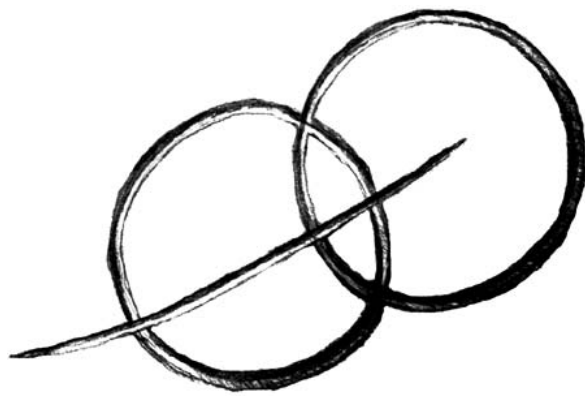


THE
CARDASSIAN
MASK



A STAR TREK: *VOYAGER* NOVEL

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

L.R. BOWEN

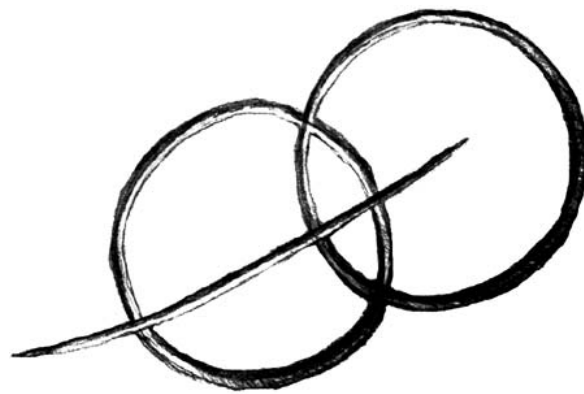


THE CARDASSIAN MASK





THE
CARDASSIAN
MASK



A STAR TREK: *VOYAGER* NOVEL

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY
L. R. BOWEN

Star Trek: *Voyager* copyright by Paramount Pictures, Inc. Characters, their distinctive likenesses and the Star Trek universe are the property of Paramount. Story and illustrations copyright 1996, 1997 by L.R. Bowen. This work is not intended to infringe on any Paramount copyrights, and is not being sold for the author's profit. It may not be reprinted, excerpted, adapted, posted, electronically archived or otherwise used or circulated without the express written consent of the author. Permission is given to circulate the electronic version available from the author's web site without charge and with all identifying information, the author's name and disclaimers intact. The illustrations, including those posted on the web site, may not be photocopied, scanned, uploaded or otherwise reproduced or circulated without the express written consent of the artist.

<http://members.aol.com/lrbowen/lrbowen.htm>

Second Printing
Second Edition
June 1997
Printed in the USA

DEDICATION



"THE CARDASSIAN MASK" is dedicated with love to Michelle Green. She read every word of it as it was produced, read every incremental revision, urged its completion on innumerable occasions, provided commentary and criticism and encouragement beyond measure. This work would have taken a very different route without her input, and without the author's unwholesome zeal for leaving her over weekends with cliffhanger endings to chapters.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A GREAT MANY PEOPLE helped with various elements of this work at all stages of its composition. Most of them are denizens of the alt.startrek.creative newsgroup and of Star Trek email lists. It is not an exaggeration to say that the sheer vitality of the online Star Trek fan fiction community has given the author much of her energy in creation for the last year and a half.

This novel would not exist at all without Gene Roddenberry's Star Trek universe and its latest incarnation in *Voyager*. Thanks to Rick Berman, Jeri Taylor, and Michael Piller for the first two seasons. I've loved Star Trek since childhood, when all we had was reruns of the original series and the first

movie was only a gleam in Paramount's eye. But *Voyager* is hands down the version that has inspired the most reaction from me, in the form of fan fiction.

MANUSCRIPT READERS and commenters: Macedon, who raised an eyebrow at mixed metaphors; Claire Gabriel, who pointed out the larger flies in the ointment. Mary Eichbauer, Becca O, Diavolessa, Kit Montana, Joan Testin, Diane Nichols, Jennifer Pelland, Laura Williams, JoAnne Soper-Cook for substantial feedback and nitpicks. Many others for general comments.

AID WITH DETAILS of fact and fancy: Macedon, for Native American spirituality; Rachel Wyman for Klingon expressions. Errors and overenthusiastic extrapolations are mine alone.

AID WITH DESIGN: Kit Montana.

PICTURE RESOURCE: Meri and her tireless video capture board.

PREFACE

THIS NOVEL was originally intended as a short story. Bet you've heard that one before. Its composition began approximately one week after the episode "State of Flux" first aired in March 1995. As more episodes aired, I incorporated more facts and details until the MS was substantially complete in early November 1995. At that point, I sent it to a number of readers who gave excellent feedback and encouragement. When "Maneuvers" aired later that month, it confirmed many of the themes already established, but I had to decide how to integrate all the new information about Seska. Work progressed slowly, with other projects taking up my attention until February 1996, when the present novel began to take shape. It reached its final form in May/June 1996, after all the second season's episodes had aired.

I couldn't take every element of the *Voyager* timeline into account, since I had to cut it off somewhere in order to finish writing! I decided to set the story at the end of the first season, after "Learning Curve" and before "The 37s", since it is basically a response to that set of shows. The stardate assigned to it reflects that placement. Details and foreshadowing from the second season crept in during revision. As a result, "The

Cardassian Mask" will fit into canon up to the events of "Resolutions", at the end of the second season. Since the Janeway/Chakotay relationship took a welcome but unexpected turn in that episode, nearly all J/C fan fiction that had been written up to that point was made non-canon, and "The Cardassian Mask" is no exception. This story exists in the universe created by so many fan authors; that of a possible route these two might have taken towards connection, given their friendship and attraction so tantalizingly offered on the show itself.

I'd like to make it clear that this is an adult novel, not meant for minors. This is not primarily an erotic work, but it contains some strong language and intense situations that may upset sensitive people. If you don't enjoy reading about sexual matters, be warned.

"The Cardassian Mask" is intended for those who enjoy *Voyager* and its principal characters. It's an homage to Star Trek and to Trek fans, an expansion on a shared universe. It is not meant as theft or infringement, but as an expression of love and dedication and acknowledgment of potential. It has this in common with countless other fan works worldwide. If one can judge a work by what it inspires in others, *Voyager* has reached an extraordinary standard.

L. R. Bowen
LRBowen@aol.com

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Frontispiece. "...in commanded to commander lies the substance of my vow."
2. Frontispiece to Part One. "She could think about him more intently when he was not present."
3. Page 35. "Two circles, one overlapping the other, with a line indicating movement."
4. Page 59. "The high whine of Chakotay's phaser."
5. Frontispiece to Part Two. "She slipped an ugly little weapon out of her sleeve."
6. Page 99. "...a lentil-shaped black disk about the size of her thumbnail."
7. Page 102. "...the sharp stiletto she was using to prepare fruit for his breakfast."
8. Frontispiece to Part Three. "For one horrible moment he was sure she knew what he had done to persuade her of his devotion."
9. Page 119. "The stuff fractured to a microscopically sharp edge."
10. Page 138. "Should she call out to him to let him know she was there...?"
11. Frontispiece to Part Four. "She made him recite every moment of his thoughts to her, sitting quietly with the tears running down her perfect face, nodding occasionally."
12. Page 171. "Morning on *Voyager* did not come with a sunrise."
13. Endpiece. "Until you settled at my side..."

All illustrations are copyright 1996 and 1997 by L.R. Bowen.

FIRST OFFICER



A smooth white fledgling swan, that spreads her wings like sails;
Her captain said to me, "Put our differences aside."
I walk her deck plates now, run my hands along her rails,
The uniform I tore away I wear again with pride.

I was a captain once; I may never be again:
The flock that I commanded orbits now another sun.
If I could choose once more, throw the gulf between us twain,
What says the star that I would seek would be a different one?

This lady's mine. I'd give my eyes to see her safe from harm;
I'd give my hands to help her but a mile along her way;
Her head I may not be, but I am her strong right arm;
My heart lies in her keeping, though gain home it never may.

Commander to commanded is my highest duty now,
But in commanded to commander lies the substance of my vow.



PART ONE: GARDENS



CHAPTER ONE

THE UNIVERSE of stars.

Kathryn Janeway looked out of the viewport in her quarters and realized that any part of the galaxy, of many galaxies, might look much the same to her from the warm haven of her bed. The many colors of the lights, never so visible from a planet's surface as from airless space, the delicate tendrils and clouds of the nebulae, the glow of new stars still obscured by the dust that had given them birth. Janeway had seen similar vistas far closer to home, and there was nothing in this one to prove to her that she and her ship were a lifetime's travel from familiar places.

She turned over, and sighed, not sadly, and put her arm out to the right where the bed was empty. It was not made for two, the bed in the captain's quarters, but she always slept to one side anyway, leaving a little room for someone who was not there. It made the bed seem warmer, somehow. Her loose hair slipped across the pillows as she slowly sat up, and fell against her back with the softest of sounds, and a touch like a gentle hand on the fabric of her nightgown. Dreaming about Mark? Someone who was not there. Her shadowy lover vanished with the first waking thoughts, always. But she had a smile for the morning, and for the stars.

"Computer, play program Janeway Epsilon Two," she said, and a happy fiddle tune, her wake-up music, drifted through the room as the lights came up. The flowers in the vases greeted her, and a medium-sized heap of data PADDs on her desk in the sitting area, visible through the open door. It wasn't yet time to get to work, but the reminders of it were everywhere, even in her most private spot. Janeway shrugged off her gown and left it in a little pink heap as she moved to the bathroom to take a shower. Her hair needed washing today, and she had thirty minutes still before she had planned to eat breakfast, so she could take her time and make a small luxury out of it. The tune of the fiddle was a good one to hum with, so she hummed as she worked out the knots with a brush in front of the mirror and stepped into the shower. Her favorite shampoo, with a little scent to it, and

several minutes just to stand and let the warmth surround her.

The dryer had her hair smooth and shining in an instant after she finished and stepped out, and she swept it up and pinned it quickly, letting the wave in front relax over her forehead. Somewhat more flattering, though still controlled; not bad. Janeway had been experimenting with her hair lately. She surveyed the effect, hands on hips, reached for her cosmetics, put on a stroke of lipstick, reentered the bedroom and dressed. The uniform had just come out of the cleaning cycle and hung crisp and smooth in her closet next to a spare and a few outfits for special occasions. A diaphanous scarf hurriedly draped over a beige dress. Lifted by the air as she opened the door, it floated to the floor, and she bent automatically to pick it up, but hesitated.

She should have put that away, or given it to someone else. The scarf was lovely, but the memories associated with it still rankled. Janeway drew it into her hands, feeling the impossibly light gossamer pass through her fingers, almost not registering as a solid substance, the veiling a nearly invisible wash of color. Beautiful, but an illusion. The Sikarians were generous with trivial pleasure, but had denied *Voyager* their space-folder, that had been a brief bright hope for the homeward journey. And the consequence? Near-mutiny, *Voyager* almost destroyed, a new friend in disgrace, an old friend sacrificing her absolute trust in him to do what she could not. Torres had returned to her work, chastened, and Tuvok stepped carefully now, the rift in what had been perfect understanding never to fully close again. Janeway folded the scarf and put it in a drawer.

The wall chronometer still gave her five minutes. The captain did not stand a regular duty shift, as she was on call all the time, but she liked a predictable schedule on days that were not disrupted by any of the myriad oddities of the Delta Quadrant. She picked up her nightgown, folded it on the pillow, straightened the covers, and left for breakfast. As she passed First Officer Chakotay's quarters, just down the corridor on the way to the turbolift, she heard him stirring.



HE WOULD have given a month's pay, not that he had much use for it out here, just to see the sun rise on trees and hills and to feel the movement of early breezes on his face. Ironic, he thought, that a man who had chosen to leave the orb of his birth should long for it now, out among the stars where he had always meant to make his home. But he had dreamed of forests again, and of a view of lakes from a high place. The most restless wanderer must sometimes circle back to touch the earth once more.

Chakotay threw the covers back and rolled naked out of bed, stretched to his greatest height with a discreet crackle of joints, bent and touched his toes. He was going to have to do a lot of walking today and wanted to limber up, his muscles tight from lack of running room. *Voyager's* chronic shortages—space, crew, power, food—needed constant attention, and in a couple of hours he would be leading an away team to gather food on a planet Neelix had recommended. *Voyager* had changed course at Janeway's order, and they were due in orbit just after breakfast. Though Neelix had burred on about the scenery, Chakotay's expectations were not too high, but this was a precious chance to get out of doors.

He sat cross-legged on the floor and closed his eyes for a moment. Here, in this cabin he was gradually filling with the work of his hands, he was beginning to find the home he needed. His medicine bundle was safely hidden where it belonged, and the medicine wheel he had painted was rolled on a shelf around the guiding stones that gave it power. He had taken a stone from each planet *Voyager* had visited, and put a mark on it that gave it the capacity to hold a piece of the natural spirit of the place. He had quite a little collection now, but none of them was very new. Weeks now since he had breathed air that had the scent of leaves and water, or looked out a window that had a sky beyond. His gaze lingered on the stars in the viewport as he chanted quietly, pausing to hear the answering notes from the lives all around him. They were here with him, and he could take some comfort from that fact alone, and not miss the ones who were gone quite as much. Those who were dead still looked over his shoulder and gave advice; but he wished suddenly he could feel warm living hands in his, and the brush of soft hair under his chin as he gave

comfort and received it. *A long time ago now, he thought, and don't go counting the days.*

He rose, and went to wash, and put on his uniform that seemed almost natural again. Black and red for Starfleet command, the life he had chosen as a boy and abandoned as a man. And then stumbled back to by a route so unlikely no dream of his had ever predicted it. The solid insignia pin on the collar was the only thing that identified him as a former Maquis—that, and the curving blue angles on his left temple. One day, if he was lucky, his father might look over his shoulder again and know that his son had returned to the path his ancestors pointed out, that he had received the ancient mark with no thought of ever returning to the stars he had loved so well. Chakotay looked out the viewport at the endless void between the bright points. A twisted path, the one he walked; doubling back upon itself, contrary: in the traveler's image.

"Hell, that's what you get for gambling with other people's rules," he said to himself, and quirked his mouth at his reflection in the mirror. Another day, another mystery meal or two from the cheerful Talaxian cook and self-appointed Morale Officer. At least the sight of Neelix always made him smile. Chakotay smoothed his cropped hair with two quick strokes of the hand, tugged on the sleeves of his uniform, and headed for the dining room.



"GOOD MORNING, Captain."

"Good morning, Commander. I see our schedules are coinciding for once." Janeway glanced at Chakotay as she filled her cup from the pot on the table. A wisp of steam spiraled out, the air disturbed by his arrival.

"Yes."

"Care for some of Neelix's 'coffee'?"

"I usually don't indulge this early in the day." Chakotay smiled slightly, holding a bowl of hot cereal. Janeway returned the smile, more broadly, and his expression changed. Not a grin, but a different smile, one that brought his whole face awake.

"I don't blame you. I have to have something to get me going in the morning, though, even if it's not the real thing." Chakotay seemed to be enjoying a private joke, and Janeway raised a

brow, looked at the pot and put it down. "Are the away teams all ready to go? Have a seat."

"Thank you, Captain." He pulled out a chair and straddled it in one motion, put his bowl on the table. "Yes, everyone has their assignments. I'm taking as few as possible, because of that Kazon-Nistrim ship we spotted yesterday, and about as many security guards as food gatherers."

"Tuvok's very concerned about that ship. And he's probably right to be—if this planet really is as good a gathering spot as Neelix seems to think, the Kazon must visit here fairly often along with everyone else."

"We'll be there as short a time as possible." Chakotay ate in between phrases while she sipped at her cup. "Frankly, there may not be much reason to stay if the verdant area is only a few thousand kilometers square. Other ships may have stripped it clean."

"But the gardens are supposed to be beautiful," Neelix called from the kitchen, where he was serving plates to a long line of crewmen. "I'd visit there just to look at them, even if I didn't need any food."

"Really?" said Janeway with interest. "Gardens? I thought you said no one lived there and all this was growing wild."

"No one lives there any more. But there are a lot of old ruins, and that so-called Kazon base—"

"Kazon base?" They said it almost in unison, spluttering hot food, and Neelix looked alarmed.

"Oh, no, no, it's only a rumor. There aren't any satellites, and only ruins on the surface. No, it's just a myth." He wrinkled his freckled nose in deprecation and stirred a sticky mass in one of his pots. "The Nistrim visit a lot, but so does everyone else who knows about it. It's a neutral area and this is the only thing worth visiting at all. The Kazon don't claim this sector, usually. Talaxian convoys go there nearly as often when the Nistrim are out of the way."

"Neelix, you might have mentioned that earlier, rumor or not. We're nearly there now." Janeway put her cup down and looked at Chakotay, who was arching his brows with dry humor. She started to reprove him with her own expression, but he shrugged.

"We were going to take security precautions anyway. If we detect anything unusual, we'll just leave. *Voyager* can outrun the Kazon."

"And you'll just love it down there, Captain," Neelix chimed in. "I've never been to the surface

myself, but I talked to a Talaxian who had talked to some one who had been, and he went on for hours about the scenery. I was simply spellbound."

Janeway and Chakotay looked at each other with a mutual smile, but she glanced down at her cup again after a moment. "We'll see. Tuvok will probably have something to say about that." She shifted her look back to Chakotay, who was still smiling, his eyes lingering over her hair. "How is the personnel situation in ship's operations, Commander?" She was a little surprised at the crispness of her tone.

"Well..." Chakotay took another spoonful of cereal. "B'Elanna asked me to mention the problems in Engineering since we lost...Ensign Seska."

"Ah." A brief pause, the name hanging in the silence between them. Chakotay's attention focused on his bowl. "And she would like my authorization for a transfer from another section?"

"I almost promised her one. Well, two, actually." He glanced up from under his brows, his face sobering at Janeway's slight frown, and tugged on one ear.

"I'm afraid there just aren't enough trained people to go around. B'Elanna's doing wonders with what she has—please tell her so. It's her own efficiency that makes it possible to run Engineering with a depleted staff, and take some of the pressure off other areas." Janeway smiled to soften the sting. "I'm sorry."

"Aye, Captain." Chakotay swallowed the last spoonful of cereal and stood up.

"Going to eat and run?"

"Well, unless there's something else you'd like—"

"No," Janeway replied, and leaned back to look into his face. "Call me on the bridge if anything comes up. And, Chakotay—"

"Yes?"

"I think you're doing wonders with what you have as well."

Chakotay paused on the verge of turning away, looked back at her with his dark eyes warm, his smile a little shy. Strange in a man so formidable, that diffidence of manner defusing his height and power—

He nodded in thanks, his gaze dropping away from hers, then stepped aside to let some crewmen pass, moved to the door and disappeared.

Janeway was still looking after Chakotay, and thought of him walking the corridors of *Voyager*

where his duty took him, glad she had a first officer in whom she could repose such confidence. She would never have thought it some months ago of a man she had meant to arrest as an outlaw. The captain smiled into her cup, grimaced and finished her ersatz coffee, and departed for the bridge.



"NO, ADAMS, I didn't draw straws. I chose people who could cover a lot of ground and carry big sacks of fruit, and whose absence wouldn't harm the ship's battle-readiness too much. If one Kazon ship has been here, there could be more, and at least some of them know how to cloak themselves from *Voyager's* sensors. This isn't the place for casual sightseeing."

"Yessir," replied the disappointed young officer, and stood back glumly from the transporter pad. Chakotay nodded to the transporter chief.

"Energize." Another group of food gatherers dematerialized. Tuvok and his security team had already been on the surface for half an hour, but had reported no sign of Kazon encampments. Chakotay stepped to the pad with the last five crewmen in the room.

"Janeway to Chakotay."

"Yes, Captain. Are you coming? All but the last group are down."

"No, Tuvok concurred with me—it's too dangerous for anyone to leave *Voyager* unless it's absolutely necessary. I'm sorry I won't be going with you." He heard what sounded like a faint sigh. "I wanted to wish you luck in the gathering, and please enjoy yourself. Tell me about the gardens when you get back, if they really are so beautiful."

"Certainly I will," Chakotay replied. "I'll describe them as we go, if you would like." He could imagine Janeway's smile in the tone of her voice.

"Thank you, Commander. All in the spirit of scientific investigation, of course. Janeway out."

Chakotay began to give the order to energize, and had a sudden thought. "Wait a minute, Ensign," he called after Adams, who was leaving downcast. "I've got a job for you after all. There's another piece of equipment we're going to need." He sprang off the transporter pad with an energy that surprised him. "I'll be back in five minutes, Chief. Adams, I hope you're in practice, because I've probably forgotten everything I ever knew about holocameras."

"Yessir," replied Adams, beaming.

CHAPTER TWO

As *THE IRONIES of the universe*, Janeway thought, and smiled in wonder. The crew of a starship, the greatest invention of science, that could take its occupants distances beyond imagination, faster than the light of the suns they brushed on their way—

Looking for the best spots to gather the fruits from the trees, and stockpiling the roots they dug by hand from the earth.

Below her turned a planet, a vast dry orb, save for a thousand square kilometers of fertile garden. In all the great desert, only one small area of verdant life; a mystery, but a welcome one.

"I wish you could be down here with me," said Chakotay over the comlink. Janeway heard a rustle of fallen leaves as he sat down. "This view is even better than the one from the hills. I ran all the way down just to get to the lake, though I was missing more sights on the way."

"Sounds like a place one could spend a lot of time in."

"I'm babbling, I know. But it's like nothing...do you want to hear what I'm seeing now?"

"Go ahead, I'm listening."

Chakotay paused, apparently composing his words for her. "Green water, clear as emerald, and the sun dancing with the ripples," he said softly. "The lake's like a jewel set in silvery grass. Tree branches trailing in the water along the shore and moving in the breeze, and all across the lake there are rafts of white flowers and huge round lily pads—each must be two meters across. They're dark green, even though the leaves on the trees have that strange violet coloration. By the way, all the lakes turned out to be full of edible fish, and Kes thinks she could set up an aquaculture tank to raise them on board."

"That's an excellent idea. How is the food gathering going, by the way? I'm not hearing too much about that."

"Very well, Captain. Nothing poisonous or too disgusting yet," he chuckled. He sounded warm and lazy, more informal than usual.

"Oh, good. I can't wait to have some of those fruits. You will tell me if you find any coffee plantations, won't you?" They laughed together over the comlink.

"Certainly. I'm on the lookout for chocolate cake bushes, too," he replied deadpan. Janeway beamed in amusement and looked at his empty chair beside her, imagining his faint playful smile. "Well, though I could spend a week here, I've still got work to do. I'll be coming back to *Voyager* in about an hour with the second load. Tuvok is still doing security sweeps, but there's no sign of any Kazon base, though there are a lot of ruins in the outlying areas."

"All right, Commander. It does sound delightful," she sighed. "Those waterfalls you described, and the floating islands of lilies on the lakes—is there any indication of why this small area is so humid?"

"The tricorder readings may tell you something, Captain. I'm afraid I'm not an expert on the weather, except for my home planet."

"Well, be careful down there. Janeway out." She cut the link. *It's a wise policy to keep the captain on the ship when there's danger*, she thought, *but I've certainly broken it before*. Why not now? Because she had broken it for good reason, to defend her crew and its interests, not for recreation. No matter how beautiful the spot, or how fresh the breezes, or how satisfactory the company. The first officer was certainly having a good time down there. Chakotay sounded better than he had for weeks.

She hadn't missed his unconscious turn of phrase—'here with me', not just 'here'. Apparently he was feeling more social, in the lovely setting she could only imagine from his words. Chakotay had been morose and taciturn for a long time after Seska's disappearance, and still lapsed into dark moods occasionally, in which he kept entirely to himself off duty. But Janeway's worries had evaporated with his first report from the surface, soft-voiced with awed delight. And what would it be like, walking with him under the violet leaves? Tuvok called with a report on the security scans, and she was distracted.

○

CHAKOTAY SMILED to himself and jumped up as Ensign Adams drew near, the young man brandishing a complicated-looking device bristling with dials and lenses. "How's the recording going?" he called, brushing aside weeping branches as he approached along the lake shore.

"I covered the area and the lake pretty well already, Commander," said Adams, lowering the holocamera that he had been holding up to his eye as he walked. "Kind of quick to do a really detailed job, though."

"That's all right," Chakotay said. "Now, would you give that to me for a while? I've got something special in mind."

"Uh, sure, Commander. The guards are right over there."

Hiking back to the exact spot Chakotay wanted took some time, but he made certain to record it from every angle. He didn't want the computer to have to interpolate elements and generalize the scene too much; he needed plenty of data to ensure the best possible result. The two security men with him relaxed visibly in this beautiful place, although their eyes kept scanning the trees and gentle slopes.

He hurried back to the transport site to supervise the beam-up.



TUVOK HAD NEARLY FINISHED his security report on the solar system, with an appended analysis of possible defensive scenarios in case of mutiny, when he realized that the temperature of his meal had probably dropped below the level of palatability. He took a bite of vegetable stew from his nearly full plate, and was confirmed in that suspicion. It would be wasteful to discard it, however, and he continued to eat, touching PADD keys with one hand as he did so. He heard a familiar laugh in the corridor, a moment of conversation, and Janeway strode into the dining room, licking her fingers in a manner that suggested delight and guilt combined. The Human penchant for simultaneous contradictory states of mind never ceased to puzzle him. She glanced over the room, at the full tables and eager diners. Few empty chairs, except at the isolated table where he sat. Tuvok was conscious of her gaze, but dropped

his own. Janeway had not shared a meal with him in weeks, although it had been her habit to do so nearly every day until the disaster at Sikarius. It was logical, he knew, to lose some confidence in a person who had violated a trust. She made her way toward him, and he could smell sweet fruit on her breath when she stopped at his table. Tuvok laid down his PADD and looked up at her.

"I'm anticipating dinner tonight, for once. I've been...examining the new food supplies, and I had my dessert first, I must confess." Janeway smiled and licked her fingers again. "Very much like a ripe peach, but I should have saved it for last."

"Captain, the nutritional value of any meal is unaffected by the order of consumption of its components," Tuvok replied, and took another lukewarm forkful.

"Quite right," Janeway said with a suppressed humor she often employed in his presence. She went to the service counter where Neelix stood in an aromatic cloud, returning with a plate of fish in a bright red sauce, and a steaming cup. "This smells wonderful. Fresh food. If I had just been able to go down to the surface and breathe some fresh air to go with it, this would have been a perfect day. But it's worked out very well in spite of that." She sat down and hitched her chair up to the table.

"You are satisfied with the results of the day's endeavors?" Tuvok moved his PADD to make room for her plate, and she picked up the report and scanned it quickly.

"Well, let's see." She smiled and sipped at her cup. "This planet was like a cornucopia, there wasn't a single problem with the away teams—I must congratulate Chakotay on that—your security sweeps turned up nothing untoward, and I've had a very good time listening to a running commentary on what must be some of the most beautiful scenes in the quadrant. He does have a pleasant voice...it must have been very enjoyable to work down there, Tuvok."

"The arrangement of individually attractive elements into aesthetically satisfying vistas implied a carefully thought-out design. The fact that nearly every species of tree and shrub bore edible fruit would seem to have been the guiding factor in their selection, however. The logic of combining two of the important functions of gardens into one was impeccable, and engendered respect for the ability of the designer."

"In other words, you liked the place," said Janeway, chuckled, and took a bite of her fish.

"I believe I said so."

"It sounded like the whole away team did.

I'm very glad about that. People need to run around in the sunshine every so often. It lifts their spirits." She continued to eat, reading the PADD. "My, this is spicy. But good. Neelix has obviously made a special effort today. I hope Chakotay comes to dinner in time to have some of this."

"Mr. Neelix spares no effort on his cuisine." Tuvok put down his fork, as he had consumed sufficient food to maintain his blood sugar and soluble vitamin levels until breakfast, and he did not care for the way the rapidly solidifying stew clung to the roof of his mouth. "But I believe the commander is not in the habit of consuming animal food."

"Ah, that's something you two have in common, then. Besides some experience in the Maquis." Janeway put the PADD down, raising her eyebrows at him and smiling slightly, but she did not seem to be making a joke.

"Captain, I do not consider that I was ever actually a member of the Maquis. My mission required —"

"You carried out your mission very well. Rather too well for Chakotay's taste, I suppose."

"Gaining Commander Chakotay's good will was not the object of the exercise."

"Of course not." Janeway looked thoughtful, and took another bite. "But perhaps you wish now that wasn't hanging between you two. Perhaps you wish there wasn't that rift of trust between you." She glanced at the PADD, the screen displaying his appendix on mutiny scenarios.

"It would be preferable from Commander Chakotay's point of view, I have no doubt." He allowed himself an ironic inflection.

"And from yours?"

"I have no reason to mistrust him —" Tuvok stopped, and considered the implications of what he had just said.

"I'm *very* glad to hear that, Mr. Tuvok," said Janeway, in a tone that he knew well. Tuvok decided to recast the appendix. The captain was not willing to entertain such thoughts just now, obviously, and he might have to come at the problem from another angle. However uncomfortable the possible hazards of their situation, he did not feel able to let them lie unexamined. Janeway gasped suddenly at a

particularly spicy mouthful, tears starting in her eyes, and he gave her his glass of water, which she accepted with thanks. Janeway returned to her meal, and Tuvok poured himself another glass.

He drank meditatively while Janeway ate for several minutes in companionable silence. A seed of uneasiness remained within him, and he examined it carefully, testing its logic. The captain had returned to her former habit of consulting with him at mealtime, which filled him with...satisfaction, but the subject of the conversation was not to his liking. Was he being admonished to move aside, to make room for another point of view? Tuvok had been Janeway's adviser so long that he viewed her confidence as his due, though of course she could bestow it where she wished. Could she not repose her confidence in a new adviser without disregarding the old? Logically, the captain must use all the resources at her command, and Chakotay was an essential resource in managing the unpredictable, untrained, sometimes dangerous element of the former Maquis crew. *Voyager* needed their skills, and Janeway needed their goodwill and loyalty. To ensure security and harmony, therefore, she had given some of her trust and the position of first officer to the former Maquis captain. Chakotay was a trained officer and had discharged his duties efficiently, so the choice had proved a good one. Tuvok had perfected this train of reasoning from frequent repetition, and the familiar route of his mind ploughing in old furrows turned the seed of uneasiness aside, covered it over to wither in the dark.

Then he looked at Janeway again, and felt the seed germinate as if it had been given water. She looked up whenever someone entered the dining room, with the beginning of a smile, but each time looked down again without speaking to the newcomer, her frown growing almost imperceptibly deeper with each disappointment. And disappointment was what he read, subtle but clear, and his heart drained hot for a moment. She glanced up, and he was grateful there was nothing in his face that she could hold against him.

"I wonder where he is," said Janeway, tapping her fork against the rim of her plate.

"To whom do you refer?"

She made a face at him. "Chakotay, of course. He had a long day down on the surface, he brought all this good food back with him — why isn't he having dinner?"

"He informed me that he was working on a personal project, and I believe he must be engaged with it, possibly having lost track of time."

"Possibly. When he gets involved in something, he doesn't do it halfway. Did you know he's studied enough comparative mythology and Human psychology for a degree in either? I've had some fascinating discussions with him –"

"Yes," said Tuvok with a faint air of resignation. "On the occasion of our adventure in Ensign Kim's holodeck program, I was treated to a lecture on the function of the legendary monster in various literary traditions. The commander appears to have done a great deal of reading in his spare time."

Janeway smiled. "True, Chakotay can seem a little pontifical when he gets onto his favorite subjects. But he feels strongly about them, and that's an excuse for many faults."

"I cannot plead such an excuse for my faults, Captain."

"Really, Tuvok? I suppose I attribute motives to you that you don't have. Forgive me, it's a Human failing."

"I am quite familiar with it."

"Well, I'm going to go check on the bridge, leave you in charge, and then go to my quarters to catch up on all those reports you keep nagging me about," Janeway said, and stood. "We'll set a course to avoid that Kazon vessel. Call me if any come within sensor range. Before they do, if possible." The quirk of her lips told him she was making a joke in earnest now, and Tuvok bowed his head in perfect gravity.

"Aye, Captain." He rose with her, and walked close by her side as they left the dining room.



"ANOTHER UNUSUAL THING about this system—" Janeway mused aloud to herself, tapping the screen of a PADD as she hunched over the desk in her quarters. "This garden, all the water—and no sign of any defenses, or of anyone staking a claim to it." She had ordered *Voyager* on its way as soon as the away teams had returned with their loads of food, not wanting to risk an encounter with the ship they had spotted on their approach.

Tuvok's report contained an outline of what he knew about the Kazon-Nistrim, which was

considerably less than about the Kazon-Ogla, the sect they had met on the surface of the Ocampo planet and had battled around the Caretaker's array. The Ogla had valued water highly, but perhaps the Nistrim had better access to sources such as this one. Neelix had said this was neutral space, open to anyone. Apparently there was an informal agreement among the peoples who passed through here to conserve the resources of the gardens and not monopolize them. *Like a water hole in a desert*, she thought; *community property*. If anyone tried to take one over, all others would be in jeopardy and no one able to travel for lack of supply. A very different situation from that in the Alpha Quadrant, where replicator technology was universal. If the Nistrim had been able to make use of the replicator Seska had stolen for them, the repercussions would have been enormous. Known for their violence, they would have been able to flout the social contract with impunity: take any oasis for their exclusive use, or simply deny its use to others. Janeway shuddered, and picked up the next PADD. Her desk intercom buzzed before the screen lit.

"Sorry to bother you, Captain," said Chakotay over the comlink. "I need a conference with you." He sounded serious and urgent, but simultaneously bursting with suppressed excitement.

"Certainly, Commander. What's the problem?"

"Not exactly a problem, Captain. Please come to the holodeck."

"The holodeck—?" A little flutter of suspicion crossed her mind. "All right, I'll be there in a few minutes," she continued, deciding to see what he had up his sleeve. The quiver of anticipation that passed through her was unexpectedly strong. Although she had been speaking to him all day over the comlink, she had seen him only at breakfast. She realized she wanted to see him, very much, see his face smile again in evidence of his good mood. Chakotay was known for his artistic touch with holodeck programming, but that was not what she looked forward to just now.

WHEN THE BIG DOOR slid open, sunlight streamed out into the corridor, accompanied by a sweet fragrance and sounds of laughing conversation. The planet's surface, just as her first officer had described it. Small groves of violet-

leafed trees embraced soft pale meadows strewn with blue-green blossoms. A number of crew members lounged on the lake shore or waded in the water, while others walked about exclaiming at the unusually colored flora.

"Thank you, Commander," she said, although he was not in sight. "That was very thoughtful of you." She strode in and looked around with pleasure.

"I'm glad you like it, Captain." Chakotay's voice came from behind her, and Janeway turned to see him emerging from an open stand of flowering shrubs. "Besides the food gatherers, who were all working hard, no one was able to spend time here, and it was too beautiful just to leave behind without taking some reminder with us." He walked up to her side and smiled his transforming smile, a once-rare sight that was growing more common.

Janeway beamed in response, genuinely happy. Chakotay's mood had been so dark the previous day, and on other occasions, and it pleased her to see the neutral mask left off, to see him openly enjoying himself. He had such boyish dimples— She squeezed his right bicep and surveyed the landscape.

"Is it the whole area around the lake?"

"Yes, I made sure to get recordings all over, especially of the best spots. It's like a Japanese garden— too perfect to be natural, even though no one had lived here for centuries. It's amazing that it's lasted this long."

"Pretty place, huh, Captain?" called out Tom Paris from the lake shore. He snapped a stone across the water and Janeway watched it skip four times. "Nuts, I was doing six or eight a minute ago. Watch this." He scabbled on the beach, holding up pebbles with a critical eye. "Hey, Commander, write some more flat rocks into this."

"Maybe later, Lieutenant. The captain gets her guided tour first."

"Paris!" called Harry Kim, lounging on the grass with B'Elanna Torres and several other young officers. "Just put in a pool table and a bar, and it's perfect, right?" A chorus of laughter, which Janeway joined.

"Ahh, it's kinda *wholesome* for my taste," rejoined Paris, and snapped another stone across the water. "Nine! Yes!" He bent to hunt for more.

Janeway looked at her first officer with a smile, then beyond him at the pale hills, a delicate

green against the cerulean sky. "Where are those waterfalls you were telling me about?"

"I was hoping you'd ask about that," he replied, and grinned, a flash of mischief of which she had hardly known him capable. "Here, come down to the water." *What an energetic mood he's in*, she thought. *Outdoor work does agree with him.*

Chakotay led the way to a strip of sandy beach, where a canoe was drawn up with two paddles laid across the gunwales. "I know you don't have a lot of time to spare, so I thought we could go across the lake rather than around it."

"Oh, wonderful—I haven't been in a canoe in ages. You'd better steer."

They pushed the canoe into the water and leapt in, Janeway in the bow. Chakotay took a paddle and shoved powerfully off the shallow lake bottom, sending them out among the floating leaves.

The lake was about one kilometer in apparent diameter; it would take twenty minutes to reach the other side. They would not actually move very far, of course, since the holodeck was only a section of Deck Six, but the sound dampers and visual barriers gave the illusion of distance. Chakotay did most of the paddling, since Janeway frequently rested and simply looked at the scenery or trailed her hands in the water. A light breeze behind them helped propel the little craft. No hurry, really. She could afford to take a break from reading, clear her head, and go back to work refreshed. She was still on the ship, so she was on call in case of any crisis. Nothing to worry about.

A sudden thought struck her. "Commander—you never went to the dining room. Aren't you hungry? You spent all evening on this program—"

"Actually, Captain," he replied with a self-deprecating laugh, "I ate so much fruit down on the surface—so did everyone else there—that I really didn't want any dinner. We couldn't resist, so I gave in and just counted it as a meal ration."

Janeway laughed merrily at the image. "I did just about the same thing in the cargo bay when the loads came in. Oh, I remember going berry-picking at a farm once when I was about six. My mother said they should weigh me, not just the baskets, to see how much we had gathered. My face was purple with the juice."

Chakotay chuckled with her, then said softly, "There are a lot of wild berry patches around where I grew up." She turned, and he was looking at the lake shore, where laden vines hung from

slender boughs and cast shadows on the water. The stroke of his paddle paused, and the droplets from the blade made a broken trail of rippling circles as the canoe glided forward. In a moment, Chakotay faced forward again and put the paddle in the water, and the practiced strength of his pull guided them across the lake.

The waterfalls were exquisite, a series of stone terraces each less than a meter high, cascading down from the river. Dark purple-blue leaves reflected in the shining pools, and the sound of plunging, dancing water mingled with soft rustles from the breeze in the tree tops.

Janeway sank down on the grassy bank and looked around with dreamy satisfaction. "This has to be one of the loveliest holoscenes I've ever been in," she said. "It's just like you described it. Better."

Chakotay fairly shone with pride, squatting down beside her. "Oh, it was already there—I just recorded it," he said modestly, and smiled. His expression was warm, almost comradely, she thought. They had never been this easy, this casual together before. Some kind of real connection, of friendship and mutual comfort finally developing? Chakotay's service with Janeway had begun with a wary dance of testing maneuvers such as the one that had put Torres in her office. She had yielded many such points to him to ease the transition, knowing that he wanted harmony as much as she did for the sake of the crew. They had settled into a careful rhythm, one that had been disrupted only occasionally, as at Sikarius. She still remembered his brief vehemence in conference and subsequent near-absence from negotiations, once she had made it clear she put the Prime Directive above *Voyager's* immediate advantage.

But he was certainly trying to make peace. Although the holorecording had been for the benefit of the entire crew, something about his manner, his half-shy appreciation of her reaction told her that this part of it was especially for her. A gift.

"Thank you, Chakotay," she said, deliberately using his name instead of his title. To her mild surprise, his smile slowly faded while he continued to hold her gaze. The camaraderie changed to something less comfortable; the energy of his mood made a subtle surge in his face. It reminded her of her first sight of him on his own bridge, captain to

captain. But the energy had gained warmth since the last time she had seen it, altered its nature in dormancy. Almost a glow. Chakotay's eyes dipped to the ground just as Janeway began to wonder how the change had come about. With a hearty slap on his knees, as if to rally himself, he sprang to his feet and jumped down the bank to the water.

"I'm going to check the resolution around the limits of the scene," he said, stepping with a dancer's lightness across stones in the stream to reach the other side. "I might make a couple of adjustments to the program—"

"Oh, don't talk about that," she chided. "I want to believe it's real, if only for a few minutes."

"Believe anything you like," Chakotay replied from the opposite bank, smiling a little oddly. "I'll be back in a minute." He turned and walked into the dark trees, uphill, and soon disappeared from her sight.

Actually, he was gone nearly a quarter of an hour, but Janeway had fallen into a reverie by the staircase of shimmering pools and splashing trickles, and hardly noticed the length of his absence.

She could think about him more intently when he was not present.

Her accidental first officer. He hadn't come up on a rotation roster; he hadn't been recommended by another captain for the post; he hadn't been interviewed or tested or cleared. Would she even have considered an officer with an outlook so different from hers? When she had invited him to take up the responsibility, second only to her own in its importance to the ship, she had really had no choice in the matter. If she wanted the Maquis's help, she had to make concessions and a true alliance—she couldn't simply claim their services without giving their captain a voice in command. Chakotay was qualified, an Academy graduate and a Starfleet veteran of many years, but he had resigned his commission to join an outlaw organization. The Cardassians were abusing their jurisdiction over his home, and that had taken precedence over all else. For a person of Janeway's bent, such an action was unimaginable. Chakotay apparently did not hold himself accountable to external authority, but to his inward directives.

What had those directives told him that had allowed him to be the lover of someone under his command? A Maquis command, to be sure, but the principle was still the same. Favoritism from the superior, improper influence going both ways,

jealousy from others in the crew, decisions of command weakened by biases that might injure the ship's mission. At least he had seen fit to break it off with Seska, probably realizing he was not immune to all those considerations. That was one mistake he would surely never make again, considering its aftermath, but Chakotay was a tester, a risk-taker. If he was certain he was right, that was all he needed for action. Janeway had reason to be grateful for that trait of his; first he had sacrificed his own ship to save *Voyager*, and then had backed Janeway without reservation. Reckless, from his perspective as a hunted outlaw, but guided by some deep conviction that meant more to him than his own immediate advantage. Had he even welcomed his unofficial return to the rank he had abandoned? He had many ideas in common with Janeway, although he saw the universe in very different terms from hers. It was inevitable that they would argue over procedure and fine legal points, and almost as inevitable that they would find that their larger goals had always been the same.

Janeway knew she looked outwards for answers; brisk, physical, direct, she dealt with problems of substantial reality much more readily than with those of abstract principle. She believed in the Prime Directive and her moral code with all her heart, and could not bear to violate them or even test the limits of their flexibility, because she feared that once she stepped off the narrow path, she would plunge down the slippery slope and be lost. The territory at the fringes of her convictions was too unfamiliar to navigate. Terrifying.

The laws of thermodynamics she could fold in every direction she pleased; the vastnesses of space were only space and could be crossed; the guns of sneering enemies could be met with reason, with defiance, with all the mighty forces of war. Solid problems, with solid answers.

But the uncharted questions of ethics in *Voyager's* unique situation? No backup, no guidance, no directives except those with which she had started. How could she face down her own doubts, shore up her wavering resolution, if she did not follow the only signposts she knew? Starfleet protocol and principles, applied as rigorously away from oversight as she had applied them her entire career. Beyond that lay darkness and chaos and uncertainty. But Chakotay moved in that realm with assurance if not always unerring direction, planting his own trail markers as he

went. His guides were natural, inborn or summoned; he could manipulate the unknown with a blackbird's wing and a stone from the river.

"Penny for them," said a voice, light with sly humor, about a meter above her head and to the left. Janeway started and turned. Chakotay stood looking down at her, hands behind his back as was his habit on the bridge, but his expression spoke nothing of duty.

"Oh, I didn't see you come up, Commander. Woolgathering." She looked around into the trees. "I shouldn't let myself sink quite so deep in thought out in the open —"

"Holodeck," he finished for her. "I'm flattered; you did forget it wasn't real. Sorry to remind you." He looked like he wanted to say something more, and a tiny shadow gathered under his brows, but he relaxed again with a smile. "How much more time can you spare?"

"Oh, I suppose I really should get back. But we'll do it the long way. I'd like another canoe ride."

"Any way you like, Captain." Chakotay led her back to where they had left the boat.

"Let me steer," she said when they had paddled a quarter of the distance across the lake. "I think I remember how now."

"I can't deny the captain the right to take the conn," Chakotay said with a mock salute. He faced around so that he sat forward, looking over his shoulder as she turned the canoe around and pointed it back along their course. She flung a paddleful of drips across his back as she switched sides, and he straightened up with an exaggerated expression of shock. "Are you sure you're certified in this class of vessel?" he said with a joking grumble.

"I can paddle circles around you, Mister," she said, and as good as her word, the canoe caught the breeze broadside, drifted in a wide arc and into one of the rafts of floating leaves. "Oh, Lord." Janeway nearly lost her paddle in the thick stems of the huge water lilies. Chakotay tried to shove off from one of the lily pads, but it gave under the pressure and filled with water. She jerked impatiently at her paddle, held fast in the tangle. "Oh, for —"

Chakotay scooted to the middle of the canoe and leaned out to seize the shaft. They heaved on it together until he gave an exuberant yank and a stem suddenly broke. The canoe rolled sharply,

then capsized altogether when both of them fell against the side.

The warm green water closed over her. She could breathe, because of the safety interlocks, but all she could see were spiraling stems and the web of sunlight around the edges of the dark circles overhead. Janeway's head broke the surface between two pads, and she looked for Chakotay. Nowhere. The canoe floated nearby, upside down, but he wasn't clinging to it. Intellectually she knew he wasn't drowning, but the flutter of panic started anyway.

"Chakotay!" Janeway trod water and turned around in every direction.

This was something like the emotion she had felt when he and Seska had materialized together in Sickbay, where the captain had run on hearing that her first officer had been wounded in an encounter with the Kazon. The doctor had immediately pronounced the small, ugly burn on Chakotay's side not life-threatening, but the commander's face had been creased in pain as Kes slashed his uniform open and administered a hypo spray. Janeway hadn't really registered then that Seska was hovering nearby with a concern similar to her own, clutching a bag of something she had gathered. Finally the doctor had shooed them out into the corridor, and she had turned to the turbolift, meeting the intent hazel eyes of the Maquis woman. Something disturbing, hungry, had flickered in them, vanishing immediately as Seska moved past her.

Where was he? The edge of the huge pad next to her lifted, and a wet cropped head bobbed up. "What a nuisance these damn things are," said Chakotay, blinking water out of his eyes. "They look pretty on the lake, but I might just delete them anyway, or make them smaller." He caught her expression and lifted his brows in surprise. "Captain, I don't write dangerous programs."

"Really," she replied, both relieved and annoyed. They swam to shore, Chakotay towing the canoe. A dripping trail followed them up the bank, where Chakotay laughed at her while she took her hair down and tried to squeeze out some of the water that was running down her face. He bent over and shook like a dog, sending a fine spray in all directions from his short hair, black and grey like an animal's pelt.

"There, I'm dry," he said, although his clothing was soaked and his boots squelched amusingly. Janeway tucked her hairpins into her

sleeve and pulled wet handfuls of her hair together into a thick rope, twisting it. Water splashed down to the bare earth under the shade of dark trees. This part of the scene was a dense grove that came right down to the lake. Some of her hairpins fell and she muttered a curse, stooping to retrieve them. Chakotay knelt and helped her pick them out of the dirt. He handed her the last one, wiped his hands on his jumpsuit, and stood up so close to her that she could have reached out and laid her hand on his chest.

"Sometimes I think I should just cut it all off as short as yours. It would certainly save time shampooing," she said jokingly. Again she was mildly surprised at Chakotay's unsmiling gaze, and at his gesture as he stroked a stray lock back from her cheek.

"Don't do that, ever," he said. "When your hair is silver, you'll have a braid that you can wear like a crown." The slow fingers lingered on her temple. He took a step towards her, and she had to look up to meet his eyes.

Janeway felt a slow, roiling, overturning sensation in her abdomen, simultaneously thrilling and faintly nauseating. It was like fear—it was fear. The smile tightened on her face. Chakotay's lips worked as if he wanted to say something, but all that emerged was the sound of his shallow exhalations. She saw his chest heave.

Janeway could not break the look between them, although she knew she should. Too much coming to the surface in that gaze. Something rose from the depths, from deep within him where it had been drowned, held down, barely visible fathoms under. Deference and protocol flooded away and left him revealed. Losing all concealment, what she had half-sensed in stray looks, in throwaway quips and turns of phrase. He was vulnerable now, exposed, but what he exposed was fire miraculously unquenched. The electricity that she had glimpsed before he had subjected himself to her; the quiet crackle of energy and command. He compelled her, he invited her, he held his hands out empty to ask her to fill them.

His asking, her own inclination; unadmitted longing spilled out and washed over her, transforming her like a baptism. Her lips relaxed, her face lost its wry joking look, her vision narrowed to concentrate only on him. Janeway felt something taking shape within her, coalescing a vague awareness into a certainty, the process transparent to the viewer. He searched her face,

slowly, but with growing confidence and warmth, the look a caress without touching, and then he touched her.

Chakotay laid his hands on her forearms and slid them slowly, slowly, up to her elbows. His thumbs nestled in the crooks as he wrapped his fingers around her upper arms and pulled her gently to him.

Janeway stepped forward of her own volition, not needing the urge of his hands. His face inclined to hers, stopping when their lips were a few centimeters apart and his nose nearly touched her cheek. Chakotay inhaled deeply and his eyes half closed. Through the smell of damp material, the warm scent of his body crept over her senses as if the sun was burning through the foliage to dry out their clothing. She shivered, knowing how cold she had been. His physical reality leaped into sudden focus, so sharp she could not imagine how she had avoided the edge so long. A big man, broad-shouldered, substantial, dark. Everything around her, the trees, the water, the earth; illusion, except for him.

Accompanying her awareness of his body was the reaction of her own. She arched her back with an inaudible sigh, her breasts pressing against his ribcage, and let his legs intrude between hers, his hip against her belly. Janeway wondered to find herself like this, laid against him, her movements guided almost by instinct. He was pausing, his mouth just short of brushing hers, but had already opened the gates to her own flood of response. So strong, her conscious thoughts were overwhelmed in a rippling tumble, washed away. Janeway tilted her face a fraction upwards, and Chakotay kissed her.

Her abdominal muscles tightened almost painfully, but she did not pull back. The press of his lips was soft and gentle, not tentative, but almost worshipful. She let him control it for a moment—indeed, she could hardly think to do anything else—and then she slid her hands around his waist and molded her body into his embrace.

“Ah—” he said into her mouth, the first word in several minutes. She silenced him with a forward nudge of her parted lips. So deliberate—but her own desire raced ahead of her mind, flowing rapidly down the slope to evade the inevitable pursuit. She had a sense of hurtling breathlessness and instability as she tried to dodge the full implications of what she was doing, of what she was admitting to him by doing this—

Chakotay vibrated with a groan and took an unsteady step as their tongues met briefly. Pulled back for a moment, returned almost immediately. The kiss was no longer merely gentle. Janeway felt his arms tighten around her and his lips open. She pressed her hands into his back, feeling the muscles shift and tense, tilting her head and opening her mouth to receive his urgent tongue, meet the tremble and velvet dampness of the curve of his lower lip. He turned slightly and something firm pressed into her stomach; the ridge of his hardening penis. Another warm rush, a sinking feeling into her groin. She welcomed him with a surge forward into his mouth, and they locked together in frank carnality. Through the wet coolness of their uniforms: heat seeking heat, joining their breathing and the pulse of their hearts. They were both gasping for air every time their lips parted.

Chakotay planted his feet, shifted his weight and rested his right thigh into the firm swell of her pubis. His hands stroked down her back and cupped her buttocks; lifting her slightly, he pulled her pelvis against him. Janeway gasped out a tiny sigh at the intimate contact. She hadn't felt anything like this in months; a man's warm body as a welcome invader to her sphere of personal privacy. A captain had to remain so distant, even from her first officer. Her first officer, who was moving his lips over hers, sliding soft and hot with definite intention, his eyes shut tight. He had forgotten for the moment everything that had kept him diffident with his captain. Janeway wavered between cold memory and tempting amnesia.

Chakotay's tongue thrust into her mouth in a slow rhythm as he rolled her hips in a similar cadence against his thigh. Her legs were apart, straddling him as she leaned back in the cradle of his hands, reveling in his strength that moved and supported her. He bent her backwards, her hands clasped around his neck. The kiss had started almost innocently, but now he was practically making love to her. If she felt like this while standing and fully clothed, in privacy guarded only by holograms, what if—?

The thought of him inside her, moving as he was moving now, his solid weight spreading her legs apart, pressing deep and withdrawing—

Racing heart, pelvic muscles contracting, her thighs clenching around his to hold the feeling back, somehow imprison it: in vain. Panic exploded simultaneously with release. Janeway

cried out in ecstatic terror, wrenching against the restraint of Chakotay's arms, her shuddering legs giving way, sagging and nearly falling. He held her up, but she broke away from him and collided with a tree, clutching it to keep her feet. Good God! Disoriented and gasping, her skin tingling, she crouched against the trunk in horror, abruptly surfacing from her dreamlike state. Chakotay bent over her, reaching to help her up, but when he grasped her arms, he did not raise her. He knelt on the ground, drawing her down with him, passion heating his face, and pulled her limp body upright against his. Did he know why she had stumbled? Her cry must have been unmistakable. Her own face went scarlet with humiliation as Chakotay lowered his head to kiss her again. This had gone so far already that stopping it was almost as bad as continuing — and if it continued, she knew that they would strip and copulate in the dirt like animals. Or like lovers so swept up in each other that nothing else mattered, that the entire universe seemed illusory by contrast. Transcendence beckoned to her, and Chakotay held her close and gave it flesh. He sensed it; triumph mixed with passion in his expression. Her body was the least of the gifts he wanted. She was about to forget everything that made this dangerous, irresponsible, impossible, and never come up for air again. What else would she drag down to drown with her? So many lives in her hands — Chakotay's lips brushed hers, and she heaved back and shoved against his chest.

"Stop."

"Wha — what?"

"We have to stop. Now. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let it begin." Janeway extricated herself from his arms and rolled to her feet, shaking.

"Kath —" he began, and twisted it into "Captain —?" Still kneeling in the dirt.

"Chako-tay..." Her voice broke and she put her hands over her quivering lips. He got up slowly, confusion and disbelief washing over his features.

They faced each other, uniforms wet and muddy, hair soaking and disarranged, faces flushed and lips swollen with shared kisses. A fresh, hot dampness slicked her inner thighs, and the plain front of his jumpsuit clung so closely that she could see far more details of — of the organ against his belly than she cared to at this moment. Chakotay took a step towards her, reaching out.

She snapped her eyes to his, unable to speak for a moment, shaking her head fiercely, desperately. Chakotay checked himself in mid-motion, his hands outstretched to her. The gesture looked like pleading. She held up her own hands to ward him off, palms out, a trembling barrier. Finally her meaning seemed to register with him. Chakotay exhaled hard, gritting his teeth, and helpless anger began to mix with his confusion.

"But — but I thought — *Why?* Will you at least tell me why?"

"I'm...the...captain. I can't cross that line..."

He grimaced and jerked his head, his fists clenching. "Are you telling me I was wrong?" The pain in his voice nearly doubled her over. What should she tell him? What was the truth, what was kindness, what was proper? When she did not speak, he raised his eyes to hers.

Chakotay's mind was open to her again on his face. How long had he worked with her, clashed with her, sat quietly beside her holding that smoldering emotion unspoken within him?

Janeway could barely breathe for a few choking heartbeats, realizing she had half-knowingly matched him, and responded. Her repeated casual touches, her professional and personal admiration, her growing awareness of his physical presence and unselfconscious virility, her odd feelings at learning that Seska had once been his lover; all moved into context. The scattered points whirled in darkness and formed a new constellation, a map of stars in a pattern she had never seen before, a brief vision of awful joy. It was like her fate inscribed in all the elements.

But she could not take it up, not when so many depended on her and her authority, her credibility, her fairness. She was needed, and she had responsibilities that no one else could discharge. If she were to throw herself open to the universe of possibility, she might not emerge the woman and the captain she had been...and that was a fearful risk, and one she was not entitled to take.

"I was wrong," Chakotay said, dead flat and quiet. "I'm sorry."

"No...no..." Janeway whispered. "It was my fault. I led you to believe I would..." Her words trailed off as she saw that they made no impression. He was withdrawing, hunching up as if he had a stomach wound. What could mend the injury, short of casting down all the barriers? She

tried again. "Chakotay, you were not wrong. You mustn't think that."

"I haven't got much choice." An edge of bitter humor. "Frankly, having made a mistake is the only thing about this that would make any sense." Even if she took it all back now, if she stepped into his arms again, he would turn away in self-defense. She could not mend the wound at this instant with any remedy. And the blow had been double-edged. They both stood bleeding, and each could offer nothing to comfort the other. This was what her training had told her to do, and it was her duty as captain to take and inflict blows without flinching. If she had needed to order Chakotay to his death for the good of *Voyager*, she would have found the will and know that she had been right to do so, by every measure she knew. And this was far short of ordering him to his death.

Why then did the sense of wrong seem so much larger than the measure?

Chakotay slowly straightened up; his expression closed down. His eyes left hers and focused in the distance over her shoulder. "I beg your pardon, Captain," he said formally. Janeway closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"And I beg your pardon, Commander," she said with a stiff nod. "I hope that makes us even."
"Yes, ma'am."

Janeway made to shake hands, but thought better of it. The gesture looked noticeably awkward as she made a fist and withdrew it to her chest. How to break the tension? She tried to laugh. "I'm wet, I need to change," she said. And then blushed pink at the double implication.

Chakotay made an indecipherable grimace that might have been an attempt at a smile. "Just leave the holodeck, Captain. All that will disappear when you step outside the door."

Yes, of course, the mud and water were only holographic matter. But not all the effects of this program would dissipate so easily...

"Computer, show door," Janeway said. It appeared ten meters off and she almost ran towards it. "I'll be in my quarters, Commander."

"Yes, Captain," he replied neutrally. The sunlight in the corridor vanished when the portal slid shut behind her.

Only then did she realize that what she had said could have been construed as an invitation. Damn, her tongue was playing tricks on her. No, he hadn't taken it that way—but then neither had she at first. Well, she could hardly go back and set

him straight. Janeway squared her shoulders and stepped into the nearest turbolift. She was dry now—at least, her uniform and her hair were—but the pins were all out and she felt rather wild with the long waves tumbling around her face.

In her quarters, Janeway slumped at her desk and stared at piles of PADDs. She doubted that any more of them would be read tonight. The door chime chirped, and her groin and stomach twinged as she half-turned to the sound. If it was him—



"CAPTAIN? I have some more reports that require your attention."

