



Episode 8-15 – Fall of Shadows

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She stood in front of the mirror, eyeing her reflection critically. Kathryn Janeway was by no means a vain woman, but this morning, the first morning of the rest of her life, she wanted to make sure that her appearance was perfect in every possible way.

She leaned forward. Her skin was still clear, firm, unlined with the exception of the tiny wrinkles next to the corner of her eyes that had started to make their appearance in the last year. Her hair was shone, still maintaining its natural chestnut hue tinged with red. The ends of her hair curled just above her shoulders, as per Starfleet regulations; she was damned if she'd go back to the upsweep she'd worn at the beginning of her command career. Her experimentations with her hair had caused some amusement among her senior staff but in the privacy of her quarters, Janeway had known the truth: out in the Delta Quadrant, her hair, trivial as it seemed, was the one thing she could truly control.

Everything else was, well, best left in the hands of fate.

Janeway's lips curled up. Fate, oh the irony. She had done everything she could, including sacrificing much of herself in terms of personal and emotional commitments, to get Voyager home and now after all of that, she was leaving her fate in the hands of a Starfleet JAG.

She ran her hands over the scratchy material of her dress uniform. She had spent an unusual amount of time on getting dressed this morning, intent that every fold should fall properly so that they - the Starfleet JAG - would find no additional fault with her.

She looked over at the news vid console perched on a nearby table; for the last few days, she had kept it on, hoping the noise would push the silence away, but the constant Voyager coverage had driven her to distraction instead. Janeway knew exactly what would be playing if she turned on the news vid now - the constant reel of Voyager's accomplishments in the Delta Quadrant, its mysterious reappearance in the Alpha Quadrant and then its disappearance. Invariably, a so-called expert would come on, either with a legal opinion regarding the status of the Maquis or the former crew of the Equinox. And lately, these talking heads had taken to commenting on Kathryn Janeway herself. Sensationalist news programs offered up their conjectures on what could possibly happen to Janeway now that she was officially back. The opinions ranged from the heroic - promotion to admiral immediately - to the pessimistic: dishonorable discharge from Starfleet.

Janeway was not unaware of the politics surrounding her situation. Conversations with Owen Paris had assured her that there was more going on here than a simple debriefing. She pressed her lips into a thin smile. Well, she had certainly faced circumstances scarier than a panel of

aging Starfleet admirals and she was damned if she would let these starched shirts intimidate her.

Kathryn Janeway lifted her chin defiantly as her eyes fell on the four pips on her collar. She ran her trembling fingers against the cool metal of the pips, as if to assure herself they were still there.

Then she smiled grimly. Hell, she'd faced the Borg, the Hirogen, and the Sernaix... what was a panel of stuffy Starfleet admirals to her?

"Captain?"

Janeway didn't turn at the sound of the security guard's voice. She knew very little about the young man assigned to guard her - just his name, Dave Evans - and she had no intention of getting to know him better. Her brief conversations with Admiral Paris had convinced her to remain on guard; who knew what could possibly be used against her?

"What is it?" she asked sharply.

"It's time to go."

"What about T'Sai?" Janeway asked, referring to the Vulcan lawyer Admiral Paris had retained for her. They had met the previous evening to go over their strategy, but Janeway had been hoping T'Sai would actually accompany her to Headquarters so that they continue their discussion.

"She'll meet us at the hearing."

Janeway nodded, concealing her disappointment. She gave her uniform another quick pat, smoothing away the barely-there creases in the heavy material.

"All right," she said. "Let's go."

Marla Gilmore had always been the quiet one, the responsible one. Even as a child, growing up in western Massachusetts, she'd always had a sense of caution, never quite willing to take a step without first contemplating all of the options available to her.

Her thoroughness was the main reason Captain Rudy Ransom had chosen her for his crew on the Equinox. Marla Gilmore, age twenty-two, her first assignment out of the Academy. She had been bursting with pride when she had received the news and had rushed, helter-skelter, to her quarters to call her family; the enthusiasm in her voice, the energy in her step - as her roommate later commented, no one had ever seen Marla move quite that fast before. She had envisioned a glorious career, one where her calm style would earn her the respect of her peers; eventually, she wanted to head up her own department.

Funny how things turned out, Marla mused. Now here she was, just minutes away from the hearing that could - no, would - change her life forever.

Sitting in the small windowless room with the other four surviving members of the Equinox crew, Marla remained quiet as the others spoke, seemingly unaware of her presence.

"We knew this day would come," Noah Lessing said quietly. "What Admiral Paris told us shouldn't surprise us."

"What do you think the verdict will be?" James Morrow asked. He and Brian Sorfin had been among Marla's closest friends on the Equinox and she knew that James had secretly shared her disgust about their actions on the Equinox; at the time, they had convinced themselves that killing the nucleogenic aliens was the only way they could survive.

Noah, always the leader, scoffed at James' question. "What do you think? If we're lucky, a dishonorable discharge?"

"And if we're not?" Marla asked softly. The four men stared at her. Marla leaned forward, folding her hands on the table. "What we did may land us all in prison for the rest of our lives."

"Admiral Paris said Captain Janeway put in a good word for us," Brian said. "That ought to count for something."

"Depends on the outcome of her hearing," Noah pointed out. "If she gets booted..." He didn't have to finish the sentence; the others already knew the implications. Right now, aside from their families, Kathryn Janeway was the only support they had.

"Damn," Brian said. He slammed his fist on the table. "Look, we just need to explain why-"

"They won't understand!" Angelo Tessonni exclaimed. He got up from his chair and began to pace the length of the room. "These admirals, they never were in the Delta Quadrant. How can they possibly understand what we went through?"

"They can't," Marla said, "so we have to make it clear we had no other options. We were simply following orders."

"Right," Noah said, slumping in his chair. Marla wished she could think of something inspirational to say, but conjuring up enthusiasm had never been her area of expertise; Ransom, she thought with a trace of bitterness, had excelled at this particular skill. "You know they've already separated Samantha Wildman from her daughter. If they'd do that to a little kid, who knows what they'd do to us?"

"We'll just tell 'em we were following orders," Angelo repeated.

"Yeah, hope that works," Noah said in a voice that clearly indicated his level of pessimism.

"According to General Order 26, subordinates cannot be held or tried for the actions of their superiors," Angelo pointed out, his voice brightening with optimism.

Brian shook his head. "Sorry, Angelo, that's only if it can be proved the crew wasn't directly involved and you have to admit, we all gave Rudy one hundred percent of ourselves. We're equally guilty."

"Don't go and take that attitude on the stand," Noah said sarcastically. "You'll hang us all. Let's stick to the bottom line, okay? We were following orders. We did what we had to to survive and yes, we regret it, but if positions were changed, would anyone do otherwise?"

"Voyager never stooped to murder," Marla said softly, but her comments were pointedly ignored by the others. Even now, the occasional smug attitudes of the Voyager crew had grated on the

already bruised psyches of the Equinox Five - as they were collectively known. For that reason, it had been difficult to form really deep friendships with the crew; their past always stood in the way. As a result, already a tight knit group, the Equinox Five had become even closer, standing united in all things during their time on Voyager. This trial, they knew, would be no different, despite the occasional dissenting comment.

"I agree," James said. "Though, I doubt anyone will much care what happens to us. That's what bothers me the most."

As James finished speaking, the door slid open, causing Marla to jump.

"Already?" she whispered, anticipating the security guards who were to escort them to their hearing.

"Relax." A gentle hand squeezed her shoulder; Marla glanced up. Tom Paris, she noted in relief. Voyager's helm officer circled the room, looking at them all with a mixture of compassion and concern. Of all the senior officers, Tom Paris had acted the most friendly towards the Equinox Five and had done his best to make sure they felt comfortable aboard Voyager.

"We're glad to see you," Marla said honestly. "I didn't think they'd let anyone visit."

"Treating us like the common criminals they think we are," Brian added, a note of indignation slipping into his voice.

"One of the perks of having an admiral for a father," Tom admitted. "Mind if I sit down?"

"No," Noah said. "Though, I'm surprised you'd want to associate with us-"

"Hey!" Tom held up a hand. "Look, I'm trying to be a friend here."

"Noah," Marla said gently. "Thank you, Tom, we appreciate it."

"How are you holding up?"

Marla glanced around the room. Noah still looked angry, but James and Brian simply looked tired. Angelo, well, Marla could never really tell with him; he was good at bottling up his feelings.

"The best we can under the circumstances," Marla said. "It hasn't been that bad. Your father was very kind when he explained the procedures."

"Glad to hear it," Tom said. "I- I plan to attend the hearing."

"What?" Angelo asked.

"You all are a part of Voyager," Tom said. "We stick together."

Marla bit her lip. She hadn't expected anyone, least of all anyone from the senior staff, to come to their hearing; Tom's show of support meant a lot and perhaps, they weren't as alone as they thought they were.

"Thanks, Tom," Marla said gratefully. She reached across the table to grasp Tom's hand. "What time is it?"

"Um, a little before 0900 hours," Tom said.

"Great," Noah said. "Well, guys, enjoy these last few minutes before the axe falls."

"You don't know that's going to happen," Angelo objected. Already, he looked happier than he had a few minutes before. "This hearing could be a mere formality."

"Ha!" Noah scoffed.

At that moment, the door opened and a yellow-uniformed officer stood there. Marla felt a shiver run down her back. This was it, she thought uneasily. She pushed her chair back, swallowing hard.

"Lieutenant Tom Paris?" the officer asked, much to Marla's surprise.

"That's me," Tom said, standing up.

"If you could come with me."

Tom glanced at the Equinox Five.

"We'll be fine," Marla assured him. She stood up, suddenly feeling strong. "Don't worry about us."

"I'll check in on you," Tom said. "Good luck. It's- it's been an honor serving with you."

With that last comment, Tom Paris followed the guard out the door. Marla remained standing, her eyes fixed on Tom's retreating figure. Finally, she turned back to face the others. "He meant it," she said quietly. "Whatever happens in there, we've got to be strong, we're going to tell them truth and-"

Noah reached over and grabbed Marla's hand.

"Yeah," he said hoarsely. "What Marla says, that's what we're going to do."

Janeway stepped out of the transport carefully; last thing she wanted to do was stumble on the day of the trial. She quirked a smile as she took in the press crowding around the doors to Starfleet Headquarters.

"I guess this means I'll make the evening news," Janeway remarked to Evans.

"Yes, ma'am," he responded, a little stiffly, as he stood next to her.

"I'm not going to talk to them."

"Yes, ma'am."

