

"TANGLED WEB PART TWO"

Captain Kathryn Janeway sighed, rubbing her eyes in boredom. Sure, being captain of *Voyager* could be exciting. After all, they were patrolling the Gamma Quadrant, trying desperately to stay one step ahead of the Dominion. *Voyager* was the perfect ship for the job. Small, agile, and fast, she could fly circles around most ships. Not only that, but *Voyager's* crew knew how to hold their own in a fight. Janeway had lost track of the skirmishes they had been in, sabotaging immense battle plans and stealthily taking out key Dominion facilities. Times like that were exhilarating.

Unfortunately, they hadn't seen much excitement over the past few weeks. They had been ducking and diving through systems throughout the Gamma Quadrant, trying to survey the Dominion's forces. No such luck. Whatever Emperor Palpatine had up his sleeve, they hadn't found it yet.

For a split second, Janeway wished she was back home with her fiance, Jack. How long had it been? Two years? Three? She smiled wistfully. It seemed like only yesterday when she had been given command of *Voyager*. Their first assignment had seemed relatively easy. A band of rogue Maquis, led by the infamous mercenary Kyle Katarn, had gone into the Gamma Quadrant to cause trouble for the Dominion. *Voyager* had been sent to retrieve them quietly.

Instead, *Voyager* found the Maquis in the midst of a horrendous battle, taking on a massive Dominion fleet by themselves. Rather than run from the fight, Janeway joined the fray. For a while, it didn't look like anyone would survive, but Katarn sacrificed his ship to save them all. Because of that, Janeway agreed to take on Katarn and his minions on as part of her crew.

Unfortunately, in the confusion after the battle, *Voyager* was reported as destroyed. Eventually, however, Starfleet Intelligence realized that the reports of the ship's demise were unfounded, but they decided to use it to their advantage. *Voyager* was officially gone, and yet she hid in the Gamma Quadrant, watching the Dominion carefully. The only contact they had with home was official, emergency messages to Starfleet when the Dominion was on the move. For all practical purposes, they might as well have been on the other side of the galaxy in the Delta Quadrant.

Janeway turned when she heard the turbolift door hiss open. Kyle Katarn stepped on to the bridge, sweeping the bridge with his cold blue eyes. Janeway knew that most of the female crew members found her second-in-command to be a dashing, handsome rogue, and to be honest, there were times when she did too. Unfortunately, his good looks were somewhat fouled with a rebellious streak. He had no real love for the United Republic when he signed on to *Voyager*. That was understandable. He, at one time, was a soldier for the Dominion. While he was training, he received official word from his superiors that his entire family had been killed by Klingons. Because of that, Katarn hated the Klingons and their allies, the United Republic. Years later, Katarn learned the truth, that his family had been killed by Dominion troops. Disillusioned, he left the Dominion, but since he still didn't trust the United Republic entirely, he joined the Maquis.

Katarn smiled at Janeway pleasantly. "Quiet shift?"

Janeway gave him a half-grin and replied, "Just like yesterday's. No sign of any major threats....nothing serious, anyway. Long range scanners picked up what looked like a Super Star Destroyer about three hours ago, but it turned out to be a sensor echo."

Katarn collapsed in his chair.

"Thank the elements for that," Katarn commented. "After that skirmish we had with the three Victory class Star Destroyers last month, I don't think we need to face a Super for a while."

Janeway nodded and rose wearily. "You have the bridge."

With that, Janeway stalked over to the turbolift. As the doors opened, a young woman dashed through and took her place at the CONN. Katarn shot a half amused look at Janeway, who simply rolled her eyes and entered the lift.

"Glad you could make it, Lieutenant Ors," Kyle chided.

Jan Ors, the helm officer, turned around and smiled sheepishly. Her brown eyes sparkled slightly as she pulled her brown hair into a tight ponytail.

"Sorry, Kyle," she replied. "My, uh....replicator was on the fritz, and I...."

Jan's voice trailed off when she saw the look Kyle gave her. He wasn't buying her excuse for a second. She blushed, shooting a furtive glance towards the OPS station. That was all Kyle had to see. With a sadistic grin, the first officer pulled himself out of the chair and slowly crossed over to the CONN. Jan had already begun squirming in her chair, aware of what Kyle was about to say.

"So, how's Harry?" Kyle whispered.

Jan reddened at the mention of the chief science officer. Although Jan and Harry had tried to keep their romance under wraps, they had failed miserably. Everyone on the ship knew. As a matter of fact, Kyle was the first to know. He had worked with Jan in the Alpha Quadrant for years and had come to know her moods and expressions. It didn't take a genius to realize that the CONN and OPS officers were "together" when they both came onto the bridge one morning six months ago, smiling coyly at each other. It was like an open invitation for Kyle to start teasing Jan.

"He's just fine," Jan shot back quietly, turning back to her console. She busied herself with reviewing the ship's log and current orders, trying to appear professional. "Still proceeding toward Dorrn VII at warp six."

"And the fake transponder codes?" Kyle asked apprehensively.

Jan glanced over the controls and nodded. "Still operating within acceptable parameters."

Kyle let out a relieved sigh. There was a trading post on Dorrn VII whose citizens sympathized with the United Republic. *Voyager* had a series of contacts there who would sneak supplies to them as needed. More than once, the people of Dorrn VII had saved their collective butts. There was one minor drawback, however. Dorrn VII was close to Coruscant, the seat of the Dominion's power and where Emperor Palpatine spent most of his time. Because of this, there was always a concentration of Dominion ships in the area. Every time *Voyager* went to Dorrn VII, they had to change their transponder signal to make their ship appear to be a Tallaxian freighter. True, if a Dominion ship got close enough, they would be able to tell the difference, but on long range sensors, the change worked wonderfully.

"All right," Kyle replied, patting Jan's back carefully. "Steady as she goes, warp five."

"I'll give us a smooth ride," Jan replied, turning back to the viewscreen.

The smell of spices from countless Gamma Quadrant worlds washed over Janeway as she stepped into the mess hall. She couldn't help but smile. That smell had worked its way into the carpet, the walls, into the very being of the room. Even if Janeway turned it back into the senior staff's wardroom, as it had been originally, it would still smell like Neelix's cooking. The smell was accompanied by the occasional clatter of utensils against pots, the hearty chattering of crew members, and what sounded like Corellian opera in the background.

In the midst of the "chaos" was Neelix, the Tallaxian cook. Actually, Janeway reflected, he was more than just a cook. Neelix was originally from the Delta Quadrant, but he had hitched rides on Dominion transports into the Gamma Quadrant. Once there, he eked out a meager existence as a junk trader. Then *Voyager* found him. Although it was against her better judgment, Janeway allowed Neelix to join her crew. He proved to be invaluable. Neelix had contacts throughout the

Quadrant, knew where they could find hard to get resources, and his cooking wasn't half bad. A little spicy at times, but the entire crew was beginning to adjust to it. As a matter of fact, not only was Neelix the one who set up the arrangement with the government of Dorran VII, he was also the one who put together the fake transponder codes.

The alien cook smiled at Janeway and motioned for her to come over to the counter. "Good evening, Captain! What can I get for you tonight? I have some absolutely delightful Endorian water gourds. Positively scrumptious!"

"Maybe another time, Neelix," Janeway said, holding up a hand to keep Neelix from cutting her a big slice. "Just some tea."

Neelix smiled and poured her a cup. Janeway took a sip and forced it down her throat. As talented as Neelix was, he still couldn't make tea properly. She turned from the counter and surveyed the crew. A wistful smile crept to her lips. True, she had served on more prestigious ships than *Voyager* but this had to be the tightest crew with which she had ever served. The isolation did that to them. They were forced to work together, with little hope of transfer or promotion, yet they were like one big family. They all agreed that the Dominion was evil. They all knew what would happen if the Emperor's forces overran the Alpha Quadrant. Everyone on the crew knew that they were in a struggle for their very freedom, and they were all determined to stick together and fight until they couldn't anymore. Maybe, someday, they would be able to go home.

Janeway took another sip of her tea, grimacing slightly at the pungent flavor. She quickly took a step away from the counter so Neelix wouldn't see her expression. The Tallaxian tended to be a little sensitive about his cooking.

"I take it the tea should be avoided?" a calm voice asked.

Janeway jumped, startled, and whirled around to see Tuvok standing behind her. The Vulcan security officer raised a quizzical brow at her, his face devoid of expression. Tuvok's race was a curious one. Developing on one of the twin desert planets of the Vulcan-Tatooine system, the Vulcans, after a long and bloody history, tried to abandon emotions and embraced logic. They became the most intelligent and stoic race in the galaxy. As the Vulcans reached out in their own planetary system, they had encountered the natural inhabitants of Tatooine, the Jawas and the Tusks. The Jawas, while clever technically, were a cowardly race. The Tusks, while brave and daring, tended to be ignorant and somewhat stupid. It was an odd combination of stoic intelligence, cowardly resourcefulness, and brazen stupidity, all in one planetary system. It was something that the Vulcans particularly rued.

Tuvok handed Janeway a PADD, saying, "The battle readiness report, Captain."

"Expecting trouble, Tuvok?" Janeway asked, glancing over the PADD. It was the epitome of perfection.

"Dorran VII is still under Dominion control," Tuvok pointed out. "Caution is called for."

Janeway smiled reassuringly and replied, "I know. I trust your preparations."

Tuvok was about to reply when Janeway's commbadge chirped. She tapped it with a frustrated sigh. It seemed like her work was never done.

"Janeway," she called into the empty air.

"Captain, we are receiving a priority one distress call," Kyle Katarn's disembodied voice said quickly. "It's coming from the government of Dorran VII."

Janeway exchanged a worried look with Tuvok, and they both started for the exit. As she dashed down the corridor to the turbolift, Janeway called out orders.

"Yellow alert. All senior staff to the bridge!"

As Janeway ducked out of the turbolift, Katarn relinquished her chair. He cast a grim smile in her direction.

"Long time, no see," he whispered under his breath.

Janeway waited for a second, allowing Tuvok, Harry Kim, and B'elanna Torres to take their stations.

"Are we still receiving the distress call?" Janeway asked.

"We are, Captain," Tuvok chimed in.

"On screen."

The starfield on the main viewer blinked out of existence and was replaced by a fuzzy and distorted image of a human male in his late fifties. Janeway recognized him as the governor of Dorrn VII, someone who had been secretly sneaking foodstuffs to Voyager over the past year and a half. His eyes were panicked, his face covered in grime and soot. His surroundings were just as bad. The lights were dim and flickering, smoke swirled in the office, and the sound of distant explosions echoed over the comm channel.

"...attack," the governor choked. "I repeat, we are under attack. They overwhelmed our orbital defenses in a matter of seconds, they're everywhere.....we can't stop them! Our weapons are useless!"

The explosions seemed to be getting closer and closer to the governor's office. He glanced over his shoulder for a second, then turned back desperately.

"Please! If anyone is hearing me, come help us....."

The governor was cut off as one of the walls in his office exploded inward, burning debris flying through the air. The governor threw his arms over his head, screaming in horror. There was a blur of motion in the new opening, and then the screen went blank. Janeway turned to Tuvok.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"Unknown," Tuvok replied. "The transmission was cut off at the source."

Janeway turned back and stared at the viewscreen, which once again showed the stars streaking by at warp. She had a gut feeling that something was terribly wrong on Dorrn VII. The people of that planet had risked their lives countless times to help them. Had the Emperor found out and punished them? She had to know for sure.

"Lieutenant Ors, take us to warp nine," she ordered, a hint of desperation in her voice.

"Captain, may I point out that a Tallaxian freighter can only achieve speeds of warp six?" Tuvok commented calmly. "If we accelerate, we could reveal our presence to Dominion forces."

"I'll take that chance," Janeway replied evenly. "Senior staff meeting in the conference room in five minutes."

Janeway glanced up from another PADD as Neelix entered the conference room. True, he wasn't a legitimate member of the senior staff, but she valued his opinion nonetheless. He was the expert on this region of space, after all. As Neelix took his place around the table, she turned and looked at each person, trying to exude a calmness she didn't feel. She hoped that they would catch on and remain composed as well.

"All right, people, we'll be at Dorrn VII in two hours. I want us to be ready for anything," she explained, then turned to Kim. "Anything on long range sensors yet?"

Kim shrugged and replied, "Not much. I'm not picking up any sort of interplanetary traffic or communication signals. As a matter of fact, I'm not picking up any ships in the area at all. Whoever attacked the planet seems to have left the area."

Janeway nodded, then swiveled to face Tuvok.

"Have you learned anything from the distress call?"

Tuvok nodded reservedly and called up the recording on the room's viewscreen. The frozen image of the governor appeared.

"I have enhanced the recording, taking into account the distortion and interference. I did not find much by way of new information, but there is this...."

Tuvok pressed a control in the table and the recording proceeded at normal speed.

".... is hearing me, come help us...." the governor said.

As before, the wall behind him exploded. The same blur of motion appeared in the gaping hole, sending the governor to the floor in a panic.

"Computer, freeze recording," Tuvok instructed. "Enlarge section 7-D and enhance."

The computer complied, focusing on the hole in the wall. It chattered to itself before the blur resolved itself into a distinctive shape. Janeway sucked in an involuntary breath.

"Sithspawn!" Kyle cursed under his breath.

It looked like some sort of droid, unlike any they had seen before. Whatever it was, it was menacing. It appeared to be at least as tall as a man, if not half a meter taller. Its body was streamlined, a dull gray, with a massive, flat head. Conduits ran over every square inch of its body, and its right arm appeared to be a massive weapon. A rocket pack was attached to its back. As impressive as all of that was, it wasn't the weaponry that frightened Janeway the most.

