



**Rating:** T<sup>TM</sup>©

**Spoilers:** *Demon, Course: Oblivion, Endgame*

**Pairings:** J/C, P/T, EMH/7  
Ne/Nicoletti, K/Webber, Tu/T'Pol, Wildman/Greskrendtregk, Joe Carey/Sarah Carey, Vo/Ca

**Summary:** The EMH keeps a secret from the rest of the crew. An A/U spun from *Course: Oblivion*.

**A/N:** Written for *Dakota's Decathlon*, Pole Vault, hosted by Naomi Wildman. I hope she's been doing her chemistry homework.

**Credits:** Thank you to Ris for a wonderful plot bunny. I hope I've done it proper justice. Thank you to Anne Rose for the beta. Thanks also due to *Iceworld* by Hal Clement, which gave me a starting point for solving the chemistry issues, and to the *Starfleet Medical Reference Manual* by Leonard McCoy M.D., *The CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*, and *The Borderlands of Science* by Charles S. Sheffield. Other research works include: *The Biology of Star Trek* by Susan Jenkins, M.D. and Robert Jenkins, M.D., PhD., *Voyager Companion* by Paul Ruditis, *Star Trek Star Charts* by Geoffrey Mandel, *The Star Trek Encyclopedia* by Michael Okuda and Denise Okuda, and *The Starfleet Survival Guide* by David Mack.

**Disclaimer:** Webster's Dictionary defines Paramount as something "of primary importance; dominant." So that must be me then, right? Cause I'm pretty important.



"Identify yourselves or we will open fire." For the first time in seven years, the universal translator didn't need to do its job. The hail was in Federation Standard.

"This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the U.S.S. Voyager," Janeway answered. "I apologize for the method of our arrival -- "

"Try again," the voice said. "The truth this time."

Janeway exchanged a glance with Chakotay. "I know we used a Borg conduit, but we are who we say. We have no hostile intentions."

"This is your final warning. We will open fire."

Janeway signaled Harry to mute communications. "Shields up. Ensign Jenkins, get us out of here. Let's see if we can't find someone a little more welcoming to talk to."

Voyager rocked as the other ship opened fire. Janeway tightened her grip on her command chair. "Evasive maneuvers. Go to red alert, but do not power weapons."

"Captain, we're being hailed by a second ship."

"Let's hear it."

". . . that you surrender immediately or you will be destroyed."

"Three more ships have appeared on sensors, Captain. All appear to be Federation vessels and they are powering weapons."

"Harry, open a channel." Janeway met Chakotay's gaze briefly. "This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager. It seems we have a misunderstanding -- "

The ship rocked again.

"Six Federation vessels on scanners, Captain. Two are galaxy class."

"Shields at sixty percent."

Another jolting blast. Overtaxed power conduits threw sparks of protest.

"Three more ships on long range sensors."

"Shields at thirty percent."

". . . this is your final warning . . ."



Nearly three years earlier, Stardate 52586.3 . . .

"It's just jitters," B'Elanna said. "I'm getting married in three hours, to Tom Paris no less."

"I'd still like to run a few tests." The Doctor followed her into the turbolift. "It won't take long."

"Just let him, B'Elanna, it'll be faster than arguing." Harry, clearly not yet recovered from the bachelor party, tried to stifle a yawn.

B'Elanna glared at him. "You had to tell him, didn't you, Starfleet?"

"Be reasonable, Lieutenant," the Doctor said. "Mister Kim was right. You wouldn't want an undetected illness to spoil your honeymoon. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

"And an apple a day won't keep me from rearranging your subroutines if this interferes with my wedding."

The threat didn't bother the Doctor. He'd heard similar threats before. He only cared about whether or not she came to sickbay.

His tricorder readings made his holographic stomach simulate a knot that would have hurt, if he could have felt pain. "I do believe you're coming down with a bit of a flu, Lieutenant. Since it's your wedding day, I'll refrain from making you suffer through it."

"How generous."

"I'll need to borrow a little of your blood, however, in order to speed this along."

B'Elanna didn't protest nearly as strongly as the Doctor might have expected, and even agreed to wait while he whipped up an antiviral serum.

He peered through the microscope at the sample, and confirmed a fear he'd had for days. The entire crew would need vaccinations. Good thing he'd gathered a fairly large sample of sulfur on that last planet. If not for his unauthorized personal research -- He pushed the long-term implications from his mind and got to work.

"Ouch." B'Elanna reached for her neck. "That hypospray is hot."

"Is it?" The Doctor felt the end of it. "I hadn't noticed."

"Maybe I should run a diagnostic of your sensory subroutines -- "

"No!" He ran a dermal regenerator over the slight burn on her neck. "It's not a malfunction. In my haste I failed to check it. It was careless of me, Lieutenant, I apologize." He smiled. "That should do it. If you still feel queasy in a couple of hours, let

me know, and I'll give you something stronger."



Despite the restrictive dress uniform, Kathryn Janeway didn't feel the usual weight of her captaincy as she grinned at Tom and teased him about the end of his bachelor days. She felt privileged to stand here, basking in Tom's happiness. These were the moments that made life worth living.

Chakotay appeared in the doorway, B'Elanna on his arm, and Kathryn took a moment to admire him in his dress uniform before paying proper attention to the bride as the processional music began.

Such joy -- it seemed that she could feel her very cells vibrating with a delight that spread through the crew like thermionic radiation through molten hydrogen sulfate. She hoped they'd have more weddings in the weeks to come.

What would it feel like to be in B'Elanna's place, ready to promise a lifetime of love and devotion? For a moment she pondered the sting of envy before happiness again dominated her mood.

"I must admit I'm a little jealous of you two," Kathryn told the happy couple after the ceremony.

"A new life together," B'Elanna said. "I never thought that I would find love, and that it would make me happy."

"There's that." Kathryn grinned. "However, I was referring to your two weeks of holodeck time."

"The fabulous Graystone Hotel, Chicago, circa 1928." Tom beamed with pride. "I've been working on it for months. I got the idea . . ."

The pilot eagerly described the program, but Kathryn barely heard him. Her attention centered on Chakotay's warm touch against the small of her back. Even through the unyielding material of her dress uniform, his fingers sent a tingle up her spine.

She wondered what those same fingers would feel like against bare skin, and weighed the possibility of luring him back to her quarters so she could find out. The chirp of B'Elanna's combadge pulled her attention back to the moment.

"Pardon the interruption, Lieutenant," Ensign Vorik said over the comm system. "You asked to be notified of any anomalies that could relate to the new warp drive upgrades, and we have detected a fluctuation in a subsidiary injector port."

"On my way --"

"Oh no you don't." Tom caught her arm. "I've got plans for you that don't involve crawling around in a Jefferies tube."

"Tom, this could be --"

"Arguing already?" The EMH smiled at B'Elanna as he joined them. "Didn't take you long to mess up, did it Mister Paris?"

"Hey --"

"I'll be a half hour, tops." B'Elanna made another attempt to leave.

"B'Elanna," Kathryn said. "This is your day. Why not let someone else take care of this? I, for one, would be happy --"

"Seven and I will do it," the Doctor said. "She's supposed to be filling in, and I'd . . . enjoy a change of scenery."

"Not much scenery in a Jefferies --" Tom then seemed to recall that the Doctor's offer was to his advantage, and that he didn't especially care if it made any particular sense. "That's an excellent idea. You can make that our wedding gift. I'm sure that

adjusting a subsidiary injector port will be nothing compared to the sabotage you managed on the *Prometheus*."

Kathryn suspected that the Doctor had little interest in subsidiary injector ports and rather more interest in being alone with Seven of Nine, but she approved the plan. They could always call B'Elanna if it turned out to be anything significant.



The EMH crawled through the Jefferies tube, several hyposprays full of pressurized sulfur gas tucked beside his tricorder. He hoped he wouldn't need them, because if he did it would be a stopgap at best.

He had to hurry. It wouldn't take Seven long to gather the proper tools and catch up with him. If his hunch was correct, he had to finish the repair before she did.

The panel slid open and the Doctor's worst fear materialized, tenfold. The Jefferies tube fluctuated wildly. His tricorder told him that the entire section was losing molecular cohesion.

He pressed the hypospray against the bulkhead, waited for the floor to stabilize, and crawled further along the passage to release a second hypospray. By the time he injected the ship a third time, his failing courage was whispering about site to site transports. Only the thought of Seven crawling through this section without knowledge of the danger sent him back the way he had come.



Dinners with Kathryn were events to be cherished, even when luck allowed him three in the same week. Chakotay delighted in the fact that lately she'd taken to dimming the lights and setting the table with flowers. Recently the food had been pretty good as well. Maybe she had finally conquered the Glorified Toaster, as she called her replicator, because it hadn't burned a single dinner in weeks.

Not that he ever truly minded when it did. He didn't care about the food; it was the conversation and the laughter that he loved. And her smile. There had been times on their journey when her smiles had been few and far between, but recently she seemed happier, energized, and full of life. That special smile she saved for drinking coffee had spread to other things.

Sometimes when she looked at him lately, he could almost believe that she loved him, that she would let herself love him, even before the Alpha Quadrant. At times like that he almost dared take the chance and make the first move. He wondered if maybe she was waiting for him, and not for the sight of Earth on the viewscreen.

In his dreams he was bold enough to find out, and in his dreams he escaped disappointment, at least until he woke up alone, but he didn't quite have the courage to gamble with their relationship in reality. The courage to face down the Cardassians, the Vidiians, and the Borg -- that was a different kind of courage. The Borg could do many evil things, but they lacked the power to break his heart.

Even as he replicated the wine, he knew he'd play it safe tonight, saving the tempting game of chance for another time, but he still felt a tingle of anticipation as he looked forward to the evening. Time alone with Kathryn, without the pressures of duty, with laughter and companionship, that made his life worth living.

Tonight they could be happy for a few hours. Not as happy as Tom and B'Elanna perhaps, or at least not in the same way as the newlyweds, but this would do.

To marry Kathryn might be his fondest desire, but that option only existed in a distant future. And if he had to choose between ten years of friendly dinners and one night of passion, then he had very little choice. He treasured his friendship with Kathryn above all else.

She smiled at him and their fingers brushed as he handed her the bottle of wine. There was something electric in the slight contact, something he wanted to explore. The urge nearly overpowered him. The strength of it flew in the face of all reason. Now that he was with her, it didn't seem to matter what he told himself when he was alone. It took every ounce of his control to keep from crossing that line.

They stood in the doorway, both holding the forgotten bottle of wine, their eyes locked together. He knew the desire in her eyes was more than his own wishful thinking. It was a tangible thing between them.

They wrenched themselves from the moment, the loss of contact a physical pain, but the sting faded and soon they were cheerfully discussing the wedding.

"I worried about your safety during the ceremony," Chakotay said. "If you'd waited much longer to let Tom kiss the bride, he might have broken out those Klingon pain sticks."

She laughed. "He was eager, wasn't he?"

Her hand brushed his on the table, and he felt alive again. He needed that contact, and gave thanks when she didn't break it. His heart leapt as her hand slid around to grasp his, and he could stroke her fingers softly with his thumb.

"I heard that Neelix almost cooked the rice," she said. "Imagine trying to get that out of the carpets."

"Forget the rice," Chakotay said. "We would have been scrubbing Talaxian out of the carpets by the time B'Elanna finished with him."

Neither made a move to break contact, and Chakotay knew he wouldn't survive if they did. Maybe he couldn't have more, but he needed her touch as much as he needed a breathable atmosphere.



"All fixed," the Doctor said cheerily. "We can head back now."

"I just arrived." Seven pulled out her tricorder. "This situation requires that we run a level five diagnostic to determine -- ."

"I already found the problem," the Doctor said. "I took care of it."

"You were not here long enough to properly -- "

"Seven -- "

"You did volunteer for this assignment?"

"Yes, but th -- "

"Then why should you be opposed to completing it properly?" Seven returned her attention to her tricorder without waiting for an answer.

"Dammit, Seven, why can't you just trust me?"

She turned to look at him, eyebrow raised. "I am following procedure. I fail to understand why you would take it personally."

He had no good answer to that, at least not one he could use at the moment.



"I really am sorry, Tom." B'Elanna handed her new husband an ice pack.

"Don't be." He pressed the ice against his collarbone. "It's supposed to be a blessing on the marriage, isn't it?"

"That's not a Klingon tradition I planned to follow." She tapped her foot impatiently at the turbolift's lack of haste.

"I didn't mind." Tom followed her down the corridor to sickbay. "It'll take the Doc only a few minutes to fix me up good as new."

"Doctor? I've got an injured man here." B'Elanna looked around, ducking her head into every nook in sickbay. "Computer, locate the Doctor."

"The Doctor is located in Jefferies Tube -- "

B'Elanna slapped her combadge.



Seven complained loudly the moment she materialized in sickbay beside the Doctor. "We did not complete the task," she said. "There was no reason to transport both of us."

The Doctor ignored her. "Please state the nature of the medical emergency. Ah, I see you've successfully blessed your union. Congratulations, Mister Paris."

"Thanks," Tom said, his facial expression somewhere between a self-satisfied grin and a grimace of pain.

"Seven?" The Doctor smiled with exaggerated politeness. "Could you get me an osteogenic stimulator?"

"I am not your nurse," she said coldly. "I need to return to the Jefferies tube and finish the repair."

"Did you find the problem with the subsidiary injector port?" B'Elanna asked.

"I fixed it," the Doctor answered. "Seven just wants to check my work."

"I doubt that's necessary," B'Elanna said.

The Doctor held his hand out for the requested device. "Seven?"

She glared at him before handing it over. "The Doctor is hardly a qualified engineer."

"It doesn't require much of an engineer to repair an injector port. This is a nice clean break, Mr. Paris, it shouldn't give you any trouble."

"I should still -- "

"It's late, Seven. You should regenerate while you have the chance. I'm sure Lieutenant Carey will notify you if anything goes wrong. Whenever he gets stuck with gamma shift he seems to find dozens of excuses to wake me up."

"He's only done that once, B'Elanna," Tom said.

"Do you really think it's wise to disagree with me right now?" B'Elanna smiled and laid her hand on the uninjured side of his chest.

"A little something for the pain, Lieutenant?" The Doctor pressed a hypospray to Tom's neck. "I promise you won't notice any unwanted side effects."

"You mean other than a third degree burn?" Tom grabbed his neck.

The Doctor ran a regenerator over the spot. "You're fine. Go enjoy your honeymoon. And Seven, you really should regenerate if you wish to be at your best in the morning."

"I assure you I will be fully prepared to function at maximum efficiency. An adequate amount of time for regeneration will remain after I check the subsidiary -- ."

"Seven, for the love of Kahless, it's an injector, not the warp core, go to bed!" B'Elanna grabbed Tom's arm. "That's certainly where I'm heading."



Kathryn pressed her thigh against Chakotay's as she sat beside him on the couch. The warmth of his leg somehow made her shiver. It seemed a strong reaction to such simple contact -- she wanted more.

She had wanted more for years, but lately the temptation seemed more urgent somehow, and protocol seemed a foolish reason for delay. Their circumstances required certain adjustments, and it was high time that they made them.

Chakotay would agree. The way he'd held her hand at dinner told her everything she needed to know. She reached over and laid her hand on his knee.

"I think we need to talk," she said. It occurred to her that perhaps she should have started the conversation before touching his leg. She could barely hear her own thoughts over the pounding of her heart.

He didn't seem aware that she had spoken. She heard his quick intake of breath as her fingers stroked the inside of his knee, and when she turned to look at his face, she saw that his eyes were closed.

"Chakotay, we need to talk."

His eyes opened. "No," he said. "We don't."

The kiss overwhelmed her senses, the warm press of his lips sending waves of joy all the way to her toes. She slid her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer still, and together they sank back against the couch cushions.



To the Doctor's relief, Seven took B'Elanna's advise and headed to the cargo bay to regenerate after only minimal additional protest. He immediately downloaded all of his earlier readings from his tricorder so he could compare them to the data he'd already collected.

B'Elanna's blood sample still shimmered in a test tube on the counter. He stared at it, wondering why it hadn't transformed itself into glass. What made this stuff hold any particular form at all?

He carefully isolated the sample, then exposed it to pressurized sulfate gas. It didn't respond. He then dropped a slice of leola root in with the sample. As he watched, a second piece of leola root formed.