Janeway sighed in exasperation. She knew Evans was a 'by the book' officer, probably one of the main reasons why he had been assigned to her specifically. Plus, he wasn't intrigued at all by her or by Voyager's amazing story; so far, he was the only person Janeway had run across, aside from Owen Paris, who had not asked for her autograph.

Janeway glanced at Evans from the corner of her eye; the color was rising in his cheeks and she wondered if he felt somewhat overwhelmed by the media circus which had gathered here. Frankly, she wouldn't blame him if he was, and a small part of her snidely enjoyed his discomfort.

"Move away!" Evans called out. He waved his arms and the media crowd parted slightly, allowing barely enough room for Janeway to pass through. "Captain?"

She didn't respond, but instead, plunged into the crowd. Might as well get this over with, she thought grimly. She noted plenty of Starfleet uniforms, but no familiar faces. She tried to push away her disappointment; she'd thought at the very least Chakotay would have made an attempt to be here, or Tom, or B'Elanna...

"Captain Janeway! What happened with the Sernaix?" The question was very loud, in her ear, and Janeway nearly jumped. She glared at the reporter, hoping the intensity of her stare would cause him to wither, but the reporter didn't back down. "What happened when Voyager mysteriously reappeared and then disappeared again? Where did you go?"

"No comment!" Evans shouted. He pushed Janeway lightly on the back and she was more than slightly annoyed by his presumption. She moved quickly, trying to stay at least a step ahead of Evans, and more importantly, she did her best to ignore the barrage of questions hurled at her.

"What were the Sernaix like?"

"Did you form an alliance with the Sernaix?"

"What is bubble space like?"

"Did you form an alliance with the Borg?"

Of course they would ask that question, Janeway thought, her lips curling slightly in disgust. From her conversations with Admiral Paris, Janeway knew that the Starfleet brass were actually considering holding her responsible for the current Borg civil war. Not considering, Janeway corrected herself. No, they were actually blaming her for the Borg insurgency.

"Weren't you afraid to have a Borg drone on your ship?" the reporter who shouted this question was directly to Janeway's right as she passed by him. "Captain Janeway!"

Janeway shook her head, hoping that the reporter would take her non-verbal gesture as an expression of "no comment." In truth, all of the words were starting to run into each other, the questions becoming an indistinct blur in her ear. However, she did catch fragments here and there.

"What do you think should happen to the crew of the Equinox?"

"How about the Maquis? How did it feel to serve on a ship with terrorists?"

At this last question, Janeway nearly whirled around, but only her sense of pride kept her headed towards her ultimate destination, her head held high. That was one question she did not care to answer. A ship full of terrorists, indeed. Apparently, the end of the Dominion War had done nothing to soften attitudes towards the Maquis.

"Do you have an opinion on what should be done to the Maquis?"

"What do you think you'll do after the hearing?"

"Do you think you'll be discharged?"

Janeway bit her lip as she ascended the steps to Headquarters. The distance from the transport, in reality only about fifty meters, seemed endless. She paused only for a second to once again scan the crowd for the sign of a familiar face. Seeing no one, she headed for the door.

Once inside the sanctity of Headquarters, Janeway let out a sigh of relief.

"Well," she remarked to no one in particular, "let's get this show on the road."

Naomi Wildman shifted in her bed. It was hard and uncomfortable beneath her body, and she longed for her bed on Voyager, which had an indentation perfectly shaped for her sleeping style. These sheets felt different too, and the colors - pink and purple - were not quite what she liked. She preferred blues and greens, but she would bring that up with her father at another time.

"Computer, time?" she asked.

"The time is now 0830 hours."

Naomi stretched. Back on Voyager, it would have been time to wake up. Just enough time, she remembered, to get ready for the day and to meet Neelix for breakfast at 0930 hours. She smiled at the memory; the last message from Neelix admonished her to be cheerful, be good, to remember him.

"I could never forget you," she had written back. "Never." And she had underlined the last word three times. She wondered now if Neelix had gotten her letter yet. She considered asking her father how long it would take for the letter to reach Neelix, but then decided not to; her father did not seem particularly interested in Neelix.

She wondered when she would get to talk to Neelix again. Lieutenant Paris had been kind enough to arrange a last minute conversation while they were still on Voyager, but since then, Naomi had only managed to send off the one letter - again, with Lieutenant Paris' assistance. She wondered, despite his new life, if Neelix missed her as much as she missed him.

"Naomi?" her father appeared in the doorway. Her father was a handsome man, Naomi admitted, tall like she had imagined him to be and strong also. He had dark hair and other than the horns on his forehead, Naomi could see no resemblance between herself and the man who asked her to call him Daddy.

"I'm awake," she said, purposely injecting a note of petulance into her voice. "Are we going to see Mom today?"

"Not today," her father said. Naomi sat up in bed, pulling her knees up to her chest. If Neelix had been here, he wouldn't have stayed by the door, she thought. She frowned.

"Then when?" she asked. She had not imagined that their short vacation in San Francisco would have ended so quickly; her mother had seemed so happy yesterday, so lighthearted - and she had laughed in a way Naomi had never heard before. All because of this man, her father. And

now, her mother was gone. Not gone, Naomi corrected herself. She is at Starfleet Headquarters with the rest of Voyager's crew.

"In time," her father said. "We will be able to arrange a visit soon."

"When soon?" Naomi asked, remembering her mother saying that their separation would only be for a short time; they would have plenty of time to spend together as a family in the future.

"I don't know."

"What about Seven?"

"Naomi," her father said and she could clearly hear the note of exasperation in his voice. "I want you to get up now. There is plenty of time for questions later."

"Well, can I watch the news vid?"

"Naomi!"

She stuck out her lower lip. She knew she sounded uncommonly childish but she was desperate for a connection to her life on Voyager. "I want to know what's going on."

"Later," her father said. He glanced in the direction of her rat cage, his lip curling in obvious distaste. He had not wanted Naomi to bring the rat here (she refused to think of her father's house as 'home') but her mother had intervened.

"Naomi needs Ratty," her mother had said. "Let her keep the animal."

Thinking about her mother now, Naomi's lower lip quivered. She knew she had to be brave, knew she had to be strong, but right now, she wanted nothing more than to curl up next to her mother and feel those gentle fingers run through her long hair. Somehow, she could not imagine her father comforting her in any way at all.

"You'll like spending time with your dad," her mother had said to her. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Naomi sniffled a little, her vision blurring unexpectedly. She didn't want to cry in front of her father, didn't want to give him another reason to yell at her.

"I'll see you downstairs," her father said in that same stern voice. Naomi nodded mutely. As the sound of her father's footsteps receded down the hall, Naomi pressed a corner of her blue blanket to her eyes. For a few seconds, she sobbed silently into the material, her thin body shaking. Finally, she managed to compose herself and get out of bed. She covered the distance to Ratty's cage in three quick but quiet steps. Carefully, she lifted the rat out of its cage and held it close to her cheek.

"It's okay, Ratty," Naomi said softly as the little animal twittered, its whiskers wiggling in rhythm with its bobbing nose. "We're only here for a little while. Just a little while and then, Mom will be back. It's okay."

And then, she replaced the rat in its cage and stared at the door leading out of her room with trepidation. Eventually, she would have to go downstairs and face her father, she knew.

"What would Neelix do?" she wondered out-loud and even before the words were completely out of her mouth, she knew the answer. With a determined air, she headed to her closet to pick out her clothes for the day.

As they made their way back to the quarters where Voyager's crew had temporarily taken residence, Tom Paris kept sneaking looks at the security officer at his side. She looked familiar - something about the shape of her eyes, the color of her hair - and he was longing to strike up a conversation; he had never been completely comfortable with silence. Finally, the officer glanced at him.

"Remember me yet?" she asked, her voice tinged with a slight French accent. Tom, surprised by the directness of her comments, shook his head.

"Sorry," he said sincerely. "I've been trying to remember since you do look familiar."

"We have." The officer looked nothing short of amused and Tom began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. It was no secret that in his pre-Voyager life, he had been quite the womanizer; there were times when he barely remembered the names of the women whom he woke up next to. He had been honest with B'Elanna about his past, but it was one thing when they were stranded in the Delta Quadrant, quite another when they were back when the chances of running into one of his former paramours were high; he truly hoped this woman hadn't been one of those disinterested one night flings he had indulged in for a semester or two.

"Look," Tom began, "whatever I did, I'm sorry. If I was supposed to call-"

"Relax, Tom. It's me, Amelie."

Tom's eyes widened in memory. "Amelie Beaugard?"

Of course he recalled her now. She had been among those cadets who had studied in Marseilles, and during his four years at the Academy, Amelie Beaugard had been pretty much his only platonic female friend.

"In the flesh, but it's Amelie Despere now." She smiled. "I was wondering how long it would take you to remember me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Amelie answered. She looked around furtively. "I would have said something earlier, but when we were in HQ, I didn't want to take the chance someone would hear our conversation."

Tom narrowed his eyes. "Something going on I should know about?"

"Quite a bit," Amelie said. "Keep walking, but we'll take the long way around."

"Okay." He followed Amelie's lead as she changed directions, from the direct diagonal path leading straight to the barracks, to an outer loop, which would eventually swing around towards the Bay. "Let me see, the last time I saw you-"

"Marseilles," Amelie said. "At Sandrine's."

"I remember," Tom replied, his lips curving up at the memory. Yes, he and the other Starfleet cadets had spent way too much time at the popular Marseilles night spot, playing pools and drinking beer. And of course, Sandrine herself, with that sultry, throaty voice, was an attractive draw for the cadets. "What a night..."

"Oh yes," Amelie said. "I won't forget it so easily. That was when you pulled a knife out on Paul. You surprised me very much."

"Not my knife, it was Paul's," Tom said. He was anxious to get the facts right, at least this time. When the police had arrived to break up the fight, Tom had looked around for Amelie and his other friends, but they had dispersed, leaving him to face his fate. Truth be told, at that time, Tom Paris had not believed he had been worth waiting for anyway, so the fact his friends had not lingered had not surprised him. "He started it. A little too much too drink, a few angry words, and voila."

Amelie cocked her head to the side. "You were brave to grab away the knife from him."

"Foolish, more like," Tom said. He shook his head ruefully. "Some good it did me." Tom had ended up spending the night in jail and the following morning, he had been sent back to San Francisco, rather unceremoniously, to face the wrath of his father. "I think a permanent entry was made on my record."

"But you acquitted yourself well."