Tuvok rang the door chime for the second time and waited for a response.

"Come—in," he heard, very faintly. The captain's tone suggested illness, and Tuvok stepped inside when the door slid open, expecting to find that her spicy dinner had disagreed with her more emphatically than he had realized. She sat at her desk, her hair down and tangled, her face pale, but with a flush on the cheekbones. Her eyes met his, and he saw them briefly flutter shut. She took a deep breath that she let out with an audible sigh, and glanced away again. A greater contrast from her businesslike jocularity of an hour earlier he could not imagine.

He put the three PADDs that he carried by her elbow. Janeway nodded distractedly, looked up at him again, and lowered her chin to her hand. The signs of disturbance were so salient that Tuvok paused and examined her more closely. Physical illness did not seem to be the cause of her emotional state. She would have gone to Sickbay for treatment in that case. Surely none of the reports, though they spoke of scarcity and potential troubles of all kinds, could have affected Janeway in this unusual manner. She was Human and emotional, but generally dealt with her emotions in a frank, open, admirably logical way. The dishevelment of her hair was puzzling. He nearly asked her what the matter was, then caught a scent in the air, hers, but strong with pheromones. It was similar to her scent during battle—no, it had a different note. Warm, spicy, sexual in a way more powerful than he had ever noted in her presence. The logical cause? Tuvok decided not to inquire further. A Human must experience the absence of loved ones even more

acutely than did a Vulcan, and how his captain chose to deal with that absence was certainly a private matter. He cocked an eyebrow, bowed slightly, and dismissed himself.



CHAKOTAY STOOD where his captain had left him, staring at the spot where the door, and she, had faded away.

Every moment he had spent on the actual planet, he had imagined her walking there with him. Every moment he had spent preparing the recordings and the program, he had imagined her enjoying it with him.

And she had; he knew that. Rather more than he had anticipated, in point of fact. He knew that she appreciated natural beauty and that she needed an opportunity to relax; that was really all he had had in mind when summoning her to the holodeck.

But her joy had made her so beautiful that he had spent the entire time with a burning lightness in his chest, a new sun coalescing out of the heavy cloud of sadness, longing, hopelessness he had carried around with him for weeks. What had he felt for her before now? Awe, anger, respect when she had magically called him by name, claimed a trusted comrade as her tool, taken himself and all his people for her own. He had made himself into her officer in the interest of all, but his own interest had quickly taken a turn that amused him, even helped him in dedication to the transition. Indulging himself with a little harmless flirtation brought a bright snap to her eyes to ease her greater worries, and comebacks both slightly

awkward and wittily reproofing. Frankly, it had been fun, and fascinating, to duel with her on every level, to move a little deeper into the workings of her mind. She had an exquisite sensibility just below the brisk bright surface. And then, with the slow growth of fellowship, the knowledge that she valued his esteem, that his advice was trusted, if not always followed, some critical mass had been reached.

From the first, she had commanded him by right. He hadn't liked that, much. But he had known it in his heart, and wondered at himself that he had offered her so little resistance. Oh, he had his own way of doing things, of dealing with problems out of her sight, but a first officer was supposed to know what deserved the captain's personal attention and what did not. Lieutenant's broken noses or a few liters of milk stolen for soup were well within his purview. He was her guardian, her filter, her right arm.

Not her lover. No. He felt her in his arms again, fragrant; soft skin over tense frame, her mouth – She had told him to stop and pushed him away.

There was his answer. Chakotay ground his teeth, so hard that tears started in his eyes, and he flung his head up and let his lids close. A few long breaths helped him compose himself, and then he sagged and dropped his head low. He might even have been a little relieved, stopped on the verge of overcommitting himself. Another critical decision taken out of his hands.

Chakotay thought the dark dust would rise in his soul again, but the sun still burned there. Once kindled, its term of life as long as his.

"Computer, show door," he said, and went to his own lonely quarters.

CHAPTER THREE

JANEWAY COULD NOT SLEEP, and stayed up, pacing her quarters still dressed until shortly before she was supposed to rise. At home on Earth, she might have gone for a walk in circumstances like these. Put on a coat, snapped the leash to Bear's collar and headed down the hill to the bay, taking the long way around to pass through the park and let the dog run free. Dim along the path, the occasional lights glowing in the mist, leaves blowing and scudding along the pavement, Bear barking out in front. The dog would run in big loops, forward and back, scouting out ahead of her, returning to urge her on as she walked slowly, wanting the time to pass. The constellations would move over her head, familiar to her from many vantage points. The Dipper that pointed the way to the Pole, the Hunter with his belt and sword, Cassiopeia enthroned.

Janeway leaned on the sill of the viewport and studied the uncharted stars. How often had she taken a walk like that? A fight with Mark? Rare, and they had never kept her up all night. Trouble with Headquarters? Also rare, and starship captains could remain somewhat aloof from Starfleet politics, privileged to keep some distance. When someone had died, perhaps, and she had needed to remember everything possible, run over a life in her mind under the stars. After Tuvok had twice failed to report from his undercover mission. She had made the call to Vulcan herself, admiring the composed beauty of his wife's features, detecting the echo of her own concern, very faintly. *She trusted me with her husband's life, Janeway thought, but she...missed him.*

Faint movements from next door. It made sense to have the captain and first officer in adjacent quarters in the ordinary run of business. They might need to have a conference, or a private meal, or just maintain a good rapport for efficiency's sake. There was even a communicating door between the sitting areas, though Janeway had seldom used it even when Cavit had occupied the quarters that Chakotay used now. He hadn't been the casually socializing type, and had liked

his privacy off duty. She had put a bookshelf against the door some time ago.

How many hours would have to pass before she could face her first officer again? Would she run into him at breakfast or another meal before she had decided what to say? Normal conversation. Pretend it never happened. Dismiss it. How?

"You're a Starfleet captain. You know how to deal with personnel problems," she said aloud. This wasn't a personnel problem. Janeway could still feel his arms around her, feel the heat of certainty climbing through every nerve and vein as Chakotay kissed her, and she kissed him back. The wave of raw emotion nearly sickened her, and she sat down, dizzy.

The manual would call for a transfer as soon as possible. Impossible. *Ignore the damn manual, she told herself. What's your solution, Captain? Go for a walk, and figure it out.* She sprang up again, and paced her quarters.

He was furious with her, and from his point of view, he had the right to be. For a few minutes, they had been telling each other the absolute truth, and had both given in to it, mind, spirit, and body. The ecstasy of discovery, like a new law of the cosmos revealed. And then she had told him that they could not use that knowledge. It was as if a way home had lain open before them, and she had deliberately closed it. Of course he was angry. He wasn't the kind who put the letter of the law above his convictions or affections, and there wasn't even a regulation against fraternization between officers — just her own conviction that this would be too dangerous, too upsetting to their balance. Captain and first officer, who should be a check on each other, neither too distant nor too close.

She stopped her pacing and held the jamb of her bedroom door, leaning against it for support, closing her eyes. Dizzy again, she let Chakotay's hands move over her once more in memory. A memory only, of how she had responded to nothing more than a look, and a gentle grasp.

And he had kissed her, so softly, the way he spoke, just to tell her something. Not to overwhelm her, or impress her, or even to seduce her, but to seal a pledge the look in his eyes had already made. She had known its meaning, and accepted it the way it was meant, because she had meant the same. Dear God...

Janeway was trembling, her head shaking in slow denial, but her mind leaped ahead, relentless in pursuit of the truth. Wasn't this a physical attraction? They had been charged from the spill and the swim, laughing, and then this had been almost an accident— No. She was still, and lectured herself. She couldn't call it only lust, or even say it had started that way. Chakotay was a handsome man, but he stayed camouflaged in a quiet mask of thought, mature and grave, a silver-backed veteran. He had startled her the first time he really smiled. Intelligent, humorous, unpredictable, subversive, feral. It wasn't lust that let a woman who knew the difference nearly make love with a man she couldn't have. If that was all it had been, paradoxically, they'd have called a halt before it had ever happened. They'd both had some experience, after all; they weren't adolescents. She was a Starfleet captain, and he had the same training, no matter how worn down by Maquis laxness. And he was private and concealed, like Tuvok in a way, though he could let all his feelings out and be vulnerable.

She remembered his stricken face just before Seska had disappeared. *I can't imagine how I ever loved you*, the Cardassian had said, and Janeway knew that was the worst possible thing one could say to a man like him. Even if she had only seduced him for his secrets, and he must have been thinking along those lines by then, Seska had cut his heart out in front of her. He had never recovered, no matter what he thought of Seska now, and he would revisit that wound over and over; it might never heal. Perhaps she was dead—who was so dead as one who denied the pull of another life?

Janeway opened her eyes with a silent gasp, the tears welling up, but she did not let them fall. What right did she have to pity him, who had just slashed him open again in a way far worse? Seska and he had parted long before and the emotions on either side were uncertain. But before Janeway had told him to stop, he had known they were in perfect synchrony, that the ripples that had refracted between them for months were about to combine and amplify into a single great wave. He had laid his dreams under her feet, and thought she had gathered them up in her arms. This was probably the first time he had reached out to anyone since Seska had left. Chakotay, however unpredictable he might be, was guarded enough to keep his thoughts veiled and his hands to himself,

unless something greater than his instincts and training prompted him. He had taken a risk because he had known he was right, and he was angry that she could see the same thing as wrong, especially after she had proven to him that it was mutual. How could she show him why she thought the way she did? Would he ever understand? The tightness in her chest, the burning of her eyes, the awful roiling of her guts— she felt so sick she wanted to pass out, end the pain, if only for a little while. Janeway squeezed her fingers on the door jamb so tightly they hurt, and focused on the sensation to pull the ache out of her core, look at it from the outside. It was like lead wrapped around her heart, molten and crushing. Tuvok had taught her, by example and instruction, how to take an emotion and disassociate it from herself, remove at least some of its influence in order to function normally in crisis. Not a permanent solution, but a necessary one. Slowly she let herself relax, and slowly her breathing evened out, and she released her grip and turned away into the sitting area. Hands on the back of her lounge, she bowed her head for a moment, then raised it to look out the viewport, her eyes stinging, but her vision unblurred again.

She could not deny the truth, and she had to use that realization to deflect it from its goal. A scientist needed to see clearly and not substitute wishful thinking for honest analysis. Her jaw clenched. She couldn't fall in love with an officer under her command, have a sexual relationship with him, and expect that all would be smooth sailing. Especially not in *Voyager's* unique situation. This crew functioned in a delicate balance, and would even if it were one hundred percent Starfleet. The isolation, the relative privation, the constant danger put a terrible strain on the best officers she had. Janeway stood upright and put her hands on her hips. Chakotay held the key to the potentially most disruptive part of her crew. Any perceived tilt or bias could take the whole ship down. The arrangement had been working as it stood. She couldn't change it without risk, and the only justification for risk was the welfare of her ship and crew. Not her personal wishes, not her deepest longing for a vision of transcendence. She closed her eyes briefly, seeing too much behind the lids. If there was any way to return to stability without living a lie, she had to find it. No one knew about this but themselves, and no one would ever know. She trusted herself

to find a solution, and she trusted Chakotay to know his duty, even in the face of his anger. Or his love.

She paced her quarters.



...THE WIND ALWAYS ROSE in this place just before dawn. The first light was showing on the edge of the sky when she came and rubbed her head against his side for him to scratch her ears. Her thick rough fur bristled up on her neck as he did so, and she growled in mock aggression and took his hand playfully between her teeth. He allowed her to tug at it, avoiding any sudden moves, for her fangs were sharp, and she was not a pet. Her real anger he did not want to know. She released his hand and sniffed at him, and he knew she could smell another's scent lingering on his skin.

"Elder sister, it is good to see you." The sun rose, and they sat together, her presence calming him. Her yellow eyes told him her thoughts. When he finally began to speak, she already knew what he was going to say, but listened, patient as the rocks on which they sat.

He had been skirting around the edges of realization too long. To pour all of his emotions out left him drained, but lighter of soul, if not happy. He was not accustomed to deceiving others, and he could not tell the truth if he did not admit it to himself. Truth was dangerous, but comfortable lies even more so. He tore open his spirit like earth, digging for the source of the eruption: a spring of water, heated by unseen fires, that had finally burst out on the surface. Of course he had known, had dismissed the attraction as both inevitable and impossible, had pretended not to notice his own folly in encouraging himself in it, had not wanted to part fire and water and cut off the soul-nourishing warmth. Sunken deeper and deeper into self-indulgence, happily drowning himself. Gods, the price he would pay for that— His anger was not only at rejection, but at himself for ever having laid himself open to it. Hadn't he been fool enough for one year yet?

She nudged his side, and he straightened up to look at the sun. "I know," he replied to his guide's unspoken words. "I was not a fool to want to be with her."

He could weave an image of her, slender, upright, the sun an aureole on her hair. The strength of her curving bones, the blue-depth of her eyes reflecting the sky. He gained a shred of comfort at the same time he rocked back and forth in sudden misery, covering his face to shield himself from the light. When he looked up again, she would still be there. She would never disappear, and her warmth would shine on him every day, from far away. But he could not touch her warmth, or offer her any of his own, or accompany her below her horizon. Every night would be dark and cold and spent alone.

"Elder sister, tell your brother what he can do. Tell him what his path must be, if the way he was meant to take is closed. Where can a traveler find rest if every dwelling is shut against him?"

She yawned toothily and stretched, then paced around him, circling him four times in blessing. The risen sun warmed him. On the ground, she scratched a moment with her paw, then looked up at the sky and the sun, and at him again. She touched him with her nose, and trotted off.

On the ground, she had made two rough circles, one overlapping the other, with a line indicating movement. He studied the figure a long time, memorizing it, then drew a finger across it to break the circles open...

THE IMAGE FADED gradually and he was in his quarters again, sitting on the floor.

Chakotay rose and gathered the components of his medicine bundle; the river stone, the blackbird's wing, the akoonah that aided the concentration; bound them up again in the skin wrapping and replaced it in its hiding place. He removed a smaller drawstring pouch from the same cabinet and said a prayer before opening it and taking out its contents to lay on the floor before him.

A dried mushroom. A knotted scrap of multiaxial cable that he had found in Engineering. Two long hairs, wound up in a circle and tied. Again he was building his medicine, slowly, to replace what he had lost in the destruction of his ship, and these items had each offered themselves when they had been necessary. He smiled at the chestnut hairs, and remembered how they had shone on the sleeve of his uniform at the end of a bridge shift. Of course he had known whose they

were, but how he had been blind to their meaning he could not imagine.

The smile faded, and he held the little circlet on his thumb. Now that he knew its meaning, its power was uncomfortably strong. Strong medicine could accomplish much, but it could destroy as well, and required discipline on the part of the user. He already denied himself animal flesh as food, a practice that had strengthened him for years, but with such a talisman in his possession, something more was required. He had been too lax with himself where his physical hungers had been concerned, even though his body had been fasting for months. The hunger was still there, and he had only starved himself to the point of famine, when he should have given up the need for sustenance in the first place. He hadn't missed meat at all, and he shouldn't miss anything else he could not have. He thought about the sign that his guide had given him, put all the items back in the pouch, and went to get his newest stone.

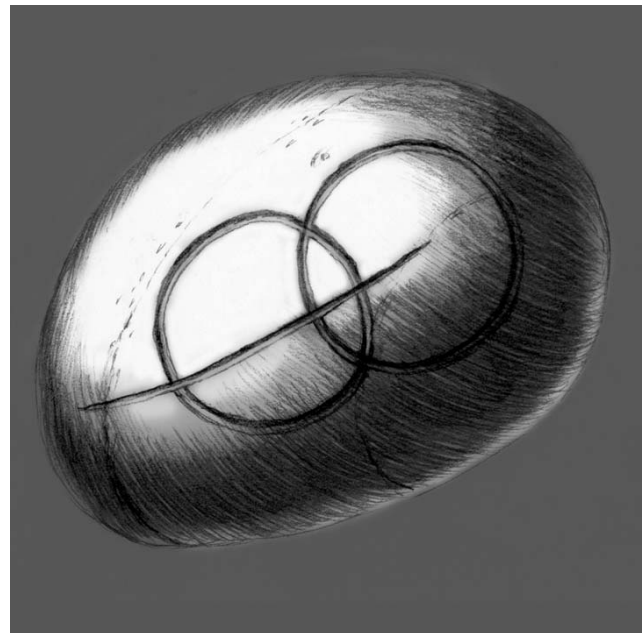
It had come from the real waterfall, just at the base where the stream ran smooth again after the tumble of the terraces. He had wrapped it up carefully once he had discovered which one to take, had thanked the river, and tucked the stone into his uniform. The security guards had watched quietly, not disrupting the process although they had not understood what he was doing. One thing about Starfleet and its code of noninterference; it fostered respect even for the inexplicable. He would have been glad to explain if they had asked, but they had not.

The stone was dark and smooth, slightly oval like a bird's egg, and flat on one side. A fine-grained basalt, said one part of his mind. The last remnant of a volcanic flow that had cooled a hundred million years ago. He weighed it on his palm, the curved side down, fitting perfectly into the hollow of his hand. This was a very good stone. He had had the feeling that it would be. Chakotay picked up his engraving tool and sat at the table to work. An area of dust formed slowly around him on the surface as he scratched and blew, scratched and blew. Two circles, one overlapping the other, with a line that indicated movement. One around the other; the fixed center, the orbit of the satellite, bound to its path. Or a comet, disturbed in its wanderings, drawn in to the mass of a sun, melting in fiery glory for brief months, then speeding away into the outer darkness, never to return. He finished the symbol, spat on the stone and rubbed

it to remove all the dust, cupped it in his hand again. Yes, it belonged in the pouch. Chakotay took all the items out again and laid them in a square, four directions marked. The scrap of cable, the mushroom, the circlet of hair. The stone completed the arrangement, and he stared at it for a long time. He hoped he would dream tonight, as he needed guidance.

The sheets were cool against his skin as he slid between them, his own body the only warmth that touched them. A thought intruded and hung before him, of another body, a tense softness, a warmth through wet clothing. Carefully he isolated the image, froze it, removed it from his mind as much as he was able. But he still imagined a slim woman curled with him, her long hair loose over her shoulders. Not her. He could not let himself think of her. The truth was overwhelming – Someone else. Wide hazel eyes, not blue, a toothy smile.

Seska. It took him a long time to go to sleep, and his dreams were dark to him.



TWO HOURS to breakfast, and no sleep. Janeway opened her door and turned right instead of left to avoid passing Chakotay's quarters. She would take another lift to Deck Six and run a hologram...no, she did not want a hologram. But at least she could take a walk while she knew she would not encounter him. If only she had a

dog to unleash and let run with her. The long curving corridors led her in circles to every part of her ship.

The night shift in Engineering was not too surprised to see her, and Carey asked her to look at the power efficiency readouts from the nacelles and warp core. Gradually declining, the change noticeable even from last week. She nodded and moved on. The dining hall, deserted, and the cargo bays, Kes's garden with fruiting plants and vines. Sickbay, quiet and humming, the doctor resting as a collection of bits in memory crystals. Did he note the passage of time and wait for someone to speak the words to bring him into the world of light again? He might be happiest when alone with himself and the library banks, unconscious and incorporeal. An advantage to be able to turn oneself off completely and be impervious to all stimuli.

The bridge, Rollins dozing slightly on watch, shaking himself apologetically, sitting down again

at her gesture. She went to her ready room and picked up a photograph of a man and a dog from a table, studied it for a while, and put it back. The distance behind her grew too long. And in front of her? An even longer void. Could she cross it alone? The void grew in her, the emptiness solid and black, drawing her entirely into itself, a singularity with no escape. But she must resist the pull of loneliness, of proximity, of inclination. Could she hover between the two, giving way to neither despair nor an illusion of joy? Would the tidal forces shatter her? To serve her crew, she must maintain the balance. Where her ship was concerned, she could never be empty or powerless. Janeway put her fingertips to the bulkhead next to the viewport, then laid her palm flat against it and closed her eyes. All the lives with which she was entrusted, cradled in the thin white shell of graceful metal. The captain of the *Voyager* smiled, and returned to her quarters to start her day.

CHAPTER FOUR

THIS IS THE LAST thing I wanted to find on my desk this morning, Dalby. The...very...last...thing."

Kenneth Dalby looked at the PADD under his nose, and then up at Chakotay's thunderous face. His former captain's eyes were slightly bloodshot, dark-circled, and his whole posture more openly threatening than Dalby had seen in a long time, but his voice was soft, quiet and dead even. Dalby pulled himself the rest of the way out of the cargo compartment in which he was crouching and stood up, straightening his uniform and surreptitiously nudging the compartment hatch closed with the heel of his right boot.

"Uhh...what is it, Commander?"

"It's a complaint. Against you. You are damn lucky this came to me, and not to Lieutenant Tuvok or to...the captain."

"A complaint?"

"If I have to tell you what this is about..."

"But...hey, I was just testing my luck. And she thought it was funny."

"Were you joking?"

"Uhh..."

"You think that kind of remark is a joke, do you? She may have tried to laugh it off at the time, but when we got back on board she filled out all the forms and filed them. And this was the first thing I picked up when I came on duty today. Thanks a hell of a lot, Crewman." Chakotay's voice was growing harsher. "I knew this was not going to be the best day of my life, and you have managed to guarantee that beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Geez, what's up your – I mean, is something wrong?"

"You are. Here. Read this, and then if you have anything to add, I guess I'll have to hear it." Chakotay shoved the PADD into Dalby's hand, stood back, and folded his arms.

"So I'm convicted already, huh?"

"You're not on trial. The most you're going to face is a reprimand. From the captain, that is, if I have to take it to her. From me –"

"You're judge, jury, and executioner?"

"Read it."

Dalby grimaced and looked down at the PADD. It held only three paragraphs of text, and he scanned them and looked up. "OK, that's what I said. So what's the big frigging deal?"

"Think about it for one second from her point of view. She's on an away mission in an unfamiliar, possibly dangerous area, and a crewman she barely knows comes up and compliments her on her fruit-picking style, and in the next breath suggests – I'll quote – 'Let's blow off the security guards, get that damn uniform unzipped *all* the way and you and me can have some real shore leave, sweetheart.'"

"I never touched her. She kinda stared at me, and then she laughed and headed off. OK, I guess I might have scared her a little."

"You did. She's Starfleet. She's not used to being propositioned on duty. The Maquis way of doing things isn't appropriate in...that kind of operation."

"Worked once or twice," Dalby muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. OK, I'm sorry. I'm *real* sorry. I was so far outta line I won't ever ask anyone to have sex with me for the rest of my life, 'cause this is frigging Starfleet and they issue duranium chastity belts along with the uniforms. I couldn't be expected to know that, *sir*, not having gone to the frigging Academy. I'm just ordinary scum who likes to sleep with a woman once in a while. You didn't used to be such a tightass on that subject, not when Seska got in the mood – *ough!*" The collar of his shirt had twisted so tight in Chakotay's grip that Dalby could barely breathe. The other fist jerked back, halted, and then he was shoved roughly away, the whole movement so fast he had no chance to respond. Dalby hit the wall, gasping, his own fists up, but Chakotay turned his face to the side and dropped his hands, staring at the floor, or at some indeterminate point in the air. He almost seemed to be asking for retaliation, laying himself deliberately open to it, but Dalby knew better than to take him up on it, whatever his motive. They paused for a few moments, then Chakotay started to laugh in short hard bursts through a set grimace, a sound that prickled every hair on Dalby's head. The last time he had heard that laugh, there had been a lot of dead bodies in the area... The laugh broke off into a hiss through

the teeth, and then silenced itself into long breaths. Dalby stared in fascination, his heart beating in furious thumps.

Chakotay turned to him in a moment with the soft even voice again. "You write up that apology, and make it a good one. This isn't just a work problem – she can't get off this ship, and neither can you, and I won't tolerate anyone making anyone else uneasy in a captive situation."

"Uh...uh...yes, sir."

Chakotay closed his eyes briefly and exhaled. "No one said you couldn't have...a relationship, but pick your targets a little more carefully. And change your style unless you know who you're dealing with. There are a lot of differences between an Academy graduate and a former freedom fighter."

"You're the expert on both, I guess."

Chakotay stared at him so long he dropped his gaze. "Just get that written. I want it by 1700, we're going to deliver it together, and then I want you to stay out of her way for a while. You don't have any reason to hang around Stellar Cartography in the first place, and if you do, tell Torres to send someone else, and tell her I said so."

"Why not just tell everyone I'm a pervert for hitting on Jenny Delaney? Then they can stay out of *my* way."

"Because if the captain ever hears about you and your crude manners, you'll get a lot more than a remedial training course, I guarantee you, and I'm going to have to administer it. Not to mention that even if she'd agreed, going off alone in that place would have been – stupid. Grow a few brain cells. You can nip it in the bud, or you can go for major surgery later. Your choice." Chakotay was quiet and controlled again, but his eyes were narrow, his shoulders tense. "Damn you, Dalby. I'm spending my credit on things like this. Don't let me down." He took a deep breath and suddenly looked very tired, although it was only 0815.

"What the hell is the matter with you, Chakotay? You look sick."

"I wish I was." A sardonic chuckle.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. You've got your orders, so carry them out. 1700 hours, or this goes straight to Janeway. *Don't* make me do that."

"Yes, sir." Chakotay stalked off down the corridor, and Dalby looked after him, scratching his chin.

"Damn," he said to himself when the first officer was out of sight. "And I thought *I* needed to get laid." He kicked the hatch open and slid back into the cargo compartment. "Well, it's my lucky day all around, I guess. He didn't spot the whiskey still I've got in here."

○

"WHERE ARE WE off to today, Captain?" asked Tom Paris breezily as Janeway came up the steps from the ready room to the command level of the bridge.

"No course changes, Mr. Paris." She put a hand on his arm as she passed the pilot's station, and he grinned at her. Even as an inmate in a Federation rehabilitation colony, he had had that irrepressibly flirtatious air. Her smile faltered, and she passed him quickly and headed for her command chair. Paris turned and looked up at her with puzzlement, but she pretended to study her monitor, not seeing the display. The chair to the left of her was empty, but after lunch, Chakotay would have bridge duty – could she find some reason to be down in Engineering or in her ready room all afternoon? It would be worth some lost work time to put off the eventual, inescapable meeting as long as she could. She had even skipped breakfast in the dining room and eaten a replicated omelet in her ready room despite all the fresh fruit Neelix had to serve. In another twenty-four hours, both of them might have gained some distance. Obvious tension in front of others would disturb the whole ship, and she hoped to spare Chakotay's feelings as much as possible. "Janeway to Torres," she said.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I want to review those energy output readings with you some time today. Can you reserve the period after 1300?"

"Sure. When did you see those? I was just writing up a report."

"I had a long night. See you at 1300."

"Aye, Captain. Torres out." Janeway jumped up and paced the length of the command level, idly scanning the displays on every wall. Perfectly routine, nothing that required her attention. For once, she chafed at smooth efficiency, and almost wished for a problem to engage her attention – not a problem, but some absorbing occupation, a scientific puzzle...

"Captain," said Tuvok, frowning at his panel. "I am obtaining some unusual readings from an asteroid belt in a solar system ahead."

"Yes?"

"They are peculiarly devoid of certain elements, and are perhaps worthy of study."

Janeway smiled in amused gratitude. "Tuvok, you're a mind reader."

"In the literal sense, that is true, but I have no contact with your thoughts at present."

"Just an expression. Let's take a look." She stepped up to the security console and began to tap at the display. "You're absolutely right. This is fascinating. Barely a trace of heavy metals such as uranium. What could have extracted them so efficiently? I'd expect at least—"

"Captain!" said a cheerful voice as the turbolift doors opened. Neelix bustled in and came around the railing to her. "I really must speak to you about— my, you're looking lovely today — is that a new hairstyle? — we've got all this wonderful fresh food, and Mr. Chell just told me that that an old Bolian harvest festival fell last week —"

"Great," muttered Harry Kim from the Ops station.

"— and what more excuse do we need for a celebration? Morale's been a little low, if you don't mind my saying, and I really think we could have stayed longer at the gardens —"

"Mr. Neelix," said Janeway with a smiling edge in her voice, "I am very busy and simply cannot discuss this with you in any depth. Please find... the first officer and make your proposal to him." She stepped down a level and sat in her command chair.

"He's difficult to pin down today, Captain. Everywhere I go, they say he's just left, and when I call him directly, he's always in the middle of a conversation and cuts me off. Now you are much easier to find, since you're mostly here —"

"And also in the middle of a conversation. He'll eat lunch eventually, Neelix. Just go back to the dining room. Now about that asteroid belt, Mr. Paris —"

"Course laid in, Captain," the pilot replied.

"You're learning, Lieutenant. Engage at Warp Four. Tuvok, I want the forward sensors on maximum, and feed your readout to my monitor." She saw Neelix shrug and return to the turbolift, and felt a little twinge of guilt, but perhaps Chakotay would appreciate dealing with

something out of the routine as well. A quiet day might be an intolerable one.

○

"I'M NOT the captain, B'Elanna," said Chakotay with as much patience as he could muster. "And even if I were, I couldn't create new engineers out of air. I spoke to her yesterday morning, and she was sympathetic, but every department on *Voyager* is short-handed, and you'll just have to make do."

Torres said nothing, the faint hiss of her laser probe audible in the enclosed corridor, but he knew she was only biding her time. The chief engineer slid out of the accessway above him, landed like a cat and put down her probe with a clang on the grated floor. She reached for another tool and glanced up at him while calibrating it, her dark brows drawn together under her high forehead. "Commander," she said, her voice more even than the Klingon ire in her expression implied, "I don't even have enough people to keep up the standard maintenance schedule. We've had so many crises — bio-neural gel packs getting the flu, dumping the warp core and reinitializing it — I've got you to thank for that one — that no one's been available to do the rounds. I'm doing grunt work myself in spare moments, as you see. This ship's going to fall apart from sheer neglect if I don't get some more people soon."

"You're exaggerating," said Chakotay, and almost managed a smile. They were fifteen years apart in age and had known each other only two years, but they had seen so much danger together in the Cardassian Demilitarized Zone that he felt the familiarity of old war veterans with her.

"Not by much," she replied, put all her tools in her carrying case and picked it up. "Jonas!" she snapped at a crewman. "Go up there and see if you can get those connections unfrozen. I've got to check some more conduit junctions."

"Sure, Lieutenant," the man replied, looked obliquely at Chakotay, and hauled himself up the accessway Torres had just vacated. She turned to move along the service corridor, and Chakotay held himself to one side as she squeezed past him, his big frame a handicap in the cramped spaces above Engineering.

"B'Elanna, the ship is running superbly, considering the conditions. All that practice on my

old clunker is paying off. And the captain told me you were doing wonders.”

Finally Torres smiled, with a hint of apology, glancing quickly over her shoulder. She set her toolbox down again under the hatch of a Jeffries tube.

“I always dreamed of working on a ship like this.” Torres gazed up into the tangle of conduits and circuits above her head. “All the time I was suffering in the Academy, the main thing that kept me going was the thought of being assigned to a state-of-the-art vessel like *Voyager*. Not one of those giant Galaxy-class things like the *Enterprise*. She’s so sleek and clean and fast—when she’s in tune—and it’s a damn shame I don’t have enough people to maintain her properly. The nacelles are taking a terrible beating, and I’d put her in spacedock for a month if I could. Can’t you do something, Commander?” Her tone was more deferential now, and Chakotay realized with a pang that Torres had not called him by name for a long time. The restless half-Klingon was following Starfleet protocol to the letter; the field commission and the heavy responsibility on her shoulders had matured and settled her nature. He had encouraged her in that direction, but the difference in her was so profound that their change of situation had never seemed so permanent. Torres seized a pair of handholds and disappeared up the Jeffries tube. In a moment her voice floated down to him.

“Look at these oxidized O-rings! No one’s lubricated these in months! Might as well throw them away! And I can’t keep replicating replacements indefinitely —”

“All right, Chief Engineer,” he said, with emphasis on the title. “I’ll ask the captain if someone can transfer from Security or Ops. I haven’t heard Tuvok complaining about insufficient personnel, so perhaps he can spare one or two.” He regretted the note of sarcasm in his voice as soon as he heard himself speak.

Torres slid out of the tube, wiped her hands on her jumpsuit, and glared at him. “Captain Janeway wouldn’t play favorites.” She snatched up a PADD from her tool box.

“No, of course not,” Chakotay replied evenly. “Starfleet captains are more carefully picked and better trained than to indulge themselves like that. Even if she and Tuvok have been together a long time.” He kept his face neutral. Torres wasn’t the person to show such feelings to, not any more.

“He’d be her Number One now if you hadn’t come along, wouldn’t he?” Torres made an entry on the PADD, keeping her eyes on the screen.

Chakotay tried to imagine Tuvok mediating between Maquis and Starfleet, forming the connection between crew and command, shuffling people around the ship like spare parts while trying to keep their feelings and abilities in mind. “I wouldn’t wish this job on Tuvok,” he said aloud, and allowed himself a moment of satisfaction.

“You’re the only person who could do it,” said Torres, a flash of the old camaraderie showing through the new reserve of the Starfleet lieutenant. “The captain’s lucky you didn’t get killed on that suicide run of yours. None of the Maquis would have cooperated if you hadn’t been backing her up. I know I wouldn’t have. She’d have had a mutiny in the first week, and I might have led it—well, me and Seska.” She laughed shortly, then broke off and glanced up at him. Chakotay felt his jaw tighten, but forced a slight smile. He was going to have to get used to the surge of contradictions that flooded his brain at the mention of that name. Whatever her faults, she had been easy to talk to—

“Hell of a way to win a battle,” Torres continued, “using your own ship like a photon torpedo, but I appreciate it for one. If you hadn’t saved *Voyager* from the Kazon, I wouldn’t have had the chance to work on this beautiful ship or to get to know Captain Janeway.”

“Yes, she is beautiful,” Chakotay replied, looking at the bulkhead where his hand rested, and pausing a long time before he continued. “I knew Janeway deserved backing up before I really got to know her. This is her ship, and our chances in the Delta Quadrant would be even slimmer if the captain couldn’t count on her crew to obey her.”

“Most of it, anyway. It’s amazing that you can work with someone a long time and not really know her. I thought Seska was my friend...”

“And she’s gone and left you short an engineer,” said Chakotay, smiling sourly. “You’ll just have to hope no more of your staff turn out to be Cardassian agents disguised as Bajorans.”

“Urrgh. Just because you’re my superior officer doesn’t mean I have to laugh at your warped jokes, does it?”

“No, that’s not in the manual. But you never laughed at them anyway.”

“Thinking about Seska doesn’t exactly put me in a cheerful mood. She was lying all along, to all

of us. She made all of the Maquis look bad, and what she did to you – “Torres broke off. “Well, the captain must have thought –” she resumed, but stopped again at the look on his face. “Sorry, Commander. It’s none of my business what the captain thought.” She busied herself with her tools. “Huh,” she muttered. “I hope the bi– the Kazon-lover likes working on their ugly hulks. Can’t even replicate food and water –”

“If she’s still alive...”

“If they killed her, it’s her own damn fault,” Torres said, jumping up again. “Who the hell did she think she was? Negotiating with the Kazon as if she were the captain? How was she going to keep that quiet? Is that typical Cardassian thinking? What kind of training does the Obsidian Order give its spies, anyway?”

“I expect they get a lot more experience in subterfuge than in straight thinking, frankly,” he replied, smiling at Torres’ passion. “Not to mention everything we saw them do in the Demilitarized Zone. But she told me and the captain that she was working for *Voyager*. She was just doing things her own way, in her view. What her ultimate aims were, I don’t know.”

“Unbelievable,” growled Torres. “But she always did have a knack for getting her own way.” Chakotay thought for a moment she was referring to Seska’s highly visible, and successful, campaign to get into his bed, and he gritted his teeth, but Torres would not have mentioned that to him. She hadn’t approved, but had never blamed him for his weakness. Seska certainly could be persuasive... He frowned as a sudden connection was made.

“Did she ever pressure you into anything?” He knew Torres had not been the only culprit in Engineering to participate in the disastrous clandestine test of the Sikarian space-folding device, but she had steadfastly refused to name the others, taking all the responsibility, and the weight of the captain’s wrath, on herself. And he knew she regarded Janeway nearly as an icon.

“I’ve always made my own decisions,” said Torres, but she dropped her gaze. “You told me often enough I had to be accountable for my actions. I guess it finally sank in, now that I’m chief engineer on a real starship.”

Chakotay took a deep breath, his feelings powerfully torn. Regret, that his own influence had not been enough, and paradoxical satisfaction that it had at least laid the foundation for her progress, when she was ready to accept it. The student was

independent of him now, and had moved on to a new teacher. A more advanced level? His pride smarted at that, and would not admit it, but Janeway had much more in common with Torres than he had ever had. The constant physical intensity, the relentlessly practical and analytical mind, the emotions close to the surface but supported by great intelligence and hunger for knowledge. In many ways, Torres was a rawer, younger Janeway, and he could not have wished her a better model. He had a mental image of an adolescent bird with feathers newly replacing down, flying to join the sun, and he was unaccountably sad at the joyous event. *Let her go, Chakotay*, he told himself. *She’s not yours any more, if she ever was. If anyone ever was.* He put his hand on Torres’ wiry shoulder, a gesture uncommon with him, and smiled puckishly at her to cover his emotion. “Well, whatever kind of training the Obsidian Order gives its operatives, at least they make decent engineers.”

“Not half as good as she thought she was,” smirked Torres. “But I could put her back to work lubing O-rings, if you got her for me.”

“Now who’s making warped jokes?”

“You’re right. You’ve been a really bad influence on me, you know.” They laughed together.

“Janeway to Torres.”

“Yes, Captain?” Torres’ eyes left his as she answered, and Chakotay turned away.

“I’m going to need some samples from this asteroid belt, B’Elanna. Can you prepare a containment field? I’ll be down in Engineering a little earlier than planned.”

“Aye, Captain. Sounds a lot more entertaining than what I’m doing right now.” Torres chuckled, but Chakotay stood still, his back to her, tightly grasping one rung of the access ladder that led down from the junction. Janeway’s next words were unexpected, and his fingers whitened.

“Have you seen Chakotay today?”

“Yes, he’s right here –”

“Oh. Well, that’s all right. Ah...I’ll be down in a few minutes, once we’ve fixed transporter coordinates for the samples. Janeway out.” Chakotay heard a small snort of puzzlement from Torres, but she made no comment, to his intense relief.

“I’d better get out of here. I’ve got a lot of territory to cover today,” he said after a moment. “Carry on, Lieutenant.” He swung onto the ladder

and climbed down out of the narrow dark service corridor, emerging into the main Engineering area once he had reached the bottom. A high open space, dominated by the coruscating glow of the warp core and the technicians moving about, where he could breathe with a little more ease.

This is Janeway's ship, and that power is harnessed to her command, Chakotay thought. Every electron of the plasma flow, every soul under one hand. And that was the way it should be. He stretched out his own hands and looked at them; square-palmed, straight-fingered, brown and capable. Capable of anything he put his mind to. He had put them in the service of this ship, and that could be a lifetime's charge. If that choice meant that the people who once focused on him had found a new loyalty, well, hell, that was the whole point of the exercise. He had wanted his crew to see the light the way he had done, to realize that Janeway was the best hope they had. She was like the center of a solar system, a star that bent the planets into orbit. Torres might have taken a little longer to fall into line, but she felt the same way he did. Well, maybe not exactly the same way... Chakotay chuckled sardonically, took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, exercising the discipline of thought native to him, and when he opened them again, he had a faint half-smile of surface peace, and he went on his way.



"FASCINATING. Oh, if I could publish papers on the things we find here—I'd be typing from now until retirement." Janeway peered at the display on the console in front of her, and then at the sample of asteroidal rock slowly disintegrating in a particle beam in a containment field.

"B'Elanna, increase the intensity a notch—ten percent—that's good."

"What have you found?"

"Mining, if I don't miss my guess. A highly sophisticated form of it. I haven't any idea how this was done, but the technology must have been as advanced as the Caretaker's."

"Mining?" Torres laughed.

"An almost complete extraction of the heavier metals—rare elements. Less than one millionth the amounts in that belt than one would expect in a solar system of this type. There are very faint

traces of energy that suggest the metals were dematerialized within the rock and transported out—but our transporters couldn't do anything of the kind. It would require selective control on the molecular level, choosing what they wanted and leaving others behind."

"Then it wasn't the Kazon, or anyone we've encountered. None of them even have transporter technology, even the relatively advanced civilizations. The Sikarians can get around by folding space, but they don't have the basics of dematerialization circuitry or pattern buffers—" Torres trailed off and Janeway saw the animated light die from her face.

"No, they don't," Janeway replied, and both of them were silent for a moment, side by side at the console. The Sikarians. She wished once again, as she had uncounted times, that Councilor Gath had never invited her to enjoy the pleasures of his beautiful planet. He had entertained the entire crew in his city, tried to heap her with gifts of sweetmeats and dresses, had even cast his eyes over her in a way that left no doubt he would like to offer her even more. And she had responded to his courteous, insinuating interest, unable to simply put him off although she had no intention of accepting that particular offer. A rumor had started almost immediately, promulgated by someone with an ax to grind, perhaps, that she was infatuated with the man. Chakotay had heard it soon after their arrival at Sikarius, for he had mentioned it to her in light of a report on morale after he had returned from a visit to Engineering. She had laughed and said something lightly dismissive in response, to which he had reacted oddly. Janeway had been surprised at the tremor, something like disgust, before he had smiled crookedly and made a joke. But she had hardly seen him for two days after that, except at briefings, and then his manner had been short and irritable. He had practically told her, in front of the entire senior staff, to violate the Prime Directive and Sikarian law to obtain the space-folder. But although the apparent breach had seemed to heal, perhaps Sikarius still preyed on his mind as it did on hers. Her rapport with Torres, so painfully found, so painfully strained, only emerged intermittently now.

"Whoever it was, they must have obtained enough uranium alone to build thousands of old-fashioned reactors, if that is what they did with it,"

Janeway said when the silence threatened to stretch out too far.

"Why would anyone who could mine it like that want to build reactors?"

"It was a long time ago, I think, and the current mix of technology in the Delta Quadrant is peculiar. As if bits of knowledge had filtered in from outside, and there had not been a normal progress of science research. Someone might have had this device and not much else. But that system had no habitable planets, and never had, so they came from elsewhere to do their work."

"Yes, this is a pretty strange place," said Torres. "It doesn't seem normal. I—I didn't always get along so well at home, but I wish I was back there anyway." She paused and looked at Janeway. "I wish I was back at home, but serving on *Voyager*."

Janeway smiled at her chief engineer, and they turned back to their consoles.



"LOOK, MOST OF THEM are just unqualified. Criminals, adventurers, people who couldn't make it in the Federation, Bajoran refugees who never had a decent education—"

"So who would you rather fill the vacancies with? Kazon? Talaxians?"

There was a burst of laughter around the table. Chakotay realized that the speakers had not seen him come into the dining room, and began to move around the corner into their line of sight.

"At least the first officer used to be Starfleet." Chakotay stopped in mid-stride.

"Now he's more-Starfleet-than-thou. Probably thinks he has something to prove, because he does. He brought an Obsidian Order spy on board with him, after all." The note of mistrust, even dislike, in the speaker's voice sent a chill through him. How many others—?

"He couldn't have known that."

"Couldn't he? You know what I heard? He and she—"

"Everybody knows that. Give the man a break. I haven't seen him do anything out of line. Janeway put him in the office, and I'm not going to second-guess Janeway."

There was a moment of silence.

"As long as *he* doesn't second-guess Janeway. I suppose there hasn't been any sign of that. Though you have to wonder why not."

"She's Janeway," said his defender, as if the name were a list of qualities in itself.

"He's not so old, or so bad-looking, and neither is she," said a woman. "Dashing renegade fighter—"

"Now that's funny," said a man, and there was another burst of laughter. Chakotay's throat clenched tight, and he wheeled to go, sick to his stomach, his appetite gone. If he could get out of the dining room without being seen—

"Commander! There you are! Where are you going? I've been trying to track you down all morning." Neelix came out of the kitchen and made a beeline for him, sending a few heads snapping in his direction. Chakotay put a calm expression on his face and tried to look as if he had just arrived. "I've just had the most marvelous idea. Come and eat, I'll tell you all about it, and then if we could talk to the captain sometime before dinner, this would be a day well spent."

"Why don't you tell me about your day, Neelix?" said Chakotay. "Mine's only half over, but it feels about spent already." He glanced at the table of Starfleet regulars as he went by, seeing only busy forks and downcast glances, and wondered if his mood would ever improve. Not at this rate.

"You don't look too well," said Neelix with a probing gaze, setting a plate down in front of him when he took a chair. "Have you been eating right? I didn't see you at dinner last night, and you skipped breakfast. So did the captain, for that matter. You senior officers ought to relax and indulge yourselves more. I know; I'll fix up a nice light supper tonight, bring it to your quarters, and you and she can discuss all your little hassles over hot pejuta and Ghaquerian biscuits."

Chakotay ran a hand slowly over his face, willing calm. "No. Thank you." The plate in front of him was garnished with beautiful fruits and berries, their sweet scent familiar and disorienting. He picked up his fork automatically, then put it down.

"Oh. Well, just trying to help. You know, Commander..." Neelix sat down and leaned confidentially over the table. "I think I've seen enough to know what's going on here." He wagged his brows when Chakotay looked up in a quick twitch of black panic.

“Have you?”

“Have I? I’ve got some experience in matters of the heart, you know – perhaps inferior to yours, you sly dog, but you’re not fooling me. I can put two and two together, or should I say one and one? Heh.”

“Really.” His lips quirked in spite of himself.

“When people skip meals that often, I know it’s not the stomach that’s involved. Oh, my lips are sealed. Not a word to anyone. If you don’t want to rush things, that’s fine, but I could help give the lovely lady a little push, you know. All I need is a hint.” The sheer ridiculousness, the conspiratorial air, the sparkle in the Talaxian’s eyes – Chakotay smiled haltingly, then at Neelix’s titter burst out in a painful snorting laugh, his lips clamped shut. It died quickly, but he slumped in relief, grinning weakly. “That’s better. Now eat your lunch, sir. Don’t let all this go to waste – oh, yes, that marvelous idea of mine. I think we should throw a party, something for the whole ship, and have a

feast while we’re well stocked. How about it? I think the captain liked the idea –”

Chakotay picked up his fork and began to eat, appetite somewhat restored. “Neelix, we need to conserve our food, not use it all up at once. Most of what we’ve just gathered is going into cold storage.”

“But we need a real celebration – harvest festivals, birthdays, whatever – it doesn’t matter. It’s for crew morale – I am the Morale Officer, after all – and you have to be the worst case of low morale I’ve seen in quite some time. But one good party, a little music, dancing, a little tête-à-tête for those of us with a yen for romance, and you’ll snap out of it.” He winked and pointed at the plate. “Have some of that yellowy-peachy one – it’s perfectly delicious. Just let me outline my ideas...”

Chakotay half-listened to a chattering stream of Talaxian inspiration, endless and cheery, and finished his entire meal, with thanks for every mouthful.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAKOTAY HAD THE BRIDGE all to himself this afternoon. He wasn't really surprised, once he thought about it, but he had been bracing himself all day to face her, and the fact that Janeway was still down in Engineering with her samples left him hanging fire. In her chair, he was hunched at an angle, not quite pushed all the way to the back, his arm dangling half off the side and the knuckles of the other hand planted firmly just under his nose. No one could be mistaking his awkwardness for ease. He didn't want to stand up and pace the way Janeway liked to do, because that would draw gazes from all over the bridge. Under too much scrutiny, his tense armor might not hold out long, though there was no chance he would feel able to drop his guard. Tuvok was boring a hole into him from behind, as usual—he twisted around in the command chair and met an intense stare still aimed at him while the man worked away at his console, apparently knowing the configuration so well he would make no miskeys even while he wasn't looking at it. At least Vulcans couldn't read minds without physical contact. In most cases. Chakotay shifted uneasily, turning back to face the viewscreen.

"Lieutenant, move us up out of the plane of the belt," he ordered. "No point in playing tag with asteroids twice our size."

"Hey, I'm practicing," said Paris, grinning over his shoulder. "You never know when you'll have to dodge something big and nasty." He maneuvered *Voyager* between two mountainous hunks of tumbling rock and up above the asteroid belt. The sun shone red on the upper surfaces, pitted and scored with eons of craters.

"Practice is a good way to learn your trade," said Chakotay with deceptive mildness, and got a one-sided smile in return. "I think the captain's got all the material she needs. Prepare to go to warp, and lay in our former course."

"We have received no order to do so, Commander," said the smooth-surfaced voice from behind him.

Oh, Tuvok, I love you too. Chakotay wrapped his fingers around his jaw to hold back the first

retort that came to mind, and waited a beat or two, his intuition prickling.

"Janeway to Bridge," said the intercom.

"Chakotay here." The first words he'd said to her since she'd walked out the door of the holodeck last night.

"Prepare to go to warp. I've got everything I need, and we should be returning to our course."

"Aye, Captain," he replied, and stood up to cover his sudden shudder, a bit of unworthy triumph mixed with the surge of emotion he had felt at the sound of her voice. Tuvok would have dropped his gaze, finally, and Kim would be exchanging a look with Paris—yes, Paris was grinning again and swiveling his seat to the left to look up at the Ops station. Chakotay smiled at the floor.

"Course laid in, Commander."

Chakotay walked down to the pilot's station and looked at the navigational sensors. "Warp Four. Engage."

Voyager raised her nacelles and flew, the system retreating behind them.

"Tuvok, you've got the bridge. It's almost 1700, and I've got an errand to run."

"Aye, Commander." Tuvok moved down to take the chair, and Chakotay turned and passed him on his way to the turbolift.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he said, and let the doors close on a quizzical Vulcan face.



"IT WOULD APPEAR that he has deliberately concealed Mr. Dalby's misstep from you, Captain. I submit that this is part of a consistent pattern, dating from the earliest part of his tenure as first offi—"

"Tuvok."

Tuvok broke off and looked at Janeway, realizing her emotional disturbance of the night before had not entirely resolved itself. Her lips were trembling and her shoulders tense. She had seemed perfectly well upon her return from Engineering, brisk and smiling, explaining her findings with precise movements of her tapered hands, but the moment he had stepped into the ready room with her and brought up the subject of Chakotay, something had changed. Her eyes were

steady and steely, however, and with a brisk nod of her head she indicated that he should sit.

"Does that imply that you would come straight to me with every minor personnel problem if you were in his shoes?"

"I...no, of course not, Captain."

"Exactly. I would trust you to take care of your job. I asked you yesterday if you trusted Commander Chakotay to take care of his job. I thought I had a satisfactory answer."

Tuvok took one of the chairs in front of the desk and spoke with careful gravity. Janeway had nearly tricked that answer out of him, and he knew what she wanted to hear; what she should hear was another matter. "Whether or not he deals with the problem in an appropriate manner is not my concern as security chief. It is the fact that he has erased the log of the original complaint and circumvented its automatic download to my console."

"Did he?" Janeway was gazing past him at the wall of her ready room, only half listening, her thoughts darkening her expression.

"He is apparently quite expert in such matters. I discovered the erasure only by accident, when Mr. Chell repeated a rumor that Ensign Delaney had been...approached on the surface by an amorous crewman, and had been emotionally upset by the incident. I made further inquiries, was informed that she had filed a formal complaint, but could find no record of it until I opened the commander's disciplinary files. He had noted that he had spoken to Mr. Dalby, and is apparently with him and Ensign Delaney at the moment."

Janeway did not reply, and Tuvok saw the shadows moving slowly behind her gaze, her troubled emotions almost palpable. Where was her usual smooth bright surface? Something had stirred her, agitating her to the depths. "Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Does this not concern you?"

She focused on him again, her features working oddly until she settled on a thoughtful scowl. "I suppose it should. But even if it is a habit of his to do an end run around procedure where the Maquis are concerned, it's worked in practice so far. If we had insisted on procedure in Lieutenant Torres' case, we wouldn't have our chief engineer. There's been very little trouble from the Maquis, considering their records, and Chakotay has to take all the credit for that. I gave him the responsibility, after all."

"I would not consider the incident that led to the unmasking of Ensign Seska 'very little trouble'."

"She was hardly a real member of the Maquis. No more than you claim to be, Tuvok." Janeway's lips quirked. She had not lost her sense of humor—she rarely did, often to his discomfiture—but the restlessness in her whole aspect prickled his skin.

"But a much closer member of the group than I. She had the captain's ear, and apparently a considerable hold on his affections. He has remained attached to his former crew as a whole, and at least until she was revealed as a Cardassian, to Ensign Seska. I do not believe that either of us has heard the whole story of their relationship, and it might be beneficial to fill in some of the missing pieces."

He was startled at the whiteness of her face. "No."

"Captain—"

"There is *no* point in questioning him further about her. I wanted to leave him some dignity, at least..." Janeway turned and put an elbow on her desk, covering her lips with one hand. Her eyes were burning bright, gleaming with shining tears. From experience, he knew that silence was his best alternative in this situation, and he employed it. Was her sensitivity on the subject of Chakotay the result of a quarrel? Why then was she defending him so passionately? They sat together for a few moments, Tuvok's gaze fixed on her profile, until Janeway took a deep breath and looked at him. "She didn't do him that courtesy, saying what she did in front of you and me."

"A disavowal of love is disturbing to the mental equilibrium of a Human?"

"Yes. Of course it is." She looked away again, her voice hard, her face tight, but she moved irresolutely as if not able to direct the anger at only one target. "It...it's difficult to think of anything worse that a person could say."

"Indeed. Then you believe that Commander Chakotay has broken all his ties to Ensign Seska as a result?"

"I...know...he's certainly tried to do so. It's not that easy, no matter what someone says..." She rose and walked up to the viewport. "I don't want this question raised again, please. It's idle speculation without foundation unless one could look into his mind—" Janeway glanced pointedly at Tuvok—"and bringing it up to him would do far more harm than good, I'm very sure."

Tuvok raised a brow, but nodded. "I will comply with your wishes, Captain."

"Thank you." She made a bow, and a small smile. "Let's get out of here and breathe some fresh air. I've cooped myself up in Engineering all day, and I want to get back to my bridge."



JANEWAY OPENED THE DOOR of her ready room and strode up to sit in the command chair, but the turbolift opened as well a few moments later and Chakotay swung out of it, and in the same direction so that they nearly collided in front of the consoles. She gripped the rail to stop herself and for sheer support, and they stood toe to toe for an instant, eyes locked, until he said, "Excuse me, Captain," in a low, quiet tone and directed his gaze over her head. Janeway's skin was flushing and chilling, her chest constricted. She nodded and passed him. Chakotay waited for her to sit, then crossed in front of her and took his own seat with a deliberate air. Instead of raising his monitor, he put his fingertips together in his lap and stared at the floor, his breathing audibly measured. Tuvok was walking slowly to his station, and a glance over her shoulder told her that he was studying Chakotay minutely. Everyone on the bridge was stirring and looking around, sensing a mood far out of the ordinary. Tom Paris coughed, and Janeway jumped at the sudden noise. Much too quiet.

"Report," she said, and the pilot recited speed, position and course. Kim summarized ship's systems in a halting monotone. Chakotay cleared his throat.

She paused before saying anything, hoping that he would speak without prompting, but he was silent.

"I hear there was some sort of misunderstanding between two crewmembers yesterday." Janeway smiled, and then leaned a little closer as she usually did when conversing with him on the bridge. Chakotay barely turned his head, and kept his eyes on the floor.

"Yes...ma'am."

"There have been some rumors," she said, hoping to hear him dismiss Dalby with a joke and ease Tuvok's concerns about concealment. Instead, his expression grew even darker and drew inward, and he was silent again. Paris turned around with

a jocular air, apparently about to comment on the rumors, but took one look at Chakotay, stopped and creased his brow, then turned slowly back to his console. Kim fidgeted with his station and shifted his weight from foot to foot. This was dreadful. This was just what she had been afraid of, and the longer it went on in public, the worse it would look.

"Commander, shall we discuss this in my ready room?" she said, very low, and he turned nearly grey. Not alone, no – that would be intolerable – "Mr. Tuvok, please join us," she added. Perhaps she could clear the air about this one matter, at least.

He seemed caged in her office, pacing a few steps back and forth between chairs and door, and Tuvok stood still and watched him, and her. This was going to take every gram of her diplomatic ability. Chakotay angry and upset, barely able to tolerate her presence, and Tuvok implacably suspicious, and, she feared, resentful under his logical justifications. If he would put a name to it himself – but a Vulcan never would.

"Please tell me about what happened. I'm sure you've dealt with it by now, but something got out. I wouldn't want this to affect morale, or create prejudice against any part of the crew."

"Which part would that be, Captain?" Oh, no. He was even sarcastic –

"Chakotay, it's only a rumor that's reached me. Please give me the facts."

He stopped pacing, facing away from her. "Kenneth Dalby made an advance to Jennifer Delaney. It didn't go over very well. She filed a complaint. I talked to Dalby. Dalby wrote up an apology. She accepted the apology. That's all."

A brief breath of ease –

"Where is the record of the complaint, sir?"

"Tuvok –"

"Right here." Chakotay pointed at his forehead.

"Do you consider that sufficient?"

"Works for me."

"As a possible security matter, it is a concern of mine as well, and I require written records to do my work, sir."

"It's not a security matter. It's taken care of. No one threatened anyone, and everyone's friendly now. She even offered to meet him for a meal."

"That sounds like an excellent solution," Janeway put in. "It would be extreme to keep a security record of the beginning of every relationship on board, no matter how rocky."

Chakotay finally looked her in the eye. "Or of the ending."

He might as well have stabbed her. Janeway felt the flash of sharp despair in his face like a knife, but it faded instantly to dark neutrality again, and he turned away. Tuvok was silent, thank God, but he had an attitude of watchful waiting that didn't bode well.

"I agree, Chakotay, there doesn't seem to be any cause for concern now. But...perhaps it would be better not to expunge your records until you are certain an incident like this has been closed. Tuvok does have a point—"

"So that every little thing can be kept on file and held against my crew? So that every denied promotion, every continued doubt can have a logical cause and a paper trail?"

Tuvok pounced. "The former Maquis are not 'your' crew, Commander."

"No, I guess they aren't. Because if they were, none of them would have *betrayed* me." Chakotay was leaning slightly forward, his head thrust out, his fists clenched. Janeway had the sense that Tuvok's icy calm was infuriating him even more than his exact words.

"That's not the issue here, gentlemen. This is not a security matter, and it is closed. Let's leave it at that."

"Some things may not lie as quiet as you'd like, Captain." Chakotay was looking directly at Tuvok. "And some are dead and buried." He glanced briefly at her, and the knife twisted in her heart again. What was dead? Only his intentions? She felt the trembling rise again, but checked it.

"That's enough. Tuvok, I hope your questions are answered. Mine certainly are. And, Chakotay..." She let her voice linger on his name, her careful pronunciation almost a caress, the vowels a little shortened. "Please, go off duty and get some rest. I know you've had...a long day."