When he exposed the new leola root to the oxygen-rich and much cooler atmosphere of the ship, it held its form, but an injection of dichromate catalyst returned it to its original composition.

The Doctor created another leola root sample, this time keeping it within the sulfate atmosphere, and this time it required a larger dose of the dichromate catalyst in order to change.

The sulfate compound he had formulated would slow down the loss of molecular cohesion, but it wouldn't prevent it. He needed to find another solution.

Hours later, he sat down to review each crew member's medical files, anxious to assure himself that he hadn't missed any advanced warnings of cellular degradation, and he noticed an incongruity. Ensign Harper's four week old infant had been conceived during a period of time for which the computer couldn't provide a proper account.

Further investigation convinced him that the crew had been on the Y class planet in the Vaskan Sector for six weeks longer than the logs claimed. The baby must have been conceived during the first two weeks of that time.

This meant that the baby had been conceived on the Demon planet. Her DNA could hold the clue he needed. He immediately called the child's mother.

" . . . I realize you are working, Ensign, but if you could just bring her down to sickbay, I could make sure. It's only a mild flu, nothing to worry over, but when any sort of bug makes the rounds on a starship, it's best to keep an eye on the youngest crewmen."

The ensign appeared in record time, the tiny infant in her arms. "It's not Sakuro's Disease, is it? My cousin nearly died of that when she was a child."

"It's nothing like that, Ensign." The Doctor took the baby. "I assure you, it's only a mild flu, and I'm taking every precaution. There's really nothing to worry about."

He could feel the anxious mother's eyes on him as he took his tricorder readings. "Could you get me a dermal regenerator? On the tray behind you. She has a tiny scratch on her arm and we might as well take care of it."

As soon as the mother turned her back, he took a sample of the child's blood. Fortunately, the baby didn't give him away by crying. Not that she had reason to -- drawing blood hardly involved leeches and needles any more.

"I'll let you know if I need to see her again, but there's no sign of the flu yet. She's as healthy as the proverbial targ."



"Lunch?" Kathryn asked.

"Certainly, Captain." Chakotay rose to follow her. The moment the ready room doors slid closed he pulled her into his arms.

"We're on duty," she said.

"We're at lunch." He kissed her thoroughly.

"We can't -- "

"No rules, Kathryn. We're not going to complicate things by worrying about whether or not Starfleet would approve every move we make. If we're alone, then I can kiss you."

"We need some parameters."

"No, we don't. We need common sense, and we have that. We're both smart enough to know that making love in the ready room isn't a very good idea, even without a committee of admirals to explain it to us."

She smiled crookedly at him. "You're dismissing one of my favorite fantasies, you know."

"That couch is far too narrow," he said.

"Not the couch." She kissed him softly. "The desk."

He chuckled. "My common sense is telling me that we'd better go have lunch in the mess hall."



The precious blood sample promised answers, but didn't give them up easily. Every strand of DNA was unique, so finding the crucial difference, if indeed it existed at all, would require much careful study.

The blood itself appeared human at the cellular level, and withstood exposure to the dichromate catalyst. All of the expected chemical components of human blood were present.

He began a molecular analysis of each individual element.

"It is inappropriate for you to summon my staff in the middle of a shift," Seven said.

The Doctor would have jumped out of his skin if it hadn't been holographic. "It is



customary to greet a person when you appear in their workplace unexpectedly."

"Starfleet regulations clearly state that routine medical visits are to be scheduled in such a way that they do not interfere with the operation of the ship."

He snorted. "I'm sure you managed the half-hour with one less ensign."

"That is hardly the point," Seven said. "As the situation lacked urgency, you should have used proper channels."

"I'll try to do better next time." He removed the tiny vial of plasma from the centrifuge. "Momentarily absent ensigns aside, did you enjoy your first day as acting chief?"

"I was not there to enjoy myself, Doctor."

"But I suspect you did." He peered at the plasma sample through the microscope, then switched on its viewscreen. "Computer, increase magnification." His eyes didn't leave the image as he reached for his tricorder.

"I believe that an apology is customary."

"Oh that's quite all right." He barely glanced at Seven before comparing his readings to the last set.

"As I just explained, it was not quite all right."

"The structure of this carbon . . ." He turned to another console and pulled up a diagram of a molecule of hydrogen sulfate.

"I believe that eye contact is customary."

"Seven, could I ask you for a favor?" He glanced in her direction and noticed that she appeared displeased. "Would you loan me a sample of your blood? I'd use my own, but of course I don't have any."

"Doctor, your behavior in the past twenty-four hours has been erratic. I believe you should run a diagnostic."

"I'm fine, Seven. Roll up your sleeve?"

"If you don't consent to a diagnostic I will go to the captain."

"The captain?" He tried to cover his panic with a veneer of amused surprise. "Why would you do that?"

"You are clearly either hiding something, or malfunctioning, or both."

"I assure you, I'm not malfunctioning. My program is as fit as a Vulcan lyre."

"Then you are hiding something." She raised an eyebrow.

"Well, if you must know, yes, there is a situation, and it is best if I keep it to myself at this time."

"If there is a 'situation' then the captain should be notified."

"It is my job as chief medical officer to act in the best interests of this crew. I assure you, that is what I am doing."

"I will require more than that to convince me."

The work would go faster with her assistance, and her physiology differed from that of the rest of the crew. Emotional stress would hasten the onset of acute cellular degradation in an ordinary humanoid, but Seven's Borg implants would keep her emotions under control. Seven had a better chance of dealing with the news than other members of the crew.

"I'm waiting," she said.

He sighed. "I'll explain, but I'd better start at the beginning."



The fabulous Graystone Hotel had its advantages, B'Elanna decided. It didn't have sonic showers or replicators, but it did have room service and a sinfully large bathtub.

She stretched out in the steamy water, sighing as Tom rubbed the tension from her shoulders. Whatever little crisis had come up in engineering today was entirely Seven's problem, and it felt wonderful.

So did Tom's lips on her neck.

"Lucky I dodged that flu," she said. "Maybe I should thank Harry for sicking the Doctor on me."

"Flu?" Tom nipped at her earlobe.

"Just before the ceremony," B'Elanna said. "I thought I had a case of -- hey, watch it."

"Sorry, too hard?"

"That must be where he burned me with the hypospray."

"You too? That's weird."

B'Elanna twisted to look at her husband. "He did that to you, too?"



"I got suspicious about four days ago," the Doctor said. "My personal experiments were giving me inconsistent data. The symptoms that Lieutenant Torres displayed not only confirmed my hypothesis, but also indicated that there's a real danger."

"What experiments were you conducting?" Seven asked.

"I kept a sample of the silver blood. I've never encountered a substance so malleable, especially on a molecular level, and I thought I could find a way to use it to create a body for myself."

Seven looked at him as if he'd just expressed a desire to transform himself into a Denebian Slime Devil. "But why would you wish to be organic? Being human comes with many inconveniences."

"Maybe, but to truly be alive, to be able to eat and sleep and make love -- " He stopped, horrified at having revealed too much.

Seven didn't seem ruffled by his statement. "You are capable of having sexual relations now."

"Making love is about more than the act of sexual intercourse. It's about falling in love, and caring for someone, and joining your life to theirs. It's about sharing and commitment. I can't do that now. I can't expect a woman to settle for a man who isn't even real."

"You are as real as any other crewmember, as you've said yourself on numerous occasions. I fail to see how this woman you speak of would suffer from your lack of organic matter."

"There are limitations," he said. "The mobile emitter, the fact that we couldn't share a meal or a bottle of wine, the way other people perceive a hologram and would react to someone who married one. I want you to have a normal life, and that's not something I -- "

She stared at him. "Me? You were doing this for me?"

"Yes," he admitted after the silence had stretched well past being simply uncomfortable. "I have feelings for you, Seven. I know it's not appropriate. I hope this won't -- "

"I prefer your current form." She laid her hand on his arm and kissed his cheek. "Now I believe we have work to do."



"We should have done this years ago," Kathryn said. "I should have known you'd be

good at it."

"Of course." Chakotay sent his fingers dancing over her skin. "I have you to inspire me."

She came to life under his touch, and everything felt different now. Better. She remembered previous happiness as if she'd read about it in a book, while each vivid moment with Chakotay filled her with elation.

"A little lower." She groaned out loud as he hit the right spot.

"Even your knots have knots," he said, rubbing harder. "Just what did you do today?"

"I gave Seven a hand in engineering, and checked out that injector port that the Doctor repaired."

"And was his work satisfactory?"

"Apparently. It's working perfectly."

"I'm not sure we should be pleased about that," Chakotay said. "He'll be bucking for chief engineer."

Kathryn laughed. "At least the warp core won't complain about his bedside manner." She rolled over. "Now lay down, it's your turn."

The intensity of his gaze set her heart racing. "I think I'll skip the massage," he said. "There's something I'd like better." He pressed her back against the sheets and kissed her until she could no longer form a coherent thought.



"Look at this! Seven, I've found it!" He looked up from the microscope and gestured for her to join him. "It's not in the baby's DNA at all! It's in her RNA!"

Seven peered through the microscope. "So her mitochondria are maintaining the carbon structure we observed?"

"That would explain the delayed symptoms in the crew. The silver blood must have used existing mitochondria from the other -- if those mitochondria had experienced a less complete adaptation -- Seven, I'll need another blood sample."

While the Doctor arranged the specimens, Seven programmed the computer to run a more detailed analysis on the RNA. The specific differences between the three samples could provide a treatment.

"Can you encrypt the files?" The Doctor asked. "If someone were to accidentally stumble upon this before they've received the treatment . . ."

She considered this. Encryption could draw attention. "When we are finished, we'll download the results onto a PADD and overwrite the original file with a diagnostic of your subroutines."



Sickbay overflowed with growing cultures of mutated mitochondria, the descendants of those harvested from the Harper baby. The Doctor felt a little guilty about repeatedly worrying the child's mother, but he reminded himself that he had over one hundred and forty lives to save. Ensign Harper would forgive him if she learned the truth, provided he cured her first, of course. If she learned the truth while still at risk, he felt certain that the increased emotional distress would cause a rapid deterioration.

The crew couldn't learn that they weren't real. The knowledge would kill them as surely as a phaser blast. Even once the danger passed, he feared how the crew would deal with the knowledge. Perhaps they shouldn't know at all.

He slipped into the galley, not bothering to call for lights. He didn't need to see to find the leola root.

"Ah ha! I knew I'd catch -- Doctor?" Neelix appeared from behind the cupboard with a handlamp. "You're the leola root thief?"

"Thief is a rather strong term, Mister Neelix. I didn't think you'd mind if I borrowed a few roots."

"A few! I've lost nearly twenty pounds of leola root in the last four days. I couldn't serve creamed leola root with my dumplings yesterday -- "

"A fact for which I'm sure the crew is most grateful. Now if you'll excuse me -- "

"I most certainly will not excuse you. I need that leola root."

"So do I. You'll just have to find another way to inflict culinary horror upon the crew. I'm quite sure you'll manage."

He left Neelix red-faced and stuttering, and returned to sickbay.



"I'm not having this conversation right now, Chakotay," Janeway said. "We don't have time."

He blocked her path to the door. "Make time."

"We have a staff meeting."

"That's hardly urgent." He treated the chronometer to a pointed glance. "You can spare at least ten minutes, and I only need five."

"We agreed that we'd keep this from having a negative effect on the ship."

"If there's a red alert, I'll be the first to let this drop. Five minutes, Kathryn."

Of course he was right, but admitting it would make for poor tactics. She glared at him. "We'll talk about this after we've taken care of ship's business. That means after our shifts, and not one minute sooner." She stepped around him.

He caught her arm. "I love you, Kathryn, and that will never change, but I won't let you walk all over me just because you're used to having your own way."

She froze. "What are you saying?"

"This is a period of adjustment for us. We need to work out these little disagreements, or they'll turn into big ones."

"After our shifts," she said. "We'll lay out some parameters. That should keep us on track."

"Parameters? Kathryn -- "

"Later."



"Did you enjoy your honeymoon, Lieutenant?"

B'Elanna looked up from her PADD. "Another social lesson? Feigning interest in a coworker's personal life for fun and profit?"

Seven appeared puzzled. "I apologize if my question was too personal, I merely wished to know if you found the experience pleasant."

"I did." B'Elanna sighed. "Thanks for asking. Unfortunately, two weeks away produced a hell of a lot of reading."

"I suggest you only read the summary I provided. Everything worthy of your attention is highlighted."

"I'd rather judge for myself," B'Elanna said. "I need to take a look at that injector port

that malfunctioned. Were there any similar problems? Do you think the new warp core modifications had anything to do with it?"

"No," Seven said. "I do not believe they were connected in any way."

"Good. I have to schedule the Doctor for a complete diagnostic, and then -- "

"I already did that," Seven said. "I can provide you with the results."

"Please do," B'Elanna said. "Tom noticed that he seemed a little off his game, and I feel a little guilty for not checking him out right away. I was a little distracted."

Seven failed to reply as B'Elanna expected. "That is perfectly understandable. No harm done."



Janeway watched her crew file out the door. The staff meeting hadn't lasted long; nothing had changed significantly in the last week, except that Tom and B'Elanna were back from their honeymoon, and the Doctor very much wanted to inoculate the crew against a minor influenza virus, something he considered of vital importance in what almost seemed a deliberately casual way.

She'd have to check on his last diagnostic. Perhaps something from one of Tom's more baffling holonovels had leaked into his matrix.

Neelix lingered behind. "Captain, if I might have a word with you, well, there's a situation I'd like to discuss."

"Of course," she said. "What's on your mind?"

"It's the Doctor," he began. "The other night -- "

His combadge beeped. "Mister Neelix, please report to sickbay."

"I'm rather busy at the moment," Neelix objected. "Could you wait -- "

"Susan would like you to be here."

"Did something -- "

"She's quite all right, Neelix, but you really should be here."

"Right away. My apologies, Captain."

Neelix disappeared before she could say a word. She hoped that Lieutenant Nicoletti hadn't been injured, but trusted the Doctor would keep her informed of anything serious.



Janeway settled down at her desk with a cup of coffee and started to prioritize the items on her agenda.

The door chimed.

"Come."

Chakotay entered, a PADD in his hand. "I have a proposal to expand Tom and B'Elanna's quarters."

"No," she said. "I'm not wasting resources by moving walls around."

"At least look at the proposal, Captain."

She snatched it from his hand and tried not to roll her eyes. "You want to give Tom's quarters to Mortimer Harren?"

"He's requested different quarters before, and then we could take down that wall -- "

"No," she repeated.

"Why not?"

"I don't see the need."

"People need their space."

"That's not what you were saying this morning."

"That was different."

"If Tom wants his space, he can keep his old quarters."

"Kathryn -- "

"Did either Tom or B'Elanna even make this request?"

"Well, no, but -- "

"You're dismissed, Commander." She picked up a report on deflector dish efficiency, ignoring him until he turned and left.



Neelix hustled across the bridge and onto the turbolift, where he paced energetically until the doors opened, freeing him to go pelting down the corridor. His heart pounded as a dozen scenarios played themselves out in his imagination, but none could quite account for the cheerful tone of the Doctor's summons.

It could only relate to one thing, and he hadn't expected an answer nearly this soon. He rushed through the door.

Susan sat on a biobed, beaming, her hand on her belly. "Daddy's here," she told it.

Neelix froze, his eyes locked on her stomach. *Did she say --*

"Congratulations Mister Neelix."

"What?" He looked at Susan.

Susan beamed at him. Then she beamed at her belly.

"You mean -- "

"Yes."

"How?"

The Doctor smiled. "When a man and woman love each other very much -- "

"No, not that. You told us that a Human-Talaxian pregnancy was impossible without gene therapy, and that if we wanted children we'd have to come back and see you, and that it might not be possible at all, and that you'd have to do more tests."

"Yes," the Doctor said cheerfully. "Clearly I was wrong."

"Clearly!"

Susan took his hand and placed it over her belly. "I was so afraid we couldn't have this. Please tell me you're happy."

"Of course I am, sweetheart, I'm just surprised. There's so much we have to do to get ready."

"Would you like to have a look at your child?" The Doctor pulled up an image on one of the screens.

The moment Neelix saw the fragile little bundle of cells, he knew that he'd waited for this moment his whole life.