"I was lucky." Tom chuckled, shaking his head at the memory. "Never thought those fencing lessons would ever pay off." He had joined the fencing class at the Marseille campus as a lark; his flame of the moment, a brunette with sultry bedroom eyes and plump lips, had been an expert fencer. "Though, there is quite a difference between a sword and a pocket knife."

"You got quite a nasty scar, if I remember correctly." Amelie stopped and ran her forefinger down the Tom's cheek, pausing for a second at his jaw, before dropping her hand entirely. "The evidence was hidden nicely."

"I was lucky," Tom said. Now that Amelie mentioned it, he could almost feel the searing pain of that knife digging deep into his skin, slicing a gash nearly three centimeters long on his cheek. "The medic who attended my injury was skilled."

"And now you're a medic yourself," Amelie said. "How things change. You know, the last time I saw you, you seemed to be more interested in things other than your studies."

Unfortunately, Tom could not disagree with Amelie. He had spent an inordinate time focusing on women, drinking as well as indulging his passions for downhill skiing and flying.

"I surprised a whole lot of people." Tom sighed as they rounded the barracks, heading down towards the water. "I guess I wasn't completely past redemption, huh?"

"I never thought you needed saving, Tom."

"You were probably the only one."

They stood at the edge of the water, listening to the waves splash up against the rocks. In the distance, they could see the hazy hills of Marin County and a little closer, the Golden Gate Bridge. Tom nodded towards a group of kayakers heading in their directions, their paddles churning up white water.

"Something I always wanted to try," he said, "but never got the chance."

"That's odd. You always took opportunities when they came."

"Not always the best ones. You know that."

"I do." Amelie squeezed his hand. "Tom, I am glad you are back. When I saw the list of Voyager's missing seven years ago and noticed your name on the list, I was truly concerned I would never see you again. My relief was great, as you might imagine, when I found out Voyager was back. You've done well for yourself, Lieutenant Paris."

Tom quirked a smile. "If you'd asked me twelve years ago when Paul and I were facing off in that night club-" he shook his head -"I don't think I would have pictured my life like this, not at all."

"You're happy?" her voice was soft, gentle.

Tom nodded. "Yeah."

"Good. I am so glad to hear that." Amelie glanced over her shoulder. "Let's head back to your quarters. They will wonder where I am. Where you are."

"Are you my guard?" Tom asked suspiciously. He had been disarmed entirely by Amelie's presence but now he was on alert again.

"I don't like that way you say that. I head up security operations here," Amelie said. "When I saw your name, I took the opportunity to escort you back. Starfleet is concerning itself very much for the protection of Voyager's crew."

"Ah. Is that a euphemism for 'under arrest'?" Tom asked sardonically. He noted that Amelie looked slightly uncomfortable but she nodded.

"Tom, I will be honest," Amelie said. "I have heard the rumors and I do not believe it will go well with you. There are many who have strong feelings, one way or the other, about Voyager and its crew."

"What have you heard? I've been talking to my father-"

"Listen to me," Amelie said. She grabbed his arm and lowered her voice. "Your father means well, but there are many who have other ideas." In her agitation, her French accent grew stronger. "I have heard they intend to imprison the Maquis, and that is the kindest sentence spoken now."

"I'm married to a former Maquis-"

"I know, Tom," Amelie said. "And it does not look good for your Equinox friends either. They will be punished, severely, for their actions."

"They were following orders."

"It matters not." Amelie resumed walking, her pace quickening as they headed in the direction of the barracks. "And Captain Janeway's hearing began this morning."

"I'm aware of that."

"Behind closed doors."

Tom stopped. "It's not open to the public?"

Amelie shook her head. "No."

"What is this, the Star Chamber? Amelie, this isn't how Starfleet does things and you know it."

"Indeed I do, but it changes nothing. The Dominion War changed things and now there is this threat from the Borg." She gazed at him intently. "All these events have made the Admiralty more cautious than usual, provoking unusual measures." Amelie sighed, her eyes growing slightly cloudy. "This is not all. I hear all Voyager personnel are to remain in the North Compound unless summoned to a hearing. It will be official this afternoon."

"That's ridiculous."

"Perhaps, but it has been ordered. As such, I'm escorting you there. You should remain inside until further notice." She punched in her code at the door. The keypad beeped and the doors slid open. "For your own protection."

"For my own protection? From whom? Or what?"

Amelie shrugged. "As I said, it has been ordered."

"Don't be ridiculous, Amelie. We're friends."

"Yes," she said softly as they ascended the stairs to the second floor. "We are friends so I am telling you this. I care what happens to you and urge you to act with caution now. Be aware and be careful."

"If I'm confined to quarters, how much trouble could I possibly get into?"

Amelie shrugged. "There are always things," she said. They rounded a corner at the top of the stairs; the quarters Tom shared with B'Elanna and baby Miral were the second on the right. Amelie nodded. "You may call me if you need anything."

"Um, thanks." Tom stepped forward, awkwardly, and wrapped his arms around his old friend. After a moment, he released her and entered the quarters. Inside, he found baby Miral sitting on the floor, surrounded by various toys, including a stuffed replica of Voyager.

"Hi there," Tom said. Miral gurgled at him as she held out one tiny hand and stuffed the other in her mouth. Drool trickled down her cheeks. Tom sighed. "That's one habit I hope you're going to grow out of eventually." He leaned down and carefully swiped her mouth with her bib, grimacing as he saw the words 'Daddy's Little Terror' scrawled in blue writing across the white material. "I bet your mother replicated this for you, didn't she?"

"Kab la," Miral answered as she reached for the stuffed Voyager toy.

Tom sighed. "I thought so."

"Did you say something?" B'Elanna appeared from the bathroom, wrapped in a heavy white robe, a towel around her head. "Back already? I thought you were going to stay and offer moral support to Noah and the others."

"I was planning on it."

"But?" B'Elanna asked. She looked down at Miral, who was now chewing contentedly on the stuffed Voyager replica. "I just washed that, Miral." Miral turned her head up at the sound of her mother's voice and offered a beatific smile in return. B'Elanna shook her head. "You're incorrigible, just like your father."

Tom settled down on the narrow twin bed by the window. He hated these tiny quarters which had been assigned to them; in a way, they reminded him very much of his Academy days when he had shared cramped accommodations like these with a roommate or two. B'Elanna looked over at him.

"Well?" she asked. "So what happened?"

"Starfleet security paid me a visit," he said. "In fact, I was escorted out of the waiting room while I was with the Equinox Five."

B'Elanna sat on the twin bed opposite him, her attention now completely focused on her husband and not the baby at her feet.

"What?" she asked evenly.

"Don't worry." Tom quirked a smile. "They aren't hauling me off to New Zealand. Not yet anyway."

"Well, what did they want?"

"She."

B'Elanna glared at him. "What did she want?"

Tom leaned back, slipping off his shoes; it occurred to him that he really didn't care for Starfleet leather boots - they were rough, uncomfortable and painful blister factories.

"To warn me," he said finally. "About what might happen to the Maquis, for one."

B'Elanna straightened, her robe slightly falling open at the chest. In other circumstances, Tom would have had found the image of his half-naked wife irresistible, but right now, he was feeling on edge; Amelie's warning, however vague, bothered him greatly.

"Well?" B'Elanna asked sharply. She clutched the edges of her robe, drawing it close. On the floor, Miral yelped as her little yellow ball rolled away. Her little face scrunched up, the color rising in her cheeks. Hastily, Tom retrieved the ball but not before Miral released a loud squeal.

"You must get that from your mother," Tom said as he handed the ball to Miral. B'Elanna made a face, but did not comment. "B'Elanna, Amelie Beaugard was the security guard."

B'Elanna looked at him questioningly.

"I knew Amelie from Marseilles," Tom went on. "Her roommate was Julie Laurent."

"I remember," B'Elanna said. "Julie was the one you got into the knife fight over."

"Not exactly," Tom said, smiling ruefully at the memory. "Rather, her boyfriend, Paul, thought I had an amorous thought or two in regards to Julie and he took matters into his own hands. Attacked me in the middle of Sandrine's. He was a little too intoxicated to understand that I had no feelings whatsoever for Julie. I haven't seen or talked to Amelie since that night."

"And now you've met up here," B'Elanna said flatly. She got up and headed into the bathroom, removing the towel from her hair as she went.

"B'Elanna!" Tom got up. "Look, there was nothing between Amelie and me--"

"I didn't say there was," she replied in exasperation.

"Then what's the problem?"

"No problem," B'Elanna said. She sighed. "Sorry. I think the stress is getting to me."

"Don't worry," Tom said softly. He squeezed her shoulder lightly, feeling the strength of muscles and tendons beneath the thick material of her robe. "It's understandable."

"So, what did Amelie say?"

"Just told me to be careful, be aware, you know. Cloak and dagger type stuff." He kept his tone light deliberately, but he also knew he couldn't fool B'Elanna.

"Terrific," B'Elanna grumbled. She glanced at herself in the mirror, squinting. "Nothing more about the Maquis?"

"Hey, they're going to pardon you."

"You sure about that?"

"Positive," Tom said. He leaned in to brush his lips lightly against B'Elanna's cheek. She leaned back against him as he wrapped his arms loosely around her. "And if so, I've always wanted to show you around New Zealand. There's a hot spot or two I'd love to share with you."

B'Elanna sighed. "I'm concerned, Tom. What if they separate us?"

"They wouldn't."

"They separated Naomi and Sam."

"That was different. Naomi's father is here in San Francisco. It made sense. Why keep Naomi cooped up in a small room like this?" Tom gestured. "It's making even Miral crazy."

"Still, I would feel better if you would talk to your father about this."

"B'Elanna-

"Shhh." She turned around, putting one finger to Tom's lips. "Please. He knows what's going on, Tom."

"I don't know what he could possibly do." Tom walked out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom. He picked Miral up, swinging her up in his arms. "He's just one of many admirals."

"Yes, but he's your father and the Captain's mentor. He's probably the only one on our side," B'Elanna said firmly. "Tom, your meeting with him was cordial enough when you last saw him. It doesn't hurt to try."

Tom looked at his wife. She looked defiant, her arms crossed against her chest, but he knew B'Elanna, knew what it meant when her lower lip trembled just slightly. It was rare that he saw B'Elanna this vulnerable.

"You're really worried, aren't you?" he asked softly. B'Elanna nodded, still keeping her distance. Tom sighed.

"I'll talk to my father," he said.

B'Elanna took Miral from her husband and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Thank you."

Seven of Nine sat at the table in her quarters, her attention intent on the various documents in front of her. She had been consigned to quarters by Starfleet security and had been advised to remain there unless called for. However, as she focused her gaze on the documents in front of her, she knew she would have to disobey.