In the middle of the droid's chest was the round, target-like symbol for the Dominion. Whatever that....thing was, it had been sent by Emperor Palpatine.

"Why would the Dominion attack Dorrn VII?" Jan whispered, horrified.

Janeway glanced at Neelix, who merely opened and closed his mouth, not sure of what to say. Finally, though, the Tallaxian swallowed hard.

"I...I don't know," Neelix stammered. "So far as I know, the Emperor had no reason to suspect Dorrn VII of helping us. Whatever happened, I...."

Janeway turned to Kyle, whose face was ashen. Finally, the Maquis mercenary turned and faced his captain.

"I'll prepare a communication package for Starfleet Intelligence," Kyle said. "We'll be ready."

Voyager carefully crept through the Dorrn system, most of its power systems deactivated so it wouldn't attract attention. True, there was no sign of whoever attacked the planet, but that didn't mean that they couldn't be hiding as well. Janeway was taking no chances.

"Report," Janeway breathed, turning to OPS.

Kim tapped in several commands and drew in an anxious breath. He looked up at Janeway in shock, the color draining from his face.

"According to this.....there are no life signs on Dorrn VII. Absolutely none," Kim whispered, horrified.

Janeway whirled around to Tuvok, who merely added, "Confirmed. The Dorrn VII outpost is completely destroyed."

"There were over ten thousand people living on that planet," Janeway said, sitting down hard in her chair.

Katarn was immediately on his feet, coming around Kim's post to look over his shoulder.

"Could some of the survivors be hiding in caves that block our sensors?"

Kim shrugged and replied, "It's possible, I suppose."

Katarn was on the move again, coming back to Janeway. "Permission to beam down, Captain. Maybe we'll learn more down there."

Janeway considered it for a few seconds and then nodded. Katarn started for the turbolift.

"Harry, Tuvok, you're with me. Katarn to Doctor," he called out.

"Doctor here," a somewhat nasal voice replied.

"Meet us in transporter room three," Katarn said. He turned back and gave a crooked smile to Janeway. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

Katarn lurched forward slightly as the transporter released him in the middle of the charred rubble that was the Dorrn VII trading post. He immediately pulled out his phaser and slowly scanned the debris, ready for anything. He glanced at Tuvok, who was also cautiously checking every corner. He smiled, approving of the security officer's defensiveness. Kim and the Doctor, on the other hand, had their tricorders out and were scanning the area.

"No life signs," Harry whispered.

"I concur," the Doctor agreed.

Katarn glanced at the holographic Doctor and smiled. He was an oddity, to be sure. Most starships had a real doctor or, at the very least, a medical droid. At one time, *Voyager* had both. Unfortunately, their human doctor died and the medical droid was destroyed in the first battle *Voyager* encountered, and so the Doctor was activated. He was a holographic replacement, one that was only supposed to be used temporarily. Thanks to a mobile emitter that they had procured in a fluke temporal accident, the Doctor could move about the ship and even on away missions.

"Anything else?" Katarn whispered, hoping the Doctor would take the hint and lower his voice.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing."

Kyle pulled out his own tricorder and flipped it open. He waved it around the air and frowned at what he saw. Sure enough, there were no life signs. The only thing that the tricorder was reading were residual traces of plasma and rocket fuel, probably due to the attack by those strange droids. He sucked in a deep breath to calm his nerves.

"Let's go," he hissed.

The away team carefully picked their way through the rubble, stopping occasionally to scan anything they found out of place. It was a grisly job. Every building they encountered had been destroyed, its walls collapsed, the debris burned beyond recognition. Nothing had been spared. Something, though, was nagging at the back of Kyle's mind. Something was out of place.

"Where are all of the bodies?" Harry finally asked, confused.

That was it. That was what was missing. Ten thousand people were supposedly dead, and yet the away team had yet to find a corpse or even the hint of one. Kyle glanced at the Doctor, who merely shrugged.

"I can't explain it either, Commander," the Doctor said. "The bodies weren't vaporized, if that's what you're thinking. The readings don't indicate that at all."

Kyle glanced at Tuvok. "What about the weapons used? Anything?"

Tuvok consulted his tricorder and replied, "There were two types of weapons used. Standard Dominion blasters, probably used by the outpost's defenses. The other is a plasma weapon of unknown origin."

Kyle nodded thoughtfully, glancing at the burned out rubble around him. He suppressed a shiver of revulsion.

"Let's get out of here."

Lieutenant Jan Ors leaned over her CONN station, trying desperately to keep busy. She hated it when Harry was gone on away missions. He was so young and inexperienced. Harry had just

graduated from Starfleet Academy, a secret training facility the Rebellion had started on Earth, when he was placed on *Voyager*. True, the young man had learned more in his two years on *Voyager* than if he had been on another ship, but that didn't reassure Jan any. Every time he left the ship, even if he was with Kyle, Jan worried that Harry would be trapped by the Dominion, killed by stormtroopers, or worse. To keep her mind from such morbid thoughts, she usually wound up busying herself with inconsequential tasks: scanning the area of space for anomalous readings, reorganizing her personal data files, that sort of thing. Usually it was just busy work, a waste of her time. She never discovered anything out of the ordinary.

This wasn't one of those times, however. Jan frowned at what *Voyager's* navigational sensors were telling her. According to these readings, there were strange eddies of an unknown energy throughout the system. Jan had never seen anything like them before, and she had seen quite a bit. For a split second, she was distracted by the turbolift doors opening. Harry, Kyle, and Tuvok came onto the bridge. A momentary surge of relief washed through her at the sight of the science officer, but that was quickly replaced by her curiosity over the strange eddies. Normally, she would stop investigating something this trivial once Harry had returned safely, but she had a nagging suspicion that this was important.

"Ensign Kim, could you come here please?" she called to Harry.

Harry nodded, trying to keep his face impassive. Kyle shot a warning look at Jan, which caused the helmsman to merely glare at him. She knew better than to conduct personal business on the bridge. Kyle stared at her for a few seconds before turning as Janeway left her ready room.

"Report, Commander," Janeway said briskly.

Jan turned back to the anomalous readings, ignoring Kyle's description of the outpost. Harry came to her station and leaned over her shoulder, glancing over the readings as well.

"What's this?" he whispered.

"I don't know," she returned, amused. "That's why I called you over here, Starfleet boy."

Harry grinned at her and tapped in a few commands. The sensors scanned the eddies again, this time in more detail. Harry frowned at the results.

"Looks like they're getting weaker, whatever they are," he mumbled to himself.

Harry moved in closer to the CONN panel, inadvertently pushing Jan out of the way. If it were anyone else, she would have protested. Instead, she merely chuckled to herself and allowed the ensign to work. Harry called up a few more analyses of the strange energy currents, shifting through the readings so quickly that Jan was surprised he was learning anything from them. His eyes grew wide as the data streamed across the console before he stifled a surprised curse. He immediately turned around, waving for Janeway's attention.

"Captain," he said, interrupting Kyle in mid-sentence. "I think you'd better see this."

Kyle looked temporarily annoyed, but followed Janeway over to the CONN station. Janeway glanced over the readings for a second, then glanced at Harry.

"Is this what I think it is?" Janeway asked, surprise resounding in her voice as well.

"I'm afraid so, Captain," Harry said, nodding grimly. "These look like the signature of a transwarp engine."

"A what?" Katarn asked, confused.

"Transwarp engine," Janeway repeated, crossing her arms. "Starfleet R&D has been working on the same idea for the past couple of years. So has the Dominion. They're supposed to be a hundred times more powerful than conventional warp engines. On a ship like *Voyager*, they could conceivably break the warp ten barrier."

"Or..." Harry said breathlessly. "Transwarp engines could be used to move something massive."

The color drained from Katarn's face. "Something like a Death Star?"

Harry nodded grimly. "Easily. The Death Star used conventional warp engines and could only achieve warp three at the most. Transwarp engines could propel a Death Star at warp eight, maybe even warp nine."

Silence hung over the bridge like a grim shroud for what seemed like an eternity. Jan stared at the readings, almost sorry that she had discovered the eddies in the first place. Finally, Janeway cleared her throat, breaking the silence.

"Can we follow the eddies?" she asked.

Jan quickly composed herself and looked over the readings. She nodded. "Yes, Captain. We can."

"Follow them?" Katarn asked, shocked.

Janeway turned, giving Kyle a surprised look. It was rare that Kyle disagreed with her decisions, but it was even more rare for him to openly question them, especially in front of other officers. She took a few steps forward, glaring at him.

"Yes, Commander, follow them. Whoever destroyed this outpost obviously has transwarp engines. We'd better find out who they are, don't you think?"

For a split second, it looked as if Kyle was going to argue. Finally, though, he backed down, shaking his head. Janeway regarded him caustically for a few more seconds before turning back to Jan.

"Lay in a course following those eddies, Lieutenant, warp six," Janeway said, then turned and started for her ready room. "Commander, follow me. Tuvok, you have the bridge."

Katarn sheepishly did as he was told. As the two commanding officers left the bridge, Harry gave a Jan a quick grimace.

"I feel sorry for Commander Katarn," Harry whispered.

Jan smiled reassuringly at him. "Don't worry. Kyle's a big boy. He can handle himself."

Katarn wasn't more than two steps through the door when Janeway whirled around and stared at him vehemently.

"Commander, I believe we've been over this before!" she snapped. "I agreed to bring your people on board so long as we had a working command structure! That means that you can't second guess me if you have a differing opinion!"

"I know, Captain, it's just..." Kyle started to protest.

"It's inexcusable!" Janeway continued, ignoring Katarn completely. She began to pace angrily in front of him. "The only way that we will function as a crew is if we respect the chain of command...."

"Captain!" Kyle interrupted. "I know, and I'm sorry."

Janeway turned toward Kyle, ready to reprimand him again, but the look on his face stopped her. Janeway had known Katarn for over two years now. This was the first time that Kyle looked genuinely afraid. She took a step forward, placing a comforting hand on his arm.

"What is it?" she asked gently.

He shrugged, looking away. "I don't know! That's just it. I can't explain it. I have...." He groped for the right word, making gestures as if he could snatch it out of the air. "...this....feeling. It's like a premonition, only stronger. I've had them before. I had one at the Dominion Academy when my father died. I had one before we faced the Dominion at Ord Mantell. And I'm having one

now. The thought of following those eddies and facing....whatever it is that made them....it frightens me. I know something will go horribly wrong!"

Kyle screwed his eyes shut, trying to block out the feeling. Janeway watched him, concerned. She had never seen him this distraught before either. He finally sighed, the fear and tension dissolving from his face. He opened his eyes and managed a weak smile.

"Don't worry, Captain," he said. "I'll be fine."

Janeway nodded. She hoped he would be.

"Captain's log, Stardate 51738.3. We have been following the transwarp eddies for the past six days and still have found no sign of whomever made them. Ensign Kim reports that the intensity has been fading. In a matter of three days, they will be so weak we won't be able to detect them. Whatever destroyed the outpost on Dorran VII seems to have disappeared completely."

Harry and Jan stepped into the mess hall, shyly holding hands. All conversation immediately died and all eyes were on them. Harry gritted his teeth, nervous. He hated this. True, it was worth it. He was with Jan, something he had dreamed about ever since he first met her. Even still, he hadn't counted on being the subject of everyone's gossip. *Voyager's* crew was small enough that rumors and innuendo moved faster than the speed of light. As much as he cared for Jan, he hated the knowing looks that people gave them when they were together.

"Ignore them," Jan purred into his ear. "They're just jealous. Half the women on the ship wanted you, and they're just sorry I got to you first!"

Harry smiled and squeezed her hand. Soon, most people had turned back to their meals and their own conversations. Harry and Jan took that as a good sign and quickly found a table in a secluded corner, one where they could look out at the stars streaking by. Neelix was soon at their side, his face beaming.

"Good evening, young lovers!" he cried, his arms open wide. "I have just the thing for you! Sumptuous Endorian water gourds, carefully aged, absolutely exquisite."

Harry smiled up at the Tallaxian and replied, "No, Neelix, that's okay. Could we get some champagne, though?"

Jan looked at Harry in surprise, but Neelix only nodded and started back behind his counter.

"Of course! I'll replicate a nice vintage right away!" he said.

As soon as Neelix was out of ear shot, he glanced at the Endorian water gourds that sat, untouched, in stasis.

"I'm never going to get rid of those," he muttered to himself.

Jan smiled at Harry, taking his hand into hers.

"What's the special occasion?" she asked.

Harry shrugged as Neelix came over with a bottle and a pair of glasses. The cook left it at their table and skittered away, smiling broadly. Harry popped the cork, pouring both of them a healthy portion. Jan didn't say a word but accepted the glass. Harry proffered his own and smiled.

"To Jan Ors," he whispered. "The most beautiful woman I know, someone who makes being here in the De...."

Harry frowned. He almost said "Delta Quadrant," but he knew that wasn't right. Why did he think they were in the Delta Quadrant? It didn't make sense. Jan's smile was replaced with a look of concern. She was about to say something, but Harry smiled again, trying to reassure her.

"...Gamma Quadrant bearable," he finished.

Jan's smile reappeared. She tried to clink glasses with him, but Harry pulled his glass away.

"There's more," he said coyly. "The past six months have been the best in my life. I want it to continue."