Seven spent her day crawling through the Jefferies tubes with hyposprays full of sulfur while evading the regular engineering crew, a task somewhat more difficult now that she no longer served as their boss.

The first close call forced her to back half the length of deck twelve on her hands and knees after spotting Ensign Vorik opening an access panel from environmental control, and the second involved the accidental discovery of Kenneth Dalby's not-so-secret but still well-hidden still.

Lieutenant Paris would probably pay handsomely for that knowledge. The crew liked to speculate about that sort of secret. This one, however, was proving most inconvenient.

As soon as the Doctor managed to inoculate the whole crew, the need for secrecy would end. Seven looked forward to that.



Janeway returned to her quarters and replicated a coffee. For the first time in weeks, her heart failed to leap joyously at the sound of her door chime. She wanted some time alone.

The door chimed again.

"Fine. Come in." She turned to stare out the viewport.

"Kathryn, we need to talk."

She sipped her coffee. "Indeed."

Chakotay crossed the room and stood behind her, like he'd done at least a thousand times on their journey. He didn't touch her, but she could feel the heat from his chest against her shoulder.

The stars streaked by at warp.

Some of her annoyance evaporated. "Okay. Have a seat and we'll talk about this."

"In a minute." He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin against her shoulder. "This is what I've always wanted -- the freedom to hold you in my arms."

Her eyes drifted shut and she wondered how she'd waited for this for so long.

"Now," he said softly. "Why do you feel the need to sneak out of my bed every night, and come back here alone?"

She sighed. "Chakotay, we can't both sleep in the same quarters. What if the ship gets attacked?"

He chuckled and she turned in his arms to glare at him. "I'm not kidding. They could trap us both, or -- "

"And what if something happens when we're having dinner, or making love, or when the whole senior staff is gathered in the briefing room?"

"If any of those things happen, then at least we'll be awake, and alert enough to react to the situation."

He smiled at her again, and his obvious amusement sparked a flash of anger within her. She pushed away from him.

"This is serious," she snapped. "There's a reason the captain and first officer are always assigned quarters that are separated by at least one hundred meters."

"So is this one of the parameters you'd like to establish? That we can make love, but afterwards we have to sleep one hundred meters apart?"

"I don't see why it bothers you so much. It's just sleep, and I'm only trying to be practical."

He stepped closer to her. "I always assumed that once we were together, I'd get the privilege of waking up beside you every morning."

"I'd just have to come back here to get dressed, and we see each other at breakfast, so I don't see the difference."

Chakotay sighed. "I guess you wouldn't."

"Explain it to me."

"I want to share my life with you, Kathryn. All of it. I want to fall asleep holding you in my arms, and I want to know what you look like first thing in the morning."

"Maybe when we get back to Earth, but out here -- "

"Maybe?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Kathryn. Look at me." He looked serious. "When you think about your future, am I in it?"

"Of course you are, Chakotay, I love you. I'm just trying to be practical."

"Tell me something. When you were with Mark, did you go home every night?"

"Yes," she said. "Usually, we both had places to be the next morning, and it was just easier."

"You were engaged," he said. "Where were you planning to live once you were married?"

"It never came up."

"Kathryn, did you even set a date?"

"No, there was too much up in the air. We were going to choose a date when things settled down, and then -- "

"I see." He took her hands. "Now, why are you really coming back here alone every night?"

She studied his face, failed to figure out what he was thinking, and shrugged.

"I think that you're used to your independence. Sometimes you'd rather sit up until 0300 hours with a book than get any sleep, and you don't want anyone telling you that you shouldn't. Am I right?"

"Maybe."

"You don't want to disturb anyone with the lights, or wake them up if you decide to play some music."

She nodded. It was true enough, if not complete.

"And maybe you feel a little trapped when you have to disengage from someone's arms if you need to get out of bed in the middle of the night? I don't want to smother you, Kathryn, and if you do wake me up at night, I can always just roll over and go back to sleep."

"You make it sound so simple and easy."

"So, are you willing to stay the night? The whole night?"

"Chakotay, it's not that easy. We still have to think about the ship's safety -- "

He cut her off. "The next time you set foot in my bedroom, you'd better bring a toothbrush. I want more than just an affair with you, Kathryn." He headed for the door. "I'll talk to you later. I promised B'Elanna a game of velocity."

She watched him go and sank down onto the couch. She'd always known that a relationship with Chakotay would prove challenging, especially in the Delta Quadrant.



"Look, I know how you feel old man, but she's going to make you wait until we're home. Either give it up or suck it up."

"It's not that." Chakotay hit the target, sending it back her way. "We've made progress recently. Significant progress, but the woman is exasperating."

B'Elanna dived for the shot and laughed. "I married Tom Paris. I'll match your exasperating and raise you an infuriating."

"Just one?"

"Face it, Chakotay, we fell for Starfleet brats." She rolled, her eyes on the target. "They're pretty good at getting what they want, they just aren't always clear on what that is. We have to be patient with them."

"You're recommending patience?" He fired, striking the target squarely. "I never thought I'd live to hear that."



"Well, with Tom I find that a healthy dose of fear doesn't hurt either, but I'm betting the captain's harder to scare."



Tom grinned at Harry. "You will not believe what I overheard today."

"Is it about Chakotay and the captain?"

"No, better."

"Can't be better," Harry said.

"Okay, not better, but a heck of a lot more surprising."

"So, tell me."

"Lieutenant Nicoletti is pregnant."

Harry shrugged.

"So, aren't you even curious?"

"About?" Harry watched Tom roll his eyes in exasperation. "Oh. Who's the father?"

"Neelix."

Harry choked on his mocha.

"That's more like it." Tom passed his friend a napkin.



The EMH held his simulated breath as he watched the cells under his microscope. If this went well, he could begin treating the crew within hours. Over the last few weeks, he'd treated sixteen individuals for the same symptoms B'Elanna had experienced. He expected that number to climb sharply if he didn't find a permanent solution.

This had to work.

He activated the modified transporter. The mitochondria under the microscope disappeared. Moments later, their replacements shimmered into existence.

"Was the test successful?" Seven asked.

"So far," he said. "We'll know more in a few minutes."

For once, he was grateful to be a hologram. He couldn't afford to blink.

One of the cells started to divide. This was the proverbial it.

"Mitosis has begun," he said. "If this isn't going to work, we'll know in a moment."

The nucleus grew broader, then began to develop that pinched look in the center. The surrounding material did the same, and the cell split neatly into two.

"Begin the scan," he said, still watching the cells. He heard the light tapping of Seven's fingers on the console, and the telltale beep.

"None of the mitochondria present in the sample match the original RNA pattern," Seven said. "It would seem that the test is successful."

The Doctor let his simulated breath escape in a rush. "Good. I want everyone assigned to gamma shift to report here before going on duty."

"When will you be informing the captain?"

"I'll worry about that after everyone has received treatment."

"I cannot continue to maintain the ship's molecular cohesion without assistance. My other duties are suffering."

"I apologize, Seven, but you need to hang in there for a few more day."

"Doctor, I must protest." Her voice contained an unmistakable edge. "I do not feel that my ability to 'hang in there' will prove adequate."

For the first time, he looked up from the microscope and met her gaze. He realized

that she looked tired. "Have you experienced any of the symptoms we've discussed?"

"No," she said. "I have not. I simply have a headache, and need to regenerate."

"That's probably the best thing you can do right now," he said. "If you were to assist me, it might raise suspicions. I'll see you tomorrow."

She turned to go.

"Seven?"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Sweet dreams."



Chakotay tried to hide his disappointment when Kathryn arrived for a late dinner with nothing in her hands but a bottle of wine. He suspected that she planned to test his resolve, or perhaps she hadn't taken his ultimatum literally.

He kissed her cheek and took the wine. "I hope you're hungry. Velocity really builds an appetite, and I may have overcompensated."

"It smells delicious." She laughed when she turned and saw the casserole. "Maybe you should invite Tom and B'Elanna to join us."

"Some other time," he said. "We'll just have to store the leftovers and have them tomorrow night." He stopped himself from pointing out that the casserole would make a good breakfast, and tried to ignore that fact that Kathryn also failed to make the suggestion.

"I owe you an apology for this morning," she said. "It was wrong of me to be so short with you over that proposal."

"Have you reconsidered?"

"I gave it more thought, but I'm not changing my decision. There are better ways to spend our resources right now."

He nodded. "It's your decision to make."

"If they decide to have children, then we'll consider the options again."

"Fair enough."

"How do we do this, Chakotay? How do we keep our personal lives from impacting on our command?"

He laid his hand over hers. "Practice."

"I was distracted all day today," she admitted. "If something important had happened . . ." She looked down at her plate as her words trailed off.

"If something important had happened, you would have put our disagreement out of your mind. No one's more focused in a crisis than you, Kathryn." He watched her, waiting for her to bring up the real issue.

"We should get this food put away."

He sighed. They straightened the table and took care of the dishes, then retired to the couch. "Kathryn -- "

She kissed him, and for a moment he only cared about the softness of her lips against his, and the way her fingers massaged his scalp.

"Let's take this in the other room," she said, her voice soft and compelling.

"Show me your toothbrush."

"What?"

"Your toothbrush. Do you have it with you?"

"No, but -- "

He sighed. "Go home, Kathryn."



After seventeen hours of inoculations and alleged full body scans, only two crewmembers still needed treatment. The EMH wondered if Starfleet had some sort of speed record that applied to this situation. Not that it mattered if they did. He could never admit to breaking it, and the captain would probably spoil it anyhow. She'd promised to stop in hours ago.

He tapped his combadge. "Sickbay to Janeway."

"Yes, I know," she snapped. "I'll be there shortly."

"Now, Captain," he said. "Unless, of course, you'd rather spend a month in quarantine while I study this new virus in more detail. I must admit that I find that option rather intriguing."

He heard the distinctive chirp as she closed the channel, and smiled.



Sickbay appeared deserted when Janeway arrived. That figured. She just wanted to get this out of the way, then go back to her quarters and make up for the sleep she'd missed the night before.

After Chakotay had dismissed her from his quarters, she'd spent all night thinking about her mistake, her mind racing in mad circles until ship's dawn. She'd skipped breakfast, and so far she'd managed to avoid him, but they had to find a solution.

She couldn't give him what he wanted, but the very thought of giving up what they had just started to build made her stomach churn.

"Captain?"

She jumped at the sound of the Doctor's voice. Her stomach jumped as well, but didn't quite keep up, forcing her to swallow hard and grab a biobed for support.

"I think you'd better lay down." The Doctor supported her as she followed his suggestion.

Janeway closed her eyes against the light. The brightness seemed to grow by the minute. She thought she heard the Doctor speaking to Seven, and she wanted to ask him to call Chakotay.

Something burned her neck, and the lights faded to their normal radiance. Her nausea seemed to fade as well.

"Stay as still as you can, Captain."

She didn't feel inclined to argue.

A few minutes later he cheerfully, almost too cheerfully for her tastes, announced her fit as a Vulcan lyre.

She sat up carefully. Both the dizziness and the nausea failed to return. "Doctor, is there something you're keeping from me?"

"Well, yes, actually. I'm a little embarrassed to admit it, but I can't seem to find the cause of your dizzy spell."

"I suspect that my sleepless night just caught up with me," she said.

"Have you not been sleeping well again?"

"Just last night."

"Any unusual stress in the last day or so?"

"Yes," she said. "You could say that."

He nodded. "I know you'll argue if I ask you to stay for observation," he said. "I would like you to stop by after dinner for another scan, however, and report any symptoms

immediately. If you do develop this flu, I think you'd find it rather inconvenient."

"Of course," she agreed. "How are the inoculations going?"

"Very well. You're one of the last."

"I'll expect a full report," she said. "Right now, I think I'll just head back to my quarters and see what I can do about my lost sleep."



The Doctor retired to his office and sank into his chair. He'd come dangerously close to losing the captain. The fact that his prediction regarding stress as a catalyst had proven correct served as little comfort.

For a moment, he wished his holographic stomach could hold a drink.

Seven emerged from the lab. "How could you lie to the captain like that?"

He sighed. "I've been lying to patients all day. I agree it's ethically questionable, but my primary responsibility is to save their lives. I had no choice."

"How long until you tell them the truth?"

"At least a few more days."

"That is not an acceptable answer. I require assistance with the -- "

"Ah, Lieutenant Nicoletti, I hope you're feeling well?"

"Just fine," she said. "Better than fine. I've never been happier."

"Glad to hear it," the Doctor said with enthusiasm. He beamed at his patient, and tried not to think about his concerns. "I'd like to start with a full body scan, so if you could just make yourself comfortable and try to remain as still as possible, that would be helpful."

He helped her onto a biobed.

The procedure would be much more difficult in this case. The tiny embryo was barely more than a zygote, and he feared upsetting the rapid cell division within it. Like Ensign Harper's child, the embryo already possessed the mutated mitochondria, and it didn't require treatment.

He needed to calibrate the modified transporter so that it only effected the mother's cells. It was delicate work, and required intense concentration.

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry I'm late!" Neelix bustled across sickbay and snatched up Nicoletti's hand.

"Mister Neelix, just what is it that you think you're doing?"

"You couldn't possibly think that I'd miss one of Susan's prenatal visits! I want to be fully involved."

"Lieutenant Nicoletti is here for the very same scan that you underwent earlier today."

"Well then I'd like to watch."

"Did she watch yours?"

"Well, no, but I'm not the one who is carrying our little bundle of joy."

"I don't mind if he stays," Nicoletti said.

"Well I do," the Doctor snapped. "And he certainly can't stay there. He'll interfere with the scans."

"Then I'll just watch." Neelix installed himself exactly three inches from the Doctor's right shoulder and fixed his stare on the console. "So how does it work?"

"Mister Neelix! Please try to restrain your enthusiasm and let me do my job."

"Oh, don't get uptight now, Doctor, this is a joyous occasion." Neelix thumped him on the back. "I'm so excited about our little miracle. Can we tell the sex yet?"

"Why don't you go have a seat over there. If you bump my arm," he lied through gritted teeth, "then I'll have to start over."

Neelix started to protest again, but Seven took his arm and led him towards the office. "As an expectant father, you should familiarize yourself with all available literature on the subject. I know the Doctor has been preparing a reading list."

With peace restored, the Doctor managed to recalibrate the equipment for Nicoletti's unique situation. He began the process. Only after the computer confirmed that the embryo had suffered no ill effects did he let out his simulated breath.



Janeway kicked off her boots and stretched out on the couch, but sleep eluded her. She toyed with her combadge, knowing from long experience just how much she could fiddle with it without accidentally opening a channel.

Things would be simpler if she and Chakotay shared these quarters. If she wanted to straighten this out, and she very much did, then she had to call him. That was the hard part. If she could just wait for him to walk through the door -- the irony of her thoughts might have made her smile under different circumstances.

She stopped fiddling with the combadge and tapped it. "Janeway to Chakotay."

"On my way," he said.

He arrived a few minutes later carrying the leftover casserole from the previous night.

She gathered her thoughts, but her combadge chirped before she got the chance to speak.

"Captain, there's a problem with the scheduling for holodeck two -- "

"Figure it out yourself, Tom." She closed the channel and opened another. "Tuvok, I'm taking the night off. If it's not worthy of at least a yellow alert, it's not worthy of my attention right now."

"Understood, Captain."

"Isn't that a bit extreme?" Chakotay asked.

She shook her head. "We have to work this out. I can't lose you."

"You don't have to worry about that, Kathryn." He dropped to his knees in front of her and took both her hands in his. "I love you. I'm not going anywhere. If you want to get rid of me, you'll have to throw me out."

"What if I can't give you what you're asking of me?" Damn her voice for shaking. "Then what do we do?"

"Then we spend time together, support each other, share meals and friendship, and at the end of the evening, we share a kiss goodnight. You will still be the woman that I love, even if we don't share a bed."

"It feels like we're moving backwards, returning to the way things were before."

He shook his head. "I didn't have the freedom to kiss you then, or hold you in my arms. I want those things more than I want sex."

She leaned forward and kissed him. "I think maybe we should try this your way."

"Even better."

"My toothbrush is already here."

He grinned and nodded towards the casserole dish. "So's mine."