Thanks to her Borg data nodes, she was able to compile the information quickly. Fully satisfied, Seven rose from her chair. As she opened the door carefully, she could hear some voices in the hallway. Tom Paris and B'Elanna Torres.

She waited until she could no longer hear the voices and then slipped out, the PADDs still firmly in hand.

There was no time to waste.

The hallways in this building were extraordinarily narrow and dark. Lieutenant Paris, in his cheerful way, had shared some of the history of this particular barracks with Seven, much to Lieutenant Torres' amusement. Apparently, this was the oldest building on Academy grounds and one of the few not to have sustained damage in the Breen attack on San Francisco during the Dominion War. According to Lieutenant Paris, this building - originally built as a dormitory - was haunted.

Seven of Nine had dismissed the story of ghosts out-right but Lieutenant Kim had appeared fascinated by the story and Ensign Wildman had remarked she was glad Naomi was not around to hear such stories as they would have kept Naomi up half the night. Seven did not miss the note of regret in Samantha Wildman's voice; it was obvious that the ensign missed her daughter greatly.

Seven frowned as she turned a corner, careful to keep to the shadows. She did not understand humans' fascinations with those long departed and she certainly did not see how a ghostly vision could be frightening.

As she approached the turbolift, she was aware of footsteps heading in her direction. Seven spun around and darted into a closet. As she pressed back against the mops, brooms and other cleaning supplies, she heard the footsteps growing louder and finally, they receded. Gingerly, Seven stepped back into the corridor, just in time to see the retreating figure of a security officer, his hand on the butt of his phaser.

Seven glanced at the panel directly opposite her. As with all older structures, this one featured an intricate internal system of air ducts and ventilation systems. Moving quickly, she removed the panel and carefully slid into the space. The air was dark, foul smelling, and she stifled a sneeze behind her palm. It occurred to her then that she should have brought a flash light, but she did not believe it prudent to head back to her quarters. Likely, the security guard would be making his rounds again.

I must be efficient, Seven thought.

Carefully, she replaced the panel over the opening and began to crawl, slowly, through the darkness, reaching out to test the floor in front of her. She could hear unusual sounds and convinced herself they were nothing but the usual heating and cool systems. Every now and then, she heard a creak in the ceiling and she could not help but think of Tom Paris' ghost stories.

"It is only a story," she murmured softly as she continued to crawl. "I must not be distracted from my task."

But still, Seven could not help but shiver every time she heard a sound.

Before long, she saw the gridded pattern of light in front of her. She paused, straining to hear footsteps, voice, anything at all that would signify another individual's presence.

Silence.

Seven peered through the slats of the panel, but saw no one. Very quietly, she pressed against the panel with the heel of her hand, applying pressure evenly. The panel fell to the floor and Seven pulled back slightly, waiting to hear if there was any reaction whatsoever. When she heard nothing, she pushed through the opening and into the light, thankful to be out of the dark. She stood up quickly, dusting herself off, and then replaced the panel.

It appeared that she had arrived on the other side of the barracks, but this appeared to be the office wing. To her intense relief, Seven spied no security officers anywhere. What was that expression Tom Paris used about lady luck?

Still, Seven did not want to take any chances. She kept close to the walls, her eyes and ears alert for any sound. As she reached the end of the corridor, she found the office she was looking for. With a quick look around, she punched in the security codes and the door slid open. Inside, the room was dark and slightly musty smelling, as if it had not been cleaned in years.

"Computer, minimal lighting," Seven requested. The computer complied with her request, casting a dim glow over the room, which measured about eight meters by ten meters.

She barely noticed the thin layer of dust covering the various furnishings. Instead, her attention focused solely on the computer console on the far wall. Her lips curved up into a thin smile. This would be easier than she had anticipated. Seven covered the distance to the console quickly.

"Now it has begun," she said softly.

Kathryn Janeway shifted in her seat. It was the typical sort of chair found in typical courtrooms - wooden with leather back and sides - and utterly uncomfortable. She glanced about, taking in the high ceilings and the smooth, polished wood paneled walls. There were no windows in this room and for that, she was grateful; after the media circus outside, the last thing Janeway wanted was for some unauthorized and news-hungry report to record these proceedings.

Directly in front of her, at the judge's bench, sat Phillipa Louvois, the woman in charge of this trial. Louvois appeared to be in her fifties, her dark auburn hair styled high about her brow. Her chin jutted out pugnaciously while her deep-set eyes set off an aristocratic nose.

Janeway's lip curled up in disgust as she regarded the woman. Owen Paris had told her a little bit about this Admiral Louvois, sketching out the woman in very general terms. Apparently, Louvois had made her name years ago when arguing whether an android was a sentient being. Janeway had had heard of that case when it was first tried and had followed the proceedings with some interest. In more recent years, Louvois had presided over trials stemming from the cessation of hostilities in the Dominion War.

"Watch out for Phillipa," Owen had warned her. "She's a friend of Admiral Warhol's, and believe me, she's going for blood. They need someone to blame for the Borg civil war, and you happen to be the right person at the right time."

"I look forward to it," Janeway had answered. She had heard of Admiral Warhol's single-minded focus regarding her trial, and truth be told, Janeway refused to be cowed by that man. "Louvois isn't the first person who has tried to do that, so don't worry about me."

Owen Paris had met her gaze steadily. "I'm not worried about how you'll handle yourself, Kathryn."

He had not extrapolated on this last thought and now, as she twisted around in her seat, Janeway wondered where Owen Paris was. He had promised to attend the proceedings and more than anything, Kathryn longed for a friendly face.

Janeway glanced up at Louvois, but the woman was intent on her PADDs. An aide stood to the side, his hands behind his back, his face completely expressionless. In addition to Louvois, Janeway knew that the panel responsible for rendering a verdict would be made up of her peers, several of whom she knew were sympathetic to her and her crew.

Dave Evans disturbed her thoughts as he slipped in next to her. He handed her a cup of coffee.

"I thought you might want this," he said awkwardly. "It's going to be a long day."

Janeway glanced down at the dark brew.

"No milk, no sugar, just java," he continued. "The way you like it."

"Yes," Janeway said, curiously touched by Evans' gesture. "Thank you."

"I hope you don't mind I looked up your preferences."

"No," Janeway said. She glanced back at Phillipa Louvois and then at the table directly to the right and across the aisle from her table. The lawyers - the Starfleet lawyers - would sit there and already, it surprised Janeway that she could make a distinction between herself and Starfleet. "It was thoughtful of you."

"It was no problem, ma'am," Evans said awkwardly. "I was getting a cup for myself..."

"All the same, I appreciate the your thoughtfulness." Janeway leaned towards him, taking advantage of the fact that he seemed to like her. "I'm looking for my first officer, Commander Chakotay or-"

"Mr. Chakotay is one the list of potential witnesses. He will not be in attendance unless called to testify," Evans said stiffly. Janeway didn't react.

"I assume the same is true about Commander Tuvok," Janeway said.

"Yes," Evans nodded.

"What about Lieutenant Kim?"

"Yes, ma'am. All members of your crew are potential witnesses."

Janeway sighed and looked down at her coffee. Suddenly, the hot beverage no longer seemed so tempting or necessary. She put the mug down on the table.

"So they intend to have my own people testify against me," Janeway said. Evans' expression did not change.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, and Janeway wondered if the young man had an opinion about anything; his apparent detachment was starting to get on her nerves. Then again, she supposed Evans' neutrality was the very reason he had been assigned to her.

"Not exactly the welcome home I expected," Janeway continued casually as she noted the team of Starfleet lawyers parading down the aisle, their chests puffed out with an exaggerated sense of self-importance. "I expected to be debriefed, of course, but nothing like this." She gestured, indicating the court room. "Starfleet went all out, didn't they? No, don't answer that, it doesn't really matter. I've been in worse situations, Lieutenant."

"I know, ma'am. I've read all about those situations. Your encounters with the Kazon, for instance."

"Ah," Janeway said. She quirked a smile. "You did your homework."

Evans did not smile back. Janeway sighed; evidently the young man lacked a sense of humor.

"Captain?"

Janeway looked up at the woman appointed to defend her. T'Sai, according to Owen, was a formidable lawyer and tireless researcher. Through her intensity and drive, she had risen to the rank of commander and was well-respected among the legal community. And, another point in her favor, T'Sai and Owen Paris were good friends, going back nearly twenty years.

"I can't think of anyone else I'd trust with your defense," Owen had told Kathryn when he informed her of his selection. "She's not one for chit-chat and she has no patience for sloppy work. But I assure you completely that you're in good hands and T'Sai will leave no stone unturned."

Now, Janeway stood and extended a hand. "Good morning, Commander."

T'Sai ignored Janeway's outstretched hand and nodded in response instead. "I apologize I was not here when you arrived. I was discussing your situation with Commander Shelrak."

"And?" Janeway asked, her ears perking up at the name of the prosecutor Starfleet had chosen. Involuntarily, Janeway glanced to her right where Commander Shelrak, an Axanar, stood talking in a low voice with his deputies, his reptilian head bobbing up and down as he spoke.

"Commander Shelrak is adamant," T'Sai said carefully. She put her briefcase on the table in front of them. "He is heavily influenced by Admiral Warhol. As a result, I believe he will settle for nothing less than a dishonorable discharge."

"A dishonorable discharge?" Janeway stared at T'Sai in amazement. "I didn't do anything wrong. You know that."

The Vulcan nodded, her expression remaining constant. "We shall present the facts, Captain, and perhaps the Admiral -" she glanced towards Louvois - "will agree with you."

At that moment, a lieutenant emerged from a door to the right of the judge's bench.

"Oye, oye, all come to order. The right honorable Phillipa Louvois presiding," he announced in a clear voice which echoed slightly through the large room. Janeway shifted in her chair, trying to catch a glance of a friendly face - anyone - in the room. While she understood why members of her crew were not in attendance, the absence of Admiral Paris was particularly disturbing. Janeway also noted the absence of any journalists as she leaned towards T'Sai.

"Is it a closed trial?" Janeway whispered.

"I believe, for your protection, only those directly involved in these proceedings are allowed," T'Sai responded.

"For my protection'?" Janeway asked sardonically. She glanced up as Louvois pounded her gavel on the bench. "I assume the 'closed' rule only applies to the press, as well as members of my crew and my family? If so, that's ridiculous."

"Unfortunately, it has been ordered this way," T'Sai said primly. Janeway frowned; the next time she saw Owen Paris, she would have to get his thoughts on this particular situation.

