

The Touch Of A Hand

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Summary: Endgame fix. Even if everything fell apart, they still have what is most important.

Disclaimer: None of this is mine; it's all in Paramount Pictures' possession. Unfortunately. If it was mine, I would give it to the great fanfic authors out there and have them make something better of it. Anyway. No copyright infringement intended.

Author's Note: I was always waiting for the moment the crew would finally return home. I was so looking forward to it. But then Endgame came and I... I cried. Not because I was happy or relieved. No, because I felt it was wrong. I remember thinking: What now? They'd spent seven years together, one ship, alone in an unknown quadrant, with only themselves to rely on. They were so much more than just a crew, just colleagues. They were a family. And by returning home, this family was going to be ripped apart.

To the day, whenever I watch the final minutes of Endgame, I can't help but still cry. So this story is - after nine years (the finale was aired in Germany in 2002) my personal attempt to get some... closure. I've never written a Voyager fanfic before, but now that I've finally decided to try it, this is something I have to get out of my system first before I tend to my other ideas. I don't know whether it's entirely in character, but I hope you like it anyways.

The last line was inspired by Doctor Who. I loved the scene in which it was said.

Ships. Countless ships. So familiar. So well-known.

No one on Voyager's bridge dared to believe what they were seeing. There was a whole fleet, filling the view screen, giving evidence that it was true. They all knew it was. And yet, after seven long years, it seemed more unbelievable than everything they'd encountered on their journey.

Voyager had returned.

The Lost Crew was home.

It was a picture that would forever be imprinted in their minds; one that would never again leave them. It was what they had waited to see for such a long time. The Alpha Quadrant. Starfleet. And, ultimately, Earth.

"We're being hailed," Harry Kim informed his captain, Kathryn Janeway, from his station, and his voice sounded as breathless as the commanding officer felt. Breathless because of the wave of emotions crushing down on her.

"On screen." Janeway's heart beat loudly in her chest when the view on the screen changed from a space filled with Starfleet ships to the one of Owen Paris and Reginald Barclay, looking at them in complete and utter surprise. Bewilderment even. "Sorry to surprise you." It was an for her unusual and therefore awfully weak voice she heard from her own mouth when she spoke. "Next time we'll call ahead." Was that really happening?

"Welcome back." Admiral Paris' words sounded heartfelt, and she was sure it was meant genuinely. But for some reason, it left her with an empty feeling inside.

"It's good to be here." Her voice was raspy, and for a moment, she feared that every ounce of self-control still existing within her would leave her; let her break down in sobs. Seven years, countless encounters with hostile aliens, unnumbered negotiations with relentless cultures, one dangerous space phenomenon after another, and she barely ever so much as blinked. Now, however...

"How did you-"

"It will all be in my report, Sir." She didn't care about protocol right now, about how inappropriate interrupting an admiral was. The older Paris, however, didn't seem to mind. He simply smiled.

"I look forward to it." And his and the picture of a still-speechless Barclay vanished, being replaced again by the ship-full space.

"Thanks for your help, Admiral Janeway," she murmured, her voice low, some irrational part of her hoping that her words would overcome the boundaries of time and space and tell her future self that they'd made it.

They were home.

They'd finally reached what they'd been working for so hard for over half a decade.

But why didn't she feel as euphoric as she ever imagined she would be?

"Sickbay to the bridge." The sound signaling an incoming message over the internal comm. system startled her, brought her back from her thoughts. The Doctor's delighted voice came along with the unmistakable sounds of a baby. "Doctor to Lieutenant Paris. There's someone here who'd like to say hello." The newest member of the Voyager family, the captain added in her mind. Somewhere behind her, there was a low chuckle, and without looking, Janeway knew it was Harry. Knew without looking that they were all smiling.

"You better get down there, Tom," Janeway told her pilot softly, a gentle smile filling her face as well, and he agreed with a joyful "Yes, Ma'am.", immediately leaving the bridge to get to his little family.

She felt so happy for him, for what he had achieved. How far he'd come. How far they all had come. She was proud of him and each and every other single crewmember. They had been to hell and back - standing together, working together, learning from each other over the course of time. There was so much to celebrate, so much to be delighted and enthusiastic about.

And yet her smile faltered when she turned around to address her first officer, her momentary joy quickly replaced again by that terrible sadness and an indefinable sense of failure.

"Mr. Chakotay. The helm."

