neither man had any particular respect for Burke, nor did either have any faith or trust in him. “Anyway, Kathryn probably won’t wake now until tomorrow morning, the final test required her to be very still. She’ll be fine tomorrow, though.”

Using the comm. unit in the room, he called the number that B’Elanna had given him earlier.

“Harry, it’s me. Keep everyone at the house. I’ve just spoken the B’E, and we’ll be home in half an hour and there’s some things I’d like them to do...”

#

Janeway was in a boat. A rocking boat and someone was waving at her from the shore, calling to her. She couldn’t hear what they were shouting and now she felt like she was falling overboard.

“Captain!”

Janeway woke with a start and gripping the mattress, realized that she was in bed and had been dreaming. The rocking she’d felt was real, however. Seven of Nine was bouncing, albeit a very gently, on the side of her bed.

Even after all the marvels and mayhem of last seven and a half years, she found it strangely comforting that she could still be surprised by *anything*. And she had to admit that Seven of Nine, an ex-Borg drone, sitting on the side of her bed, *bouncing*, was pretty damn strange. So strange, in fact, that Janeway wasn’t quite sure what to say.

Seven noticed that Janeway had woken and stopped her motion.

“Good morning, Ca-Kathryn. Welcome home.” Seven leant down and kissed her on the cheek. “I am to ‘see if you need a hand’ getting up this morning.” Seven smiled a very small smile. “Harry said that I should jump on your bed, because I am the youngest and it is therefore my job.”

Janeway thought that statement was only slightly less bizarre than Seven bouncing on her bed and kissing her good morning, and still she couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“Do you require any assistance?”

“Thank you, Seven. That’s very thoughtful of you, but I think I’ll be able to manage.” Seven stood up but Janeway grabbed her hand to stop her leaving. “Seven, I hope you’ll be able to forgive me for the way I spoke to you. I didn’t really mean...” Janeway’s voice was still croaky and her speech still slightly slurred but Seven didn’t appear to notice.

“Captain...Kathryn...please, I do understand and there is nothing to forgive. Really.” Seven gave her a bright smile. “I am just very pleased that you are finally home.”

“Thank you, Seven. It’s more than I deserve.”

“Not at all.” Seven helped Janeway stand. “If you do not require my help, I will go downstairs and guard your breakfast, otherwise Harry may consume your pancakes.”

Janeway tottered towards her wardrobe. She’d opened the door before it had even registered that she was in her family home, indeed her childhood room, in Indiana.

“Actually, Seven, I think I may need some help after all.” she said, as she attempted to shrug on her old dressing gown with one arm before Seven helped her put it on. “Pancakes?”

“B’Elanna suggested them. She calls them ‘comfort food’ and we all thought it would be appropriate under the circumstances.” Seven looked almost excited. “My favorite is strawberry pancakes, but I have hidden the fruit from Tom and Harry. Pancakes are...” Seven seemed to search for a word. “...yummy.”

At that moment, laughing could be heard from downstairs. The unmistakable laugh of Tom Paris.

“They’re really all down there? I’m not sure...” Janeway looked uncertain.

“Your immediate Voyager family. B’Elanna, Chakotay, Harry, Tom,” Seven smiled, “and myself. Of course, the whole crew wanted to be here to welcome you home, but we have agreed that it would be perhaps overwhelming. There is some discussion, however, of a ‘real’ welcome home celebration within the next few weeks.” Seven eyed Janeway carefully. “I will assist you down the stairs. Chakotay and B’Elanna will be especially glad of your presence as they are having trouble coping with Tom’s high spirits since we found out you’d come home.”

“Thank you, Seven.” She took the young woman’s arm. “You’re right. I will need help getting downstairs.”

“It is my pleasure.”

Janeway was glad of Seven’s help. She certainly wouldn’t have been able to negotiate the stairs by herself as she was still having difficulty with her lack of coordination.

As Seven gently guided and supported her down the stairs and towards the kitchen, she could hear the voices of her former crewmates. Suddenly, she felt quite emotional at the prospect of seeing everyone and hoped that she wouldn't cry when she saw them all. A firm, but gentle tug on her arm from Seven got her through the final few steps.

The big Janeway kitchen and dining room looked the same as she remembered it. It was the first time in well over seven years that she'd set foot in it and Janeway found herself slightly uneasy about seeing it again after all this time.

The welcome she got surprised and delighted her and she forgot her trepidation within seconds. It was though she'd never been away from them and the past six months had never happened. Seven guided her to the table and she was happy to sit down in a large comfortable chair that was usually found in the living room. The short walk had exhausted her. Looking around at this little gathering she was reminded of all those occasions where she'd joined them for get-togethers and celebrations in the mess hall. And after seven years together, there were more wonderful memories than she could count... although, no one had ever used her first name in the mess hall.

"Good morning, Kathryn, welcome home." B'Elanna seemed to be the first to notice her arrival, "Thank goodness you're here. Maybe Tom'll behave now." B'Elanna leant down and kissed Janeway on the cheek as if it was something she'd always done and returned to the kitchen counter where she seemed to be in full pancake production mode.