His shoulders slumped visibly. "Yes, ma'am." Without another word, he left. Tuvok stepped back to let him pass.

"Have you had an altercation with Commander Chakotay?" he asked when the door had shut again.

"I'm about to have one with you." Janeway slammed a hand on her desk. "Even you should be

able to tell when to leave well enough alone." She rolled a glare up at him, and he raised both brows.

"I cannot agree that important questions should be left aside simply because of the emotional state of the parties involved. If the commander's judgment has been impaired by his attitude, it is cause for concern."

"Then let him repair his attitude on his own. Don't give him more cause for anger. He'll be all right if you let him function the way he sees fit."

"And you, Captain?" His voice was quieter, and his eyes ran slowly over her face.

"I'm fine. This is not your problem, and you will not pursue it. That's an order." Whatever his suspicions were, she had probably just confirmed them. Which was unfortunate, but inevitable, since nothing escaped Tuvok's notice for long.

"Aye, Captain. Will you give the commander a similar instruction?"

"Tuvok— Take the bridge. I feel very tired, and I'm going to turn in early. Good night."

"Good night, Captain."

Janeway led him out of the ready room and left him standing by the command chair, deep in thought. The ache in her heart grew sharper when she passed Chakotay's closed door, and throbbed dull and sick as she undressed and got into bed, but she dropped off quickly, her exhausted mind and body leaving her no more choice in the matter.



...SHE GROWLED and rose, the hair bristling on her back, prowling to the edge of the dark trees that had risen silently from the earth during his tale. He shot to his feet. This place should not change so rapidly. It was slightly different each time, but it was the landscape of his own mind. He knew it like his mother's songs, his father's face, his officer's oath, his ship's controls. The trees grew taller and darker as he watched, she circling him, a pale shape, rough and lean. The sun reached its zenith, but the shade under the branches was impenetrable.

Something was watching him. He could not sense what it was, but it was not Human. Until he knew what it was, he would not be able to see it. She could smell it, however, and she went rigid, her whole body an arrow. She pointed to the watcher, and he knew who it was...

CHAKOTAY WAS SITTING bolt upright, drenching wet, his throat raw from a cry he could not remember letting out. Instantly he flung the covers away and got out of bed, striding to the wall and slamming his palms against it, pushing hard against a memory, solid as the objects around him.

Gods, she was there, he howled silently. On the planet. Watching me, close enough to shoot me. Why didn't she? Chakotay put a hand over his eyes and leaned against the wall, shaking. The first time he had managed to forget her for a full day; rambling in the gardens, making a new one in the heart of the ship, and still she lurked and watched him. At least in his mind, she did... He realized this dream was familiar, that he had had it the previous night, and that his mind had been so clouded he had not remembered it on waking. "Damn, damn," he said to himself, and flung open the closet to find some clothes. His old shirt and trousers came first to hand, and he yanked them on and shot out the door.

This is dangerous, Chakotay told himself. You should leave this alone and keep your mouth shut. The door of the holodeck closed behind him, and he stepped to the control panel, not wanting to use the voice interface yet. What was the point of this exercise? Yes, he had seen something suspicious near the waterfall scene when he had left Janeway there and taken a walk to cool off, but he had forgotten all about it when he had seen her again, and no wonder. A recorded lurker in the bushes hadn't been that damn important when she had a smile like that for him... Why was he doing this? He punched up the holocamera recording he and Adams had made on the surface, and violet-leaved trees sprang up all around him, silently.

Chakotay scrolled through the tape to the waterfall scene and froze the recording. There it was, just where he had seen it on his perimeter check, but a little clearer since this was the original tape and had not been processed and cleaned up. A faint impression of a humanoid figure, too small for a Kazon. He ran the tape at fast-forward until it looped back on itself, noting the changes in posture and the point at which the figure vanished.

At the time he had made the recordings, he had noticed nothing, intent on setting the camera correctly, calling up the on-line help in its memory.

Whoever it was had apparently watched him for some time, moving a little—there was a second impression about three meters to the right. Perhaps it was just a crew member, but why skulk around like that?

The security sweep had turned up nothing in the area only an hour before. Even the guards had not felt it necessary to make more than a quick initial scan, and obviously they hadn't seen anything. Chakotay had not made any tricorder readings, only the holorecordings, so he had only visual and auditory information to go by. This was only a tape and not a program, so the objects had no substance. Chakotay ran it back to the beginning of the sequence and froze it again, then walked straight towards the figure, passing through the tree trunks until he stood next to the indistinct greyish blob.

"Computer, advance time reference by thirty-second intervals." The figure shifted slightly and leaned forward. "Stop."

Yes, that was the best shot. The figure was half concealed by a tree, but the area where the head and face would be was only slightly obscured with branches. Blurry as hell, though. If he hadn't had the camera set to record at a much higher resolution than usual, the figure would probably not have shown up at all.

"Computer, isolate the figure in front of me."

"THERE ARE TWENTY-ONE THOUSAND, FIVE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-NINE DISCRETE OBJECTS IN FRONT OF YOU," said the voice, like a disapproving math teacher.

"All right—eliminate all objects smaller than one meter in all dimensions," he said. The obscuring leaves, branches, grass all disappeared; trees, large rocks and the figure remained.

"Show grid." A luminescent 3-D cube appeared. "Place origin here." He pointed with one finger and the cube shifted. "Scale by 25 percent." The figure was caged with glowing lines.

"Eliminate all objects outside grid." Now he saw a piece of tree trunk and a shadowy grey form floating in the darkness of the holodeck. Areas of the figure that had been blocked with leaves and branches were filled in with textures gleaned from the rest of the object. "Substitution off, fill with neutral shade." The unrecorded areas became blank. He did not want any computer interpolation to bias his eyes.

"Scale by 400 percent." Nearly half life size, the blurry shape took on some more specific characteristics. Long hair brushing the shoulders.

One hand laid on the bark, a forward listening posture. It was still mostly a silhouette – “Increase contrast by increments of 5 along a 100 point scale.” Detail harshened on the face. “Stop. Show gamma correction curve – compress.” The values equalized.

Chakotay let out a breath that forced all the air from his lungs. The ghostly form hovered on the edge of recognizability. Did he really want to take this any further? Yes. If his suspicions were true, the very ones which had spurred him to investigate in the first place, he had a duty to pursue this as far as it would go. And he was working so hard to find something lost and barely visible, restore it to recognizability – Duty was the last thing on his mind, actually. He had to know.

“Increase color saturation.”

“Sharpen thirty percent.”

“Sharpen twenty percent more.”

A young woman with Bajoran features looked at him, her face crisscrossed with blank streaks of grey. The wide hazel eyes had a hungry glare.

Delete it, said a voice of sick panic. Delete it. Wipe it out, and no one else will ever have to see her again –

“Save image and enhancement history,” he whispered so low that he had to repeat the instruction for the computer’s benefit.



“THE HOLODECK – ? Why does he want us on the holodeck in the middle of the night?” asked Janeway in flat tones, standing in the open doorway of her quarters. Tuvok estimated that her heart rate, as measured by the visible pulse in her exposed throat, had accelerated by thirty percent since he had spoken. Even if he had not known her well, her emotions read like bold print.

He did know her too well to make any comment. “I do not know,” he replied. He spoke low, so as not to disturb sleepers in the cabins nearby. “The commander was very insistent that both of us, and only we, should see what he has to show us.”

“Why didn’t he call me directly – ” Janeway stopped and gritted her teeth. She wrapped her

dressings gown around herself and accompanied Tuvok to the turbolift.

CHAKOTAY WAS WEARING dark trousers and a rumpled shirt woven with angular patterns that Tuvok recognized immediately. The traditional dress of a Native American colonist, common among the Maquis. Apparently he had risen in haste and chosen his attire at random. When he saw Janeway in her nightclothes, her hair loose, his eyes closed briefly, then reopened, expressionless. He said only, “This is the tape I made,” then showed them a sequence of image processing, froze the final result and waited, without turning to see their reaction.

Janeway’s eyes narrowed in fury, but it was directed at the woman whose faint, blotchy image hung before them. She bit her words out through drawn lips.

“She was there. That – ” She put a hand over her mouth, took it away. “Seska, or whatever her real name might be.”

“Curious,” commented Tuvok. “I discovered no sign of a Kazon base, despite Mr. Neelix’s warnings, and no ship was within sensor range at the time.”

“Could the Kazon have abandoned her there?” Janeway sounded as if she hoped very much that they had.

“From what we know of them, they would have been more likely to leave her where no food or water could be obtained, or simply to kill her, if they had no further need of her,” the Vulcan replied.

“But – ” Chakotay had said very little since they had arrived, and his back was still turned. “If she escaped from them – ”

“She won’t escape from me,” said Janeway in tones so steely both her officers turned to her. “Not again. We’ve got her this time.” She wheeled and left the holodeck.

Tuvok and Chakotay were left looking at each other. “I think that means she wants us on the bridge,” said Chakotay, a faint smile starting on his lips.

“Indubitably,” replied Tuvok. “I would suggest that you get into uniform, Commander.”

CHAPTER SIX

NO, CAPTAIN. I can't let you go down there to look for her." Chakotay's voice was quiet and intense; he obviously meant business, but he would meet her eyes only briefly. "She's too dangerous. And — excuse me, Captain, but I feel that this is my responsibility."

"Ensign Seska is..." Janeway realized that she should not finish the thought in the conference room with others present. After a moment of silence, she fell back on protocol. "It is the first officer's prerogative to warn the captain against going into a hazardous situation," she acknowledged.

"It's my prerogative to *stop* you from going into a hazardous situation," said Chakotay, and held her gaze with an apparent effort of will. Paris let out a long breath through pursed lips, like a silent whistle. Everyone was studying the walls, the table, their own fingernails.

"That's in the manual," replied Janeway, her voice steady, trying to lighten the mood. "Let's defer this discussion for a few minutes. Mr. Tuvok, do you believe that more powerful portable scanners will do the job?"

"Yes, Captain. If they are calibrated to cut through another type of shielding than the standard varieties we originally attempted to detect, the scan will have a significantly greater chance of success."

"Another type of shielding?" asked Janeway.

"Yes. It is not penetrable to normal scans and does not even betray its presence. There are elements in common with the Romulan/Klingon cloak, and with only one other kind that I have ever seen. I propose that we study our logs of the Caretaker's array and the underground Ocampa city and evaluate how our scanners might be modified to penetrate shields of that configuration. I believe that may be what we are dealing with here." The eyes all refocused on the Vulcan.

"We're dozens of light-years from where the Array was," said Ensign Kim, and exchanged glances with Torres.

"But he spoke of another of his kind before he died," said Janeway. "Another being of his technologically advanced race, who had departed centuries before. She could easily have come this far."

"Why would she build an underground base?" said Torres. "If that's even what we're going to find."

"I have no idea," Janeway replied, and smiled. "If we had found the Array empty, we wouldn't have known its purpose without a lot of study. But the apparent age of the other structures on the surface would jibe with the theory that the Caretaker's mate had something to do with this planet. They are very old —"

"— and all ruined," said Torres, continuing the thought. "If she was here, she's long gone." Kim's face fell. "But she might have left a lot behind," she added, and smiled at him. "Maybe even something that generates a displacement wave. Press a button, and we're home..."

"B'Elanna, I'd like you to review the logs that were made at the Array, and work on ideas for penetrating its shields. Tuvok will assist you as needed," said Janeway.

"Right," said Torres, rose and left.

"I'll review the logs from the planet where we met the Kazon-Nistrim," said Paris. "They'll probably try to use that same cloaking technique, blocking our specific sensor frequencies, if they want to sneak up on us. They were only hiding that time, but next time they might attack."

"Good idea, Lieutenant. That's your assignment. Try to spot anything that could be used as a marker to locate their ships — and keep your eyes open as well." Janeway looked at the agenda on her PADD. "That covers everything needed for the search. May I see you in my ready room, Commander? And you as well, Mr. Tuvok." She rose, and the meeting broke up. The officers filed out to the bridge, and Chakotay frowned down at the table and rose as well. Tuvok followed him out the door, his eyes fixed on the first officer's back.

They were standing side by side in front of the desk when she entered, Tuvok relaxed and straight-backed, Chakotay a little slumped, his hands slowly curling and uncurling. Their heads

were nearly on a level, but the Vulcan gave the impression of greater height because of his lean build. Chakotay still reminded her of a bear, although he had laughed when she had told him so. Dark, heavy-shouldered and substantial, a deceptive appearance of easy-going deliberation, but claws and teeth hidden beneath the gentle coat.

"Commander," she said, and both of them turned to her as she moved behind her desk, remaining standing. Janeway looked Chakotay in the face. "You were right. I shouldn't go down to the surface." She watched his expression open up, the tense features smooth out, his lips parting slightly as his eyes widened. He'd been expecting a dressing-down, obviously, and she had to suppress her smile.

"Thank you, Captain," he said finally, and looked away. Tuvok raised an eyebrow.

"I applaud your logic in coming to that conclusion, Captain," he said, and Chakotay glanced sideways at him. He looked at Janeway again, seemingly about to speak, but paused at her upraised hand.

"I accept that this is too dangerous a mission for my direct participation," she said, "but I cannot accept that comment about it being your responsibility, Commander." He raised his chin. "Ensign Seska was a member of your former crew, and under your command – formerly. She was also...your lover." Janeway could not hold his eyes while she spoke that word, but she looked up again immediately. Chakotay's gaze was directed to some distant point, but seemed to focus inwardly. "That does not make you responsible for her actions, and it does not make you responsible for redressing the harm she has done to *Voyager*. She is a member of *Voyager's* crew, and subject to its regulations, to Starfleet regulations. I've allowed you to carry out your independent decisions in dealing with the Maquis because you know them better than I do and have experience in disciplining them. But you do so as my executive officer, and not as their former captain. I am the captain, and I have the ultimate responsibility for every soul on this ship. Is that clear, Commander?"

"Yes, Captain," Chakotay replied, his gaze steady on hers again, but his voice flat and neutral, carrying no ring of conviction.

"Good," she said after a moment. "We're well on our way back to the system. Mr. Tuvok, I expect the scanners at 1600 hours, with whatever improvements incorporated that we can manage.

You will assist Commander Chakotay in planning security for the away team."

"Aye, Captain."

"Commander – I leave the procedure to you. After all – you know her better than anyone else on board."

"No one knew her very well," said Chakotay, with a hint of bitterness, too acid to be humor. Janeway wondered if she would ever again see him smile as he had when she had entered the holodeck the day before. *Seska must have hurt him very badly*, she thought. Perhaps seeing her brought to justice would help. Perhaps that would help with one rejection – what about the other? She leaned forward and put her hands on the desk for support. The task at hand had proved a welcome distraction, a necessary one. Janeway could hardly imagine how she would have coped otherwise, sitting a meter from him day after day, watching his stony profile, feeling the ice of protective protocol forming over the remains of what might have been friendship, or might have been something far more.

"Let's get back to work," she said. "I'll see you both at 1600."



B'ELANNA TORRES always experienced a jolt when Janeway appeared unannounced in Engineering, and today was a worse one than usual for sudden visits. Her face twitched with tension as she pounded the consoles and painstakingly applied laser arc-welds to tiny components, and she was cursing quietly and continuously under her breath, alternating between Standard, Central American Spanish, and flowery Bajoran epithets she had picked up in the Maquis. Carey stood at her elbow, silent at his work, handing her the occasional tool while he created design specs for the chips she needed and programmed the replicator to spit them out. She had a tunnel focus just now, tight and black-walled and aiming for a red fury where she did not want to arrive. *Use the anger*, she told herself. *It's energy. Don't give the energy to that – targh ngaghwl. Use it against her.* The Klingon phrase tasted vile in her mouth, but it was the only description that fit Seska any more.

"Give me the –" Carey put a eight-millimeter drill into her hand. "Thanks." She punched the

trigger and watched the greenish light reflect off his blunt face, brandishing the thing like a weapon, then sliced it into a sheet of alloy. "Where's the mounting for the next chip assembly?"

He pointed at the top of the console, where he had laid out all the components he had already fabricated. They were arranged in the exact order in which she would need them, and she gave him a brief smile, which he returned.

"Well, maybe we'll get this done in time after all," she said in a moment. "Where the hell is Tuvok with that shield harmonic analysis? We can't do the next chip set without it."

"I'll check," said Carey, and stepped to the small viewscreen over the main engine console. The security chief's dark face appeared, and they began a conversation. Torres continued to punch holes in her sheet of alloy until the mounting's pins fit snugly into them, knelt, and placed the assembly inside the casing of the scanner. This would be a delicate weld, as she would have to be careful of the first set of chips already installed. Holding it in place with one hand, she reached up for her welder with the other, hit an obstacle, and experienced a jolt.

Captain Janeway stood over her, peering into the casing, and Torres' hand had collided with her ribcage. She moved back immediately, with a gasp at the impact, but the damage was done.

"Dammit!" The sheet and the mounting slipped and fell into the casing, rattling loudly. A patter of tiny chips went after it as the first mounting was knocked askew. Torres jerked her head, hair flying out, and suppressed the next phrase that came to mind as she seized the scanner to keep the whole thing from falling over. She felt a slim hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, B'Elanna, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. Let me help." Carey returned from the console with a PADD in hand, and all three of them knelt to retrieve chips.

"*Ghuy'cha*," muttered Torres as she snapped them back into the mounting and adjusted it again, then shot a glance at Janeway to see if she had heard. She gave no sign, but stood up and looked at the designs on the console display, nodding.

"Excellent. Used together, these should cut through nearly any kind of cloaking at close range."

"That's the idea. If we get them finished before she skips out." Janeway glanced up at Torres' tone, her eyes gone dark in her pale face.

"Is there anything I can do to help with this? Besides staying out of the way, that is." Her lips quirked, but her eyes had no humor in them.

"Not really—" Torres began, but the intensity of Janeway's gaze stopped her. "Yes. Carey, did you get the scan?"

"Here it is, Lieutenant." Carey passed her the PADD. "Lieutenant Tuvok's analyzed all the readings from the Array and broken them down into frequency patterns already. And there's a graphed curve of the possible weak points. He always was thorough." Janeway smiled at him.

"Yes, I know." Torres paused. "He did the same thing for me with the Type II Cardassian shields when they started to equip the scout vessels with them." She looked away from the PADD.

"That's his job," said Janeway, her voice even. "May I have a look at that?" Torres handed her the PADD and she scanned it quickly. "The lower infrared looks promising."

"Exactly. If you want to help, you can calibrate the patterns with the scans from the planet, and look for correlations. That will tell me where to concentrate the enhancements."

Janeway nodded, already moving to a console. Torres returned to her welding task. The captain did like to get her hands dirty even on ordinary projects, she thought, and this one had a special meaning to her, obviously. Seska was still the only member of *Voyager's* crew who had rejected everything Janeway's leadership offered. "That *lo'laHbe' ghew*," she muttered, savoring the bitterness of her mother's native language. *She's hurt the people I trust most, and violated their confidence – never mind about mine.* She looked over her shoulder at Janeway, working quickly and smoothly without a trace of agitation in her movements, but her face intense, eyes burning, beautiful. Tuvok appeared on the console viewscreen again and spoke briefly to Carey. There was another person she had believed she had known once, as well as she could know a Vulcan, or cared to, but at least she hadn't thought they had liked each other.

"Lieutenant Torres?" She jumped at the level voice, and Tuvok's eyes turned to her.

"Yes?" She did not put her tools down.

"I believe Commander Chakotay wishes to speak to you."

"Oh." She turned the welder off and approached the viewscreen. Chakotay's face

replaced the Vulcan's, and she hunkered down over the console. That queer haunted look in the dark eyes, the tight line of his chin drawn down below the level of his tense shoulders. He was a lot worse off than she was, carrying much more weight, and though he had rarely shown her any vulnerability on purpose, Torres felt a surge of something like protectiveness.

"B'Elanna."

She paused a moment before answering.

"Are...you OK?"

His chin jerked up. "Fine."

"Look, Chakotay, I thought you only found that image last night."

"Yes."

"Then why were you so strange yesterday? What's going on?"

"Nothing that's got any relationship to catching...her." His eyes narrowed. Torres pursed her lips and looked skeptically at him, but he was more closed off than ever. "Would you like to hear what I was going to ask you?"

"Go ahead."

"I want you on the away team."

Torres felt her mouth curl in a snarl, the red rage burning bright. "Glad to."

"No."

"What?"

"Not like that. As...as a friend of hers."

"Chakotay—"

"We've got to lure her out. If she wants to stay hidden, she probably can't be found. There has to be a reason for her to come out, if she's still there. I'm taking Harry Kim with me as well."

"Harry?"

"She...liked him, I know. I think it's worth a shot." He glanced down, then back up at her, the broad planes of his face catching the light from Tuvok's console. "If we see her, I need you to be on good terms with her." Chakotay smiled wryly. "Probably only for a short time. How about it?"

"I..." She glanced at Janeway, whose back was turned. "All right. You can count on me."

"Thanks," Chakotay said softly, and signed off.

"Oh, dammit," Torres murmured, and leaned down momentarily to rest on the console. *How many times are you going to be betrayed, Chakotay?* she asked his image in her mind. How many times would he be slapped in the face before he wouldn't even trust his own eyes or intuition any more? She straightened up and returned to the scanner

casing. Janeway's fingers were flying over the displays, her face rapt. Torres watched her a moment, admiring the balance, the concentration of intellect and body on the task. There were only two people, she realized, whose word she believed without question. They trusted her, and they believed in other people's word, and they kept their own promises. Only the trustworthy could really give trust, and how much could they give when some *yuD lung* flung it back at them with curses? She finished the weld and stood. *If you lose your faith, she thought, I might lose my faith in you. I don't ever want that to happen, because I'm running on faith.* "I'll give it back to you," she said low. "I won't let you down." She meant it for both of them, her captains, former and current. She had her focus still, but the rage was now a fire that fueled her. Torres stepped to Janeway's side and remained there with a smile, almost a peaceful one.

○

SHE WAS WALKING with purpose along the corridor just outside Engineering, her head down and her eyes bent on the carpet, and did not see Tuvok until they met at the door of the turbolift. He took the opportunity to study her face and manner, and decided that this was as good a time as any to air his concerns. *Voyager* would arrive at the garden planet in two hours, thirty-eight minutes, and the sooner this was said, the better.

"Captain."

She looked up, and he saw her faraway gaze resolve instantly to focus on him. "Hello, Tuvok. Going to speak to Torres about the scanners? There's nothing more to do but assembly, so I left."

"I have provided her with all the information available to me."

"Then...you want to speak to me?" She smiled slightly and gestured at her com badge. "You didn't have to come all the way down here to do that. I was heading to the bridge in any case."

"Commander Chakotay is on the bridge."

"...Yes?"

"Yesterday you requested that I not re-open the question of Ensign Seska. The question has been broached nonetheless. Have I your permission to discuss it at this time?"

Janeway took a deep harsh breath and looked at him, her mouth setting in a hard line. "This is certainly a security matter now. Go ahead."

"Perhaps —"

"Here." She nodded at the open turbolift and they stepped inside. "Computer, hold lift." There was a brief silence, and Tuvok cleared his throat.

"Captain, it is of the utmost importance that we ascertain Commander Chakotay's attitude towards Ensign Seska. It is logical that he should lead the away team, as his presence was what prompted her to stay in range of the camera in the first place, and he knows her...well. But the result of a face to face meeting is unpredictable without more information."

"If you are asking if I know anything on that score..."

"Do you?"

"I..." She looked down and bit her lower lip. "Possibly. Understand me, this is pure inference. He has never talked to me about her since the later stages of the investigation of the stolen replicator, the one she gave to the Kazon-Nistrim."

"I would value any inference you can make."

"I don't think he...is as attached to her as he might once have been. He knows she was a spy — that's obvious. But I...have reason...to believe..." Her voice broke slightly, and she swallowed hard and continued. "I believe he has ended his emotional attachment to her."

"Indeed? What is your evidence?"

"I can't tell you. It was given to me...in confidence."

"If you feel able to make the inference, I must assume the evidence is solid."

"I think so."

"I will weigh that as a factor, then. Though his manner when he showed us the enhanced image seems to point to the opposite conclusion. He appeared highly agitated, and attempted to conceal that fact."

"That could have been due to...a lot of things. He's slow to lose faith in anyone, of course, unless he has very good proof. It took the doctor's discovery that she was a disguised Cardassian to shake his loyalty to her at all, and even then he tried to maintain a belief in the possibility of her innocence as long as he could." Janeway bowed her head for a moment, touching her lips.

"That would seem to imply he might have had sympathy for her actions. It has already been demonstrated that Commander Chakotay's loyalty to Starfleet and to Federation law could not survive the test of the Cardassian peace treaty. His loved ones and his home were put in jeopardy, and

he abandoned his duty to fight for them. It would logically follow that he would put emotional connection above principle in this case as well."

"Emotional connection *is* a principle for a Human, Mr. Tuvok," Janeway said. Softly, but with a tight gaze on him that made him raise a brow and compress his lips. "It has to be weighed with all the other important factors in a decision. And Chakotay decided to do his duty to *Voyager*. I never had any doubt that he would. I have no doubt that he will continue to do so."

"Your own faith does you credit, Captain. I fear that I have only my logic to guide me."

She looked at him for a long minute, and ordered the turbolift to the bridge.



"CAPTAIN'S LOG, stardate 48864.3. *Voyager* has returned to the planet at maximum warp. From orbit, there is no sign of any humanoid life. No Kazon ships in sensor range. It seems very unlikely that they could have built anything so advanced as the surface structures as long ago as the dates indicate. An intense scan of the area of the gardens has turned up evidence of a widespread irrigation system, which has apparently failed from age everywhere else on the planet. Ensign Seska's presence here is still unexplained."

Janeway tapped her coffee mug speculatively. Problems like this required caffeine; she was on her third cup from the extravagant potful she had replicated an hour ago. Thank heaven for work; she felt almost normal again.

"Commander, Mr. Tuvok, report to my ready room," she said to the intercom. The door slid open instantly, as if they had been waiting just outside. "Have a seat, gentlemen."

Chakotay had finally regained a familiar aspect, a businesslike deliberation, as if he had something important to accomplish but was waiting for the opportune moment. His half-smiling lips quirked upwards a fraction as he met her eyes. A palpable release of tension let her guard down, and she was surprised at how tightly she had been controlling herself in his presence. *Good, she thought. Perhaps that incident can be forgotten after all. Something approaching normality and our good working relationship.* Chakotay sat down and casually crossed his legs, glanced at Tuvok as he also sat, and then back at Janeway,

under his brows with fleeting intensity. All the unexpected power of their interrupted embrace hit her again while her shields were down. She found herself shifting her pelvis in her seat as a ripple of slow contraction squeezed and gradually released. Almost imperceptibly, her spine arched towards him and her breasts rose –

Janeway carefully relaxed her entire torso and sat herself back in her chair. Had he noticed? He had looked away immediately and the faint smile was unchanged, and that might mean any of a number of things, but her face had gone unmistakably warm. Was he shutting off his notice of her for the sake of peace, had that glance been unintentional? Oh, for a telepathic Betazoid officer – poor Stadi had been something of a chum, and willing to drop hints – but was dead along with Janeway’s original first officer, Cavit, and so many others. Cavit had been a stiff-necked, efficient executive, and had provoked not the least bit of disturbance in her. Stern and predictable and Starfleet to the marrow. A safeguard she had never given a thought to was now so conspicuous by its absence that she realized how important it had always been to her style of command. If she was to be warm and intimate with her officers, she had to know they would never take it the wrong way, and so she had chosen reserved, disciplined men, a woman who knew exactly what she was thinking at every moment, and a Vulcan. Tuvok was examining her now, wondering at her silence, perhaps, and raising an eyebrow. “Captain...”

“Yes, Tuvok. Are the scanners ready?”

“They are. Lieutenant Torres and Ensign Kim are preparing them for transport to the surface at this moment. I have detailed eight security guards for the away teams.”

“Very good. Commander?”

“I plan to start the search in the spot where...she...was detected,” the first officer said softly. “Lieutenant Tuvok and Lieutenant Torres will form one party, and Ensign Kim and myself the other. Each group will take four guards along. Torres and Kim will operate the scanners.”

“I see – you think she might respond to people she knows?”

“That’s the general idea...” Chakotay seemed to be having some difficulty in speaking. His hand went to the chest of his uniform, and he seemed to touch something under the material.

“That’s a good thought,” Janeway said encouragingly. “Let’s hope you’re right. We’ll be

maintaining a constant transporter lock on all of you, and hopefully she’ll show herself long enough to lock onto as well.”

Chakotay and Tuvok rose, and she nodded to the Vulcan. “Good luck.”

“Random chance may indeed play some part in our success or failure,” he replied. Janeway smiled and fielded a sideways glance from Chakotay. She had noticed that he liked to needle Tuvok, but not as affectionately as she did. After all, he had some reason to regard the Vulcan in the same light she saw Seska.

“Chakotay.” She moved around the desk to look into his face. “If anyone can catch her, you can. You know how important this is to our security.” Especially since Tuvok had raised the question again, she wanted Chakotay to know she trusted him even on such a matter as this, with his loyalties possibly divided. Appealing to his sense of duty could only bolster it. She had no doubt in her mind that he would carry it out to the letter as she instinctively put her hand on his arm.

She saw his eyes, dark and steady on her face, the half-smile returning. He looked nearly the same as he always had, except for the cool distance in his gaze. Janeway held it for a moment and realized it masked an echo of the longing that had provoked their misstep. The incident was not forgotten. But he would never ask for the gift again, believing it permanently out of his reach. Instantly she realized that his glance had been as involuntary as her own response to it, and that he was suppressing himself as well as he could, perhaps flattering himself that he was entirely unreadable. He bowed slightly, his own hand moving to rest lightly on her elbow. “I’ll get her for you, Captain, if she’s down there.”

Janeway didn’t know if she wanted to be on a pedestal like that, untouchable, for ever. Even now her body threatened to soften to him, to stoop down and raise him up to her side. Tuvok frowned and shifted uneasily as they stood arm-clasped together, the pauses between their phrases so long they would have seemed peculiar to someone far less perceptive. He glanced at Chakotay as well, and she could almost hear the click of realization. His eyes returned to hers, his dark face stern. She withdrew her hand and nodded to both her officers.

“Report in every fifteen minutes, if it’s safe to do so. Dismissed.”

She settled down again with her pot of coffee. Could be a long vigil.

"CHAKOTAY TO JANEWAY."

"Yes, Commander."

"We've done an initial sensor sweep. No sign of any humanoid life forms. The area where...she was standing shows some sign of disturbance, but Tuvok says the readings are inconclusive."

"All right. Are you going to split up now?"

"Yes, Captain. We'll set up the portable scanners about five hundred meters apart and start an underground probe for any shielded hiding places. The sun is setting and it will be dark in about a half hour. That's all I have to report so far."

"Be careful, all of you. I'm sure you know more about what she's capable of than I do."

Chakotay answered softly, "I have a pretty good idea. Chakotay out."

Janeway rose from her seat and paced to the couch by the viewport, then returned to her desk and sat on the edge. Caged here in her ready room. She itched to take a phaser and tricorder herself, search through the lovely, dangerous woods for signs of the escaped traitor. And when they found her? Arrest her, bring her back to *Voyager* for trial? How could they keep her locked up in the brig indefinitely? Janeway measured the length of the room with slow strides. Almost preferable for that woman, that monstrosity wearing a face not her own, to die in a struggle or firefight. The captain had a vision of Seska dead, the pink flesh peeling back to reveal the cold grey lizard scales of Cardassian hide...

How had she been altered? Modification at the genetic level, the doctor had said. How else would her hair have kept growing out light and silky, not the hard coarse black she had been born with? But her entire epidermis, the huge neck tendons and flaring trapezius muscles: hideous surgery, flayed alive and wrapped again, slashed and reconnected, butchered. Every square centimeter of her ripped away and changed. How could the mind survive intact under such assault, even if willingly submitted to? How could one live serene in such a mutilated body?

And to reach out to a man, to lure him with limbs and complexion not one's own? Even her sexual organs had been transformed, apparently. Janeway had not inquired closely into the exact nature of Chakotay's relations with Seska; he had

assured her nothing had passed between them while on *Voyager*. But he had been her lover at least once, that much was clear. He had had no inkling that the body he had embraced was a constructed shell. What must he have felt on learning that? How many nights had he lain awake, remembering her touch on his skin? Had he shuddered with horror, or wept with regret?

Janeway recalled her own restless nights, and poured herself another cup of coffee. She had no intention of sleeping until the away teams returned.

THE REPORTS CAME IN regularly from her first officer and security chief alike.

"Tuvok to Janeway. The scanners have picked up indications of a large underground complex, heavily shielded and impenetrable to sensors..."

"Chakotay to Janeway. We can't tell if there is anyone still in there. One thing is sure; the Kazon couldn't have built it..."

"Tuvok to Janeway. It is now entirely dark, and we are moving with caution. Commander Chakotay's team is two kilometers west of our position. Both teams are attempting to locate an entrance to the complex..."

"CHAKOTAY TO JANEWAY. Ensign Kim has picked up a slight ionization trace that could be a landing site. Tuvok's team is moving to meet us before we investigate further. If this is where a ship is concealed —"

"Harry! Get back —"

A sizzling burst of weapons fire over the comlink —

"Commander! What's going on down there?"

It was a long moment before he answered. "There's a hatch opening —" She heard the snap of his phaser coming out of the holster. "Ensign Kim!" he roared. "Harry! Can you crawl back — *Keep your head down, dammit!* Remember your obstacle course training —" He cursed under his breath.

"Peters! Rutsko! There, and there — get to the sides —" The high whine of Chakotay's phaser.

"Commander!" called another voice. "There's at least a dozen Kazon coming out!"

"Stay in the trees. Don't let them see how many of us there are— Lieutenant, are you there?"

Tuvok's level tones. "We are presently one-half kilometer from your position, Commander, and are proceeding at a rate of speed that will bring us up to you in approximately three minutes and forty-two seconds."

"I'm getting you out of there, Commander," said Janeway. "Transporter room, have you maintained your lock on the party?"

"Captain, we just lost it."

"You what?"

"There's some kind of shielding field over the whole area. It wasn't there fifteen seconds ago. Trying to reestablish lock."

"Seska," she muttered. "Commander, can you retreat?"

"No, Captain. I've got a wounded guard, and Ensign Kim is pinned down in the open." *BOOM!* A tremendous detonation almost overloaded the comlink's sound dampers.

"...cussion grenade of some kind. There's another one hurt—" His phaser whined again.

"Got that one, sir!"

"Kim! I'm covering you— run, dammit!"

A pause, punctuated with sizzles and whines. Janeway gripped the edge of her desk in helpless fury. Seska knew Federation technology, all right—

probably majored in it during her Obsidian Order training. Knew Chakotay's tactics, knew his mind, perhaps—

"Shit! *Harry!*"

"He's still alive, Commander! I can reach him if—"

"Stay where you are, Peters. Keep firing under the hatch if you can."

A rustle of grass and swift panting exhalations as Chakotay crawled along the ground. A young man's painful groan.

"I'm here, Harry. Can you move at all?"

"I don't know, sir— *aagghkk!*"

"Put your arm around my shoulders, Kim. I'll pull, you push."

"Commander! Watch out—"

Another sizzle, a cry from a deep chest—

"Report!" barked Janeway.

"Oh my God, Captain— they got them both."

Janeway slumped into her chair. Killed? Kim and Chakotay...

"Captain, they're carrying them inside the hatch. Rutskoï too. I don't have a clear shot—"

"Mr. Tuvok—"

"We are just coming in sight, Captain."

A dizzying burst of sound from another grenade. Rough voices when the dampers cut out, and the thunderous slam of an armored door. Faint whines from outside, battering at the defenses.

The comlink went dead.



PART TWO: SESKA



CHAPTER SEVEN

THERE WAS A HARD, COLD SURFACE under his cheek. Under his whole body. He shivered, and a painful tingle crackled through him, as if the entire area of his skin had fallen asleep. Some sort of sound escaped him, but he couldn't hear it. So cold –

Then it was heat, burning pain in his extremities, his hands clenching involuntarily and trembling. He thought he was groaning, because his chest and stomach ached dully with movement.

Were his eyes open or not? Dark, with hot points of red dancing across his vision, or his mind's vision. Something lying over his legs.

Startling clarity – a voice in his ear.

"The marked one is waking."

"Call the alien," replied another.

His eyes were closed after all, so he opened them. Grey. Dim. A wall coming into focus.

A bright white light snapped on. Chakotay squeezed his eyes shut again.

"Turn him over," said a woman.

Hard hands grabbed his shoulders and heaved him upright to a sitting position. He squinted into the painful brightness, barely making out the silhouette of slender limbs and long light hair trailing over the shoulders.

"Hello, Chakotay. How nice to see you again," said Seska in a laughing voice. "You're looking well, considering. I see the bitch hasn't worn you out yet."

"What...?" he managed.

"Where's your sense of humor, *Commander*? Oh, sorry. Stun beams don't enhance that quality in anyone. How's Harry?"

She stirred the inert figure at Chakotay's side with her foot. Rutskoi was rolling upright on her own.

"He's wounded. He needs medical attention," said Chakotay. "Let him go, at least."

"Poor Harry. That's not my fault; these smelly thugs wanted to kill you all. It took a lot of persuading to get out there with a stunner before they fried you to a crisp. Seems they don't like taking captives."

"No? I suppose that's a specialty of the Obsidian Order," Chakotay said, and found her eyes.

"Ah, that's my Chakotay," said Seska.

"B'Elanna may not appreciate your twisted jokes, but I'm rather fond of them, myself."

"Yourself? Which one do you mean?"

"Exactly. Good example."

Kim began to groan. Chakotay saw with horror that the young man's upper back and part of his scalp were scorched down to the skin, which was burned red and brown.

"Don't you have a medic?" he asked. "He's going to be screaming in a minute unless he gets something for the pain."

"Oh, I suppose that could be annoying," Seska said. She raised her gloved hand to her hip and snapped open a small case. "Give him a shot of this – he'll be in bliss for hours. These ugly bastards use it for fun." She tossed Chakotay a vial and a grooved needle in a sheath.

"What is it?" he asked suspiciously, catching.

"How should I know? An opiate of some kind, judging from the effect. I didn't specialize in poisons. Just dip the needle in and then puncture his skin with it."

Chakotay looked at the apparatus with disgust. Kazon recreational drugs? Kim moaned louder and rolled onto his side. His bloodshot eyes opened, blinked, registered Seska's presence.

"Commander? Why – *auughh...*"

Seska pursed her lips. "You're the one who warned me he would need something for the pain. If you're not going to use it, I suppose I could just stun him again –" She slipped an ugly little weapon out of her sleeve.

Chakotay caught her wrist. Immediately a Kazon grunted, and several of the huge bushy-headed men converged on him.

"Oh, stop that," said Seska. "If I need your help, I'll ask for it." She broke his grip with a snakelike twist and concealed her stunner. "Chakotay – take my advice." She reached in her jacket and touched a stud on a small box. "There – I won't be translated for them now. These gentlemen are itching to see the color of your insides. Don't give them too many excuses. They don't care too much for me – they just want whatever they can get out of the arrangement. But they hate your guts. They saw you standing beside

the bitch, and for her sake, they'd like to send you back in little bleeding pieces."

Kim was panting hard, trying to conceal the tears running down his cheeks. Chakotay grimaced and dipped the needle into the vial, shaking off all but a tiny drop of the substance, and pricked Kim's neck near the burn. The drug took immediate effect, the tortured face relaxing into smoothness as a glazed, dreamy look invaded the young man's eyes. Rutskoï started to speak, but subsided with a groan and put her hands over her ears, her face covered with blood from her nose and her broken eardrums, the effect of the concussion grenades. Seska smirked and took the apparatus from Chakotay.

"My, he looks a lot happier than you do. Cheer up. This could be your lucky day." She turned away from his narrow-eyed stare, turned on her translator again and snapped at the Kazon. "Is the ship ready to go? Put them on it, and let's get out of here. *Voyager's* phasers can't cut through to us, but a photon or two on that hatch won't make us very happy." Seska whipped away down the corridor. Several Kazon—she was right, they did smell—hailed Chakotay to his feet and pushed him along after her. Kim had to be dragged, and Rutskoï staggered under prods from a weapon.

The corridor took a turn and ended in a huge double door. Chakotay noted that all the metal of the structure had a bronzy cast—whether that was an inherent quality or some form of rust or oxidation he could not tell. Moisture streaked the walls in spots, and heavy dust lay in the corners. Two Kazon pushed the doors aside by hand. Apparently the mechanism was broken.

A small, fast-looking ship resembling the Kazon fighters he had battled around the Caretaker's array sat in the dark hangar.

"Move it!" barked Seska. "Where's the pilot? Tell him to get his grimy ass on the bridge."

Chakotay realized that the Kazon men—eight of them visible—followed her orders slowly and grudgingly. She strode up the boarding ramp, boot-heels clicking on the corrugated metal, then turned to look at him. Her long legs were encased in some heavy half-matte covering that fit her like a second skin, but she wore a loose charcoal-colored jacket, belted, that enveloped her upper body and hips. The effect was vaguely like a Cardassian uniform, and Chakotay fought his inclination to snarl.

Seska caught his expression and held his gaze for a moment, cocking her head to the side and compressing her wide mouth into a fleeting smile. Chakotay tried to see the Cardassian bones under the Bajoran flesh. *That's all false*, he reminded himself. *Everything you see is false*. But something familiar shone out in the hazel eyes, something from within, through the mask.

"Step on board, Chakotay," she said. "We're all in this together now." She unknowingly echoed Janeway, who had wondered how anyone could betray his or her shipmates—

Seska did not believe she was a traitor. Her words on being discovered, the harsh words she had spat at the captain, at him—she had given a replicator to the Kazon because she knew *Voyager* needed strong allies. All along, possibly even now, she had worked to help the homeward journey as she saw fit. Chakotay realized that his suspicions must be true, that she must have conspired with or pressured Torres to install and conduct the disastrous test of the Sikarian space-folder. No one had confided in him. Obviously Seska had already regarded him as under Janeway's thumb.

And now? In her power, or that of the Kazon. What was she planning to do with her prizes? He walked up the ramp towards her, Kim and Rutskoï following with the group of huge, growling men.

"Put them in the lockup," she said. "Not him. Come with me, Chakotay." He looked with concern at the two wounded officers, still his responsibility. Kim was in dreamland, but Rutskoï managed a tight smile. "I promise they won't get eaten for lunch, *Commander*. You're the one whose safety is in question, anyway." She raised her brows and cocked her head again, smiling to show her white teeth. "Come on."

He swallowed his mistrust and followed her.

HIS STONE WAS GONE. The little pouch he had worn on a cord under his shirt had been taken from him. Seska, or the Kazon? He didn't feel like inquiring just now.

The little bridge had some similarities to that of his lost ship, that had ended its days as a missile to bring down a huge Kazon-Ogla cruiser. How many had he killed in that battle? These men were Kazon-Nistrim, but they were all the same species, and shared resentment at *Voyager's* presence in their space. Janeway had humiliated their leaders, and he was her officer. Even before he had become

that, he had defended *Voyager* with everything he had, and at great cost to her enemies. Chakotay realized the degree of the hatred they must bear towards him. He had felt that same look, the one the pilot turned on him, on his own face when dealing with a Cardassian Gul.

"Sit there," said Seska. "Turn to the viewscreen, and hold that pose. Good."

"Now," she continued, taking the tactical station, "Are the engines warmed up? The hangar doors are ready to go."

"Yes," replied the pilot, and allowed himself one more venomous look at Chakotay before concentrating on his task. Chakotay watched the ignition sequence carefully; fairly straightforward. Strange how the basics of starship engineering could change so little at such a distance from familiar places. Take a basic humanoid, put him in a tin can, watch him fly.

Dim starlight broke in from above as an irising opening rapidly expanded. When it had grown to a size sufficient to accommodate the ship, the engines roared with a burst of yellow flame that lit up the whole cavern. Shuddering, the ship leaped into the night sky. Chakotay caught a glimpse of small lights in the forest as the pilot banked, and then they were in the stratosphere.

"High orbit," said Seska to the pilot. She rose and made her way along the consoles to where Chakotay sat.

"Shouldn't be long now," she said. Lights blinked on the panel, and she slid in front of him and poised one finger over a switch. "Keep your eyes front, and don't say a word," she hissed over her shoulder. "Remember, I've got two of yours in the lockup." Chakotay let his face settle into stoniness. She hit the switch.

Janeway's voice. Hard with anger. "Ensign Seska. You can't get away, you know. I think you would prefer to be tried fairly—"

"To be locked up for seventy-five years, you mean? I have a better idea." Seska moved aside to reveal Chakotay. He looked up at the screen and into his captain's eyes.

For a moment, Janeway's beauty shone through the hard shell. She gasped, then ordered with a low growl, "You will release my officers at once. Transporter room—"

"Do that, and watch him die," said Seska, with the snub of Chakotay's own phaser against his temple. The two women snarled at each other

into the viewscreens. "I have Kim and Rutskoi as well. I think you want to talk to me."

Janeway flicked her eyes to him. He nodded in confirmation. She wheeled; motioned to someone to cut the channel. In a moment, she was back, Tuvok visible behind her.

"Talk, then," she snapped.

"All right. Condition one. Power down those phasers, and tell B'Elanna to dump that tractor beam she's readying."

Janeway's eyes narrowed. She made a quick nod to the side.

"That's better. Condition two. After this conversation is over, I'm going to move to the opposite orbit position—the entire planet between us. If I see even *Voyager's* nose peeking over the horizon without my say-so, I space a hostage. Understood?"

The captain looked at Chakotay, still quietly sitting with the weapon pressing into his tattoo. He felt like throwing up, his stomach and bowels contracting, a terrible taste in his mouth, but breathed evenly and gently, willing calm. He had seen Seska kill before. She had an arm over his shoulders and her breasts pushing against his upper back, and he had no doubt she would vaporize his skull and cerebrum if she saw fit. Just a cloud of fine pink mist as his body slumped forward in her embrace.

Janeway's face. He concentrated on her wonderful eyes, and drowned his fear in them. *Trust her. She's a Starfleet captain. One Obsidian Order operative, and a squad of grunting Kazon goons? Not a chance.* He felt a faint smile on his lips.

"Understood," replied Janeway. Chakotay knew that look. He didn't have half the slyness of which she was capable. Honest and open to a fault, probably his main fault. Never cultivated a suspicion if he could help it. That line could head his obituary.

"I'm glad you understand so well. Now here's my shopping list: Replicator. Transporter console circuitry. Four photon torpedoes. Copies of all the programming and data in *Voyager's* computer banks. Package that all up, and I'll tell you where to deliver it."

"I'll deliver it to—" Janeway flared. It was a calculated outburst. "In exchange for what?"

"All my hostages, of course." Seska rolled her eyes.

"Ensign," said Janeway, "I think you should know that we have two of your Kazon crew in the brig. I propose an exchange—"

"You can shove them in the waste reclamation system for all I care. I've told you the sort of currency I'm dealing in. Everything I mentioned, and you let me leave the system and join up with my dear friends again, too. Details later. Decide in an hour." Seska cut the transmission.

"She's looking well, too. The situation must be agreeing with both of you." She faced him and tucked the phaser into her jacket. "Don't look so green. It wasn't you I was going to space."

"She'll never give you all that for us."

"I think she will." Seska smiled, lifted her small chin and took a deep breath. "The bitch likes you pretty well, I see. How long did it take her to get her claws on you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Innocent boy, huh? She's wanted your big sweet ass for quite a while. And I don't think she's the type to wait too long for what she wants." Her eyes narrowed. "Why, I even thought— that's why you turned me down that day, wasn't it?" Seska's voice was becoming shrill. "Screwing the captain. What a sweet deal for you. No wonder you lost all your nerve. She's got your balls in her pocket—"

"Stop it!" he nearly shouted at her, anger and pain overcoming fear. "I won't listen to another second of your accusations. I've never touched her—" He knew his face had betrayed him when the memory of Janeway's kisses flashed like a weapon's bolt across his brain.

"Oh, you've done *something*, haven't you?" Sharp and triumphant, her ploy having unmasked a fact he would never have willingly told her. He shouldn't have forgotten what a good actor she was. "What was it? Don't tell me—" Chakotay fought to get his expression under control. He rose and turned away, shaking. Never again, not even if he lived through this. He thought the burning in his chest would consume him.

"Incredible," Seska murmured. "Slapped you down? Not the impression I had from her just now. Good old Starfleet discipline, I suppose. She *is* their senior officer in the quadrant— has to uphold the honor of the entire blasted Federation." She folded her arms and stared at him. "A Cardassian commander wouldn't bother with ridiculous scruples like that, you know. She—or he— would sleep with you to ensure your loyalty, if you wanted it. Whatever it takes. That's why we'll destroy the Federation when the next war comes. No self-imposed ball and chain. And if *you* had done what I and all the Maquis expected you to do,

and taken command of *Voyager* immediately, we wouldn't even be having this discussion— we'd be home."

"And in a Cardassian prison camp, if you had your way." He tried to see flaring grey scales on her slim neck. Seska regarded him levelly, her eyes showing that odd quality again.

They wouldn't have had to change the eyes. She stepped forward, took his face in her hands, kissed him. He jerked away violently, gasping in distaste and at the shock of older memory. Seska was left grasping empty air, her hair fallen over her forehead.

"Bastard," she whispered.

"I thought you said you couldn't imagine how you ever— loved me," he spat, and wiped his lips with his hand. Seska's face trembled, and then hardened again, his compunction at the theatrical gesture as brief as her vulnerability. Another damn trick on his sympathies—

"Maybe my imagination is running away with me." She brushed back her hair, her face pale, her eyes a little wild. The Kazon pilot stared at them, and she glanced over Chakotay's shoulder, then drew the phaser, took him by the elbow and propelled him into the corridor. They took a few steps before she halted. He stopped, knowing she had the weapon at his back, and waited, listening to her breathe. The snub of the phaser touched his back, and he straightened up with a fiercely suppressed gasp. The phaser drew a line across his side, over his arm, nudged his ribs as Seska moved around and into his line of sight. It came to rest directly under his breastbone, and he looked into her eyes. "How could you want that bitch, and turn me away?" Seska hissed. "I've been with you so long. I'm a better cook than she is. I gave you my body—"

"The one the Order surgeons gave you?" He glanced down at her grey jacket, so like the uniform he had hated. "So that you could infiltrate my group, sell us all to prison camps and torture? What could that have meant to you?"

"Cardassian women don't make love lightly, Chakotay. I would never have turned you in. I thought I could persuade you—"

"To betray my own people?" he said, choking on the thought. "You didn't know me well enough to love me."

"You betrayed the Federation to join the Maquis."

"The Federation sold my home for a false peace!" he roared. "I told their government I didn't owe them any loyalty, and they cut me loose. You can't be a traitor to something to which you don't claim allegiance." The phaser dug into his stomach. *So kill me now*, he thought. *I won't give you any claim on me* –

"And do you claim allegiance to *her*?" Seska said, and bared her teeth.

He would have shouted *Yes*, he would have poured out his heart and guts to her, he would have died gladly for his captain –

And Kim, and Ruskoi? he suddenly recalled. *Will they die gladly for your blunders?* Chakotay broke the gaze and looked down at the phaser. *Honest and open? Maybe you should learn something from that smart, cunning woman whose abilities you so admire.* Janeway had sent an agent after him as well. She had her ironclad principles, but she didn't shrink at deception in a larger cause. Be an old friend like he had asked Torres to be, for a little while...

"No," he said. "She represents the Federation here."

"Now, we're getting somewhere," replied Seska.

SHE LED THE WAY AFT to the crew quarters and the lockup. Kim was still smiling beatifically, slumped on the floor of the cell. Ruskoi sat on the cot, holding her head in her hands. Most of the blood had dried and flaked off by now.

"Time for a choice, Chakotay. Do I put you in here, or in my quarters?" The scowling guard moved aside when she gestured. "Having trouble deciding? Let's see if we can help you along," she purred, and dropped the force field with a small cylindrical key. Ruskoi looked up dully. Probably deaf from the eardrum rupture. Kim's wounds smelled like roast meat.

"Can't you do something to treat them?" Chakotay asked.

"If all goes well, they'll be back on *Voyager* in a few hours," she replied, entering the cell. "That snippy hologram can patch them up as good as new. Kazon medicine isn't anything to write home about."

Seska squatted down by Kim. "Hello, Harry. I'm your friend, you know."

"Lo, Seska," he mumbled. "You haven't been round for a while."

"No, I haven't been, but I missed you. Did you miss me?"

"Course I did. Yer a lotta fun."

"Why, thank you, Harry. I'm glad you think so. I'm sorry I didn't get better, um, acquainted with you, sweetie. I was looking in the wrong direction, I guess..."

"Didja still wanna go on that holodeck ride?"

"Why, sure, Harry. That did sound nice, and I was sorry to miss it. Wasn't my fault, really. Can I make it up to you?" She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips.

Chakotay felt a frisson of loathing shiver up his spine. "Leave him alone." The drug apparently made Kim susceptible to suggestion.

"Jealous? Why? You just made it quite clear you don't want this for yourself. Maybe Harry would appreciate it more. And I'm sick of looking at these ugly, hairy, stinking Kazon." She slanted her toothy smile at him, and arched her dark brows coquettishly. Her hands stroked Kim's uniform over his chest and stomach, and he smiled, his glazed eyes not registering anyone but her. "Can I ask you something, Harry?"

"Sure, what?"

"How'd you know where to find me?"

"Kim, don't talk to her. She's no friend of yours."

"Of course I am. Hmm?"

"Oh, gosh..." Kim's brow furrowed in concentration. "Commander Chakotay picked you up in the holorecording he made for the captain –"

"That he made for the captain?" Seska's voice was a quiet purr.

"Yeah. It's so pretty here. Gee, you'd like that recording. It's gotta lake and they took a, um, a canoe to see the wadderfalls...she was having a really good time, it looked like. I think you'd like it a lot."

"Oh, I like a lot of things Chakotay does," said Seska, and turned to look at him. Appraisal, the quick process of thought, and a powerful undertone of anger, almost a sense of, unbelievably, betrayal. She leaned over and kissed Kim tenderly, then looked up at Chakotay under her brows. Seska was trying to provoke him, obviously, and he wouldn't give her the satisfaction. He crossed his arms and pretended to a stoicism he did not feel.

"Stop that. He's drugged, and I'll –"

"You'll what? Harry likes it, don't you, Harry?" she cooed, biting the young man's ear and

flicking her tongue along his smooth cheek. Her hands slid lower on his body.

"You're awful nice to me, Seska," Kim droned. "Didn't know you liked me that much."

"Why, of course I like you. I thought you were just the cutest thing the moment I saw you. Black hair, broad shoulders," she glanced up at Chakotay — "those sweet curved lips and trusting manner..."

Jealous? She was working pretty hard at that— Let her think it was succeeding. Let her think he still wanted —

"Stop it," he said through his teeth. "Get your hands off him."

"I told you you might regret passing up an available mate. Had your sights a little higher, perhaps? Good strategy. Nice idea. Too bad it didn't work."

Gods, she thought he had meant to work his way into intimacy with Janeway for his own purposes? Only what she had done to him herself. "Guess my heart wasn't in it," he managed. Seska smiled.

"Oh, and Harry — how were the scanners configured? That base has better shielding than anything I've ever seen." She slid her hand down to his crotch and squeezed. Ruskoi started up, but stopped when Seska twisted and displayed a weapon. She dropped back on the bunk and stared at Chakotay, obviously not understanding the conversation or the point of Seska's actions. Kim began to recite a list of technical specifications Chakotay only half understood, and he watched her grope at the young man while she listened and nodded, keeping her eyes on Chakotay. She began to inch down the fastening of Kim's uniform, grinning. Ruskoi kept staring at him.

"Stop that, dammit. Kim, don't tell her —"

"Pay no attention to him. He's having regrets. What frequency in the low infrared was that, Harry?"

How the hell could he pull this off? He had to try, no matter how the thought ripped at his guts. He had made love to this woman, and he had never been able to forget that fact, whether he had remembered it with warmth or bitter humiliation, except for a few minutes in another's arms. That solace was closed to him forever. Seska nodded and smiled at Kim, and ruffled his hair while her left hand stroked and tickled along his groin, teasingly, more as a display than anything else. Ruskoi was fuming, her expression nauseated. Kim finished his recitation and beamed happily at Seska.

"Thank you so much, Harry. Go to sleep now, precious." Kim relaxed and closed his eyes. "Good stuff, that Kazon drug," Seska grinned. She stood with a long graceful uncoiling of her body and tossed her hair back. Chakotay ground his teeth. Seska left Kim as he was and returned to the cell door where Chakotay stood. Her hands slid up his chest and around his neck, her long nails stroking just above his uniform collar. She was tall, taller than Janeway, and her lips came within centimeters of his when she levered his head down by digging her nails into the back of his neck. Chakotay did not move, either backwards or forwards.

Ruskoi was looking alternately at Chakotay and Seska, her expression unchanged for either. He tried to explain with his eyes, but she turned to the wall and hunched over.

"Coming?" Seska said archly. "Or do I throw you in with your little Starfleet buddies?"

His fists clenched in impotent fury. Am I a prisoner, or a collaborator? Do I join a woman who stands for everything I despise, because she holds the upper hand? Do I take the opportunity to gain advantage for the future, to hold true to my real loyalties in the end?

If once, why not again?

"I'm coming," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I CAN’T GIVE HER even a single particle of dust from this ship.” Janeway felt the warmth drain from her face as she pronounced the words that might spell the death warrant of the three hostages.

Kim, that innocent boy on his first mission. Rutskoj, a good solid crewmember who didn’t deserve such a reward for years of meritorious service.

Chakotay...

He was her first officer. A valuable member of the team. A man utterly worthy of trust, into whose charge her ship and crew would fall if anything were to happen to her. She knew he would take good care of them – if he ever got the chance.

And no other reason that you want him to return to you can have any influence on your decision...

“Captain, you have to get them back. It doesn’t matter what she’s demanding. Give her anything, and we’ll get it back later,” pleaded B’Elanna Torres, leaning over the conference table. “I know her, Captain. She will kill them if we don’t cooperate. She was one of the most ruthless fighters in our Maquis cell. She doesn’t stop at anything to achieve her goals.”

“Did she even kill Cardassians?” asked Janeway softly.

“She once slit the throat of an Obsidian Order operative we caught before Chakotay could stop her,” said Torres. “I only realized why a little while ago – she must have been afraid he might blow her cover.”

Tuvok quirked an eyebrow upwards. “I must concur with Lieutenant Torres. I did not witness the incident in question, but it is consistent with the psychological profile I compiled while observing the cell’s operations.”

“Observing, huh?” muttered Torres. She darted a glance at the Vulcan.

“Do you compare my actions within your group with those of Ensign Seska, Lieutenant?”