"Aye, Captain." When the commander walked down from the bridge's upper level to Paris' station, Janeway herself slowly made her way to her chair and sat down. There was this gut-wrenching thought somewhere in the back of her mind that this probably was the very last time she would ever take place in this chair, as a captain to this wonderful crew; that while everyone around her gained so much, she would lose everything that mattered to her. Desperately she tried to push those thoughts away, but they bore of a cruel resistance, threatening to completely choke her voice with tears. She swallowed hard, her body trembling, and formulated words well used, but now sounding so strange. So wrong.

"Set a course... for home."

All this time in the Delta Quadrant, searching for a way home, and Janeway had never felt uncomfortable sitting in her Captain's Chair. Until now. As Voyager began to move, her captain soon became restless herself. This was supposed to be the last time she sat in her seat - but, for what it was worth, it wasn't where she felt she belonged. Or more, where she belonged without her first officer at her side.

Slowly she rose and stepped down towards the helm. She didn't say anything; she simply stood behind Chakotay, her body shielding his one shoulder from the rest of the bridge officers when she laid a hand on that shoulder, squeezing gently. She wasn't expecting much of a, if any, reaction from him; nor was the gesture primarily meant for him. She merely wanted to give herself some kind of personal moment.

For one, to assure herself that, for the time being, they all were still here. They were still together, the crew of the USS Voyager, the people who had started out from two antagonistic crews and become friends - who had become a family. Now that their time as a crew came to an end, every single second of the remaining hours together appeared more important than the past seven years ever could have.

But it was also for the sake of one last memory of the bond between them, the captain and her first officer, the command team who'd gone through so much, side by side, for she was sure that they were never again going to serve together. Was it her knowledge of protocol and Starfleet procedures, or was it just premonition - she didn't know. She just knew that this was going to end soon. They would leave this ship so full of memories, and they would never return - not as they were now.

In all the craziness of their return, she needed to know that at least for now, and if only for another short while, there was this one constant she'd come to rely on so much for the better part of a decade; there was the man whom she once had been supposed to hunt and take prisoner, and who had turned out to be the one person she trusted most - on this ship, in this quadrant... Yes, even in the whole universe, of which she had seen quite a bit.

Janeway was so lost in her musings that, when Chakotay suddenly reacted with a movement of his own, it seemed to intrude her private moment of recollecting memories. But only almost.

There wasn't much to do at the helm's controls once the course was laid in. It was an easy flight and nothing that was really demanding his undivided attention. Earth was so close they, figuratively speaking, could have reached out and touched it, and there was an escort of more than a dozen other ships. If there had ever been an easy task in seven adventurous years, this one undoubtedly qualified as such.

Her fingers felt slightly cold when Chakotay's found them on his shoulder, and he covered her smaller hand with his larger and, more importantly, warmer one, entwining their fingers gently, their thumbs caressing each other by a only a hint of movement. His head told him that right then, he should have been with Seven, with his newfound lover, but for reasons he couldn't - or maybe didn't want to - fathom, his heart protested, claiming it would have been wrong. Instead, sharing this moment of subtle privacy, intimacy even, with Kathryn in the astonished quiet on the bridge seemed so much more like the right thing to do.

Even so the physical coolness of her fingers only slowly faded, there was an unmistakably, literal warmth in the gesture. It had so much meaning that it nearly overwhelmed them. It didn't show on their faces, no. They didn't move, didn't even twitch a single muscle in any way. On the outside, they appeared as if there was nothing unusual happening; it was nothing more than a commanding officer accompanying her second-in-command by standing close to him, like they'd done so often in the past. Because the command team was bound to have some close and special connection.

They were captain and commander, obviously silently rejoicing that they'd brought their crew home after all those years.

On the inside, however, there was nothing of captain and commander, nothing of the ordinariness a moment shared between them should have had.

Over the years, Kathryn had always found great comfort in Chakotay's presence, his calm attitude, his spirituality and compassion. His gentle dark eyes. And his sometimes mischievous, sometimes cheerful, but always reassuring smile. Likewise, the commander's devotion to his captain had blossomed from the realization that she indeed had given him back this feeling of inner peace, of settling down after fighting for so long, like he had told her back on New Earth.

With the prospect of parting soon, of having the crew split up, both felt even more drawn to each other, to the comfort the other was giving them, than ever before. It was as if they needed to try and at least hold on to each other when everything else they've come to get used to, they've come to *love*, was so close to falling apart.

The touch of their hands was their way of silently agreeing on never leaving the other. Maybe their respective paths would take them into different directions, but whatever was going to happen next, they would hold on to this moment, to their friendship, and what else this bond between them symbolized.

When they tenderly squeezed each other's hand at exact the same moment, they knew right then that, whatever would follow now, no one would ever be able to take that touch full of meaning and promises from them.

Because in the cold and ruthless depths of the universe, they had the most important of things:

A hand to hold.

END