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. Jan momentarily lost her breath when she saw it. Harry's smile grew even wider as he flipped the top, revealing a sparkling diamond ring. With trembling hands, she took the ring and slipped it on her finger. Tears of joy flowed down her cheeks and she took Harry's face in her hands and kissed him.

"I take it that's a yes?" Harry asked. "I'm glad. That ring cost me two months of replicator rations."

Jan playfully punched him on the arm. Suddenly, the entire room erupted with applause. Harry and Jan looked around the mess hall and realized that, once again, everyone was looking at them. This time, though, it didn't seem that offensive. Neelix came forward, crying almost as hard as Jan.

"That was simply lovely!" the Tallaxian blubbered. "I hope you'll let me help plan the wedding!"

Harry laughed good-naturedly and replied, "How could we not?"

The celebration continued, with most of the crew present congratulating the happy couple. It seemed like nothing could destroy the romantic mood, but that was not to be.

The yellow alert klaxon ripped through the mess hall, accompanied by Janeway's terse voice. "Yellow alert! All senior staff to the bridge!"

Harry and Jan quickly dashed out of the turbolift, taking their stations. As Jan reviewed the situation log, she felt Kyle lean over her shoulder and let out a low whistle.

"Nice rock," he commented softly.

Jan cast him a sardonic look and turned back to the terminal. According to the log, the ship had been proceeding along at warp six, still following the dwindling transwarp eddies, when long range sensors picked up what appeared to be a massive ship. If the readings were correct, this monstrosity was almost the same mass as a Super Star Destroyer, but it didn't match any known configuration.

"Are we within visual range yet?" Janeway asked.

"Yes, Captain," Harry replied from the OPS station.

"On screen."

The viewscreen focused on a small dot set against the stars.

"Magnify."

The view changed. Now the mysterious ship filled the viewscreen. Jan felt her stomach begin to churn wildly. Sure enough, it was like nothing she had ever seen before, and for some unknown reason, that terrified her.

"Whoever it is, they're definitely the origin of the transwarp eddies," Harry chimed in. "The readings I'm getting from their engines conforms to transwarp theory."

"Do we have any idea who they are?" Janeway asked quietly, as if not wanting to disturb this leviathan.

Tuvok answered from the tactical station. "None. It does not conform to any known design. Some of these readings, however, are consistent with Dominion technology."

Jan continued to stare at the ship, dumbfounded. She didn't even know how to classify this vessel. It was devoid of stylized shape or texture. It didn't even have a hull, or so it seemed. Jan could see the power conduits and other components running along its sides. But that wasn't the most disturbing feature of this mysterious vessel.

What scared Jan the most was its shape. Most ships in the Galaxy had the same basic features: engine housings, weapon systems, that sort of thing. Coincidentally enough, any ship design, no matter what race created it, seemed to have one thing in common: the ship itself was always stylized. Even Dominion Star Destroyers looked like arrowheads. This ship, however, seemed to mock conventional wisdom. It was a simple geometric shape: a cube. For some reason, it caused chilled spikes to dance up and down Jan's spine.

"Any reaction to our presence?" Janeway asked in a hushed voice. Apparently the Captain was nervous as well.

Harry glanced over the readings in front of him and replied, "None, Captain."

Katarn rose from his chair and carefully stepped to Janeway's side, also mesmerized by the image on the viewscreen. "Now what?"

Janeway didn't answer, still transfixed by the sight of the massive vessel. Finally, she shook herself, as if waking from a trance, and turned to Tuvok.

"Try hailing them," she whispered.

Tuvok's head popped up in surprise. "Is that wise, Captain? That is a Dominion ship."

Janeway glanced at Tuvok, who didn't back down for a second. Kyle finally cleared his throat.

"Our transponder code still shows us as a Tallaxian freighter," he pointed out.

A faint smile played on Janeway's lips.

"Neelix, report to the bridge."

Neelix let out a long breath, trying desperately to calm himself. He fidgeted with his hands, not sure if he should clasp them behind his back, keep them at his side, or cross his arms over his chest. Finally, he forced his hands to grab onto his pants and sucked in yet another deep breath. He turned to Tuvok and, before the panic could rise again, nodded. What Neelix recognized as humor played around the Vulcan's eyes as Tuvok tapped the panel.

"Tallaxian hailing frequencies open," Tuvok reported.

"Unknown vessel," Neelix started, hoping that his voice didn't betray his growing sense of panic. "This is Captain Neelix of the Tallaxian freighter....uh, Morning Light...."

Neelix glanced at Janeway, who was actually smiling. He shrugged, but turned back to the screen.

"We, uh....we're looking for people to trade with," Neelix continued. "Would you be willing to....."

Suddenly, a deep, resonant voice cut him off. Actually, it was more like a whole chorus of voices, devoid of any emotion or expression.

"Tallaxian Freighter Morning Light, your offers are irrelevant."

The abruptness of the dismissal caused Neelix's jaw to snap shut. He stared at the mysterious ship for several seconds before he could speak again.

"Well, then, could you at least identify yourself? We've never encountered a ship like yours before, and we'd....."

"Our identity is irrelevant. You will power down your shields and prepare to be boarded."

A trickle of sweat appeared on Neelix's brow.

"By what authority?" he stammered. "We have done nothing wrong."

"That is irrelevant. You will comply."

To accentuate their words, a blue tractor beam lanced out from the unknown ship. *Voyager* rocked beneath the crews' feet as the beam tried to capture them. Janeway strode forward, taking command of the ship silently. Neelix gratefully retreated.

"End transmission," Janeway growled. "Lock on to the tractor beam's source and fire."

Crimson phaser beams cut through the vacuum, obliterating the tractor beam. The unknown vessel returned fire, energy weapons blasting into Voyager's shields. Janeway had to sit down, gripping the sides of her chair.

"Shields at seventy-five percent," Tuvok reported.

"Switch to ion cannons," Janeway replied. "Let's disable them if we can."

As the ion bolts slammed into the vessel's surface, what looked like blue lightning storms danced across its exterior. The lights within the strange, cube vessel flickered briefly and died in some sections. Thankfully, it seemed to have worked. The strange vessel didn't return fire. Janeway let out a sigh of relief and turned to Tuvok.

"The ship is disabled," Tuvok reported. "But I'm not reading any life signs."

A feeling of dread churned in Janeway's stomach. She didn't intend to kill anyone. What happened to the crew? She turned to Kyle, who was already moving for the turbolift.

"I'll check it out. Harry, Jan, Tuvok, you're with me," he ordered.

Tuvok checked the power level on his phaser and slipped it into its holster. Next on his checklist was his tricorder. Flipping it open, he checked the calibration, making some minor adjustments. Finally, he glanced at Harry and Jan, who were looking over their weapons as well. Tuvok silently approved. He, like everyone else, knew of Harry and Jan's romance. In spite of that, he still allowed them to go on away missions together. If it had been any other members of the crew, Tuvok would be worried that the relationship would jeopardize their objectivity. Harry and Jan, however, could maintain their professionalism no matter what. There had been countless times on past away missions that one of them would be put in mortal danger and the other would perform admirably.

"So where's Commander Katarn?" Harry asked tentatively.

As if to answer, the doors to the transporter room hissed open. Kyle stepped through the door. For a split second, the breath in Tuvok's throat caught. Kyle Katarn was dressed as he was when Voyager first found him. Instead of a Starfleet issue uniform, he wore the rough clothing of a mercenary. Instead of the usual Starfleet equipment, Kyle wore a backpack brimming with weaponry. Tuvok could see thermal detonators, sequence charges, as well as a miniature rail gun tucked neatly in their place. Most surprising was the weapon Katarn had tucked under his arm. It was a concussion rifle. Instead of firing thermal energy, the rifle shot energized pockets of air. It was the most powerful personal weapon in the galaxy, able to take out multiple targets at once and even blast through duracrete. In spite of all its advantages, not many people used it. It had a vicious recoil and really only worked at long ranges. If a person stood too close to his or her target, the back blast tended to vaporize them as well. Tuvok looked over the first officer, one brow raised in skepticism.

"Feeling a bit nostalgic, Kyle?" Jan asked in a hushed voice.

Katarn said nothing but stepped up onto the transporter pad. The dour look on his face made it clear he didn't want to be questioned. Tuvok glanced at Jan and Harry and then took his place behind Katarn. Even if the first officer's choice in weaponry was a bit...unorthodox, he still was in command of the away mission. Jan and Harry glanced at each other for a split second, as if unsure of what to do. Finally, Jan shrugged and the two of them took their places on the pad as well. Katarn nodded to the transporter technician. A low whine filled the air as a familiar tingling washed over Tuvok. He tensed inwardly. Within a second, they would be aboard the alien vessel. He wanted to be ready for anything.

Janeway looked up as the tactical console beeped. The ensign manning that station glanced at the captain.

"They're away," she said, a nervous edge to her voice.

Janeway could sympathize with her. Voyager had faced numerous battles with the Dominion before, each one worse than the last. There were times where they had escaped by the skin of their teeth. That was against conventional Dominion forces, though. This was wholly different. Now Janeway was beginning to have one of those strange premonitions herself. She closed her eyes, hoping that the Force or whatever guided the galaxy would watch over her four crew members.

"Maintain a transporter lock on them," Janeway ordered. "Be ready to pull them out at a moment's notice."

Kyle's finger tightened around the concussion rifle's trigger the moment the transporter released him. He immediately brought it to the ready, scanning the interior of the ship. A feeling of cold dread washed through him. The sensors on Voyager had been wrong. There were hundreds, if not thousands of....beings aboard the vessel. Katarn's breathing became labored at what he saw. The members of the alien vessel's crew stood as still as death in slots along the wall. Mechanical devices covered their bodies with tubes running in and out of their skin. Their pasty white faces stared forward mutely. Each one of them was a cyborg; their limbs, eyes, and other body parts replaced by an unknown technology.

Tuvok ran his tricorder over one of the still figures, frowning at what he saw.

"Interesting," the Vulcan observed clinically. "These individuals seem to be linked into a central computer of some sort."

Harry nodded, consulting his own tricorder. "Some of this technology is Dominion, but it looks like whoever these people are, they are collecting technology and integrating it with their own. I'm finding Hapan, Vadian, even some Klingon and Romulan technology."

Katarn walked over to the rail and looked over the edge. He had a completely unobstructed view of the ship's interior. Level after level stretched out before him, each one with similar slots lining the walls. His eyes drifted up to the ceiling. Conduits ran over his head, some connecting together with strange, inverted pyramids that glowed and pulsed.

"What are those?" he asked, indicating one of the strange structures.

Jan pulled out her tricorder and aimed it at a flashing pyramid.

"Looks like power distribution nodes," she commented.

"Commander!" Harry shouted, some thirty meters down the corridor. "You'd better come see this!"

Katarn whipped around and jogged over to Harry. The corridor widened into a somewhat spacious alcove. Even more technology lined the walls, but that wasn't the dominant feature. In the midst of the flashing lights and indicators was a man, strapped to a large table. Katarn gasped when he saw who it was. The governor of Dorran VII lay passively on the table, half of his face replaced with blinking implants. So had part of his chest, tubes connecting him to the machines in the alcove. He stared forward, nothing registering in his eyes. Tuvok stepped into the alcove, looking over the technology impassionately. For a split second, Katarn hated the Vulcan. He wished he could be as calm.

"It appears as if this technology, whatever it is, was disabled by our attack," Tuvok commented.

"Then why is he out of it?" Katarn asked, jerking his head towards the governor.

Tuvok scanned the vacuous man and frowned.

"He has been sedated," Tuvok explained, then turned to Jan. "Lieutenant Ors, your medkit please."

Jan proffered the small pack. For a split second, Kyle almost smiled. Jan had been drafted years ago as a nurse by the Doctor. The only reason for it had been her experience patching up Kyle after his missions. It was a job she particularly hated, but did all the same.

Tuvok flipped the small pack open and selected the appropriate hypospray. He glanced at Katarn for a final confirmation. When Kyle nodded, the Vulcan pressed the device to the governor's neck. A small hiss filled the air as the stimulant was forced through the older man's skin. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, the governor's eyelids flickered and opened. He looked around the alcove blankly, as if his eyes weren't focusing properly. Then they came to rest on Katarn.

"Commander....Katarn...." he whispered hoarsely, a harsh mechanical echo in his voice. "Where am I?"

"We're still trying to figure that out," Katarn whispered, trying to reassure the man before he panicked. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I'm not sure...." the governor replied weakly. "First, there came those large...droids. They destroyed any resistance we could offer. After them....these....these cyborgs stormed our city. They injected us all with...with tubules coming out of their hands....and we started...."

The governor finally looked down at his own body. His eyes grew wide with horror and he started to scream. Kyle looked at Tuvok, frightened himself. He didn't know how these creatures would react to the shrieks. Tuvok immediately started looking for a sedative again. It was too late, though. Kyle could already hear some of the cyborgs clanking down the corridor. He brought up the concussion rifle and started to back away.

"Get away from him!" he shouted.

Tuvok looked up and, seeing what Kyle intended to do, dashed out of the way, grabbing both Harry and Jan. Kyle waited for a few seconds for them to get clear, and then fired. A white hot explosion erupted around the table, incinerating the governor and turning the equipment in the room into molten slag. Kyle steadied himself and turned to his crewmates. Harry openly gaped at him. While Tuvok would never respond emotionally, Katarn could tell that the Vulcan secretly disapproved. Jan seemed to be the only one who wasn't shocked. She was used to Kyle's unique style of handling things.

Kyle finally shrugged and replied coldly, "It was too late for him. Let's go."