“There’s some basis for comparison there,” she replied, reluctantly but with a growl that made Janeway glance sharply at her. Tuvok said nothing.

“Gentlemen,” said Janeway into the crystallizing tension. “We are not here to debate the relative morality of undercover operations. I called this conference to find a solution to the immediate problem: how to get our people back without compromising the Prime Directive and putting powerful weapons technology into the hands of the Kazon-Nistrim.”

“Can’t we attack her?” suggested Tom Paris. “If we put together a small group and transported on board –”

“Too risky,” said Janeway with a wave of the hand. “We’d have to deactivate their shields first, and that would give them plenty of time to kill the hostages. You saw Seska with that phaser against Chakotay’s head.”

“Yeah, but...would she really do that? I thought she was one of the Big C’s old girlfriends.”

“You should know better than to ask a question like that, Paris,” sneered Torres. “Old girlfriends are the worst kind.”

“None of mine ever wanted to kill *me*,” he snapped back.

“Don’t be so sure about that,” she said.

“Gentlemen,” said Janeway, with an edge in her voice.

Paris gulped and nodded.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” said Torres after a moment. “It’s just...Chakotay...and Harry...” Her voice trailed off.

“I know, B’Elanna. We’re all...concerned about their welfare. Suggestions?”

Torres bowed her head, and Paris cracked his knuckles, jumping at the sudden sound into the silence. Tuvok cleared his throat.

“Ensign Seska has not yet specified the arrangements she wishes to make for the delivery of the ransom. She is due to contact us for our decision in thirty-six minutes. If we simply refuse to pay, she may kill a hostage to convince us to reconsider. An outright refusal would therefore be unwise.”

“Yes, Tuvok. My thoughts exactly. We have to play along with her until our people are out of danger. B’Elanna – get together all the items Seska mentioned, and put them in carrying cases.”

“Aye, Captain – but –”

“Yes?”

“That anti-transport field she used during the fight on the surface – it was a pretty sophisticated

one, but I think I know how to counter it in case she uses it again. If I could take some people—

“As many as you need,” Janeway nodded. “Get on it right away.”

When Torres had left, she turned to Tuvok. “What do you think? Is Seska playing straight herself? Do you think she’ll just hand over her captives and fly away?”

“To bring so many valuable technologies to the Kazon might give her some prestige in their society. She went to them with nothing but her knowledge of Alpha Quadrant inventions and her engineering skills, which, if truth be told, are significantly inferior to those of Lieutenant Torres. These attributes would be of some use to the Kazon, but she may feel that her position is precarious. I believe she will logically be seeking some way to consolidate her power, to place herself above threat and the favor of one Maje or another.”

“Yes, Tuvok, that makes a lot of sense. But what could she do to consolidate power?”

“She may have no intention of handing over her acquisitions, but instead to use them to seize control of a group of Kazon and act as Maje or warlord.”

“But she’d need a bigger ship—”

“Maybe First Maje Culluh is going to get a little surprise when his Cardassian friend gets back,” grinned Paris.

Janeway returned the smile, grimly. Seska and Culluh, a match made in a diseased imagination. What a pair those two devious vipers must make.

“Security to Lieutenant Tuvok,” buzzed Tuvok’s com badge.

“Excuse me, Captain,” he said, and tapped it. “Proceed.”

“Sir— this is Peters. I’m in Sickbay. The Kazon prisoners...the doctor just pronounced them dead.”

“Indeed,” said Tuvok. “May I presume they committed suicide?”

“That’s right. We searched them, but we’d have had to shave them to get through their hair. One of them had a poisoned needle. I’m sorry, Lieutenant.”

“There is no need for apology, Crew man.” Tuvok looked at Janeway, and she lowered her head to her hand and took a deep breath.

“It’s all right, Peters,” she replied. “It’s not your fault. What did they fear more than death...?” She shook her head in disbelief. “At least we weren’t counting on them as a way to get our own

back, the poor devils. Have the doctor put the bodies in stasis. Perhaps we can return them to their people eventually.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The silence in the briefing room hurt Janeway’s ears, and when she spoke, her voice seemed harsh to her.

“Well, until we get a communication from Seska, all we can do is find ways to counter the devices we know she has. Let’s get back to work.”

“Wait a minute—how is she going to call us if she’s on the other side of the planet where we can’t observe her?” asked Paris.

“She has placed a communications relay buoy between us,” replied Tuvok.

“Hey...maybe we could use that to tap into her systems—”

“I already thought of that,” said Janeway. “It’s not activated at the moment; she’ll notice if I try to turn it on. And after that threat, I don’t want to do anything to make her think we’re sneaking up on her. The ball’s in her court. Gentlemen— dismissed.”

AFTER SUPERVISING THE PACKING of the ransom items, Janeway headed down to Engineering to check on Torres and Carey.

“I think she used an EMP generator to create an ionized radiation field. It makes transporter lock impossible. I can use an ion-damping beam to disperse it, but she would be expecting that, and probably has measures to deflect anything of the sort,” said Torres, sorting through parts in a locker.

“So what’s your idea, B’Elanna?” asked Janeway.

“Pattern boosters, with an enhanced lock signal. If we use those in conjunction with the ion-damping beam, we can cut through the interference and beam out the hostages— and the ransom.”

Janeway frowned and shook her head slightly. “That would do it— but pattern boosters would be difficult to conceal. We can’t let her know about them until we’re actually energizing.”

“Yes,” said Torres, with a smile at Carey. “Lieutenant— punch up that design we worked out.”

Carey’s fingers flew over a console, calling up glowing green lines that spiraled and converged into a wire-frame image.

"A miniaturized booster—" breathed Janeway. "But where can you fit the enhanced lock—"

"See, the flared bipolar couplings on the upper end—"

"Perfect," said Janeway, beaming. "Well done, you two. How soon can you build a set?"

"We'll have them ready in an hour."

"What would I do without you, Torres?" She clapped Torres on the shoulder.

Carey smiled a little ruefully.

"WE ARE BEING HAILED, Captain," said the young ensign at Ops.

Janeway glanced up from her monitor, on which she had been drumming nervously for the past five minutes.

"It is now eight minutes, four seconds past the time that was set," said Tuvok.

"Enough time for us to start to worry, but not enough to confirm our worries," muttered Janeway. "Open a channel." She rose to face the viewscreen. The small bridge again, but only the Cardassian this time.

"Hello, *Captain*," said Seska. "Had enough time to think about it?"

"Yes, Ensign, we have. I want to offer you one more opportunity to give up your prisoners and turn yourself over. I promise you'll be fairly treated."

Seska smiled a mirthless, toothy snarl. "As fairly as you treated all of us when you destroyed the Array? As fairly as you deprived us of any chance to get home? I'll depend on your fairness, bitch, the day I see my family again and greet them with my own face. You've locked me in this skin for the rest of my life."

The big hazel eyes met the narrowed blue ones, and Janeway was startled to feel a trickle of pity starting in her thoughts. Trapped inside one's own devices...

Then the wide mouth snarled again, and Seska hissed, "Take a shuttle. Hold *Voyager* in geosynchronous orbit on the equator, directly opposite the base. Bring the items I mentioned to the entrance your unfortunate party discovered, and wait for me. Be there in an hour. If I see anyone besides you and Tuvok, I'll deliver my prisoners in pieces, courtesy of my Kazon friends. Clear?"

"You want me to deliver the ransom myself?" A Red Alert began to flash in Janeway's mind.

"That's right, *Captain*. None other. I've got a few words to say to you that really need to be delivered in person. That's all you need to know." The screen abruptly showed the planet's surface again.

"Damn! Sorry, Captain, she didn't keep the buoy active long enough," said the ensign at Ops.

"That's all right, Ensign," said Janeway, still staring at the screen. "I didn't expect much new information from a probe through it anyway. We already know what kind of ship she has, and how many people are on board. As for what she's planning—we'd have to be telepaths to know that." She thought of Stadi again.

THE SHUTTLE BAY echoed with the soft thumps of antigrav loading units. Torres handed Janeway a grooved cylinder, about the size of two small clenched fists held together.

"One of the boosters is in the container with the transporter circuitry. Tuvok has one, and you have the third, Captain. Press that flange to activate it. You'll have to move to create a triangle enclosing the hostages before you can energize. If you time it right, we could even get Seska."

"Let's hope that we time it right, then, Lieutenant," said Janeway. She tucked the booster into her field jacket and stepped into the shuttlecraft where Tuvok waited. "And the ion-damping beam will activate in the shuttle when the boosters are turned on, and then the transporter?"

"Yes, Captain. I whipped up a trigger relay."

"You're a fast worker, B'Elanna."

"Try practicing with four Cardassian patrol vessels coming at you with all batteries blazing, and the shields failing." Torres smiled, and Janeway returned it.

"That's what we used to call 'the school of hard knocks'." She inspected the machinery a moment longer, then turning, she put a hand on the young woman's shoulder. "B'Elanna—Seska was a friend of yours, I know. If it's at all possible—we'll try to bring her back alive."

"Captain—"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Don't risk anything on my account. The person I thought was my friend never really existed." The Klingon ridges on Torres' forehead were sharp and prominent in the harsh light of the

shuttle bay. "Bring back Chakotay, and Harry, and Rutskoi. As for *her* — all I want to see is her head, Captain." Torres spun and walked quickly away.

Janeway looked after her with concern, and wondered: if Seska was *one* of the most ruthless fighters, who was *the* most ruthless?

"Captain," said Tuvok as she moved forward to the pilot's seat, "I must reiterate my concern about these arrangements. The danger to you is very great."

"Yes, Mr. Tuvok. I'm aware of that. But...I don't think I have much choice. She didn't leave any space for negotiations, intentionally. And anyway..." Her voice died to a whisper.

"Captain?" asked Tuvok.

"I listened to two crewmen die, as I thought. And I was here on the ship, and could do nothing to help them. I—" Janeway closed her eyes, and a tear slid out under the lashes. Vulcans disliked public show of emotion, but Tuvok would understand. "My people. All of them, however they came to *Voyager*. This is my responsibility. I have to do everything I can to bring them home." She meant the hostages to the ship, the entire crew to the Alpha Quadrant. "I won't shirk that charge. I cannot give it up to anyone as long as I live. Not to anyone." She opened her eyes again and smiled into the ceiling above her, her lips parted, her tears brimming. "There are some things only the captain can do."

Tuvok did not speak for a moment, and when he did, his voice was very quiet.

"I would suggest that we get under way."

"You're right as always, Mr. Tuvok," said Janeway, and gave the order to open the shuttle bay doors.

"WHERE IS HE, Ensign?" Janeway's voice rang out like a bronze bell in the forest clearing. "What have you done with my first officer?"

"I haven't done anything to damage him, if that's what you mean. I just thought it would be better to leave him on my ship." Seska grinned sideways, flanked by four huge Kazon.

"The ransom for all the hostages, you said. What kind of bargain is this?"

"But these *are* all my hostages," Seska said with an air of honest innocence, gesturing to the blindfolded Kim and Rutskoi.

"Where — is — Commander — Chakotay?" Janeway repeated with icy anger.

"I told you. He's on my ship. Specifically, in my quarters. And," Seska laughed, "he went there of his own free will. He's not a hostage, he's an ally."

Janeway's hand went to her phaser, but she controlled her fury with an effort. "You're lying. I demand to speak to him."

"Indeed," said Tuvok. "I, too, find that difficult to believe." He glanced at Janeway.

"What do you know about him, Vulcan? Neither of you has worked with him for more than a few months. I've been with him for years. I know all about him, because it was my business to find out. Federation espionage is nothing compared to us. You didn't even know I was a Cardassian agent. And I know every square centimeter of Chakotay."

She looked at Janeway and repeated, "Every square centimeter." Her expression was feral, possessive, triumphant.

Janeway gritted her teeth in revulsion at the thought of Seska's hands measuring their way over his body. But she knew they had; he had admitted as much to her. Would Chakotay have allowed her to revive some dormant feeling still within him? He had resisted her attempts while they were on *Voyager* together. Why would he have acquiesced now?

The cradle of his hands, the press of his lips to hers, the warmth like sunlight that had filled her mind and enveloped her body...

And the cool gap between them. The height of the pedestal on which her rank and her own decision placed her. No room beside her for anyone.

"I don't believe you," said Janeway. She walked a little distance to the side to break the rigid standoff. The containers of ransom items and the photons with their antigrav carriers stood behind her and Tuvok. They had left the shuttle in the forest and taken the cargo out to the clearing by hand.

"I don't care," hissed Seska. "The items I specified, for my hostages." She pushed Kim hard and he fell forward onto the ground, sprawling in front of the Kazon.

Tuvok met Janeway's eye briefly and stooped to help Kim up. Seska's hand flashed inside her jacket, and he halted where he was. The hideous burns on the young ensign's back made Janeway want to gag, and she wondered why he wasn't

howling in pain. Rutskoï stood drooping, bloodstains visible on her shirt.

Kim was within the triangle now. The containers at the apex, Tuvok at an opposite point, and she herself drawing the line out to the right. Janeway imagined an elastic cord stretched between the corners. Rutskoï would be in the area with only two forward strides, and Seska stood just outside the edge. Tuvok moved forward slightly, but Seska sensed that she was being outflanked and inched back, leaving Rutskoï in front of her.

Was she suspicious? Of course she was; she'd be a fool not to be. But she didn't know of what to be suspicious, not yet. They would have to make a move soon before she put two and two together. Chakotay's absence was a surprise and a horrible disadvantage, but the other hostages were wounded and must be rescued.

What was up Seska's sleeve? Janeway knew Chakotay had a long history with the woman, but to betray *Voyager* for a Cardassian infiltrator? Not in a thousand years. Perhaps he was playing along for now, leading her to believe he had defected, but how far would he carry such a deception? How far could he? Dissembling and trickery of that kind, face to face, seemed so foreign to him. He would feign damage to draw in the enemy, or mask himself to move unchallenged, but to speak lies outright and smile in a face he hated?

The pattern boosters had to be activated just before beam-out. The one in the carrying case was already on, since the signal would not read as anything unusual for transporter circuitry. But Tuvok and Janeway had to turn theirs on simultaneously to create the triangular field of influence.

She made the prearranged signal, a tap on the lips, and walked deliberately along the group of

Kazon as if in thought. Not too far – the miniature boosters had a limited range. Tuvok matched her movement a moment later.

Seska whirled from one to the other, clearly confused. Janeway pressed a hand to the loose front of her field jacket and said low, "Now." She saw Tuvok activate his booster as well.

A crackle of static electricity stirred the hair on her neck. Time slowed to a crawl.

Seska's face mutated into a scream of rage. The Kazon began to scatter towards them, moving out of the boundaries of the triangle as Seska gestured. Rutskoï stood alone within it, blind and oblivious. Kim sat near the containers. Tuvok whipped his phaser out and began to lower it –

Something hit Janeway in the stomach, a blur of grey so forceful she lost her wind and was carried to the ground. Fabric ripped, and the scene began to dissolve into dancing sparkles as the shuttlecraft's transporter energized. Half-solid, Seska grappled with her, sweeping the booster out of her jacket and away. The triangle collapsed to one-third its former area.

The sparkles faltered and faded in front of Janeway's eyes as the figures of Tuvok, Kim and Rutskoï, and the containers dissolved into shards of energy. The pattern booster vanished with them as she gasped painfully to fill her lungs. Seska sat atop her, one hand twisted in her hair, pushing her face into the dirt. The other hand contracted around her throat until her vision turned red. With an agonizing effort, Janeway locked a wrestling hold on Seska's arm and shoulder, flipped her on her back, and drew her phaser. A Kazon wrenched it out of her grasp, and she felt a small hard object in her ribs.

Seska smiled, genuinely this time.

A monster hand slapped consciousness away.

CHAPTER NINE

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN RATS, or the Kazon equivalent of them, before they had been skinned, dried and salted. Lacking replicator technology, Kazon vessels obviously would have to carry all their food, severely limiting the range of their travels. The four little brown corpses lay on a dish where Seska had left them for him, the tiny paws and tails clearly visible.

Chakotay's stomach growled persistently, but such food was so little to his taste that he could barely stand to look at it. He had maintained a vegetarian diet when he could manage one, though Maquis fighters couldn't be too fussy about personal needs. He'd eaten worse than this, certainly, and sometimes raw. Whenever he could, he'd purified himself with sweat and prayer, and fasted to get the flesh out of his system though the ritual left him weakened in body. Here, he couldn't weaken. He was going to need his strength, and if he was going to try to persuade Seska that he would cooperate with her, he should eat what she gave him at the very least. A sign of trust, and a test. She had picked one of the things up and taken a bite, crunching the tiny bones between her teeth, before she had left on her errand. Probably to show him that the food was not drugged, but she knew perfectly well he would hate it. She, who had cooked for him so often. When had his last real meal been? A lot of fruit for lunch two days before, Neelix's heaping plate twenty-four hours later, and not much since then, as he had not exactly been thinking about eating.

Chakotay took another look and swallowed hard. It wasn't wiggling like Klingon food; it was definitely dead. That was a point in its favor. If he ate quickly enough, he could get it down. Chakotay picked up one of the leathery little things, said a fast prayer for its soul, and started chewing.

Well, it was better than rancid, phaser-scorched Cardassian field rations. Two months on that while his ship's replicator had been broken had nearly killed him, alleviated only by the small stash of dried fruit and nuts that Seska had hoarded away for him. Dried fruit—there, that was

a similar texture. Pretend it's dried fruit. With bones. He swallowed, and took another bite. She had been genuinely surprised and miffed when he had insisted on dividing the treat among his whole crew, even though there was only a handful for each. 'You Humans,' she had said. 'You're the captain, it's your privilege.' Torres had finally scrounged the parts to repair the replicator, grumbling about pampered digestions, and the crew had stuffed themselves until nearly unconscious. Oh, how she had cursed when they burned out the power coupling again. Chakotay smiled faintly at the memory. He'd learned a couple of new Klingon words that day. He finished the last rat, though he left the paws and heads on the dish, drank a whole container of water in one long swallow, and began to pick the bits of bone out of his molars.

Time to evaluate his surroundings. He had heard the ping of a magnetic lock after Seska had shut the door, but he should try it anyway. The big lever moved a quarter turn and stopped, and his experimental shove budged the door not at all. Well, that meant the Kazon probably couldn't get in, which was good if she had left the ship. He went over every millimeter of the compartment with painstaking thoroughness. Two narrow bunks, one above the other, a lot of locked cabinets, and a tiny privy cubicle with an open hole in the deck and no washing facilities. The bulkheads were heavy, fabricated with huge bolts and thick welds. Good basic steel alloy. The craftsmanship had a brutal soundness to it, devoid of subtlety or weakness. No ventilation ducts larger than his arm. Short of a limpet mine or a well-charged phaser, nothing was going to break him out of here, but it wasn't really in his interest to do so, anyway. His own uneasiness disturbed him as out of proportion to his actual predicament. Chakotay thought he had passed one hurdle and could see the next one coming; unless he was careless, his former lover was not likely to kill him. Why then did something seem wrong, why did he have a restless urge to get out, to warn...?

He was tapping at the base of the door to estimate the thickness of its plates when Seska put her key in the lock. He quickly retired to the seat by the sturdy porthole, but knew she had a very exact idea of what he had been doing while she

was gone. He had taught her some of those techniques himself.

Seska hummed something to herself as she stepped inside, a tune Chakotay remembered having heard her sing. Catching his eye, she smiled with a barely suppressed wriggle of delight, then turned to one of the cabinets and took out a comb and hand mirror. Her hair was tangled and her face marked with streaks of dirt, but she was glowing and pink-cheeked, her eyes bright. Happy about something, obviously. Apparently her plans were going well. Chakotay crossed his arms and leaned back against the bulkhead.

Where had she been? he wondered, frowning at the deck. To collect the ransom she had mentioned? Surely Janeway hadn't capitulated. The demands had been ridiculous. Not if Seska had held twice as many hostages would the captain have given her so much — or anything at all. She would have played along, looking for a chance —

Had Janeway gambled too much? And lost the stakes? No, she wouldn't have taken that much risk, surely.

Perhaps she had. She must have felt responsible for young Kim, as Chakotay did himself, and she had known Rutskoi for years. But the safety of the ship and crew as a whole and the sanctity of the Prime Directive must come first. She would not have compromised either for the sake of any individual.

Her own safety was a different matter. Chakotay thought that he could die for his captain, because he knew she would die for — He shivered suddenly, and looked up again.

And Seska was humming a little song to herself, and combing out her long light-brown hair, and putting away her weapons — some of them, at least — into a locking cabinet. Unclasping her heavy utility belt, she put it in the cabinet as well and snapped the panel shut. Her jacket she hung on a hook, and she turned to him in her tight body suit. Armor? Perhaps — the material had a dull metallic sheen and a texture like firmly woven wire or tiny greyish scales. None of the Kazon he had seen wore anything like it.

Seska's body seemed carved of polished graphite, a simulation of a woman, in a dark substance that would mark him if he touched it.

Only a few steps across the compartment, he sat wavering between feigned indifference, horror-tinged fascination, and a fierce inner debate

between grudging acquiescence and active collaboration. What could he afford? He felt something brushing around the edges of his intuition, a whisper of fear. If something had happened to Janeway, what was his best course of action? Could he even keep up the facade necessary to convince Seska he would cooperate with her? He met her eyes, and knew his face was twitching with tension.

His captain. She couldn't be dead; he thought he would have known. Her spirit had touched his, whether she had meant it to or not. But something had put Seska into a good mood. When she had left him here, she had been tense and jittery. She had refused to say where she was going, or what she was planning to do. He was not quite a hostage, but not yet an ally.

He knew how he could push the metamorphosis forward. Seska was smiling at him, running her eyes over his face and body. Her hands flexed as if they wanted to follow the same path. But his skin crawled at the thought of her touch on him. False, monstrous flesh. And the truth was grey Cardassian hide. He had knowingly touched Cardassians only to kill them. Could he let himself be used — or use her weakness to gain advantage? Chakotay turned away to hide his expression.

No matter what Seska was or what she had done, she was a woman with a heart, who had once claimed to love him, whom he had once thought he loved.

He had been new to the Maquis, building a cell from nothing, when she had approached him in a tavern and asked for his help. An intense young Bajoran, pretty in some lights, with a wide smile and a wiry, slim body. Her amorous designs had been so obvious from the beginning that he had put her off brusquely, sent her on tedious errands, spoken harshly to her in an attempt to shatter her illusions, as he saw them. No moonstruck girls in any group under his command.

But her determination had only increased, as if his feigned irritability had been a positive encouragement, and she had ferreted out every detail of his life and his tastes in a very short time. Soon she was cooking his favorite dishes when she could get ingredients, mending his clothes although he didn't thank her, even cutting his hair when it flopped into his eyes from neglect. Eventually he had grown so guilty and miserable

at the way he was treating her, and she had proven herself such an efficient fighter, that he had gone to her and apologized. That was the first time he had made love to her, and he still wasn't sure how she had maneuvered it that way.

He knew now what had motivated her and recognized her strategy for what it was: a brilliantly simple way of gathering all the information about him that she could, directly under his nose, without raising the slightest suspicion in him or in any other member of the group. And he had been so willing to believe that, such a damned fool.

But although she had molded herself to fit him with ulterior motives, her subterfuge seemed to have taken on a life of its own. She had come to him again and again, growing more passionate each time, and for a while he had given in. Flattered, perhaps, and wanting a woman in his arms, amongst all the death and hardship of the Demilitarized Zone. And her passion had been catching. To be told he was loved, that she would follow him wherever he went, help him in all his work. He hadn't asked for that kind of devotion, and it made him uneasy, but gratitude and sheer need could work wonders. He hadn't had Janeway's discipline as a commander, had been unable to deny himself the comfort. Love? By whose definition? Seska had done so much outwardly to prove hers, but the state of her mind—unknowable, unplumbable. Her thoughts too deeply hidden for him. If he exploited her physical lust, which was unmistakable, would he be playing turnabout, or wounding a vulnerable heart?

And his own feelings—physical revulsion at knowing what she was and had planned to do, but she looked as she had always done. The same face as the comrade who had found clothing and supplies for his group and for refugees, fought at his side and defended his cause, brought him soup on cold nights, talked to him for hours, kissed him and lain with him, so warmly... He was grateful, Chakotay realized with bitter irony, because a Cardassian agent sent to destroy him had helped make his life in the Maquis bearable.

He smiled a twisted smile, and looked at the woman who had threatened to kill him only a few hours before. Seska was twirling a lock of her hair around one finger and eyeing him with speculation.

"First things first," she said. "Let's get that uniform off you."

"No," he said involuntarily.

"Oh, don't give me that frightened deer look, Chakotay," she said lazily. "I've seen it all before. Just change your clothes, would you?" She nodded to a bundle she had dropped on the bunk when she had entered. "It took a while to scrounge something decent, but there you go." Seska pointedly turned her back.

Chakotay could think of no good reason not to comply. At least she wasn't holding a weapon to his head—she sounded casual and relaxed.

He walked over to the bunk and examined the clothes, then turned his back on her as well and began to strip.

He thought distantly that he should let her look if she wanted to.

Boots off first. Open the front of the jumpsuit. Pull it off the shoulders, down the arms. Step out of it. Shirt off over the head. Out of uniform. One identity gone. He folded the red-and-black slowly and put it down.

He stood bare-chested in his briefs facing the bunk, knowing she was watching him. The bundle held a pair of loose dark trousers, a long-sleeved shirt with faint patterns in the weave, and a leather vest with cargo pockets.

What did it matter how she dressed him? Janeway had done the same, and he had put the Starfleet uniform on again as if he had never taken it off. Did he change his loyalties as easily as his shirt? A live dog, a dead lion. The blade of grass bends in the wind, the unyielding oak cracks and falls. Which was he? Which did he want to be? Chakotay tried to lose all affect, all emotional reaction to his surroundings and his own actions. Putting on all the clothes, he pulled his own boots back on and fastened the front of the vest. He wasn't going to turn to face her. Seska moved slowly around him and emerged into his line of sight from the left, her face rapt.

"I thought those would fit you pretty well—" she murmured. "You've lost a little weight on Neelix's slop." Chakotay glanced dully down at himself and realized that she had chosen clothing to resemble his old Maquis wear. It felt oddly familiar, though it smelled peculiar and chemical, and faintly, antiseptically damp. "You look much more at home now. And my boys aren't too fond of men in uniform, so I thought it would be a good idea to get rid of the thing." Her hands ran lightly,

lingeringly over him, adjusting the lie of his shirt collar, pressing it briefly against his chest and throat. "Oh, I've got something for you." She returned to her jacket and pulled out a small drawstring pouch on a cord. His special stone, which he had worn into danger for all the good it had done him. Seska raised it over his head and put the cord around his neck again, slipping the pouch under his shirt. "Had to make sure it wasn't anything dangerous."

"Not that kind of dangerous."

She smiled at him, her hands resting on his shoulders. "Just one of your little souvenirs, of course." Her fingers spread out as she smoothed the folds of his shirt down his arms and began to roll up his cuffs for him. The sleeves of her garment extended in half-gloves, leaving her fingers and half her palms bare.

"Where did you get that armor?" he asked, to take his mind off the cool scaled touch on his skin.

"This place has a lot of interesting things tucked away in the corners," she murmured, taking neither her eyes nor her hands off him. "It's not originally Trabe – that's who built all the Kazon ships, by the way. It's enormous. They don't know how half the stuff works. Most of this part has been looted of everything portable, but I found a sealed section with living quarters and storage. That's where these came from –" she stroked her fingers along the side seams of his trousers, " – and my clothes as well. We had to wait a while for you to show up, so I poked around a bit." Her hands remained on his hips.

"How did you know *Voyager* would visit this planet?" Chakotay willed himself to remain still as she moved closer. Cooperate. It doesn't matter. It won't mean anything to you.

"You think I haven't been keeping an eye on you, Chakotay?" she chuckled. "I knew you'd be foraging, and this is the best place in a thousand cubic light-years. Aren't the fruits wonderful?" She glanced at the dish that had held the rats and smiled. "The Kazon like meat better; that's one reason they stink. Did you know, they never wash their hair, ever? That's why it looks so awful." Seska made a little face of disgust, laughed, and lifted her chin in a characteristic, familiar gesture. Her hip bumped his.

"And when we were here the first time, why didn't you try anything then?" Chakotay's voice was beginning to roughen.

"Those stupid, bragging knuckle-draggers I've got with me," Seska spat. "Culluh loaned me his personal transport and this bunch because I told him I could get something valuable if I had the chance. Then they refused to go out on the surface while the big gathering parties and all the security guards were here. Kazon prefer overwhelmingly favorable odds, especially where *Voyager's* concerned. So I looked around by myself, but your precautions were too much for me to do anything on my own. You almost caught me by the waterfall, you know." She ran her forefinger along his chin, pressed it at the dimple as she had always liked to do. "I moved out of range, but I just couldn't leave for a little while." She arched her back to brush her breasts against him, stretched and rippled like a snake. A lithe, grey, scaled snake. An image from an ancient story: the serpent in the garden.

"I know," said Chakotay. "That's why we came back. The holorecording I made there picked you up, like Kim told you." Calm. Stay calm. Neutral. No loyalties at all. There was a terrible taste in his mouth again.

"I was wondering about that. I figured you had re-analyzed your readings and discovered the base. But you came back for *me*, huh?" She smiled coquettishly up at him with her head at an angle.

"The captain pretty much insisted."

"Just obeying orders?"

Chakotay remembered his struggle over whether to tell Janeway of Seska's presence in the recording. "No."

Seska moved her hand from his chin to touch his lips, softly. "I told Culluh to give me a few days and stay out of sensor range," she murmured, "and I was so angry at these idiots after they blew the first chance I actually considered booby-trapping this rustbucket and sending them off in it."

"Really."

"Oh, dammit, Chakotay. I hate them. It's horrible living on that ship, and Culluh – ugh. Seems he likes exotic women. I've been fending him off, but he's awfully determined." She glanced up at him, rolling her eyes slightly. "I haven't got much leverage, you know. I have to show them some results soon, or they may get tired of having me around. This was my last hope. They – they're fond of torture. Not necessarily to get information." An uneasy smile. "They don't know half of what I do about extracting – well, let's just

say they lack finesse. I won't let them get their hands on you, no matter what."

"Thanks." He could manage only a whisper of irony.

"But you've got to help me. I had to put on a show for them – they don't respect anything but strength and arrogance. I – that must have sounded awful to you. I didn't mean it. You've got to believe me."

"I believe you were putting on a show..."

"To save your life! I've saved your life before this, you know –"

"I know." He looked away.

"That means something to you, doesn't it? To your people?"

"I suppose it does to anyone."

Seska laid her fingertips along his jaw, cradling his face in her hands. "I missed you, Chakotay. I was angry the last time I saw you, and then just now, the way the bitch looked at you – I...I was jealous." She sounded girlish, singsongy, though under other circumstances he might not have doubted her sincerity. "I suppose I've got no right to be from your point of view."

"You couldn't imagine how you ever loved me," he repeated, very low.

"What?" She studied the movements of his lips, and flushed. "Please – will you ever forgive me for that? Would it make any difference...oh, I wish it were just the two of us here. There's enough food and water here on the planet to feed a lot of people on a permanent basis, and enough equipment and instruments tucked away here to study for a lifetime. But you wouldn't have to stay here any longer than you wanted. Just figure out how some of the weapons work, and then take your pick of the ships that visit – how does that sound, Chakotay? Wouldn't you like to have your own ship again?"

"I'm more partial to buying or borrowing them than stealing them."

"I know. I helped raise the money for ours, remember? You're a good bargainer, Captain – very passable poker face when you want to use it, but we needed cold cash for that transaction, not promises." Seska laughed, and the combination of the memory and her smiling face wrought a twist in his perceptions, seemed to carry him backwards along his path to a time when the emotions stirred by that smile had been very different.

...THE GREAT RIVER of memory, swirling in eddies, flowing steadily onwards, but caught in deep pools and turbid cauldrons, circulating endlessly over and over the same stones. A year ago could seem like yesterday, or the future be as familiar as a story his grandfather had heard from his own grandfather. He knew where he was, and when, but another experience lay over it, combined itself with the present...

...Seska had embraced him once, in a tiny dark cabin, aboard a cramped ship. It was much like this one, but it orbited a small cold planet in the Badlands as they hid from Cardassian pursuit. He was exhausted, stiff-faced, his arms aching from the long flight, hard piloting through the twisting storms. Bendera was lying wounded in their improvised sickbay and Suder wasn't much better off, and the raid had failed anyway. Huixtepec they'd had to leave lying among the Cardassian corpses, barely recognizable as Human after four phaser hits, half cremated already. That was all the burial his father's sister's son would ever have. He'd lost a comrade and a kinsman, and his eyes stung with anguished fatigue. Seska had boosted him out of the pilot's seat, his muscles so cramped he could barely move, and helped him to his cabin while Torres and Ayala went below to check the overheated impulse engines. The bunk was too small for him to sit upright, so she had dragged the mattress to the deck and seated him on it, rubbing his shoulders until he relaxed, moving around to look into his face, telling him softly, over and over, that he had done his best. He'd still been grim and silent, though the strain of the flight was fading under her hands. Then she'd stood and dropped her clothing piece by piece, teasingly, until he lunged up and grabbed her around the waist. Kissing her stomach, soft and smooth, slightly ridged with muscle, one oval mole just on the apex of the curve below her navel...

Chakotay shook off the memory and looked down at the armored body close to his, trying to push away the image of its nakedness. His hand brushed over her, warding her off, but she pressed into it, turning his gesture into a caress. Seska's eyes, the warmth burning in them, avid and hungry. The past closed over his head again.

...SHE HAD HELD HIS HEAD with long fingers digging into his scalp, pushing his face into her skin, dragging him down to meet her hot core, rub herself over his nose and mouth. The salt sting of her. He had urged her down with both hands on her hips, but she had braced her knees and kept herself where she was. Her strong thighs clenching as he obliged her, stroked her and kissed her, used tongue and lips and fingers, inhaling her through the damp screen of her pubic hair. Over and over, she had begun to moan loudly, to tremble above him, but over and over, she trailed off into anguished sighs. Fingernails gouging through his hair, her frustration echoing in every crevice of the little space, locked in with him, broken gasps in the darkness. Finally she had collapsed to her knees, unable to remain standing any longer, and he had lifted her over his lap, settling her over his erection, kissing her wide mouth until her arms went around his neck. Her cry, when he pierced her, was triumphant, happy, and he had wanted to please her so, wanted to give her back the warmth he felt closing around him. The day's horrible work, the dry blood under his nails, the cold death of space; nothing. There was life in his arms, and she loved him...

Horror.

A deep stagnant hole in his memory, dark and scummed, undrainable, and poisoned. He had drunk so deep of her, thinking her wholesome, and then the source of pollution he carried in his body had stained every drop of his recollections. Everything she had touched, she had marked. Most of the last three years had seeped into this deep hole, good and bad, since he had known what she was. All but one scene of his life marked since he had met this woman, and that one scene held its own pain. Would he ever purge himself of the touch of a Cardassian? Had it become part of him, so that somehow he still longed — His stomach twisted, its awful contents uneasy.

No. No, gods. He had breathed so much fragrant smoke, sweated himself to exhaustion, meditated until his knees ached from sitting motionless so long. Her influence over him was done. The last bit of power her memory had over him had vanished, when Kathryn Janeway had smiled up at him under violet leaves. He was sure it was gone, forever...

There was a tingling pain on the side of his neck, and Seska was staring up at him with mingled anger and yearning, her nails still spread.

"You with me?"

"Yes."

"I hate it when you do that. I can't reach you at all sometimes."

"No."

"Dammit, Chakotay," she said, and pulled his head down, and this time he did not flinch away.

She tore the clothes off of him, ripping the shirt since he barely moved to help her, and popped small catches open down the back of her armored bodysuit with a writhing twist of her arms. He skinned her of it at her insistence, looking helplessly at her body. Here he had spent so much of his power, given her his essence to hold within her. Her heavy breasts, her long legs. The mole on her stomach. Familiar, and yet he had not seen them for eleven months, not since he had told her the crew was muttering, that they were spending too much time alone, that maybe they should cool it for a while. Perhaps he had known somehow what she was, that she was no more loyal to him than was Gul Dukat, that she was smothering him with a purpose — He hadn't had a clue. But he'd known she wanted it more profoundly than he did, and something had nagged at him, his own self-indulgence; and he had told himself he was using her. What a noble idiot. She had agreed right away, to his mild chagrin, and he was relieved and regretful at the same time, and she kept following him with her eyes. There was more than strategy there. He fasted at his own insistence, and if they hadn't ended up on *Voyager*, the other jaw of the trap would have closed on him. He might have gone to her again, and begged her forgiveness...

Her hands were groping and tugging at him, her body weighing down on him as he lay inert on the mattresses she had dragged out of the bunks. Her lips and teeth nipped at his throat and face, and she kissed him. The familiar woman-smell surrounding him. He realized with distant shock that he was erect in her palm, and that his body remembered her for all his effort to remain aloof. A warm woman, any woman. Seska moved over him and pressed down, engulfing him, and he gasped. Nearly a year now since he had had sex, but this

was nothing like sex for him. He liked to give, but to have it taken from him – He trembled and heaved, and she moaned in pleasure while he shook uncontrollably. The careful plan of action began to shatter along with his composure. How, when he had worked so hard to cleanse himself, could he dive back into the corruption? How, when he carried the light of the sun in him, could he plunge into darkness? Did it somehow draw him, was he filthy for life? He was drowning in darkness of his own making; fear, revulsion, anger. With every heave, the anger grew. Any semblance of arousal was dying. No one to blame but himself. Except her. Except her. Turnabout?

Chakotay reached up and seized Seska's arms, half intending to pull her off of him. Instead, he jerked her down and thrust his tongue into her mouth, kissing her as violently as he could. Physical action might stiffen his resolve, among other things, and he simply couldn't stand to lie unresisting any longer. He couldn't pretend she was taking him against his will.

Over with an effort, and he thrust into her while she cried out in startled joy and reached for him. Her face, her lying face – he couldn't stand to look at it. Chakotay yanked one of her legs up and across her body, seized her hips and flipped her over without disengaging. If he slipped out, his erection fading, he wouldn't be able to penetrate her again. Roughly, he forced her into the mattresses, pounding in a punishing rhythm that she tried to meet. When she turned to kiss him, he pushed her flat with a hand on the back of her neck. There, he was stiffening a little from sheer mechanical stimulation – Gods, if he could only come, and soon, but it was going to be difficult. This was even less like sex, this frantic assault, though she was crying out, high-pitched, the sound lancing his roaring ears. He didn't want to hear her. He would give anything to release himself, and be finished –

"Ooaaoh, ooah," Seska was groaning into the mattresses. Familiar...she was approaching climax. So fast? It had never been easy with her, even with patient stimulation, everything he could give her, body and heart all for her. Did anyone else exist for him right now? His gorge rose at the thought. Binding himself to her again, and for what? Would he have any reward worth this? The defiling of himself, by himself. What was the use of a plan when he destroyed himself to carry it out? Would he even recognize himself when it was complete?

A Cardassian wouldn't care. She had been fitted into a new skin, and kept her purpose without knowing herself any more. Everything he saw was false. Hair, face, skin; everything he touched, even what he was plunging into. Hot and tight and wet, but he could barely feel anything. Didn't want to feel anything. He would never get release from this, never; he might have been ramming an object into her. And she had always been so difficult to bring to orgasm. Reconstructed all over, and Obsidian Order surgeons were probably better at genetic engineering than genital surgery... Pity surged through his mind to accompany the sudden horror, and he could barely continue. A Cardassian wouldn't care. Any means to bring about the end.

What was rape to them, the real thing, not this ugly echo of it? A tool like any other. He had seen the depredations left behind in the wake of their raids on colonist's villages. How many sightless eyes had he closed, how many ravaged bodies had he carried from desecrated homes, how many prayers said beside the funeral pyres? The thought crossed his mind that he could kill her now, easily, while she was off guard. The cord of the pouch round her throat; a quick thrust with one hand on the skull and a hard jerk with the other. She would never see it coming.

The sweat of exertion and nausea ran down his contorted face.

If he killed her, would the Kazon simply kill him as well? There was no way to escape this ship unseen. Paradoxically, it was too small to allow a clandestine exit. If he had been held on one of their huge cruisers, he might have had a chance.

Seska gasped and twisted under him, her muscles contracting like a groping hand. Still in a trap. If she died, there went his protection from eight or ten huge, well-armed men who would gladly hang him in his own intestines. And if, as he suspected, she had good reason to be so happy about the way her plans were going, who else might he place in jeopardy? That thought, and only that, prevented him from snapping Seska's neck as she sank limp and fainting to the deck. He might not have cared about being ripped apart by Kazon if he had taken her with him...

Chakotay pulled out of her, heaved himself dizzily to his feet, staggered into the privy cubicle, and vomited rackingly.

CHAPTER TEN

KATHRYN JANEWAY stared at the ceiling of her prison, hands on hips, scanning the bulkheads and frowning. Options clicked through her mind, swiftly evaluated and discarded. *What are my chances of escape?* she wondered. It would take a phaser several seconds to cut through that heavy steel, if she had had a phaser. She was lucky they had left her with any clothing at all. Seska's strip-search had been regulation Cardassian, leaving Janeway's uniform shredded and her every orifice aching; for a few moments, she had even been afraid her teeth would be pulled and examined for implants. She had heard of such extremes in Cardassian interrogations even before she had met any members of the Maquis. Her muscles ached from the stun beam, and she rubbed her neck, her unbound hair falling down her back. There was a steel slab projecting from the bulkhead, apparently meant as a bunk, but Janeway winced at the thought of sitting down.

Perhaps the rebel's point of view had some merit, if their families were routinely treated like this under Cardassian rule. Janeway wondered what she would have done in Chakotay's place, if her home had been given into hostile command and her friends and relatives harassed, tortured, even murdered. Earth in alien hands? Her mind would not form the picture. It was too preposterous. Yet the unimaginable had happened to uncounted thousands in the Demilitarized Zone. Unless war came into her own life, she would never really know of what she was capable. Starfleet had been so much of herself for so long that resigning would have been like amputation.

Chakotay had been in Starfleet long enough to be a lieutenant commander, and had been up for promotion when the treaty with Cardassia had been signed. Had he given up any less than she would have? *And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off,* she thought.

Janeway glanced at the Kazon guard who stood on the other side of the force field. The beady dark eyes were still locked on her, as they had been for the last twenty minutes. She tugged at the just-

too-short sack that Seska had made her put on after the search. Although the Cardassian's techniques had been vicious, she had not really had her heart in it, smiling and gleeful though she was. After leaving Janeway in the cell, she had hurried off with a few words to the guard.

What was going on behind that ridged forehead? Kazon resemblance to clean-shaven Klingons disturbed her.

Another one of the crew came in sight and glared at her. All ten of them had stood around to watch the search, laughing in vile enjoyment and looking as if they wanted to eat her alive. When Seska had not really hurt her, they had seemed disappointed. Perhaps she was being saved for First Maje Culluh. Starfleet personnel were not routinely equipped with any means of quick suicide, what had in former years been known as a 'cyanide tooth', but perhaps the new isolated situation would warrant it, to avoid giving out information that could damage *Voyager* or its crew. At the very least, Janeway might carry something in future, assuming she had a future. If she had to die to keep *Voyager* safe, she would, but she prayed that she would tell Seska nothing before that happened. Real torture had no real defense. Janeway hoped it would not come to that, of course. She smiled grimly to imagine what Tuvok would do to thwart the Cardassian's plans. Vulcans made unsurpassed friends, once they had decided to make allowances for your Human foibles, but to make an enemy of one—that took courage. Or ignorance.

But Tuvok had his blind spots, of course. Emotional motives, however he might study and analyze them, still eluded him in their essence. If he tried to predict what Seska might do with logic, he would go seriously astray. The woman hated Janeway with a passion, but she was cunning and well-trained. She would not make serious errors, but small ones. The security chief would have to be very careful and observant, and use all the intuition he could muster. If only Chakotay, who lacked nothing in intuition, had been there to work with him.

Chakotay...where was he? A ship this small would not have more than one lockup. Perhaps Seska had told the truth about him being in her quarters. It would have been unwise to put the captain and first officer together where they could

plan, anyway. She and Tuvok worked together well, complementing each other intellectually, but something about Chakotay struck fire from her. Perhaps because they thought so differently, approached problems from opposite sides, clashed and argued on important points, they stimulated each other's thinking to a much greater degree than if they had been in agreement. Together, they were something altogether different from the sum of the parts. The businesslike, brisk, incisive captain, who nonetheless felt the human dimension of every decision. And the quiet, contemplative, deep as oceans commander, who found a wry smile for the worst situation. Janeway remembered her last sight of him, when he had looked to her for courage with death smiling toothily over his shoulder. Something had passed between them that had strengthened both resolves. A promise. He was a member of her crew, and she would do everything possible to save him.

Her body warmed even now at the thought of seeing him again, safely on her bridge, within an easy arm's reach.

And now Janeway was a prisoner herself. The damned luck, that was all. As Tuvok would say, random chance. That Seska had realized just a moment too soon, had moved quickly enough, had found the pattern booster and dislodged it. The plan was good and had nearly worked. Actually, it had worked very well; the two hostages, the ransom, and Tuvok were safe. That the solution of one problem had created an equal or worse one? The damned luck.



"DAMN, I SHOULD NEVER have given you that Kazon shit to eat. Though it does you credit— If I had some decent ingredients— here, drink some more water." Seska poured into the glass Chakotay had let rest on the table. "Are you feeling any better?"

"A little," he replied truthfully. Seska set down the steel canteen and locked the lid with a twist. All the water on this ship was apparently kept secure. She put the back of her hand against his forehead and frowned.

"You feel awfully warm— of course, Humans always do. Your skin is so delicate."

"I'm not sick," he said, trying not to flinch away from her. "I— it was just, well, exertion, I guess. And that food."

"Exertion—I'll say." Seska grinned lasciviously, her nearly maternal attitude melting into something equally intimate, a familiar mixture. "That was the best fuck I've had since I left Cardassia Prime. Why didn't you ever do it like that before? Not that I'd really complain any way you did it..." She began to run her hand up his arm. Chakotay swallowed hard and took another drink of water.

Gods, the way he had done it. Clumsy and desperate and angry. Yes, probably the most intensity he'd ever brought to bed with him, and the least amount of pleasure. She had felt the heat of rage held in stiff check and mistaken it for passion. Seska was brushing her fingernails along his jawline, tracing the outline of his lips. The nausea rose again, although his stomach was empty. And uneasiness, a new feeling of dread, a threat very near, but somehow not to him. Chakotay frowned in discomfort and confusion, trying to define the shadowy cloud of portent, but he saw the marks on Seska's throat and knew the revulsion was for himself. He felt as if he had dragged Janeway into the muck with him, for he carried her in him somehow, though she had pushed him away. He had indulged his anger and his irresolution, using the same body she had once embraced, the same hands that had touched her. Betrayed her. A trust she had rejected, but that he had held as sacred all the same. And not two days later, he had defiled what he held sacred. If he could betray her personally, he could do anything, betray his office, his ship; were they less than her to him? He'd never thought himself capable of that, and never capable of carrying out a plan like this or even formulating it, though it had been forced on him. To wish he was committing a crime whose perpetrators he had shot himself, when he could find them?

And Seska had enjoyed what he thought of as an assault on her and on himself. The worst he could do, she rejoiced in.

"Well, I didn't know you were a Cardassian," Chakotay said, smiled, and cast around for the source of his anxiety.



THERE WERE FOUR KAZON at the cell door now, conferring among themselves with frequent glares in her direction. Seska was nowhere to be seen. Janeway did not like the look of them at all. She had seen no signs of obvious insubordination, but the Kazon did not seem to regard the alien woman as a rightful commander. They followed orders, but the process of decision was visible. If Janeway had had an officer with a trace of their attitude, she would have made sure he was cured of it in short order. Seska did not want her damaged, at least not yet, but did the Kazon concur?

No escape. This little room was no more than a steel box with one wall of crackling energy. If they dropped the field, their bodies would block the entrance. She was unwounded and alert, at least. Janeway placed her back into a corner of the cell and waited.

One of the four seemed to argue the merits of caution, but not very vigorously. The other three gestured and snarled at him and at her, until the objector held up one hand in a gesture of surrender, and handed one of the others a small cylindrical object.

The forcefield dropped instantly at the touch of the key, and the first Kazon stepped in.

He went straight for her, taking no precautions at all. When her barefoot kick connected with his shin, he goggled at her before howling in pain. The howl choked off with a yelp as she stomped his instep and seized the fold of material between his legs with a vigorous twist. That vulnerability, at least, was an almost universal humanoid characteristic. Thank goodness. The big bushy head bowed down before her as the owner doubled over and fell to the floor.

The next two both tried to squeeze through the narrow door at once, and burst through suddenly. The little cell was getting crowded, without much room to maneuver. Having seen their overeager friend's fate, they were more careful. One tried to move behind her, and the other climbed onto the protruding bunk. The fourth, the cautious one, hung back a little, but came through the door as soon as he could.

Janeway stabbed stiffened fingers at the nearest one's eyes, but he dodged and grabbed at her wrist. She barely broke the savage grip. Perhaps if she called out— Seska might stop them from ruining her prize. Were they planning to rape her, kill her, or eat her alive? Maybe all at once, if

they could manage. The dark reddish tone of their faces spoke volumes.

"Help!" she croaked from a strangled throat. "Help!" Whirling, she eluded the one sneaking up from her left, but collided with the bulkhead. No room. The nearest one seized her arm again in a bonecrushing fist. Her kick was ill-timed and only made him grunt. The one at her feet rolled over and nearly tripped her.

"Help!" she cried again, more loudly. She heard a muffled bump from the other side of the bulkhead, communicated through the ventilation ducts. A steel door clanged open, and a rush of booted feet—

The fourth Kazon, still at the cell door, looked around in surprise and stepped out into the corridor.

Wham! His body hit the wall with a resounding thump. The whole ship vibrated slightly with the impact. Wrestling with the one who had her arm in his grasp, Janeway had a glimpse of a dark-clad figure trading blows with the Kazon.

"Harry!" called a familiar voice. "What are they doing to—"

Crash! The struggling men fell to the deck together.

Chakotay—he was free—Janeway twisted around and bit the Kazon in the wrist. She drew blood, and he let go. Under his arm she dived for the door. The other tackled her, and they too hit the deck.

Chakotay was pounding the Kazon's face against the door frame with both hands buried in the man's hair. His opponent tried to grab back, but could get no grip on the commander's cropped head. The ridged forehead cracked against the bulkhead, and the Kazon went limp. Chakotay rolled off of him, started to spring up, and saw Janeway.

Blank shock, horror, fear. His eyes, bloodshot and dark-circled, locked with hers in a moment's communion.

"Captain—" he whispered.

Two more Kazon appeared in the corridor behind him. One jumped on his back, throttling him with a long arm. Chakotay reached up and caught the man's coat at the shoulders, crouched and pulled to roll the attacker's weight off balance, then propelled him forward, catching his arm and twisting as the large body tumbled heavily face

first to the deck. The Kazon screamed, breaking his nose with a crunch, his shoulder dislocated.

Janeway smiled in artistic appreciation, but had to pry squeezing hands from her throat. The other new arrival and the remaining man in the cell both went for Chakotay. Slamming him up against the bulkhead, one landed a solid right cross to his chin while the other punched him in the stomach. The man on Janeway pinned her on her back, pushed up her brief garment—

A sizzling burst of bluish energy enveloped him for an instant. Every muscle in his body leaped to maximum tension, then relaxed utterly as he collapsed on her. When Seska aimed her stunner at the two pummeling Chakotay, they backed off reluctantly. Janeway rolled the inert man away and staggered up, yanking at her garment. Chakotay averted his eyes and gingerly touched the purple lump forming on his jaw. His bloody lips curved in a one-sided smile, and he glanced back at her face. She began to return the smile, and then Seska spoke.

“Good work, Chakotay. I did say we had to keep her intact for a while. Apparently my crew doesn’t agree with me.” She kicked the stunned man.

Chakotay’s face fell into the neutral mask he assumed so often. The dark eyes blanked and cooled, the intensity of combat fading. When Seska stepped over to him, pulled his head down to her and lingeringly kissed his stained mouth, he hesitated only an instant before embracing her and thrusting his tongue between her lips.

Janeway’s vitals wrenched with agony that hunched her shoulders and forced her features into a rictus of horror. He was faking—he had to be—but Seska broke the kiss and turned to her with such a blatantly authentic just-fucked smile that the captain experienced a shuddering moment of real doubt. Chakotay’s face conveyed nothing beyond dark, shuttered thought. Suppressed disgust? Or guilt?

“Drag those shitbags out of here,” Seska ordered, brandishing her weapon. The Kazon growled and one started at her, then stopped as if thinking it over.

“We will obey,” said the one who had given up the key, sitting up with his hand to his swollen face. Janeway jumped to hear him speak intelligibly. She had almost forgotten they were not animals. “But the Maje will hear of this.”

“You are *quite* correct in that,” hissed Seska. “He will hear how you have thwarted my plans at every stage, and have nearly deprived me of the means to seize the greatest prize of all. Your petty revenge will have to cool its heels for a while. I promise you, none of you will be disappointed in what I have in mind.”

The Kazon looked skeptical, but picked up the stunned man and helped the one Janeway had injured to walk out of the cell. Blood poured down the face of the one with the broken nose as he whimpered from the pain of his shoulder. Chakotay raised his brows insolently as the Kazon left.

“You may have to shoot some of them before you’re done,” he said to Seska.

“Straightforward, aren’t they? At least for Kazon. Culluh is a sneaky bastard, but these fellows’ plots aren’t very deep.” Seska checked the charge in her stunner, and it vanished up her sleeve. “They may try again, and they’ll work faster next time.” She jerked her chin at Janeway. “We’re going to need to keep her in sight or more secure, or find her scattered all over. And I need her for leverage.”

Leverage on whom? Only Tuvok? Janeway wondered. Chakotay was unreadable just now. He refused to meet her eyes, and continually bit his lips. Under scrutiny from both women, he gravitated to the well-armed one. Sliding his hand around her waist, he leaned close and whispered in her ear. Janeway could not look; she could not bear to see him kiss the Cardassian again.

“Come on,” she heard Seska say. “We’ll lock her in my quarters while we take off. I’m not staying any longer like a rat in this hole. Tuvok won’t do anything stupid, but where the bitch is concerned, he’ll be—determined.”

“What are we planning to do with her?” asked Chakotay casually.

Seska laughed. “Let’s get her secured first.”

EVEN THE CAPTAIN’S QUARTERS on this ship were not very large. Seska shoved Janeway hard as she hesitated at the doorway, and she stumbled over the sill and into the compartment. Chakotay hung back, allowing the Cardassian to do as she liked. Janeway hit the deck and stayed there for a moment, her thoughts as off balance as she was. *What is his game?* she wondered.

Perhaps Seska would leave them alone for a moment, and she could talk to him. Perhaps Seska was too smart for that. Everything he did, every expression on his face, was susceptible to several interpretations. At the very least, he had returned to physical intimacy with Seska. Willingly or not. Of all possible betrayals, that seemed the worst. Janeway knew her emotions were ruling her head, but her grief and anger, mixed with delayed reaction to her narrow escape from the Kazon, took itself out on Chakotay.

He is a criminal, she reminded herself, sprawled on the deck with Seska standing over her. A terrorist. He's set bombs, conducted raids, killed people. Does a man who can commit such acts outside the law have real principles? Might he throw in his lot with the strongest party to save himself? What if he agrees with Seska that the Kazon's might is his best friend in this quadrant?

Oh, Lord – and I let him conduct so much of the investigation of the stolen replicator – and B'Elanna, another former Maquis – no, please, no – did Seska take the fall for a larger conspiracy? Is my ship a nest of vipers? Dear God, I trusted him, and I thought he –

She turned and shot a look at her first officer. He no longer wore the uniform of the Federation, but something dark and anonymous. His face drawn and frowning, brow creased. He'd looked like that when he had first beamed over to *Voyager* months ago with a phaser in his hand. But he'd met her eyes, and had had nothing to hide from her. She had thought she had known everything important about him, months ago. She'd read his dossier, after all. But Chakotay was nothing like what she had expected when she had sent Tuvok

after him. Janeway stabbed her gaze at him, hoping to catch some tiny clue to his real mind. Chakotay was no dissembler. Surely she knew him well enough to know what he was thinking – but Seska knew him better. If he was able to deceive a woman who had fought beside him and loved him for years, then he was too deep for Janeway to fathom. And if he was hiding loyalty behind those obsidian eyes, to draw out any sign of it would be perilous for them both. She would have to wait, and wonder.

Seska opened a cabinet and tossed Chakotay a pair of shackles.

"See those little panels in the wall opposite the bunks? Snap one open and pull out the ring. These will attach."

He stooped and did as she instructed, then tightened his lips, took a deep breath, and looked at Janeway. Instead of meeting her eyes, he focused on her chin, making a quick motion of the head to beckon her to him.

Janeway let her sickened fury show, but he was not looking at her face. He hefted the shackles and waited.

All right, she thought. All right. However matters stood with him, whether he wanted his captain a prisoner or not, she would have to behave as if she believed in his betrayal. On the one hand, it would help convince Seska that he was on her side, which would give him opportunities to undermine her –

And on the other hand, it would be the truth.

She sat against the wall, and Chakotay chained her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY LEFT HER where she was and locked the door behind them. After a few minutes, the engines began to hum and throb, and the ship tilted upwards, then leaped like an arrow. Doubtless Seska would assume the same position in orbit opposite *Voyager*.

Janeway leaned her head against the cold steel behind her and allowed herself to relax and her eyes to close. A little peace and time to reflect, at least, for the first time in hours.

Physical situation: In orbit, aboard ship, locked in for protection as much as to prevent escape. Escape would be difficult in any case. This ship had no transporter, but it might have a one- or two-crew sled or dinghy. Even if she broke out, found one, managed to launch it, it could be rammed or tractoried or simply shot down.

Shackled to the bulkhead. Her wrists were enclosed in steel bracelets with a magnetic lock like the doors. Unpickable by ordinary means, as there was no keyhole. Two rods connected with a universal joint linked the bracelets. The wall ring looped over the rods and held her hands in front of her about sixty centimeters off the deck, enforcing a sitting position.

Personal condition: Substantially sound. Recovering from stun beam, not much weakness or soreness remaining. Arm and knees bruised in struggle with Kazon. Inconsequential. No equipment, not even her hairpins, which Seska had wisely confiscated. Those pins could be very useful when properly employed. The tangled locks fell in her face, but she could not push them back with her manacled hands.

Anything in reach? She opened her eyes and examined the deck and bulkheads near her. More small panels that presumably covered rings like the one to which she was secured. Her hands could not reach the catches, prevented by the short, rigid rods. Her toes — She swiveled around and brought one foot up. After some work, she opened one panel and saw that it indeed hid another ring. Not much use there.