"This court will come to order and the charges against Kathryn Janeway shall be read," Louvois announced. T'Sai and Janeway stood, as custom dictated. It took all of Janeway's restraint to keep still as Louvois read out the charges in a firm voice. "Kathryn Janeway, you are hereby charged with aiding and abetting a hostile power, treason, numerous violations of the Prime Directive, incompetence, conduct unbecoming an officer, cruel and unusual treatment of-

Janeway stopped listening. She knew exactly what they were charging her with; T'Sai had explained everything in great detail. Janeway lifted her chin defiantly.

Let them charge me, she thought. They weren't there, they didn't have to make their own rules. I did what I had to in order to get my crew home.

And Janeway knew then, no matter what the outcome, she had no regrets about anything she had done.

Marla Gilmore rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them. She felt unusually cold. She looked at the judge; Art Curie was in his early fifties and according to the Starfleet personnel database, had only recently been appointed to his judgeship; the Equinox hearing would mark his third month on the job. Next to Marla, Noah Lessing sat stiffly, his eyes focused on their petite lawyer who had taken her place in front of the judge's bench.

When they had first met Maria Pachano, Marla wasn't sure that that the tiny woman with the soft-spoken voice would be able to be the forceful presence they needed. Pachano exuded a delicate fragility that didn't fill Marla with an overwhelming confidence, but she had kept her quiet; Starfleet had chosen Pachano to represent the Equinox Five and Marla knew, there weren't many other lawyers who were willing to take on their case.

"Imagine this," Pachano began. Marla jerked in surprise, amazed at the firmness and confidence in Pachano's voice. "You have just been pulled into the Delta Quadrant. You are more than seventy thousand light years from home. You're on board a science vessel, equipped with minimal weapons and shields. Within one week, you have lost half of your crew. Systems are failing but you have yet to encounter an alien species friendly enough to help you with repairs. In fact, most encounters are violent in nature and you've grown distrustful. In fact, in the cold darkness of your quarters, you're not sure you'll ever make it home. You're hungry, tired and injured. And then, a miracle happens. By accident, you find a 'silver bullet,' an injured alien species which possesses a nucleogenic compound which makes it possible for your warp drive to function again. You think about home, you think about Starfleet, you think about what's right. The alien species in your custody dies. You think about it again. Then, you make a decision." Pachano stopped walking as she turned her attention to the judge.

For a moment, Marla felt immensely comforted. Pachano was building their case well enough, Marla thought. She leaned forward, eager to hear, as Pachano resumed speaking.

"You're a Starfleet officer, but you're also a human being. You don't feel good about what you're doing, but you also know you want to get home. You want to be warm again, you want to be with your friends and family. More importantly, you want to survive. There, you have the story of the crew of the Equinox. They were faced with a harsh reality, one that is unimaginable for those of us who did not experience it. Their decisions, however deplorable, were based around one very human drive: the need to go home. Faced with similar circumstances, what would you have done? Would you have turned down the only option left to you or would you have done something similar? The defense intends to show that the crew of the Equinox exhausted every last option before they gave into the unspeakable. Thank you."

Pachano paused for a moment before returning to her seat. Marla leaned over to Noah.

"That went well, didn't it?" she whispered softly. Noah shrugged.

"If you say so."

Marla was confused by Noah's apparent indifference and she adjusted herself in the hard-backed chair. She watched as the prosecutor walked toward the front of the room. Commander Hileya, she noted, was an Orion. Despite the fact the Federation had had relatively cordial relations with the Orions for several hundred years, it was rare to see an Orion in a Starfleet capacity.

"Murder," Hileya's voice resounded through the courtroom. "Plain and simple. No question whatsoever as to what happened on board the Equinox. Murder."

Each time Hileya uttered 'murder', Marla flinched. She could see Noah's knuckles whitening as he gripped the edge of the table; James, Angelo and Brian looked equally uneasy. Marla inhaled deeply.

"My colleague, Commander Pachano, intends to spin a story about desperation and longing. But I remind you all. The Equinox was a Starfleet ship and as such, was bound by Starfleet regulations and protocols, regardless of circumstances." Hileya turned and stared. Marla willed herself not to shrink from the intensity of his gaze. "Maybe this would be a good time to remind the court as well as the former crew of the Equinox of some of our general orders."

Marla desperately wanted to jump out of her seat and remind the Commander that indeed, she did know the General Orders forwards and backwards, but she restrained herself.

"To begin with, the crew of the Equinox violated order number one, commonly known as the Prime Directive. Does this sound familiar? 'As the right of each sentient being to live in accordance with its normal cultural evolution is considered sacred, no Starfleet personnel may interfere with the normal and healthy development of alien life and culture.'" Hileya paced the area in front of the judge's bench, the floor creaking beneath his boots. "Not even in the case of saving one's own life can this directive be ignored. Indeed, the sorrowful story Commander Pachano has told does not give a viable excuse for the actions of these five individuals. In addition to violating the Prime Directive, I intend to prove to the court that the crew of the Equinox also violated General Order Two, which speaks against the use of force in regards to an alien species. Thank you."

Hileya sat down, a satisfied and smug grin spreading across his scaly features. As Marla looked at him, she shuddered. Dear God, she thought, rubbing her hands again. We don't stand a chance.

Much to Tom's annoyance, Amelie Despere arrived to escort him to his father's office. While he was happy to see Amelie again, Tom silently fumed at the significance of her presence.

"This is ridiculous. I can find my own way," Tom said. He meant it as a joke as they descended the stairs. "After all, I was a cadet here for four years."

"I know, Tom, and I'm sorry," Amelie said. "But you know what they say, orders are orders."

"Yeah," Tom said. He paused at the bottom of the staircase to wait. "My own protection, I got it. All of this security doesn't bode well for what's going on here. B'Elanna's really concerned."

"I can imagine," Amelie said. She opened the door and Tom blinked as they stepped into the bright sunlight. "Your baby is beautiful, Tom. She looks like you, in the shape of her eyes."

"You think?" Tom felt a rush of pride swell through him. He did think Miral was beautiful, but as B'Elanna had pointed out, he was very much biased. Still, it was nice to hear Amelie say the words and even nicer to know Amelie thought Miral did look like him a little. Most everyone thought the baby resembled B'Elanna and B'Elanna, rather self-consciously, always said it was the forehead ridges which made people think Miral resembled her; B'Elanna was always quick to point out the features Miral shared with her father.

"Yes. I would not lie to you."

Tom and Amelie fell into step together as they quickly crossed the green leading over to the main quad of the Starfleet HQ campus. Admiral Paris' office was on the third floor of Memorial Hall, a Colonial-style brick structure which had survived many renovations, including the latest to repair damage caused when the Breen attacked San Francisco during the Dominion War.

"Glad to hear it," Tom said. He sighed. "No one thought coming home would feel like this."

"Debriefings are standard procedures," Amelie said neutrally. "You know that."

"Not like this," Tom said, thinking of the Equinox Five. He stopped. "Amelie, have you heard anything about my friends? The Equinox crew?"

"A little, yes," Amelie said. "Come, Tom, your father is waiting. We cannot be late."

"Are you avoiding the question?" Tom refused to move. Amelie glanced at him and then back at Memorial Hall.

"It is not good news, Tom, I'm sorry."

Tom sighed. "What is it? They couldn't have possibly come up with a verdict yet. It's only been a couple hours since I saw them."

"My husband, he is part of the legal team which prepared Starfleet's case," Amelie said quietly.

"So you have the inside track?"

"What little information Charles chooses to share with me, yes. There is still an element of confidentiality regarding the proceedings."

"So? Have you heard anything?" Tom asked eagerly. Any information at all would be an improvement over the current situation; he truly hated not knowing exactly what Starfleet had in mind for them.

"At best, I believe, they will be dishonorably discharged," Amelie said reluctantly. She started walking again and Tom had to jog to catch up with her. "Their records will permanently record this verdict."

"But no imprisonment?"

Amelie shook her head. "I do not know. It has not been decided yet and my husband could only share this much information with me."

"What about the Maquis?"

Amelie looked at Tom with obvious compassion. "I know your wife is former Maquis so this is of great concern to you. There has been no decision as of yet but again, Charles is not optimistic. There are many who have long memories and cannot forgive what they see as acts of terrorism by Federation citizens. It is very political, Tom."

Tom inhaled deeply. He and B'Elanna had discussed the possibilities of what could happen to them shortly after their return and she had voiced her opinion that her Maquis past could come back to haunt them both. Of course, Tom had been more optimistic about the situation and had insisted that the Maquis' time on Voyager should count for something, but now Amelie's comments made him fear for the very worst.

"You will let me know?" Tom did his best to keep his voice steady. "Starfleet seems to want to keep us all in the dark."

"Of course, Tom."

"Thanks."

Tom swallowed hard as he glanced up at the third floor of Memorial Hall and then three windows to the right where his father's office was. Maybe B'Elanna was right after all. Tom Paris wasn't a pessimist by nature, nor did he particularly enjoy begging, but in this case, Tom was willing to forgo his pride and ask his father for help.

Seven of Nine examined the control panel very carefully. The technology was familiar, as she had spent long hours studying Starfleet schematics in preparation for this moment. She knew the access codes would be simple recursive algorithms and she had already spent some time calculating the most likely solutions. However, she knew she would only have three tries. The fourth failure to log on to the system would result in a total shutdown of this console as well as all connected systems; in addition, an alarm would be sounded, revealing her attempts to tamper with Starfleet systems.

Carefully, Seven typed in her first code and the panel flashed a red "Access Denied" message back at her. The former Borg drone remained calm and typed in the next most likely variation. Once again, she received the "Access Denied" message. Seven glanced about, noting that the room only had one door through which she could escape if she triggered the alarm. It was then she noticed the vent in the ceiling. Satisfied about her options, Seven typed in the third and final code. To her relief, a green message reading "You are logging on to terminal VT2000" appeared on the screen.

The log on process took several minutes and Seven felt the strain of impatience. Despite the fact this room looked as if it had been unused for several months, she knew it was only a matter of time before security realized she had left her quarters and began searching for her.

Finally, the terminal displayed the familiar LCARS interface with several application menus to select from. Seven's fingers flew across the console's keypad quickly as she pulled up Starfleet's latest information regarding its security protocols and current defensive positions. In addition, she also downloaded the latest updates to the Federation star maps. As an afterthought, she also glanced at the blueprints of this particular dormitory, as well as its history.