Before Kyle could tap his commbadge to call for a beam out, three of the cyborgs stepped around the corner. Reacting to the sudden threat, Kyle whirled and fired. One of the soldiers burned with a horrendous white light, writhing in temporary agony before its body literally fell to pieces, some of the mechanical components twitching. Without saying a word, Tuvok followed suit, drawing his phaser and firing. A crimson beam slashed through another cyborg's shoulder, dropping it as well. Kyle smiled grimly to himself and turned toward the final target. He was vaguely aware of a rushing sound behind him, but he ignored it. He was completely focused on his target.

His finger was beginning to tighten on the trigger when he heard Jan cry out and point behind him. "Kyle!"

Kyle whirled around and the blood drained from his face. Hovering in the air before him was a colossal droid. Its entire body was a dull gray, its domed head swiveling to assess the targets. The droid exuded raw energy, but it wasn't the droid that commanded Kyle's attention. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the massive weapon in the droid's hands. Without uttering a sound, the droid fired.

Orbs of white hot plasma slammed into the deck around Kyle. He quickly leapt to one side and could feel the hairs on the back of his neck get singed from the barrage. As he did, he saw consoles lighting up all around him, systems coming back on line. Apparently his putting the governor out of his misery had attracted some attention.

Tuvok dropped behind a melted console and opened fire on the newcomer. The phaser beam ricocheted off of the droid's body without even scorching it. The droid swiveled around and returned fire, causing the Vulcan security officer to abandon his cover. Jan and Harry joined in the fray, firing at the massive droid as well. It did little good. Finally, Kyle managed to bring his concussion rifle around.

"Get down!" he shouted.

His three crewmates dropped to the deck as Kyle opened fire. White hot air erupted around the hovering droid, sending it flying backwards through a series of conduits. Kyle smiled to himself and patted the rifle affectionately. He was turning back to his crewmates when he heard it.

A metallic growl resonated through the air. Kyle turned around, his eyes wide with shock. The droid had freed itself from the conduits and was rocketing back across the chasm towards him. The only evidence that Kyle had damaged it was a series of cracks running throughout its body. Without thinking, Kyle opened fire again. Then again. And again. It didn't slow the droid down at all. Finally, Tuvok crawled his way next to the first officer and they began firing in unison, trying to concentrate their shots around the already existing damage. Finally, in one, satisfying explosion, the droid blew apart, pieces flying in all directions.

Kyle was just about to heave out a sigh of relief when something knocked the rifle from his hands. He turned in surprise to see the third cyborg standing in front of him. His heart literally skipped a beat. Apparently the third soldier had hung back, waiting for the droid to finish them off. Tuvok whirled, drawing his phaser. Before the Vulcan could fire, the cyborg swung its artificial arm, knocking the security officer off of his feet. Kyle struggled to pull another weapon from his pack, but before he could, the cyborg turned towards him. Vicious looking tubes suddenly popped out of the soldier's hand and its arm drew back, as if it were preparing to strike him.

Suddenly, though, the cyborg stopped in mid-swing. It froze, its head cocked to one side, as if it were listening to someone. Kyle stopped as well, looking at Tuvok, Jan, and Harry, confused. It didn't make any sense. One minute, the cyborg was cleaning house with them. The next, it had frozen like a statue. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the cyborg lowered its arm and turned on its heel. It started to march down the corridor. Kyle glanced at Tuvok, unsure of what to do. After taking a few steps, the cyborg turned and looked at them blankly.

"I believe it wants us to follow," Tuvok observed dryly.

"So do we?" Harry asked quietly.

"I don't think we have a choice," Jan replied, jerking her head toward the area that the droid had been.

Kyle pulled out his rail gun, the next most powerful weapon he owned, and started after the cyborg. Whatever was about to happen to them, he wanted to be prepared.

Katarn snarled to himself. He didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit. Their guide was leading them deeper and deeper into the alien vessel. What was worse, it didn't look like they were going to arrive at their destination any time soon. True, Harry and Jan had busied themselves, scanning the interior of the ship as they went. Kyle was certain that the two of them were gaining all sorts of insights about their "hosts," but it made him all the more nervous. His hand tightened around the rail gun's grip.

Tuvok, he noticed, seemed just as concerned. Although the Vulcan's facial expression remained passive as always, his eyes were darting around the corridor as well. Tuvok was watching for trouble. That was good. After all, the corridor that they were being led down was lined with the cyborgs, each one staring blankly ahead. While they were nonthreatening now, Kyle suspected that they could come to life at a moment's notice. If that happened, they would make short work of the away team.

After what seemed like hours of walking, Kyle finally saw a large room ahead. As they entered it, their escort stopped, taking up position by the door. What met Kyle's eyes astounded him. There, in the middle of a room that was the size of a large house, was a massive sphere. Conduits and cables ran from it in every direction, running out into the ship in all directions. Kyle took a few steps forward, staring at the mostly inert components.

"Why have you come?" a voice demanded.

Kyle blinked in surprise. This wasn't the same voice that had spoken to them before. This one was deep, masculine, and almost....human. He glanced at Tuvok, who merely raised a quizzical brow. Apparently the Vulcan didn't know what to make of it either.

"We...uh, we were curious about your ship," Kyle said warily. "We had never encountered a vessel of this design and...."

"You are lying," the voice growled, interrupting him.

"I'm....I'm not sure I understand," Kyle said, a chill beginning to run up and down his spine.

"Your ship's transponder codes are for a Tallaxian freighter. That is false. Your ship has United Republic technology. Only one member of your crew is Tallaxian. According to the files we have, you are from the Starship *Voyager*."

A feeling of dread began to churn in Kyle's stomach and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. The situation was deteriorating.

"And who are you?" he demanded with a confidence he didn't feel.

"I will show you."

The sphere split in half and began to open. Standing inside the core was another one of the droids, or so it appeared. Cables were attached to its body which were strung out in every direction. As the sphere opened, the wiring snapped away in a shower of sparks and the droid stepped forward, leaving its cocoon behind. Kyle brought up the rail gun, ready to fire at a moments notice. As soon as the droid was free, the dome irised open, revealing an old man. Kyle's mouth dropped open in surprise. The man stared at him coldly with steel blue eyes, his white hair in a military cut.

"Who are you?" Kyle repeated in awe. This was a twist he hadn't expected.

"I am the axis. I am the hub," the man said. "I am the essence of this ship. I am General Mohc."

For some odd reason, that name seemed familiar to Kyle. He quickly shook off the feeling and slowly approached the man. Mohc smiled in what seemed like detached amusement.

"More importantly, what are you?" Kyle asked. "What is this?"

"This, my dear sir, is the Borg Collective," Mohc replied. "Perfection itself. We are thousands of minds, interlocked together in a immaculate unity."

Kyle stared at Mohc for a few seconds. A familiar sense of doom was welling up inside him.

"Did you attack Dorran VII?" he whispered.

"Yes," Mohc replied matter-of-factly.

"Why?"

"They were added to the Collective. Their biological and technological distinctiveness was added to our own. As will yours."

That final phrase caused Kyle to stop short. He started to back away from Mohc, the away team coming in behind him tightly.

"No," Kyle replied firmly. "If you attack us, we will defend ourselves."

"Resistance is futile," Mohc said. "You will be assimilated."

"Over my dead body," Kyle replied, firing his rail gun.

An explosive charge rocketed from the weapon, latching on to Mohc's body. For a second, nothing happened, but then it exploded, fire consuming the elderly man. For all its power, though, the explosion could only stagger Mohc. The armor plating quickly came up to protect his head. Mohc started back for his sphere.

"You may fight if you wish, but you will be assimilated. You, and your New United Republic of Planets. It is inevitable."

With that, the sphere closed over Mohc. Kyle glanced at Tuvok.

"I suggest we get out of here. Now," Kyle whispered.

Tuvok never got the chance to reply. Without warning, ten cyborgs materialized from the walls and started advancing on them. The four Voyager crewmates formed a protective circle, standing back to back. Kyle quickly slapped his commbadge quickly.

"Katarn to Voyager!" he called. "Emergency beamout!"

There was no reply. Tuvok tried his commbadge as well. Still no response.

"They must be jamming us," Jan said, pulling out her tricorder. "I'll try to localize the source."

Kyle nodded and fired a detonator toward one of the oncoming Borg soldiers. It exploded on impact, throwing the cyborg off of its feet. For a few seconds, its body twitched and then was still. Tuvok opened fire as well, dropping another of the drones. Harry gritted his teeth and fired as well.

This time, a greenish force field sprung into existence, blocking Harry's shot. The Borg soldier stopped advancing for a second, but then continued relentlessly.

"Commander!" Harry warned.

Kyle turned and watched as one of Tuvok's shots was blocked as well. The feeling of doom began to grow. He turned and fired at another drone. Sure enough, a force field protected his target from the explosion as well.

"They've somehow adapted to our weapons!" he shouted, charging forward desperately.

Apparently his change in tactics took the Borg by surprise. The drones paused for a second, as if unsure of what to do. That worked for Kyle's advantage. He swung his weapon in a vicious arc, clubbing one of the soldier's over the head. One of the components shattered and the Borg fell to the ground, twitching slightly. Kyle was about to tackle another soldier when he heard Jan's shout.

"Kyle!" she cried. "I've isolated the source of the....."

Jan's voice was cut off by a startled gasp. That gasp turned into a horrified scream. Kyle whirled around. A Borg soldier was standing near Jan, her entire body was rigid. At first, it looked as if the drone had grabbed her, but then Kyle saw what was really happening. Tubes that had extended from the Borg's hand were embedded in the small of Jan's back. For several seconds, nothing seemed to happen, but then her skin began to literally crawl. It appeared as if something was wriggling underneath her skin. Then mechanical components began erupting all over her body. Her scream was slowly strangled as an eerie calm descended on her face. Her eyes grew vacant. The Borg removed the tubules and Jan turned, marching out of the core silently.

"Jan!" Harry cried, starting after her.

He didn't even make it two steps. A small rocket suddenly whistled in from above, exploding in the middle of the three startled crewmates. Kyle was knocked off his feet. He looked up and was horrified to see three of the larger droids flying in rapidly. One of the droids launched another rocket, this one missing Tuvok by a few meters.

Jan said she had isolated the source, Kyle thought grimly to himself. *Let's hope I can hit it.*

Kyle began to fire blindly, rail detonators flying in all directions. Explosions reverberated around the chamber, sparks and debris cascading down around them. Two more rockets from the oncoming droids added to the confusion, one of them knocking Kyle onto the Borg soldier he had injured, but those explosions apparently destroyed the jamming equipment. Soon the familiar and comforting effect of the transporter washed over him.....

"Transport complete," the ensign at tactical reported.

Janeway turned toward the view screen and watched as the cube ship began to show more and more signs of life. Lights that had been extinguished by the ion barrage were slowly returning. In a matter of minutes, the vessel would be fully powered again, and that was something Janeway didn't want to see.

"Ensign Calloway, get us out of here, maximum warp!" she shouted.

The ensign at the CONN punched in several commands and Janeway could feel the ship surge beneath her feet. Without waiting to see if the alien vessel was following them, she turned on her feet and started for the turbolift. Within minutes, she was jogging into the transporter room. What met her eyes surprised her. Katarn, Tuvok, and Harry were coming off of the transporter pad, their clothing singed and ripped, their faces covered with blood and grime. Lying on the transporter itself was the prone figure of what looked like a cybernetic being.

"What happened?" she demanded. "Where's Lieutenant Ors?"

"She's gone," Katarn replied bitterly. "The Borg assimilated her."

"What?" Janeway asked, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll explain as much as I can, Captain, but I think we should get our prisoner to Sickbay. Maybe he can answer some questions."

"Well, our first answer is that our prisoner isn't a man," the Doctor observed. "She's a woman."

Janeway looked at the holographic medic in surprise. "Are you sure?"

The Doctor gave Janeway a condescending look and replied, "I may be a hologram, but even I can tell the difference between an X and a Y chromosome."

"What else do you know about her?" Janeway asked.

"Well, she's human," the Doctor replied. "Corellian, if I'm not mistaken. She is twenty-three or twenty-four, give or take a year."

The Borg soldier was stretched out on the biobed. Her eyes were shut and she was breathing evenly. She appeared to be peaceful and serene. If Janeway hadn't heard Katarn's report, she wouldn't have thought of the soldier as a threat.

"What's her prognosis?" Janeway asked.

"It appears as if her connection with the....well, the Borg collective, I guess we should call it, was severed when Commander Katarn clubbed her. She appears to be stable for now, so I'm beginning to remove the Borg components."

"Is that wise?" Janeway asked.

"Well, most of it is superfluous to her existence outside the Collective," the Doctor said after a few seconds of consideration. "Unless you want me to repair the damage and return her to the Borg."

Janeway shook her head and replied, "No. Right now, we need somebody to tell us how to defeat them. She's it. Try to revive her."

As Janeway turned to leave, the doors to Sickbay hissed open and Katarn stepped inside. For a second, he hung back, staring at the Borg with open contempt. Janeway could sympathize. Because of the Borg, Lieutenant Ors was gone. Jan and Kyle had worked together for years before they came to *Voyager*. They were as close as two people could have been without being lovers. It was almost like they were brother and sister.

Finally, Katarn took a few steps forward, looking to Janeway. "You're needed on the bridge, Captain. It looks like the Borg vessel has powered up and is on the move again."

"Coming after us?" Janeway asked, a knot of fear twisting in her stomach.

Katarn shook his head. "No. They're headed for the Maw Wormhole."