Neelix didn't know what had gotten into the Doctor lately, but he didn't like it. They'd had disagreements before, but this time it really mattered. He had a baby on the way, and if the Doctor wasn't going to show his patients a little common courtesy, then maybe it was

time for a change.

He slapped his combadge. "Neelix to Captain Janeway."

"What may I do for you, Mister Neelix?"

"Tuvok? I want to speak to the captain."

"The captain is unavailable. What seems to be the trouble?"

"This really is a matter for the captain. Is there some sort of crisis? The captain isn't ill, is she? I could make her some soup."

"Her health is fine, Neelix, now what can I do for you?"

He already knew exactly what Tuvok would have to say regarding the Doctor's personality, or lack of one. "It'll keep until the captain is available."

"Indeed."



Ensign Vorik realized that Ensign Lyssa Campbell was smiling at him again. This had occurred with increasing frequency since he'd danced with her at B'Elanna's wedding reception.

She had described the entire ceremony to him, since his duties in engineering had kept him away during the wedding itself, and lately she had included a number of references to Klingon pain sticks in their conversations.

"Why so serious?" She sat across from him and sipped her drink.

Half of their conversations began with this question. He felt no particular need to answer it. "Good evening, Lyssa."



Seven's headache continued to increase in severity even after it started to affect her eyesight. She finished securing the ship's molecular cohesion with the sulfur compound and headed back to the cargo bay to regenerate.

The Doctor had to tell the others the truth now. Their emotional responses no longer posed a threat. She would go to the captain herself if he refused, but first she needed to regenerate.

She stepped into her alcove. "Computer, initiate regeneration cycle."

Nothing happened.

"Computer, initiate regeneration cycle."

"Unable to comply."

Her heart began to beat a little faster as she picked up her tricorder and scanned the alcove. Everything seemed to be in working order. It had received the same treatments as the rest of the ship. "Computer, run a diagnostic of alcove zero one."

"Diagnostic complete. Alcove zero one is operating within normal parameters."

Seven swallowed hard and turned her tricorder on herself.

She slapped her combadge. "Seven of Nine to the Doctor."

Everything grew warm and the cargo bay started to spin. The floor tilted, striking her, and it went dark.



The Doctor slapped his mobile emitter into place and rushed to the cargo bay. He

found Seven on the floor, and he was sure that his hands shook as he checked her vital signs. She had a pulse, although it was weak. Her cortical node was failing.

He called for an emergency transport to sickbay and immediately got to work.

If Seven died -- he couldn't stand the thought. This was his fault. He had failed to predict how her implants would react to the mutated mitochondria. He had pushed her, demanding that she continue to maintain the ship instead of telling the captain the truth.

Perhaps he deserved punishment but this price was too high. He refused to be responsible for the death of the woman he loved. Seven had so much left to experience in life. The Borg had already stolen her childhood. She couldn't regain her individuality only to die now. He would find a cure.

The cortical node was responsible for maintaining Seven's vital functions. Once it shut down completely, she would die. The computer could maintain those functions for a few minutes at most.

He either needed a replacement for the cortical node, which was too complex to replicate and would in all likelihood prove impossible to find, or he needed to repair the one that was malfunctioning.

Unfortunately, he was a doctor, not an engineer.

His hand flew to his combadge, and paused. If he called B'Elanna, would she really be able to help? The only person on the ship who knew more about Borg physiology than he did was Seven. In fact, Seven had applied Borg technology to a number of situations on *Voyager* in the past, and she had done some research in that direction this time as well before he had discovered the changes in the Harper baby's RNA.

He hurried to the lab and searched for Seven's notes. If only his trick with the mitochondria would work on inorganic matter.

The monitors screeched a warning and he abandoned his search. Several minutes of frantic activity followed as he fought to regulate Seven's fluctuating heartrate. He needed help. He couldn't care for his patient and find a cure at the same time.



Kathryn realized her combadge was chirping. "So much for no interruptions."

"I knew it was too good to last." Chakotay rolled over and started fishing through the clothing on the floor. "Catch."

She snatched it out of the air. "Janeway."

"The Doctor has requested your assistance in sickbay," Tuvok said. "Seven is ill."

"On my way."

Chakotay, already half dressed, handed her a uniform. He didn't try to assure her that everything would be fine, which she appreciated.

When they arrived in sickbay, they found Tom watching the monitors. "She's unconscious," he said. "The Doc said it's her cortical node."

She sucked in a breath and grabbed Chakotay's arm for support. Seven would not survive without a cortical node, and they couldn't exactly ask the Borg to loan them a spare. "Where is the Doctor?"

"Doing research," Tom said. "He's asked not to be disturbed. He thinks she has about three hours before her body starts shutting down. He has to find a way to repair the cortical node by then."

Janeway nodded. "We could try to find a new one. Harry detected a cube about a week ago. It might take some creative thinking, but I'm sure we could steal -- "

"Kathryn."

She looked up at Chakotay. "I know. There isn't time."

He squeezed her shoulder, then turned to Tom. "What can we do?"

"Help me monitor her vital signs. The Doc thinks that if we use the computer to support her cortical node, it might buy some extra time."



The Doctor bent over his work. Tom hadn't asked any questions, and he couldn't afford to worry about whether or not the captain suspected anything. Nothing mattered more than saving Seven's life.

Nanoprobes seemed like the best option. Seven's own plan had involved programming them to stabilize the chemical reactions that were causing the loss of molecular cohesion. If he combined her methods with the principles that seemed to account for the success of the mitochondria, it just might work.

The steady tick tock of passing time made every effort to distract him. Twice he heard the monitor screech and had to force himself to keep working. Tom and the captain could keep her alive. He had to repair the damage.

Once the nanoprobes were programmed, he tested a few on a hull fragment salvaged from a Borg cube. The treated fragment held its form even when subjected to the dichromate catalyst. He headed back out into sickbay.

"A treatment?" Janeway looked pale.

He nodded. "Captain, I need you to control Seven's vital functions from the computer. She'll be without a cortical node for almost thirty seconds. Chakotay, stand by with the inaprovaline, just in case. Tom, assist me."

He cut into Seven's forehead with the laser scalpel and removed her cortical node. Tom took the scalpel and passed him the nanoprobes. He injected them. For ten long seconds, he held the tiny device, fearing that it could melt into nothing, stealing away Seven's chance at life. Then he slipped it back into place.

"It's working," Janeway reported. "Her vitals are stabilizing."

He swallowed hard and started breathing again.

Tom thumped him on the back. "I never doubted you, Doc. Not for a second."



The moment the door slid closed behind them, Janeway turned to Chakotay and wrapped her arms around him. "We could have lost her."

"I know." He held her tightly.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for being there, and thank you for not trying to tell me that everything would be okay."

"I wasn't sure it would be." He stroked her hair. "One thing I'll never do is lie to you. Now, what do you say we go get some sleep?"

"Sounds good."

They settled down together for what remained of ship's night, and she decided that she might not miss sleeping alone all that much after all.



The Doctor stood beside Seven's biobed and watched her breathe. He'd treated all of the equipment in sickbay with the nanoprobes, but he kept returning to this spot.



She stirred and her eyes opened. "Doctor?"

"Welcome back." He smiled and touched her hand. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel like I have failed to regenerate for several days. What happened?"

"Just a little trouble with your cortical node. Nothing to worry about now."

"It failed to interface with my alcove," she said. "The rate of molecular deterioration must have increased."

"It's repaired now," he said. "I programmed some nanoprobes as you had suggested in your research."

She asked him a number of technical questions before he finally convinced her that she could safely regenerate. He walked her back to the cargo bay and monitored the beginning of her regeneration cycle. Then he returned to the lab to program more nanoprobes.



"Lieutenant Torres will ask questions," Seven argued. "It would prove easier to reveal the truth. This deception no longer serves any purpose."

"Seven, I don't think you fully understand how the crew is likely to feel when they learn the truth. This is something that needs to be handled very delicately."

"I doubt their feelings on the subject will remain relevant if *Voyager* loses molecular cohesion and disintegrates."

"That won't happen now that we've found a solution. We just need to inject the nanoprobes into key parts of the ship and let them do their job."

"I will assist you," Seven said. "However, if you fail to inform the captain within one week I will do so myself."

"That's all I'm asking," he agreed. "Just give me time to prepare a full report, and she can choose when to inform the rest of the crew."

"One week should prove adequate."

The Doctor agreed.



"Captain." Something in the tone of Harry Kim's voice made everyone on the bridge take notice. "I'm detecting quantum fluctuations one light year away, at bearing 019, mark ten."

"Adjust course, Mister Paris," Janeway said. "Maximum warp. Let's have a closer look."

Chakotay caught her eye, and followed when she headed for the ready room. "What do you think it is?"

"We'll know in about three hours," she said. "The odds that we'll find a stable wormhole to the Alpha Quadrant are a little slim, especially since Astrometrics failed to detect it days ago, but we might find something of interest."

"We usually do."



Wormhole. Long distance scans from Astrometrics confirmed it, although they failed to determine the stability of the anomaly.

"We'll know more when we're close enough to send a probe through," Janeway told the senior staff. "We'll need to test for time displacement. It won't do us any good if we end up in the sixteenth century."

Tom chuckled. "Sure it would. Then we could catch some Elizabethan theatre and show the Klingons a thing or two about Shakespeare."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "We can equip the probes with chronometric sensors."

Janeway nodded. "Good. We'll need those probes within the hour. I want to start testing the moment we're in range."

"Captain, do you intend to take *Voyager* into the wormhole?" Seven asked.

"Only if it proves stable, and leads in the right direction. I don't have any intention of visiting the Gamma Quadrant." Janeway leaned on the table and smiled. "Even if it doesn't lead home, and you all know the odds of that, this wormhole could teach us a great deal. You have your assignments. Let's get to work."



The bridge crew held its collective breath as the first probe entered the wormhole. In the last three hours, they'd let their hopes rise a bit higher than any of them would admit.

Harry Kim knew better, but he let his thoughts linger on his fiancée, as he always did when *Voyager* seemed to find a path home. Libby had probably moved on years ago, common sense told him that, but in his fantasies she always greeted him when they reached San Francisco.

"Mister Kim?"

"Sorry," he mumbled, feeling like a first year cadet. He focused on his console and his breath caught. "Beta Quadrant, Sector 008."

Cheers erupted until Janeway raised a hand for silence. "Inside Romulan space?"

"No, ma'am, the probe seems to have emerged just inside the Neutral Zone."

They sent three more probes. The wormhole seemed to end just inside the Neutral Zone, although it fluctuated slightly, and it showed no signs of imminent collapse.

"We haven't detected any time displacement," Janeway said. "The anomaly is large enough to accommodate *Voyager*, and it would put us within days of Earth."

"Captain," Tuvok said. "I feel compelled to mention that entering the Romulan Neutral Zone could be viewed by the Romulans as an act of aggression by the Federation."

"We won't stay long," Janeway said. "With any luck, they won't even notice us."

"We should also consider the possibility that the anomaly will collapse while we are inside it," Seven said. "We should conduct a more thorough study."

Harry watched the look that Janeway exchanged with Chakotay. He saw the first officer nod slightly.

"You're probably right, Seven," Janeway said. "But sometimes we just have to take a chance. Take us in, Mister Paris, full impulse."



Janeway reached for Chakotay's hand as *Voyager* entered the wormhole. They had waited five years for this moment. She grinned at him.

The ship trembled slightly as the inertial dampeners fought to compensate for the increased gravitational forces within the wormhole, and then they emerged on the other side.

"Harry, I need our exact coordinates. Tom, be ready for warp nine."

*Voyager* shuddered and pitched sideways.

"Report!"

"Phaser fire," Tuvok answered. "Two vessels off starboard."

"Romulans?"

"Negative."

"There's another vessel closing fast on our port side."

"Shields up," Janeway said. "Open a channel." She waited for Harry's nod. "This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship *Voyager*. Our intentions are peaceful, but we will not hesitate to defend ourselves. Stand down and identify yourselves."

The vessel off port immediately surrendered. The vessels off starboard had different ideas. They fired again.

"Tuvok, fire a photon torpedo across their bow," Janeway said. "I didn't come all this way just to get blown up in the Beta Quadrant."

"Aye, Captain."

The other vessel fired yet again.

"That's it, target their engines and weapons systems."

"They've been disabled."

"Now let's see if they're willing to talk. Hail them."

"The Federation has no business here," a shrill voice announced. "We are simply attempting to reclaim our property and we do not appreciate your interference in the matter."

"Is that so? I'll give you two options. Either you beam over and we'll all have a nice chat, or I can just have you beamed into the brig for firing on a Federation vessel. Your choice."

"I'm sure we can come to a reasonable solution, of course, there's no need for any hostilities."

"Good," Janeway said. "I look forward to meeting you." She signaled Harry to close the channel. "Do we know anything?"

"Their weapons signature appears to be Ferengi," Tuvok said.

"Terrific." Janeway stifled a groan.

"Their life signs are human," Harry added.

"And the other ship?"

"Also human."

"Hail them. Invite the captain to join me for a cup of coffee. In the meantime, get a tractor beam on those vessels and tow them out of the Neutral Zone before the Romulans start to complain."



Ten minutes later, Janeway sat down in the briefing room across from a very nervous freighter captain who very much needed a shower.

"So," she said. "The Neutral Zone. Interesting place to be conducting business, wouldn't you say?"

"We were chased off course," he claimed. "Those scoundrels would do anything to get their hands on my cargo."

"And that cargo is . . ."

"Oh, nothing of interest. Just supplies. Perfectly ordinary supplies. Boring, really."

Janeway almost smiled. "Try again."

"Nothing dangerous, Captain. Nothing you need to worry about at all."

"So, Romulan Ale, then?"

"Why no, Captain, certainly not. That's illegal in the Federation. Where would I even sell it?"

"Pretty much anywhere, I'd imagine," Janeway said. "Now as for your friends out there. What do they want?"

"My cargo," he said. "They're nothing but common thieves. They've been on my tail since --"

Janeway smiled. "Since Romulus, perhaps?"

"Since Devron," he admitted. "Please, Captain, I throw myself on your mercy. I'd never survive prison. I couldn't stand it."

"I've been away for a while," she said. "But last I knew, the penalty for smuggling Romulan Ale did not include prison time."

Her combadge chirped.

"Ah, that will probably be our other guests."

Tuvok and Ayala escorted the two men into the briefing room.

Janeway stared them down. "Which one of you gentlemen fired on my ship?"

The one on the left shifted uncomfortably.

"Do you make a habit of firing on Federation ships?"

"A misunderstanding," he claimed. "I merely wish to reclaim my property and be on my way."

"And what property would that be, exactly? Do you officially lay claim to this gentleman's cargo?"

"I do. I'd like to make arrangements to transfer it to my ship immediately."

Janeway smiled. "So you acknowledge that you are the rightful owner of the Romulan Ale in his cargo hold?"

"Yes, and I want it transferred to my vessel immediately."

"You do realize that the transport of Romulan Ale through Federation space is illegal?"

He stammered a bit, but Janeway didn't bother to listen. "I think it's about time that I called headquarters, don't you agree, Tuvok?"

"That seems prudent, Captain."



"You agreed to give me a week," the Doctor said. "It's only been four days."

"An error of judgment on my part," Seven said. "I failed to anticipate this turn of events."

"Precisely," the Doctor said. "The crew has enough change to deal with right now without being made to question their very existence."

"They must be told."

"I disagree. It could be extremely damaging psychologically. They just accomplished the goal they've been working towards for five years --"

"They haven't been working towards anything for five years," Seven argued. "They've only been alive for a year."

"Now is not the time to tell them that."

"When, then?"

"Perhaps they don't need to know at all. They're home, they have friends and family to reunite with, who are we to tell them they aren't real, and spoil their homecoming? For all we know, the real *Voyager* will never reach Federation space. What's the harm in letting these people have a happy ending?"

"I do not know."

"Then let's not spoil this. We don't need to give Starfleet all sorts of new questions, it could make things unpleasant for everyone. We'll just let it go, unless something happens that makes it necessary to reveal the truth."

"Agreed," Seven said. "At least for now."



"Welcome home, Captain!" Admiral Paris beamed at her. "How did you manage it?"

"Luck," she said. "We found a wormhole."

"Is there anything you need?"

"There's the little matter of some riff-raff we picked up in the Romulan Neutral Zone," Janeway said. "I'd like to know what to do with it."

"Oh?"