When the downloads were completed, Seven ran a simple worm virus, which would effectively eradicate all trace of her activities on this terminal. Satisfied with her actions, Seven grabbed her

PADD and carefully climbed up on some furniture to reach the ceiling panel. Stretching upwards, she could barely nudge the panel out of place, and so she grabbed a stool to give herself the added height. Finally, she pulled herself up into the ceiling, replacing the panel carefully.

T'Sai rose in a smooth, fluid motion. Janeway had always envied the elegant grace and quiet Vulcans carried themselves with and the inner serenity with which they presented themselves. T'Sai was no exception to the rule as she approached the bench, her gaze focused resolutely on Phillipa Louvois.

"Good morning," T'Sai began. Her voice was even, carefully modulated, but it carried well across the room. "Seven years ago, Voyager was lost. We know this story well. Captain Kathryn Janeway had been sent to capture a group of terrorists, the Maquis. In the Badlands, Voyager encountered an entity called the Caretaker, which hurled them seventy thousand light years away. Faced with entirely new circumstances, Captain Janeway did the logical thing: she created a new mission for herself." T'Sai turned and glanced at Janeway. "Her mission was simple. Get her crew home. However, given the hostile aliens and forces Voyager would encounter over the next seven years, Captain Janeway occasionally had to make decisions most Starfleet personnel never were faced with. In retrospect, we can point out every violation but in the situations Captain Janeway faced, it was necessary to make a decision quickly. Wasting time would have put her crew at risk and above all, including one's ship, a captain must put her crew first."

Janeway eyed Louvois carefully. The admiral seemed intent on T'Sai's every word, her dark eyes following the Vulcan woman around the room.

"During Captain Janeway's time in the Delta Quadrant and later in 'bubble space' -" T'Sai winced visibly at the unscientific term - "she consistently acted in the best interests of her crew. This much, I believe, we can all acknowledge." T'Sai glanced around the courtroom, as if daring all present to contradict her. Janeway noted that Louvois shifted in her seat and not for the first time, Kathryn wondered if the verdict had already been decided.

"When possible, Captain Janeway obeyed the Prime Directive to the best of her ability. I believe the evidence will show that there were several times when Janeway left a crewmember's fate in jeopardy in order to avoid violating the laws of the world Voyager orbited. You will also learn that Captain Janeway avoided violating territorial disputes when possible and used her full authority as a Starfleet captain to negotiate treaties that were both beneficial to Voyager as well as the other party."

At this last statement, Louvois sat up a bit straighter. Janeway noted the movement with a sense of trepidation. Janeway squared her shoulders, hoping she appeared outwardly calm, despite the fact her stomach was churning. It was with some irony that Janeway recalled that not even her negotiations with the Kazon had been able to disturb her to this extent.

"When in uncharted territory, it is impossible to predict every outcome. I believe the hearings regarding the actions of Kathryn Janeway during her time in the Delta Quadrant will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that she acted in ways only beneficial to her crew and to Starfleet. You will see the evidence in front of you, ma'am," T'Sai said, her voice cracking just a little, much to Janeway's surprise. "Kathryn Janeway is an intelligent, highly-regarded officer and her command decisions brought Voyager home. How can we penalize her for that now, given the triumph of her return? It would be an illogical conclusion to a journey rooted in a firm logic. Thank you."

T'Sai took her seat and Janeway took the opportunity to lean over to compliment the woman on her opening statement. T'Sai acknowledged Janeway's gratitude with a simple nod of her head and turned her attention back to the front of the room as Commander Shelrak took the podium.

"When it comes to Kathryn Janeway, it is impossible to know where to start," Commander Shelrak said. His little round eyes focused directly on Louvois. "I believe we have listed the most egregious of the charges. From our perspective, it is easy to applaud Kathryn Janeway as a hero. After all, she has fulfilled Starfleet's mission. She has gone where no one has gone before and yes, it is true that she has brought back quantities of scientific data which will be of great value to the Federation for the years to come."

"At least they acknowledge that," Janeway muttered under her breath. Next to her, Evans scowled while T'Sai appeared not to have heard her comment.

"However, even just a few of these charges are enough to permanently discharge any Starfleet officer," Shelrak continued. "Aiding and abetting a hostile power? Genocide? Dereliction of duty? Attempted murder? Sirs, this is only a sampling of the charges against Kathryn Janeway and we ourselves would be derelict in our responsibilities if we overlooked even a single instance where Janeway violated those tenets most sacred to Starfleet. I have no doubt that Commander T'Sai has prepared a logical explanation for each of these transgressions." The scorn in Shelrak's voice startled Janeway. "I ask all of you to listen to the facts as I present them. I believe, when you have a complete picture of what happened in the Delta Quadrant, you will be able to separate myth from fact. Yes, we cannot disregard the triumph of Kathryn Janeway's homecoming, but I ask you also not to overlook the her blatant disregard for the values held most dear to this institution. Thank you."

Janeway heaved a sigh of relief as Shelrak took his seat. Louvois glanced up from her PADD; it had not gone unnoticed that she had spent the majority of the time while Shelrak was speaking jotting down notes. In fact, Janeway had been faintly surprised to note that Louvois had been more interested in Shelrak's statement than in T'Sai's.

"Thank you, counselors," Louvois said. Her voice was gravelly and she paused to sip some water before continuing. "Commander Shelrak, you may call your first witness."

Shelrak rose and looked meaningfully at Janeway.

"I call Mr. Chakotay to the stand," he said.

Janeway blinked. She had known that Shelrak could call any of her crew to the stand at any time, but she hadn't expected Chakotay to be his first choice. The doors in the back of the room opened and Janeway willed herself not to turn and look. As Chakotay passed her, she deliberately averted her gaze.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" Louvois asked as Chakotay slipped into the stand.

"I do," Chakotay responded in a firm, clear voice. He stared directly at Janeway and this time she couldn't turn away. She pressed her lips into the thinnest smile possible, hoping he knew that she had already forgiven him.

The last time Tom had stood in his father's office was just a few hours after he had revealed the truth about what really happened at Caldik Prime. To say the meeting had been uncomfortable would be an understatement of gigantic proportions; it was then Tom had dismissed all possibilities of ever having a mature relationship with his father - the gulf between them had grown too large.

Now, almost ten years later, Tom still felt slightly awkward in his father's office, despite their cordial meeting aboard Voyager eight months ago. At that time, Tom had been flushed with the joy of becoming a new father, absolutely enthralled by his new daughter, and the depth of those feelings startled him; he had been able to, even briefly, look at his father in a new way. Later, in bubble space, Tom had occasionally pondered what his relationship with his father would be like when Voyager finally returned to the Alpha Quadrant. And it occurred to Tom that now that he was a father himself, he very much wanted to mend things with his own father.

Now, Tom Paris glanced at his father, who remained seated behind his desk. In a way, Tom felt like an adolescent again waiting for a reprimand.

"Good morning, sir," Tom said awkwardly. Owen Paris nodded towards the chairs in front of his desk.

"Good to see you, son," Owen said. "Please, have a seat."

The formality in Owen's voice surprised Tom; back on Voyager, Owen had been warm and even loving. In those hurried meetings, there had been no distance between them.

"Thanks." Tom sat down. "How are you?"

"Good." Owen pressed the tips of his fingers together. "And you? How is the baby? B'Elanna?"

"Fine, both of them."

"Glad to hear it." Owen shuffled some papers around on his desk, knocking a PADD onto the floor. The entire time, he seemed intent on not making eye contact with his son. Finally, he tipped his fingers together and looked up. "It's good to have you back, Tom."

Tom swallowed hard. His father sounded sincere enough.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I'm glad to be home." To his surprise, Tom realized that he was truly happy to be back.

"You've done well," Owen continued, his voice cracking ever so slightly. He shifted in his chair. "Kathryn spoke well of your achievements."

Tom cleared his throat. "Thank you, sir. It means a lot to me to hear you say that."

Owen Paris regard his son closely and then leaned forward, his temporary awkwardness gone. "Lieutenant Despere said you had something to discuss with me."

Tom inhaled deeply. "I'm concerned about what's going on and so is B'Elanna. I thought you might be able to shed some light on what's happening to us."

"I'll do my best."

Tom leaned forward, heartened by his father's words. "What's going to happen to Captain Janeway?"

"Well." Owen Paris leaned back in his chair. "I assure you, Kathryn has competent counsel. I'm sure you remember Commander T'Sai?"

Tom nodded, recalling the tall, stately Vulcan who had often visited the Paris home for one reason or another. "Yes, of course."

"So, as you can see, I have chosen the best possible lawyer for Kathryn. You do not need to worry about her defense."

"It bothers me that everything is so secretive."

"You understand the need for discretion. The story of Voyager is one that many people are following with great interest. So for that reason, it's necessary to keep things to a small group in order to prevent the spread of even more rumors. Tom, I assure you, Starfleet is only interested in making sure the true facts about certain situations come out."

"Sounds like a fact-finding mission to me."

"Yes, exactly."

Tom was relieved. "I thought it was more serious, given what Lieutenant Despere had to say about the former Equinox crew-"

"Just because Charles Despere assisted in the preparation of Starfleet's case doesn't mean your friend is a reliable source of information," Owen said sharply. He pushed back in his chair, the legs scrapping against the floor loudly. "Don't listen to rumors, Tom, however well-meaning the source is."

Tom flushed at his father's words, recalling how many times his father had been able to reduce him with mere words. How could he have forgotten how cool and distant his father could be on occasion?

"I'll keep that in mind," Tom said slowly.

"Anything else? I imagine you're curious about your own upcoming hearing."

"Actually-" Tom tipped his head to the side - "I haven't thought about it that much." This was true; B'Elanna had spent enough time worrying for the both of them. Tom had regarded his fate with a curious disinterest, trying to tame B'Elanna's concerns with his self-deprecating humor. As long as he, B'Elanna and Miral stayed together, nothing else mattered much to him at this point. "I assume it's a mere formality?"

"I can't promise that. You understand things have changed," Owen said. "I know what Kathryn promised you-"

Tom held up a hand. "You don't have to explain. I'm fine. Whatever happens."

"Understand I'll do whatever I can."

"I'm fine." Tom grinned. "Trust me."

Owen Paris looked noticeably relieved. "Well, then. Did you have something else?"

"Um, yes. About being confined to quarters..."

"Well, yes." Owen shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "'Confined' is a little bit of an exaggeration, but in the interests of security and confidentiality, Starfleet felt it to be the best course of action that all of Voyager's crew remain in the North Compound until further notice."

"In the interests of security and confidentiality?" Tom asked incredulously. Amelie had said much the same thing, but hearing it from his father gave the words additional weight. "What does Starfleet expect from us? We're not criminals, contrary to popular belief."