That knot turned into a frenzied churning. If the Borg ship made it through the wormhole, there was no telling what kind of damage they would do. She suspected the only reason they were able to disable the Borg the first time was because they had taken them by surprise. If they could adapt to United Republic weaponry as fast as Katarn reported, it would be over before it began.

"I've already ordered a pursuit at maximum warp, but with their transwarp engines....." Katarn allowed his voice to trail off. They both knew it was a long shot, but they had to try.

"Thank you, Commander," Janeway whispered, then turned to the Doctor. "If there's any change in her condition, let me know."

With that, Janeway left Sickbay. Katarn turned and glared at the Borg again. He was so tempted to strangle the bitch in her sleep, but she was their only link to Jan. A twisted smile twitched on his lips for a second. He would wait until after the crisis was over. Once it was, then he would kill her with his bare hands.

"Captain's log, supplemental. Surprisingly, the Borg vessel has reduced speed from close to warp nine point nine nine nine to warp eight. Perhaps they don't consider us a threat. We are pushing our engines to the limit in hopes of catching up with them. Our ETA is three hours. During that time, we are trying desperately to come up with some strategy to stop them.

"Captain's personal log, supplemental. Crew morale is at an all-time low, and I don't blame them. We've always known that something like this could happen: the Dominion has released a seemingly unstoppable weapon, and we're the first line of defense. Not only that, but the loss of Lieutenant Jan Ors is particularly hard to take. *Voyager* is like one big family, and it is as if we have all lost a sister....."

Kyle was surprised. Apparently there really was a young woman under all of that Borg technology. Not only that, but she was somewhat attractive as well. The Doctor had managed to remove most of the unnecessary Borg components. An arch over her eye, a small starburst of metallic fingers on a cheek, and mechanical webbing over a hand were the only outward hints that this woman had ever been a Borg. One thing eluded the Doctor, however, and that was how to revive her. Kyle's blow on the Borg ship hadn't killed her. Yet in spite of all of the Doctor's ministrations, nothing he did could resuscitate her. She simply lay on the biobed, as still as death.

"Well," the Doctor said finally, dropping yet another instrument back on his cart. "I've done all I can. I believe the only thing we can do is wait."

With that, the Doctor returned to his office. Kyle frowned down at the patient, a feeling of doubt washing through him. Just hours before, he had been certain he wanted to kill this woman. Now he wasn't so sure. She wasn't the monster she was when she came on *Voyager*.

He frowned. Some of her newly grown blond hair was dangling down over her eyes. He gingerly reached out to brush it to one side....

....and as his fingers brushed across her forehead, what felt like a jolt of pure electricity danced up his arm.

Kyle jerked his hand away, surprised. For a split second, it had felt like his entire arm was on fire. He looked down at the former Borg drone again, and was surprised to see that her face had contorted briefly to a frown. The wrinkles slowly softened and she once again looked serene.

"Doctor!" Kyle called. "Get out here."

The Doctor swung out of his office in a brisk jog. He stopped, looking over the Borg's vital signs and then glancing at Kyle, confused.

"What's the matter?"

"I...I don't know," Kyle gasped, still rubbing at his hand. "I want you to monitor something for me...."

The Doctor gave the first officer a skeptical look, but pulled out his tricorder anyway. Once he was ready, the Doctor nodded. Kyle swallowed hard, trying to calm his jangled nerves, and reached out, touching the Borg's forehead again.

Kyle stiffened as the burning sensation coursed up his arm. Suddenly, he wasn't in Sickbay anymore, but he was back on the Borg ship. He was standing in a slot along the wall, plugged in to the ship's systems. He could hear....thousands of voices, all speaking at once, filling his head with thoughts that....

With a start, Kyle withdrew his hand and stumbled slightly. The Doctor quickly reached out to steady him.

"Incredible, Commander!" the Doctor whispered. "I don't know what happened either, but you were stimulating the Borg's brain somehow." The Doctor seemed to consider something before speaking again. "Tell me, were there ever any Jedi in your family?"

Kyle looked at the Doctor in surprise. While he had been growing up on Sullon, he had suspected that his father was a Jedi. One time, Kyle had discovered a lightsaber in Morgan Katarn's closet. His father had quickly hidden it again and never really explained whose it was. Kyle had never revealed his suspicions to anyone. Even he had known about the Emperor's murderous pogrom against the Jedi Knights. The fact that the Doctor would ask a question like that was incredible.

"Why do you ask?" Kyle asked, a little too quickly.

"According to United Republic databases, that appeared to be a Force-related event. I can't be sure, as I've never had any experience with Jedis before, but...."

Kyle didn't listen as the Doctor started babbling about the clinical studies of Force-related phenomena. It was so overwhelming. Finally, he raised a hand, silencing the Doctor.

"What is the Borg's condition now?" he asked quietly.

The Doctor consulted the Borg's vital signs and raised his eyebrows in surprise. "According to this, they have improved."

Kyle nodded. "I thought as much."

He began to reach for the Borg's forehead again. The Doctor's eyes grew wide in shock and he quickly pulled Kyle away from the biobed.

"What do you think you're doing, Commander? We have no business trying this! Besides, you have had no formal Jedi training. Anything you try is just guess work...."

"Doctor!" Kyle snapped, cutting him off. "In an hour, this ship will be engaged in a battle to the death with the Borg! This woman is our only hope if we want to survive! If I can bring her out of this coma through this....ability I have, I say we do it!"

The Doctor stared at Kyle for several seconds, still clearly skeptical. Finally, though, he released him.

"All right," the Doctor returned acidly. "But I intend to monitor you both carefully. If I feel that either of you is in danger, I will force you to break contact."

Kyle nodded. He stepped back to the side of the biobed, breathing as steadily as he could. He tried to empty his mind, reminding himself of things that his father had told him years ago. They seemed to be just good advice, but maybe there was something more to it. Maybe his father was preparing him to be a Jedi. Avoid anger. Let go of hatred. Let your mind be clear, and anything was possible.

His hands slowly reached out and hovered over the Borg's forehead. He could already feel a tactile shock begin to build around his fingers. Finally, with one last breath, he firmly planted his hand on her forehead....

With one dizzying rush, the bottom dropped out of his mind.

He was four years old, sitting on the bridge of his parent's ship....they were exploring a sector in the Delta Quadrant.....then a mysterious ship dropped out of warp! They overwhelmed the meager defenses the Raven had in seconds and soon, strange hulking creatures were beaming onto the ship. They attacked his parents and then grabbed him as well. He could feel Borg nanoprobes crawling beneath his skin as they worked to assimilate him into the Collective.

He could feel General Mohc force his way into his mind, subjecting it to his powerful will. Kyle could feel the icy fingers slither past his defenses, probing the depths of his soul. He tried to resist, but the Collective proved too powerful. Every trace of individuality he had was drained from him. He opened his mouth to scream, but his vocal cords were frozen. All he could do was accept the change.....

A strange transporter dropped him into the middle of a town. The citizens, strange bird-like creatures, ran from before him, terrified. He relentlessly strode forward, taking care to assimilate everyone in his path. He could see the larger droids advancing as well, obliterating whatever resistance the people mounted. It was a horrifying, sickening spectacle, yet Kyle accepted it as normal. This is what the Borg did. They assimilated. They improved themselves. They were perfection.

Suddenly, Kyle was aware of others with him. He turned and was shocked to see his father standing before him. A blue aura flashed and glowed around his translucent body. For the first time, he could feel his father's strength. Morgan Katarn reached out his hand and, with a single gesture, brushed the Borg implants from Kyle's body. Kyle could feel a new strength welling up inside him. It was unlike anything he had experienced before. His father smiled, nodding, and then faded from view. Kyle closed his eyes and began to fight against Mohc's control.

In the process, the strange town the Borg had been assimilating wavered and vanished. Kyle found himself standing before a human brain, a thick, black cloak enveloping it. He could almost taste the evil that emanated from the dark covering. It sickened him. With a mighty cry that seemed to echo and reverberate throughout the cosmos, Kyle leapt towards the dark veil, red energy crackling throughout his very being. He latched on to it, flames of unadulterated power

coursing from his body into the evil that coated the trapped mind. It thrashed against him, trying desperately to escape his onslaught, but it was a futile gesture. He refused to give up.

The darkened veil slowly began to dissipate and weaken. Within seconds, intense white light was beginning to stream through rips and tears in the mantle. Kyle could hear distant screams of pain as the Borg Collective lost their last bit of control and the veil disintegrated. The sudden explosion of light slapped Kyle backwards like a giant hand.....

.....and as Kyle opened his eyes, he realized that he was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling of Sickbay. He breathed heavily for a few seconds, trying desperately to stop the room from spinning. He could hear a tricorder humming less than a foot away from his head, its insistent chirping causing his headache to grow worse.

"Do you mind?" he croaked, pushing the Doctor's hand away.

The Doctor snorted, bringing the tricorder back down and scanning Kyle's head.

"I'm sorry if this annoys you, Commander, but I want to make sure that you're all right."

Kyle pushed the Doctor away again, sitting up with a moan. The holographic medic sighed, continuing his examination.

"How long was I...." Kyle asked, not sure of how to describe his experience.

"By my reckoning, only thirty seconds," the Doctor said, closing the tricorder and standing up. "Lucky for you, your brain functions are returning to normal."

Kyle frowned, shaking his head slightly. During those thirty seconds, he had seen the Borg woman's entire lifetime. He had witnessed every day of her life as a part of the Collective. It felt as if his experience had lasted decades. He sat there, trying to comprehend what had happened. Finally, though, he remembered why he had risked himself like that.

"How's the Borg?" he asked.

"Ask her yourself," the Doctor replied, looking to the biobed.

Kyle stood up and turned. His breath caught in his throat. The Borg woman, who just a minute earlier had been comatose, was sitting on the edge of the biobed, looking around at everything in obvious curiosity. Finally, her blue eyes came to rest on the first officer.

"Who are you?" she demanded, a hint of fear in her voice.

Kyle held out his hands, approaching her as slowly as he could. Sudden movements would likely cause her to panic.

"I'm Commander Kyle Katarn of the Starship Voyager. You're in our Sickbay and we're going to take care of you," Kyle said carefully.

"Why have you removed me from the Collective?" the woman asked, her eyes darting around Sickbay like a trapped animal.

"We didn't have much choice," the Doctor replied, stepping around Kyle. "You were injured on your ship and were accidentally brought here. Besides, we need your help. The Borg are going to assimilate our people...."

".....and they've assimilated a member of our crew!" Kyle put in, shoving past the Doctor. The hologram was taking too long. "I know you have no reason to trust us, but I've seen what the Borg did to you.....what they did to your parents. You're free of Mohc now. Please, help us!"

Kyle and the Borg woman stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. Under normal circumstances, Kyle would have no idea what she was thinking. This time, though, he knew her better than anyone else. He had seen her entire life through her eyes. He understood her secret pain. He could see her decision in her eyes before she could say a word.

"I will help you," she said, staring back at him.

"What's your name?" Kyle asked.

"We are....." the Borg started to say, but then stopped, frowning. Kyle could feel her confusion. For the first time in twenty years, she was an individual again. It had to be disorienting. Finally, though, she started over. "I am Seven of Nine."

Janeway walked into the conference room and looked to her senior officers in turn. Each one of them wore a grim mask. They all knew that they would be engaging the Borg in less than forty-five minutes. Even though they were all acting optimistic about the confrontation, Janeway knew they all didn't expect to survive. To be honest, she didn't think they would either. Still, she couldn't let them go without a fight.

B'elanna glanced at Tuvok and then at the other empty chairs. "Seems like we're running a little low on bodies."

Janeway shrugged as she sat down. "I've given Ensign Kim some personal time. The Doctor and Commander Katarn should be on their way. Tuvok, you have some information about General Mohc?"

Tuvok nodded and replied, "I've found some references to General Mohc in the computer. Three hundred years ago, there was a man by the same name in the Old United Republic of Planets' military. Although I can't be sure, I believe that it is the same Mohc we encountered on the Borg ship."

"Why do you say that?" Janeway inquired, leaning forward in her chair.

"He was rather outspoken about his views regarding United Republic policy. At the time, the United Republic was undergoing a slightly tumultuous period. Two factions arose within the Senate."

"What was the conflict over?" B'elanna asked, frowning.

"It is inconsequential. What is important is General Mohc's response to it. For several months, it appeared as if the United Republic would fall apart. Mohc was an idealist and didn't want to see the unity disappear. He started a movement among his troops to impose a military reign and force concord on the people. While it is not clear how he intended to do this, it appeared as if he wanted to use cybernetics as a means. For a while, it appeared as if he and his closest aides would succeed. One of them, however, realized that the General was unbalanced and turned him in."

"What happened to him?" Janeway asked.

"It is unclear what his fate was. Rather than execute him or lock him up, the United Republic took Mohc and his co-conspirators, locked them on a ship, and sent them to an unexplored region of the Delta Quadrant. What happened to them after that is uncertain."

"I think I can help fill in the blanks," Kyle said as he strode into the conference room.

Janeway was about to reprimand him for being late, but the words caught in her throat when she saw what was following him. An attractive young woman who she assumed was the Borg soldier walked into the room with the Doctor in tow. Kyle motioned towards the woman with his hand.

"This is Seven of Nine," Kyle explained. "I think she can help us."

After he sat down, Kyle explained what happened in Sickbay. Janeway was amazed. If Kyle truly were Force adept, as it seemed, that would explain the premonitions that he had been having. It was remarkable! Under other circumstances, she would have wanted to explore that more deeply, but they didn't have the time.