Mental condition and morale: The checklist of options was beginning to calm her. A tangible

problem to solve, a puzzle to work. She would need to concentrate on that to keep unwelcome pictures out of her mind.

A peculiar smell in here — acid, musky. Sick and sensual. Janeway saw the two bunks inset in the wall, one above the other. The mattresses from both lay untidily on the deck. What had happened before Chakotay had rushed out at the sound of her cry? He had looked unwell, but Seska had been purring like a well-petted cat. Janeway swallowed hard, pushing mental images aside. "Harry," he had called. He hadn't known that the other hostages were gone. Was that consistent if he was an ally?

No, but if he had been ingratiating himself, working his way into her trust, had not yet completed the process —

Once more, that could mean he was working with her, or against her. Janeway closed her eyes again in despair.

...CHAKOTAY WAS CALLING to her, through darkness neither of them could pierce. "Captain...please — help me," he pleaded. "I'm down here...look down —"

She was floating, lost and weightless, lightless...

"Here I am," he groaned. "Please help me..."

Voiceless...only her hands, and they were shackled...

She reached them out to find him. Her own body had dissolved into the substance of the darkness, and she let it spread out, endless, boundless, into the emptiness of the void. She filled all corners of the universe, and knew it all, and she found him huddled in a ball, covering his eyes with his paws, his ears laid back against his head. She embraced him, and stroked his fur, and he licked her face.

"Help me," he said, and his arms went around her, and he kissed her, and she felt his broad chest under her hands. "Help me, Captain."

"Yes," she replied, and he cried out with joy in the darkness...



"DAMN, I FEEL good." Seska suddenly stopped in the corridor and turned, right in front of Chakotay, so that he stepped into her arms. She was shaking, her breath unsteady, a febrile brightness in her eyes and in the flush of her face. Gripping his shoulders, she pulled herself up to him and locked her mouth to his. Her breathing changed to a hard steady rhythm and she darted her tongue against his closed teeth. But she tore away again quickly, before he could gird himself to respond, and dragged her hands down over his arms, clawing her fingernails through the material of his shirt. Chakotay could not help a grimace of pain.

Seska's fingers clamped around his wrists like manacles. For a moment he fought her, then jerked his arms above his head, bringing hers aloft as well, turned and slapped his palms against the bulkhead. Seska was pinned by his body and by her own grip on his wrists. He looked down at her, cursing inwardly, and kissed her savagely, bruising her lips against her teeth. She bit him, but he didn't stop until he tasted blood. *Think like a Cardassian*, he told himself. *Do what she wants*. The knowledge that Janeway wasn't entirely sure of him any more was grinding deep in his belly. The foundation of his own trust in himself could not depend on her—he could rely only on his inner resources. It was all up to him. And what was he doing to prove his own resolve to himself? This wasn't him, this impotent anger. No more of it. He twisted away from Seska, broke her hold and flung her hands from him.

"The sight of her in chains get you charged up, lover?" said Seska shakily. She stood with her back against the bulkhead, panting with her mouth open. "Maybe all that energy you couldn't use for months is breaking loose. Let it out. Doesn't that feel good? Sure does to me." She bared her teeth in a smile, her split lip leaving dark-red traces across them. Her head fell back and a shiver went through her. Chakotay narrowed his eyes as she rolled her body against the bulkhead, arching her spine and tilting her pelvis, her eyes closing as she took a great gulp of air. "Wonderful," she breathed. "Perfect." Her head lowered again and her eyes blinked open, still glassy and bright. "Let's go stick it to Tuvok," she said. "I want to see his face crack. Soon we'll have everything we need."

"What do we need?" Chakotay asked. Seska smiled.

"All that stuff I asked for, of course. Maybe a little something extra, considering who he's ransoming now. I want to see him wiggle on a pin. Don't you hate that Vulcan control? Don't you hate him?"

"He's not exactly a friend of mine."

"He betrayed you. He sent messages to Starfleet Intelligence. He sent them to the bitch. You must hate him."

"He was doing his job," said Chakotay. Now what was she getting at?

"I suppose. For him it was a job. For me, it was a vocation. You really didn't mind finding out that your trusted comrade was spying on you?"

"I minded that a great deal. But I trusted him as a matter of course, as one of my crew. It wasn't personal, and what he did to me wasn't personal. It was his duty as a Starfleet officer."

"I was sent to do my duty as well, Chakotay," Seska said softly, the tip of her tongue emerging from her mouth. "I picked up a little more than I bargained for." She licked her bleeding lip.

"Did you?" He kept his voice cool.

"Do you hate *me*, Chakotay?"

Ah. That was what she was getting at. "Did I ever act like I did?"

Seska moved forward and put a hand on his chest. "Kiss me again, Chakotay." He closed his lips firmly. Her eyes flicked to them, and she slid her hand up to his throat, ran her fingers over the sides of his neck, just where the muscles tapered up to his jaw. "I would never have realized that a Human could be so...appealing. But I always wondered what you would look like if you had been born on the right planet." He flinched, and quickly bent down to cover the lapse, closing his eyes. He had started this scheme and he couldn't abandon it now. Seska might not want to kill *him*, but Janeway... She had seen him betray her, her doubts blazoned on her face, but he was her only hope, he knew. Perhaps he could save her life at the very least.

Soft and swollen, lips met his. *Gently*, he thought, *careful*. *Let her respond first, or pull away. Let her do what she wants, and then you'll know what she's thinking*. She moaned and pushed forward, opening her mouth. He put his arms around her waist and lifted her slightly, raising her against the bulkhead, pressing her breasts to his chest.

Her voice murmured deep in her throat, calling up memories. Back along his path, struggling against the current to find still water, a

quiet place to come to rest. Kissing her, he slid one arm under her hips and supported her, boosting her up, her muscular weight a burden. Chakotay stroked his other hand over her head and pushed the loose hair back from her face.

Gods— The long hair in his fingers. Wet and tangled, wet clothing, the body's warmth seeping through. He had found a memory, only two days old. The clearest of any, though cold with pain. He clung to it for a moment, moaning helplessly into Seska's mouth, kissing her in a way that belonged to another. She gasped, encircling his neck with a strangling grip that broke his illusion. He shrank back and released her. Losing the support of his arms, she fell against the bulkhead, braced herself with her hands and stared at him. Chakotay stared back, breathing hard, shaken by the vivid image still fading before him, feeling the chill of sweat on his back and chest, running down under his clothing. Seska hissed.

"Bastard. Who are you making love to, Commander?"

Chakotay held her gaze, an odd sensation of new courage beginning to calm him. "Who are you?" he replied.

"Fair question," she said. "I suppose I can't blame you for some confusion on that score. Maybe I'll tell you someday." She laughed in a way that prickled the hairs on his neck. "In the mean time, we've got business to attend to." She whipped around and continued to the bridge, and he followed.

THE KAZON AT the consoles glared at him, but there was a hint of fear, even deference in their manner now. Strength and arrogance got on their good side, all right, as she had said. Chakotay glared right back and even managed a snarl. They dropped their eyes and turned back to their work, and although he felt like a posturing idiot, he also gained a little confidence. Perhaps they'd think twice about attacking Janeway again— though Seska was right; they would only work faster if they got another chance. Seska ordered launch, and the ship soared away again, the fiery tail of its engines lighting up the clearing. The little bridge was silent for many minutes after the ship achieved orbit, and Chakotay watched the stars move past the viewports and the sun emerge from the shadow of the planet. He sat in meditation for a while, then closed his eyes, retrieved the stone

from under his shirt and prayed silently, palms cupped upwards on his knees, eyes moving under closed lids.

...SHE PUSHED HER nose into his hand, although it was entirely dark. She did not want him to stay here. Her hard head nudged him, and he stumbled in darkness. Then she was gone, and he turned helplessly, lost. But all around him, the darkness had substance. He called out into it, and lost his footing, and fell. Hunching over, he tried to hide, but he wanted to be found. Where was she? Had she gone to find someone?

Someone was coming. A cool hand on his back, stroking. He turned and held something formless, that gained solidity in his arms, and warmth, and specificity. "Help me, Captain," he said, and she answered, "Yes."...

When he opened his eyes and tucked the stone away, Seska was staring at him, and grimaced. "That's so strange. It gives me the shivers when you do that."

"It's how I live," he replied, and folded his arms.

"I know — it gives you power. Power's good, no matter how you get it, I suppose."

"More than just power." He thought about the message, and looked out the viewport at the sun.

"Whatever you say. Tuvok will be back on *Voyager* by now," said Seska musingly. "He's got wounded to take care of, and he knows Janeway would want him to do that first." She checked a readout at the tactical station in front of her. "He's holding position, it seems— that's the logical thing to do. Well, he's probably stewed long enough, and we don't want to give him too much time for cooking up any plans." She rose and moved to the viewscreen, and Chakotay stepped to her side.

"What are your plans? Don't keep me in the dark. I might be able to help you solve this—"

"I don't have any problems right now, Chakotay. I've got all the cards. I'll let you in on my plans when you need to know."

"Tuvok's not stupid, you know. He's not going to fall—"

"You talk when I tell you to, and not one word before that," Seska snarled. Chakotay closed his mouth and stepped back. Seska worked at the

communications panel for a moment, flipped the com switch and sat down.

"Seska to *Voyager*," she said, in a falsely sweet tone. "Please come in, *Voyager*." The screen flickered and resolved.

"This is Lieutenant Tuvok." Chakotay's eyes widened. Composed face, direct eyes, both familiar, but harder than he had ever seen them. Absolute control, without any clue at all to emotion, an emotion in itself.

"Oh, hello, Tuvok. How's that groin wound I sewed up for you after the raid on the *Merthkat*? I forgot to ask about it the last time I saw you." Her grin was lascivious.

"I assume you mean to negotiate terms for the return of the captain and Commander Chakotay."

"Oh, your memory's not that short, Tuvok." Seska reached out for Chakotay and seized his arm, pulling him into the field of view. "I don't think he wants to leave."

"If you will recall, Ensign, neither the captain nor I are inclined to believe that." Tuvok looked at Chakotay, then at his clothing.

"If she could, she might tell you she's changed her mind about that," Seska laughed. Chakotay looked down and tried to suppress his grimace.

"I would like to speak to Captain Janeway," said Tuvok.

"You're not going to. You're going to come back, and we're going to try it again, without the pattern boosters this time."

"I have no intention of exposing myself to abduction, Ensign."

"Don't call me that, you Vulcan slime. You cheated on me, I cheated on you. Was it a fair trade? I think I got the longer end of the stick. I know you'll do a lot for the bitch. You'll even sacrifice her trust in you. You got her the space folder, but you lost her, because you went behind her back. But you'll do anything to get that trust back, won't you, Tuvok?" Chakotay saw no reaction whatever on the Vulcan's face. "You'd give your life, wouldn't you?"

"If I were to sacrifice my life in pursuit of my goals, the result would be moot," Tuvok replied.

"Oh, not this one. You'd die for her. Look, all I want is some machinery. You violated her precious Prime Directive for her sake once. So what's —"

"I cannot trust your word, Ensign. I do not see the captain, and the logical assumption is that she is dead."

"Oh, I can demonstrate she's alive. I'll bring her in here and let my crew make her scream for a while —" Seska's face was reddening.

Chakotay seized her shoulder and she broke off. "Tuvok," he said, and Seska hissed. He paid no heed. "Janeway's alive. She's all right for the moment. But the Kazon already tried to attack her, and I don't know how long we can keep them away. You've got to go along with this."

"I do not see the captain," Tuvok repeated.

"Listen to me! She's alive."

Tuvok focused on him, the flatness of the viewscreen image disguising the probing gaze not at all. "I must weigh your word more heavily than that of Ensign Seska, Commander," he said. "I will conditionally accept your statement as fact."

"This is Captain Janeway we're talking about, Tuvok! Damn your cold green blood —"

"The fact remains that I cannot trust the arrangements. I will make a counter-proposal. You will allow me to move over the horizon and into transporter range. You will drop your shields and allow me to beam Captain Janeway to *Voyager*. I will then send the ransom items to you."

"Oh, I'm supposed to believe you would honor an agreement like that?" said Seska. "Even if you send the stuff, you send a phaser barrage after it, don't you?" She was shaking with rage.

"With Commander Chakotay still on board, that would be inadvisable."

"Don't give me that shit. You don't care about him. If truth be known —"

"Every member of Captain Janeway's crew is precious to her." Tuvok looked at him again. "And I believe her impression is that the commander has served with...some distinction."

"Thanks a lot," said Chakotay. "Seska — I've got it on good authority that Vulcans don't lie. Take him up on it."

She stared at the viewscreen, her ridged nose twitching, her eyes glowing under her lowered brows. "No."

"Seska —"

"Stay out of my line of sight, Tuvok. You'll lie any day it suits you. I'll call again in a minute. Don't say I didn't warn you." Seska cut the transmission and whirled on him. "I told you not to say anything."

"You weren't making any headway with him —"

"No, damn him. The ransom's not the important thing here —"

“What is the important thing, Seska? What the hell are you planning?”

“First things first,” she said, and stormed off the bridge, drawing one of her weapons.

“Seska!” Chakotay caught up to her and tried to seize her arm. She writhed out of his grasp and aimed the phaser at him. They stared at each other for several seconds, but Seska snapped the snub upwards and smiled fiercely.

“This may be all I get out of this mess,” she said. “I have to make sure it’s done right.” She

darted down the corridor again, Chakotay at her heels. At the door to her quarters, she took out her key, unlocked it, and flung it open. Janeway started from her crouched position, her chains rattling. Chakotay glanced at Seska, and saw the fury mount with the dark flush of her face. She brought the phaser down, extended her arm, sighted along it, so rapidly he saw it as one striking motion.

“Bitch,” said Seska, and her thumb slammed down on the trigger.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HE ALMOST BROKE her arm, though she was strong. The bolt left a molten streak on the floor. Seska shrieked in pain, and called a name.

"Krast! Bring them all—" Chakotay hauled her into the compartment and slammed the door. No time to lock it—she was wrestling out of his grip, aiming the phaser again. He tackled her against the door, pinned her wrists, and kissed her, with all the passion he could muster. Janeway—Seska bit his tongue, and he pulled away and fastened on her throat. The hand with the phaser he kept pinned, though she strained to free it, and he ground his hips into her, seizing one breast through the flexible armor.

"Seska," he groaned into her neck. "Stop it. This can't be part of your plan." A heavy thump resounded on the door. Chakotay thrust all his weight against it, holding it shut, holding her against it. "Send them away. Cool down." He found Seska's lips again and kissed her desperately, hoping at least to distract her long enough to make her listen to reason. He could not disable or kill her; the Kazon pounded on the door again, and would gladly take revenge. "Tell them to go. Listen to me."

His one weapon. Seska writhed and twisted, trying to free her arm. Chakotay held her fast, and heard a sound behind him. Janeway, her chains scraping against the ring in the wall.

Janeway— *Oh, gods, forgive me, Captain, his mind cried out. That I have to make you watch this, forgive me. Can you understand why?*

He had another vision of her, smiling, wringing out her wet hair. He moaned, and embraced the woman he held, pinning her arms to her sides, and felt her lips soften under his. The door moved slightly and the impact shook them both. "Please—I'm trying to help you. Can't you see that? Don't throw away your trump card. Send the Kazon away. Listen to me."

Seska pushed back, letting him retain the hand with the phaser, and stared at him. Her eyes seemed blank, but the fury was receding. Another crash against the door threw it halfway open, and

a bushy head emerged. Seska stumbled into his arms, then twisted to face the men forcing their way in.

"Back to your posts, boys. False alarm." She had to brandish the weapon to get the meaning across. When the door was shut again and locked, she thrust the phaser into her jacket and pulled his head down to hers. "Fine. You've made your point. But we'll discuss it later." She kissed him voraciously and began to yank at the fastenings of his clothing. He heard Janeway's chains clank.

"Seska—"

She had her hand down the front of his pants, groping at him. "Something the matter? I know you can get it up again, if that's what's concerning you." She glanced over his shoulder and smiled at what she saw. He could not look. Janeway— This was his own fault. Seska's grin told him she knew exactly what the matter was. She opened his pants, pulled out his penis, turned him around to face Janeway, and dropped to her knees. "Coward," she said, and took him in her mouth.

Chakotay squeezed his eyes shut and shook with horror and fury, his fists balling up. If he pushed her away, she might just pull the phaser again. But how could he manage to do this in front of Janeway? He would have to, as best he could. He had no way to protect his captain from this outrage, and he knew his body would refuse to cooperate with another act of violence. Seska sucked him noisily, chuckling, and he felt so ill he wanted to pass out.

Janeway— *Think about Janeway— This is for her sake. You can do it for her sake.* He opened his eyes, and put his hands on Seska's head.



JANEWAY CROUCHED in misery against the unyielding bulkhead, covering her head with her hands. No, dear God, not here, not with her forced to listen. What worse torture could they devise? Seska had burst in so quickly that Janeway had not even realized her intent until the phaser had fired and Chakotay was struggling with her. Her chains rattled as she shook, hearing the sounds she could not shut out. Obviously they were in disagreement, and he counted on his physical attractions to sway the argument.

Good God – Why had he made the holorecording? A peace offering, or with a darker purpose in mind? Why had he taken her to a private spot? Had he been waiting all this time for the right opportunity? Why had he –? Janeway raised her arm and looked under it. Seska was on her knees, shrugging her bodysuit off, her mouth on Chakotay’s penis. His shirt was open to the waist, and he held her hair wrapped around his fists as she worked avidly.

Janeway covered her face again. That his body, which she had held and caressed so briefly, should be wrapped and enveloped in that monster’s embrace, buried in her –

He was dead to her, then. Or, as B’Elanna had said, never even really existed. Had he taken on the Starfleet uniform only to gain time and a foothold? Had he kissed her, tried to make love to her only to exert influence over her? She had to see his face for confirmation. A false assurance, she dimly realized, but the coils of deceit wound her so tightly that her rational mind was smothered. Janeway opened her eyes again with burning tears streaking her cheeks.

Seska still clutched him, pulling his clothes away from his body, running her hands down his thighs, raking the golden skin with her nails. From this angle, her face was invisible. Only the long, light-brown hair –

He stroked it, pulling it through his fingers, caressing it with such attention...

Janeway looked at his face.

He was gazing directly at her. At his captain. Concentrating on her with such intensity she nearly gasped in surprise. When he saw her eyes on him, he flinched, looked away, then disentangled one hand from Seska’s hair and made a gesture, open palm pressed to his heart and brought out again.

Forgive me.

Her heart almost burst with the realization.

Chakotay stared over her head, tremors of nausea fighting with anguished determination across his features. He looked pale and sick, unable to meet her eyes. He was forcing himself into something vile, and for her sake. Using his body as a shield to save her. Janeway slumped against the bulkhead, trembling. This was worse. That he had not betrayed *Voyager* was only what her own mind would have confirmed on calm reflection. The awful measure of devotion he had given the ship, and her, hit her like a stunning bolt. Could she

have faced such violation herself as a duty of command?

The Cardassian pulled away from him and looked over her shoulder at Janeway. Her basilisk gaze held an evil glee. Janeway twisted away, her whole body painfully contracting, her anger incandescent. She bruised her wrists again jerking at the chains. What could she do?

“Make love to me, Chakotay,” Seska whispered seductively, slid up his body, and peeled off her armored bodysuit. “Do it the way you used to.” She dropped the suit to the floor and pulled off his remaining clothing. Janeway could see he was in no state to succeed, and no wonder. His gaze brushed hers briefly as Seska pulled him down on the mattresses with her. She tried to hold his eyes, and caught him for a moment. *I understand*, she tried to say. *It’s all right. Do what you have to.* Perhaps that was a flicker of recognition before he moved down Seska’s body and put his face between her legs.

“Aaahhhghh...” Seska moaned as he stroked his hands over her thighs. Her hips moved irregularly, and she flung her arms up over her head and rolled her torso back and forth, letting out little yelps. Chakotay reached up and drew her hands back down, and clasped them, his head moving in subtle rhythm as Janeway watched. Somehow she could not look away, as if that would leave him alone, abandon him to outrage. She clamped her lips together, breathing hard through her nose in fury, in pain at his violation, praying that he could bear it. At that moment, she could have shot Seska in cold blood, exactly as the Cardassian had meant to do to her. Had she been angry at treachery? She had not known what anger was.

Soon Seska was shrieking in short bursts, drawing her knees up and kicking at Chakotay’s shoulders, arching her back with every breath and pulling at his hair. Her fingers slipped through the short strands; she could not get a grip. “Gods,” she howled. “How did I keep my hands off you – oh, gods, Chakotay –” She shook uncontrollably, but could not seem to come to climax. “Damn – Chakotay –” Seska lashed her body like a whip, and fell back, panting. “Fuck me, dammit. You know what I like.” He rose up and she kissed him, licking over his nose and mouth like an animal. “Come on, do it. I want you.” Chakotay rolled her over and slid one arm under her hips as he knelt behind her, and stroked the other hand over her

buttocks and downwards. "Chakotay, you bastard, you're trying to drive me crazy..." She began to shake again. "Please...g-gods..."

Chakotay's face was sweating, his expression grim. In spite of that, his hands moved gently and surely. His fingers pressed into Seska's body, and she began to rock back and forth on all fours, tossing her head so that her hair covered her face. Her manner had changed dramatically; her movements no longer had an air of calculation or taunting. Janeway wondered if she was acting, or if something deeper was actually surfacing. Her voice had a pleading tone. "I want you. Love me, gods, love me, please—it's been so long." Chakotay's face contorted. "That wasn't you a few hours ago. I want you."

"Seska," he said haltingly. "I—it's not—"

"Ohh, gods, please. Chakotay—I love you. Can't you love me, even for a little while? I love you."

"Seska—"

"Kattell," she gasped.

"What?"

"My—name—is Kattell. I told you...that story about a bone marrow transplant from a Cardassian—I gave you my own name—so I wouldn't forget it later if you asked again—"

"Kattell," he said, and she made a strange sound, like a sob.

"Chakotay, damn you, make love to me..." He looked up at Janeway in desperation, holding Seska's—Kattell's—hips and stroking his fingers steadily in and out of her, his big body crouched over her back. Janeway nodded at him, and tried to smile. He shook his head slightly, a trickle of sweat working over his cheekbone. She leaned forward and took a deep breath, calling on her strongest resolution, and tried to give it to him with her eyes. *Courage*, she wanted to say. *I'll live through this. And so will you. Let me help.*

A flush burned over his face, and he broke the look, then turned back and focused on her more intently. Janeway held his eyes, willing calm, both for herself and for him. Chakotay was tense and shaking slightly, but he began to breathe more deeply, a new quality creeping into his expression. Gradually his face relaxed, and his body, and his gaze began to drift over Janeway. Kattell began to buck and heave in his arms, her cries inarticulate under his ministrations. Her face was half obscured with her hair, arousal and frustration in the snarl of her open mouth. Chakotay held her

closer and moved forward, lying over her as she sank prone to the deck. He did not look at her, but still at Janeway. An element of question, of supplication. What did he mean? Kattell seemed small under him, his body hiding most of hers. He began to move against her, body to body, chest to back, hips to buttocks. He had a purpose now, somehow, and even smiled faintly, a quirk at the corner of his mouth. His eyes, dark as boundless night.. She had dreamed something, in her short exhausted sleep, and had reached out to help him. Chakotay believed in the power of dreams. Janeway settled back against the bulkhead, feeling the difference in the air, the wonder growing with every breath she took. He was watching, seeing the light dawn in her expression, the thought forming between them. They were not powerless. They could choose the nature of the act. It lay in their minds, and if they refused violation, if they could turn the meaning of an assault into a connection—Chakotay's lips opened, and he searched her face for her consent, and she gave it to him. She saw him silently form her name, and his eyes closed. Relief, thankfulness, and slowly warming arousal transformed his face. The desire was meant for her, she knew, and the heat of it seemed to move over her, drawing her out to him, a conduit that freed her from her chains, seemed to put her spirit in another's body. Janeway knew he was visualizing her under him, and could almost physically feel the truth of it. For Chakotay, visions had reality and meaning, and dreams as much significance as the waking world. His conviction spoke to her, at the least. She felt herself go limp and heavy. For the moment, for Chakotay, she would not exist in this shackled body, but in the woman who lay with his weight on her, moaning softly, arching her neck against his shoulder, her long hair trailing over the deck. The strength of his faith held her there.

...SHE WAS SLIM and muscular, soft-skinned, fragrant. Her hair had come down, and tangled in his fingers. It was too dark to see her, so he must proceed only by touch. She was willing, and she would not push him away. Perhaps only this once. He must prove himself true in the only way he could, and give himself into her service, accepting the gift of herself as a sign, or a tool, or a weapon. The power of the gift made him tremble. It was a dangerous one, though he had first asked for it without fully realizing that. He must be careful, or it could destroy them both. Her body pushed up

against him, and he lifted himself slightly, allowing her to tilt her hips and start a rolling motion that he immediately echoed. His penis was responding to her. Sliding between her legs, stroking through the slippery moisture, firming with every movement. He lifted again, and probed, and sank deep. He sucked in a profound breath through his open lips, that twitched into a smile while his head dipped, then flung back. Gasping, he held himself in quivering check, gripping her thighs convulsively.

“Don’t move, Kat—” he blurted out.

JANEWAY FROZE TO SEE his face, its dark beauty never more visible. Fierce, soft, the teeth a pure slash of white. How could she ever have doubted him?

Chakotay regained control and moved slowly out with a tiny sound of wetness. He tilted his pelvis and entered again with a smooth thrust. Janeway gasped and drew her legs up, squeezing her thighs tightly together. Chakotay was not touching her in any way, but for an instant— No, she was watching, her unexpected emotions were all from the sight before her. Pain and outrage drained away, were replaced with an empty ache, a wish. So powerful, her body slowly rocked with his movements. Her view of the woman with him was vague and cloudy, as if she were a faded holographic image. A waking dream, a trance. Illusion, except for him.

Chakotay was lost in communion, his expression smooth and peaceful. His head bowed and rolled, floating on his shoulders with his eyes shut. She was with him somehow in a way she could not begin to understand, connected as long as she could maintain her will and focus. *All of it must go to give power to this illusion he has made for me, she thought. I will even forget that it is an illusion... I cannot let anything distract me, or make me let go, or turn away.* Oh, his hands stroking over her sides, cupping her breasts, the surge of his hips against her...she felt what she saw, this might be as real for her as it was for Chakotay. Janeway let her head fall back against the bulkhead, her hands

limp in the shackles, shuddering hotly so that her eyes would barely stay open.

A little faster, a little more vigorous—

CHAKOTAY GRIMACED NOW, and his nostrils burned with deep inhalations. He used his hands to pull her closer with each stroke, withdrawing almost to exit and plunging deep again with a curling motion and a small thrust upwards at the bottom of the rhythm. Again, and again, and again.

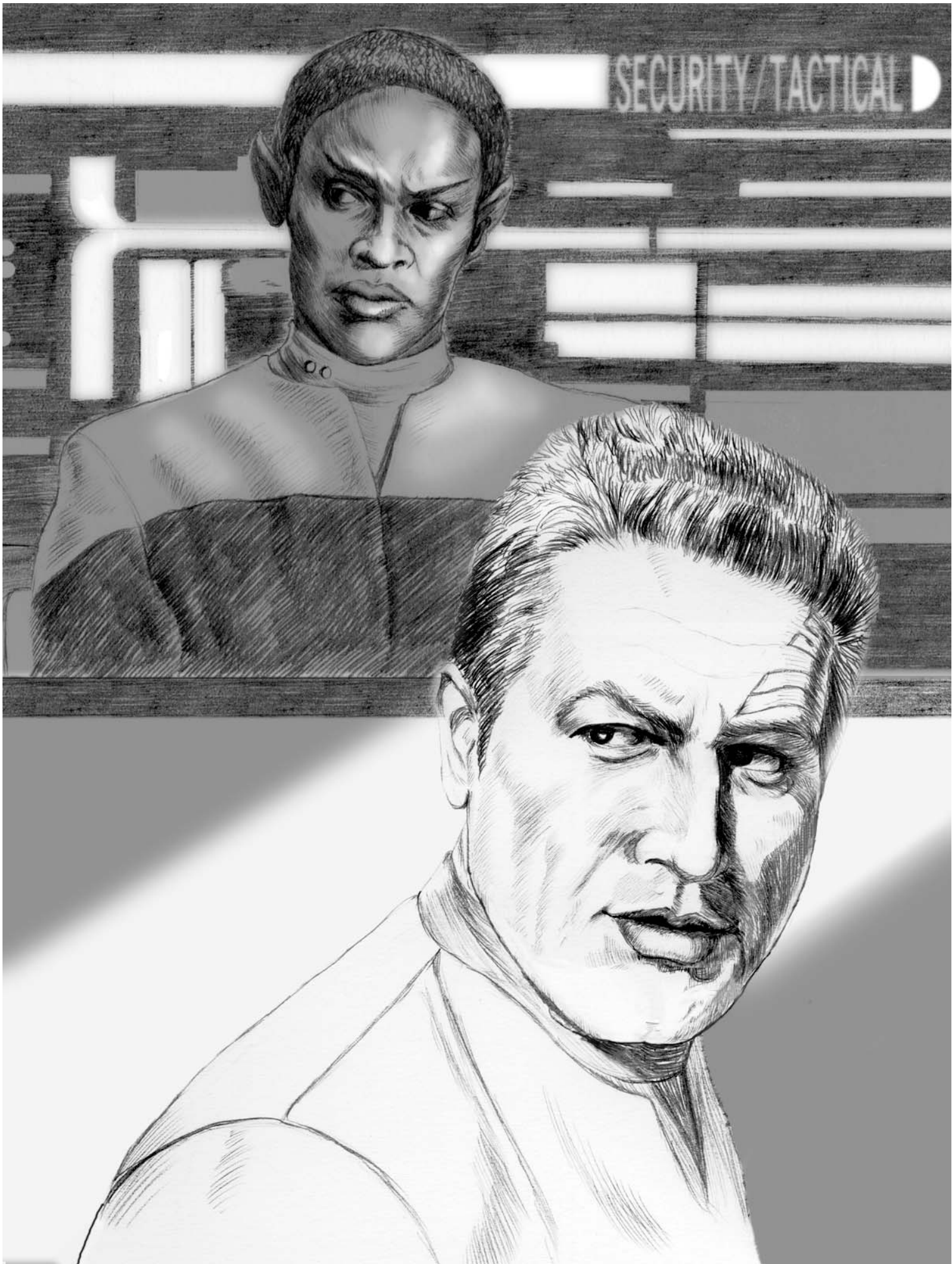
Her cries increased, to long, warbling, ecstatic sighs, and when he reached forward to run his fingertip along her folds, she exploded in a wailing shriek while rearing up, shuddering. Chakotay held her while her bucking subsided, pressing her thighs back against him, riding her to keep himself inside her. She went limp and sagged. He leaned forward, his palms against the deck while she lowered her head on her folded arms.

Now he pounded hard and fast, building up to his own climax that could wait no longer. Breathing loudly through set teeth, he smiled in elation as release crept up to him. The gift was made.

HER BODY RUNNING with perspiration, her hair damp where it touched her face, the slow pulses in her body gradually dying away. Janeway could barely raise her head. They had done this together, succeeded where one would have been powerless, gained an advantage— And tangled their spirits, already touching, already poised to seek each other, in a way that might never come undone. Janeway smiled, suppressing tears, and Chakotay climaxed with a deep groan, struggling for air, his joy rending her heart.

Janeway watched him, his features working with an ecstatic glow, and wondered how she had ever left him, standing bereft and alone in the garden he had made for her within her ship. When he looked at her again with gratitude, collapsed and embracing the body beneath him, sweat shining on his forehead and shoulders, she almost wept for having wounded him so.

PART THREE: ESCAPE



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GO TO SLEEP. I'll keep an eye on them. I think they know now I'm not such an easy target."

"Better—yaahh—take my stunner. You'll only have to wave it at them. There isn't much charge left. Yaahh... Gods, I'm tired. I've been awake for fifty hours. I wish I had a crew I could trust."

"You won't find that with the Kazon," said Chakotay lightly.

"No...they're backstabbers and plotters, every one of them. But they respect strength. They don't attack when they know the odds are bad. That's the only way to keep them in line."

"So—how are you going to prove to them that the odds are bad?"

"They'll know it when the time comes. I'll have shiploads of them begging to sign on."

"Look, I'm trying to help you. Can't you see that? If you don't tell me what you're planning, I can't give you my input."

"All right, I guess you earned it." A low laugh. "Gods, what a man you are. And in front of her, too. Though that might have put a little spice into it, hmm?"

He was silent for a moment, apparently considering how to reply.

"Oh, you are so damn transparent. Had her on the brain for a while, have you? You like a woman who gives you orders? I can do that better than she can. I can give the right kind of orders."

"You're planning to take—"

"That's it, of course. Why the hell would I want little scraps when I can get the whole thing? I'm not going to give a damn thing to Culluh. He's an idiot. The bitch made him look like a fool. He is a fool. Heh. How about you?"

"I'm not as much of a fool as I used to be."

"Good. Better put your mind to the problem. Tuvok's the obstacle now—yaahh—I'm so tired..."

"Go to sleep, Ses—Kattell." Janeway heard the sound of a kiss, and the compartment darkened. Chakotay stepped out and shut the door behind him, and she heard the lock ping. Kattell turned over in the bunk and looked at Janeway,

her eyes gleaming in the faint reddish illumination, then settled back down and did not move again.

ABOUT AN HOUR later, Chakotay slipped in, silent, and gave Janeway a little water. The smell of the other woman's body hung around him as he knelt and held the cup to the captain's lips, and he was reluctant to meet her eyes. His hands hovered close to her face when she took the cup and drank gratefully, and she thought for a moment that he might stroke her cheek. Had they just been lovers? In one sense they had, although he had never touched her.

The much-needed drink began to clear the throbbing in her head. Chakotay's expression was obscured by the darkness in the cabin, but his head was turned and he held the back of one hand over the lower part of his face as he waited for her to finish. Shame? Janeway could not see him as tainted, and wondered that he would think so. He finally raised his eyes to hers as he took the empty cup again, clasping it in both hands. Bowing his head, he touched the rim of the cup with his lips where hers had been. A slow shock moved her, like ripples that spread from a stone plunging into water. Janeway let out a long shuddering breath, with more than a little sob in it, and suddenly they were clutching at each other, faces pressed together, a desperate embrace, mouths shut tight and jaws clenched for silence. She was sitting with her knees drawn up, her hands grasping the front of his shirt and crushed between their chests as Chakotay enveloped her with all his strength, kneeling on one knee and pulling her against his body. Her legs parted around him, nose and mouth were buried in the hollow between his neck and shoulder, and his chin was locked down on the side of her face, arms hot and powerfully constricting, his knees pressing the sides of her pelvis, every part of him holding her so tightly her breath was gone. She felt the pulse hammer in his throat, against her lips. Shuddering, holding back sobs, they rocked slowly, his fingers digging into her skin, her legs wrapped around his thighs. Then Chakotay went limp and sagged against her, heavy, pressing her into the bulkhead. He collapsed to the deck, lay curled around her and his head fallen in her lap, and she lifted her knees to bring him in reach of her shackled hands.

"Chakotay..." she whispered, as softly as she could, almost thinking his name to him, and cradled his head, stroking a short, restricted path through his hair. He was sobbing into her uncovered stomach, muffled by her body, and she could feel his breath surging back and forth, his open mouth and his tears wetting her skin. There was nothing she could do but wait for a moment and comfort him until he could listen. Janeway shot a glance at Kattell's bunk, and saw no movement except that of slow breathing. The woman was exhausted, deeply asleep, and Cardassian hearing was less acute than Human. "Chakotay," she said again, a little more loudly, and bowed her head to him. "Listen to me. We won't get another chance." His irregular shaking gradually subsided until he was breathing evenly, his arms around her waist and his face still pressed into her torso. "Can you hear me?" He took a deep breath and nodded, his face sliding against her stomach, in the hot moisture his tears had left, and then sat up and leaned against her chest so that she could whisper in his ear.

"I think it's working. She's never really going to trust you, but she will think you are on her side, or at least willing to work with her. It was a good plan, the best one open to you, and I know that carrying it out must have cost you a great deal." He clutched her shoulder, wordlessly. "But you've got to carry it even farther. You've got to be willing to do whatever it takes to save *Voyager* from her."

"Captain?" Chakotay whispered.

"You've sacrificed a great deal already. You may have to sacrifice even more. Will you do that?"

He straightened up slightly and looked at her, their faces inches apart. "I'd die for you," he said simply, and Janeway closed her eyes in pain and gratitude.

"I...know. That's not what I'm asking you to do." His brows furrowed. "This isn't about saving me. This is about saving *Voyager*. The crew. Not just one life. Do you understand?"

"No." He put a hand on the bulkhead behind her and shoved back, then planted the other hand above her shoulder, so that he surrounded her with his outstretched arms like a fortress, no longer embracing her. "No."

"Promise me. I don't know what will happen, so I can't give you a specific order. But if you have to choose between me and *Voyager*, you must think about one hundred and fifty lives, and the

imperative to keep our technology out of enemy hands. Promise me you will not let your personal feelings intrude on that decision."

Chakotay sagged his head slowly, his breathing ragged again. "I—"

A sigh from the bunk, and Kattell turned over. He froze, hunching protectively over Janeway, and they huddled for a moment, barely breathing. Janeway's heart was pounding so hard she fancied it could be heard. After a few long moments with sounds of disturbed sleep from Kattell, Chakotay let out a silent gasp and looked for the drinking cup. He rose, tucked the cup into his shirt, and crossed to the bunk. "Sorry I woke you," he murmured. "Just checking. Go back to sleep." A sound like a lilting purr, and the Cardassian fell silent again. Chakotay opened the door to go, glanced back at Janeway, his big form silhouetted by the slightly brighter light of the corridor, and stepped over the sill. She could not read his expression in the dimness, and he closed the door and locked it, the faint ping of the magnets echoing in silence absolute.



"HERE, LET ME peel that for you. Ooh, this one has a lot of seeds, doesn't it? But I think they're edible. Mmm, delicious. You're going to like this one." Kattell put a plate in front of him and began to slice a round green fruit into it. "Come on, eat. You look like you need it." She dangled a juicy finger over his lips and ran a sticky line along the lower one as he opened his mouth to let her drip the sweetness on his tongue. She leaned forward and kissed him quickly, plunged the finger into her own mouth, and smiled. Her other hand slid up his arm, holding the sharp stiletto she was using to prepare fruit for his breakfast.

"Careful with that."

"Ooh, wouldn't want to spoil his lovely complexion. Gods, you're beautiful, Chakotay. Even on two hours sleep, you look extremely tasty. I'd probably have ten children in ten years with you, if I were a respectable mated woman at home—heh. I'd like to have sons of yours—"

"Ah—" Of course she knew that Humans and Cardassians were not usually cross-fertile, but perhaps this was not a good time to bring that up. He munched on fruit and took a long drink of water.

"Let's rub your shoulders. I'm sorry I couldn't let you get more sleep." Kattell moved around behind him, dropped a kiss on his neck, and began to massage him through his shirt. "You are awfully tense. You shouldn't worry so much. You always were a worrier."

"There's plenty to—uh—be concerned about." Chakotay grunted when her thumbs dug into a sore spot. "You couldn't have picked a more difficult goal, and we don't have a lot of resources to work with. Your crew is pretty small, and you can't trust them anyway. If they found out that you were planning to cut Culluh out of the spoils, they'd probably kill you."

"They might try," said Kattell, and worked into his shoulderblades with her knuckles. "What they call combat training is pretty rough. Culluh's fairly good with poisons and drugs—that's how he got where he is—but I could take him down, hand to hand, any day, as long as I had a knife or a garrote. These bastards are big and strong, but a little slow. And anyway, I'm not going to let them know. Even Culluh won't know until he wakes up one morning with a needle full of—well, that's pretty long term. Suffice it to say that I'll have enough 'unique technology' to string him along for quite a while."

"If we succeed." He casually swept the last few slices of fruit off the table and into Janeway's reach.

"With your help, lover—" she nipped his ear from behind—"the odds are pretty good. I've got an idea taking shape here."

"All right, let's discuss it."

"Ohh, let me mull it over for a little while. Shouldn't disturb it while it's forming." Kattell stroked the fingers of one hand over his head, ruffling the hair. "I'll just fiddle and think. How delightfully ornamental you are."

"Mmm." Chakotay grunted noncommittally, but he gritted his teeth and did a little thinking himself.

Well, perhaps he had convinced her that he was working for her interests, but Obsidian Order operatives never really trusted anyone fully. Even someone they loved. If she loved him... Chakotay shook the thought away. How could he define love, when he had been wrong so many times? Janeway was still huddling by the wall, chewing with discreet avidity on the scraps of their meal. Even while she was half-dressed in a sack, her hair dirty and tangled, he could admire her strongly cut

beauty, her self-possession. *Damn*, he thought, *what self-possession*. How could she maintain it? How could she appear so calm in the face of crisis like this?

Just the way she had shut down like a slammed door on the holodeck. He had been sure that she was responding to him on more than a physical level, that all of her wanted to have him, that she knew his mind and had accepted what he was trying to offer her. And he had been wrong. Only when more depended on their connection than inclination alone had she allowed herself to give in to it. Her duty might be inseparable from her.

Kattell purred and pawed him, slipping one hand inside his shirt and running the other up and down his thigh. He pretended to ignore her, but shrugged slightly to dislodge her fingers from his chest. Well, he'd heard, long after the fact, that Cardassian men behaved irritably when they wanted to show their interest in a woman. He'd laughed. At the time. With his Bajoran lover. 'I suppose I've got something in common with the ugly bastards after all,' she'd said. 'You're so cute when you're grouchy.' And then, many months later, when the world had turned upside down and they were both serving on a Starfleet vessel lost in the antipodes of the galaxy, she had cooked him one more batch of mushroom soup...

And had embraced him, and offered herself again; to what end? To this end, perhaps, the one they were planning now. That they should wrest *Voyager* into their own hands, and continue the quest for home in their own way.

Loved Kattell? The emotion of half a man, of someone who had been living in darkness with no idea of the sun. And what did he feel now, now that Janeway had reached down to help him back into the light, cleansed him with no care to keeping herself free from his defilement? Now that he had taken possession of what she had given him? She glanced up at him, her eyes fathomless blue, and he felt the power of her gift again. Strong medicine, a share in her spirit, part of herself to sustain him. If he could only have asked her what she meant by it. He looked away before he could blurt out the question, trying not to form it at all. This had been the only plan open to them... She had done it out of necessity. But she had wanted it too, and both of them had known that. Did this change anything? Would anything be different if they only lived through this? The sudden hope

pierced him painfully, an echo of what he had felt once in her arms, the warmth of her body through a wet uniform. Slowly he turned his eyes to Janeway again, Kattell's hands still on his head, and saw her lips form silent words, something he could not make out. His name, perhaps. She had tried to extract a promise from him, but he was still not sure he could give it. She called him to duty, and told him to forget his heart.

Kattell laughed, and he started.

"You're going to escape from me," she said.

"HOW DO YOU KNOW he won't just cut my throat while he's at it?" Chakotay said a little nervously. He eyed the big sullen Kazon holding a scalpel to his naked right shoulder.

"Because he knows you're essential to the plan," Kattell replied. She ran her fingertips over his back. "Just a little incision. You'll hardly feel a thing."

"Couldn't I just take a communicator of some kind instead?"

"I don't have anything else that will do. The transmission has to be on a low subspace channel that won't show up on ordinary communications monitoring. This is a modified eavesdropping device—and it needs to be absolutely secure. Implanting it in you is the best way. I'll know if it's tampered with, and it can't be found in a visual search, if Tuvok gets suspicious."

"That's another problem. Will he believe that I've managed to escape from your ship?" Chakotay twitched as the blade opened a three-centimeter slit behind his collarbone.

"Yes, he will. I said you were not a hostage any more, and our little session with him would have been pretty convincing. You tell him that I sent you on an errand with the sled to get something from the base, and that you made a run for *Voyager* instead. It's perfectly plausible. And a lot sounder than trying to get Tuvok to fall for the same thing twice."

"Except that I'm leaving the captain behind."

"It's necessary. It's expedient. You figure you can rescue her more easily if you have *Voyager's* resources. And you tell them there's a device you discovered in the base that will help."

"That sounds awfully convenient. And B'Elanna will want to know details—ouch!" He gritted his teeth while Kattell probed the wound

open and inserted a lentil-shaped black disk about the size of her thumbnail.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it? Sorry I don't have any anesthetics except that powerful stuff. You need to be clear-headed." Kattell applied a salve and a bandage. "There will be a mark, but it's pretty small. The transmitter won't be detected by ordinary transporter security filters. Just don't let yourself be scanned."

"I think I can avoid making any doctor's appointments," he smiled.

"Don't remind me. The first thing I'm going to do is remove that busybody's personality," Kattell hissed. "If it hadn't been for him and his blasted Bajoran medical texts, I wouldn't be having to go to all this trouble now."

"Would you ever have told me?" Chakotay asked quietly.

The Cardassian woman's hazel eyes regarded him from the Bajoran face. Her small chin betrayed no scars of surgery, no trace of her true aspect. The mask was invisible.

"Put your shirt on," she said.



"IF EVERYTHING'S READY, then I'll go. That little sled will take a couple of hours to make it over the horizon so *Voyager* can pick me up." Chakotay stood and ran a hand over his hair, glancing down at Janeway. "When you make your call, I want to see her, understand?"

"All right, all right, I agreed." Kattell rolled her eyes. "Why would you think I want to hurt her?"

"No reason." He scuffed at the phaser burn on the deck.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, I was frustrated. Everything's fine now – this will work like a charm. I don't want to kill anyone – some of those people are my friends!"

"Like Harry?"

"Yes, like Harry!" She seemed genuinely distressed. "And Torres – Gods, I miss her. They don't take women on Kazon ships. For months, it's been nothing but grunting thugs and that Culluh." She spat the name. "Just getting back on board again...I never thought I would miss a Starfleet ship so much, and now all the inconvenient people will be out of the way. Thanks to you, we can do it nice and tidy. Get Tuvok down to the base with everyone who would put up too much of a fight, and *Voyager* is ours."

"Ours..." He looked at Janeway again, who had no visible reaction.

"Joint captains, Chakotay. I've got what it takes to negotiate with the Kazon – and make no mistake, we need them on our side – and you have the technical skills and the command experience. With Janeway out of the picture, you're next in line anyway. That will help bring the good little Federations around. We'll have to leave some of them behind here with her and Tuvok, I expect, but I know plenty of them will be glad to serve with commanders less overscrupulous and more practical. Carey, for one. Did you know he worked with me and Torres to get the space folder?"

"No one told me a damn thing about that."

"You were better off not knowing, probably." Kattell smirked. "Tuvok took the fall, and you filled in for him with the bitch. Was that when you got the idea?"

"What idea?"

"To butter her up. Get into her...ah, good graces."

"I'd say it dates back a little farther than that." He folded his arms tightly.

"Certainly does for her." Kattell crouched down to peer into Janeway's averted face. "It made me sick, the way she used to flirt with you. But then she kept fluttering her eyelashes at that Gath fellow on Sikarius – he'd probably have given her all the 'equipment' she wanted if she'd had any sense. Self-righteous, prudish bitch –"

Chakotay grabbed her shoulder as she leaned forward, snarling, and pulled her upright and against him, his fingers closing around her wrists. Her teeth flashed at him for a moment, and then she consciously relaxed herself and smiled disarmingly.

"Don't worry. We won't have to put up with her too much longer. We'll leave her here with the key to the base so all of them can hide from the Kazon. There's plenty of food and water – it's nicer than living on *Voyager*, practically." Kattell smirked ironically. "That reminds me – you're supposed to have that key from me so you could look for that mysterious device." She wriggled out of his grip, groped in her jacket, and handed him a flat card of bronzy metal. Chakotay took it and looked at both sides, then slipped it into a pocket of his vest.

"That has got to be the worst part of this plan. Ancient alien artifacts? Torres will see right through that. Can't you think of anything better?"

"How else are you going to get a big away team down there? And I thought Torres was a prime candidate for us. She was toadying to the bitch, but if she's gone, B'Elanna will follow you like she did before."

Chakotay decided not to argue the point further. "I'll get moving. Give me plenty of time to get on board, and a day to sound out the crew. And make it plausible when you see me on the viewscreen, or I'll be in trouble. We both know how observant Tuvok is."

Kattell snorted. "If he's the best the Federation has to offer in security chiefs, the Cardassian Empire is sure to win the next war. You told me yourself he had no idea I wasn't a Bajoran."

"Don't underestimate him. Not much gets by him. He was concentrating on me and my plans, not on whether I was harboring any other agents. Frankly, you were an ally of his under those circumstances, not a threat."

"Lovely," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'll be glad to see the last of him, at any rate, and I suppose you will too. Just remember, the moment you step on that ship, you're his superior officer. He'll follow orders." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him lingeringly. "I hope this doesn't take too long. I want you back with me."

"One way or another, I will be." Chakotay twisted his smirk to the side.

The sled held only one pilot and had room for another person, or cargo, in the back. The Kazon he had injured showed him the controls and switches cursorily, his arm still in a sling from the dislocated shoulder. At least they were treating him with a little more respect now. But on a *Voyager* half filled with them, in their home territory, with new technology and growing knowledge of its weaknesses—how long could he and Kattell last in command? Chakotay hoped it would be for long enough to rescue the marooned crew, if he had to go through with the whole plan. How long could he last with Kattell? Once she had enough technical experience and had consolidated the new regime, he would become more and more expendable. And as for the other part of their relationship—she would be sadly disappointed in that very soon. It might come to that, however. He was still in the coils of a giant constrictor as long as she had Janeway in her keeping.

Once he had launched and dropped away from the ship, he wondered: if Kattell had ever let him help her find her animal guide, what would it have been? She did not trust his spiritual practices, and never had. Perhaps they delved too deep for her. Janeway had expressed interest and curiosity, if a bit flippantly; he smiled at the memory of unwrapping his bundle in her ready room. He had trusted her with his deeper self so quickly...

Would she be safe with Kattell? For the moment. He had made it very clear he would not agree to any plan that harmed those members of the crew who seemed intransigent to any change of command. The Cardassian needed his cooperation just now, and she would do what she had to keep it, however grudgingly. He didn't trust her, but he trusted her intelligence and resourcefulness. They had a solid plan now. She would not throw away advantage for the sake of hatred.

His tiny craft skimmed the surface of the planet, keeping low as if eluding detection. Only around the base was there much vegetation anywhere. A range of high brown hills dotted with scrawny cacti came up in his forward viewport. Chakotay adjusted his altitude to clear them. Some of his ancestors had roamed country like that, centuries ago. A hard life, but one rich in tradition. If he had grown up far from that heritage, helping to build a new one on another globe, he had done his best to remember where the bones of his grandfathers were buried. A low rhythmic song filled the cockpit as he sped on his way.

"VOYAGER TO UNKNOWN CRAFT. Please identify yourself."

At last. Chakotay stretched painfully in the cramped seat where he had spent the last two and a half hours. The fuel gauge was dropping low. Com switch—there. He flipped it over.

"Harry—it's me, Chakotay. Tractor this damn thing on board, and make it quick. I'm not sure I can get much climb out of her."

"Commander? What—how did you—"

"Ask me later, Ensign. I'm glad you're all right," he added. The sled had no viewscreen, but Kim's voice was clear and alert.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Lieutenant—?"

"You may engage the tractor beam when ready," said Tuvok without a trace of surprise.

Voyager. Sleek, and white, and graceful, carving endless spirals in orbit, trailing her captain in silent duty. The sight shocked him with longing.

Torres was there with Tuvok in the shuttle bay to greet him, and startled him with a kiss on the cheek. Her eyes were wet.

"What the hell is that getup, Chakotay?" she asked when she finally stepped back.

"Well, you had to know sometime. I'm a deserter from the Cardassian military." He waited for her anguished groan to smile thinly. "I'm changing out of it on the double. I need a shower—actually I need fumigation—and a bowl of soup, anything—and then we've got work to do." He brushed past Tuvok and ran to the turbolift with the Vulcan following.

"Commander, where is Captain Janeway?"

"I had to leave her behind."

"Indeed?"

"It was the logical thing to do."

Tuvok's eyes were like stone. *All right, that was a badly timed joke, Chakotay thought, but at least the man could try to lighten up his expression a little...*

Conversation would be difficult with this damned implant in his shoulder. Relayed by the communications buoy, the transmission carried every sound he heard directly to Kattell's ears. A tether, a fine strong line held him like a fish. She was letting him run, but the bait and hook held him, and the reel could snap back at any time. Chakotay tried to think of a good way to tell someone he was wired without arousing Kattell's

suspicions. The problem was, as soon as they knew, their manner would change, their words become halting, the chances of a misstep increase exponentially. And it might take only one to end Janeway's life.

Tuvok insisted on debriefing him through the bathroom door, and he shouted over the roar of running water. Yes, the captain was unhurt. No, neither of them had been tortured for information. Yes, he expected Seska would ask for ransom again. No, he didn't think his escape would endanger the captain.

He deliberately walked out into the bedroom naked, rubbing his head with a towel. Tuvok raised an eyebrow and finally left for the bridge.

Neelix was in his mode as Morale Officer, and rang the door chime with a huge tray of oddments and a blessedly hot tureen of vegetable soup, sans leola root, while Chakotay was getting dressed.

"And how is our good captain?" he asked anxiously as Chakotay struggled into a uniform and tried to eat at the same time.

"She's well," he replied. "And I'm trying to keep her that way."

He jogged down the corridor to the lift, drummed his fingers as it hummed upwards, stepped out of it a little breathless. Tuvok rose, and all the bridge crew turned with various attitudes of attentive worry.

"I trust you are refreshed—" Tuvok began with an air of faint reproof.

"I am, thank you, and there's no time for a formal briefing," Chakotay said. "I have a plan, and it's going to take a lot of work, so we'd better get started on it now. Some of you are not going to like it very well—" he looked at Tuvok "—and so I will remind you—"

"In the captain's absence, I am in command now."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KATTELL SAT at the built-in table in her quarters, eating a meal slowly, ignoring Janeway. She hadn't even given her anything to drink. Possibly just as well, since she hadn't offered to let her relieve herself either. Janeway studied the side of Kattell's face, evaluating all her options. Absolute silence and submission; reasonable requests; stern demands. Probably nothing she could say would persuade the Cardassian to do anything she didn't want to do. Her mouth was parched and her arms were aching, but she was not sure she should call any attention to her discomfort. Kattell would probably increase it if she could, and she had no moderating influence on her now that Chakotay was gone. Her behavior towards Janeway had been strange from the beginning. Every bit of their planning had been carried out in front of her – Kattell seemed to relish watching Janeway for reaction in any case. The Cardassian was a trained agent, experienced and ruthless, but her sheer joy in the situation, her excitability and intensity betrayed a mind not fully focused on her practical goals. Unless her goals focused on Janeway personally, and not just the acquisition of *Voyager*.

Alone with her. Kattell had a small pickup for the eavesdropping device she had insisted on implanting in Chakotay's shoulder, and was listening to it as she ate, the volume high enough for Janeway to hear some of the transmission. Silence so far, as he flew to intercept *Voyager*, except for a soft chant in his own language, and the steady sound of the engines. There – *Voyager* was hailing him, and the low hum of a tractor beam on the hull. He was safe, and home. Some snatches of conversation. B'Elanna's voice. A turbolift. Tuvok. Chakotay sounded impatient and brusque, almost angry, unfamiliar.

"Sounds good," said Kattell with satisfaction. She finished her meal and made a face. "Rotten stuff. No wonder he lost it; he always had a tender digestion. Silly of me to give him any of their meat; I should have gone to pick some fruit in the first place. Guess I wanted to see how adaptable he was going to make himself." She bit into something like

an apple and chewed. "I don't suppose you ever cooked anything for him. Or even asked him what he liked to eat." She cocked an eye at Janeway.

"I'm his captain," she replied.

"I guess I'll take that as a 'no'," smirked Kattell. "You don't know much about how to keep a man comfortable, do you?" They stared at each other with open dislike. Janeway fought back the sharp words she wanted to use. *Ignore her*, she thought. *She's baiting you*.

"I know *exactly* what he likes," Kattell said, and stretched with a long sigh. "I haven't felt so well fucked in a long time. Not since the night we got separated from the rest and hid in the irrigation channels near that village –" Her mouth drew out in a wide, sly smile at Janeway's expression. She took a long swig from her water container, was about to cap it again, and then looked at it, shrugged, and put it on the floor by Janeway. "I suppose I don't want you dying on me just yet," she said. Janeway could not reach the container with her hands, as the rods of the shackles were too short. She had to bend over and seize the rim between her teeth, straining painfully, and lift it up so that she could hold it. Kattell watched her with a slight smile, running the tip of her tongue between her teeth. Janeway raised the container to her lips, conscious of severe thirst. The drink Chakotay had given her had been hours ago, and not enough, though probably as much as he had been able to steal.

Kattell's mouth had been on the container moments before. Janeway hesitated, then drank. Chakotay had managed to be far more intimate with the Cardassian than sharing a drink, and she could not let him surpass her courage. She finished the water, as there were only a few swallows left, and let the container fall.

"So, *Captain*," said Kattell. "Just you and me. Girl talk." She sniggered. "And whatever shall we talk about? So *many* concerns in common." She rose and took her jacket off to hang it up, then sat down on the mattresses and lounged in front of Janeway in her gleaming bodysuit, bare of ornament. Like a hide, seamless. Kattell rolled to her back and put her hands behind her head, placing one ankle on the bent knee of the other leg. "I always wondered what it would be like to talk to the captain, one on one," she said, twitching her booted foot and smiling at it. "You gave us those

little pep talks as a group, and left most dealings with the Maquis up to Chakotay...that was wise, I suppose. Oh, I did appreciate being made an officer, by the way—I never told you that, did I? Made independent action a lot easier. And independent action was a necessity on a ship like that. I never had commanders acting so witless in my life.” She glanced at Janeway. “That must have taken some doing. To give B’Elanna attacks of conscience. To rip the spine out of a man like Chakotay. He even told me and Jarvin he’d throw us in the brig for mutiny if we talked about backing him to take the ship—”

“Good for Chakotay,” said Janeway.

“You like him like that, don’t you,” Kattell hissed, suddenly rolling over to face her. “You like ‘em flexible and docile. Just snap your fingers and the puppydog comes sniffing around your ass. Humans have such ridiculous pets. Sit up, beg for scraps, put their heads on your lap, wanting their ears scratched. You want him tame. He’s not tame, you know. But I had to remind him of that. I got some pretty good proof after I got you back here.”

She touched a red mark on her throat, a bruise Janeway had noticed when Kattell had returned to the cell after Chakotay had run in to fight the Kazon. He had inflicted that? Her horror and disbelief must have shown, for Kattell smiled open-mouthed. “He can fuck like a Cardassian if he wants to. He was always so careful and sweet—and that’s all very well, but a little long-winded sometimes. Not that I mind being licked for half an hour at a time, but...” She grinned at Janeway. “A few minutes of cock like his beats that any day.”