"No, no, you're not." Owen's face softened a little. "Don't think I'm not sympathetic, Tom. The last thing I want is for my granddaughter to be cooped up in a small, musty room. I did fight the order as best as I could, but you have to understand. The situation has become increasingly political and I've been choosing the battles I can win without losing face."

Tom bristled at his father's words. "Without losing face? That's what's most important to you?"

"Tom, I can't help you if I fight the small battles," Owen said. "Eventually, the powers that be will band against me and my opinion will have no weight whatsoever. I'm doing the best I can for Kathryn, for all of you. You have my word."

"I still resent the fact that we're being treated like criminals."

"Understandable."

"If we'd known this was the type of homecoming we'd get, we would have stayed in the Delta Quadrant or even bubble space."

"Like I said, son, I'm doing my best for you and the others. You do know that Starfleet has an obligation to treat all of its officers with respect and courtesy during confinement and I'm going to do my damndest to make sure that happens."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir," Tom said sincerely. He had no doubt that his father was being truthful on this point at least; the passion in Owen Paris' voice assured him of that. "Thank you."

"Anything else?"

"About the Maquis...?"

"No decision has been reached on their status," Owen said shortly. "Tom, I don't want you to feel I'm withholding information from you-"

"I have to know," Tom interjected. Owen nodded.

"This is a stressful situation for all of us-"

"You don't have to tell me that, sir. If you know anything at all..."

"On the Maquis, I do not know. I'm being honest with you." Owen sighed. "Tom, there is something that I do know, and I'm glad you came today as we have a matter of great importance to discuss."

Tom straightened. His father appeared even more uncomfortable now than he had at the beginning of the meeting. Tom knew - could feel it in every inch of his body - that what would come next would not be good news.

Marla Gilmore licked her lips; she'd helped herself to a glass of water prior to taking the stand, but still, her mouth felt chalky. She swallowed hard again as she focused her gaze on Noah; the left corner of his mouth quirked up and she felt slightly better. She only wished that the constant lurching in her stomach would cease.

"You are Marla Gilmore?" Commander Hileya stared at her with his beady black eyes. Marla nodded. "You must speak your answers out-loud for the record."

"Yes, sir," Gilmore responded. She kept her voice even and steady, as her lawyer, Commander Maria Pachano, had advised. Hileya, an Andorian, tended to be rather crisp and curt in his questions, Pachano had said; he liked to keep the pace brisk, a tactic designed to keep each member of the Equinox crew slightly off-balance. Noah had testified well though and Gilmore had been proud of his performance. She only hoped she could do as well.

"And your current rank is crewman?" Hileya asked.

"Yes, sir." Marla could still remember the shame of being stripped of her rank. That day, Gilmore knew that all of her aspirations in Starfleet were gone; Janeway's wrath had been such that Marla had known, despite at their good behavior, it would be next to impossible to attain a position of any respect on Voyager. Chakotay had been more forgiving, but in the nearly three years Gilmore had served aboard Voyager, Janeway had rarely taken notice of their presence.

"You are currently assigned to the USS Voyager?" Hileya barked.

"Yes, sir."

"And previous to that, you were assigned to the USS Equinox, under the command of Captain Rudolph Ransom?"

"That's right, yes, sir," Gilmore said. She took a deep breath, hoping her anxiety wasn't too apparent. She also wanted to be sure that while she answered Hileya's questions completely - keeping information back from him would not serve her or her friends - she also wanted to make sure she didn't give too much information. As Pachano had said earlier, "Just answer the question and then shut up." It was good advice and Marla intended to follow it.

"You were assigned to the USS Equinox after graduation from the Academy?"

"Yes, sir." Easy questions, Gilmore thought, but she knew eventually, it would get harder and that Hileya would start asking about the events which still disturbed Gilmore's sleep on occasion. Even after all of this time, what happened on board the Equinox still had the power to rile Gilmore's conscience.

"You were assigned to Engineering."

"Yes, sir."

"Please explain the circumstances under which you ended up in the Delta Quadrant."

Gilmore nodded. This question she knew she could answer with emotional detachment and for that, she was grateful.

"Our story is similar to that of Voyager's," Gilmore said quietly. "The Equinox was a science vessel and we had been assigned to collect data in an area near the Badlands. However, a storm blew us off course and disabled our sensor readings. As we drifted through the Badlands, an entity known as the Caretaker pulled us into the Delta Quadrant."

"Where you assumed you were the only human beings until Voyager contacted you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long were you in the Delta Quadrant before Voyager contacted you?"

"About seven years," Gilmore said softly. Seven long and dark years filled with unspeakable horrors.

"While you were in the Delta Quadrant, you participated in some experiments, is that true?" Hileya approached the stand, his dark eyes gleaming with anticipation. In reaction, Gilmore straightened. She refused to give the Andorian lawyer the pleasure of seeing her squirm.

"Yes, sir, under the order of my commanding officer, I did."

"And did these orders include the taking of life of a sentient species?"

Gilmore winced. "Yes, sir, they did."

"And you participated willingly, Crewman?"

"Under the orders of my superior officer, I did as I was told."

Hileya was now only inches away from Gilmore. "Even if the Starfleet codes specifically prohibit the murder of any being, humanoid or otherwise?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you were also responsible for modifying the warp core which made it possible to use the remains of -" Hileya hesitated - "Species 6291."

"Yes." This time, Gilmore didn't bother to add the honorific title. She didn't trust herself to keep her voice steady for much longer and she could tell that Brian and the others were looking away from her.

"That's all I have for this witness." Hileya threw a disdainful look in Gilmore's direction and marched back to his seat. Maria Pachano stood up, her expression warm and respectful; for that, Gilmore was immensely grateful.

"Crewman Gilmore, you say you were in the Delta Quadrant for seven years prior to meeting up with Voyager?" Pachano queried.

"That's correct," Gilmore said.

"And what was it like when you first arrived in the Delta Quadrant?"

"We were confused at first," Gilmore said. "It seemed inconceivable that we could be thrown so far. Some of the crew had left children behind and all of us had families and friends. It was a very difficult time."

"You also ran into the Krowtonan guard at that time, didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, the first week. Thirty-nine dead. That was half -" Gilmore swallowed - "of our crew." She had a dim memory of bodies everywhere and of touching a friend, her hands coming away soaked in blood. "I was grateful to be alive, but stunned at what had happened to us."

"You were seventy thousand light years away from home," Pachano said gently. "And had lost half your crew in the first week. How did you feel?"

"Scared." Gilmore's voice trembled slightly and she dared not to look at Noah and the others. At this point, she didn't care if they thought she was weak; for once, she was being honest about what had happened aboard that ship. "I didn't think we'd make it. Rudy - Captain Ransom, he had faith. We would uphold the Starfleet mission, we would be explorers, make great scientific discoveries. So, we did rally for a time."

"You liked the idea of being the first to explore the Delta Quadrant?"

"Yes, ma'am, we liked that idea." Gilmore smiled. "There were challenges and we looked forward to them. We were science officers, after all. But after the first couple years, we found that getting by on exploration alone was not possible."

"Why is that?" Pachano asked.

"The Equinox was a Nova-class ship. We had minimal weapons and no resources to make more really. Top speed was warp eight, on a good day. Half the time though, we were too battered to actually make it much past warp five. We spent a lot of time hiding in nebulas while we did our best to hold the ship together." Gilmore shook her head. "I still don't know how we did it. Some times, it was a miracle that we even survived those first two years."

"Tell me about Species 6291." Like Hileya, Pachano chose to refer to these nucleogenic creatures by their Borg designation. "You found out about them on the Ankari homeworld."

"Yes, ma'am, we did. We had entered orbit around Ankari. We had absolutely no dilithium left, no food, and unfortunately, I had done all I could to hold the ship together. We were in bad shape. The Ankari were friendly enough and treated us to a little show - starring Species 6291. The Ankari referred to them as 'messengers.'" Gilmore shook her head. "We traded technology and summoned one of these creatures into our science lab, but something went wrong. The creature refused to be contained and eventually, it died trying to break through the barrier."

"So that's when you found out that its corpse could be transformed into an antimatter substance that could send you ten thousand light years in less than two weeks?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How did you feel when you converted the corpse into energy?"

"Horrible, absolutely horrible," Gilmore said. She directed this last comment in Hileya's direction. "A part of me could not believe what I was doing, but we were so desperate at this point. I hate to say it, but I don't think there was much I would have said no to then. I wanted to get home, I wanted to live -" her voice cracked - "I know what I did was wrong, but if you were there, under the conditions we were, you would have done the same thing."

"Thank you, Crewman." Pachano glanced at the admiral presiding over the hearing. "I appreciate your candor. That's all I have."

Hileya jumped up from his seat and walked forward purposefully.

"You continued to hunt this Species 6291 even though you knew you were committing a heinous crime," Hileya challenged.

"Yes, sir." Gilmore raised her chin defiantly. "I explained the circumstances-"

"Did you search for alternative methods?"

"Well, in the beginning -"

"You're an engineer, Miss Gilmore. I find it hard to believe you could not find an alternative fuel source," Hileya continued. "You obviously possessed the capability of modifying the warp core, so why not find a way to modify an existing inorganic fuel to power the ship?"

"We tried many things-"

"And you gave up when you discovered Species 6291."

Gilmore bit her lip. At the time, despite their reservations and the fact the crew felt morally sick over what they were doing, yes, they had given up on finding alternative sources of fuel.

"Yes, sir," Gilmore responded. She glanced at Noah and saw he had covered his face with his hands. I'm so sorry, Gilmore thought as she looked at all over her friends. She knew she had at least damned herself, not to mention the others.

"So you took the easy way out," Hileya commented.

She had no choice but to agree.

"Tell me, Miss Gilmore," Hileya said, "the exact proportions of compound generated versus increase in warp drive efficiency."

"Ten isograms provided us with a .03 percent increase," Marla admitted. "We were able to travel an additional ten thousand light-years with each increase."

"So you killed one, extracted the compound, and when that ran out, you killed another?"

"Yes," Marla's voice was barely above a whisper.

Hileya turned to the judge and nodded.

"I'm finished here," he said with a sneer. "No more questions."

Gilmore looked at Pachano, willing her lawyer to stand up and ask something that would dull the impact of Hileya's questioning, but Pachano remained seated. Finally, the judge leaned over.

"Crewman Gilmore, you are dismissed. Please take your seat."

When she stood up, her legs felt weak, but somehow, Marla Gilmore managed to make it to her chair without incident.

Chakotay did not dare to look at Kathryn.