"At any rate," Kyle said as his story concluded, "I've learned quite a bit about the Borg from Seven, including what happened to General Mohc after his exile. Mohc and his aides, in order to survive in the hostile environment the United Republic had banished them to, linked their minds

together via cybernetic implants. There were only ten of them at the time, but that was how the Collective was born. Eventually, they started to steal more and more technology from the species they encountered and added it to their own. Sometimes they would meet an individual who could help them: doctors, physicists, engineers. Instead of just stealing the technology, they would forcibly add them to the Collective."

"The Collective became strong," Seven added from where she stood. "Soon, there were enough Borg to build a ship. From that moment onward, Mohc proceeded with Phase II."

"Mohc started building those massive droids that we encountered on the ship. He calls them his Dark Troopers," Kyle said, a small shudder running through his body. "It's all building up to one, final event: the total assimilation of the galaxy."

"But why is he working with the Dominion?" B'elanna snapped impatiently. "It doesn't make any sense!"

"It is only a temporary arrangement," Seven explained coldly. "The Emperor and the General both have similar goals. Both wish to impose order on the galaxy. For now, the General will work with the Emperor. When it no longer is convenient, the Emperor will be assimilated as well. It is inevitable."

Janeway felt a chill run up and down her spine. This former Borg soldier seemed so nonchalant about the destruction of individuality. She suppressed a wave of revulsion and forced herself to concentrate.

"So what do we do to stop them?" Janeway asked. "I'm assuming that the Borg have adapted to our weapons."

"That is correct," Seven confirmed. "Standard United Republic Weaponry would be useless in any attack."

"That's a cheery thought," B'elanna observed dryly.

"...however...." Seven continued, shooting a mildly annoyed glance in the chief engineer's direction. "There is a way to disable their systems temporarily."

"How temporarily?" Janeway asked, not liking the sound of that at all.

"Five minutes, maybe six," Seven elaborated.

"Five minutes?" B'elanna snapped. "That's hardly enough time for us to take them out!"

"That's just it," Kyle explained. "*Voyager* can't take out the Borg ship. One person, however, beamed into the core, can."

Kyle called up a schematic of the Borg vessel. Janeway blinked, surprised. This was more detailed than anything *Voyager's* sensors could have produced. Kyle smiled apologetically.

"We were able to extract this from one of Seven's components. That's what took us so long," he explained, then turned the schematic. "The Borg vessel is controlled by a series of power distribution nodes. Lieutenant...." Kyle's voice caught in his throat for a split second. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. "Lieutenant Ors noticed them in our initial survey. They effectively split up power generation throughout the ship. That way, there isn't one power source to be destroyed, like on *Voyager*. A few good shots at our warp core, and we'd be done for. With the Borg ship, though, we'd have to take out over two-thirds of these nodes to destroy them."

"So what do we do?" B'elanna insisted, slightly more belligerent. It was obvious that her Klingon half was beginning to get the best of her.

"The power distribution nodes are connected to three junction circuits," Seven explained, calling up the information on the display. "If we modify three of Commander Katarn's sequence charges, we can take out the circuits. The resulting disruption in the power grid will cause the Borg ship to destroy itself."

"Why one person?" Janeway insisted. "I would prefer to beam over a team of security...."

"No," Seven insisted. "General Mohc would panic if he detected more than two people beaming over. He would not see a smaller team as a threat. One person should go, two at the most. Any more than that would raise an alarm."

"I'll go, Captain," Kyle said immediately. "I've had experience with this sort of thing before."

Janeway considered it for a few seconds. On the one hand, she didn't completely trust Seven of Nine. After all, there was no logical reason for the former Borg drone to help them. On the other, they had to stop the Borg vessel. If this didn't work, they wouldn't get another chance. She finally sighed.

"What do we need to do to disable them?"

Half an hour later, B'elanna strode into the bridge hurriedly. Janeway could see the tension in her face from working at such a frenzied pace. At the same time, though, the Captain could see the triumph in her eyes.

"The phased polaron beam is ready," B'elanna said, the relief evident in her voice. "I don't know how the hell it's supposed to work, but if what Seven of Nine told us, it should."

The half-Klingon chief engineer glanced around the bridge for a second and then took a few steps closer to Janeway.

"Do you trust her?" she whispered.

Janeway shrugged and replied, "We don't have much of a choice, do we?"

B'elanna grumbled something not entirely complimentary about the former Borg drone under her breath, but went and assumed her station. Janeway stifled a smile. Instead, she looked to the viewscreen. They could already see the Borg vessel, rushing forward to their final destination. A twinge of hate tightened her stomach for a split second, but she forced it from her mind. Now was not the time. She had to remain focused.

"Janeway to Katarn," she called.

Kyle glanced up from his weapons pack. He was making some last minute modifications to his spare concussion rifle. He hoped that modifying the frequency of the discharge would somehow penetrate the Borg's defenses. It might buy him two or three shots, but those would be worth it.

"Go ahead," he replied.

"Get ready to beam over," Janeway's disembodied voice instructed. "We will fire the phased polaron beam in three minutes."

"Confirmed. Katarn out," Kyle said.

He closed the casing of the concussion rifle and shoved it back into his pack. Slung over his shoulder, Kyle also grabbed a specially altered tricorder. It was programmed with the three locations of the junction circuits. It would guide him through the Borg ship. By his calculations, he would be able to plant the three modified sequence charges in two hours. If the Borg maintained their current speed, they would reach the wormhole in two hours and fifteen minutes. It would be close.

Kyle leapt onto the transporter pad, unslinging a phaser rifle.

"Prepare to transport me to Alpha site," he instructed the transporter chief.

The doors to the transporter room hissed open and Harry Kim dashed inside. Kyle smiled grimly at him.

"Come to see me off?" Kyle asked.

"No, I'm coming with you," Harry replied.

Kyle stared at Harry in shock. For a second, he almost thought that the young ensign was joking with him. The look on Harry's face told him otherwise.

"What?" Kyle demanded. "Don't be ridiculous! You're not qualified to do this! Besides, it's a one person job."

"No, two people can do it," Harry pointed out. "Seven did say that two people could get in without Mohc reacting."

"That's beside the point!" Kyle snapped, maybe a little too harshly. "We don't have time to brief you, we don't have another modified tricorder...."

"Like this one?" Harry asked, holding up a tricorder of his own.

Kyle's head snapped back as if struck. He hadn't expected that. For a few seconds, he stammered, unsure of what to say next. Finally, though, he latched on to one final argument.

"Look, I know why you want to go over there again. You're hoping to find Jan. Harry, forget about it. By now, she's been completely assimilated by the Borg," Kyle whispered as gently as he could.

"You were able to save Seven!" Harry pointed out vehemently.

"That was a fluke," Kyle replied quietly. "Besides, we have no idea where she is. She could be anywhere on that vessel!"

"That's why Seven added a subroutine to my tricorder that can track down newly assimilated Borg. Seven says that I should be able to find her with it," Harry said.

Kyle stared at Harry for several seconds. Finally, he sighed in disgust.

"I suppose you're not going to take 'no' for answer?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. Kyle grimaced and motioned for Harry to join him on the transporter pad. As the young ensign eagerly took his place, Kyle pulled out one of the sequence charges.

"Here you go," Kyle said, gingerly handing the explosive device to him. "Plant this on the junction circuit and activate it. We'll be able to detonate it once we're safely back on Voyager. You'll beam in to Gamma site. Once the charge is planted, work your way to Beta site. I'll meet you there."

Kyle turned back to the transporter chief, but then turned back to Harry. He pulled the concussion rifle from its place and handed it to the ensign.

"Just in case," he whispered, giving Harry's shoulder a reassuring pat.

Harry's eyes grew wide as he took the weapon. For a few moments, Harry looked at the weapon like it was going to bite him, but then he carefully tucked it under his arm.

"Janeway to transporter room three, fifteen seconds."

"Thank you, Captain...." Kyle answered, glancing at Harry nervously. "Uh, just so you know, Ensign Kim will be accompanying me on the away mission."

Silence filled the transporter room for a few seconds before Janeway replied, "I see. Janeway out."

Kyle sighed in relief. He had half expected the Captain to storm down to the transporter room and yank Harry off of the pad.

"I'll need to explain the chain of command to our Borg colleague," he muttered to himself.

Janeway glanced at B'elanna. The chief engineer nodded grimly. It was time.

"Fire the polaron beam," Janeway ordered.

A green beam of energy blasted from *Voyager's* deflector dish. It tore through the vacuum and exploded over the Borg vessel, angry red energy waves crashing over the cube. The lights within

the ship flickered for a second and then died, every system the Borg had completely disrupted. If Seven was right, that meant Mohc wouldn't know what was happening.

"Match their coasting speed," Janeway continued. "Janeway to transporter room three, happy hunting gentlemen."

Within seconds, the voice of the transporter chief reported, "They are away, Captain."

Four minutes later, the power systems of the Borg vessel had restarted. Janeway tensed, almost expecting the Borg to retaliate. Thankfully, it appeared as though Mohc was willing to continue on to the Alpha Quadrant.

"Now we wait," Janeway breathed.

Kyle peeked over the edge of the console he was hiding behind. The transporter had released him in the middle of what appeared to be a Borg meeting hall. By Kyle's count, there were over fifteen Borg milling about, most of them clustered around the relay circuit. Kyle gritted his teeth. He doubted that he could simply stroll over, plant an explosive charge, and get out of there without the Borg noticing. For a second, he considered blasting them with a few rail charges, but he decided against that immediately. Sure, that would get rid of these obstacles, but it would also alert the Borg to his presence. Not only would it be likely that reinforcements would come, it would be impossible for him to reach the Beta site alive. It would probably mean sacrificing Harry as well. There had to be another way.

Kyle glanced around him, trying desperately to find some way to distract the Borg. Suddenly, though, an idea popped into his head. At least, it felt like an idea. Maybe an instinct was a better word for it. Whatever it was, something was telling him how he could get by the Borg. Summoning a sense of calm deep within him, he pointed to an area down the corridor. In his heart of hearts, he imagined a noise or something that would distract the Borg. Amazingly, every Borg drone reacted as if it had heard Kyle's imaginary noise. They turned and trotted down the corridor to investigate. The minute they rounded the corner, Kyle dashed from his hiding place. He quickly took the disc-shaped sequence charge and attached it to the relay circuit. Once the trigger switch had been flipped, a tiny transmitter started to emit a low-frequency ionic field. According to Seven, it would prevent the Borg from detecting the explosive. He smiled to himself and then pulled out the tricorder. The small sensor device was already locked on to the next relay circuit. With a chuckle, Kyle ducked down the corridor.

Harry Kim blew out a nervous breath, trying desperately to wipe the sweat from his hands. He glanced around the corner at the relay circuit, uncertain as to what he should do. Twenty Borg drones wandered around the area, checking and rechecking the components that *Voyager's* attack had neutralized. As near as he could tell, there was no way to get past them. He looked down at the concussion rifle in his hands. For a second, he considered firing it at the Borg, but then decided against it.

Harry was still considering his options when every Borg in the area suddenly froze, staring into space. Harry tensed, worried that they might come after him. Instead, they turned as a unit and trotted down the corridor. Harry sucked in a nervous breath and peeked out of his hiding place. The coast looked clear. He quickly dashed out and attached the sequence charge to the relay circuit and flipped the switch. That being done, he pulled out the tricorder.

For a second, he stared at the device. It bleeped and whirred in his hand, locking in to the third relay circuit's location. He hesitated and thought about it. Kyle had told him to meet him at the Beta site and then they would search for Jan from there, but Harry doubted that. It would take them

a while to reach the core of the vessel, where the Beta site was. By the time they had planted the third charge, it would probably be time to beam out. Not only that, Kyle was the one with the third charge. Technically, he wouldn't need Harry's help at all.

Harry made his decision. He quickly tapped in the commands that would activate the special subroutine that Seven designed to track down newly assimilated Borg. The program immediately locked on to three signals. Harry frowned, trying to adjust the sensor packet in the tricorder. One possible target disappeared, and fifteen seconds, another vanished from the tricorder as well. Harry smiled to himself. The remaining signal had to be coming from Jan! Now all he had to do was track her down, disable her somehow, and get her back to the ship.

Harry started to move down the corridor, following the instructions the tricorder was giving him. He was concentrating so intently on the task at hand that he didn't notice as one of the Borg drones that lined the wall detached from its slot. He didn't notice as the Borg turned, following him as he carefully crept down the corridor. The first hint he had that something was out of the ordinary was when the Borg swung its club-like arm and smashed it over his head. Stars exploded in Harry's vision and he fell to his knees. He tried desperately to bring the concussion rifle around, but the Borg swung again, this time catching him squarely across the jaw. Harry managed to moan once, a low, pathetic gurgle, before he collapsed to the deck, unconscious.

Kyle swung around the corner, keeping his phaser rifle at the ready. His eyes darted to every corner, making sure his way was clear. Unfortunately, the corridor to the last relay circuit was lined with Borg drones, each one plugged in to their own individual slot. Kyle wished that he didn't have to try and sneak past them, but there was no other way.

He glanced at the chronometer. It had taken him a little over an hour to get here. That meant that the Borg cube would reach the wormhole in another hour. He was relieved that Harry had insisted on coming along. If the ensign hadn't joined him, it would have been a lot closer than Kyle would have liked.