This conscious sexual vulgarity — *Kattell is only baiting you*, she reminded herself. *She’s not telling you her stories to pass the time...*

“You actually never had him? Pity. Might have knocked some sense into you. I can just see it—he hauls you into the ready room, rips that awful uniform off — who designed those, anyway? — bends you over the desk and really hammers it in — except that you’d be dry and tight as your narrow little mind —” Kattell’s nostrils were flaring, her white teeth were protruding over her lip. “I doubt you’ve ever had it really good. You’ve probably whipped every man who ever knew you into submission, or just driven them off in stampedes. If Chakotay was kowtowing to you in one day, the average Human male must have fainted dead away when you walked in the room. Or when you opened your mouth. Now, you

should meet Gul Edak, or—” She cast around for a moment, then continued in an exaggerated laughing drawl, “ — the Legate I had to screw to get the letter of recommendation to the Order — or just a squad of good Cardassian soldiers. I wish I’d been able to let the Kazon have it off with you. Problem is, they wouldn’t have left much.”

She rolled to her feet and crouched over Janeway. Leered into her face. “I need you a little longer. Tuvok needs to see you’re alive, and Chakotay does have a Human moral conscience. Fine, I can afford to keep that salved for a while. Men are really very easy to deal with if you just let them think they’re getting their way. Cardassian, Human, Kazon — oh, Culluh was ranting about how you had bearded him — you really hurt his little feelings, you know.” Kattell snorted. “If you had just tried letting him save some face, giving up that disabled ship to him, or done in the first place what I had to do in your stead —”

“Hand over technology, in direct violation of the Prime Directive, to a group known for its violence and ruthlessness? Cooperate with someone capable of having a man poisoned so that he couldn’t give out information?” Janeway wasn’t sure if it was wise to speak, but she burst out at Kattell anyway. “You may think you were doing the right thing, but I believe you’re in over your head.”

“I don’t think so, bitch,” Kattell hissed. “My way of doing things makes a lot more sense than yours. And what makes you think I’m out of my depth dealing with people who use the methods that work? I’m trained in that. I respect that. I know what they’re capable of, and I can do ‘em one better. You’re the one at a disadvantage there. I could have told you that saving a wounded Kazon’s life wouldn’t mean much to Culluh. You went to a lot of effort for nothing —”

“We found you out, didn’t we?”

Kattell drew her lips back from her teeth and pulled her small chin back in a curiously animal-like gesture. “You’d never have done it without Chakotay’s help. All right, I underestimated him that time; I thought I had it squared away with the soup and reminding him how nice it was to have a warm cunt around. I didn’t realize he was planning bigger things — say, I’m curious — just how did he try to jump you? Pretty recently, I gather.”

Janeway was silent, but memories roiled in her brain. *She’s wrong. She has it all backwards, all*

twisted to fit her views on how the world works. Why is she so obsessed with my relationship with him? Her agenda is not wholly clear-eyed.

Kattell watched her face. "Oh, yes, you liked him, didn't you? Don't blame you. I thought it was going to be a chore screwing a Human—though some of the images in his dossier showed promise. I'd heard the males were boring, though tender-skinned as boys, and very solicitous—mmm, the rumors were right on that last. Then I met him, and I knew this was the best job I'd ever had. OK, bad food, physical hardship, so what. If only I'd been able to do it in my right body—" Kattell broke off, strode to the opposite bulkhead and leaned on it a moment. "That's the worst part of this situation," she said after a pause. She looked at her hand, stretched it out in front of her. "I seriously doubt anyone in this quadrant could do the surgery and the genetics to remake me in my own image— heh—even if they knew what a Cardassian looked like. These ridiculous nose ridges." She rubbed forefinger and thumb along them. "Even looking Human would have been better than this. Those Bajoran whores, luring Cardassian men away from their families— Frankly, I don't think it would have made much difference. Any man who could do it like that in front of you—" Kattell drifted to the spot where she had lain with Chakotay and curled up on the mattresses again. "Was it good for you too, *Captain*?" She rolled her lids up at Janeway and grinned.

Janeway felt a chill, a prickle of goosebumps over her bare arms and legs, but she set her lips and said nothing.

"He wants you. He wants his captain wriggling under him— no, pardon me, he probably wants you sitting on his face and issuing orders. He likes a woman who takes charge of the situation. You pulled the rug out from under him, and he started panting around after you. Turned him on, I suppose. And you either didn't see it or thought you were above all that. Idiot bitch. Even Culluh's not that dumb."

Janeway drew in a breath. So the Cardassian wasn't loath to use herself for any goal she had...

"So now I've taken the...tool you wouldn't use. He won't need to pretend in a little while. He'll be screwing the one in charge, and this one is going to appreciate it. This one is going to do everything right that you've been doing wrong. Seems he likes to be the power behind the throne. He was all right as a captain, if a little too emotionally involved—you wouldn't believe what

it took to soothe him down after a bad day cleaning up behind my countrymen. Needs some guidance, really. He's a wild animal when he's really angry. But he'd be a wonderful weapon in the hands of someone who knows how to aim him. And sex can aim any man. Power is an aphrodisiac— don't I know it; that Legate was about a hundred and twenty, but he left me sore for a week. And I was in better shape then. I looked like myself." Kattell rolled over on her stomach and lay prone in the same position into which Chakotay had pressed her.

"But this face is almost Human, and the hair was fortuitous. Gosh, we could almost be sisters." She grinned evilly, reached up and pulled her hair forward, stroking it, beginning to undulate her body against the deck. "Oh, I liked having you there. Making you watch, and feeling him squirm—he was always concerned with privacy. Delicate sensibilities to go with the digestion. Well, if he could overcome that, and make love to me so, so— I knew he was good, but that was like nothing I've ever done. Not on Cardassia, not even with him before." Her big eyes were glowing, her face dreamily sensual as she spoke almost to herself. "I thought I was on fire. I felt...like I'd come home. That's how he would make love to his captain, and I'm going to take her place. Perfect. Perfect. Aahh—" She shivered, and her eyes closed, and she let out a long sigh.

Good God. Janeway pulled herself up to sit straight-backed against the bulkhead. *And I'm alone with her...*

Kattell's eyes blinked open and refocused sharply on Janeway at the sound of her movement. She pushed up on her hands, leaning forward, and smiled, speaking softly, running the tip of her tongue over her teeth.

"Actually, once we're set up, it won't be all that different from what he had planned anyway. Just substitute me for you. He's a little slicker than I thought— though I guess he didn't anticipate what a tightass you really are. A patient man, though. I'll admit that's a failing of mine. He'd have waited a while and tried again— how the hell did you turn him down? Either he really blew it, which I doubt, or you are the most frigid bitch alive. You want him, I know. You still do. And you turned him down. Kicking yourself yet? Too bad. Too late. He's mine now."

She's wrong, Janeway thought, she's wrong, she has it all twisted, all reflected from her own dark thoughts, but she's right as well, I do want him, oh

Lord, I could have had something he offered me...not what she assumes it was, something pure like fire – She had made a decision. It was the right one, no matter what her body had told her to do. Or so much of herself – She admired and respected Chakotay as her first officer, as a sincere and passionate man devoted to his duty. Even more now that she had seen his integrity tested so severely. She wouldn't put that relationship at risk for any whim of her own. It wouldn't be right to indulge herself the way this woman did. Unbridled hatred, lust, treachery lay down that road. She would wish *Voyager* destroyed before it fell into Kattell's hands. If her plans carried through somehow, if Chakotay had to play it to the end, he would find some way to get Janeway and Tuvok back on board. There was the loophole in her plan, as she had seemed to know before Chakotay insisted otherwise. *Leaving us here on the planet – while there's life, there's hope. I doubt that's a current saying on Cardassia –*

"I'll be rid of you soon," said Kattell meditatively, mirroring Janeway's mood. "I'll get out of this smelly little bucket, and I'll move into your quarters and throw away all your stuff, and use your closets for my clothes, and sleep in your bed. And I'll screw the man you want, and take your ship where I need it to go. Give orders to your crew." She scooped her hair up and wrapped it in a knot, held it to her head. "You don't have anything left. It's all mine now. Everything you have is mine."

She slid over, sitting very near Janeway, and touched her bare knee lightly with a fingertip. "This is wonderful. Delicious. Just like this. You and me, no one to interfere." Kattell leaned forward so that her hair slithered over her

shoulders, fell over her face like Janeway's. "Kathryn. That's your name, isn't it? I like it. Kat, he called me. What a lovely coincidence." Her hand was crawling up Janeway's thigh. "If I didn't know better, I might keep you. Just chain you to the wall in my quarters and let you watch all the time. I want you to know what's happening to your ship. I want you to know what I'm doing. But I'll have to settle for less." Her face was a handspan from Janeway's. The captain tried to stare her down, her skin shrinking at the contact, the cool palm on her thigh. The eyes were hungry, insatiable.

"Did he ever kiss you?" Kattell whispered. Janeway shuddered involuntarily and felt her face twitch. "Guess so." The Cardassian moved even closer. Janeway fought for calm. "That belongs to me too. He's mine, and has been from the moment I saw him. I own him, every square centimeter."

All on the surface. "Now who wants him tamed?" said Janeway evenly, and Kattell flinched back.

"Bitch." They stared at each other. Kattell broke the gaze, dropped her eyes, ran them over Janeway's body, took a deep breath. She rose and grabbed her jacket, shouldered into it. "Maybe I'll throw you to the Kazon after all. Take a holocamera, if I had one –" An empty threat. "I have to go check on my devoted comrades. Don't go anywhere." A sullen half-smile.

"Sometimes I wish I weren't so clever. Then I could do just what I wanted, when I wanted, instead of having to wait. I'll take a leaf out of Chakotay's book, and be patient." She looked Janeway over once more, licked her lips, and was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAKOTAY STOOD before the command chair on *Voyager's* bridge, and for the first time knew what it would be like to be her captain. The power under his hand now. Every head was turned to him, every expectation aimed in his direction. No one to relieve him at a critical point or take any decision from him. He knew what the command of his own small ship had been, but this was different. This was *Voyager*.

He looked over his shoulder at Ops and met Harry Kim's eyes, then at Tactical and saw Tuvok taking his station. Paris was half-turned in his pilot's seat to look at him, and Torres was at Engineering. The rest of the stations were all staffed, and the officers riveted on him.

"Obviously the first priority is the captain's rescue," Chakotay began. "It's going to be damn difficult. She's on Ka—Seska's ship, and will be shot at the first sign of trouble. We need a method of disabling everyone on that ship before they even know we're there. Seska had a plan that I think we can turn against her."

"How the hell did you get away, Commander?" Paris blurted out. "From what Rutskoi said, there were a dozen of them and Seska too—"

"Ten," Chakotay replied. "Two of them were stunned in the firefight by the hatch, and I never saw them again. And one is fairly well out of commission."

"Those two we took prisoner," said Tuvok. "They committed suicide shortly after regaining consciousness."

"Suicide?"

"They appeared to fear interrogation, and perhaps prisoners are not welcomed home again as in our cultures." The Vulcan's tone was bland and ironic, but something about it put Chakotay on alert.

He looked at Tuvok again and realized that intent stare had an element of suspicion in it. Probably a professional habit, but he had better deal with it before it got out of hand. "I managed to persuade Seska I would work with her." Torres growled audibly. "I was her captain once, and I

know her pretty well. Once I realized she was trying to get me on her side, I only had to...to play along. She's interested in a device we located in the base, and she sent me to look at it since she doesn't trust her Kazon crew. I took the opportunity and returned to *Voyager* instead. That's it in a nutshell. Janeway is in danger, obviously, but Seska won't kill her as long as she thinks she has something to gain by keeping her alive. Right now, she knows we have no reason not to pursue her and shoot her down if she has no hostages to threaten. So for the moment, the captain is safe."

"What's this device you mentioned?" asked Torres. "Something that could disable everyone on the ship at once? Some kind of broad-spectrum stun—"

"We'll need a large away team for security, and to operate the thing," Chakotay interrupted, "plus a shuttlecraft ready to transport some of them on board Seska's ship—this is going to be complicated. Torres—start working on ways to cloak a shuttle from her sensors. I'll select the away team. Mr. Tuvok, I want a detailed tactical analysis of the situation."

Silence for a moment, then Torres nodded and called Carey to take her place on the bridge. Paris wheeled in his chair and examined his console.

"Aye, Commander," Tuvok answered, and began to touch the control pads at his station. Chakotay let out a breath he had been holding and sat down. A moment to think. He was going to have to work pretty hard to make this sound plausible to *Voyager's* crew. There was a PADD lying on the monitor in front of him, and he picked it up, debating his options. Type some kind of message? Who to? Perhaps not Tuvok. Torres would take his word, but her reaction might be unpredictable. Carey walked out of the turbolift, and as Torres left for Engineering, she threw Chakotay an odd glance. Why hadn't Kattell thought out some of these things a little better—

Deliberately. She had saddled him with this implausible story deliberately. If he had to think on his feet just to avoid detection, he couldn't devote much time to a plan to betray her, if he had one. She had him wrapped so tightly he could barely move. He had command of *Voyager* and all its resources, but he was as much a prisoner as ever. Anger surged through him anew, its power

nauseating him. Hands around her throat, squeezing the life out of her—

Chakotay was gripping the arms of the chair so hard his fingers squeaked against the metal. Had she stowed away in his skin somehow? He was thinking like a Cardassian. Command of *Voyager*? He didn't want it. This was Janeway's ship. Hers. He ran his hand through his hair, bowed his head for a moment. Perhaps he could take a few minutes and consult his guide, reconnect himself with the workings of his own mind. The image of his hands around Kattell's throat throbbed in his head. Once he had strangled a female Cardassian soldier for shooting farmers working in their fields. Chakotay remembered her look of surprise as he sprang into her sniper's post on a brushy hill above a village. Her face had turned dark grey above his desperate grip, her white teeth snarling brightly in death. But she had deserved it, and his phaser charge had been exhausted, and she would have shot him if he had given her a chance. Kattell had killed no one under his protection. Not yet. Nor was she threatening to kill him now. Where did this murderous fury come from?

A moment's respite, gods—

"Commander. Two Kazon warships, on direct intercept, warp five, distance one hundred million kilometers." Paris wheeled around again. "I think we've been spotted."

Chakotay was on his feet, not knowing how. "Red Alert!" he bellowed. "Shields up, full power to phaser banks." Officers scrambled as the lights dimmed, the glow of the consoles in sudden prominence.

"They will be in phaser range in two minutes, twenty seconds," said Tuvok. "Their shields are up, and their weapons are coming on line."

"Looks like she took some exception to your skipping out on her, Commander," said Paris.

Had Kattell called them? Was she actually working with the Kazon-Nistrim and not merely for her own interests? Chakotay tightened his lips and stared at the viewscreen. "I don't think so, Lieutenant. I think she's going to be just as surprised as we were."

"Even more so," said Tuvok. "As she is presently on the opposite side of the planet, and her sensors in all probability not as effective as ours, she will not detect them until she comes over the horizon."

"Over the horizon— Paris! Take us out of orbit, now! If we have to fight, and move into Seska's field of view, she may panic and harm the captain before she realizes what's going on."

"Aye, aye, sir!" *Voyager* came about in a tight curve, and Chakotay thanked his gods that she was so maneuverable.

"Full impulse. Dive under them as they come in, and get us out of the orbital plane of this solar system. I want to be prepared to go to warp if necessary." *This is a complication I don't need*, he thought. *Though I'd almost like to blow up a few—*

"But the captain—"

"I'm aware of the danger to Captain Janeway, Mr. Paris. Full impulse!"

"Full impulse, aye, Commander." Paris bent to his console.

"The Kazon have dropped out of warp, and are veering off to intercept us," reported Tuvok.

"Open a channel to the lead ship, Kim."

"Channel open, sir." A familiar face, square-jawed and sneering, appeared on the viewscreen.

"First Maje Culluh. I am Commander Chakotay. My intentions are peaceful. Power down your weapons, and we will do so as well."

The face gained a speculative expression.

"Where is your Captain Janeway?"

"She's indisposed," Chakotay replied. If Culluh spotted Kattell, and claimed her prisoner as his, he wouldn't give a rotten apple for Janeway's chances.

"How unfortunate," said Culluh with false politeness. "Convey my regards to her. What is your business here?"

"This is a neutral area. I might ask the same of you."

"Today it is neutral, yes. Tomorrow you may be trespassing. I am patrolling my prospective territorial claims, Commander Chakotay. Do you plan to claim it as well?"

"We're gathering food— if that is any of your business."

"That is all?"

"Yes, that is all. You were expecting something else?" *He's wondering what's become of his personal transport and his errant ally, of course*, Chakotay thought. *She must be very overdue.*

"I will speak to your captain," said Culluh.

"I am in command," replied Chakotay with a flash of anger. "Captain Janeway is not able to speak to anyone."

"How convenient. She allows her subordinates to greet me while she is otherwise occupied."

"I assure you, Maje—"

"What could be so important, I wonder? Perhaps the interrogation of prisoners? Perhaps the investigation of a captured vessel—?"

Oh damn, he's feeling pretty confident today, Chakotay thought. "Culluh, we have no prisoners to interrogate," — that at least was the literal truth — "and have captured no vessels. Captain Janeway—"

"You will return my property to me—"

"Open your ears, Culluh," Chakotay snapped. *Time to show him we're not afraid of him.* "We don't have anything of yours." *Well, we have a little sled with a low fuel gauge —* "You didn't mind taking property stolen from us, and I will not listen to your accusations." He gestured to Kim to cut the channel. The sneering face disappeared. "Mr. Tuvok—where is Seska? Has she seen the Kazon?"

"Curious," said Tuvok, staring at his console. "Ensign Seska's ship should have come into view by now."

"She's not there?"

"I cannot detect any trace of her."

"What—" *Gods. Of course. She heard all that on the eavesdropping device, and she's landed and hidden in the underground hangar. She doesn't want Culluh horning in on her leverage. If Tuvok deduces that she's got a bug on us and says so, I'm sunk.* Chakotay put a hand to his right shoulder. Janeway's life was hanging by a phrase...

"Never mind," he blurted out. "It's the Kazon we have to worry about right now. What's their weapons status?"

"Still at full power, and now within range."

"Kim—"

"They're hailing us, Commander."

"Open the channel." Perhaps the man would listen to reason—

"I will give Captain Janeway one more chance to face me," snarled Culluh. "If the woman will treat me with such disrespect and flaunt her markings in Kazon space—"

"You sound more sure of yourself than you have any reason to, Culluh. Photon torpedoes ready?"

"Torpedoes ready for launch, Commander," replied Tuvok. "Phasers at full power, and locked on target."

"Hear that, Maje? I'll give *you* one more chance. I am acting in command of *Voyager*, and I

mean you no disrespect, but if you fire on me, I will return it. In spades. I am confident that *Voyager* can handle both of your ships, but I don't want anyone to die for posturing's sake. When we have finished our business here, we will leave, but not one second before." The sneer twitched. *He's overextended his threats,* Chakotay thought. *He knows it, but he's angry, and losing face —*

The screen went blank as the channel was cut from the Kazon side, and *Voyager* rocked with a volley.

"Fire phasers!" Chakotay roared. He leapt to the forward weapons console and executed the order himself. The hot red beam lanced out, playing over the giant beetle-like form of the Kazon ship.

"Direct hit on Kazon forward shields," Tuvok reported. "Damage sustained, shields at fifty percent."

"Evasive maneuvers, Mr. Paris—lead them away from the planet. Mr. Kim—report!"

"Minimal damage to starboard shields. No casualties—" *Voyager* rocked again, and the crew had to hold their consoles for stability.

"Another hit on starboard shields. Down by twenty percent."

"Firing phasers." Chakotay hit the console again. *Voyager* turned and dove, directly towards the two Kazon vessels, turning on edge to slip between them. The blue bolts of Kazon weapons crisscrossed between the vessels as their targeting systems followed *Voyager*. The shields flared, but held. Chakotay saw a spray of debris from Culluh's ship. Paris grinned and *Voyager* righted again as he stroked his fingers over the console, then sped away in the direction of the system's sun. Crazy hotdogger—but the Kazon were responding slowly, obviously taken aback.

"Damn, this is a beautiful ship," Chakotay heard the pilot say.

"Our shot missed the lead Kazon vessel, but the second ship's phasers have damaged its engines."

Paris laughed at Tuvok's report, and pumped a fist in the air.

"The second ship is in pursuit, and has locked on weapons." There was a flash and jolt as *Voyager* was hit.

"Port nacelle, moderate damage," called Kim.

"Commander!" shouted Torres from Engineering. "If there are any more hits to the engine systems, we could be in big trouble."

"Let's waste a photon on them, Tuvok," Chakotay said, relinquishing the weapons console to the duty officer. He turned and sat in the command chair. "Target the shields again. I don't want them unable to beat it out of here."

"Engineering reporting injuries," Kim continued.

"Photon torpedo locked on target."

"Fire."

"Firing torpedo." A flare of hot light showed on the viewscreen.

"Direct hit on forward shields. Shields down."

"He's a sitting duck, then. Lock on phasers, but don't fire until I give the order."

"Aye, aye, Commander."

"Second Kazon ship is breaking off pursuit. Returning to lead ship."

"Perhaps they've seen the error of their ways. And about time, too."

"Lead ship is hailing us, Commander."

"On screen."

Culluh's ugly face again. "My associate has persuaded me to fight another day, Commander.

Have no doubt that I will. I will return, and soon, and your tricks will avail you nothing against us." Chakotay made an impatient gesture of the head, and Kim cut the link.

"Kazon vessels retreating."

"Return us to the planet as soon as they're out of the way."

"Aye, Commander."

"Kim – dispatch repair crews to the starboard shield generators, and to the port nacelle. Engineering – casualty report."

"A fall off a ladder, and the person underneath," said Torres. "Both knocked out cold. Kes is here and taking care of it. And the nacelle looks repairable, since we only took one hit."

"Cancel Red Alert," said Chakotay, and sat back in the command chair. Not bad for his first outing in an Intrepid-class vessel. "Thank you, Mr. Paris, Mr. Tuvok. Good work." He took a deep breath, and smiled at his own satisfaction.

That was the last moment of pleasure he had in command of *Voyager*.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HOW COULD SHE BEAR IT? He knew that Kathryn Janeway was made of sterner stuff than most, but the toughest captains Chakotay had ever known might have broken in the Delta Quadrant. This command was different from any other in Starfleet. Utterly alone, no backup, no reinforcements, no resupply. Even the loose organization of the Maquis had provided him with some sense of context and order, of a higher authority to which he could refer. To someone used to the firm directives of Starfleet Command, *Voyager's* isolation must be disorienting. Even frightening. Not from the dangers of enemies alone, but from the remoteness of everything that gave guidance. The weight was directly on her shoulders. Every life, every death. And the stern dictates of conscience and moral training. From what could Janeway draw her strength and her sense of direction? If she could not rely on others, she must strengthen herself. For the first time Chakotay realized some of the motive for what he saw as her rigidity. As first officer, he could indulge in flexibilities of thought that the captain could not allow herself. He had to think like a captain now, and a captain with the greatest responsibility in Starfleet. He wasn't sure he liked that.

"WE'VE RESUMED equatorial orbit, Commander. Seska's there, all right. I tried to keep out of her way, but she must have seen the Kazon."

"Thank you, Mr. Paris. Let's hope she won't hold them against us."

"Yeah," replied the pilot, briefly and soberly.

Chakotay hit an intercom button. "Torres—report. How are the repairs coming?"

"Another ten or twelve hours, Commander," she replied over the comlink. "This was not a good time to get into a fight, and when I say something like that—"

"Yeah. Twelve hours?"

"Just to get the basic functions restored. We're limited to impulse until the plasma injectors are replaced—eight hours, minimum. And until there

is a complete overhaul, warp capability will be limited. We'd better hope we don't have to go anywhere fast."

"Tuvok estimates the Kazon will be back with reinforcements within thirty-six hours. Possibly a lot sooner."

"We'll be able to move before that. Warp Two certainly, possibly Three or Four. But the captain—"

"Will not get rescued if we're blown out of space."

"Sure. But you've got to tell me more about that device if we're going to plan this thing. Why are you being so vague? Is there something—"

"Don't worry about it, Torres. Your priority is repairs. Keep me posted on your progress." Chakotay cut the link. *Damn*, he thought. *Nearly dead in the water*. Another ten-ton weight on his back.

His options were narrow enough as it was. Plan the false rescue audibly for Kattell's hearing, keep her confident for Janeway's safety. Hope that nothing she heard would spook her. Try to think in between breaths. He turned to look at Tuvok, and was met with a cold stare that cut off the words he was forming. *Damn*.

"Commander," the Vulcan said. "Since she apparently took shelter to avoid detection, it is possible that Ensign Seska was able to intercept—"

"We'll discuss that later, Tuvok," Chakotay replied, too abruptly. "Where's that tactical analysis I asked for?"

The security chief's gaze grew perceptibly chillier. "I shall commence work on it immediately, Commander."

"You do that," said Chakotay, and slumped back into the command chair, his heart pounding. He had to tell Tuvok he was wired for sound, but it was going to look like a trick, a double bluff, since the suspicion was already there. He glanced back again to see Tuvok dabbling at his console with a grim look to his calm. *Damn. Damn*. He could type something on a PADD and hope—

"Sickbay to Commander Chakotay."

"Go ahead."

"The injured technicians have regained consciousness," said the doctor's voice. "I will be keeping them for observation for another twenty-four hours at least."

"Thank you, Doctor. I'll be down to see them when I can."

"And I was only recently informed that you had escaped and returned to the ship. As a matter of fact, I was not informed that you and the others had been captured in the first place, and only found out when Ensign Kim and Crewman Rutskoi were brought to Sickbay."

"Sorry about that." Chakotay couldn't help smiling.

"I'm getting used to it," the doctor replied with heavy sarcasm. "These little surprises do keep me on my toes. Are you in good health, Commander?"

"Fine."

"You were not treated as badly as the others, then? Fortunate for you. But I think a medical scan would be in order."

"No." Chakotay tried to sound casual, but Tuvok would add that to his list of clues, of course. "I'm afraid I don't have time for that. Chakotay out." And he had to think how to truly rescue Janeway, weigh whether the risk of going along with Kattell's plan to maroon part of the crew would pay off. Perhaps that would be the safest route. That would give him time to plot his next move. Right now, time was a rapidly diminishing resource. Time, and every mental and physical reservoir he had. His head ached, his eyes stung from fatigue, and his soul writhed in restless fear. Gods and ancestors, a moment's respite.



"THIS IS REALLY IMPORTANT, Chakotay."

"Would you mind telling me just what *isn't* important right now?" Kurt Benders had his com badge half muffled in his hand, but Torres could hear every word, and even the sarcastic tone of Chakotay's voice over the comlink. She looked up at Benders from her station at an engineering console and smiled, briefly.

"I know. It's—I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but B'Elanna practically ordered me to, and I certainly had to agree with her."

"Is she there?"

"Yes. But she's trying to finish the repairs on the port nacelle. If that doesn't happen, the whole question is going to get decided for us. By the Kazon."

There was a long pause before Chakotay answered.

"And you think this could turn serious?"

"Maybe. I think they're trying to get up a group to come to you, demand that you take off and leave Janeway behind. There isn't exactly a lot of agreement about that right now, but this meeting might create it, and once that's happened—"

"Mutiny?"

"If you're there, maybe not. If you aren't there..."

"All right, I get the picture. Are all the Maquis going to show?"

"About half of us, I think. Some didn't get told, and of course a lot of us are on duty in Engineering trying to get the repairs done. B'Elanna told me to go, but I wish she would come. I might need backup."

Chakotay chuckled sardonically. "Better not tell Chell unless you want it...broadcast...to the entire quadrant."

"He got told."

"Great. Only a matter of time before everyone will know. Before Tuvok— When is the meeting?"

"Ten minutes. In Dalby and Gerron's quarters."

"Gerron? You've got to be kidding."

"It's mostly Dalby, I think. Well, not really him—he's just the kind of guy who'll go along with whoever's talking the best game, and make it sound like it was his idea. You know."

"Yeah, I know. Who's talking the game?"

"Jarvin. And Hogan. Maybe Jonas, but he's not saying much."

Torres heard something unintelligible from Chakotay.

"Yeah, what you said." Benders laughed quietly. "See you there, *Captain*."

"Don't—call—me—that." The words were soft and dead even.

"Uh...sorry, Commander. I didn't—"

"Chakotay out."

Benders turned and looked at Torres. "Gee, he used to like a good bad joke. What's his problem?"

"What *isn't* his problem?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't want to be in his shoes right now. But...he's been so mellow since we signed on here, and now he's back to...I don't know, I keep getting flashbacks to the Badlands. He's so damn angry."

"He just spent two days with Seska. And didn't get to kill her, and probably had to watch her beat up Janeway and not say a word." Torres slammed a fist on the console. "I wish she'd captured *me*."

"I'm glad she didn't," said a voice by her elbow, and she looked up to see Carey.

"Oh...hell. What are you doing here? Your shift—"

"Lieutenant," he continued, "if there's some place you think you need to be for a few minutes, I can take over for a little while." He drew in his lips and glanced down, then up at her again, his blue eyes calm. Torres looked at him, then glanced at Bendera, who shrugged eloquently.

"Thanks," she said, held Carey's gaze for a moment, then slid out from behind the console. "It's the coolant stacks—"

"I've got a handle on it. Don't worry."

"Thanks," she said again, and strode out of Engineering with Bendera.



POSSIBLY AN UNAUTHORIZED transmission, thought Tuvok, staring at the readout on his console. Minimal power, in all probability audio only, and low fidelity. The readings are intermittent, on a low subspace band, and seem to originate from the bridge. Curious. I should inform the commanding officer. That is correct procedure.

Tuvok looked up at the back of Chakotay's head. He recalled seeing him dressed as a rebel, holding the shoulder of a traitor, his soft voice gone brittle, his expression unfathomable.

The logical course? Sometimes he might have to bypass correct procedure. Captain Janeway had taught him a great deal about the use of indirection, and conversely, of straightforward action when indirection failed. He had not always applied those lessons well, unfortunately, and he felt himself at fault in that. Her instincts in such matters were nearly faultless, and her opinions invariably instructive. He was made far more aware of her absence by the fact that another sat in her place.

His com badge beeped, and he touched it and spoke quietly into it, then broke the link. He worked at his console for a few more moments, frowned, and stepped forward.

"Commander. I have a concern that I must share with you."

"Finished that analysis already, Lieutenant?" said Chakotay, barely glancing up from the PADD he was working on.

"No, sir."

The dire glance Tuvok received might have made a Human take a backward step. "Then what is it?"

"I would prefer that we speak in private, Commander."

Chakotay sat back in the command chair and looked him in the face. "I'm a little busy, Tuvok—" he began. The Vulcan raised a brow and waited. Chakotay let out a small sigh. "The ready room?" he asked, rising.

"The briefing room, if you please," Tuvok replied. There was a little snap of tension in his voice, though he kept it otherwise level. Tuvok had followed every order Chakotay had given him, had let Torres express all the doubts about the away mission and the rescue, had slipped into the role of acting first officer as if he had been preparing for it for years. But too many disturbances intruded for serenity of mind, and the absence of the captain was only the greatest of them. This matter, the one waiting in the briefing room, might enlighten him on the larger picture. Chakotay led the way after handing the bridge to Paris.

A pale-haired woman in the gold-shouldered uniform of Security stood against the far end of the room, staring out the viewport. She turned and brushed Chakotay with a quick, reluctant look, just enough for recognition, seemingly not wanting to leave her eyes on him any longer than necessary.

"Rutskoi," he said. "I hadn't seen you— are your injuries—"

"I've been healed, Commander," she said, level and steely. She turned and stared out the viewport again.

"I asked Crewman Rutskoi to come here as the first stage of an investigation," said Tuvok.

"Investigation?" Chakotay looked at him incredulously. "Don't we have enough—"

"She has made some disturbing allegations about your conduct while on Ensign Seska's ship," said Tuvok. He watched as Chakotay's face darkened and his cheeks hollowed, the hard line of his jaw giving him an aggressive air.

"Apparently Ensign Kim was...sexually assaulted...while a prisoner."

Chakotay let out a harsh breath and rubbed his eyes with one hand. "That's right. He was under the influence of a powerful drug at the time. Does he remember it?"

"Not clearly. The holographic medical program decided to inform him after considering Crewman Rutskoï's statements. She came to me immediately afterwards."

"How did Kim take it?"

"Surprisingly, he seemed relatively undisturbed," replied Tuvok with genuine puzzlement. "His words were to the effect that if it had not bothered him at the time, he would not dwell on it now."

Chakotay shook slightly with a silent chuckle. "Harry's tougher than he looks—"

"You just let her do it, you Maquis bastard," said Rutskoï suddenly, wheeling in Chakotay's direction, but still refusing to meet his eyes. Every word was a splatter of venom. "You just stood there and watched her! You get off on that kind of thing?" Tuvok saw Chakotay jerk, but Rutskoï raged on. "You were fucking her all along, she was part of your bunch of filthy terrorists—you're a traitor just like her. You're back here only because she let you go for some reason. You have no right to command Starfleet officers—"

"Crewman," Tuvok cracked out, "you will refrain from using such language to your superior officers."

"I'll apologize to you, Lieutenant, but to this Maquis scum, never."

Chakotay seemed to be breathing with difficulty.

"Why has everyone forgotten he's a criminal? We set out to arrest him, not hand over command of the ship to him. You should have been first officer when Cavit was killed—why the hell didn't Janeway put you there?"

"Crewman—"

"Just a moment, Lieutenant," said Chakotay. He walked around the conference table and confronted his accuser, who stood shaking with rage, clenched fists tucked under her folded arms. A strand had escaped from her upswept bun.

"Answer me one question, Rutskoï. What is the ultimate source of authority on this ship?"

"What?" she snapped.

"Who makes the final decision? Whose word is law?"

"The captain, of course," she said.

"One particular captain? Or anyone who sits in that chair?"

She flicked her eyes to his face, finally. No reply. Tuvok raised both brows. Chakotay leaned in closer and spoke with a bitter edge and gradual crescendo.

"You follow Captain Janeway's orders because she is the legitimately constituted authority on *Voyager*. Not because of who she is as a person, though that has a lot to do with why she's in authority in the first place. She'd be the first to tell you that personal loyalty, likes and dislikes, is not what runs a starship. It's discipline. The discipline that says, 'I am a Starfleet officer. I follow the orders given me unless they are illegal or subvert the ship's mission. I do what I'm told when Captain Janeway tells me to fire on an array that is the only means I know of to get back to everything familiar. I don't do it because she's Janeway, but because she's the captain'. If Janeway had been killed instead of Cavit, if he had been acting as captain and had given that same order, it would have been obeyed just as unhesitatingly."

Silence, the two Humans projecting emotions so strong that Tuvok could nearly feel them through the air.

"Am I right?" The phrase like the strike of a fist.

Rutskoï's face was tight with sullen anger, but she nodded briefly. "Yes, *sir*. I get the point, *sir*. May I be dismissed?"

"You may," replied Chakotay, and sagged slightly when she had gone.

"Mr. Tuvok," he said. "Seska was—well, proving a point. I did everything I could to prevent Ensign Kim from being assaulted. It wasn't much, and Rutskoï's eardrums were broken; she couldn't hear."

"Crewman Rutskoï's accusations seem to be at least partially motivated by emotional considerations that have no place in a properly conducted investigation, and the situation appears to have been a complicated one," replied Tuvok.

"That's putting it mildly," said Chakotay, and leaned wearily on the back of a chair. "How about it, Tuvok?"

"Perhaps it would be best to defer this inquiry, in light of the circumstances—" Tuvok began.

"Everything's in light of the circumstances, you damn Vulcan. The nuances of emotional states and individual reactions. If you can't take those

into account, you've got a blind spot the size of a moon." Chakotay spun the chair sharply and let it rebound against the table. "Now let's drop all this damn nonsense about 'criminals' who never had a choice about the crime." He stalked past the silent lieutenant and through the door.



"STAND AND FIGHT, that's what I say. Kill enough of them, and they'll know better next time." Suder's voice was low and whispery, but carried, clear-edged as a shadow in bright sunlight. "Knock out their shields. Transport a few squads on board with hand weapons. I'd like to get the chance to kill some Kazon." Torres looked into his unnaturally dark eyes and grimaced, but did not reply.

"Where the hell is Chakotay?" she murmured to Bendera. "This is getting ugly."

"Look, they are probably coming back with four or five ships. Maybe more. And we can't outrun them, not now – right, Lieutenant?" Hogan leaned towards her and gestured at Suder. "He's nuts. We can't stay here to get slaughtered. If we leave now, we can get away. Every minute we stay, we're in worse danger."

"I would really have to concur with that, actually," Chell piped up. "It's sheer foolishness to hang around, and what's the use of getting Captain Janeway back if we get a Kazon armada blasting us into dust a few minutes later? Wouldn't you call that a zero-sum transaction? I certainly would. Let's go to Chakotay and tell him that. I'm sure he's done the math, as the saying goes, and he'll see the sense in it, won't he? We'll be fine with him as captain, since he knows what he's doing, as far as I can tell – I'm no expert, of course, and of course I liked Captain Janeway very much. Don't get me wrong. She really was a fine leader, a fine officer, and it's just too bad. I liked Seska too. That was so disappointing when she turned out to be a Cardassian. I'm not sure I believe it yet, frankly, and I have no idea how that kind of surgery works. Doesn't bear thinking about, really. Ooohh." His fat blue face pursed up. "It's terrible to have to leave Janeway behind, but wouldn't she want us to, honestly?" Torres growled, but Chell forged on. "We're talking about one person, and there are a hundred and fifty – well, more like a hundred and fifty-two, if I'm not mistaken – at any rate, a lot of

people on board, not to mention all our technology, and she's said again and again that it would be very bad to let the Kazon get hold of any of it. I can't see that we'd stand a chance against five, or six, or who knows how many ships. And – oh, spirits, we might get disabled and captured, and then we'd be prisoners. Ooohh, and I don't know how they'd treat Boliens. I just can't imagine anything worse. I just can't –"

"Shut UP!" said Torres. "You just can't shut up –"

"We go to Chakotay," broke in Jarvin. "We go to him and tell him we've decided it's not worth the risk, and that we want to leave."

"He may not agree with that," said Jonas, his eyes flickering around the circle.

"So what if he doesn't? He won't have much choice –" Dalby began.

"You're going to give the orders?" Torres scoffed. "Even if he thought getting the captain back was hopeless, he wouldn't take a vote on the options!"

"Um, yeah, you are talking about having him take over as captain –" ventured Gerron.

"Damn straight," shouted Bendera. "And if you lowlifes think you can run this ship on your own, you're...mistaken. Anyone talks about dictating terms to Chakotay again, and I'll pop 'em one. If he wants to stay here and rescue Janeway, we stay here, and we do our damn best to carry out our orders!"

Dalby smiled, and rubbed his chin. Jonas cast a quick look around again, and seemed to be formulating his thoughts.

"So we just stay here and die? What's the damn point?" Hogan flung his hands up and turned away.

"And *you* shut up!" Torres snapped. "We'll get the warp nacelle back on line, and the rescue's not hopeless. We'll be ready to get that device out of the base in a few hours, and he said it was our best hope. I know it sounds far-fetched, but he wouldn't rely on it if he didn't have reason to believe it would work. You've – got to have faith in him." Her voice cracked from sheer emotion.

"I'm glad at least one member of this crew takes my word these days," said another voice, soft and ironic. The door slid shut behind him, and Chakotay stepped forward into the sudden silence.

"Shit..." someone whispered.

Chakotay tucked his hands behind his back, flipping a PADD up and down, and made a slow

survey of the room. Some of the occupants straightened up and looked him in the eye, and some stared sullenly at the floor. Torres smiled in relief.

When he finally spoke, it was with a faint smirk and a gentle edge, some kind of amusement dancing in his eyes. "So...when the cat's away, the mice will play?"

There was a general throat-clearing.

"I'm here for one reason, gentlemen. And it's *not* to hear what you've got to say. I don't care if you've decided anything among yourselves or not—"

"We know that," said Hogan, stepping forward. "You're in charge while the captain's gone."

"I'm glad you realize that."

"But, dammit, Commander, we've got a right to tell you what we think." Hogan swallowed hard and stood trembling. "Most of us aren't officers, but this is Starfleet, right? We're not supposed to keep our mouths shut when we have concerns." He met Chakotay's cool gaze, then squeezed his eyes closed as if expecting a blow. Torres held her breath, though she knew Hogan was not in physical danger.

"Go ahead," said Chakotay, gently.

"Ahh...umm..."

"Anyone else want to do the talking, then? Two minutes, and then your time's up. I don't have a lot to waste on this."

Silence again for a few moments, and then Jarvin stepped beside Hogan. "We don't think it's worth the lives of the whole crew to try to get Janeway back. We run the risk of handing *Voyager* to the Kazon if we stay here, or of having to destroy her and all of us along with her. If we leave now, we'll be safe." He cocked his head. "And you'll be captain. What's so awful—" He broke off at the brief snarl that lifted Chakotay's lip.

"Sometimes retreat is the best option," said Dalby, as if he were quoting someone.

"Not forever," Bendera shot at him. "They're everywhere. No offense, Chakotay, but Janeway's handled them pretty well, and I'd like to see her back on that bridge. We need all the leadership we can get."

Chakotay smiled. "Anything else?"

"Hey...this is Seska we're talking about, right?" Jonas made a nervous movement. "She's reasonable, isn't she? So she's making a power

play. She'd have to, just to survive with those guys. We can work something out with her. She doesn't want to see us all dead." He smiled to show his prominent front teeth. "Give her what she wants, get the captain back, and we can go. Isn't that the simplest solution?"

"Out of the question. You know that."

"Because Janeway would say no?" Jarvin asked.

"That's right."

"Then what about simply leaving now? That wouldn't violate any Starfleet principles. We could be far away even at Warp Two before they come back, and she'd want the ship to be safe, wouldn't she? Would she say yes to the risk you're running just for her? Maybe you didn't get a chance to ask her, but what would she have said if you had?"

Torres saw many currents of thought behind Chakotay's eyes; his face changed color under the golden tone, and he rubbed his right shoulder with the fingers of his left hand. "We're not leaving," he said briefly.

"Sounds good to me," murmured Suder, and Chakotay glanced at him with narrow eyes.

"Commander..."

"Yes, Hogan?"

"I don't want to...die here...and I don't think anyone else does, either." His eyes were tear-filled. "Please, I don't want to die."

Chakotay was silent for several seconds, and Torres watched him grind his jaw. "No one's going to die." He looked at the room and met each pair of eyes in turn. "You've all said your piece. I've heard it. My decision's made, and it's not changing. Now get the hell out of here and back to your duty."



TORRES FOLLOWED HIM out into the corridor as the Maquis scattered and jogged slightly to keep up with him. Chakotay walked grimly on, not really knowing where he was going, ignoring her until she actually grabbed his elbow and spun him around.

"Chakotay!"

He let her see a glimpse of his mind, almost involuntarily, and she gripped his arm with Klingon strength.

"Dammit. You're actually thinking about it, aren't you? You're thinking about leaving her—"

"What did I just tell them?"

"What you wanted them to hear. But— what did SHE tell you?"

"Janeway? Nothing. I didn't speak to her."

His heart was beating so hard he knew he was shaking, and he found himself clutching the implant site again, the incision still painful.

"My God. Jarvin was right. That's what she would have said— 'Leave me behind and save the crew.' You can't do it, Chakotay!"

"I said we're not going anywhere."

"I know what you said! What the hell did Janeway tell you?"

"I— didn't— speak— to— her." He had never even tried to lie to Torres before.

"Chakotay—"

"If you ever want to see her— " He stopped. "Lieutenant, get back to Engineering. Get those repairs finished. It's the best thing you can do for her."

"Aye, Commander." Hurt and angry, with despair rough in her voice. Chakotay heaved a sigh as she turned away.

"B'Elanna."

Torres stopped, but did not turn around.

"I've got a lot on my mind. But I'll rest easier once we have warp drive restored. Everyone will."

Her whole body sagged, then tightened again, and her eyes were burning with painful tears when she looked over her shoulder. "You're in charge. You have to do what you think is best for the ship." She left him, and vanished into the turbolift.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IN HIS QUARTERS, Chakotay took a few deep breaths, leaned against the inside of the door, and could not relax. He was not alone. The implant in his shoulder brought the Cardassian's presence into every room with him. She was sitting heavy on his back, legs wrapped around his neck, her hands on him, clutching, her lips searching for his, silencing him. He had to fight to keep from crying out loud at the image. Some kind of scream had been building in him for hours. The PADD with the message he had meant to give to Torres fell from his hand and hit the floor. He thrust the bursting urge down and took long breaths, closing his eyes, bracing his elbows against the door and resting his forehead on his clenched fists. He needed to meditate, obviously, and to try to contact his guide, before he could do anything else. What was he going to find in the inside of his own head?

Chakotay knelt and brought his medicine bundle and pouch out from their hiding place, took them to the low table in the sitting area, and laid the bundle's wrappings out to create a pad. The blackbird's wing, the stone from the river. He prayed in his head; the akoonah pulsed under his hand. *Do I feel cool hands over my eyes?* he wondered. *Can that evil presence wrapped around me ward off every spirit but itself?* He had to banish her, but at the same time he could not forget her listening ears. If he asked any question aloud, he might alert her to his state of mind. Searching, his eyes scanned back and forth under closed lids. *Come and talk to me,* he pleaded. *Elder sister, come and speak to your brother. He needs you. Bring comfort and guidance with you...*

Darkness. Not the familiar place, not the familiar yellow eyes. Chakotay groaned and his lids snapped open. Nothing. Not even the presence he had conjured the day before, the feeling that Janeway was with him. Cut off somehow, the little pellet of metal just under his collarbone sending a subtle poison throughout him. The anger, the violence in his thoughts, the meat he had eaten—

his medicine was worthless. Panic seeped through him, cold and acid. *I might have neglected my power once, he thought, but it has always been there, patient, as much a part of me as my limbs, and I knew that even when I scoffed at it as a boy. If it's gone, I'm paralyzed. Can the Cardassian even block the spirits from looking over my shoulder? Can she own me entirely, claim my soul the way she claimed my body? What did I leave behind me on her ship? What will I leave behind if I take this ship out of danger?*

If I am powerless now, I might be powerless forever. If I let Janeway die, I might have killed everything important in me. He clapped his hands over his ears, seeing her face in the dim reddish light of Kattell's quarters, hearing her intense whisper.

"PROMISE ME," she had said. "Promise me you will not let your personal feelings intrude on that decision."

His com badge beeped, and he touched it instantly. "Chakotay here."

"Commander," said Tuvok, "We have just picked up a trace on long-range sensors."

"The Kazon?"

"Two vessels on the fringes of this system's Oort cloud, approximately one light-year from this sun. Will you report to the bridge?"

"I'll be there in a minute." Chakotay sagged and ran a hand over his face. "Only two ships?"

"I would surmise that they are waiting for additional ships to arrive. They were only detectable for a few moments until they moved off again, and probably cannot pick us up on their own sensors at this distance."

"I...there's something I have to take care of. Give me a little while."

"I would remind the commander—"

"—that he's acting as captain? I know that, Tuvok. I don't need reminding, dammit." Chakotay slapped his com badge, then tore it off on impulse and flung it into a far corner of his quarters. He heard it rattle against the wall, sprang up immediately and began to hunt for it, cursing silently. Couldn't lose that little thing, that badge that told Tuvok every instant where he was, that placed him at the call of the entire ship. Couldn't lose it, any more than he could lose the damned implant. There were two hooks in him, and he was scabbling for one of them, hands and knees on the

floor under the couch. Looking for it, to sink it into himself again and feel the tearing of his flesh. He was going to be ripped apart between them— Chakotay sat down and put his head in his hands. *Elder sister, he thought, where are you? Where is my power, or anything of my own thoughts?* He was surrounded by the ship and its crew, but more alone than he had ever been in his life. *Gods, I have abandoned you, I have strayed from the path of my ancestors. I have destroyed myself. I cannot hold myself up alone. Who will hold me up?*

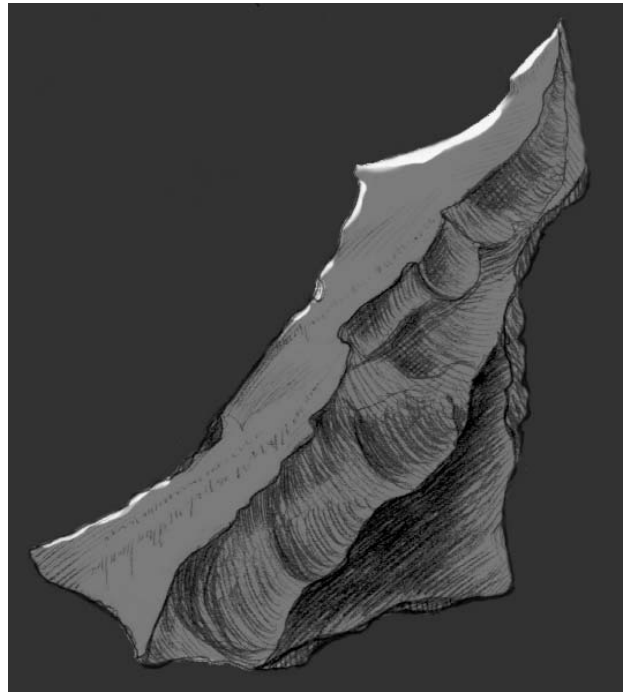
Wrapping tighter and tighter into himself, no core left, only a husk, the self vanished while under the mask. Frantically, he swept his hands over the floor, and grabbed his badge where it lay. The three points of the corners dug into his palm, and he kept his fist closed against the carpet, staring at it. He pressed his other hand to the implant site, his nails raking the skin through the material of his uniform. *Tear it out, he commanded himself. Rip the incision open, force the damned thing out, crush it under your foot. Let the blood run down your arm and drip from your fingertips. Rid of them both at one blow. You're in command now.* He let go of both badge and shoulder and slammed his fists against the wall.

Just leave orbit and run – That bastard Culluh would undoubtedly keep his word and return with reinforcements. Two of them waiting already – *Voyager's* survival might depend on flight. Janeway died, and her ship was safe for the time being, and that's what she had told him to do. *Tear the implant out. Get rid of the hook in your flesh, snap the line that holds you.* He'd have his own ship again, be a captain who'd never have to chafe at anyone else's scruples. He was not the powerless one here, but the one whose decision was the most critical. He held everything in his hand now; all the responsibility was his. No one to relieve him among a hundred and fifty.

He stood up, slowly, and walked to a cabinet, which he opened. A sharp flake of volcanic glass, from a place where the air had burned with sulfur and the ground had been warm under his feet. Chakotay picked it up and tested the edge with his thumb. He had struck this piece off from a larger core and chosen it as the raw material for a knapped point, a traditional weapon. The stuff fractured to a microscopically sharp edge. It sliced skin and muscle more cleanly than would steel.

A little bump, just behind the collarbone, barely detectable through the material of his uniform. Chakotay unfastened the front of his

uniform and slipped the right shoulder down and aside. The neck of his undershirt pulled out of the way, and he could feel the thing clearly now, a painful little knot under the skin. He'd better take the shirt off all the way, or he'd soak the front with blood. He was going to get blood on his hands anyway. The pain wouldn't stop him.



When he had stripped to the waist and left the arms of the jumpsuit dangling, he took the flake of obsidian and knelt to brace himself. He'd better avoid medical scans for a few weeks until the gash had healed and all the evidence was gone. His mind was numb and dull, but he knew Tuvok would have plenty of questions. For the good of the ship, he had to deflect them. If he was the legally constituted authority, he had to seem above suspicion...

Why am I doing this? his mind hammered at him. *For myself? To be Voyager's captain? To take all the weight on his shoulders? To make himself rigid and inflexible, to bear a job he wondered how to bear? Who was going to help him the way he'd helped Janeway?*

She hadn't been alone. He had been there to hold her up even when she hadn't realized what he was doing for her. More and more, she had been

turning to him for his support, and though there were setbacks, they had begun to move to the same rhythm. He had been trying to guide her, gently, and she had been letting him try. They might have managed to agree who was going to lead the dance at what points, eventually. But already, the first steps were mastered. Who was going to step forward as partner for him now?

Not Tuvok, that's for damn sure. He wanted to laugh out loud at the thought.

To save the lives of everyone in this crew, he realized, he would have to make his life hell. If he thought he was hearing problems with the Maquis now, just wait until he was no longer the way to shortcut procedure. Until Tuvok dealt with the personnel problems, and heard about the would-be mutinies before he did. And when Torres looked at him like a *lung ngaghtwI* because he'd left behind the best captain she'd ever known. Lizard fucker—that was what he was, wasn't he? He'd confirm everything Rutskoi thought of him. How long could discipline hold out against personal dislike? It would be to everyone's sorrow if he got an answer to that question. The balance was so delicate. If Janeway died under these circumstances, the balance might never return. This ship would die a slow death instead of a quick one—

No. Tuvok wouldn't let that happen. He'd fight for *Voyager*. He might even call this a logical decision. He'd discount the emotions that went into it, and only look at the facts and Janeway's directive. *I'll only be obeying her.* He gripped the sharp flake more tightly, but did not raise it.

Can I obey her? Even Tuvok might turn and run now. The path had been pointed out to him. He put the edge of the flake to his throat, then slid it lower. *A quick cut and it's out. Push hard so you don't have to do it twice—*

He gasped at the burn of pain down his arm, and his hand jerked involuntarily away. The obsidian flake went spinning, but he let it go, sitting back on his haunches and trying to stop the blood with his fingers. He felt it trickling down his chest, and the hard lump of the implant, still in place, deeper than he'd realized. He should have known it would be more difficult than that to operate on himself. Instinctive self-preservation would prevail, no matter how clear the path. Chakotay hunched over, his eyes stinging.

But he didn't walk anyone else's path. He rebelled when it wasn't looked for, and he went

along with situations everyone expected him to fight. He was an unbalancer, and he'd been almost proud of that in the past, but he had tried to keep everything flowing smoothly here for months. It had been working. Why had he made such a destabilizing move towards Janeway? What kind of flood had he released when he had showed her how he felt?

The blood trickle slowed, and stopped. Chakotay let his hands fall in his lap and stared at the dark stains. She had been trying so hard to put back what had spilled, and all he had done was feel sorry for himself. What an idiot he had been. She had been thinking of the crew, and he had been thinking he had been betrayed one more time. But she had given all of herself to him, overwhelmed him and herself with her own emotion. No matter what she would let herself do about it, she cared for him. Gods, he had made her forget her duty for a few moments. What greater proof could he have?

What in hell am I going to do?

Darkness. Chakotay covered his face with his bloody hands and tried to see nothing, but a little light traced a web in the spaces between his fingers. Somewhere in him, there had to be an answer, since there was no one else he could ask. No one to relieve him. Slowly he began to dress again, and fastened the front of his uniform, oblivious to the half-dried smear down his chest. Crawling back to the table where he had left his bundle and pouch, he stared at the talismans there. *Useless, he thought. I'm poisoned. I'm thinking poison. If I had four days to sweat and pray and fast, I might get it out of my system. I might have four hours.*

Unless I have a new medicine in my grasp. There is a gift that was given me, a dangerous one— He touched the pouch, feeling the stone he had replaced within it, and knowing the little circlet of hair was there as well.

No. If I make full use of that, I will never let go of it. My captain, and her gift of herself, never to be repeated. I might starve for the want of her. How can I shackle myself like this? But I must have power, and she is my only weapon.

He slipped his hand into the pouch, drew out the stone, and stumbled to his feet. Somehow he was out in the corridor, leaning against the wall next to the panel and tapping in his security code to open the captain's quarters.

The door slid open, and he nearly fell inside. Darkness. The door shut, and he had not told the computer to turn on the lights. Nothing but

starlight through the viewport, since *Voyager* was on the night side of the planet. Chakotay crawled across the floor, feeling his way around the furniture. He didn't have the strength to stand, so he found an open space and collapsed on the carpet. Curled into a ball, he covered his eyes. *Just breathe for a while...* He could smell her, her spicy odor, sweet and warm, carried in the dark air. Alertness, painfully focused attention, a hard edge of apprehension. He might have been in the same room with her, he felt her presence so strongly. Slowly he hauled himself up to a sitting position, and crossed his legs, and held the stone between his sticky palms, his hands drawn up to his chest. *Breathe her air*, he told himself. *This is as close as you're going to get to her.* Chakotay lowered his hands to his knees and let them open, palms up, the stone resting on his right hand. His heartbeat increased in spite of his relaxed posture, some outside influence driving it faster and faster. He began to hyperventilate helplessly until he was afraid he might pass out, and sagged, dizzy with oxygen. The stone slipped to the floor, a soft thump on the carpet that he barely noticed.

What was channeling this to him? Not anything of his making. Chakotay flung his hands out suddenly, his chest heaving. The line, the line that held him — Janeway was on the other end. She was hearing him through the transmitter. The Cardassian was listening, and she would have the captain with her. The painful bump behind his collarbone. Here was a strange talisman, a thing meant as poison, an assault turned into a connection... Something taut and vibrating, something that transmitted both ways. Just the breathing, the beat of the heart, the life in each. She was lending strength to him again, across thousands of kilometers.

He bowed his head again, without his talismans before him. He had power.

...WATER MURMURING, talking over the stones, falling from terrace to terrace on its way to join the green lake. He stood on the opposite bank, and she did not realize he had returned. He could watch her without her knowledge, and study the way the sun traced its pattern through the leaves and over her face. The beautiful curve of her bones, the translucence of her skin, the shifting highlights in her hair. She smiled at nothing, then grew more thoughtful, sunlight dancing on deep water. Joy

and wisdom, compassion and knowledge, desire and duty. The light burned in his chest to drive away the darkness. She raised one hand and brushed back a fallen strand of hair, and he crossed the stream to stand beside her.

He could not speak. He was invisible to her, and the shape in the trees behind him, the serpent, had followed him. It would cross the stream in his footmarks, and he himself had shown it the path. He had led it here. How could he warn her? It was coiling around his legs, darting its tongue out against his face, since it could walk upright like a Human. Perhaps it would be distracted by him long enough — no, gods, it slithered away and approached her. He could not speak —

"Elder sister, come to me. Elder sister...I have wandered, but I am not far. I am by the river, near where it joins the lake. Come and find me."

A rough-coated shoulder nudged his leg and a lean brindled shape brushed by him. Circled between them, four times around, then took one white hand between sharp teeth, gently. She started, looked up, and met his eyes. He could not speak, but he could look into the blue, like clear water, and see her begin to smile. But the serpent took her other hand, and darted out its tongue, and struck.

HE HADN'T REALIZED that death would hurt so much. Wasn't death the end of pain?

If so, why was he screaming so loudly?