"One ship full of Romulan Ale, and the captain of an entirely different vessel who was pretty eager to claim title to it."

Admiral Paris chuckled. "Home five minutes and you've already caught yourself some pirates. Transmit their information and I'll see if they're wanted anywhere in particular."

"I'd appreciate that. Our orders?"

"Set a course for Earth," he said. "I'll put the champagne on ice."



Starfleet sent an honor guard to accompany *Voyager* back to Earth. The crew celebrated with great enthusiasm, and redoubled their partying efforts when Janeway received word that the former Maquis had received official pardons.

"Happy?" Chakotay asked.

Janeway turned from the viewport and smiled at him. "It's almost too good to be true. Starfleet is arranging transports from Vulcan, Bajor, and Bolarus. They've even found Seven's aunt."

"How about your family?"

"My mother and Phoebe have already arrived in San Francisco." She grinned. "I can't wait for them to meet you."

"There's one thing we need to take care of before that happens," he said.

"Oh?"

He pulled a small box out of his pocket. "Will you marry me?"

She didn't answer with words.



Tuvok allowed himself to feel a bit of anticipation at the thought of seeing T'Pol again. More than five years had passed since he'd last seen his wife, and he had never met his young granddaughter.

He looked around for his family as he walked down the ramp and onto Starfleet Academy's parade grounds. The bright sun shone down on hundreds of people, making their boisterous displays of emotion even more surreal as they enthusiastically greeted loved ones once thought lost.

To his mild surprise, Tuvok understood the crew's joy at their own reunions, and even

felt a measure of it himself as his eyes locked with T'Pel's.

"Greetings, my husband." She raised her hand in the traditional Vulcan greeting.

His hand rose to meet hers. "Greetings, my wife."

For a long moment they stood like that, hands joined, eyes locked together, and then he gave in to temptation and embraced her.



Joe Carey sprinted the remaining distance and swept Sarah off of her feet. "You've lost weight."

She laughed. "Certainly not. Now put me down."

He spun her around again. "Now where are my boys?"

Hunter grinned and hugged his father, while his older brother Joseph made an attempt at dignity and offered his hand.

Joe shook his older son's hand, amazed at how he'd grown almost to manhood in five years. "It's good to see you, son."

"Welcome home," Joseph said, but his voice betrayed his outer calm and he abandoned the attempt at restraint, hugging his father fiercely.



The Kims could be heard from half way across the parade ground as they called to their son, but Harry didn't mind at all. He ran to them, and hugged them both at once. His mother cried and clung to him, while his father thumped him on the back with enthusiasm.

"It's good to be home," he said. "It's so good to see you both."

His father stepped back and nodded to the side. Harry followed his gaze.

Libby stood there, as beautiful as he remembered, tears in her eyes. "Welcome home, Harry."

He hugged her, inhaling deeply as the smell of her shampoo filled his nostrils. Maybe she had someone else in her life now. Maybe what they'd shared would always remain in the past.

Those thoughts scared him, but his fear failed to compete with the overwhelming need to kiss her, even if it turned out to be just one more time. His hands came up to tangle in her hair and he kissed her gently, nearly weeping with relief when she grabbed his face between her hands and kissed him back.



Kathryn hugged her mother and her sister, fighting to keep the tears from forming. "It's so good to see you both."

"Welcome home," her mother said. "We've missed you."

"Aren't you going to introduce your friend?" Phoebe asked.

Kathryn stepped back and took his arm. "Mom, Phoebe, I'd like you to meet Commander Chakotay, my first officer."

Phoebe nodded. "And your lover, unless I'm slipping."

"Phoebe! For heaven's sake!"

"It's okay, Mom, she's right." Kathryn felt her cheeks grow hot as Chakotay slid his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

"I see," Gretchen Janeway said, eyeing Chakotay suspiciously. "And your intentions?"

"I intend to marry your daughter as soon as the arrangements can possibly be made," he said. "I love Kathryn with all of my heart and soul. Without her, I would be incomplete, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to bring her as much joy as she has brought me."

"Okay then," Gretchen said. "Just so long as that's clear."



Janeway weaved through the crowd with Chakotay at her side, trying to meet all of those who had gathered to greet her crew. Everyone on board *Voyager* had made a tremendous contribution, and they deserved to have their families know it.

Harry Kim's mother had nearly smothered her as she thanked her for the safe return of her son, then promptly demanded to know why Harry hadn't been promoted to at least Lieutenant.

Ayala's mother and his two sons seemed awed to learn that he'd often been in command of the ship.

"He saved my life once," Janeway said, describing the incident for an audience that hung on her every word. "We were very lucky to have him on *Voyager*."

They made their way over to where Tom was nervously introducing B'Elanna to his parents.

"You already had the best pilot in Starfleet in the family and now you have the best engineer as well." Janeway put one arm around Tom, and the other around B'Elanna. Her grin dared Admiral Paris to doubt a word she said. "I was very lucky to have these two on my senior staff. We wouldn't have made it home without them. Performing their wedding was one of the greatest honors of my career."

She shared some of the highlights of Tom's career aboard *Voyager*, as well as some of B'Elanna's more impressive accomplishments. "I was blessed to have such an extraordinary crew," she said. "I hope to serve with them again in the future."

"I'm sure you'll get the chance," Admiral Paris said. "Starfleet will take your recommendations very seriously, and I'm very pleased that you think so highly of my son and daughter-in-law."

"You should be very proud of them both, Admiral."

"I am," he said. "I'm proud of you as well, Kathryn. Now, pardon me if I'm reading the situation wrong, but am I correct in assuming that there's something going on between you and Commander Chakotay?"

"I plan to marry him," she said. "Hopefully soon. I hope Starfleet won't object."

"I don't foresee any trouble." He grinned. "The man clearly adores you, Kathryn, and I for one think it's wonderful. After all you've been through, you deserve to be happy."



"So you've heard all about what we were up to out there," Tom said to his father. "What have you been doing?"

Admiral Paris grinned. "I've been working with the Vulcans on the deployment of the MIDAS Array. It's a long range communications device. *Voyager* was supposed to be our test subject, but you've rather spoiled that by coming home."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"This is the sort of disappointment that I welcome," he said. "I'm very pleased to have

you home, Tom, and I don't ever want you to doubt that I am very proud of you."



Debriefings took up almost the entire next day. B'Elanna's took the longest, at just over three hours.

"There might be more questions," Admiral Paris told them. "Especially from the scientists. You brought home a tremendous amount of data. Your mission debriefings, however, are officially finished."

Two nights later Tom flew *Voyager* over the Golden Gate Bridge during the grand finale of a spectacular fireworks display, and Starfleet threw the most lavish party of the decade in the crew's honor.

There were promotions, medals, and job offers for everyone. Janeway urged all of them to take a few weeks to enjoy being home before making any major decisions. "I'm hoping to see you all back on board *Voyager* again," she said in her speech. "She won't be the same without every one of you."

She tried not to see her own new pip as an imposition. "I will serve the Federation to the best of my ability," she said. "But I refuse to pilot a desk for the rest of my career. There's too much to do out there."



Chakotay eagerly accepted Gretchen Janeway's invitation to visit her home in Bloomington, Indiana.

"My old thinking tree," Kathryn announced, the fondness clear in her voice.

He reached out and touched it, savoring the rough texture of the bark under his fingertips, remembering the times Kathryn had mentioned it on *Voyager*.

She smiled up at him. "Would you and the tree like some time alone?"

"This is where we should get married, Kathryn. Here. Under this tree, with our crew and your family gathered around us."

She squeezed his arm. "If you like."

Later, he settled down on the couch with Kathryn in his arms, while Phoebe perched on a nearby armchair and interrogated him ruthlessly. "Was it love at first sight?"

Kathryn laughed. "We were both a little busy at the time, Phoebe, and the circumstances were rather difficult."

"It was, though," Chakotay said. "Even with everything going on, I noticed that Kathryn was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and from the very moment she gave the order to destroy the Array, I knew I'd gladly follow her to the very ends of the universe."

"Wow." Phoebe leaned forward eagerly. "So all that time . . ."

"Oh no," Chakotay said. "Our relationship was strictly professional then. We had a ship to run, and rules to follow. Besides, Kathryn was still engaged to Mark."

Phoebe dismissed the very notion of Mark with a wave of her hand. "So when did you two get together, then?"

"We were friends first." Kathryn stroked his arms affectionately. "Best friends. I've never been closer to anyone."

"We actually waited for years," Chakotay said. "Protocol. The command structure. All of that. But one night after dinner, Kathryn touched me, and I knew I couldn't survive another moment without kissing her."



"And how was that?"

Kathryn sighed. "Enough, Phoebe."

Chakotay kissed the top of her head. "It was everything I'd ever dreamed of, and so very much more."



Over the past five years, Vorik had often heard his crewmates discuss the things they missed about home. He had understood their dissatisfaction with Neelix's attempt to cook various Alpha Quadrant foods. Plomeek soup, for example, had always seemed too spicy in *Voyager's* mess hall.

Now, however, he noticed the absence of the spices as he ate his meal. He also noticed the quiet, and found himself eager to return to Starfleet. He wondered what Ensign Campbell -- Lieutenant Campbell now, he reminded himself -- was doing now, and if he'd have the chance to serve with her again soon.

The logical thing to do, he decided, was to send her a message.



Worn out from Phoebe's enthusiastic discussion of possible bridal gowns, Kathryn fled to the porch with her painter's easel. Chakotay had promised her a home cooked meal, on the condition that she not try to help him prepare it.

"I want to prove to your mother that I really can take proper care of you," he had told her. "Now go relax."

Her attempt at leisure ended when a panting Irish Setter bounded up the steps, dragging a somewhat flustered man at the end of a leash.

Kathryn jumped to her feet. "Mark!"

"Welcome home, Kathryn." He swept her into a hug as the dog wound the leash around them both.

Behind them, the easel quietly toppled over, splattering pastels all over the leash, the dog, and the white porch.

"Oh Molly." Mark reached for the dog and found that while the leash did little towards restraining the dog, it had proven quite effective at tethering him to Kathryn, who started to laugh as the pastel dog grinned up at them, panting.

"We'd better wash that off before it dries on her head," Kathryn said.

Chakotay appeared in the doorway. "Need a hand?"

"Some soapy water and a towel might help." She grinned at him. "Mark, I'd like you to meet Chakotay, my first officer and soon-to-be husband."

"Well congratulations." Mark looked up from untangling the still-moving leash. "I'd shake your hand but I seem to have tied myself to your future wife."

Chakotay caught Molly by the collar and with some effort the three of them managed to restore some semblance of order to the porch.

"I hope you can stay for dinner," Kathryn said. "Chakotay is a marvelous cook."

"I would guess he'd have to be." Mark took the towel Chakotay handed him and made some attempt at removing the rapidly drying paint from the squirming dog. "This isn't coming off."

"We'll have to put her in the bathtub," Kathryn said. "Then you can tell me everything you've been up to lately."



Chakotay returned to the kitchen, chuckling at the sounds coming from the upstairs bathroom. He wondered what Gretchen would have to say when she saw her porch, and probably the tub as well, but figured that after more than five years in the Delta Quadrant, anything that made Kathryn laugh like that was worth a bit of a mess.

He had to admit, at least to himself, that he was grateful for the knowledge that Mark had married someone else. In fact, he wouldn't particularly mind if this someone else would be so kind as to show up about now.

Carla Johnson did arrive about a half hour later, just as Kathryn and Mark emerged from the bathroom with a dog that didn't appear significantly wetter than the two people who had just washed her.

"I'm going to miss that dog," Carla said, a catch in her voice.

"Miss her?" Kathryn asked, looking at Mark. "I wouldn't dream of taking her away from you now. She's been with you for years."

"Oh thank you." The woman threw her arms around Kathryn. "Thank you so much. Please feel free to visit any time. Any time at all."

"Kathryn," Mark said, laughing. "I'd like you to meet my wife."

"I like her already."

After dinner, Kathryn led her new friend Carla off to find a book they'd been discussing, leaving the two men alone.

"I've known Kathryn since we were kids," Mark said. "I've never seen her this happy."

"I'll do everything in my power to keep her that way," Chakotay said. "I just hope it's enough."



B'Elanna stared at the tricorder in her hand and considered running a diagnostic on it. She had to admit, though, that the odds of all three tricorders malfunctioning in the same way were remote at best.

She crossed the room and tapped at the small viewscreen on the table. The minute's wait seemed endless.

The Doctor's smiling face greeted her. "Good morning, B'Elanna, what may -- "

"You have some explaining to do," she said.

He looked startled. "What seems to be the problem?"

"This." She held up the tricorder.

He squinted at it. "Ah, that. I suppose you'd like to discuss it?"

"Yes," she said. "I hope that now is convenient?"

"Of course. I'll see you in a few minutes."



Chakotay scanned through his messages while Kathryn changed clothes for at least the third time.

"Almost ready." She pulled off her earrings, looked in the mirror, and put them back on again. Then she retreated into the closet and came out wearing different shoes.

"That's it," he said. "Kathryn, you look perfect. Let's go."

"I want to make a good impression."

"You're an intelligent, talented, and accomplished woman. You defeated the Borg, crossed seventy thousand light years, and gave the Federation its first enhanced warp drive. You're a Starfleet Admiral. No one is ever going to judge you based on your shoes."

"This is different," she said softly. "We're not going to face the Borg. This is much scarier. I'm going to meet your former girlfriend."

He chuckled. "It's possible you're letting past experience spook you, Kathryn. This one's not likely to try to kill either of us, although I suppose attempted murder is somewhat more likely than any commentary on your footwear."

"You're laughing at me."

"I am. Just yesterday I met your ex-fiancee. Do you remember what I was wearing at the time?"

"No, actually, I don't."

He chuckled again. "Your mother's apron. The pink one. With the ruffles."



"We need to talk."

Tom looked up from the boxes he was sorting, for once not missing the serious tone in his wife's voice. "What's wrong?"

"I just got back from seeing the Doctor."

"Oh God, B'El -- "

She burst out laughing. "I'm pregnant, Tom."

"But I thought -- Doc said it might take -- you're sure?"

She nodded.

Tom swept her up into his arms and let out a whoop of joy.



Kathryn liked Sveta immediately. The pale Russian woman radiated sincerity. She was honest to a fault and she held back nothing.

"She's the one, Chakotay," Sveta announced. "I see it in your eyes. Now admit it, was I right before?"

He laughed. "You were, and thank you."

Sveta laughed and leaned closer to Kathryn. "I taught our man here everything he knows. All of the important stuff, anyhow."

"Then I should thank you as well." Kathryn smiled. "His cooking is divine."

Sveta laughed and threw an arm around Kathryn's shoulder. "I like you, which is a relief, because I'm going to ask Chakotay to help me with a little project offworld, and things could have gotten awkward if I didn't want to ask you as well."

"Offworld?"

Sveta described her group's efforts to rebuild colonies destroyed by the Cardassians, including those on Setlik III, Dorvan V, and Chakotay's homeworld of Trebus. "It's work worth doing, and I hope I can convince the two of you to join us."

"It sounds like your group could use official support," Kathryn said. "Some funding and materials, some security support."

"We've discussed that," Sveta said. "Unfortunately, Federation support is likely to come with Starfleet supervision."

"True, but the right supervision might not be so bad. Not if you happened to find a

Starfleet Admiral who didn't mind getting her hands dirty and doing a little work." Kathryn smiled. "I think I just might know someone."

"You just might," Sveta said.

Chakotay laid his hand over hers. "Kathryn, is this something you want? We haven't been home that long, and the Cardassian border isn't exactly a vacation spot."

She shrugged. "I'll take any assignment that doesn't keep me tethered to a desk for fifty weeks a year, and like Sveta said, this is work worth doing. We should look into it."



The Doctor straightened his mobile emitter for the third time. As much as he wanted to call tonight's outing a date, he knew that Seven most likely thought differently. They both enjoyed music. Attending a concert was exactly the sort of thing two friends might do on a Saturday night in San Francisco. He knew that Seven's invitation lacked romantic intentions.

He fussed with his emitter anyway, and smoothed the holographic tuxedo that B'Elanna had kindly provided. A week had passed since he'd last seen Seven, who had gone to stay with her aunt for a while. It felt like a month.