At first, the questions Shelrak posed to him were relatively innocent; they went over the rudimentary information such as name, rank, history, and some other basics. These were the easy questions, the ones Chakotay knew he could answer without seriously harming his friend. However, he knew that Shelrak would not let him off so easily.

"Commander Chakotay, is it true you objected when Janeway agreed to a truce with the Borg?" Shelrak asked. The man stood directly in front of Chakotay, his reptilian head bobbing. The ventilator edging Shelrak's lips hissed, causing his breath to come out in rasps. After inhaling the methane mixture, the rasping noises ceased.

"Yes," Chakotay said shortly. He had gone over his testimony with T'Sai the day before and she had advised him to simply answer the question and not provide any additional details, unless specifically asked.

"Explain why you didn't support your captain." Shelrak clasped his hands together in front of him.

Chakotay frowned. "As her first officer, it was my responsibility to give her my opinion when the situation warranted. I did that."

"So you specifically recommended not forming an alliance and Janeway disregarded your advice?"

"She was the captain and she made the decision she felt was best at the time."

Shelrak advanced towards the stand. "Even though technically, she was aiding and abetting a hostile power in violation of Starfleet General Orders?"

"I believe, with all due respect, sir, that General Order number eleven gives a captain the right to negotiate a treaty with any entity, if the action will save the lives of her crew," Chakotay said carefully.

"Even if the Federation is involved in an undeclared state of war with the Borg?" Shelrak asked, his beady eyes gleaming as he neared Chakotay.

"Captain Janeway took the well-being of her crew into consideration above everything else. Given the circumstances, she didn't have much other choice," Chakotay answered. He knit his fingers

together to stop the trembling in his hands. As he looked up, he saw Janeway watching him, her eyes filled with the familiar compassion.

"If I recall correctly, Mr. Chakotay, your logs specifically mention an alternative solution. You proposed settling on an M-class planet, did you not?" Shelrak asked.

Chakotay shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Yes."

"You could have also gone around Borg territory, couldn't you, and avoided this Species 8472?"

"Yes."

"So by venturing into this Northwest Passage, Captain Janeway was deliberately putting her crew at risk-"

"Objection." T'Sai rose to her feet. "The Commander is making a statement about my client without basis. I do not hear a question."

Shelrak glared at T'Sai and then looked up at Louvois. Louvois nodded.

"Objection sustained. Commander, you are welcome to rephrase as a question to the witness," Louvois said. Shelrak sighed audibly.

"Mr. Chakotay, isn't it true by going through the so-called Northwest Passage, Voyager's crew would have faced many risks?"

"Yes," Chakotay said. He bit his lip as he looked at Janeway. At this point, his friend seemed intent on her fingernails and Chakotay figured it was for the best. He had no desire to see the expression on her face as he answered these vaguely condescending questions.

"Which, I'm sure you'll agree, is a violation of General Order Seventeen."

"Objection." This time T'Sai spoke from her seat and her voice was calm, but carried through the room with strength. "Commander Shelrak should refrain from making such inflammatory statements which are not based in fact, merely opinion. Such comments are without merit."

"I agree." Louvois glared at Shelrak. "Behave yourself, Commander. You have been in my courtroom before and you should know by now I have no patience for such tactics."

"Yes, your honor," Shelrak said meekly, but Chakotay was not fooled; he sensed that Shelrak was after blood, specifically Kathryn's.

"Resume your questioning."

"Was there a reason why you chose to go through this part of space, even knowing the dangers which lay ahead of you?" Shelrak asked. Chakotay nodded, unable to speak; his throat felt dry and scratchy.

"You must answer the question out-loud," Louvois reminded Chakotay.

"Yes," Chakotay said. "Kathryn is very principled and she had promised to get the crew home. Settling in the Delta Quadrant was not an option."

"So she was willing to risk her crew's lives?" Shelrak asked, a note of incredulity slipping into his voice. He glanced back at Janeway and Chakotay was proud to see that Kathryn did not flinch beneath the lawyer's steady glare.

"It was a calculated risk," Chakotay said. "She thought it out very carefully."

"But despite this 'careful thinking,' she still made a tactical mistake, didn't she? She entered into a negotiation without having all of the facts."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're saying," Chakotay said. Actually, he knew exactly where Shelrak was going and he was hoping T'Sai would mount an objection to this line of questioning; unfortunately, the Vulcan remained seated.

"In your own words, please tell the court what you learned about the Borg and Species 8472."

Chakotay cleared his throat. "I discovered that the Borg had lied to us."

"In what way?" Shelrak advanced towards the stand.

"They were the ones who had started the war with Species 8472."

"So by entering into a treaty with them, you actually made it possible for them to perpetuate this war?"

Chakotay swallowed hard. The lump in his throat was almost painful.

"Depends how you look at it," Chakotay said. He didn't dare to look at Kathryn now. Please forgive me, he thought.

"In your opinion, did Voyager aid and abet a hostile power? One with whom the Federation has been in a state of undeclared war for years?" Shelrak's voice was unusually crisp.

"Unknowingly."

"Is it your opinion that Kathryn Janeway was remiss in fully researching the circumstances surrounding the situation before entering this treaty?"

T'Sai got up and her sigh was audible. "Once again, Commander Shelrak is stating an opinion, disguised in the form of a question. I request that it be struck from the record."

Louvois frowned. "I disagree, Counselor, and I'd like to hear the answer. Mr. Chakotay?"

"We had information-"

"What kind of information? What was the source of the information?" Shelrak barked.

"The bodies of the dead Borg, to begin with," Chakotay said. He kept his voice low, hoping the panel of peers directly to his right would not hear him. No such luck; Louvois asked him to speak up.

"Anything else that would contribute to this decision?" Shelrak queried.

Chakotay glanced at Kathryn. She tipped her head slightly to the side.

"One of our crew members, Kes, she experienced a telepathic vision in which she received a message. 'The weak shall perish.'"

"So on the basis of these two pieces of information, Captain Janeway decided to form an alliance with the Borg?"

"Yes." Chakotay glanced briefly down at his hands. Damn, it had been hard to utter that one syllable. When he looked back up, he saw Shelrak consulting his notes. Irritation filled every cell of his body as he watched the prosecutor inhale from his ventilator before turning back to the stand.

"Moving on," Shelrak said briskly. Chakotay relaxed. He knew he had gotten off relatively easy in this case, as there were more damning questions Shelrak could ask. In a way, the omission of more pointed questions was almost suspicious in itself. "In reviewing your logs, Mr. Chakotay, I noticed a mention of passing through an area of dead space. How long were you in this particular area?"

"About three months," Chakotay said. He remembered every dull moment of that time too; the crew had fallen into such a redundant routine with each day resembling the one before it with frightening accuracy. There were times when Chakotay felt as if he were caught up in a perpetual sense of *deja vue*. Mentally, those three months had been among the toughest during their time the Delta Quadrant.

"I believe you took command of the ship during that time?" Shelrak asked pleasantly enough.

"No, I did not," Chakotay said. "The Captain always maintained command of the ship."

"I'm confused then," Shelrak said. "Your logs specifically mention that the Captain remained in seclusion for most of the time you were traveling through dead space."

"They may, I don't remember," Chakotay answered neutrally. Shelrak dropped off a PADD in front of T'Sai and then held one up for Chakotay to see.

"Maybe this will refresh your memory," Shelrak said. "Is this your log?"

Chakotay scanned the PADD reluctantly. "Yes, it is."

"In your log, you said specifically that the Captain had not left her quarters for nine days. Is this true?"

"It could be," Chakotay said. "But I assure you, nothing happened on that ship without the Captain's knowledge or approval."

"Despite the fact she did not appear on the Bridge at all during that time?"

"It was not necessary," Chakotay said firmly. "The situation was such that if the Captain needed to keep to herself, this was the ideal time for that. There was nothing of scientific interest nor did we encounter any other alien species. If either circumstance had arisen, I assure you, Captain Janeway would have dealt with the situation herself."

"So you took over the running of the ship during this time?"

"I wouldn't say that. I consulted with Janeway every day."

"How often?"

Chakotay considered. Breakfast mostly, if he recalled correctly. The meetings would consist of Kathryn huddled over coffee while he spoke. She would barely acknowledge his presence and then he would go, knowing that she hadn't heard a word he had said. At the time, he had been alternately infuriated and concerned about Kathryn; she had never withdrawn so much into herself before. But he refused to let Shelrak and the others know exactly how difficult that time had been on him.

"I saw her at least once a day," Chakotay said finally.

"And once a day was sufficient for the Captain to understand all of the operations of her ship?"

"There was not much going on." Chakotay's voice took on an edge.

"In one of your logs, you comment that the Captain seemed to have lost interest in her ship. Is this a true statement?"

"I don't recall saying that."

"Perhaps you'd like to review your logs yourself?" Shelrak asked in a voice dripping with scorn. He handed a PADD to Chakotay. "Are these yours, Mr. Chakotay?"

"Yes," Chakotay said, his voice barely above a whisper. He cursed himself now for being so damned honest in his logs. But spirits, he had been so alone during that time; his closet friend had locked herself in her quarters and B'Elanna had seemed perpetually on edge the entire time, her temper flaring at the slightly provocation. His only outlet had been his logs and if he had only known that Starfleet would use his comments against Janeway, he would have restrained himself. "But you're taking it out of context. If you read my logs again, you'll see that I said that the Captain seemed to settle into boredom, like everyone else on board, and that it was hard to take interest in anything at all."

"I imagine you're right," Shelrak said, albeit a bit reluctantly. Chakotay felt a small sense of triumph at the lawyer's discomfort. Not enough of a win to give Kathryn the upper hand, Chakotay knew, but it was a small point in her favor and for that, he was grateful. "But I still find it hard to believe a captain would lock herself in her quarters for nine straight days. To me, that sounds like a clear sign of dereliction of duty."

"Objection." T'Sai sounded slightly bored, as if she too had traveled through dead space. "I do not hear a question."

"Agreed. You've been warned," Louvois said. "Ask a question, Commander and please refrain from making gratuitous comments."

Shelrak nodded. "My apologies, your honor. I believe, I'm concluded with this witness at this time."

Chakotay blinked. That was all? Though, he supposed he ought to be grateful that Shelrak was letting him off relatively easily.

"We'll break for fifteen minutes," Louvois announced. "When we return, Commander T'Sai, you will have the opportunity to cross-examine this witness."

T'Sai nodded and turned her attention back to her PADD. Chakotay, heaved a sigh of relief; no doubt, T'Sai's examination would redeem Kathryn. He had no doubt of it. It was only a question of time.

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