His voice was raw, his own howling grinding in his ears, like an animal's, inarticulate, his throat torn with pain. He must be alive, then. Crumpled on the floor of Janeway's quarters, his hands clenched and shaking in tight claws. What had cut him this time? What had been cut — ? No — no — The line, had it gone slack? Was there anyone still drawing breath in unison with him?

Still with him, still with him. Her breath still moving, her blood still washing in her veins, her warmth still seeping through his limbs. The acuity of the contact was slowly fading, but the taut lifeline still trembled faintly with her vitality. He clung to it in desperation, trying to speak to her, groaning into the carpet, his face pressed to the floor. Kattell was with her, Kattell was listening to him and to her. If he spoke, Janeway would hear him — but he could not speak aloud. What had the Cardassian made of his cry? He waited for another shock, one that might destroy him utterly. Waiting,

he felt the trembling, like the movement of eyes under closed lids, like Janeway's mouth when he had first kissed her.

The shock did not come.

Janeway was still with him, she wasn't dead; but she had thought she was dead for a moment, and he had felt her conviction of death, and realized what it would mean to him. As if his heart had been slashed out of him and devoured. The heart from his body, and the heart of *Voyager*. He was almost surprised to feel the beats still vibrating in his ribcage.

Chakotay's breathing gradually slowed, though his chest pounded so hard he could not get a full gulp of air. He shoved up from the floor and sat cross-legged again, and focused on the stars in the viewport. Slowly he registered his surroundings as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Janeway's desk, her sofa and table, the flower vases scattered around the room. Through the dark passage of the door, he could see the bedroom, and her bed.

A shudder, pure fire, went through him at the thought of her lying there, her pale limbs uncovered, her hair spread over the pillows. The power and clarity of the vision amazed him, and his weakness was such that he could not resist. Her scent drew him in. Chakotay rose to his feet and moved haltingly through the bedroom door until the bed stopped his progress. Again her presence was nearly palpable. The images in his mind crowded in until he gave in and let them enfold him.

...REACHING OUT, reaching out to embrace him and draw him down. Welcoming his weight on her. Naked for him. His uniform off his shoulders, the shirt pushed up, slipping his clothes from his body, her hands helping him. Pillowed on her, kissing her mouth, brushing his fingers under her thighs while she reached down to stroke him. His penis firm and swelling, his hips pushing against her, struggling the clothes off, lying skin to skin with the deepest of groans. Kissing her. Gentle, hard, soft and wet, bruising. Fingers trailing over her belly, arching and reaching, the moisture slick and fast. Crying out, wanting him. Pulling him over her, tilting to meet him, kissing him. Now. Now...

HE HAD FALLEN to his knees, his head resting on the bed, his arms embracing it. Not in surrender, but in reaching to lift some burden. If she would let him, he would lift and support all that he could carry. Was it wrong of him to need her so? To need her at all? Was it an insanity to want nothing withheld between them, to give himself utterly into her service? He could never offer, for such a gift required complete return in kind, her whole being. If one such gift, of spirit alone, had been dangerous, the entirety would consume him. He turned and slid down against the end of the bed, sitting at its foot, on the floor.

Gods and ancestors, help me, hold me up, watch over me, watch over my captain. Tears streaked his cheeks and ran along his chin. Weeping, he sat and meditated, mixing Janeway in with his silent prayers as both protected and protector.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN a long time later, Chakotay found his way to the door again and slipped out, weak and limp, but strength gradually returning. His uniform was soaked with sweat and blood and the collar with tears. He locked his own door behind him and threw everything into the cleaning cycle. A basin of cold water to dunk his head in, and he washed something away besides the salt and stickiness. Invisible filth dissolved away, or had burned off. He'd been stripped to the bone, but now he felt clean again, his purpose straight and clear before him. Like an arrow aimed at the heart of the enemy, waiting only to fly. But he had no fury in this battle, only purpose. Pure power. He hadn't felt like this in years.

Chakotay dressed quickly in a spare uniform and retrieved his com badge, checking the chronometer as he did so. He wasn't sure when Tuvok had called, but it had been at least an hour since he had gone into Janeway's quarters. More queer looks would come his way when he got to the bridge, but he knew what he had to do now. Where was that PADD? It held a brief explanation of the situation and the problem of the implant, and he had meant to put it under Torres' nose and slip out of Engineering until their meeting in Dalby's quarters had scotched that idea. Chakotay picked it up from the floor and scanned it again, wondering what Tuvok's reaction would be. "Don't say a damn thing aloud about this," was the first line, and he grinned at the thought of a Vulcan

brow raised over the phrase. Perhaps he should reword that—

“Commander Chakotay to the bridge,” buzzed his com badge. “Ensign Seska is hailing us.”

He took off for the turbolift at a dead run, not even bothering to acknowledge.

Kattell smiled at him a little too broadly when she peered over Janeway and said, “This is getting familiar.”

“Are you all right, Captain?” he asked.

Janeway nodded slowly and closed her eyes for a moment. Her hair was still tangled over her shoulders, but Kattell had given her something to wear, at least. Something close-fitting and black, which only emphasized her pallor. To look at her again nearly overwhelmed him.

“That was very slick, Chakotay,” the Cardassian said, remembering to snarl. “You certainly had me fooled. You can convince a girl of anything, once you put your—mind—to it, can’t you?”

For one horrible moment he was sure she knew what he had done to persuade her of his devotion. This deception, these layers upon layers of falsehood that concealed the withered, shrunken reality—he longed to destroy them all at a blow. His new determination fought to reveal everything. But he had to cling to the wrappings of lies a little while longer to have any hope of ever telling the truth again.

“I doubt that,” he said. He stood before the command chair where Janeway might have in his place, his arms behind him. “I assume this is another ransom demand.”

“More of a check-in, Commander. You see what I have, just as a reminder; you tell me what you’ve got, and we think about how to make everyone happy.” Kattell twiddled a long lock of Janeway’s hair around her phaser and smiled at her.

“What’s your point, Ensign?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I don’t know if I ever want to give her back. Maybe I’ll let you have *some* of her...”

Bluff, of course. She was hamming it up for Tuvok. This was supposed to keep everyone distracted from the possibility of a takeover, make the phantom artifact seem even more important. If negotiation was impossible, the most desperately

slender straws would look attractive. This part of the act rang too true for his taste, but Kattell knew he would never cooperate if Janeway or any others were harmed. She still had only ten men out of the dozen she had started with, could not take the ship by force, and needed his help to succeed. Although she was reasonably sure of Chakotay’s intentions, she had hedged her bets effectively. If he was loyal to her, she had no problems. If he was not, she had his captain, and could at least take her revenge.

“You *will* keep her alive, Seska. Otherwise, I won’t have any reason at all to keep *you* alive.” Good line, a little hokey, but well delivered. Janeway was silent, but he saw her nose twitch as if she were suppressing a smile. Nervous, however. Her eyes blinked frequently in an irregular pattern. That was at odds with her perfectly controlled body language—

One quick blink. Pause. One quick, one slow. Short pause. One slow, one quick. “Damn,” he breathed to himself. She had been doing this through the whole transmission. A very old trick. Possibly too old for an Obsidian Order operative trained to counter the latest Federation technology. He allowed himself a tiny smile of acknowledgment. Janeway nodded almost imperceptibly. *And she twitted me for using tactical chestnuts*, he thought, concealing another smile.

“Sounds like a standoff for the moment,” said Kattell. “But don’t unpack all that merchandise I ordered.” She reached to the console and flicked the switch. Janeway’s eyes were steady on his when her face vanished.

“I’ll be in the ready room,” said Chakotay after everyone on the bridge had taken a deep breath. Tuvok seemed about to speak, but compressed his lips.

Janeway’s room. Her chair, with the imprint of her body, her souvenirs on the bookshelf, her plants and flowers. Chakotay could almost taste her. He silently asked permission before sitting and activating the desk monitor. He replayed the transmission with manual controls, speeding and slowing it as needed. The pale, resolute face; the avid, viciously humorous one.

He picked up a PADD and poised his hand over it. She had started right after he had asked her how she was. Short. Long. Long. Short. A breath. Short. Long. Short. Short.

Chakotay typed slowly. P. L. A. N. S. Long pause. Every Starfleet cadet for the last thirty years had suffered through Professor Chiangkush and his Basic Communication seminars. Semaphore, flashing mirrors, tree blazes, naval flags, and International Morse. At least he himself had gotten extra credit for demonstrating a few traditional methods even the instructor didn't know.

T. O. Long pause. Kattell had discussed everything about the plans in her quarters, in front of Janeway. She had constantly searched for reaction, both on the captain's face and on his. Perhaps that was why she had let Janeway look at the viewscreen so long.

K. I. L. L. Long pause. 'Plans to kill—' Oh, gods...Chakotay felt an icy wind under his breastbone. His fingers trembled on the PADD. M. E. Pause. A. N. D. Pause. T. E. A. M. 'Plans to kill me and team...' Kattell had probably taunted her with it, perhaps held the phaser to her head, and although galvanized with horror, Janeway had retained the presence of mind to warn him... There was the source of his shock in the captain's

quarters, the one that had burned away every doubt he had and set him implacably on his course. Kattell had no idea what she had done. A miscalculation, spurred by hatred on so many levels he wondered it had not caused a misstep before now. He should have realized how deep and irrational it was.

Tuvok. He had to make Tuvok understand now. Where was that damn PADD with the message—?

"Commander," said the intercom, right on cue.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"I need to confer with you, sir."

"Of course, Lieutenant. I was just about to call you in."

The door swished open, and the security chief stepped just inside. His dark face was utterly blank of expression. The door closed again, and Chakotay began to rise from the desk.

"Kindly remain seated, Commander," said Tuvok, and aimed a phaser directly at his chest.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KATTELL WAS LISTENING. Chakotay knew she had heard every word. If she realized her plot was discovered, that she had no chance of taking *Voyager*, would her hatred simply flare into blind action? The target at hand was Janeway. In comparison to her, he was in no danger at all.

The Vulcan was an expert at codes. He had read Janeway's message as she gave it, and had thought it intended for him – why should he not? – and had interpreted it as a warning against the man who was insisting on a dubious away mission. Perfectly logical. And perfectly suited to his inclination, if truth be known. A man who had stepped between the Vulcan and his captain. A Vulcan's loyalty was no small thing. Chakotay had believed he had it once, and had been astounded at his luck. Learning that the loyalty had always belonged to another had been a blow, but had seemed somehow...logical. At least he couldn't fault Tuvok's choice of devotion.

Chakotay brought his right hand up, slowly, and laid his forefinger on his lips in the universal gesture for silence. Tuvok lifted one brow and stepped closer, the phaser steady. Chakotay moved the finger to his forehead, drew a loop between the brows, then swept it down to the left in a sloping line to the point of the shoulder. Finally he traced the rim of one ear and tapped it. His former Maquis comrade would remember the tribal signs for two things Chakotay's ancestors had never even imagined – *Cardassian. Surveillance device.*

"Mr. Tuvok, please sit down," he said with a facility that surprised him.

Tuvok raised his chin slightly, but he did not lower the phaser. "Thank you, Commander," he replied, laying one hand on the back of a chair, but remaining standing. His brows prompted Chakotay to continue.

"I would like your assessment of Ensign Seska's probable actions," he said lamely, while he tried to explain with his hands. He tapped the right side of his throat four times in a line front to back.

Four pips. *Captain.* A back and forth motion of one forefinger over the other. *Danger.* The sign for silence again, and the circle and tap of the ear. Four pips. A two-handed gesture, inclusive of himself. The palms out, empty of weapon. Tuvok still did not lower the phaser.

Chakotay let his frustration show. Damn. He could never explain this way, and writing it down again would take too long, and be just as unconvincing to a suspicious Vulcan.

Tuvok moved his own hand to his temple after a moment. "I do not believe Ensign Seska is looking for a ransom at this point. Revenge, or some other plan seems more likely," he said. At least he was playing along with the charade. Tuvok would need confirmation of a very sure kind before he let Chakotay out of his line of fire, however. "Beyond that basic observation, I have little to add." The hand at his temple spread out in a stylized gesture, touched the forehead and cheekbone, then moved to indicate Chakotay. What did he mean?

"The mission to the base is even more important now, it seems," he replied. "We have to do everything possible to keep the captain safe." A mindmeld? The Vulcan form of telepathy by contact?

"I concur with you, sir. I will continue to prepare the away team." That would certainly confirm his loyalty and tell the whole story as well – but how much else?

"Very well, Lieutenant. Dismissed."

"Sir," said Tuvok, stepped to the door, opened it, closed it again, and waited. Could Chakotay keep anything away from him in the process of a meld? The phaser had never wavered in its aim. Chakotay knew it was on stun, not killing power, but if he were stunned, the jig would be up anyway and Kattell alerted. If she hadn't been alerted already by the halting conversation. His mental privacy, which held secrets he knew Janeway would not want known, even, or especially, to Tuvok, or her safety? No contest there. He nodded, and stood at the motion of the phaser's snub. Tuvok pointed at the couch by the viewport, walked there himself, and put the phaser in his holster after deliberation. He bowed his head and put his fingertips together, then looked up at Chakotay, spreading his hands out in an inquiring gesture, a formal act of asking

permission without the weapon in hand. A *Vulcan*, Chakotay thought, *must not want to sully his traditional practices any more than I would mine...* He nodded again with his hands relaxed at his sides, walked slowly to the couch, and sat. At Tuvok's gesture, he lay back and swung his feet up from the floor.

The Vulcan knelt at his head, reaching over the end, the long dark fingers settling over Chakotay's face; temples, cheekbone and jaw. He leaned forward, pressing into the couch for support, far enough that his face was visible. The heavy inclined brows drew together; the eyes closed.

Silently, the lips formed words.
"My mind...to your mind..."

...A RUSH LIKE WATER, sudden as a river down a hillside, gathering in pools, filling the channels, quick, cool. A light turning on in a room that had always been dim. A landscape he had thought familiar made unrecognizable with new illumination, a new angle of view.

Someone with him in a place that had always been private.

Chakotay sucked in a panicked breath, his head tensing and rearing back into the cushion. The new presence faded, then returned. It said nothing, but waited patiently. Slowly he let himself expand to accommodate it, as simultaneously it thinned out and spread over a wider and wider area. It melted and soaked into him, filling the interstices until he was whole and seamless. A single mind, a single thought.

They moved slowly, sifting memories.

THEY SAT IN A SMALL SHIP, damaged with its passage through tumbling fire and unimagined space. A woman's face on the viewscreen. Chestnut hair, bright, upswept. She turned to them, addressed them by name with her hands on her hips. They had never seen her before. How did she know their name? They knew her very well. Both of them were there, one at the controls, one at the engineering station that the missing Torres should have manned. The shock at the sight of the woman's face—

Recognition. Awe.

She lay on the ground, a grey figure on top of her, both fading, the whole scene dissolving into glittering energy. The last time one of them had seen her. She was gone, and in danger, and perhaps for the sake of one hostage. How did he deserve such concern? Neither of them thought he did. And she was in the hand of the viper. A mishap of random chance. Why then did they blame themselves?

ANOTHER WOMAN. Younger, harder, with a Bajoran face. She moved up to them with a lascivious grin, ran her hand over the phaser in their holster. "I could clean that for you," she said. "You'll need everything in good killing order." They sneered at her and tried to shake off her hand, but she followed them, undiscouraged. And the phaser did need cleaning, if it was to do its work, so they let her do it, but made sure not to thank her.

The Bajoran was weeping, and the tears tore them with guilt and chagrin. She knew that, and that was why she was weeping. Her eyes were still clear, bright and hungry. They tried to apologize, and fumbled on the words. She moved up to them, and ran her fingers through their cropped hair, and within ten minutes, she was stripped and on her back. They were panting and rolling together, and the release was welcome. Self-indulgence. Idiocy. A warm woman, and she claimed to love them.

They followed her thread.

She told them they were unworthy of her love, and tore them open with the words. Dust on the soul, settling in every corner of their thoughts. When would they ever see her again, and settle this wound with its maker?

Watching from the trees, grey and ghostly, forced into sight. They wanted to conceal her again, but they had no right to do so. They had tried so hard to drag her out of hiding, and they had to face her again. The silhouette of slender limbs. She kissed them and they recoiled, but regretted having done so. She smoothed the collar of a dark shirt she had given them, and they stood still to allow her touch. And within ten minutes, she was stripped and on her back, panting and rolling with them...

The joined beings pulled abruptly apart, and both gasped in pain.

MUTINEER. TRAITOR. INTERLOPER. YOU STAND CONVICTED—

No. No. Read my emotions. Try to understand a language you do not speak...

TWO CONTRADICTORY STATES. IMPOSSIBLE. INCOMPREHENSIBLE.

Try to understand. Janeway. For her sake. My emotions...

ONE MIND in two bodies again.

Blue eyes, meeting theirs across the compartment. They felt their stomach heaving and wrenching, both at the memory and at the revelation of the memory. The woman bent under them, rocking, crying out. They were sweating, desperate, weak with fear, and the blue eyes were steady, reaching for courage, holding out hope until they realized what they must do. An assault turned into a connection. Detached in amazement, watching herself with comprehension and condemnation, a new perspective layered on the original. They closed their eyes, and felt their captain with them, almost in body. Strange, fascinating, vile. Necessary, logical, abhorrent. The gift, the gift was made— An odd, unformed anger, an unpracticed rage, a feeling of bereavement, resentment at an interloper in the special relationship. *YOU HAVE NO RIGHT*, they accused themselves, and replied, *We know*. And how did they know? Movement at the speed of thought, undeflectable.

Down, down. They broke the surface of a warm green lake. Violet leaves in sunlight. A gentle kiss, that released aching desire. And more, far more, the joining of souls, the truth like a blazing sun. Both of them gasped, pulled her closer, reveled in the opening of her lips, her arms around them. Both of them, equally.

THE SECRET OPENED, its nature unexpected. They would never harm her or let harm come to her. They would die for her. Both of them, and both recoiled in shock from a part of themselves.

A Vulcan? His loyalty no small thing.

And this interloper, this feral, unpredictable, unknown quantity, was a hideous danger, but not the danger previously feared. Images whipping

past, of the big man with cropped hair, dispassionately observed and analyzed. An outlaw, an uncomfortable officer, a potential risk who must be watched. Their logical side analyzed the tactical situation and the advantages that could be gained through a direct attack on a Human's vulnerable emotions. The Cardassian had had nearly the same idea, had analyzed the advantages in the same way, and they compared their own assumptions with hers, feeling a queer mix of reaction. Although they knew now that she and their logic had been wrong about the motives involved, this was worse; their fears were doubled, the prospect of mutiny fading away and something far more unsettling taking its place...

They embraced their captain and she bent under them, willing for a few moments. They were lost in her. Would they ever be able to extract themselves from her arms, disentangle their souls from her, from each other? The synchrony was too strong, between them and with her. They were drowning in her embrace, her grip too strong for them. Every inhibition, every tenet of training was burning away, and they knew this was the truth...

THEIR PHYSICAL BODIES were breathing in unison, deep and harsh, nearly mastered by the memory brought out so intensely, as if they were experiencing it in reality all over again. The logic fought for supremacy, and tried to pull them out of the deepening pool. In hindsight, they had been fatally wrong, whether the emotion was true or not. Emotion had no value, no meaning, should be disregarded in any important decision. This was no basis for the command of a starship, for loyalty to captain. Devotion to the individual, not to the principle? Dangerous, lacking in logic, subject to improper influences—

She cried out, and pushed them away. The pain roared through them, cold, an icy ache, and they quenched themselves again, and watched her vanish. Another critical decision taken out of their hands. The landscape no longer seemed beautiful, but somehow the sun still shone on it. The emotions so mixed, so incomprehensible. Hurt, anger, humiliation; strange aching joy, a cleansing yearning—

A forcible wrench, one part mastering the other. Up to the surface again, struggling desperately for air.

Stay out. Stay out.
IT WAS NECESSARY THAT WE VISIT EVERY POINT
ALONG THE PATH.
Satisfied? Damn you.
WE ARE SATISFIED. WE MUST APOLOGIZE
NONETHELESS FOR THE INVASION. IT IS FOR HER SAKE.
WE HAVE BOTH MADE SACRIFICES FOR HER SAKE.

The clarity of a summoned voice.
Her eyes held theirs with a smile, and they quailed at the force of her beauty. The logic of the connection eluded them, but it was a fact nonetheless.

"Lieutenant Tuvok, I'm pleased to meet you. I hope we'll get along very well. Call me Captain."
"I will." They were hers from that moment.

"It's good to have you back with us, Mr. Tuvok." She stepped up to both of them as they stood on her bridge, and greeted one of them as her own. The other felt the phrase as a blow, and stared at the Vulcan, not in disbelief, but with a shock of certainty mixed with the anger. How could they have ever thought otherwise? This woman was their natural leader. They were hers from that moment.

"We have forged this relationship for years, and I depend on it." Her eyes were filled with tears, but they could not hold her emotions in disdain. Not hers. We violated our principles and hers to obtain this object, this folder of space, which is useless. Lieutenant Torres, Lieutenant Carey, and Ensign Seska are also culprits, but we are the senior officer, and responsible. And none of these serve her as we do. We did what she could not do, a sacrifice for her sake. She is greatly affected. We will not allow that to happen again. Her...happiness is precious to us. Her effectiveness as a leader is bound with her emotions. We must serve her on that basis. We are content to serve.

Firm pressure ushering the memory away.

ARE WE SATISFIED? One emotion calling out to another it recognized. An aching desire, a wish to be united, to fly to join the sun. And slowly emerging from hiding, an unformed longing, buried and drowned, deeper than ever thought possible, nevertheless cataloged and filed away. A kernel of a shining essence, once touched, carefully sealed. Both saw the hopelessness, and one

wondered at how it had been concealed, and the other at how it had been revealed.

No action, no expression, no acknowledgment. We will address you as Captain. We will return you to your rightful place. Our purpose, our minds united.

The memories sifting.

A careful dance with teasing hatred. The layers of deception wrapping over the truth again and again until it was invisible. Hidden from sight so long they had forgotten its face. How would they know if it had changed while concealed? How would they recognize it when they saw it again? Would anything be different, if they lived through this? A long flight alone, to haven, but abandoning the focus of their thoughts. Realization, acceptance, trust in themselves, deep concern for the future. Vulcans do not worry. My captain...

DRAINING APART, a rising and separation of two dissimilar elements. Some of each had dissolved into the other, some of the essence of each extracted. A lighter rapport now between two separate beings, question and answer.

SHE WILL NOT KEEP HER WORD, AS YOU SUSPECTED ALL ALONG. HOW SHALL WE KEEP THE CAPTAIN SAFE?

The Cardassian will want her to know that her death is coming. The team will die first in front of her eyes, and only then will she face the phaser. They will be lined up against the wall; she will not take much time. We must send another team down after the first, to intercept her once she believes the plot is in place and has brought the captain out.

TIMING WILL BE OF THE ESSENCE. VERY RISKY. The alternative?

WE MUST ENSURE THAT NO WEAPONS ARE FIRED. LIEUTENANT TORRES AND I WILL PREPARE AN ANTI-PHASER FIELD GENERATOR – A HIGH-ENERGY DAMPING DEVICE. I AND THE OTHERS WILL ACT AS BAIT. YOUR TEAM MUST FOLLOW QUICKLY, NONETHELESS.

Everything is in your hands, then, Lieutenant. I can't be in earshot of any of the real preparations.

I UNDERSTAND. WE TRUST ONE ANOTHER ABSOLUTELY IN THIS RESPECT. I SHALL NOT FAIL YOU, COMMANDER. I SHALL SEND YOU PROGRESS REPORTS AS NECESSARY, WHILE YOU CONTINUE WITH THE CARDASSIAN'S PLAN TO KEEP HER PACIFIED.

Agreed. But make it quick; she can barely restrain herself from murder, even with so much to gain.

SLIPPING AWAY, a less-than-wholeness, half-empty. Chakotay was lying on his back, the Vulcan bent over him. Tuvok removed his fingers from Chakotay's temples and sat back. Chakotay opened his eyes slowly, refocusing outwards. He could face the dangers ahead with calm logic now, he thought. A difficult problem, but not insurmountable. He sat up and looked at Tuvok.

As he sat on his heels in an attitude of tense meditation, the Vulcan's elegant features were working with muscular spasms as if he were in pain. Chakotay had never seen him so affected, not when he had been wounded, not when he had seen things that left his Maquis comrades blind with tears. Once he might have gloated to see the thick shell pierced. Chakotay reached out, meaning to touch his shoulder, and Tuvok's eyes snapped open. He let out a long breath, rose, and gestured to the door.

TOM PARIS OBVIOUSLY had no idea why Chakotay was grinning broadly at Tuvok after all the strained exchanges of the past few hours. As he left the bridge to allow the security chief to call a meeting of the senior officers out of his hearing, Chakotay met the pilot's startled gaze and couldn't resist a quick wink. Once the turbolift doors shut, he nearly exploded with relief and suppressed laughter, leaning against the wall and holding a hand over his mouth to silence himself. He might have wept as well if he could have, for two longings that had merged for a moment into one, and neither ever to be fulfilled. He knew that now. He was damned if a Vulcan was going to handle his emotions better than he was...

Neelix bustled over to him as soon as he entered the dining room, expressing concern and asking anxiously about Janeway's welfare, and that sobered him a little. Kes relayed plates and cups to him at his table, her small hands fetching and whisking away, and he ate far too much for his stomach to handle at once, but he had realized just how hungry he was, and how physically weakened. His mind and body had left him no peace for days, and now he could restore them both. His strength was approaching a peak of some kind, his reservoirs fully charged. Kim was off duty and having a meal at the same time, so Chakotay waved him over.

"Harry, how are you doing? I've hardly had a chance to ask."

"Oh, just fine, Commander. Frankly, I don't recall much of it. Rutskoï had to tell me what happened."

"You're lucky." Chakotay took a deep drink from his glass. "Ah...I just heard Rutskoï's side of it."

"Hey, she took it pretty hard," said Kim sentimentously. "I'm OK."

Chakotay paused while he finished a pile of sliced fruits, one of them green and sticky, with edible seeds. "How do you feel about...Seska? How she treated you?" Here he was on dangerous ground, perhaps, but Kattell would be expecting him to do some probing.

Kim smiled thinly and said nothing.

"And...what about the way I acted?"

"Hey, I think I owe you my life, sir." Kim put out his hand, and Chakotay looked at it for a moment.

"Why?"

"Well, Seska wanted you to help her, I guess, and she knew you wouldn't unless she could threaten someone else and make you do it, so she didn't let the Kazon kill us. Isn't that right?"

"Maybe."

"If you'd told her you wouldn't have any part of it, she might have shot us first and maybe regretted it later."

Chakotay thought about the near-murder of Janeway and wondered. "You might be right."

"So I owe you my life, and Rutskoï does too. She'll come around." Kim offered his hand again, and Chakotay took it. "I have to admit, Commander..."

"Yeah?"

"I didn't like the idea of serving with a Maquis first officer. I'm Starfleet. But I kind of doubt Commander Cavit, rest in peace, would have been able to do the same thing. I'm glad you're with *Voyager*, sir."

"Thanks, Kim. I doubt Cavit would have been in that situation in the first place."

"Maybe not." They grinned at each other.

"Ensign Kim to the bridge," buzzed Kim's com badge.

"Oh, no. I just got off duty an hour ago." Kim made a face and put down his fork. "Well, it must be pretty important. Coming, sir?"

"Ah...in a few minutes." Chakotay knew that Tuvok would be informing all the senior staff, and as many others as needed to know. Once that had been done, he could return and get back to work.

Freed of much of its load, his mind felt like a clear lens, focusing on the overriding goal. Janeway. "Janeway," he whispered through his fingers as Kim rose, and the young man looked quizzically at him.

"Excuse me?"

He suddenly didn't care if Kattell had heard that or not. "Janeway. We're working to free her. That's all that matters now."

"Well, maybe getting Seska behind bars."

"We'll do our best, Ensign."

"Sir," replied Kim, and left. Chakotay attended to his meal. Never knew where the next one was coming from sometimes.

"Torres to Chakotay."

"Chakotay here," he replied, stepping into the turbolift to return to the bridge.

"Damn you—" She swallowed her words, choking with tears that he knew were joyful ones. "We can get warp now. Five point five or six, I think. I'm going to keep tinkering, and Carey just had a good idea about the magnetic constrictors. Maybe we can get more for a short time, if we need to."

"Thanks, B'Elanna."

"Don't mention it. Oh, hell..." She signed off.

Chakotay smiled, and met the eyes of all the bridge crew as the doors opened. He'd always liked having his work cut out for him.

"GOODLUCK," Chakotay said, anticipating the inevitable response.

"The exigencies of random chance cannot be enlisted in one's favor," replied Tuvok, checking his equipment. Torres directed a security guard to the transporter pad with a load of scanning devices. Window dressing for the charade of searching for alien super weapons.

"Whatever you say, Tuvok," Chakotay chuckled. Kim smiled, waiting with the phaser damping device, disguised as a tricorder. Torres and Carey were getting a lot of practice with miniaturization. Kazon weapons, judging from what they had seen of them, were similar to phasers or disrupters and should be blocked by the same frequencies.

A tiny interlude of levity in a situation so tense and delicate Chakotay had a vicious stomachache. The smile left his face almost

immediately. Torres glanced at him with sympathy, and he managed a grimace in return.

"Don't worry, Commander. Everything's set up, nothing can go wrong. The captain will be back in time for dinner," she said. They watched as the rest of the party took their spots on the pads, and Chakotay gave the order to energize. Tuvok's face was the one he concentrated on, seeing him give a nod before the figures faded. Thirteen were going down in all, carefully picked to seem plausible to Kattell. Torres was staying behind, but would be one of the next group, the rescue team. She had insisted, and Chakotay was glad to have her fighting skills to aid them.

"Tuvok to *Voyager*," came the voice over the comlink. "Down and safe. We will proceed to the location of the hatch and enter the base once we have ascertained whether Ensign Seska's ship is present."

"Acknowledged. Be careful once you're in; communications between you will be tricky with all that shielding, and it will be impossible to transport you out."

"Yes, Commander. Tuvok out." Chakotay looked at Torres and nodded, signaling the next phase of the game.

"I'll be on the bridge," he said, stepped into the corridor and walked to a turbolift. Inside, he cleared his throat and spoke. "Kattell. The party is at the landing site. Give them a few minutes to open the hatch and get inside before you land. Your cloaking from *Voyager's* sensors is holding." Actually, it was not—Paris, warned, had spotted her shadowing them an hour ago, but had typed his observations to Chakotay's and Tuvok's monitors rather than mentioning it aloud. Tuvok had briefed the bridge crew carefully.

Chakotay's stomachache felt like a heavy grenade in his belly, the pin easing out with every passing moment. Ten minutes, perhaps fifteen. His freedom would be restored, or his life shattered. He stepped out of the turbolift to the bridge, exchanged pleasantries, went to the ready room. Torres arrived in a minute with the security detail, another of Tuvok's hand-picked groups. There was none of the usual chatter or joking among the ten men and women. Well-trained, disciplined. None of them Maquis. Rutskoi let her eyes remain on him a moment. They filed in silently, assumed the standard away-team spread around him. Paris glanced through the open door with an unaccustomed look of nervousness, then checked

his console. When Kattell had landed – Paris turned and gave a thumbs up. A transporter technician waited with a portable console. Chakotay counted down, his eyes half closed. Open the back of the ship, deploy the boarding ramp, get the Kazon down it, prod Janeway, blindfolded, across the clearing...

Success depended on the timing, as Tuvok had said. Too soon, and Kattell would see them before her group had intercepted the first away team, before Kim could activate the anti-phaser

field. She might just shoot Janeway immediately. Too late –

Into the hatch, left open by Tuvok. Down the corridor, find the away team, only slightly spread out as if searching. Kim would see Kattell, and he would swiftly press a button on the tricorder – would the sight of him give her pause? Not much. Chakotay tugged on the sleeves of his uniform, glanced around at the alert eyes of the security guards, turned to the transporter technician, and slashed a forefinger downwards.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

NOT ONLY BLINDFOLDED, but gagged as well. She had on a black coverall and no shoes, something like a uniform, but unrelieved by any color. Janeway tripped on the ramp, and Kattell grabbed her by the hair.

"No stalling, bitch. You're going to die, and your pet Vulcan too, and all your favorite people. Not in that order, of course. I like to save the sweetest for last." She took Janeway by the elbow and propelled her along over soft grassy ground. The Kazon were conversing in low, chuckling tones. Apparently they liked the idea of a little cold-blooded slaughter. *Not so much resemblance to Klingons after all*, Janeway thought.

"Shut up, you amateurs," Kattell said. "Here we are. You two—take point. No shooting until I say so. The rest of you—behind me, and stay there." She clamped a cruel grip on Janeway's wrist, twisted it up behind her, and forced her down a steep companionway. The echoes sounded like metallic walls, long corridors. The group moved slowly through a larger room, then into a corridor again. This place smelled musty, very old.

Janeway heard voices up ahead. Kattell halted and called the pointmen back, then moved up to listen for a moment. "Sounds fine," she said low. "Right number of people, right tone of voices. I knew I could count on him. I've never known Chakotay not to keep his promises." She laughed quietly.

That's right, thought Janeway. *He made a promise to me*. They moved down the corridor again. Closer, louder. Was that Tuvok—? Janeway caught a few phrases.

"Lieutenant—this is a very unusual technology. The shielding's so good, I don't think we could even use communicators more than a few rooms away. It damps everything, even the tricorder scans. There's no way to tell how big the place is, or get an idea of the whole layout."

"In that case, we will do a room to room search for the artifact Commander Chakotay spoke of," replied Tuvok. *He couldn't have fallen for that story, of course*, Janeway thought. Chakotay had told him the truth, somehow. Kattell had kept the

pickup for the eavesdropping device with her constantly, and had kept Janeway nearby to guard her from her own crew. A few awkward moments in the conversation, some interesting assertions on various points of law and ethics from Chakotay, obviously meant for Kattell's hearing, a harrowing exchange with a group of Maquis and then with Torres, a great many terse orders and long intervals of silence. Janeway had never listened to him so intensely. She had to trust that he had found a solution.

"Draw weapons, boys," the Cardassian said. The Kazon snorted at each other in anticipation. Kattell ripped off Janeway's gag and blindfold, stepped around the corner, her left arm around Janeway's waist, her right hand resting on her shoulder, the phaser against her throat. The Kazon divided and flowed to each side of her, flooding into the room.

"Hello, Harry," said Kattell.

"I don't think I like you anymore," replied Ensign Kim, removing his hand from his tricorder.

"Gosh, that makes this a whole lot easier," sneered Kattell. He answered her with a look Janeway had never seen before, that made his handsome young face much older and harder. He glanced at Janeway as the Kazon pushed him against the wall with the rest of the party. Apprehension, but not much surprise. Her heart lifted slightly. Tuvok stood quietly, his hands raised while the Kazon stripped away his phaser and scanner. Kattell moved up to him, loosened her hold on Janeway, and slapped him viciously across the face.

"I thought you had some sense once, Vulcan," she said. "When you went to trade for the space folder yourself. But you wouldn't leave my plans alone when I tried my best to gain allies for us. You've lost all your logic to her, and now you're going to lose your life." She embraced Janeway again, moved back. "Line them up," she ordered the Kazon. "Him first—" she jerked her chin at Kim—"and him last." She bared her teeth at Tuvok. "I won't make you watch anyone else die, Harry."

"Gee, thanks," he replied.

Thirteen *Voyager* officers, ten Kazon, one with his arm in a sling. "Pick your targets, gentlemen," Kattell said. "Leave the Vulcan for me." The weapons rose. Several officers closed their eyes,

but there was no outcry. Janeway stiffened, took a deep breath. There had to be something – some plan – Tuvok was impassive, his lip bleeding from Kattell’s blow, a splash of vivid green on his brown skin. Kattell pulled her closer, peered in her face, breathing harsh and rapid through open lips. “Fire,” she said.



THE LITTLE SHIP stood in the clearing; the hatch stood open. No life signs anywhere – so everyone was in the base. So far, so good. Chakotay spoke briefly to Paris on *Voyager*, then led the detail to the hatch, Torres right behind him.

“You’ll have to use your phasers as bludgeons initially,” he said, knowing that Kattell could not hear him now because of the base’s shielding. “The anti-phaser damping will last about twenty minutes before the power cell burns out. Kim has probably activated it by now. I hope it’ll be quick, but there’s the potential for a long fight, with both sides unable to use energy weapons. Let’s go.” Rutskoi took up the lead, with another guard beside her. Tuvok’s team had planned to stop and wait in the second set of rooms down the corridor, so the detail proceeded swiftly until they heard voices. Strangely, their own ears were better alarms than their scanners in this area.

Chakotay heard a blow, no cry of pain. Kattell’s voice, mellow, as she could sometimes render it, then harsher, giving orders. He swept the detail forward with a gesture. A scream of rage, an explosion of shouts. Chakotay rounded the corner just in time to see Janeway wrench out of Kattell’s grasp and land a vigorous punch to the Cardassian’s midsection. Tuvok dropped one Kazon with a neck pinch and grappled with another. The security guards paired up on the huge men, striking. Chakotay and Torres instinctively went for Kattell.

She and Janeway were struggling, faces contorted. Kattell caught a handful of Janeway’s loose hair and yanked her off balance, then flashed a hand into her jacket. What did she have – ? Chakotay tried to grab her arm, but she twisted away and brought out a naked stiletto, its blade stained at the tip.

Poison – a viper’s tooth –

The only thing that saved Janeway was the fact that Kattell hesitated fractionally, jerking

towards Chakotay with the point as he dodged. Torres struck her on the arm, seized the hand with the knife, and knocked the weapon to the floor. Chakotay kicked it away.

“Damn you! Damn you!” Kattell shrieked at him. Her voice tore out of her like flesh rending, like bones breaking. Janeway got an arm around her throat and choked her off. The Kazon, cornered, were fighting like lions. One of them tossed off two big guards and began to strangle a third. The first team, mostly science and administrative personnel, stayed out of the way as much as possible, causing distractions for the Kazon as they could. Tuvok pinched the Kazon strangling the guard. His first victim was already struggling up from the floor. Cries of pain and roars of battle resounded off the walls.

Kattell broke Janeway’s hold and darted between Chakotay and Torres, slipping through their grasp. She vanished down another corridor that led deeper into the base. Torres started after her, but Chakotay jerked his thumb at the main fight. Scooping up a dropped phaser, he threw it to Janeway, who caught it out of the air and smiled at him. They went after the fugitive together.

Just a flash of hair visible around the corner at the end of a long, straight corridor. Left turn. The light was a dim glow from ceiling panels. Janeway ran behind him, nearly as fast as he. When they rounded the corner, Kattell tried to fire from a doorway, but the weapon was still damped. She ducked into the room. Chakotay slammed into the wall beside the door to stop himself, peered around carefully. Dark. Another door sliding shut, a bright thread of light just showing. He ran for it, drawing his phaser. Soon they would be out of the damper’s sphere of influence. Janeway followed.

Another corridor, running left and right. Dusty – prints to the left. Again they pelted after her. A few more turns – a T intersection. He halted, looking for signs. A small object on the floor to the right... Gods –

Chakotay thrust himself backwards as Janeway collided with him, twisted around to catch her, half carried her to the nearest doorway and threw himself inside with her. The fragmentation grenade leaped to waist height and sent a vortex of shrapnel whizzing in every direction, razor shards embedding themselves in the metallic walls. No gas, at least. They rolled up again and looked down the intersection. A shadow whipping away to the right – she had paused to

see the effect of her little surprise. Off and running again.

"I hope you're remembering all these turns," Janeway shouted as he drew ahead of her.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. Damn—there she was. Kattell skidded through another doorway, and he followed. Through this room and out into a long, curving, featureless corridor. Did she know where she was going? Probably. Another grenade—and his momentum was too great to halt and reverse in time.

"Cover!" he shouted to Janeway, who was falling behind. He ran ahead as hard as he could sprint, passed the little black disk, and hit the floor when he heard it pop up. Most of the shrapnel went over his head, but he suffered some cuts to his back and shoulders. Janeway—he rolled over and looked back down the corridor. She was just reemerging from the last door, unhurt. Chakotay sprang up and continued.

This corridor seemed to be an express route deep into the base. It turned and descended in a gentle curve with a large radius, so that he could see some distance ahead—about thirty meters. He ran on for several minutes, never glimpsing Kattell. There were occasional doors, but none of them looked disturbed. Where was she leading him? Janeway could not keep up with his pace, but he could not wait for her. Downwards, the footprints in the dust urging him on. He passed a huge double door, then whipped back. There were faint scrape marks in the dust. Big black symbols above it, and what he could have sworn was a warning sign. He put his hand to the panel by the door, then flattened against the adjacent wall as the mechanism engaged. The beam of Kattell's weapon scorched out through the opening, leaving a hot spot on the opposite wall. Set to kill. Chakotay dove under the beam and through the door as it closed again, then rolled to the side and took a snap shot.

The bolt missed and vanished into the distance of an enormous chamber. Kattell darted around the towering construction in the middle. Some kind of reactor. This must be the power source for the base, or for part of it. Chakotay scrambled, keeping low. Kattell was climbing up the opposite side on a service ladder, aiming for a suspended catwalk that circled the core. Already ten or twelve meters up. If he stunned her at that height, she might be killed in the fall. He aimed, then hesitated. Kattell stopped on the ladder and

drew a bead on him; Chakotay dodged behind a console. When she reached the catwalk, forty meters up, she would be able to fire on any point in the room, and he would have no protection. He ran to the core and started up another ladder, four rungs at each leap. Taller and faster than she, he made up the start she had and arrived on the catwalk at almost the same time. Both of them dodged to the shelter of the huge cylindrical core. Crouching on the opposite side from Kattell, Chakotay pressed against the warm metal and listened. She called out to him.

"Chakotay—" She was gasping from exertion, as was he. "You betrayed me. I actually relied on you, and you betrayed me. You Human bastard." Angrier at herself than at him.

"At least now you remember I'm Human, Kattell."

"Don't call me that. You've got no right." He thought she might be crying, although her voice was hard. "That woman's dead. And the bitch is dead. I'll kill her if it's the only thing I accomplish for the rest of my life. She's trapped me in this body. I'll never see my home or my own face again. It didn't matter so much when I thought I had you with me."

"Will you kill me too?" he asked. "Because you'll have to, to get to Janeway."

"Chakotay—Oh, Gods, Chakotay, how could you make love to me like that if you didn't want me?" She was definitely crying. He stood hugging the reactor between two consoles, alert to any sign she was moving around towards him, but he could feel her silent sobs communicated through the gridded metal of the catwalk, an irregular vibration above the low steady hum of the machinery.

"I'm sorry," he said, wondering why he felt that necessary. Silence in response, the sobs continuing. He took a careful step to the right, then another. If he could come up on her left before she noticed, perhaps he could get in a quick shot.

"Stop," Kattell shouted, her voice high and harsh with tears. "Don't think I won't kill you."

"The possibility never left my mind." Pity? Remorse? What was he thinking?

"I don't want to kill you, Chakotay, so don't move." What? She had dropped two grenades in his path, was using a full-power weapon—what was she saying? Actions spoke louder to him just now. "I want you to tell me—I want you to tell me why."

“Why?”

“Why you knuckled under to her. Why you offered yourself to her and handed over everything to her. Don’t you have any balls? What happened to the man who tossed his career for his people? What happened to the Maquis captain? You were the king of that ship, even if it did have a rebuilt engine and never enough photon torpedoes. Why did you just give up? Do you like having a foot on your neck? And she slapped you down; what a disappointment that must have been. You were counting on being her pet boy, weren’t you, handsome? She’s already got one, and I hear Vulcans have a lot of stamina—”

He snorted softly in derision.

“What a shock it must have been to discover you had brought him back for her yourself. A Federation agent under your nose, one of your most trusted people—”

“Who’s talking about agents, Cardassian?”

“Don’t you get it? I wasn’t working against you any more. I read your dossier, and I volunteered for the assignment, and I knew I’d have everything I needed in two months. I did have it. Why do you think I stayed and stalled so long? I fed the Order little bits of information, nothing that could hurt us—”

“Us? My Maquis cell, that was working to hurt Cardassia every way we could?”

“You weren’t exactly in danger of conquering Cardassia Prime, you know. I could let you succeed on your little raids, and even help you out, because my goals were a lot bigger than that. The Order is going to do great things, and they need people who take the initiative. Going on a dangerous mission like mine, undergoing this awful transformation, living like an animal for months or years—that was going to get me a lot of credit. But I needed something really big, some real asset to bring back—”

“What? Me? Are you talking about me?”

Chakotay was flabbergasted. Was she spinning some kind of story? Gods knew she was good at that—

“You, Commander Chakotay. A high-ranking Starfleet officer, and a Maquis captain. The help you could give the Order would be pivotal. You were already a defector, and I thought I could show you the advantages—”

“You wanted to recruit me to the Obsidian Order?”

“They would use your talents as they deserve to be used. None of those shackling Starfleet regulations. None of the hardships and shortages of the Maquis. You’d have resources, and a free rein. You’d even be able to influence the policy towards your homeworld, get the garrisons restrained or removed. Wasn’t that your goal, anyway?” There was no trace of tears in her voice now; it was even, matter-of-fact. Plausible? He felt dizzy.

The Obsidian Order. Would he ever have stooped that low to protect his planet? Become the very thing he despised most to save innocents? Was he only a tool in his own hands? Chakotay leaned against the warm bronze metal of the reactor core. And what had he done when he had put this uniform on again? If Kattell’s offer sounded abhorrent, what about Janeway’s? He had said he didn’t owe the Federation any loyalty. If Starfleet was going to uphold a treaty that destroyed the hopes of thousands, he couldn’t be a part of them any more. *Why did I lose sight of that?*

In light of the circumstances...I accused Tuvok of having a blind spot. I accused Rutskoj of indulging in personal loyalties that had no place in maintaining discipline. What about myself? I saw a Starfleet captain, I saw a woman; I held myself out to her with my own two hands. Myself, my ship, and all my people. Because she could set aside the petty differences between us and work towards a larger goal. Not a selfish one; not advancement in the ranks of assassins and poisoners, but the service of her ship and crew, which included me and mine without reservation. And the good of the helpless, and the defiance of the brutal. She’s what Starfleet was meant to be. The reason I joined in the first place. Her dreams interlock with mine.

His vision seemed sharper now, his mind more acute than it had been in days. “Kattell. You’ll never understand, but I’ll try to explain. I won’t betray everything that makes me a Human being for any goal. I would lose it in the end if I did that. I have to accept restraints on my actions or I will become a monster. Can a monster have dreams?”

“Yes, she can.” She was crying again. Manipulative bitch—but his heart contracted. Lost, enveloped in her own devices, so deep in deception she could not recognize her own face in the glass. “I’ll forget this. Come with me.”

“Janeway may never get home,” he said, his voice soft and gentle. “She may have destroyed all hope of that with her own hand. But she is at peace with herself, and she knows who she is, and she

has lighted her way with her principles. Your path might seem easier, and justifiable, but it goes straight down into darkness. I'll never go with you."

Kattell was silent for a moment. "Last chance, Chakotay," she finally said. "If you want to live, you'll follow me out of here. So you don't trust me; fine. I don't trust you, either. But I love you."

"I don't know what you call love. You wanted to make me a Cardassian official to aid your own career, you say. I'll say again: You don't know me

well enough to love me. Janeway knows me, and I know her."

"But she doesn't love you."

Chakotay paused for a moment. "She won't compromise her duty. I was wrong to ever try for that, and I hadn't meant to. She's my captain, and I serve with her, and that's enough. It has to be."

"Come with me."

"Haven't you heard anything I've said? I'd rather die than live my life as you'd have me do."

"Die then," Kattell said, and stepped around the core, fast as a striking cobra, and shot him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HE HAD LEFT HER BEHIND ten minutes ago. Janeway had had to pick her way through the metal shards on the floor, and his legs were longer than hers. His prints were on the floor, but she could no longer hear his footfalls. This corridor seemed to go on forever. Janeway did not like the perception that she was going deeper underground with every step. This place was huge, and empty, and echoed with ghosts. Her own panting breaths and the thump of her bare feet were all she could hear. Except for a faint vibration, a hum of power, that had grown stronger with every step. What was that? A phaser burn on the wall, opposite that big door. Fresh. No smell of burnt flesh. Janeway halted and listened carefully. A faint clanging, irregular, like boots on metal. She opened the door with a touch on the panel and slipped inside.

It was the size of a starship dry-dock, a huge echoing chamber dominated by the towering graduated cylinder of a reactor. Some automated system, that had kept this base powered on its own, perhaps for centuries. How much longer did it have to live? She scanned the room for the source of the distant sounds she heard. Echoes and reechoes. Up high — She saw movement near the top of the core, on a catwalk that must house the main controls. The ladders up the sides of the core were the obvious access, but anyone on top could fire straight down on climbers. Janeway moved around the perimeter of the room, staying under a projecting balcony that might give her some protection. There — under those open observation windows — that looked like a turbolift. If she could get to the top, she could at least see what was going on. The doors opened at a touch, and the lift shot to the highest level.

She had to run along a corridor that passed behind the wall of the chamber to reach an observation window. Yes, that was the main control area up there. Consoles ringed the core. She heard voices, one low and cutting, the other light and tense, both familiar. The echoes made them nearly unintelligible. Surely the ladders were not the only access to the top. Some kind of projecting

bridge, perhaps? This control panel, below the window — yes. There were seams in the wall, and she could see other identical observation areas that seemed to have covered bays for machinery below them. Were the bridges broken? She tried the panel, and got a faint protesting whine. Something still active in there.

Oh — out on the catwalk. The Cardassian. She was working on the consoles, visible in profile moving from one to the other, mostly hidden behind struts and girders. Janeway could still hear two voices. Chakotay must be on the other side — where? Ah, there he was, holding himself against the central core. Kattell vanished again, moving around the opposite side of the core from Janeway. Chakotay was speaking, very clearly and quietly, so that the echoes died and his voice began to carry.

“Janeway may never get home,” she heard. “She may have destroyed all hope of that with her own hand. But she is at peace with herself...” His own voice overtook him, reverberating around the chamber. Then he paused, and the echoes died again. “I’ll never go with you.”

Kattell’s response was not intelligible. Chakotay’s voice emerged again after a few moments of exchange, speaking slowly.

“She won’t compromise her duty. I was wrong to ever try for that, and I hadn’t meant to. She’s my captain, and I serve with her, and that’s enough. It has to be.” He was sure, and serene, but the note in his voice caught at her. Janeway took a breath, cast her eyes up as a deep pain lanced through her. Should she call out to him to let him know she was there, or would that only distract him? Where was the Cardassian now?

A bright flash of reddish light, the exact hue of a phaser. Chakotay recoiled, staggered off the railing, and fell to the floor of the catwalk, writhing. Janeway snapped her weapon up and hit Kattell dead center. The slender grey figure jerked back, but did not fall. That damn armor she had — Janeway thumbed the phaser to the kill setting and sent another bolt whining past Kattell’s head. Too slow — the woman’s movements were superbly coordinated. Kattell leaped up the side of the core, clinging to inset handholds, and fired at Janeway. The bolt sizzled through the window and knocked a hole in the wall behind her. Crouching, Janeway hit the panel and heard the bridge begin to deploy

She peered out again and saw that Kattell had reached the ceiling, ten meters above the catwalk, and was slapping a flat key card against a hatch. It slid open, and the captain glanced down at Chakotay. He was moving feebly, trying to drag himself around a console for cover. Apparently he had lost his phaser. Kattell took another shot at Janeway, then instantly fired at Chakotay. He rolled and lay still. Had he been hit, or was that only avoidance? Janeway fired again as Kattell pulled herself up into the hatch, but missed as she swung her legs up and vanished. The hatch clicked shut.

The bridge was almost fully extended, and Janeway opened the door, ran along it, and jumped the last two meter gap. She sent a bolt up at the ceiling hatch, but only left a mark. And then she turned to her first officer, whose chest, right side and arm were smoking with a terrible wound. He was still, and pale, and –

He had a standard tricorder, and she scanned him quickly, unable to tell much beyond the basic fact that he was alive. Whether he was dying – Janeway dropped the tricorder and put her hand to his face. Chakotay opened his eyes and slowly focused on hers, then cast a glance around.

“She’s gone, Chakotay. Through the hatch up there.”

“What...what was she doing? Check the consoles...oh, hell, I should have realized...” His head fell back, and he gave a strangled howl of agony. Janeway looked at him a moment longer, then searched him for equipment. A small field medical kit in the pouch with the tricorder. She found the hypo of painkiller and administered it, then ran the tiny medilyzer over the wound. Better – but it would take the doctor to repair it. This would pull him back from the brink for a little while. What was that? A dull rattle on the metal floor, and a tiny object slipped through the grid and fell. Kattell’s eavesdropping device, which had worked its way out from the wreck of his shoulder. Janeway left him with a squeeze of his good hand and leaped to the consoles.

She had to study them for a minute, and went back to fetch the tricorder. Chakotay caught the look on her face as she scanned the core, and closed his eyes momentarily. Janeway was not given to swearing, but she swore now.

“Shit. She’s dumped all the coolant, and set the reaction rate to maximum. Four reactors like this one, at various points in the area. And the

whole system is locked out. She knew what she was doing. If Torres were here – “

“How long?” Chakotay said with a rasp.

“No more than fifteen minutes before the entire complex goes.”

“No time to get her then. We have to get our people out of here. The com badges won’t work,” he said, struggling up on his left elbow.

“That hatch might be a short cut to the surface.”

“Yes, you must be right. We have to get it open.”

Janeway emptied the entire charge in her phaser before the hole was large enough. Chakotay’s weapon was gone over the railing of the catwalk. It took a minute for the metal to cool. Chakotay was sitting, panting in effort, his forehead beaded with cold sweat. He waved her up the core.

“Go up and around to the first hatch again, and you might get to them in time.”

“Are you giving me orders, Commander?” Janeway smiled. She helped him up, and he leaned heavily on her for a moment. “You can make it.”

“I’m certainly going to try,” he said, and grinned at her while she leaped up the core and caught the handholds. When she was through the hatch, she lay flat and reached down to him as he came slowly up, hitching with his left hand and using the strength of his legs. His right arm was useless, bone showing through the seared flesh, but he made no sound as he grabbed her wrist and heaved himself through the hatch with her help.

This was some kind of service tunnel, a long low corridor with a door at one end. They ran towards it, found it open, and discovered sunlight shining through the ceiling of the little cubicle at the end. The hatch was tiny, and Chakotay could barely squeeze through, but they were out. He hit his com badge.

“Chakotay to *Voyager*. One to beam up.” He ripped the badge off his chest and thrust it into her hand.

“Commander – “

“Don’t argue with me, Captain. I’m right, and you know it.”

She had to admit he was, as the sparkles carried her away.

○



CHAKOTAY RAN through the violet forest, clutching his right arm with his left hand in a vain attempt to keep it from moving too much, heading for the clearing where the hatch they had first entered would be. It should be about two hundred meters more to the east. He had an excellent sense of direction and distance, and had been aware at every moment how far he had come from his starting point. The sunlight burst abruptly upon him as he came out of the trees. There was Kattell's ship, the docking ramp still down. Was she in it? Could she fly it on her own? He had no weapon, and no time to investigate. He skirted the clearing to avoid the ship and dashed out to the hatch. Five minutes left, perhaps less. The pain of Chakotay's wound was creeping up on him, but he ignored it. He stumbled on the little hillocks of grass. There was no one at the hatch, no one in the corridor. The fight was still going on; he heard a Kazon roaring. He staggered the last few meters and entered the room. Four of the Kazon were down, and two of the security guards. One of the guards aimed a fist at him, then quickly drew it back.

"Commander? Where's Captain—"

"Safe," he said. "We've got to get out of here."

"Sir, you're hurt—"

"I noticed, thank you. Move it!" he bellowed.

"Tuvok! Never mind the Kazon! This entire complex is going to melt down in less than no time. Out on the surface, everyone! Go! Go!"

The fight froze in mid-grapple, then the scramble began. Chakotay counted the Starfleet uniforms out the door, and saw that the two fallen guards were picked up and carried. The Kazon ran without tending to their wounded, but he paid them no heed. The phasers were probably working again by now, but he had no time to restart the fight. All right, twenty-three, and Torres. He turned to follow them, and sagged against the wall, his vision going grey. He would have fallen, but a strong arm caught him, and he knew Tuvok was there.

"Move it out, Lieutenant," he whispered, and the dark waters closed over his head.



JANEWAY LEAPED off the transporter pad with a nod to the surprised technician, and headed for the bridge. In the turbolift, she pressed the intercom button.

"This is the captain. All transporter rooms, prepare for emergency beam-out. And ready a tractor beam. Ensign Seska may be taking off very soon." The doors opened, and she strode to her seat, Paris whipping around and yielding it with a beautiful smile. "Main viewer on magnify," she ordered over her shoulder to Ops. "I want to see the area around the base."

"Aye, Captain." The view switched to the island of green in the vast dry desert.

"Sensors on maximum. Can you detect any ships?"

The lieutenant at Tactical worked frantically at the panels. "No, Captain," she replied. Paris was peering at his own console, but he shook his head.

"Transporter rooms—" Janeway said.

"We've got a lock on some—" was the reply.

"Bring them up as fast as you can. Many are missing com badges."

"Aye, Captain."

Paris's head jerked up. "There's something building down there. I'm getting it through the shielding."

"Transporter rooms—"

"We've got twenty now. And, uh, one Kazon—"

"Good God. Put him in the brig."

"This is enormous," said Paris. "That whole area is going to—"

The magnified view made it seem as if *Voyager* were only a few miles above the planet's surface. Serene, verdant, the sun sparkling off the lakes. And then a tremor, visible as a ripple spreading outwards from several points. The waves converged and met, and the ground tore open in great arcs. The lakes vanished. A light as if a sun had materialized within the core of the planet. The huge silent fireball rose and ballooned towards them, its surface crawling with incandescent serpents. It spread out and seemed to envelop them, the sheets of flame twisting into the stratosphere. *Voyager* hovered far above the actual explosion's influence, but Janeway seemed to feel the whisper of fire on her skin. The light glowed on the faces of the bridge crew. The flames fell and died; the enormous mushroom cloud of dust covered the viewscreen.

No one on the bridge spoke for a moment. Janeway took a deep steadying breath and looked at the remains of the gardens. A radioactive hole in the crust, the grave of beauty. And of all the

potential knowledge hidden in the ancient corridors. What else? Who else?

"Transporter rooms," she said again. "Report."

"The last batch were just dematerializing when the explosion hit. We have them in the buffers, but the radiation—"

"Materialize them in sickbay," Janeway ordered. "Activate emergency medical hologram." She swung out of her chair and into the turbolift.

"HOW ARE THE PATTERNS holding up?"

"There's been a point zero one eight degradation in the last minute."

"Good God."

The two transporter technicians bent over the console again. Janeway tightened her clenched jaw as hard as she could, then consciously relaxed herself, mind and body.