Taking a deep breath, Kyle started to creep down the corridor, casting furtive glances at the Borg drones. He expected them to leap down from their slots at any moment, but instead, they remained as still as statues. To try and keep himself calm, Kyle focused on the portal at the end of the corridor, counting down how many steps he had left. Forty. Then thirty. Then twenty. Fifteen, and he was agonizingly close. Ten, and his heart felt like it was about to leap out of his throat. Then five....four....three....two.... With a sigh of relief, Kyle stepped through the portal. As he did, his spirits sunk. He had been in this room before.

The massive sphere that General Mohc rested in dominated the central core. Right below it was the last relay circuit. Not only was the room filled with regular Borg drones, six Dark Troopers stood guard over the last target. Kyle gritted his teeth, glancing around the core nervously. Had he been found out? He doubted that. If Mohc was aware of his presence, he probably would have been stopped long ago. He could feel his finger tightening nervously around the trigger of the phaser rifle, unsure of how to approach this problem. His nerves were too upset to try his little "trick" again. Maybe it was time for a straight-forward approach. If the Borg didn't think of him as a threat, they probably wouldn't attack him.

He carefully stepped forward, his eyes never leaving the six droids that circled the core. Every movement they made caused him to jump. What worried him the most were the massive weapons they cradled in their arms. A thin trickle of sweat dripped down his forehead and onto his lower lip. He could taste his own fear. Finally, he stood in front of the last relay circuit. He gingerly pulled the sequence charge from his pack and carefully attached it to the circuit. With a sigh of

relief, he flipped the switch and turned from the core. Without thinking, he started to jog for the corridor. He would contact Harry and they would try to find Jan in the next forty minutes. Hopefully they could, and then they would send this Sith-spawned monstrosity back to the hell it came from. Kyle reached up and tapped his communicator.

"Harry!" he hissed. "Meet me at coordinates 842 mark 324 mark 177. Bring that fancy tricorder of yours and we'll...."

"I'm afraid he won't be able to make it," a booming voice growled.

Kyle whirled around, startled. The sphere had opened and Mohc was stepping free, his armored body glistening in the dim light.

"You see, Harry Kim met with an unfortunate....accident," Mohc said, making a gesture with one hand.

Kyle looked in the direction the General was pointing. Two Borg drones stepped out from behind the core, holding Harry's limp body between them. Harry's head lolled back, his eyes fluttering open. The ensign glanced at the two Borg and then back at Kyle.

"Change of plan?" Harry asked weakly.

Kyle nodded grimly. He had prepared for this eventuality as well. At least two of the charges were in place. Kyle and Harry had agreed that, if they couldn't get away in time, they would still detonate the charges and destroy the ship. Kyle carefully palmed the charges' transmitter and gritted his teeth. He carefully stared at General Mohc defiantly.

"You have something to say, Commander?" the General rumbled.

Kyle nodded.

"See you in hell," he snarled.

With that, he pressed the detonation switch on the transmitter. He braced himself, ready for a wall of fire to erupt from the relay circuit. It would be a quick death, he reassured himself.

Nothing happened. Kyle suppressed a frown and tapped the switch again. Still nothing. That single trickle of sweat turned into a torrent. Mohc chuckled throatily.

"Not quite yet, Commander," Mohc taunted. "I believe these are yours?"

Mohc extended his hand, revealing the other two sequence charges. Kyle's head spun, dizzy with terror. That had been their one shot. The Borg would make it to the Alpha Quadrant. They would overrun Deep Space Nine and soon, the entire United Republic would be assimilated.....

Kyle quickly swallowed his fear and forced a look of defiance on his face. He took a step forward, glaring at Mohc with all the fury he could muster.

"So now what?" he demanded. "You have your little puppets kill Ensign Kim and me? What's the matter, Mohc, afraid to get your hands dirty?"

Mohc chuckled, a sound that chilled Kyle's very being. The massive cyborg took a step forward, the deck plates rumbling beneath his feet.

"On the contrary, Commander Katarn," Mohc growled. "I intend to kill you both myself. It has been a long time since I faced a man in combat. But first....."

Mohc made a gesture towards the sphere. Part of the core flickered for a second, then revealed a viewscreen. On it, *Voyager* sailed forward at warp speed, trailing the Borg cube. Mohc turned back to Kyle.

"....I intend to deal with your meddlesome ship!"

Without warning, the Borg vessel began to fire green energy bolts at *Voyager*. Janeway nearly jumped out of her chair in surprise, but she was able to call out the order for evasive maneuvers.

The ship surged forward and down quickly, dodging the first two blasts. The third, however, hit home. Janeway could feel the floor shudder beneath her feet.

"Aft shields at forty-five percent," Tuvok called calmly from tactical.

"Arm quantum torpedoes and charge phasers!" Janeway ordered.

"What about Harry and Kyle?" B'elanna demanded from her station.

Janeway glanced at the chief engineer. B'elanna locked eyes with the Captain and finally looked away. Janeway turned and nodded to Tuvok. While the security chief carried out his orders, Janeway rose and crossed over to B'elanna.

"I can understand your concerns, B'elanna," Janeway whispered. "I can even sympathize. But if the Borg are firing on us, it likely means that Commander Katarn and Ensign Kim failed. We have to fight back."

B'elanna nodded, steeling herself. Janeway turned back to Tuvok, her face grim.

"Open fire."

Kyle watched as quantum torpedoes and crimson phaser beams lashed out from *Voyager*. Even though he knew that Tuvok's aim would be true and that the shots were connecting with the Borg vessel, he couldn't feel the effects at all. He glanced at Mohc. The General still remained hidden by that gray dome. How he wished he could smash it in and kill the bastard inside. His hands tightened around the phaser rifle. Maybe there was a way....

"Now watch, Commander, as I finish your ship," Mohc chortled.

"Damage was negligible," Tuvok reported.

Janeway bit off a curse. She stared at the Borg ship, which seemed to taunt her from the viewscreen. She whirled back to B'elanna.

"Can we use the polaron beam again?" she suggested.

B'elanna shook her head and replied, "Not without rerouting power from the shields, and I don't think we should do that right now."

Before Janeway could respond, the Borg ship fired again. More green energy bolts slammed through *Voyager's* shields, this time accompanied by golden rays. The ship bucked violently beneath Janeway's feet, throwing her to the floor. Panels on the bridge exploded around her, throwing sparks and flame in every direction.

"Shields have failed!" Tuvok called, picking himself up from the floor. "We have hull breaches on decks five through seven, emergency force fields not responding. Structural integrity field is at forty percent and failing."

"We've got bigger problems!" B'elanna shouted. "One of the deuterium tanks is leaking! If it's not locked down within five minutes, it could destroy us."

Janeway didn't have to say a word. B'elanna was already on her feet, heading for the turbolift. The Captain knew that she would do her best to stop that leak or die trying. It was a futile effort, though. Janeway had other plans.

"Ensign Hanson!" she shouted to the officer at the CONN. "Ready an approach vector and prepare to ram the Borg cube. They aren't going to make it if we can't!"

Kyle blew out a cleansing breath and turned, bringing the phaser rifle up to his shoulder. He had Mohc's head in the middle of his sights. Before he could pull the trigger, though, a white hot burst of plasma smashed the phaser rifle out of his hand. He whirled around, glaring at the large Dark Trooper that had shot him. Mohc turned and shook his head sadly.

"Really, Commander, you disappoint me. I am the Collective. I see through all my people!" Mohc said. "I have half a dozen drones watching you. Do you really think I wouldn't notice your attempt to kill me?"

"I guess not," Kyle said, rubbing his hands to try and dull the pain. "Worth a try, though. Let's just get this over with."

"Gladly."

Mohc suddenly leapt through the air, boosters in his feet carrying him across the distance easily. Kyle barely managed to roll out of the way before the massive cyborg landed on him. He immediately was digging through his pack, trying to draw out his rail gun. Maybe that would put a dent in Mohc's armor. Unfortunately for him, the gun was tangled in the webbing of the pack and wouldn't pull free. Mohc laughed as he watched Kyle struggle.

"You see why we are superior to you, Commander?" Mohc roared. "We are one with our weaponry! Nothing can stop us!"

As if to illustrate his point, Mohc opened fire, white hot globules of plasma slamming into the deck plates around Kyle. He quickly shed his weapons pack, realizing that speed would work better. Maybe there was something in this core that could be used as a weapon. For a second, he glanced at one of the massive weapons the Dark Troopers carried. If he had one of those.....

He blinked, surprised. The weapon was shuddering a bit, as if it were trying to escape the droid's grasp. A crazy idea occurred to him. When he was younger, he read cheap stories about the Jedi Knights. He hadn't believed them at the time since they were too fantastic. In them, Jedi Knights were able to move entire planets with a single thought. But maybe that exaggeration was based on a kernel of truth. He stretched out his hand, trying desperately to will the weapon into his hands. Much to his shock, the weapon began to shake even more. Kyle ducked some more of Mohc's bolts, trying even harder. He threw every ounce of his will into it, picturing the weapon leaping into his hands.

Suddenly, the weapon tore away from the Dark Trooper, sparks flying everywhere. It sailed through the air until it landed in Kyle's hands. He immediately turned and started firing back. The sudden offensive took Mohc by surprise. The large cyborg actually faltered. Unfortunately, Mohc's armor proved to be more durable than Kyle suspected. True, most of his shots with the Dark Trooper's weapon hit home, but the energy simply cascaded off the General's body like water.

"Get him, Commander!" Harry offered.

Mohc turned and snarled, "Oh, shut up!"

A rocket shot from the General's weapon, exploding on the ground in front of Harry. The human and his two Borg captors were thrown off their feet. Harry's head ricocheted off the ground and he was still. Kyle felt a stab of pain flash through him. He had to end this and get Harry back to *Voyager*. How did Mohc fire that rocket?

As Mohc and Kyle fought, several hundred eyes were on them. Mohc had ordered all of the drones in the vicinity to observe the fight. Some were to analyze Kyle's strategy. Others were to maintain the attack on *Voyager*. Still others were regulated to merely record the battle for Mohc's later enjoyment.

One of the drones, however, was observing the fight with a sense of confusion. True, the Collective gave it a sense of order and understanding. It knew that the ship called *Voyager* and these small beings were trying to stop the Borg and deserved to be obliterated, but still, it couldn't help but be bewildered. There was something familiar about that man fighting the General. It took a step forward, staring at the strange human. Why was he so familiar?

The drone then turned to stare at the human that lay prostrate on the ground. The sensors that were a part of it could tell that he was dying, but for some reason it couldn't explain, that made the drone.....sad. There was a definite feeling of grief welling up from some unknown source. The Collective noticed it and tried to quash it, but the drone fought back, trying desperately to understand.

For some reason, the drone was compelled to look at its hand. It made no sense. Although it couldn't understand why, the drone knew that something significant was on its left hand. It looked down, its sensors noticing the complex carbon crystal embedded in a gold loop. The drone's analytical side attached little value to it, but yet, the drone knew what it was.....

.....Harry's engagement ring.....

.....Harry Kim's pledge to love her forever.....

.....Kyle Katarn's friendship.....

.....*Voyager*.....

.....no!

The drone's eyes went wide. How could she have forgotten? She staggered forward in shock. Neither Mohc nor Kyle noticed the sudden movement since both men were intent on obliterating each other.

"Harry....." she whispered in a hoarse voice. Whatever control the Collective had on her began to slip and Jan Ors came crashing back into existence. Without warning, she turned on Mohc and screamed, "NO!"

Mohc whirled around, staring at the drone as if struck. Kyle stopped fighting as well. Jan raced forward, swinging her arms wildly.

"You can't!" she screamed.

As she ran towards the General, a look of understanding finally washed over Kyle's face.

"Jan!" he whispered in horror.

The Borg who used to be his best friend smashed into the General, knocking him to the ground. She turned to Kyle, her eyes flashing with murder.

"Kyle, get Harry and go!" she shrieked desperately, wrestling with the General for his weapon.

"We can't leave you!" Kyle replied, taking a few steps toward her.

"Damn you, go!" Jan replied.

A strange transporter beam suddenly enveloped both Kyle and Harry. Before Kyle could say another word, he was gone. Jan smiled to herself, knowing that whatever part of the Collective she had wrested from Mohc had just transported the two men she loved most back to *Voyager*. Finally, she turned to Mohc, giving him a sadistic smile.

"Assimilate this," she snarled.

Before Mohc could stop her, Jan slapped the secondary fire trigger on the General's weapon. A rocket burst from its launcher, smashing through Moch's armored helmet. It detonated immediately, ripping through Mohc's body with fire and debris. Jan could feel the General's death throes, as could the rest of the Borg on the ship. A cacophony of Borg screams began to reverberate and echo down the corridors of the ship as explosions ripped through the vessel. Without Mohc's control, the Collective was nothing. Without Mohc's unity, the ship could not regulate itself. Without Mohc, the ship couldn't exist.

Jan began to sob as the incredible pain of pure chaos wracked her mind and body. A wall of fire erupted from the core and washed down the deck towards her and Mohc's dead body.

"Harry....." she whispered.

Janeway was about to order Ensign Hanson to ram the Borg vessel, but a flash of light stopped her. She whirled around and was surprised to see Kyle and Harry lying on the bridge.

"What happened?" she demanded, her last minute course of action temporarily forgotten.

"I'm not....sure," Kyle said, looking around the bridge, confused.

"Captain," Tuvok called. "The Borg ship is self-destructing."

"What?" Janeway asked, turning to the viewscreen in surprise.

Sure enough, small eruptions of fire were beginning to burst through the Borg cube. Those were followed by larger ones, then even larger ones. Janeway finally shook herself out of her wonder and took a step towards Hanson.