The door chimed. He hurried over to fumble with the doorknob and gasped at the vision before him. Seven's hair fell in soft golden waves to cascade over creamy shoulders left bare by her slinky black dress.

Men in novels always had poetry available for such a situation. The Doctor made a mental note to ask B'Elanna to add some Browning to his programming at her earliest convenience, because when faced with Seven of Nine in a slinky black dress, he couldn't remember anything he'd read in a more traditional manner.

"Are you prepared to leave now or do you require more time?"

He stared at the slinky black dress and cascading hair.

"Doctor?"

"Oh, yes, my apologies Seven, yes, I'm ready. You look, well, you look incredible."

"Thank you," she said. "Your appearance is pleasing as well."

The music festival included a performance by the Federation's leading player of the Ktarian *lal-shak*. The program claimed that she was the only human to ever master the difficult instrument.

"Why does her name sound so familiar?" the Doctor asked.

"She was once engaged to Lieutenant Kim," Seven answered. "And is again, if Commander Paris is correct."

"That's wonderful news," the Doctor said. "I'm glad things are finally working out for Harry." He recognized the opening, and gathered up his courage before it expired. "Speaking of marriage, I received an invitation to Admiral Janeway's wedding."

"I did as well," Seven said.

"Would you consider attending?"

"Certainly," Seven said. "I would think that the captain would be hurt if I failed to attend."

"Of course, I meant . . . what I meant was, would you consider attending with me, as my date?"

"Yes, Doctor." She smiled. "I would be delighted."



Janeway looked out the window at the old tree she had climbed so often in her youth. In a few hours, she would stand beneath it and say her vows. Well, she would if she ever finished writing them.

How could words possibly sum up all that she felt for Chakotay? She tapped at the PADD in her hand and thought about how she felt when he touched her. She remembered their first kiss, and the way her heart had leaped with joy at the love in his eyes. Her mind wandered to the first time she'd woken up in his arms and realized, to her surprise, that she'd slept soundly all night.

He always knew what she needed, even before she did herself. He supported her, and loved her, and he stood his ground when she bullied him. Best friend, partner, first officer, lover -- none of these labels really said enough.

"For goodness sake, Kathryn, haven't you even started to get ready?"

She looked up and found her mother in the doorway. "The ceremony isn't until 1600 hours."

"A wedding has very simple rules," her mother said. "First of all, they don't operate on military time, and secondly, the bride needs at least four hours to get ready before walking down the aisle."

"Four hours?" She laughed. "That dress might have a few more buttons than are strictly necessary, but I think I can manage in less than an hour."

"You need to do your nails now if you expect them dry before you touch that dress, and you have to put it on before your sister gets here to do your hair." Her mother held out a small pink bottle.

"As I've said before, I'm not letting Phoebe anywhere near my hair, and as for my nails, they're fine as they are right now. They certainly don't need to be pink."

"Kathryn -- "

"Admirals do not have pink fingernails."

"But they'd look so nice with your earrings. You are wearing the earrings?"

"Yes," Kathryn said. "Of course I'll wear the earrings. Daddy gave them to me when - well, Daddy gave them to me, so they're special. But I don't think he intended for me to paint my fingernails to match them."

"You're just like him, you know."

"He didn't like nail polish either?" she asked dryly.

"Very funny. He was stubborn, just like you. I hope Chakotay knows what he's in for. Now hurry up and get ready before Phoebe gets here."



"Chakotay, sit down before you wear out the carpet." B'Elanna set his tea down on the table and pulled out a chair. "Relax, she's not backing out now."

"Of course not," he said. "I'm not worried about that. I'm not really worried about anything."

"Then sit down and drink your tea."

"Oh, leave him alone, B'Elanna, you're not going to get him to sit still." Tom grinned. "I know just how he feels. Don't you remember how you felt the day we got married?"

"Yes," she said. "Nauseated."



Laughter rose up through the window with the summer breeze. Janeway moved over to the window and savored the view. Everyone looked happy. Even Mortimer Harren, the most reclusive and often downright grouchy member of *Voyager's* crew, seemed to be enjoying himself. It looked like Mariah Henley was responsible for that. She held his arm and smiled up at him as he talked to Joe Carey, now reunited with his wife.

Both Delaney sisters made the rounds, leading Kenneth Dalby and Chell along after them. Little Naomi dragged her father through the crowd, eagerly introducing him to each member of the crew.

The Doctor had his arm around Seven of Nine, and Vorik had Lyssa Campbell on his arm. The crew, as she had predicted so long ago, was pairing off. The return home had included reunions with loved ones, as well as new romances between crewmembers who had been close friends in the Delta Quadrant.

Neelix and Susan Nicoletti had married the week before, and Janeway had received an invitation to Harry Kim's wedding just the other day. Walter Baxter and Lydia Anderson were planning a fall wedding, while Ayala and Jenkins had chosen a date for the following spring.

Today, though, they had gathered to share her joy as she exchanged vows with Chakotay. Vows she still hadn't quite finished writing, so it looked like she was going to have to wing it, because she was out of time. She thought better under pressure anyway.



Chakotay stood under the big willow tree beside Tom Paris and waited. For a moment, he imagined Starfleet calling Kathryn away to deal with some emergency, or the sudden arrival of a Midwestern thunderstorm that would chase them all indoors. Perhaps they should have eloped to Risa.

Then Kathryn appeared and all other thoughts fled. She looked every bit as beautiful as he'd always dreamed. Even more so, in fact, because a few too many of his fantasies had involved Starfleet dress uniforms, or at least combadges.

She smiled at him and he fell in love all over again, his own grin so wide it almost hurt.

"I love you," she whispered.

He barely heard the preacher as the ceremony, and the rest of their lives, began.



**Stardate 54973.5 . . .**

*Voyager* pitched hard and sparks flew from overloaded power conduits.

"Shields at thirty percent," Tuvok said.

The voice over the comm system gave yet another final warning.

Janeway exchanged looks with Chakotay. "We surrender," she said. "Stop firing and we will lower our shields."

"Prepare to be boarded."

She swallowed hard and ordered Harry to open shipwide communications. "This is your captain speaking. We've arrived in the Alpha Quadrant, but Starfleet has some doubts

as to our identity. Please cooperate with them fully until we have this little misunderstanding sorted out. I'm sure it won't take long. Thank you."

Next, she turned to Lieutenant Ayala. "Get down to sickbay and make sure they don't try to separate that baby from her mother."

She sank into her chair and pushed away the urge to reach for Chakotay's hand. This would only take a few minutes, and then her heroic crew would receive the welcome they deserved. They'd crossed seventy thousand light years in seven years, faced the Borg a half dozen times, and returned with enough data to keep Federation scientists busy for decades.

This little indignity would end any minute.

Three Starfleet officers in a grey uniforms marched onto her bridge, phasers drawn. "On the ground. Now."

Tuvok got down on his knees.

"Down!" The officer waved his phaser. "Hands behind your head."

Janeway watched her bridge crew follow the orders, laying face down on the floor with their hands behind their heads. "This is ridiculous. These people have done nothing to deserve -- "

"You think you're special? I said down on the ground. Now!"

Even the Kazon had only forced them to their knees. She swallowed hard as she felt the restraints lock around her wrists. After seven long years in the Delta Quadrant, she never dreamed, even in her worst nightmares, that their lowest point would come only minutes after their greatest triumph.



Hours passed as Janeway sat in the brig on an unknown Starfleet vessel. She wanted to pace the floor, but they lacked space. She and McKenzie Jenkins took turns assuring Samantha Wildman that Naomi was fine.

"She was in sickbay," Sam said. "She wanted to see the new baby."

"Then I'm sure the Doctor is taking care of her," Janeway said. "He always has before." She kept her worries about Icheb and the Ashmore's little girl to herself. Starfleet's reaction differed from what she'd imagined, but they weren't the Hirogens. The children were safe.

A security guard appeared on the other side of the force field. "You." He pointed at Sam. "Come with me."

Janeway stood. "I'm the captain."

"So you say. Don't worry, you'll get your turn. Now you, in the old science uniform. Come with us."

Sam exchanged a look with the others, and left with the guard.

"Don't worry, Captain," Jenkins said. "I'm sure they're just questioning everyone."

"I'm sure you're right, Ensign," Janeway forced herself to smile. "We'll be greeting our families on the parade grounds before you know it. They're just being cautious. After all, last we heard Starfleet had just ended a war with a powerful race that had the ability to pose as other species. It shouldn't take them long to sort things out."



The Doctor looked up from his monitor, sure he'd heard Seven calling him from the kitchen. He went to find her. "What's wrong?"

"It is time to tell Admiral Janeway the truth. Starfleet has apprehended a vessel

matching *Voyager's* description."

"The real *Voyager*?" His question was unnecessary, of course. "Is Admiral Janeway on Earth right now, or are they still on Trebus?"

"We are fortunate," Seven said. "I believe she's on Earth. Lieutenant Kim mentioned having lunch with her."

Technically, that qualified as good news, but it served to increase his anxiety as he crossed to the monitor and asked the computer to establish communications. Admiral Janeway would not be pleased to hear what he needed to tell her.



Chakotay watched Harry Kim pace. He'd half expected to see the inside of a Starfleet brig when they reached Federation space, but he'd never imagined that Harry would be with him.

"Our families must be going crazy," Harry said. "Why would they hold us like this?"

"I doubt our families have any idea," Chakotay said. "Starfleet's hardly likely to tell them that we made it home but they tossed us in the brig, even if they did believe us, which they clearly don't."

"That's insane."

"I won't argue, but then again we don't know what's happened here in the last couple of years. Maybe we've been impersonated before."

"Species 8472?"

Chakotay shrugged. "Or the Cardassians' new friends, or something new."

"I hope we haven't arrived in the middle of a war," Harry said. "I know that sounds selfish."

A security guard entered and pointed at Chakotay. "You, with the tattoo, we have some questions for you."

"Good." Chakotay stood. "We'll have this cleared up soon then. Hang in there, Ensign."



Admiral Janeway came in from the garden, where she'd been helping her mother plant tomatoes, and noticed that the communications console wanted attention. She hoped it wasn't Starfleet. They seemed determined to pack a year's worth of business into her two weeks of alleged vacation.

The screen door rattled as someone pounded on it. "Admiral?"

"Doctor?" She hurried to let him in. "What's wrong?"

"I think you'd better sit down," he said.

The faces of each member of her former crew flashed through her mind. "Who?"

"What? Oh, everyone's fine, although I doubt I will be in another minute."

"Do I need coffee?" she asked.

"Probably," he said. "First of all, I want to say that everything I did was in the best interest of the crew. I realize that some of it falls into a very grey area, ethically, but I hope you can understand why I did what I did, and why I kept it from you until today."

"Go on."

"Do you remember that Y class planet in the Vaskan Sector, just outside the Swallow Nebula?"

She nodded. "The mimetic life forms."



"And you no doubt recall the way the silver blood duplicated Harry and Tom."

"You kept a sample, didn't you?" She let herself breathe again. "I knew about that, Doctor, there's no need for melodrama. Has it caused some sort of damage?"

"No," he said quietly. "There's more. You, I mean, well, you allowed it to duplicate the rest of the crew. What you didn't know is that it duplicated the ship as well."

"How do you know this?"

He met her gaze. "Because that's the ship we brought to the Alpha Quadrant."

"You're telling me -- "

"You aren't the original Captain Janeway," he said. "I've known for two years, and I didn't tell you."

She sucked in her breath and listened as he described his experiments with the silver blood, and B'Elanna's symptoms, and Seven of Nine's brush with death. She listened as he revealed the truth about the flu vaccinations, the mitochondria, and how close *Voyager* had come to losing molecular cohesion.

She glared at him. "There are Borg nanoprobes holding my ship together and you didn't see fit to tell me this?"

"The emotional stress could have proven dangerous for you. I almost lost you when you were upset over something else. I couldn't take the chance, at least not before I'd made sure the treatment worked. Then we were home, and I didn't see the point."

"So why tell me now?"

"Because the real *Voyager* is back, and Starfleet has arrested the whole crew as imposters."

Janeway swore, something she never did. "I suppose I'd better do something about that, then."



Chakotay answered all of Starfleet's questions, each more mundane than the last. They wanted to know what the captain liked in her coffee, the subject he'd chosen for his essay when he applied to Starfleet Academy, and the name B'Elanna had chosen for her newborn daughter.

"She was born at a rather inconvenient time," he said. "I haven't seen her yet, and I'm not sure what name they chose."

"I see," said his interrogator. "What musical instrument does Ensign Kim play?"

"More than one, I think. The clarinet, the saxophone, and what do you call the one that looks like a clarinet -- the oboe, I think it is. You should probably ask him."

The man's combadge chirped and he left the room.

The door opened again almost immediately and Kathryn strode through the door. "Chakotay, I'm so sorry."

"This isn't your fault," he said.

"Actually it is, in a way." She held up her hand to keep him from interrupting. "I'm not your Kathryn."

He noticed the wedding ring, and then the extra pip. A parallel universe where Kathryn had married Mark Johnson? He swallowed a stab of jealousy. "I think you'd better explain."

"Apparently I'm a mimetic life form from the Y class planet that *Voyager* visited about three years ago. I just found out myself. The Doctor knew, but he somehow failed to mention it until he heard of your arrival."

"And you beat us home." He watched the emotions play on her face, mirroring those he'd seen so often in the last seven years.

"I have to go tell the real captain what happened," she said. "She can tell the others, but I felt like I owed you an explanation in person."

"Are you okay?"

"I will be." She treated him to that half smile he knew so well. "Leave it to you to worry about me in the middle of all this. Wish me luck, I have to go talk to me, and I'm probably going to be pretty angry."

"I'd imagine that's true. Am I free to go?"

"You will be in a moment. I'm having you all transported back to *Voyager* while I explain everything to Admiral Paris."

"I'd wish you luck on that, but after you're finished with you, he'll be a pushover."



The guard returned without Sam.

"Where is Ensign Wildman?" Janeway demanded.

"Back on *Voyager*, ma'am," the guard answered. "The admiral would like to speak with you now."

Quite a change. She exchanged glances with McKenzie. "And Ensign Jenkins?"

"She may return to your ship," he said. "Follow me?"

He took her to a conference room that looked like every other conference room on every other ship in Starfleet. This one, however, had one particularly startling and memorable feature seated at the end of the table.

"Welcome home, Captain."

"Thank you," Janeway said. "Admiral Janeway, I presume?"

Her duplicate sighed. "Not for long, I suspect. Have a seat."

She noticed the flash of gold on the other woman's hand. "We did check for temporal displacement before -- "

"It's not that. I'm not real, or so it seems. This afternoon our Doctor informed me that my *Voyager* and her crew originated on the Y class planet we encountered three years ago. Or you encountered, I guess is more accurate."

Janeway digested this. "You beat us home. How?"

"Enhanced warp drive and a convenient wormhole. You?"

"Borg transwarp conduit." She tried not to ask, but the temptation proved too strong. "And that ring on your finger?"

"You can't guess? He proposed as soon we cleared the Romulan Neutral Zone. Well, after I finished that business with the smugglers."

"Chakotay?"

"Of course. Aren't you . . . ?"

"No." Janeway felt her throat tighten. "We haven't had the chance, and I'm not sure we will now. I think he's seeing someone."

The other Janeway's combadge chirped. "That will be Admiral Paris. You should head back to *Voyager*. I'm sure he'll give you a call shortly."



Chakotay materialized in *Voyager's* transporter room and immediately called the bridge.

"Vorik has begun repairs," Ensign Wildman said. "Captain Janeway has not yet returned."

"You have the bridge, Ensign. Let me know the moment the Captain is aboard." He headed down the corridor towards the turbolift. His combadge chirped. "Chakotay."

"Commander," Seven said. "I need to speak with you."

"Seven, could this wait? I have a few things I need to -- "

"I would prefer to do this now. I will not require much of your time."

He met her in the cargo bay.

"When we spoke previously, you indicated a willingness to make a commitment. I wish to release you from that promise."

"Seven, what -- "

"Our relationship has reached a conclusion. I was using you." She looked thoughtful. "I probably chose you because I knew that you could never love me."

"I could," he said. "You're a very special woman, Seven."

"My attributes are irrelevant. You love Captain Janeway."

"That's true," he said after a moment. "I do, and I probably always have." He met her gaze. "I never meant to deceive you."