Tom, also at the counter, turned around holding a plate.

"Ah, there you are. Welcome home. I've missed you." He kissed her too. "Now that you're here maybe Seven will tell us where the strawberries are. What do you say, Seven?"

"Of course, Tom." Seven smiled at him and opened one of the cupboards. "They are in here. If there are any left after I make Kathryn's breakfast, you may have some."

It was all so normal, yet completely strange that Janeway couldn't think of anything to say, so she just sat quietly at the table and simply enjoyed being with these people again. As she sat and watched Seven smacking away Tom's attempt to steal berries, the group was joined by Harry Kim, carrying Miral.

"Hello Kathryn. Lovely to see you. Welcome home." He handed Janeway the baby and kissed her on the forehead. "Here hold this for me, will you?"

She didn't have time to be shocked by Harry's action, because at that moment, Miral grabbed her nose. So engrossed was she with the baby, that she didn't realize that Chakotay had completed the group. Miral seemed perfectly content to sit on her lap and Janeway was more than happy to have her. The large chair they had seated her in gave her plenty of support and she relaxed into it.

The kitchen was abuzz with talk of coffee, tea, pancakes, bananas, strawberries and laughter. When Miral, who seemed perfectly at ease with being passed from person to person, was lifted from her arms by Tom and a most delicious breakfast treat put in front of her, Janeway wondered where Chakotay had got to.

He'd been to get coffee. Bless him. Chakotay sat next to her, bringing with him a mug of wonderfully fragrant coffee. "Only one cup for the day, I'm sorry Kathryn. Doctor's orders." He then, like everyone else this morning, leant over and kissed her. Although he, *unlike* everyone else, kissed her on the lips, making her forget temporarily about pancakes and most everything else. Putting the coffee down on her right side, he then quietly cut up her food and put a fork down also on her right

side. He then turned his attention to his own breakfast and, an apparently, on-going discussion of activities for the day.

Finally, everyone was seated at the table and Miral was in a high chair next to B'Elanna.

The conversation was full of the usual Voyager banter. Janeway had never heard anything so wonderful. No one seem to expect her to explain her actions or tell them anything of what she'd been doing for the last six months, for which she was very grateful. Apart from not really being ready to share the worst of it, still struggled with her speech. Not that anyone would care, of course, but she found it frustrating.

"Is that the comm?" Harry asked, as he poured himself another coffee and then carefully pushed the pot out of the reach of Miral.

"I'll get it." Said B'Elanna, as she picked up her empty plate and put it on the sink. "It's probably someone else from the crew checking."

"Crew?" This was the first word Janeway had spoken since entering the kitchen.

"Yeah," said Tom, "the comm's been running hot since we found out you were home, with the family wanting to know that you're okay."

B'Elanna returned a few minutes later.

"Who was it?" asked Chakotay.

"Some woman named Tahara. Of course, she wanted to talk to Kathryn. I told her she was having her breakfast." B'Elanna took her seat at the table. "She said 'no problem' and also said she'd probably drop by later, around ten, if that was okay." B'Elanna replaced the soggy piece of toast in Miral's hand with a new one, "I told her sure, as long as she called first to make sure Kathryn was up to it and that she cleared it through Owen's office."

Harry and the Tom looked at B'Elanna, open mouthed.

"What?" B'Elanna asked.

"You just told the President of the Federation that Kathryn was busy?" Harry whistled. "I guess that's the end of you being the senior officer here."

"Senior officer?" Janeway asked, bemused by all the comments.

"You're on leave, Harry's only a lieutenant, so that makes me the most senior officer."

"You stayed in Starfleet?"

"Oh yeah, and got a promotion to go with it."

Janeway smiled. "Commander Torres? Has a nice ring to it. Congratulations, Lanna."

"Thanks. Now that you're home, we can finally have the celebration party."

Janeway seemed quite overcome by this pronouncement. She didn't have a chance to get too emotional however as Tom suddenly thrust Miral into her arms.

#

By late afternoon, the group had quieted down but still remained in the living room. Janeway had her meeting with President, who had turned up at the front door with no fanfare or even visible escort, but declared that she had indeed cleared her visit with Admiral Paris. She'd seemed both amused and impressed with B'Elanna's attitude. The President had only stayed a short time, not wanting to tire out the still fragile Janeway. The two women had been left alone in the kitchen with a pot of tea.

A knock on the door immediately sent B'Elanna into what Tom was calling her "watch dog role".

"If it's the Admiral in Chief, tell him that Kathryn is busy groping Chakotay right now."

B'Elanna and Janeway both gave Tom death glares, although Janeway's wasn't completely effective due to Chakotay picking that moment to play with her hair. B'Elanna left to attend to the visitor.

"She hasn't got a bat'leth by the front door, has she?" asked Harry, only half joking.

"She won't hurt anybody, but she could give them a serious verbal scolding." Replied Tom.

"Look who I just found."

All eyes went to the doorway to view the latest arrival.

"Philip!" Janeway stood quickly and then practically toppled over. However she wasn't deterred from moving towards him once she regained her feet. "Welcome home!"

The Doctor rushed to Janeway's side to embrace her, before helping Chakotay get her back onto the sofa.