"Ensign Hanson, get us away....."

Her order was cut off by the sudden explosion of the entire Borg vessel. Debris and energy flew in all directions, followed by a massive shock wave. Within moments, the shock wave smashed through *Voyager*, tossing it end over end. The inertial dampeners strained to stabilize the ship, but the sudden force was too much for them. The crew was slammed against the bulkheads, the ceilings, back to the floors, over and over again before finally, the ship righted itself. Lights flickered and died all over *Voyager*. Janeway picked herself up from the floor, wincing at the sight of her own blood on her hands. She could feel a nasty gash in her forehead. She carefully turned to Tuvok, who took a few seconds to look over his panel.

"Extensive damage to the entire ship," he said, shrugging. Even a Vulcan could understand the obviousness of that statement. "The warp drive is off-line, as are the impulse engines. We are without shields, navigation, weapons, or internal communications and life support is failing."

"But we are alive," Janeway pointed out. "Let's make sure our ship survives as well."

"Captain's log, Stardate 51852.8. It has been two months since the destruction of the Borg vessel and life has yet to get back to normal on *Voyager*. We have managed to restore most of the systems to a minimal level. We can only travel under impulse power at the moment, but Lieutenant Commander Torres is confident she can have the warp engines on-line by late tomorrow. We are completely without weapons right now, but in our condition, we couldn't put up much of a fight anyway. It has been a difficult decision, but we are limping back to the wormhole. I am declaring our covert mission at an end. At these speeds, though, it will take us at least two days before we get back home.

"Personal log supplemental. While our systems may be back on-line for the most part, our lives are still in shambles. We lost over thirty members of our crew to the Borg, and it has formed a rift in our surrogate family that is not healing easily. That is especially true of Ensign Kim....."

Neelix quickly ran to another table, carrying another order. The mess hall had always been busy, but it was doubly so now. For some reason he couldn't explain, his little safe haven had escaped serious damage. Not only that, but Captain Janeway had ordered all frivolous power consumption curtailed. That meant no holodecks, no entertainment from the computer, nothing. So most of the crew came to the mess hall to socialize.

All of them, that is, except for Harry Kim. The young ensign never seemed to talk with anybody. He merely came into the mess hall and took a seat by the window, staring at the stars for hours on end. Normally, Neelix would talk to him, try to cheer him up, but now wasn't the time. The young man needed his own time to grieve.

Neelix looked up as the doors opened and Seven of Nine strode in. The young woman surveyed the mess hall with a cool detachment that gave Neelix the creeps. Even though the ex-Borg was

truly free of the Collective now, she still frightened Neelix. Most of the crew didn't like her either. She represented the force that had ripped so many of their loved ones out of their lives. She was an object to be hated, reviled. If she knew that, Seven didn't say anything. She merely went about her duties silently, performing them with the efficiency only an ex-Borg could possess.

Seven focused on Neelix and strode through the crowd, ignoring the nasty whispers of the crew. Neelix calmed himself, hoping that he wouldn't appear too intimidated.

"You are Neelix, the cook?" she asked coolly.

"I...I like to think of myself as many things, but....yes, I'm the cook," Neelix stammered.

"The Doctor informs me that I am ready to consume solid food. He suggested I speak with you about my first meal," Seven explained.

"Why not make it your last meal?" one of the crew members muttered under his breath.

Neelix chose to ignore the comment. He immediately went behind the counter, trying to find something relatively bland that wouldn't upset the Borg's stomach.

"Let's see here," he muttered to himself, rummaging through the kitchen. "Too spicy.....too hot....much too sweet....saving that for the Captain....here we go!"

Neelix held up a plate of sliced fruit. Juice was pooling underneath the pieces and a distinctly sour smell filled the air. Seven's head snapped back, her nose wrinkled from the pungent odor.

"Endorian water gourds!" Neelix exclaimed. "Perfect for a first meal! Not too harsh on the stomach! Huh?"

Seven's face remained passive the entire time but she replied slowly, "That will be.....acceptable."

"Wonderful!" Neelix said, motioning Seven towards a table.

Since the mess hall was so full, Neelix had little choice but to set the plate of gourds on a table that six crew members were seated around. Seven followed the Tallaxian, glancing at the crew members stoically. Their response was harsh glares.

"Don't seat that bitch here," one of them snarled.

Neelix smiled amicably, hoping that he could diffuse the situation, asking, "Well, she doesn't have any place else to sit, now does she?"

His appeal to pragmatism fell on deaf ears. As Seven sat down and stared at the gourds, the crew members shied away from her. Neelix sighed. It would likely take some time for the crew to accept Seven. There was little that he could do to help.

Seven carefully pulled a piece of the gourd from the plate, noting with a suppressed sense of disgust that the fruit was extremely sticky. As she raised the gourd to her lips, a large chunk of a white, slimy substance smacked the side of her face. She carefully wiped the goo from her cheek, turning to see who attacked her. There were plenty of suspects. Just about every crew member in the mess hall regarded her with venomous hostility. She stared back with passivity, turning back to her meal. Once again, before she could even take a bite, the plate of gourds was knocked off the table.

"Get out of here, you monster!" a voice growled.

Before Seven could react, her chair was knocked over. The crew members started cheering, most of them calling for Seven's death. The former Borg drone lay on the floor, unsure of what to do. If she were still part of the Collective, her fellow drones would have responded and pacified the attackers. If worse came to worse, the Dark Troopers would be used. Now, though, she could only lie on the floor and accept the Voyager crew members' screams of rage.

The one who knocked her to the floor looked like he was getting ready to kick her when a voice cut through the shouting, "Stop it!"

Without warning, Harry Kim tackled the crew member to the ground. Before anyone could react, the ensign was back on his feet, blocking the crew members' way to Seven. Fury burned in his eyes as he faced off against her attackers.

"Stop it right now!" he fumed. "I know that the Borg killed your friends and family. It's not her fault!"

"She's a Borg!" someone pointed out nastily. "That makes it her fault."

"What about my fiance,?" Harry shot back. "She was a Borg as well, and yet she saved us. It's not fair to judge Seven. She had nothing to do with the attack on Voyager! Now back off! She's just as unique as the rest of us."

Harry looked over the crowd, glaring at each crew member. As he did, he continued, "Some of you were Maquis. Some of you attacked Cardassia Prime, a planet of mostly civilians. Maybe the very idea of that much violence turns your stomach now, but you all started somewhere. Seven is starting out now. We have to let her discover herself, just as well all did."

The doors to the mess hall hissed open and Tuvok jogged in, phaser drawn and flanked by two of his security officers. The Vulcan immediately assessed the situation and realized that Harry was in control, at least temporarily.

"Is there a problem?" Tuvok asked loudly, making sure he attracted the attention of everyone present.

Harry stared at the other crew members, who looked away ashamed. They began to file back to their places, not saying a word. Finally, Harry turned to Tuvok.

"It seems like things are back under control, sir," he said evenly.

"Very well, Ensign," Tuvok replied.

The Vulcan turned and left the mess hall, his two officers in tow. Harry turned and helped Seven up from the floor. The former Borg drone stared at Harry quizzically.

"Why did you help me?" she asked, frowning. "Your fianc, was assimilated by the Borg."

Harry smiled grimly and replied, "Part of me is angry at you, but I know it's not your fault. You're just re-entering the human race, and you can't do that if everyone around you hates you."

With that, Harry went back to his solitary table and sat down. Seven stood in the middle of the mess hall, considering what he said. Finally, she moved over to Harry's table. Harry turned and looked at her expectantly.

"May I....join you, Ensign?" she asked tentatively.

Harry gave a weak smile and motioned to the chair across from him. Seven sat down and looked out the window, frowning. Her eyes darted from star to star, not sure of what she should do next. She finally turned to Harry.

"What is the purpose of this activity?" she asked.

Harry turned to her and shrugged.

"Jan and I...." Harry's voice caught slightly as he spoke. He closed his eyes painfully for a few seconds before continuing. "Jan and I used to come here all the time. We used to stare at the stars for hours. She used to say that we could see the future out there. I think I'm just trying to see what she saw....."

Harry turned back and stared at the stars. Seven turned and watched as well. While she couldn't see the future out there, she could sense the peace within her grow. Maybe she could survive here after all.

Janeway slowly paced the bridge, trying desperately not to groan. True, her crew was performing admirably. Most of the damage done by the Borg had been repaired, but there was still

more to be done. B'elanna was still doing the final checks on the newly repaired warp core. Tuvok had almost restored partial power to the shields. *Voyager* was beginning to behave like a Starfleet ship again, but it was far from being complete.

The stress of the constant work had begun to take its toll. Janeway had heard about the attack on Seven the other day. Similar fights and arguments were beginning to break out all over the ship. It had been a hard two months. Thankfully, they were close to the wormhole. Once the warp engines were back on-line, it would be a quick jaunt and they would be home. The first order of business, Janeway mused with a smile, would be shore leave on Bajor for everyone. At least six months of it. Maybe more.

The turbolift doors opened and Kyle stepped through. The first officer's face was drenched in sweat, and bags lined his eyes. Out of all the crew members, Kyle had dedicated the most time to repairing the ship. Janeway suspected it had something to do with losing Jan on the Borg vessel. Maybe the work helped Kyle to forget. Whatever the reason, he had personally restored power to the replicators, sealed over a dozen micro-fractures, and repaired the short range sensors, the main deflector, and the navigational systems.

"We almost have communications, Captain," he reported. "I've managed to realign one of the transmitters. We can't contact Deep Space Nine from here, but we'll be able to hail them when we make it through the wormhole."

"What about long range sensors?" she asked hopefully.

Kyle shrugged and replied, "Limited, but they're up. We might be able to tell if we pass a planet accidentally."

Janeway smiled weakly. It was the first one she had mustered in a long, long time. She came down from the engineering station and collapsed in her chair with a groan. Kyle smiled and sat down as well.

"How are you holding up, Captain?" he whispered.

Janeway shrugged and replied, "I've been better. So has this ship."

"When's the last time you slept?" he prodded gently.

Janeway glanced at him wryly and countered, "When's the last time you did?"

Kyle chuckled and held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, you got me. At least we'll be home soon."

Janeway closed her eyes and smiled. It had been too long. Soon, she would see Jack again. She could go back to Earth, maybe take a few months leave to recover. For a while, she would try to forget about the Dominion, about death.....about everything.

"Captain!" the ensign at OPS cried out. "I'm picking up about thirty Star Destroyers heading our way.....plus three Super Star Destroyers."

Janeway was immediately on her feet. "On screen!"

The viewscreen sputtered for a few seconds before a grainy image appeared. Sure enough, a massive Dominion fleet was bearing down on them at warp speed. Janeway turned to Kyle and grimaced. There was no way they would survive this. With partial shields and no weapons, *Voyager* was as good as dead. She turned back to the viewscreen, trying to keep herself calm. At any moment, she expected the fleet to drop out of warp, fire their turbolasers a few times, and that would be it.

Surprisingly, though, the Dominion fleet didn't stop. They didn't even slow down. Janeway could feel the deckplates rumble beneath her feet, the ship vibrating slightly as the massive ships blew by them. Janeway turned back to Kyle, frowning.

"They're headed for the Alpha Quadrant," Kyle breathed. "Deep Space Nine.....it doesn't stand a chance!"

"We've got to warn them!" Janeway said. "Commander, go and work on the other transmitters. We have twenty minutes before they reach the wormhole."

"I'm on it," Kyle said, leaping up from his seat and heading for the turbolift.

Suddenly, though, the deck plates began to rattle even more. It felt as if the entire ship was about to shake to pieces. Janeway had to reach out and steady herself. Kyle turned, looking around, confused.

"Captain!" the ensign at OPS shouted. "I've got something.....massive approaching us at high warp speeds! I'm reading a transwarp engine....."

Before the officer could finish, *Voyager* suddenly rocked violently, being tossed end over end. Janeway flew into a wall, her head bouncing off the bulkhead. Within seconds, the ship had stabilized itself and the Captain picked herself up off the floor. She was immediately jogging over to OPS.

"Let me see the readings," she demanded.

The ensign got out of the way, allowing the Captain to call up the sensors information of the object. For a few moments, the information was jumbled as the sensors tried desperately to realign themselves. Then the readings became clear. Janeway's face paled when she saw what had blown by them. It was bad enough a fleet of Dominion ships was on its way to the Alpha Quadrant. This made things infinitely worse.

Janeway started towards the CONN, calling out as she went: "Janeway to engineering."

"Torres here, Captain," B'elanna's voice replied. "What the hell was that?"

"No time, B'elanna!" Janeway replied. "I need warp speed, and I need it ten minutes ago."

"We were just about to perform the final checks now, Captain...."

"Forget it. Get the warp core on-line. I need to be at...." Janeway called up the sensor analysis and blinked when she saw the object's velocity. "....at least warp eight point seven in fifteen seconds!"

"You've got it, Captain," Torres replied.

Janeway sat down at the CONN and waited. Within seconds, the warp engines came on line. Without waiting for the systems to fully initialize, Janeway plotted a course for the wormhole and took the ship to warp nine. The ship groaned in protest, but Janeway ignored it. She focused on the task at hand. She had to make it to the wormhole before that object did. There was no room for error. *Voyager* had to make it first and that was that. If they didn't.....she didn't want to think about it. They had to.....

"If we don't, may God have mercy on their souls," Janeway whispered.

TO BE CONTINUED

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The idea was mine, so there.

E-mail me at j*****u and let me know what you think of the story

God bless!