"If you had, you would have failed." She smiled. "I enjoyed our time together. You have acceptable table manners and a pleasant kissing technique."

He laughed. "That's just what every man wants to hear, Seven."

"I wish to maintain our friendship."

"I'd like that," he said. "If you ever need anything . . . "

"Likewise."



Captain Janeway transported back to *Voyager* and headed down to engineering to give Vorik a hand with the repairs. She needed time to figure out how to break the news to the crew. Weird might be part of the job, but this one was a little hard to take.

When Chakotay caught up with her, she pulled him into B'Elanna's office and asked him to see what he could find out about the crew that had arrived first.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything," she said. "What they're doing now, what sort of relationships they've rekindled with family and friends . . . This crew needs to know what they're walking into when they do contact their families. This has to be handled carefully."

"Of course, Captain. What are you going to tell them?"

"The truth, of course, I'm just not sure how." She picked up a hyperspanner. "I think better when my hands are busy. By the time *Voyager's* back to former glory, I'll have something to tell them."

He reached out and squeezed her arm. "And how are you holding up?"

For a moment she savored the warmth of his fingers against her elbow, and wished she could take comfort in his strong arms. "I'll be fine," she said. "At least this duplicate didn't -- " She shook her head. "I'll be fine. It's some of the others that I'm worried about. Samantha Wildman is probably about to learn that she lost her husband to her own clone."

"I'll look into that first," he said. "I'll let you know what I find."



Tom just wanted to sit with B'Elanna and hold his beautiful new daughter. A summons from his father made his stomach twist, especially after the bizarre behavior from *Voyager's* welcoming committee. Then the news he received managed to exceed his

considerable dread.

He found the captain in engineering. "I need to speak to you privately."

She looked up from the console, and for a moment she looked prepared to argue, but she must have read the emotions on his face. "We can use B'Elanna's office."

He swallowed hard. "I just spoke to my father. He told me what caused all the confusion."

"I haven't told anyone yet," Janeway said. "Chakotay's doing a bit of fact gathering first. How are you dealing with it?"

"Having a duplicate?" Tom shrugged. "It's not like I didn't know. It's Starfleet's reaction that concerns me."

"We'll work it out," she said. "People have been duplicated in transporter accidents before. Starfleet -- "

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Captain, but my father asked me to bring you a message -- strictly unofficially -- and it's not good. He thinks you need a lawyer."

The shock on her face flamed his outrage at the situation.

"They want to count martial you for violating the Prime Directive," he said. "My father wants you to contact Sam Cogley. Apparently he's the best."

She nodded. "If your father thinks so, I'm sure it's true."

"This isn't fair," Tom said angrily. "They have no right to treat you this way, especially after everything you've done. The charge is ridiculous. What happened on the demon planet had nothing to do with the Prime Directive."

"Maybe it did," she said. "The silver blood didn't even have sentience before we arrived."

"That's bunk, and you know it. You didn't give them technology. You didn't even know they took it. And what happened with Harry and I -- that was an accident. The silver blood would have duplicated the crew if we had agreed or not, only it could have killed us."

"Maybe I should have you argue my case," she said.

He wondered how she could even pretend to smile under the circumstances. "I would if I thought it would help. You're a hero and they should treat you like one."

She laid a hand on his shoulder. "You know what might help? Why don't you introduce me to your daughter?"

"Nothing would please me more, Captain."



Samantha Wildman not only had the bridge, but she had it all to herself. Everything looked different from the captain's chair. Then again, seven long years had passed since *Voyager* had seen these particular stars.

Several minutes passed before she finally had company. Ensign Jenkins emerged from the turbolift and took her seat at the helm. "How's the view?"

Sam grinned. "I'm looking forward to seeing Earth on that viewscreen. I was so worried that Naomi would grow up before she saw it. Everything's different now. My daughter can finally meet her father. I hope he's stationed close enough to be here soon."

The turbolift opened again and Captain Janeway stepped out of it.

Sam leaped to her feet. "Captain, I -- "

"Relax, Ensign. How did Naomi cope with our little adventure?"

"Better than I did. The Doctor sent her on her own mission, and I think now that it's over she's far too proud to be upset."

"Mission?"

"He sent her to fetch the Ashmore's little girl and hide."

"Good plan," Janeway said. "In another few months, Naomi will be leading away missions and the Doctor will have his own command." Her tone turned sober. "I do need to see you in my ready room. Ensign Jenkins, you have the bridge."

Sam's heart started to pound, and her anxiety only increased when the captain gave her a cup of tea. "Is it Greskrendtregk?"

"He's safe," Janeway said. "There is a complication."

"Oh God, he's not remarried or something?"

"I'm sorry Sam -- "

"But he wouldn't do that!"

"He didn't. Remember the Y class planet in the Vaskan Sector?"

Sam nodded. "I wrote a paper on it that I planned to -- wait, are you saying that -- "

"Yes," Janeway said. "Our duplicates beat us here. It seems the silver blood had the ability to create another ship as well. Another *Voyager*. They forgot how they were created. They had our memories, and they found a wormhole over a year ago."

"I feel numb." She stared down at her tea. "Thank you for telling me."

"There's more," Janeway said. "There's a duplicate of Neelix running a restaurant in San Francisco."

"What about Joe?"

Janeway nodded. "Everyone we've lost since that planet has a duplicate here."

"I'm not sure how to feel about that."

"Me either," Janeway said. "It should be good news, but it's a little unsettling."

Sam stood up. "I have to go explain this to Naomi, and someone should tell Susan about Neelix."

The captain stood as well, and Sam was sure she saw tears in her eyes. "I know what it's like to lose the man you love to someone else. I can't imagine what it must like to lose him to yourself."



Janeway struggled to maintain her composure after Sam left. She had to break the news to Harry Kim that his former fiancée had married his duplicate. Then she had to tell the rest of the crew that they had doubles wandering around Federation space. Doubles who outranked them, no less.

She'd also received orders, and her crew would not be allowed to return to Earth until Admiral Janeway finished informing the duplicate crew of the situation. If a court martial lay in her future, they failed to mention it, but it seemed likely. At least the Maquis had received full pardons, so the news wasn't all bad.



Days passed while *Voyager* hung motionless in space. Chakotay managed to get a recording of the duplicate *Voyager's* welcome home party, and some of the crew gathered in Astrometrics to watch it.

"I always wanted to do that," Tom said as they watched the other *Voyager* swoop over the Golden Gate Bridge in the middle of a fireworks display.

Janeway sighed. He would be doing exactly that if she'd found another solution on the demon planet. She remembered how much the duplicates of Harry and Tom had resisted the very notion of leaving the planet, claiming they felt tied to it. She never would

have imaged the duplicates would leave it, even if they could, and that the silver blood had figured out how to either create or obtain antimatter for the warp drive shocked her.

Maybe her actions had pushed pretty hard at the Prime Directive, but her crew never should have suffered for it. She still needed to tell Chakotay about the probability of a court martial, but she had avoided spending any time alone with him.

If they spoke in private, and she had to look him in the eye knowing that she'd lost him, and to Seven of all people, she would have to fight to keep her voice level and her expression neutral. With anyone else, she could control her emotions, but she'd let down her guard with Chakotay often enough that it might prove difficult under the circumstances. She'd grown closer to Chakotay than to anyone else.

She swallowed hard and focused on the screen, where her duplicate stood receiving the Cochrane Medal of Honor.

She felt a warm hand close around her elbow, and turned, expecting Chakotay.

"That should be you," Tom said, too quietly for even a Vulcan to overhear. "And it will be, once Starfleet decides to use some common sense."



Janeway received official notice of her impending court martial right before *Voyager* received word that they could return to Earth. She told Tom, who agreed not to tell the others, and made an appointment with the attorney.

Then she called her mother, who invited her for dinner.

"Bring Chakotay as well," she said. "I'll make plenty of vegetarian dishes, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Chakotay won't be joining me."

"Why ever not? He's certainly welcome. Make sure he knows that."

"I will," she lied. "I'll see you shortly."

Dinner was awkward. Her mother scolded her more than once for not bringing Chakotay, and Phoebe acted so overly polite that she wanted to scream at her. Obviously her family preferred the duplicate, the admiral with the wonderful husband, and didn't really need an extra.

She left after dessert and returned to the temporary quarters Starfleet had provided. She might as well get used the small space; she'd probably be living in similar quarters for some time. Briefly, she wondered if the rooms in New Zealand would at least have a better view, but she doubted it.



Susan Nicoletti stood outside the restaurant for ten minutes before she finally gathered the courage to go inside. The hostess looked at her twice before showing her to a booth.

"Would you like to hear the specials?"

She listened to the list of familiar foods and ordered, although she hadn't come for a meal.

"Wow." The woman who brought out her meal stared at her, and she stared back without offense. "Admiral Janeway explained, but seeing you in person. Wow."

"It's rather unsettling, isn't it?" She picked up a fork and fiddled with it. "Is Neelix here?"

"He's preparing for the dinner rush. Where's your Neelix?"

Susan cringed. "In the Delta Quadrant."

Her duplicate slid into the booth. "I'm so sorry. What happened?"

"We came across a colony of Talaxians. He chose to stay with them."

"I can't believe he'd do that!"

"He wanted children," Susan said. "When the Doctor couldn't find a way to compensate for the genetic differences, well, we couldn't have children and it just didn't work out. Then he met the Talaxian woman. I don't know if he was more in love with her or the idea of raising her son."

"You couldn't -- we must be different than you somehow, then. Neelix and I have a daughter, and I'm expecting again."

"Congratulations," Susan said.

"I really am sorry," her duplicate said. "It hardly seems fair at all."

"No one ever said life was fair."



Chakotay left yet another message for Kathryn. She'd ignored the last three, and when he'd looked for her in person, he'd failed to find her. He wondered if she was hiding from everyone, or avoiding him specifically.

Tuvok had left for Vulcan, so he had to settle for asking Tom.

"Yes," Tom said. "Something's bothering her, but she asked me not to tell you, and I won't break her confidence."

"Give me something, Tom, I'm worried about her."

"Then go see her. She needs you right now, even if she's too stubborn to admit it."

"I've tried," Chakotay said. "I think she's avoiding me."

"She'll be here tonight to see the baby, but you didn't hear it from me."



Sam Cogley invited Janeway into an incredibly cluttered office and showed her a picture of his great grandfather with the famous James T. Kirk.

"They tried charging him with murder," Cogley said, tapping on the image of Kirk. "But Grandpa figured out that the victim wasn't even dead. Faked the whole thing. He proved it in court, and then defended the guy against fraud charges. Got him off, too."

Janeway wondered if she should wish that old Grandpa Cogley was around to defend her.

The younger Cogley pointed to his forehead. "Insanity defense. Easy, really. A guy willing to fire himself out a torpedo tube just to make a point is pretty likely to be missing some marbles, after all. Don't worry, your case'll be just as easy. From what I've seen, this charge against you wouldn't stick if the Starfleet prosecutor used a gallon of glue. I'll have them apologizing by the end of the week."

"What doesn't make sense to me is why they want to court martial me for my role in creating a duplicate that they clearly love. She married her first officer and they didn't even blink. They made her an admiral and awarded her every medal they could find." Janeway started pacing around the room. "I spent seven years sacrificing my own happiness just to follow protocol and all I get is a court martial. If only I had known."

"Never expect logic from a bureaucracy." He patted a chair and sat across from it. "Now what I need is for you to tell me everything that happened on this Y class planet and

I promise you that this whole mess will be over by the weekend."



Sarah Carey found the concept of mourning her husband a little challenging, since her husband was currently in the back yard playing catch with their two sons. Admiral Janeway had explained about the inhospitable planet and the mimetic life forms, but to her, the man in the back yard was indistinguishable from her Joe.

Yet Tom Paris had come to see her, and told her that her Joe had died six weeks ago saving his life. The thought made her numb inside, but the grief she felt didn't seem to be enough. It felt like she was cheating Joe somehow.

For the first time, she wished she had some friends in Starfleet. Her own friends wouldn't understand this, and she didn't feel like she could talk about it with Joe -- the duplicate of Joe, with whom she'd spent the last year -- because she feared it would make him feel like a replacement copy.

Maybe if she just went out for a while, alone, she could process it all. As it was, she couldn't believe Joe was dead while watching him throw a baseball around the yard.



Samantha Wildman had put it off as long as she could, but it was time for Naomi to meet her father. She'd looked forward to this day for so many years, and that it now served as something to avoid seemed rather cruel.

Naomi had a thousand questions about her father, who made her nervous, but the thought of a duplicate didn't bother her. "It'll be like having a twin sister," she said. "I always wanted a sister."

"She has all of your memories," Sam reminded her. "At least until we landed on that planet. It's okay if you feel a little uncomfortable."

"I think it's neat," Naomi said. "Are you sure that my father isn't scary? Ktarians are scary."

"He's not any scarier than you." Sam scanned the park, but saw no sign of her husband. "Let's play on the swings until he gets here. I haven't done that since I was your age."

For a while, it felt good to laugh with her daughter, although she continued to scan the park for new arrivals. When she did see someone, it surprised her. She recognized the woman, although she had never met her.

"Naomi, stay here for a few minutes." She approached the woman. "I don't mean to intrude, but aren't you Sarah Carey?"



Harry's parents actually seemed delighted at the prospect of having two of him.

"You were already our little miracle," his mother said. "Now we have two miracles."

"Don't you think it's a little unsettling that we're exactly the same?"

"Of course not! You're perfect, and we love you just as you are."

"What if we're both here at the same time?"

"That might get confusing," his father admitted. "But it won't keep us from loving you both."



Harry decided they were both nuts, but he had bigger things to worry about. "He -- the other me -- married Libby."

"That is a shame," his mother said. "I know how much you love her, and she just adores you, but it'll work out somehow. You'll see."



Sam and Sarah found a picnic table and sat down.

"I was friends with your husband," Sam said.

Sarah stiffened. "Friends?"

"Oh, nothing like that," Sam said quickly. "We had this group, kind of an unofficial support group. We'd all get together on important days and talk about our spouses back home."

"Starfleet tried to arrange something like that, after they found out you weren't all dead. I never went. Now I wish I had."

"I can't imagine what you must be going through," Sam said. "To lose him and have him at the same time. It must be so confusing."

"It is," Sarah said. "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel, and every thought I do have seems terribly wrong."

"Joe almost didn't let himself be duplicated," Sam said. "He said it felt wrong to doom a clone to a life stuck on that planet, without a chance of seeing you and the boys again."

Sarah met her gaze. "How do you think he would feel about what's happened?"

"He'd want you to be happy," Sam said. "I know that without a doubt. I'm sure he'd understand how confusing this is, and he certainly wouldn't call your feelings wrong. He said often enough that he'd understand if you found someone else, I'm sure under the circumstances he'd be glad his double made it back, since he couldn't."

"How about you?" Sarah asked. "You said you had a spouse back here; do you have a duplicate, too?"

Sam nodded. "She's been with Greskrendtregk since they got back. I can't imagine what I'm going to do."

"My God," Sarah said. "What a mess. I'm so sorry. Have you seen him yet?"

"He's supposed to meet me here, to meet his daughter. Of course, he's been raising her duplicate for more than a year now."

"Daughter? And I thought my situation was confusing. How is she taking it?"

Sam shrugged. "She says it's neat. She might feel differently after they meet."

"You never know," Sarah said. "Kids adapt better than adults."

Sam saw Naomi jump off the swings, and turned to see Greskrendtregk entering the park. "That's him now. I'd love to talk more."

"We could have lunch later in the week," Sarah said. "Neelix has a restaurant not far from here."

"People eat there voluntarily?"

"I guess," Sarah said. "Some of the food is quite interesting. Anyhow, I'm very glad we met. Our talk helped."

"I'm glad," Sam said. "I really am sorry about Joe."

"Thanks, and good luck."

Sam nodded, her heart pounding, and headed back towards the swings.



Greskrendregk swept her up in a hug, and for a moment all Sam could think about was the feel of his solid chest against her.

"I missed you so much," she said. "It's so good to see you."

"Ah, Samantha."

"What are we going to do?" She pulled back to study his face. "I don't want to walk away from you."

"I love you," he said. "You are the woman I married. She's exactly like you. I don't know what is right, but I can't turn you away. Either of you."