"Kathryn, you look so much better since the last time I saw you." He gave her a familiar scowl. "But I think you are disobeying the doctor's orders. You do remember the direction about 'bed rest', don't you?"

"Oh, come on Philip. We're home, at least let me enjoy it a little, please?"

"Well, just this once." He looked around. "Hello, everyone. It's good to see you all again. Where's Miral?"

"She's just having a nap, but she'll be on deck soon enough."

"Good, I'm looking forward to seeing her again."

"Doctor, not that we're not glad to see you, but how did you get released so quickly?"

"Well, apparently the President of the Federation, under strict instructions from an unknown source," he smiled at Janeway, "well, I'm not sure *what* she told them, but they had B'Elanna's detailed instructions for my re-integration out in the blink of an eye and had the procedure completed within minutes. Then they handed me my mobile emitter and shook my hand. If I thought that was a surprise, it was nothing to seeing the waiting shuttle to bring me here."

"To bring you *home*." said Janeway.

"Yes, we're finally home, Kathryn." They shared a smile. "The good news is that they even let me keep some of the mementos that I picked up along the way."

"That's wonderful, Doc. I mean, Philip. What have you got?" Tom peered into the satchel the Doctor had put down to hug Janeway.

"Well, for starters, there are all the souvenirs that Kathryn bought me from some of the planets we visited..."

"Philip, no..." Janeway's tone was stern, but she was struggling not to laugh.

The group's interest was piqued now.

"Of course, she bought home Indiana." He looked at Janeway, who was leaning into Chakotay on the adjacent sofa. On her lap, was the little cat, leaning against her in a very similar manner. "*Her* cat."

"*Your* cat."

"Hmm. She looks like my cat." Not giving her a chance to reply, he continued to rummage around in the sack, pulling out a chip. "Ah, yes, it's the collection of wonderful folk music that Kathryn obtained early in the mission."

The group looked mystified when Janeway and the Doctor looked at each other and burst into laughter.

"This must be what it was like for our family and friends when we got home." said Harry.

"Yep, this sounds like a real case of 'you had to be there'." Tom ventured.

"Well, perhaps," said the Doctor with a smile "but here, Mr Kim," he handed Harry the chip, "I think you will enjoy the *music*. We thought of you when Kathryn bought it back."

The Doctor again rummaged around in the bag until he found another data chip. "Ah, yes, this is what I was looking for." He held it up. "Some of the mission logs."

"Philip! I'm surprised at you. Surely they'd be still classified."

Not that any of the group cared. They would have liked to have known details of their captain's mission but were not prepared to ask her to break any regulations to get them.

"Oh, don't worry. I had this cleared before I left. Although, apparently after the President's 'request', I could probably ask for the Enterprise to take me to Risa and it would be at my doorstep." He prepared to put the chip into the player. "I think we could call this the mission's 'blooper tape'."

Suddenly, Janeway realized what the chip contained. It was episodes of her drunken ravings that had been recorded when she'd returned to the ship. This had the potential to be extremely embarrassing.

"Oh, no, Philip. Have mercy."

"Certainly, Kathryn." He gleamed in triumph. "Whose cat is Indiana?"

Janeway knew when she was beaten. She sighed.

"She's mine. She's *my* cat. All right?"

"And how do you feel about her?"

Janeway's eyes narrowed. It was a look that used to cause her crew to quake in their boots. It now merely bounced off the Doctor, who was currently fiddling with the chip in a meaningful way. Janeway sighed again in total defeat.

"I adore her." She gritted out.

"Excellent." said the Doctor and put the chip back in the satchel.

"Hey, I want to listen to that." said Tom. *Boy*, did he want to listen to that.

"I wouldn't think so, Tom." said the Doctor smugly. "It's just my personal logs."

#

Janeway couldn't remember having a more wonderful day. After being filled in on details of the crew and how they were all faring, she was extremely content to sit on the sofa in Chakotay's arms and listen to them.

However, a few hours after their informal dinner, the group made preparations to depart.

"You're not leaving?" Janeway was genuinely upset at the prospect of her friends going. "When will I see you all again?"

"I'd say tomorrow at breakfast." Said Harry.

"We could come earlier, if you wish, but I assumed that Chakotay would be responsible for making your bed bounce from now on." Seven added guilelessly.

Tom nearly choked and B'Elanna actually laughed out loud.

"What?" asked Seven.

"I'll explain later." Harry turned to Janeway. "Starfleet have organized direct transports for us all between our homes and the house."

"Seventy thousand light years and you still can't get away from us." added B'Elanna.

"I've never wanted to get away from any of you." said a teary Janeway.

The Doctor picked up his bag and made to join the others.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" asked Janeway.

"Well, I thought..."

"This is your home. This will *always* be your home. Upstairs, first room to the left at the top of the stairs." Janeway tottered from Chakotay's tender grasp. "Consider yourself a Janeway, Philip. I wasn't kidding."

A shared moment of understanding passed between the two and then the Doctor made his way to the stairs.

"The cat sleeps with you." He called when he got to the top of the stairs.

“Meow.” said Chakotay.