Visiting little Miral Paris had become the single joy in Kathryn's life. The baby represented the one triumph that her own crew hadn't lost to their duplicates. She was also the cutest thing she'd ever seen in her life.

"I know it's a lot to ask," Kathryn said. "But would you be willing to bring her to visit me in New Zealand?"

Tom didn't try to placate her with a promise that everything would turn out fine. He squeezed her shoulder. "If it comes to that, I'll bring her every day."

"B'Elanna might have something to say about that."

"She owes you as much as I do."

"I don't want you to feel -- "

He shook his head. "We both love you, Captain, we'll do anything we can for you, no matter what happens."

She swallowed to keep from crying, and looked down at the baby in her arms. "Thank you, Tom."



Chakotay paused at the door to take in the sight of Kathryn gazing down at the baby.

"You look good holding her," he said after a minute.

She looked up, startled.

"I didn't mean to disturb you. She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"She is," Kathryn said. "She's the most beautiful thing in this whole quadrant."

This time he knew he heard a catch in her voice, and he wanted to take her in his arms like he could never do on the ship. "Kathryn, you know I'm here if you need to talk."

"I don't," she said. "I can't."

"That's not true. You don't have to go through this alone."

She shook her head and looked down at the baby.

"Have dinner with me."

"I've eaten."

"Coffee, then. I miss you."

She looked up at him again, and he could see her fight against tears. "You'll adjust."

"To missing you? Not a chance."

The baby started fussing, sensing the same tension that Chakotay read in Kathryn's stiff shoulders. When she started crying, Tom appeared, took her, and closed the door behind him.

Kathryn stood up and moved to the window, her back to Chakotay, and he moved to stand behind her, as he had done so often in the past. For a while, neither spoke.

"Talk to me," he said at last. "Please."

"We did the impossible," she said. "But they did it first. They got extra pips and fireworks over the Pacific, we got plastic wrist binders and a lovely visit to the brig."

He thought she'd say more, but she fell silent. He laid his hands over her tense shoulders. She jumped at the contact.

"Kathryn, I know we got the short end of the stick, but you did it. You got our crew home. They don't care about the extra pips and the fireworks, and I know you don't either, not this much."

"I'm at a pretty low place right now," she said quietly. "Starfleet doesn't want me, my family doesn't need me . . ."

He turned her to face him. "I will always need you."

"That's not true either." Her voice sounded strained and she avoided his eyes.

"Of course it's true," he said. "I can't imagine my life without you."

"You have Seven now."

"What? Oh, no, Kathryn, I'm so sorry. Seven and I aren't together. I didn't know that you knew about that. I'm fond of Seven, but she's not you." He pulled Kathryn into his arms, holding her tightly, as he'd longed to do so many times. "She could never hold a candle to you."

"Then why?"

"It was something Neelix asked me to do. He and the Doctor had this crazy theory. It doesn't matter. It only lasted a few days."

He felt her arms slip around his neck. "I thought . . . after what I did on Quarra, I wouldn't blame you, and then I heard . . ."

"I'm so sorry." He held her and stroked her hair. He could feel her shaking. All the horrors of the Delta Quadrant had failed to make her cry, but he'd managed quite well. "Oh, Kathryn, I'm so sorry."

"It's not just that." Her voice sounded rough. "I'm being court martialled."

He pulled back to look at her. "What the Hell for?"

"Prime Directive," she said. "The duplicates."

He swore again.



Tuvok returned to Vulcan. His younger children had grown quite a bit in his absence, and he now had a granddaughter. He even still had a wife. When he'd arrived, his duplicate had greeted him with the news that T'Pel had gone to meditate.

She returned almost a full day later and welcomed him home. The logical solution, she had said, was to accept both men as her husband. They both possessed the same memories, and she could neither deny Tuvok his children, nor the duplicate Tuvok the child she carried now.

He'd have to examine the jealousy he had at that thought when he meditated, but he accepted her solution. It was hers to make, and he could not fault the logic.



Vorik arrived on Vulcan to find that his duplicate planned to marry Lieutenant Lyssa Campbell.

At first, the idea of marrying a human, especially years before his next pon farr, seemed like an odd decision, but when he thought about it, he concluded that she was indeed a logical choice after all.

Ensign Campbell had all of the qualities he would want in a wife. He decided that perhaps he would be wise to discuss the matter with her when he returned to San Francisco.



Janeway marched into Starfleet Headquarters with Chakotay by her side. Her attorney greeted her with cheerful assurances of victory.

"I brought my holoimager," Cogley said. "My grandson will have quite a collection."

Janeway hoped she that the grandson wouldn't end up handling her parole hearing. Seven members of the duplicate crew's senior staff were scheduled to testify. Their EMH looked pale, and she wondered how he'd accomplished that.

The duplicate Harry Kim approached her. "I apologize, Captain, this is all my fault."

"Save it for the stand, young man," Cogley said. "Save it for the stand." He hustled off with his arm around Harry's shoulders, enthusiastically explaining the importance of legal strategy.

Janeway was sure she heard him mention the holoimager.



Admiral Nechayev tapped the brass bell three times, a ceremonial gesture which served only to raise the anxiety of everyone present. "We are gathered for the general court martial of Captain Kathryn Janeway. If counsel has any objections to the panel as assembled, now is the time to speak."

Janeway listened as the prosecutor outlined the charges. There was truth in every fact stated, but the interpretation differed wildly from her own view.

"In exchange for deuterium, a resource that she could have acquired elsewhere, Captain Janeway willfully violated the Prime Directive, giving full access to the most advanced Federation technology to a pre-warp culture, representatives of which used this technology to reach Federation space within two years of this incident."

The prosecutor went on to give a lecture on the importance of the Prime Directive, the dangers of exchanging technology, and the moral implications of interfering with the natural development of any society.

He called Janeway to the stand first.

"Did you receive deuterium while on the surface of the Y class planet located in what you call the Vaskan Sector?"

"We did, but we -- "

"I'd ask you to limit your answers to a simple yes or no, captain."

"I swore to tell the whole truth. 'Yes' is not the whole truth."

"Your answer is yes, though?"

"Yes, but -- "

"Did the inhabitants of that planet possess warp technology before your arrival?"

"No, they -- "

"And did the inhabitants of that planet obtain Federation technology? Yes or no?"

"Yes, but -- "

"Tell me, Captain, did you study the Prime Directive while attending Starfleet

Academy?"

"Of course, and I understand -- "

"That will be all." The prosecutor took his seat and kept his eyes focused on the table.

"Mister Cogley, would you like to cross examine?"

"Not at this time," he answered.

"What?" Janeway asked.

Chakotay leaned forward and whispered in Cogley's ear. He waved his hand.

"You may return to your seat, Captain," Nechayev said.



The prosecution included a complete analysis of the technology in the duplicate *Voyager* in the body of evidence, and cited specific documents describing the classified status of *Voyager's* more advanced systems.

By the time he rested his case, it sounded like Janeway had set out seven years ago specifically to deliver the complete knowledge of the Federation to a previously unnamed planet in the Delta Quadrant, in exchange for about half as much deuterium as it took to actually reach that planet.

Chakotay fumed.

Kathryn's attorney had yet to lift a finger in her defense. He declined his right to cross examine the witnesses, and let all of the prosecutor's statements pass without objection. Chakotay half expected the man of having ulterior motives.

When Cogley finally stood up to speak, he called Lieutenant Kim, Harry's duplicate, to the stand. "Lieutenant, where were you born?"

"Until recently, I would have said San Francisco. Now I know that I was actually born, if that's even the right word, in the Delta Quadrant, on a Y class planet."

"So you're saying that you are one of those representatives of that pre-warp culture the prosecution was so concerned about?"

"You could say that," he said. "It wasn't much of a culture. We weren't even sentient before Harry Kim -- the real one -- tried to take a sample of what looked like a silver liquid and we sampled his DNA."

"So, are you saying that your planet was not inhabited prior to *Voyager's* arrival?"

"You could say that."

"Isn't that interesting," Cogley said. "I believe that it is Federation policy to terraform uninhabited planets. Terraforming is quite invasive, isn't it? It definitely changes the future development of that planet."

"Objection." The prosecutor jumped to his feet. "Counsel is making speeches."

Admiral Nechayev seemed to agree. "Was there a question in there somewhere, Mister Cogley?"

"My apologies, Admiral. Tell me, Lieutenant, about this alleged trade between your people and Captain Janeway. How much deuterium did you offer her in exchange for warp technology?"

"We didn't make any such offer."

"No offer? But how did you convince her to give you the technology?"

"We didn't. We just took it."

"I see. So she didn't actually give it to you, then?"

"No Sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. No further questions."

The prosecutor stalked across the room. "Lieutenant Kim, how is it that you remember the details of this acquisition of technology, when by your own admission you

do not even recall your own origin?"

"When we learned the truth, I started to remember."

"So now you remember this planet?"

"It's beautiful there," Harry said. "Everything shimmers with a dozen shades of gold, and -- "

"Yes, I'm sure it's quite lovely. Tell me, since your newly restored memory is so excellent, why exactly did Captain Janeway allow her ship and crew to be duplicated?"

"Tom and I were created by accident," Harry's duplicate explained. "Captain Janeway only allowed the others -- the volunteers -- to be duplicated after we demanded it. We refused to allow *Voyager* to take off and leave us alone."

"I see. You said volunteers. Did she allow Naomi Wildman to volunteer? A child only three years old at the time?"

"We duplicated Naomi after *Voyager* left, like we did with the other people who didn't volunteer, and the ship itself. We acquired the crew's memories. We knew the captain would never allow us to create the technology."

"I see. Perhaps we should court martial you for theft, Lieutenant."

"Perhaps."

"No further questions."

Janeway took the stand next.

"Captain." Cogley smiled at her. "While on the class Y planet in question, did you trade any technology at all for deuterium or any other substance?"

"No."

"Did you give the planet's inhabitants any technology of any kind?"

"No."

"Were you aware that the planet's inhabitants had duplicated your ship?"

"No."

"When did you become aware of the fact that they had in fact done this?"

"Several hours after returning to Federation space, when I first met Admiral Janeway, my duplicate. She explained the whole situation to me."

"I see." He turned and smiled at the prosecutor. "Your witness."

"Tell me, Captain Janeway, did it not occur to you that allowing members of your crew to be duplicated could be problematic?"

"The duplicates of Tom and Harry showed no desire -- "

"That's a yes or no question, Captain."

"Then no. I had no reason to think they'd leave the planet, or even could."

"Ah, so what you actually thought was that no one at Starfleet would ever find out what you'd done."

"The entire incident is recorded in my logs," she answered, raising her voice to be heard as he tried to cut her off. "Pretty sloppy of me if I intended to hide it."

Chakotay smiled. Kathryn had decided not to take any more of the prosecutor's abuse, and the man had little hope against her in a fair fight. Despite the prosecution's closing argument, which painted Kathryn as incompetent and quite possibly evil, it took the panel only a few minutes to decide on an acquittal.



Janeway slumped in relief. "Thank you, Mister Cogley. I suppose I owe you a holimage or two?"

He grinned at her. "What did I tell you? No trouble at all. I expect they'll be apologizing and promoting you any minute."

"To be honest, I hope they don't promote me. Let the duplicate play desk jockey, I don't think I could take it."

Chakotay pulled her into a hug, and she found it hard to care if Admiral Nechayev happened to see.

"I couldn't have made it through that without your friendship," she told him. "Thank you."

"You'll always have my friendship," he said. "And more, if you want it."

She smiled. "I do."

"Run away with me," he said. "I bought a little ship, and we could explore the mysteries of the Alpha Quadrant in it, at least for a few weeks."

"You're on," she said. "I'll go home and pack right now."

"I already packed the coffee."

"In that case, let's just go."



He took her to Tevlik's moon first. "I know it's not a very romantic spot," he said. "But I needed to come here, and I couldn't face it without you."

"I'm grateful that I can be here for you," she said. "You've always helped shoulder my burdens, and I welcome the chance to finally try to support you the same way."

Chakotay dropped the little ship he'd dubbed *The Alpha Flyer* out of orbit and descended on the tranquil moon where so many had died during the Dominion War. They viewed the memorial that Sveta and the other surviving Maquis had built to honor the brave men and women who had lost their lives to the Cardassians, and for the first time Janeway felt that Chakotay wasn't afraid to lean on her for emotional support.

From Tevlik, they went to Betazed and tried the famous uttaberry pudding at Apolloni's Retreat. "We have to see the Janaran Falls," Chakotay said. "Then tonight we can have dinner at The Oskoid. I've always wanted to eat there."

When they reached the falls, he dropped to one knee and pulled a ring from his pocket. "Kathryn, I can't wait until dinner to ask. Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will," she answered. "On one condition."

"What's that?"

"That we not have the ceremony on this planet."

He laughed and slid the ring onto her finger. "I didn't think of that," he admitted. "We're less than two weeks from Risa, though."

"Two weeks alone together on your ship?" She grinned. "I think I can handle that."



Sarah Carey smiled across the table. "I'm so glad you called. How is everything working out for you?"

"Things are a little different," Sam said. "My duplicate left for three months to study Alpha Omicron creatures, so for the moment, I have both girls. You think twins could be confusing? Try dealing with twins who share a name."

Sarah laughed. "And your husband?"

"We're staying together, at least for now. I love him dearly, but I don't see how he thinks this time share arrangement he's devised is going to work out. Sure, we're all Starfleet officers, so we'll travel a lot, and my duplicate and I might not cross paths very often, but the whole thing isn't very conducive to romance."

"I wouldn't think so. Maybe you'll get lucky and your duplicate will meet someone."

Sam shrugged. "Time will tell. She's a lot like me, but she does seem to have an impulsive streak that I lack. She changed her hair color before she left. I'd never do that."



In a million years, Harry Kim never would have imagined that he'd ever let Libby fix him up with a date, but he needed a date for the wedding. A blind date arranged by his former fiancée did seem to fit the strangeness of the occasion.

Seven of Nine as a bride was strange enough, but that both Seven of Nine and her duplicate would choose to share a double ceremony bordered on scary. He suspected that the Doctors were to blame for that. Doc had found Megan and Jenny's double wedding rather charming.

Harry glanced at the chronometer, checked himself in the mirror, and headed out. He wondered what his mystery date would make of a double wedding involving a former borg drone, her clone, and two holograms. If she didn't run screaming, maybe he could even tell her that he'd once come back from the dead.



The Doctor paced the floor, making the final adjustments to his tuxedo a little bit challenging for B'Elanna.

"What is it with you men?" she demanded. "Can't any of you sit still for five minutes?"

Tom chuckled. "This is what you women do to us."

"I'll feel better when this is over," he said. "How did I ever think I could stand up in front of all of those people?"

"You'll manage," B'Elanna said. "From what I understand, the other Doctor once performed a solo concert for thousands. There are only about three hundred people coming to the wedding."

"Only?" he demanded. "That's twice the size of the crew!"

"What a coincidence," Tom said, almost without smirking.



The Doctor paced the floor, making B'Elanna chase him as she attempted the final adjustments on his tuxedo.

"You're making this awfully difficult," she complained. "Can't you stand still for five minutes?"

Tom chuckled. "Give him a break, B'Elanna, he's about to get married."

"I'll feel better when this is over," he said. "How did I ever think I could stand up in front of all of those people?"

"You'll manage," B'Elanna said. "As I recall, you once performed a solo concert for thousands. There are only about three hundred people coming to the wedding."

"Only?" he demanded. "That's twice the size of the crew!"

"What a coincidence," Tom said, almost without smirking.





"Transwarp conduit or wormhole?" the usher asked.

"Transwarp conduit," Janeway answered after a moment's pause. "Clever."

She and Chakotay followed the young man down the aisle, where he seated them up front and to the left. Their duplicates smiled politely from the right side.

"Weird is part of the job," she said.

Chakotay laughed and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "We should have dinner with them sometime."

"We already are. Phoebe insisted that we all get together for lunch tomorrow. She says we're family and we'd better get used to it."

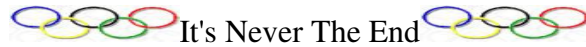
"She's right, you know."

"I know," she said. "But if you ever tell her I said that, I'll deny it."

"My lips are sealed."

She smiled at him. "I think I'd rather just keep them busy."

He chuckled and leaned over to kiss her. "That's definitely a better solution."



It's Never The End

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