"Boost the power to the buffer relays," she said. "Tsiang, you've got to hold those patterns together."

"Boosting power now. There—"

"I've got materialization initiated. Rate of degradation increasing."

A bright blue-white light appeared and shone on the faces of the technicians, the captain, and several security guards being treated in Sickbay, all watching tensely. It differentiated into four groups and spread vertically, and the familiar sparkles began to assume form around the light.

"Four—"

"Where's the last one? Have we lost a pattern?" Janeway's voice cracked.

"No. I'm reading five— I was reading five. I'm not sure—" The sparkles began to waver and fade.

"Tsiang!"

"Reinitiating now." The sparkles strengthened again, but did not solidify. "It's the radiation, Captain. It's degraded the signal and is interfering with materialization."

"Run the signal through decontamination again. That should reduce the radiation levels enough to allow materialization."

"That'll take time, Captain. The degradation will reach point zero five in another minute at this rate. That's when the effects—"

"Do it."

"Yes, ma'am." The small round-faced woman bent to the console. The four groups of sparkles

faded, and the hum went silent. Janeway paced. Kim. Rutskoi. Torres. Tuvok. Chakotay. Everyone else was safe, though some had been injured in the fight.

"Bridge to Janeway."

"Yes, Mr. Paris."

"Four Kazon warships, approaching at warp six. They'll be here in ten minutes. The radiation from the blast reduced our long-range sensor efficiency."

"Prepare to leave the system and go to warp, but hold tight until I give the order. We're still trying to retrieve the last few members of the away team, and I don't want anything to disrupt that."

"Aye, aye, Captain. Um— is Harry OK?" Janeway could hear the slight break in Paris's voice.

"He'll be fine, Tom. We only need a few more seconds..."

"Decontamination complete. Reinitiating materialization. Degradation at point zero four seven."

The four groups formed again. Who was missing? Or was the reading distorted by the radiation as well?

The outlines grew solid, and resolved, and opaque. Kim. Rutskoi. Torres. And the fourth; Tuvok, holding Chakotay in his arms in a posture of protection, hunched and defensive. All five had charred uniforms and ashy skin. Tuvok's face, when he raised it, was the color of burned wood.

"Captain," he said, and collapsed. Trainees caught him before he hit the floor, and swept up his burden.

"Janeway to bridge. Engage."

"Yes, ma'am," said Paris with gusto. "We're outta here."

Janeway followed the groups to the intensive care beds and found herself helping to lay Tuvok flat while a trainee fumbled with a hypospray. He opened his eyes after a moment.

"I believe," he said levelly, looking at the trainee, "that the anterior end is the one in which to load the vial." He looked up at Janeway as she leaned over him, resisting the urge to touch him. He wouldn't say anything to discourage her, but she knew he preferred her not to.

"I am gratified to see that you are well, Captain," he said.

"As am I to see you, Mr. Tuvok." The flash burns were dreadful, but he betrayed little pain, though his face was tense. The hiss of the hypo

relieved him of even that evidence of discomfort. She smiled, then glanced up at the bed where the doctor and Kes worked. Chakotay.

"Go to him, Captain," said Tuvok, and closed his eyes.

She stood still for a moment, then approached with her steps slow and deliberate. His uniform lay on the floor, scorched and slashed. They had had no time to cover him, and he lay unconscious and naked, pale as sand. "One hundred ccs metacordrilline," said the doctor. Kes handed him a hypo and continued her work with a hand-held unit over Chakotay's chest. Janeway stood at the end of the bed. She could see red rib bones where the flesh had been burned away. Most of his right shoulder was gone, and the exterior muscles of his upper arm. Blackened skin in rags— The doctor snapped off his whirring instrument and injected the drug, then checked the wall readouts. "Cardiac stimulator," he said, and held out a hand. Geron thrust an instrument into it, tears running down his cheeks and dripping off his nose. The doctor punched the instrument vigorously against the left side of Chakotay's chest. His body shuddered, but remained limp. The doctor's expression gave Janeway pause, and she looked at the wall readouts herself.

Flatlined. She reached out and gripped Chakotay's feet.

"Twenty ccs neocordrazine."

That was a drug used only in extremis—

Kes quickly loaded another hypo and handed it to the doctor. He made the injection, applied the cardiac stimulator again, then tossed it to Geron. "Neurocortical stimulator," he said, and slapped the proffered disk to his patient's blistered forehead. Janeway could not look at the wall readouts now, but concentrated on Chakotay's face, not nearly as badly burned as Tuvok's. The Vulcan had protected him from the first instant of

the flash. A moment later, and all of them would have been consumed, beyond hope of revival.

Behind her, the other members of the away team shifted in their beds, growing aware of the situation.

"Lieutenant Torres, you can't get up—"

"I'm up, aren't I?" said Torres. She staggered to Janeway's side, looked at Chakotay, and then at the captain. Janeway barely registered her presence until she felt a strong hand on her arm, and turned to see the half-healed face, the expression part pain, part compassion, part stoic courage. Torres tried to smile, and Janeway tried to return the smile.

The doctor made a grunt of satisfaction, and Janeway snapped her gaze to the wall readout again. A heart rate, a brainwave pattern. Geron burst into loud sobs. The doctor grimaced at him. "We need to get the commander into surgery now," he said to Kes.

"Yes, Doctor," she replied in her low voice, then turned to fetch instruments and turn on the sterile field.

"Captain," she said when she saw Janeway, "I'm very glad you're back."

"Will he..."

"Commander Chakotay's condition is grave, but not necessarily terminal. That is, if there are not too many unneeded personnel in Sickbay." The doctor brushed around her and threw her a warning look. Janeway retreated, but she did not leave all through the reconstruction operation, even when the doctor smoothed down the last piece of replicated epidermal tissue, lowered the sterile field and said to Kes, "We've done all we can."

The captain sat by her first officer's bedside, holding his limp left hand, until Kes persuaded her to get some sleep.



PART FOUR: PURSUIT AND CAPTURE



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

IT WAS TWO and a half days before Chakotay regained consciousness, and Janeway spent as much time as she decently could in Sickbay. The injured guards were fit for duty a few hours after the fight, and those who had suffered burns and radiation poisoning were healed in a day, Tuvok and Torres getting back to their stations at their own insistence. Janeway visited all the patients every few hours until Tuvok was able to alternate on the bridge with her, and then she held vigil by the one still-occupied bed. She had some excuse to be in Sickbay on her own account, having had little to eat or drink during her captivity. A little dehydrated and weak, but the emotional reaction had not yet taken hold. The fight, the pursuit, the shock of seeing her first officer nearly killed had pumped her adrenaline so high that the aftermath of her own narrow escape from a helpless death had been submerged.

"Don't be frightened when it does set in," said the doctor, checking her fluid levels as she sat on one of the beds in the examination area. "The symptoms may be quite sudden, and quite severe. A natural reaction to extreme stress." He glanced at his scanner and seemed satisfied with the readout.

"That's very encouraging, Doctor," said Janeway, narrowing her eyes at him. Kes came over, smiled humorously at her and handed the doctor a PADD.

"Ah, very good," he said, looking at the screen and beaming. "These results indicate that the tissue transplants are growing on their own. I did a commendable job of surgery, of course, but the rest is up to the patient. Commander Chakotay's own natural healing processes are taking over." Janeway slipped off the bed and moved towards the intensive care area again. "Now, Captain—" he began, but broke off when a small hand touched his arm. Kes had thoughtfully left a chair for her, although the doctor kept muttering about clutter and upset routines.

Janeway sat down and rested her arms against the edge of Chakotay's bed.

He was sleeping deeply, no longer as pale as he had been. Covered to the armpits with the insulating blanket, his bare arms resting at his sides. Janeway laid her palms on his chest, feeling the rise and fall of breath, the steady beat of his heart. A strong man, who was already recovering. No need to worry now. But she could not help but feel that her presence might benefit him, that her touch might somehow help to heal him.

When she touched him, there was a wholeness in her mind, a fit of one to the other, two elements sufficient to themselves but together creating an entity entirely new. She had felt that wholeness before, faintly at first as they had evaluated one another in the first turbulent hours of their acquaintance, but with sufficient conviction that she had not hesitated to perform the logical action in inviting Chakotay to be her first officer. Janeway remembered the quizzical look he had given her, the sideways glance at Tuvok as if to ask what emotion a Vulcan might hide at being displaced, the quirk of his lips as he smiled and nodded shortly in agreement. She had shaken his hand then, and the touch had sealed some nebulous connection into permanence. The Starfleet uniform had fit him again, the protocol of their positions had settled over them, the potential of their synergy had been directed at the challenges that faced them. Perhaps that was all it could have sustained at first. But the coal of fire had always been there, banked, and burning slowly, growing gradually in warmth and strength almost unnoted. Friendship, she had hoped, even when they had disagreed so sharply that the discussions had adjourned to the ready room. Trust, so that she had forgotten his past and seen him only as her officer. The honesty of comrades, the respect between commander and executive. They had these apart from anything else, the ground established now under their feet. From this firm base, could they explore something more? Having once glanced into the heights, dizzying mountains above the cautious plain, could they ever hold themselves back from wishing to scale them?

His hands, the fingers well-turned and straight, blue veins showing through the brown skin. Janeway picked one up again, just to hold it for a while, to curl her fingers under his and feel his warmth. Even the right hand was responsive

now. Hardly a trace of the phaser blast that had nearly burned his life away. The pinker color of his reconstructed arm and of the right side of his chest, and a slackness of the muscles in contrast with the left, were all that reminded her of that sudden burst of deadly light. At the time, her mind and body focused on the chase, she had not allowed herself a moment's panic. The priorities of the situation had changed when he was wounded, that was all. The Cardassian had escaped, or perished; the sensor logs could not confirm either. *Voyager* had left the planet far behind, though one Kazon ship still pursued, and they were taking a zigzagging course in the attempt to lose it.

Quiet, but tense and watchful, a deeply inhaled breath waiting to be let out. Janeway was aware that she was nearing the brink of her endurance. Her nervous energy would not let her sleep more than a few hours at a time. She would find herself lying wide awake, staring at the wall and running over the events of the past few days again and again.

The depth of her own anger at Kattell had shaken her. It went beyond the wish for justice, into something personal and unreasonable, elusive to her conscious mind. Janeway had felt her emotions echoed back from Kattell, a darkened mirror of herself. A warning of the dangers of unbridled desires? A woman wanting control of her destiny, determined and dedicated to her goals, but reaching out to another person for aid and support. Companionship, yes, but also that deeper connection, the bond of spirit. Another soul to find in the darkness, to remind her that she was not alone, that another hand could clasp hers as they moved through the deeps of the limitless universe. And the warmth of a man's body, his touch on her skin, the smell of his hair, the softness of his mouth as he breathed into hers.

Chakotay was still, quiet, the electricity muted, his heartbeat slow.

There was nothing she could do, physically; only wait and watch for signs of waking. She reminded herself that the doctor had said he was healing on his own. What difference did it make whether she stayed with him or not? Her duty — *My duty is to my crew*, she said to herself, *and to the good of Voyager. Commander Chakotay has done his duty, far beyond it, and I will repay him in every way that I can.*

"I was reading," said Kes, coming to make an adjustment on Chakotay's intravenous feeding

pack, "that many societies practice laying on of hands to aid the sick and injured."

Janeway started a little, and looked at herself, resting on her first officer's chest, her left hand clasping his right. She was reaching across his body, her head inclined so that their faces were very close.

"It sounds like a lovely custom," Kes continued. "It reassures the patient that others are close and care for them, and it is beneficial for the person who performs the therapy as well."

The intimacy embarrassed her suddenly, although Kes certainly meant well, and Janeway straightened up and released Chakotay's hand. The fingers twitched and opened, then relaxed. She had seen that reaction many times over the last two days, and had thought at first that meant his waking was imminent, but the doctor had explained it away as mere reflexes.

"At least, that's what the research papers say," said Kes. Glancing at the wall readout, then at Janeway, she entered a few numbers on a PADD. "Increased brain wave activity," she said softly, and slipped away so quietly that Janeway was almost startled to find that she was alone with Chakotay again. Her head lowered slowly once more to fill her vision with him, and she sought out his hand where she had abandoned it. His face was so composed, so peaceful, but relaxed in profound sleep, unguarded. His lips faintly parted, the long planes of his cheeks softened, the warmth of his eyes concealed under lids that moved slightly with his dreams. She wanted to be there when he opened them again to the world. Duty permitting. Tuvok might call her at any moment, although he had been refraining from doing so unless necessary.

The doctor had not insisted that she move Chakotay's medicine bundle, at least. It was still under the bed where she had placed it, wrapped and tied as she had found it in his quarters. Torres had hung his medicine wheel as soon as she had been able and arranged the stones in silence, passing each one over his body, raising it to her own head and then attaching it to the painted design. These artifacts of his were precious to him, Janeway knew, but she had little idea of their workings. Had he been able to consult his animal guide while wrestling with his dilemma? Janeway had heard nothing through the eavesdropping device to suggest that he had. His recovery now might be as much psychic as physical. He had been

alone, cut off, unable to confide in anyone when his situation must have tormented him. His outburst at Tuvok after the insults Rutskoi had flung at him—how had he told him what was going on? Somehow Tuvok had avoided telling her. She knew it had happened after she had delivered her message during the transmission, but the details had not emerged yet. After Chakotay woke, she would ask him.

His breathing changed rhythm, a slight catch and hesitation, a heavier exhalation. His fingers closed and squeezed hers firmly for a moment, then relaxed again. Janeway looked at his face and followed the movement of expression over it, the contraction of the corners of his mouth, not quite a smile, the creasing of his brows. A quick glint of white under the eyelashes. She almost called for the doctor, but suddenly wanted this all to herself. No one in his sight but her when his eyes should open. He took a deep breath and swallowed, clenched his jaw and pushed his lips out, pulling the hollows into his cheeks. His face smoothed again and became so still that she thought she might have been mistaken. Then his eyes blinked open and gazed at her, clear and dark. Recognized her, took in her presence at his bedside. Chakotay smiled almost shyly and his eyes half closed again. Soft words shaped his lips, inaudible. They were not spoken to her, but to the air and to the elements, in thanksgiving. Janeway wondered if she should break the silence yet, and with what. Her gaze could not hold all of him, mere sight could not encompass what she needed to find before her. She knew she was trembling, and that he could feel it in her hands. His eyes turned to her, told her he was waiting.

"Commander," she said, and regretted it instantly. "...Chakotay," she added, but the prefix had defined the phrase. "Chakotay—" she began again. What did she want to say to him? She had waited for two days, turning the possibilities over and over, never settling on any sentiment for longer than an hour. Congratulations, gratitude, some impulse of the moment—Janeway reached to touch his face, and the doctor came over with an attitude of cheery bustle.

"I see that the patient has regained consciousness. Excellent. Commander Chakotay, how do you feel?"

"All right, I guess," he replied. "I gather I haven't been incinerated in a reactor meltdown."

Janeway began to laugh as he raised his brows at her. The full realization of their ordeal broke through as the dam of her emotions opened, and she wept like a child in front of him, her tears streaking his chest, until Kes came and led her to her quarters.



"WHO PUT IT THERE?"

"The captain."

"Why?"

"I believe she thought it would be beneficial."

Chakotay smiled in bafflement, and picked up his medicine bundle. "I wonder where she got that idea."

"I don't know. Why don't you ask her? Hold still." The doctor passed a whirring diagnostic scanner over his right arm.

"That's probably not the most important question I have," said Chakotay softly.

"I'm not going to release you for duty for another twenty-four hours at least, Commander. Any consultations with the captain should wait until then. You still need rest."

"I'm not going to argue with that," he replied, and lay down on the bed again with a sigh. "How many more tests?" He lifted his arm and looked at it, flexed the fingers of his right hand. How much of it was him and how much new? It seemed mostly familiar, but the skin was soft, tender and flushed, only slowly taking on its proper color.

"Nearly done." The doctor tapped at a console. "The grafts have fully integrated into your nervous and circulatory systems. Your unconscious state was the result of wound shock and the radiation damage to your organs. It aided healing, as a matter of fact; I might have induced coma in any case because of the severity of your condition. But you're fit as a fiddle now." The doctor folded his tricorder with a snap and nodded. "I've never had the opportunity to perform such extensive reconstructive surgery before. An edifying experience."

Chakotay smiled. "I'm glad somebody enjoyed it." He sat up, grimaced, and slid off the bed. "Do I have your permission to return to my quarters, Doctor?"

"Certainly, Commander. But no work until you've had a good night's sleep, and light duty for a week, or as long as you feel necessary."

"Where's my uniform?"

"Here you are, Commander." Kes put a folded one on the chair beside him. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No, I suppose not—except, well—"

"Ah, of course," said the doctor. "I'll give you some guidelines on physical therapy and an exercise routine to follow until you're fully healed. Your usual one will be too heavy. I'll have them in my office when you're ready." The doctor drew the privacy curtain and departed. Kes was about to follow him, but glanced back. She let the curtain fall and turned to face Chakotay, her hands behind her back.

"Commander? I...I don't want to pry—"

"I never thought you were the prying type, Kes. What is it?"

"If you'd rather not, it's all right, but from some things the captain said, it sounded like you might need someone to talk to."

"Things the captain said?"

"While she was here sitting with you."

"What?"

"She spent most of her time right next to your bed. Sometimes she talked to you. I wasn't trying to listen, but her voice carries well... And then this morning after you woke up, I stayed with her for a while in her quarters. She...was very upset. She didn't say exactly what happened while both of you were prisoners. She asked me to call Tuvok, and I left when he came. But you haven't had a chance to speak to anyone."

Chakotay looked up into the blue eyes, the porcelain face framed with flaxen hair, pure and guileless and lovely. "It wouldn't be very pleasant to hear."

"I know. But if I can help, then I don't mind hearing whatever you want to tell me."

Chakotay let out a puff of air and half-smiled. "You have no idea what you're getting into. This isn't something—"

"Commander. I know I'm not quite two years old, and that seems very young to you. But remember, I was a prisoner of the Kazon too, for weeks. I might know more about what can happen to people in that situation than you're giving me credit for." She smiled, he looked into her eyes, and for not the first time since he had met her he realized that she held a very ancient wisdom in her bright gaze. Sometimes the ability to touch the infinite was simply inborn, and not hard-won, and depended only on the clarity of the soul. "Neelix

helped me very much. Just having someone to talk to helps. Especially someone you love, if that person is near."

Chakotay closed his eyes for a moment.

"You're right. There are some things I would like to tell you about. I know that you will keep them to yourself, as they don't concern only me. And when I'm finished, I'll go and tell my spirit guide the same things, and perhaps that will be the end of it. Perhaps I can let go of something I should never have tried to grasp."

"It's not something you are holding, I think." Kes's gaze was faraway, though she looked directly at him. "It's a part of you. You would have to cut it out and rebuild yourself."

"Yes. I would. I'm not too good at surgery."

"I've done a lot of reading on that lately."

"Have a seat, Kes. This could take a long time."

SHE MADE HIM RECITE every moment of his thoughts to her, sitting quietly with the tears running down her perfect face, nodding occasionally. It was like giving the weight of years to a child, the whole bloody mess dumped at her feet, staining her with his festering wounds of the soul. But only at first. Under her gaze, utterly lacking in censure or fear, he felt purified. She did not take a stain, and could not be poisoned. And she took his hand when he told her what he had done to save his captain's life, and what Janeway had done to help him.

"She must wonder how you feel about that," the little Ocampo said.

"I think she knows."

"And you wonder how she feels?"

"I...thought I knew. Now, I can't..."

"Yes, you said so. But have you asked her?"

"Of course not. I haven't had the chance, and I...if she hasn't changed her mind, I don't want to hear her tell me that again." Here, right here in Sickbay, had been Kattell's words, *I can't imagine how I ever loved you*. Their sting far less profound than what had happened on the holodeck with Janeway...

"What did she really tell you?"

Chakotay closed his eyes, seeing violet leaves, sun on the water. "She pushed me away. She told me to stop. She said she had led me to believe that she would...make love with me, but that wasn't true."

"She said that?"

"Basically, yes. And I can't imagine anything would change her mind —"

"Not even what you've just gone through together? Wouldn't that affect anyone's thinking?"

"I don't know...I don't know." He dug the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. "I hoped...but then Tuvok and I...he showed me something about that kind of feeling. He's been around a lot longer than I have. He's dealt with it, in his way, and there's a piece of him in my head right now. He's telling me she was right anyway. It wouldn't work." He dropped his hands. "I should know that from my own experience."

"But that was with a different person. A person who was capable of the things you are describing to me. How can you compare her to Captain Janeway?"

Chakotay's head snapped up. *Gods, how can I?* "She compared herself to Captain Janeway. She had me thinking like her —"

"You know she was wrong. How do you know you are not wrong?"

"I...I just don't think I am. And I know it would be better if the captain doesn't want me. I can bear it. I can stand pain." He touched the tattoo on his left temple.

"Better for whom? For her, or for you?"

"Kes?"

"If she is the one who is pushing you away, then you can put all the weight on her. You don't have to work so hard at resisting your feelings. She has to do it for both of you."

Chakotay felt a deep shudder throughout his body, and his skin went cold. Like the impact of a stunner.

"Commander — oh, are you all right? You look so pale — I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." Kes put her hand on his forehead. "Doctor —" she began to call.

"No, please." Chakotay turned and let Kes's hand slip away. "I'm just tired. I'd better go and get some sleep, in my own bed."

"I'm so sorry. I've hurt you, and I meant to help."

"You have helped, Kes. You'll never know how much. But I'm afraid you're wrong. Captain Janeway isn't interested in disrupting the command protocol of *Voyager* and putting her in jeopardy. Not when we've fought so hard to keep her safe."

"Of course not. She loves her ship, and her crew. She's a good captain, and she deserves everything we can give her in return."

"Yes." Chakotay looked down at his hands, then slowly dropped his face into them. He felt Kes's light touch on his hair.

"I think you should talk to her. Just to get to know her again, after so much has happened. Don't pay any attention to what I said. What do I know? I'm not even two years old." He looked up to see her smiling, the clarity of her wisdom shining in her eyes, and she slipped out between the curtains.

Chakotay dressed slowly, taking off the blue medical pajamas he wore and pulling his service undershirt over his head with some difficulty. That arm was definitely not up to a hundred percent. He'd need to limber it up once it felt less limp. He stepped into his jumpsuit and pulled the sleeves up and over his shoulders. With the front fastening left open well below the yoke as was his habit, he pinned his rank insignia to the collar of his shirt and his com badge to the left breast. Back in harness. He smiled, parted the curtains and walked out into the main Sickbay area, carrying his talismans with him. "Chakotay to Janeway," he said, and tapped his com badge.

"CAPTAIN JANEWAY IS NOT AVAILABLE," replied the computer voice.

"Not available?"

"That is correct," said the doctor, emerging from his office.

"But she was here earlier today —"

"She is in her quarters, and Lieutenant Tuvok left instructions that she was not to be disturbed." The doctor raised his brows. "Lieutenant Tuvok is very protective of his captain. He'd make a good doctor, if it weren't for that Vulcan bedside manner."

Chakotay smiled wryly. "I guess I'll have to give it a few days. She had to wait a while for me to wake up, and I can wait for her too." A little of his regained well-being drained away. She didn't want to talk to anyone? Not even — Perhaps especially not him. He would be a reminder of some of the worst experiences of her life, and she might need distance.

"Get some rest, Commander," said the doctor, cocking his head with a knowing smile.

"All right," he replied, and left for his quarters.

As he passed through the corridors, he ran his hand along the bulkheads, a long caress. Crew members greeted him with smiles or wide eyes, and he nodded to them, but his obvious fatigue excused him from any long conversation. When the turbolift opened and he saw his door, he realized just how tired he was. Janeway was just down the corridor, and with her safely there, he would sleep very well. He passed his own door and took a few more steps, feeling drawn, wanting to sound the chime in spite of warnings. She was empty, she was in need. But she was not in any shape to speak to anyone. Chakotay laid a hand on the bulkhead, about where the dividing wall would be, and said a prayer before retreating again.

In his own sitting room, he put down what he was carrying. "Lights," he said, and the room illuminated. Before he sat down, he touched each wall and the viewport, marking the four directions, orienting himself. Spreading out his medicine bundle, he handled each object, naming them softly, and placed his palm on the akoonah.

"Akoo-cheemoya," Chakotay said, and closed his eyes. "I am far from the bones of my grandfathers, but I am home."



"CAPTAIN..."

The front of his uniform was still dampened from her tears, but he had not recoiled at her display. Her emotions were not the illogical, self-indulgent exhibition of a child or of an ordinary Human. Her weeping was not light drops shaken from tree tops, but the spilling over of a profound ocean. He had grown up near the sea, the blue expanse that draped sere Vulcan, and he knew its power.

"Captain," he said again. "Shall I call Kes back?"

"No," she said, and her voice was steady now. "I'm all right. Please, Tuvok, stay and talk to me. If you can—how many of them are still following?"

"The one that has remained on our trail has been joined by another."

"Damn." Janeway rose and crossed to the viewport, looking out as if she could see the Kazon, nearly half a light-year behind them, stubborn as sehlat on blood-scent. "I wonder if that's only Culluh's wounded pride..."

"His sense of priorities is limited by the demands of his martial society."

"I wonder about my own priorities sometimes," she replied, and smiled at him.

"I have not found fault with them," he said, puzzled.

"Thank you, Tuvok." She sat down again, obviously exhausted, her face pale and eyes swollen. "But I've had reason to reevaluate some of them lately..."

"Indeed?"

"I've told you what happened. Enough of it, at any rate."

"I cannot see why adversity would cause you to change your basic way of thinking. Are not moral principles meant to apply in all cases, no matter how extreme?"

"There speaks my compass." She laughed slightly. "No, I can't say my basic principles could change from adversity. But my perspective on the situations to which I have to apply them—that's another matter." Janeway picked up a tissue and blew her nose. "I should clean up and get back to the bridge."

"Captain, you are not well."

"I'm perfectly all right. Frankly, I think getting back to work would do me good."

"Please do not concern yourself with the minor details of the ship's functioning. You may remain off duty with no adverse effect on—"

"Tuvok, are you saying I'm redundant? I don't think so. If the Kazon are hanging on our tail, you're not keeping me out of that chair. And what's this I hear about the damage to the port nacelle? Why does Torres have doubts that the repairs will stand up to sustained high warp factors?"

"Ah...I have this morning's report in my files."

"Good. I'll download it and read it, and then visit Engineering. Now get out of here so I can change into a fresh uniform, and I'll see you on the bridge. I think you need to do the same. No arguments, Lieutenant." Janeway glanced up at him sideways.

He made one last attempt, although he calculated the odds of success at less than two

percent. "Commander Chakotay has placed himself back on the duty roster for the second shift tomorrow and can certainly deal with the ordinary running —"

"Chakotay nearly died. If it hadn't been for you, he would have died. I wasn't even particularly hurt. I had some cuts on my feet, and I was dehydrated and hungry. I am certainly not going to let him go back on duty before I do. I was on partial duty for two days before...this, and you didn't object too strongly then. What in heaven's name is this all about?"

For the first time in his life, he could not admit his own motives. The illogic of his thoughts troubled him. Why should he be concerned that his captain would meet her first officer at this time? "Captain, your emotional state..."

"My emotional state? Tuvok?"

"You have been deeply disturbed, Captain. Your mental equilibrium may not have returned, and there may be danger —"

"I've never heard you express concern about my emotional state before." She rose, turned away and moved to the viewport again. Her unbound hair concealed her profile when she spoke to him again. "I assure you, I have dealt with it. I apologize for subjecting you to it just now, but I had to speak to you before I could give way

entirely and let it all out. That is how experience has taught me to cope with the overwhelming; simply to acknowledge it and admit its power. If I conceal it, I have no way to surmount it. I don't know yet if I will be able to put every incident of the last week behind me. That might take a long time to discover. But my equilibrium has returned. If you like, I'll speak to the doctor, but I'm going back to my bridge, and that's that."

"Yes, Captain," he said, and turned to the door, resigned.

She looked back at him, and smiled with her eyes shining, moving slowly over his face. "It's good to be back with you, my friend. It's been difficult for you as well."

"At some points the odds of success seemed low."

"I count on my people to beat the odds. And I don't ask anything of them that I don't expect of myself. Now go on and get back to the bridge to keep an eye on those Kazon. I'll be there shortly. Dismissed."

"Aye, Captain." He made his slight bow, and left.

As the door shut, he saw Janeway pick up a small object from the table and cradle it in her hands. Something smooth and dark and rounded, like a stone from the bed of a river.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

COMMANDER—“Chakotay was working hard on the weight, curling his right arm against the pull of the machine, with a grunt each time he touched his knuckles to his shoulder again.

“Yes, Ensign,” he replied, short from exertion.

Kim looked a little nervous, and Torres hovered behind him, tugging on both ends of the towel around her neck. Kim glanced back at her, and she gave him a “well, go on” expression that her forehead ridges made emphatic.

“Well, Commander, um, we were wondering, that is, we’d like to ask you if we could do a, a thing for the crew, and, um, for you and the captain.”

“A...thing,” repeated Chakotay, finishing his set and releasing the handgrip. He raised both arms above his head and stretched, pulling on his right hand with the left.

“Yes, a party.”

“A party? Now?”

“Um, well, Neelix was talking about one before all this happened, and he said you told him at the time that we couldn’t, but we really have something to celebrate now.”

“That might be true, Harry. Go on.”

“I was thinking...if people donated replicator rations, and we used some of the stored food, and had some entertainment, it could be really nice. I was looking at the inventory—” Kim held out a PADD. “It wouldn’t make that big a dent in the supplies.”

“Harry, we have three Kazon ships chasing us. We’ve had to maintain Warp Six for days. It could be a while before we can stop for food again.”

“I knew you’d say that, Commander...” said Neelix, puffing through the door to join the group. “But as Morale Officer, I really have to insist.” Chakotay glanced up at him. “We’ve got you and the captain back alive after we thought we might lose you both, and that’s the kind of event that really needs an observation of some kind. People want to talk to you and welcome you back on duty, you know. Back from the dead, practically, so Kes

tells me. And...” He leaned down and put a hand on Chakotay’s shoulder, murmuring low so that Torres and Kim couldn’t hear. “My offer of assistance still stands. No better time than a party to talk about love, eh?”

Chakotay could not answer, and Neelix went on. “I was reading some of your Human books—the ones on food—and I ran across a wonderful line somewhere. Let’s see...‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’ Isn’t that a lovely sentiment?”

Kim made a choking sound, and Torres laughed.

“No, really, I think it cuts right to the heart of the matter. So we’ve got Kazon tracking us. So there’s another ship every time we look back. We’re all together and alive, and I think that’s something to celebrate. If we had to wait until we were completely out of danger to have a good time, we’d wait an awfully long time. Sometimes you have to take some risks and use up some resources to do what’s important. Can’t keep things in reserve forever.”

Chakotay let out a long chuckling sigh, and smiled.

“Ah. I always thought you were a risk-taker, Commander. A man after my own heart.” He gave Chakotay a hearty slap on the back, and started at the grunt of pain. “Oops. That’s your bad shoulder, is it? Sorry. Better start getting that into condition.” He hustled out.

Chakotay got up from the bench, picked up his towel and mopped his forehead, keeping his face pressed into the towel for a long moment.

“So, um, we thought tonight at 1900 hours in the dining room,” said Kim.

“All right. I know a conspiracy when I see one.” He laughed and looked up at the ceiling. “At least when they come to me and beg for permission.”

“Well, we didn’t want to bother you or Captain Janeway with the details, so we kind of organized it already. Neelix said he had some surprises for us.”

“Is this why I had all those requests for shift changes?”

“Yes, sir, I guess so,” Kim laughed. “So, will you be there?”

“I’d be honored, Harry, of course. Have you asked the captain yet?”

"Yes, sir, she said she could come for a while."

Chakotay sat down at the leg press station and pulled off his exercise jacket. "Sounds like you're all set. Dress uniforms, right?"

"Oh, do you think—" Kim began, then realized he was being joshed and grinned. "We'll see you there, Commander." Torres punched Kim lightly in the arm as he passed her on his way out the door, and headed for the showers. Chakotay smiled to himself, and started his lower-body workout.



"CAPTAIN."

"Commander." Janeway paused in the corridor and smiled at the other guest of honor, also arriving fashionably late. She hadn't seen him since she had left him in Sickbay the previous day, her vision blurred with tears. Her gaze lingered over him; she could see very clearly now. Chakotay was deliberate in his movements, his tread a little heavier than usual as if he felt the weight of his body. Should she order him to take a few day's break? He probably wouldn't take that any better than she had taken Tuvok's suggestion. If she could use work as her therapy, she should grant Chakotay the same privilege. Familiarity and routine. He had worn his uniform; Janeway wondered if she should have done the same. No, it was a party, and she had so little opportunity to get her dresses out of the closet. Chakotay bowed slightly, glancing over her long blue skirt and short-sleeved top. He seemed to want to say something, hesitated, then offered his arm with a half-smile. Janeway was taken aback for a moment, then saw it as an appropriate gesture, if a little formal. His smile broadened. She could laugh and refuse, treat it as a joke, or—she could slip her hand under his elbow and be escorted the last few steps along the corridor. Just like Starfleet banquets at Headquarters. Perfect old-fashioned protocol. What would he prefer? He had offered... She smiled and bowed herself, loose tendrils of hair drifting forward from her relaxed bun.

"You look very...festive, Captain," he remarked as she took his arm. "But I suppose a uniform is always appropriate."

"Certainly, Commander," Janeway answered. There was an undertone there she could not quite make out.

"Especially considering that the only other choice in my case is old work clothes."

"Haven't you ever replicated anything new for yourself?" Janeway wondered if he really didn't need anything else.

"Frankly, Captain, I prefer to use my rations on things other than my wardrobe," he chuckled. He seemed relaxed and easy—almost. Trivialities of conversation, a measured stride down the corridor to the dining room. Trying to keep his distance, not quite succeeding—his arm drew in closer to his side until she bumped against him. Their glances met, and they stopped in the corridor.

"Chakotay..."

"...Yes?"

"Thank you," she whispered, feeling the warmth of his gaze roll over her. He did not ask her what she meant, but seemed to take it in his own way. His eyes moved over her face, his lips parting. Hot and cold and deliciously warm, her blood surged through her and her breathing changed profoundly. Chakotay's arm tightened again where she held it, and he turned to face her completely. Both of them were immobile, but trembling—

"Scuse me, Captain," panted a young lieutenant, towing another officer by the hand and brushing past. "Sorry..." They darted into the dining hall with embarrassed smiles. Chakotay had dropped his gaze when she looked back, and he was breathing slowly with conscious measure, chewing his lips. It was in the air between them, it was waiting to be said, but this could not be the time. Would it ever be? Could she ever justify to herself what she wanted so much? The doubts were in her face when Chakotay looked up again, and he studied her, then turned to resume his course. He took a step down the corridor, propelling her with him, halted again, took two very deep breaths, and strode on.

They were at the door, and the muffled stir of voices told her that the room was full of crewmembers waiting for them.

"Grand entrance, Captain?" Chakotay asked.

Janeway rolled her eyes slightly. "They would probably like that." Chakotay straightened up, made a show of pulling in his gut, and they stepped forward to open the door.

Packed to the walls. A roomful of heads turning, and a roomful of smiles and applause. Janeway acknowledged her crew with a gracious inclination of the head, then looked up at Chakotay. He was nodding and smiling tightly, obviously moved. Their eyes met, and she recognized identical emotions of pride, protectiveness, loyalty. Their crew. His as much as hers. Their charge and greatest mission, the service of the commanders to the commanded. Someone was leading a cheer at the back of the room. Anna Ruskoi.

An impromptu receiving line began to form, Ensign Kim at the head. Chakotay's look of tolerant amusement was so characteristic of him, so endearing— Janeway was unprepared for the massive wash of desire that flooded through her. Trembling, the perspiration starting on her palms and forehead, between her breasts. The substance of her equilibrium melting, moving lower, the hot flow draining through her ribcage and into her pelvis. Oh, and in a room filled with officers and crew, all looking at them, at her— Chakotay's arm was pressing against her side, and she gripped it for balance. Everyone—two thirds of the ship's complement, waiting to greet her, smiling with their hands outstretched. She had to let go of him—no, she could still shake hands while holding on to him. He couldn't use his right arm while she claimed it, but he could manage with the left.

"How is your arm, Commander?" she asked, clasping hands and clapping shoulders with most of Stellar Cartography. "A little weak still?"

"Strong enough," he replied. He stood quietly, allowing her to lean on him while the beat of her heart shook her with her longing. Janeway wanted to embrace him, reach up to stroke the side of his face, guide his lips down to hers— She had to close her eyes for a moment.

"Stuart—Jenny," she said, recovering, shaking hands. Several young Maquis men were monopolizing Chakotay, eagerly asking questions about the fight with the Kazon.

"Ask Torres," he told them. "She worked on them a lot more than I did." The security detail that he had led to the base came in a group and stood at attention as one by one they gripped his hand. Ruskoi said nothing, but glanced at the arm the captain held so tightly, then snapped a small salute. Janeway's emotions threatened to overflow again. She had cried all the fear and pain and despair out of her system. Now the tears that

filmed her eyes were happy ones, happiness so acute it ached more than the worst of sorrows.

"No one's eating anything, and the pejuta is getting cold!" wailed Neelix.

"We certainly can't have that," replied Janeway, laughing gratefully. She tore herself away from Chakotay and strode to the table where Neelix stood, glancing over the dishes and bowls placed there. Dozens of crewmembers had donated replicator rations and tinkered with programs to produce a banquet. Neelix had provided half a dozen dishes of his own, and fruits and berries from the lost gardens were piled in platters. She took a plate and flatware, and said, "Engage." There was a mad rush to line up behind her.

"Let me recommend the angla'bosque," said Neelix officiously, pointing to a huge kettle of multicolored goulash. He seized a ladle and plopped a generous helping on her plate. "And the keema balls in pureed—"

"Thank you, Mr. Neelix," said Janeway firmly, and took some fruit and pastries. She saw a bowl of corn salad, reportedly one of Chakotay's favorite dishes, and decided to try some. Her plate was full now, so she took a glass of pejuta and looked for a place to sit. The big table by the viewport, where she could talk to as many people as possible. This was her favorite kind of party— plenty of food, and plenty of company.

"Isn't there any *booze*?" boomed a loud voice behind her. A Maquis crewman— Dalby.

"Have some fruit juice," said Neelix, and was rewarded with a snort. Janeway sat down and ate her dinner as well as she could, since every time she took a bite, someone else came up to greet her. It didn't really matter; the presence of her crew was nourishment to her. She looked for Chakotay. He had not yet visited the buffet, but was in the center of a knot of people, apparently re-telling a battle; his hands were describing ship maneuvers in the air. Lieutenant Benow, her tawny braid pinned neatly around her head, was following every gesture with rapt attention. Yes, he was a handsome man, and a fine figure in a uniform. Many of the crew undoubtedly found him attractive. What might that mean for their attitude to a connection between their commanders? How many considerations must she account for? Janeway turned the question over and over again while she exchanged small talk with the head of Xenobiology. Another young lieutenant, dark and curly-haired, hovered nearby and took a seat at her

table as soon as one became vacant. She gave Janeway a cup of replicated coffee, beamed when thanked, and immediately asked her what kinds of books she liked to read. A circle gathered around her like the one around Chakotay, smiling faces and lively discussion. The warmth and affection surrounded Janeway on every side.

"Bridge to Janeway," said Tuvok's voice, and she touched her com badge.

"Go ahead."

"I apologize for interrupting, Captain, but you asked to be called if any additional Kazon ships approached."

"How many?" she asked softly, not wishing to put a damper on the festivities if possible.

"Two," he replied. "They are making no aggressive moves, but are holding position directly above us at a considerable distance."

"I'd better take a look." She set down her plate and approached Chakotay, whose group of listeners parted for her. "Commander—I've been called to the bridge."

"Kazon," he said, keeping a smile on his face for the benefit of onlookers. The circle closed again around them both.

"Yes. There may be no immediate cause for concern, but are we ready for trouble?"

"Certainly we are, Captain. All critical systems are staffed, and we can get to battle stations in less than five minutes."

"I hope I won't be long—I don't want to miss too much." She glanced at Ensign Kim, who was directing several crew members with musical instruments to set up chairs in a semi-circle against one wall.

Chakotay smiled. "We'll wait for you."



KIM'S FACE FELL when he saw that Janeway had left, but Chakotay assured him she would be back. The musicians went to get some more food from the rapidly diminishing spread, and Chakotay followed them, aware that he was actually very hungry. Three days of intravenous feeding could do that to a man. He appreciated a good meal, one offered to everyone equally so he could take as much as he wanted. And he felt the need for distraction, as the conversation had not yet moved his thoughts away from Janeway. She had held his arm so tightly, looking flushed and

very animated, even feverish. He had thought for a moment she might be feeling faint. Perhaps she was still ill—but her conversation had been lively, her eyes clear and bright. This was a very public event, and they would have no chance for private conversation, but afterwards, maybe... He resolved to take Kes' advice, and simply speak to Janeway alone. No matter what the outcome. The thought unsettled him, but exhilarated him at the same time. Got to run risks to do anything important... Taking a plate, he loaded up with cake, corn salad, some excellent-looking frijoles with tortilla strips and salsa, smoked stuffed anchos—

"Commander!" Neelix was beaming, holding a covered tureen. "I saved this to bring out *especially* for you. These ravenous hordes would have slurped it all up in no time."

Probably mildewed leola root au gratin, Chakotay thought. "What is it, Neelix?" The gaily dressed chef set the dish down, whipped off the lid with a flourish, and handed him a ladle and a large soup bowl. That aroma...no, it couldn't be—and the contents were somewhat...greenish-yellow...

"I used vornox milk, of course—it's got much more flavor—but the recipe is perfectly authentic," said Neelix. "I did a little research while I was recording all my best dishes in the archives. You Humans do some amusing things with your food." He chuckled and wagged his bristly brows.

Chakotay dipped the ladle in the tureen with an experimental air. Right consistency, at least. The pieces chopped a little too coarsely, but no matter. Smelled...almost right. He filled his bowl with some trepidation, took a spoonful and a deep breath, tried to think of a tactful phrase so he wouldn't blurt out the first thing that came to mind. The color gave him pause. Neelix was waiting, the pride and anticipation beginning to fade to a question. *The things I do for this crew*, Chakotay thought, and sipped at the spoon.

He felt the smile begin inside his mouth before it curved his lips. Damn. Mushroom soup. A little spicy, and the milk was sweeter than it should be, but not bad at all. "Thanks, Neelix," he said, and the Talaxian's look of pure happiness was almost more satisfying than the taste of the soup. He clapped Neelix on the shoulder, picked up his dishes, and went to find a seat.

A table full of Maquis and Starfleet hailed him, shoving chairs down to make room. Lieutenant Carey and Torres were diagramming on the table top with fingertips, heads together, but

looked up as he sat down. "Carey, you helped save a lot of lives," Chakotay said, and reached out to shake the lieutenant's hand.

"Well, Lieutenant Torres—" Carey began modestly, half rising.

"I know all about Torres, and she knows it," said Chakotay. "I haven't said it to you, and I'm doing it now. You're a good officer, and a good engineer, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Commander," said Carey, and they nodded to each other in mutual understanding.

"What's that crap you're drinking, Commander?" asked Dalby. "Here, spike it up." He shoved a bottle half full of clear liquid down the table. Chakotay cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Liberated medical supplies?"

"No, *sir*. Strictly home brew. The troll—that is, the Morale Officer—wanted to know if we had any...traditional handicrafts to occupy us in off-hours. So I said, if I had about forty kilos of grain, I could occupy a lot of off hours, and keep plenty of morale floatin' around too."

"Grain?"

"Corn's good, or lots of other things. But he gave me something like potatoes—good and starchy—they were spoiling anyway, so they had a head start."

"Where's the still, Dalby?"

"Wherever it needs to be, Commander. I build 'em portable. Drink up." He craned down the table and splashed a good ten centiliters into Chakotay's glass. Chakotay glanced around and saw signs of mild intoxication around the whole table, except for Torres. She generally abstained, since her Klingon heritage meant her reaction to alcohol was unpredictable. He looked at his drink skeptically. His own ancestors had had reason to curse the existence of "firewater", though they had certainly known how to make the milder kinds of fermented beverages. Gerron reached for the bottle, poured most of it into his own glass, and tossed it back.

"You sure you want to do that, Crewman?" asked Carey, laughing as Gerron choked, wheezed and turned bright red. "Uisge beagh, the water of life," said Carey, and poured himself some more from a fresh bottle. "I'm ashamed I didn't think of this myself."

"That's really smooth," the young Bajoran croaked, and took another swig.

"Whattya mean, 'usky bah'?" demanded Dalby. "This is whiskey." Carey toasted him, still laughing, and held his glass up to the light.

"Actually, it's more like vodka," said Rutskoj, passing by and plucking the glass from Carey's hand. She drained it with one swallow, exhaled with a smile, and replaced it empty. Carey looked comically at it and grabbed the bottle again. Torres was laughing. This party was shaping up to be a real event. Chakotay took another look around the room and smiled to himself. He didn't feel like being the sand in the cornmeal just now. As long as no one seemed to be overindulging, he could afford to keep one eye shut and let the doctor deal with the hangovers. Janeway hadn't called from the bridge, so she must not think there was any immediate danger. Chakotay tried a mouthful of his own drink. Diluted, the stuff wasn't so bad, and the hot bite of the alcohol was welcome. He'd better eat something first, however.

The food was so good he went back for seconds, and then thirds, and drank several glasses of various beverages, all strengthened with Maquis moonshine. Dalby had made a large batch, apparently, and several of the tables were passing bottles around.

"What is this shit?" he heard Paris say. "Give me something to rinse my mouth out with. Say, does anyone know how to make *lager*?"

It had been quite a while since he had drunk with a group of friends, and the company encouraged consumption. Maize beer around the fire, a memory of his grandfather and uncles. An excellent feeling. He noticed Tuvok across the room—when had he come in? and waved him over.

"Hey, Lieutenant, come to have a good time?"

The Vulcan walked slowly and stiffly through the noisy room, avoiding Neelix's offer of a plate, and stood by Chakotay's table. "The captain informed me," he said, "that I was required to put in an appearance."

"You mean," said Chakotay, laughing, "that she said, 'Tuvok, go take a break at the party while I hold down the fort.' How are things on the bridge? She's been gone for half an hour."

"The Kazon ships we detected are still holding their relative position at a distance."

"Not planning to do anything soon, then."

"In all probability."

"Have a seat. Or get some food. Neelix is bringing out another pot, I see."

"I have already eaten. And I do not plan to remain here for long."

"Only a Vulcan would eat dinner before a party," said Chakotay, and licked smoked ancho off his fingers. "What's eating *you*, Tuvok?" His good mood was not quite impervious to the cold expression on Tuvok's face.

"You are intoxicated, Commander."

"In all probability. Do Vulcans get drunk?"

"Consumption of non-nutritional calories in a toxic form is not logical."

"I don't feel logical. I feel—" How did he feel? Convivial, stuffed, somewhat overindulged. Bolstering his courage? The way Janeway had looked at him when the crew applauded, the way the soft wisps of shining hair brushed her cheekbones, the feel of her pulse as she wrapped her arm around his... Why did he need artificial courage? No matter what the answer would be, he had to ask. For a gift he thought she might want to give, though not entirely hers to bestow. Neither of their lives belonged to them alone.

"You look like you want to unload something, Tuvok. Shoot."

"You are correct in deducing that I wish to speak to you. But what I have to say should be said in private."

"Then you are just going to have to wait, Lieutenant. Both guests of honor are not supposed to desert the party." Chakotay looked over at the semi-circle of chairs, where the musicians were finally sitting down at Kim's urging. The ensign had a woodwind of some kind that he must have bartered for on a planet they had visited, and there were two guitarists, a violinist, and a keyboard player.

"Um...if I could have your attention, please..." Kim was saying above the din of conversation.

"Keep it down!" roared Chakotay. The noise diminished slightly.

"We're going to play some of the captain's favorite pieces that we've been rehearsing, and I've set up a comlink to the bridge so she can hear. So if we could stop talking for a few minutes, um..."

"You heard him," said Chakotay, rattling a spoon in a glass. Gradually the voices trailed off, and the standees turned to face the musicians.

"Captain, are you there?" asked Kim.

"Loud and clear, Ensign. Very thoughtful of you, I might add." Janeway sounded crisp and amused.

"My pleasure, Captain," said Kim, a broad smile on his face. He gestured with his instrument, and the quintet launched into something lively and complicated—a Bach concerto? Chakotay listened dutifully for a few moments, then realized that Tuvok's intent gaze was still fixed on him. Classical music was not Chakotay's strong suit, and no one would notice if they went next door for a minute. Might as well hash it out, whatever was on that Vulcan mind. He gestured to the door with a motion of his head. Tuvok bowed, and Chakotay rose and led him out of the dining room.

THERE WAS A SMALL conference room down the corridor, furnished with four chairs and a table for private mealtime discussions between officers. Chakotay sat down and put his feet up on another chair. Tuvok remained just inside the door, his hands tucked behind his back. Neither of them spoke for a minute, until Chakotay sighed deeply and leaned back, putting his hands behind his head.

"All right, what concern do you have to share with me this time? I think Rutskoi has reconciled herself to having a former Maquis as a superior officer. And I'm sorry I let Seska get away again. I was really in league with her all along, you know. Even I wasn't working for me." The joke was lost on Tuvok, of course. Chakotay hated that. Torres at least had the grace to groan. The alcohol was taking firmer hold. Four drinks—or five? Too many, at any rate. "Say something, damn you!" he burst out suddenly, thumping his feet to the floor, slamming his hands on the table. Too loud.

"My concern," said Tuvok in a voice that could have frozen a runaway reactor, "is with your relationship...with Captain Janeway."

Chakotay let out a long, viciously sibilant breath. "I was wondering when you would get around to that. You rummage through my mind, you invade my privacy and hers—"

"The nature of the captain's duties do not allow her the same privacy as an ordinary crewmember."

"Are you telling me you've got her under surveillance, Security Chief?"

"Certainly not. But if her efficiency is impaired—"

"What makes you say that?"

"The captain spent approximately seventy-one percent of her waking hours in Sickbay at your

bedside while you were unconscious. The occasion of her capture may have been precipitated by her excessive concern for one particular hostage. When she returned to the bridge this evening, she was physically...aroused, in a manner that I have noted before in conjunction with her contact with you. And your conduct on the first occasion in question—

“The one you spied on, you god-blasted Vulcan.” Chakotay clenched his fists.

“In order to gain a clearer idea of the nature of the incident on Ensign Seska’s ship.”

“And is it— perfectly— clear to you now? Are you SATISFIED?” Chakotay felt his face heat as he shouted. “What are you telling me to do? Drown my emotions the way you do? Amputate them at the shoulder? Humans don’t work that way, and it’s a source of constant amazement to me that Vulcans can think that they should.” He stopped and gritted his teeth, made a quick impatient movement of the head. Tuvok was staring at the wall.

“Discipline can accomplish a great deal in any person, no matter how...passionate.”

“Is that so?”

“I have seen into your mind, Commander, and you have seen into mine. You should have...some impression of what discipline and training has accomplished in my case. Indeed, I would have thought that you had benefited from the experience, and been better able to restrain yourself in many areas as I have done.”

“That you’ve managed to remain faithful to your *wife*, you mean? Were you ever going to tell her?” Tuvok had gone utterly rigid, his eyes motionless. Chakotay blazed on, impelled by rage and shame at his weakness, the reins of self-control loosened by the liquor. “No—I’ll bet she knows already, and just counts on your precious Vulcan *discipline!*”

They stood still, Tuvok staring unseeingly, Chakotay half risen out of his seat in a crouch.

“You mischaracterize my...friendship with Captain Janeway,” the Vulcan said finally. “The Human perspective on such matters is obviously a limited one—”

“The hell it is. You looked into my mind— did you understand me any better than I understood you? She...she is the one thing we really agree on, and even there, you want to make my feelings into something vile.”

“I will not venture to judge your emotions. I will point out to you that the expression of them has put Captain Janeway into an unfortunate quandary, and will do so again if you approach her in any way.” Tuvok turned and bored his gaze into Chakotay. “We are in a critical situation, the captain has barely recovered from extreme physical and emotional stress, and any declarations on your part may jeopardize the entire ship, as the ship depends on her.”

Chakotay nearly strangled on his fury before he sagged and dropped back into his chair. His head was swimming with the liquor, but the calmly-stated truth sank through the fumes. This wasn’t his call. No matter what he thought he had noticed, if Janeway didn’t want to bring the subject up, now or ever...

“It is my belief that the Kazon are mustering the forces of more than one sect. There are more ships following us than are known to be under Culluh’s direct control. They may sense an opportunity, as they know *Voyager* was damaged in the battle. And if Seska survived, she will have informed them that the captain and first officer are at the very least partially incapacitated, and possibly dead. We are in greater danger now than we have been since we first encountered this species.”

“Tomorrow we die,” Chakotay muttered under his breath.

“Possibly we shall.”

Oh, damn that Vulcan hearing, Chakotay thought. *Damn that Vulcan and his calm.*

“But I submit to you that a declaration at any time would be highly inappropriate. The problems of protocol and the questions of illegitimate grounds for command decisions would be insurmountable.”

“What’s the matter, Tuvok?” Chakotay asked with quiet venom. “Don’t you trust her? She’s not a Vulcan, but you’ve stuck with her all this time—”

“Janeway is my captain. You, on the other hand—”

“Now we get to the real point, don’t we? What am I?”

Tuvok had almost a smile. “A defector from Starfleet. A Maquis terrorist. An emotional Human with a lack of self-control in certain areas, and whose judgment in those areas can be called into question. A first officer who keeps order among his unruly former crew with the threat of physical violence.”

"Go on."

"A commander who became involved with a person under his command..."

"...and who stopped it because he knew he'd made a terrible mistake. A mistake that's nearly cost him everything." Chakotay stared at the table top, a shaking hand over his face.

"I am certain that you take my meaning, Commander."

"You've made me speak it for you. Damn you." His head dropped low.

"When a logical sequence of reasoning has arrived at its conclusion, the result is clear and inevitable to all who have followed the argument."

"Yes." He could only whisper.

Tuvok nodded with an air of satisfaction that set Chakotay's teeth clenching. "I will return to the bridge and relieve Captain Janeway, as it is my impression that she would prefer to attend the dinner."

"It's safe now," Chakotay said with bitter humor. "You've made sure of that." Tuvok merely raised an eyebrow, and turned to go. "Just a damn minute, Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"You're right. I'm not going to say a word, and I'm better off if she doesn't either. It's no good for her, and worse for me. Maybe I couldn't handle it well. Either I'd fight her decisions harder to prove I wasn't under her thumb, or I'd just...drown in her. I can't be her...pet. I'm her first officer. She needs me as an officer —"

"I am gratified that you have come to realize that."

"But I won't let you think that what I feel for her is something disgraceful. Or what she feels for me, and I know she does feel it, though perhaps not to the extent that I do."

Tuvok was unreadable, neither tense nor relaxed. Chakotay began to speak softly, with a careful edge, finding his words somewhere beyond his anger.

"You think this is a danger to her, and to the ship. I know your point, and from what you think of me, it's justified. You want us to remain separate and circle in our own orbits, keep the cycles going without disturbance. The mere fact that I came in on my path has perturbed everything in your system. You thought I was only a wanderer who would move on, and instead I was captured by chance, and by her influence. So now you want me to fall into the orbit that you've defined for me, if

you can't have that position for yourself. But I can't follow your path. It's not my nature to walk anyone else's road." He traced a figure on the table top before him, two overlapping circles and a line. Tuvok was watching him. "And there isn't a damn thing you can do about this anyway. No matter what we say to each other or what happens in future, we're bonded for life. It's already happened. The best things about Humans are their capacities to connect with one another," Chakotay said, and looked the Vulcan in the eye. "We don't have the ability to look into each other's minds. We can only grope in the darkness, but we find each other anyway. We can know each other on levels that you never bother with, that you don't even dream about, because you probably don't even dream. I've seen my dreams — I can't break that connection with her, even if I wanted to."

Tuvok had lost his infuriating smugness, and was frowning. Chakotay felt a surge of despondent anger, his bitterness at concession getting the better of him. The liquor roiled in his head. "Rest easy, Tuvok," he growled, "because you've just destroyed any hope I've got, and hers along with it. You can't have her, and no one on this ship can, and that's just the way you want it, isn't it? You can keep her locked away and off limits to everyone, and keep your blasted Vulcan virtue, your Starfleet protocol, and her as some kind of icon to it. But she's not yours. You don't own her soul. She can guard it by herself, no matter how you try to be her watch-dog. Seska couldn't break her, and no one ever will. Certainly not me, though she's given me a kind of strength I never knew I could have. I'll try to emulate her example now, but it's because of her, not because of you. I — don't — give — a — DAMN what you think, or what your concerns are. You can go straight to hell, and slam the door behind you!"

Tuvok's jaw muscles were clenching, but his features were stiff. *Gods, an angry Vulcan. Quite an accomplishment, Commander. Proud of yourself?*

He remembered the invasion of the mindmeld, which had probably saved Janeway's life, and knew he would do it again a thousand times for her. And the small part of himself that he had gained from the Vulcan, that had exchanged with a fraction of his own essence, spoke a cool logic to him. *He's concerned for her. He wants her to remain his focused, brilliant, decisive captain. As do you. You don't want yourself as a millstone around her neck. She is your leader, and you will carry out her wishes, and execute her orders, and trust in her*

judgment. As long as it doesn't clash with mine, Chakotay thought wryly. Then I'll give her every argument I've got, and we'll come to some agreement in the ready room, and emerge united for the benefit of the crew. The good of the crew. You don't want her putting any one officer above the ship as a whole, not even the first officer. As if that could ever happen...

"Trust her, Tuvok," he said softly. "She'll do the right thing. Haven't you known her long enough? Much longer than I have, and she doesn't hide her light under a bushel. She's Kathryn Janeway, the captain of the Federation starship *Voyager*, and she does her duty."

Tuvok looked at him, and the shell was so thick over him it was as if it had never been breached. That suggestion Chakotay had felt when the barrier had been deliberately lowered, the unformed yearning—had he even read that correctly? So quick, so odd, so alien. This man was not Human, but he was a living being. The feelings

dwelt deep, a current rich and strange. He wished there was some way to let Tuvok know that he valued that glimpse without causing further withdrawal. Some things were better left unsaid.

"It's the whiskey talking, Lieutenant," he said, and felt its influence evaporating. "It's not too logical to poison one's judgment. I'm a fool, but I'm only Human." He glanced in the direction of the dining room. "I'd better get back in there, or poor Kim will think he's lost all the senior officers."

"You are far from being a fool, Commander. Captain Janeway chose you as her first officer, and her judgment is unimpaired."

Tuvok turned and left, leaving Chakotay staring after him, leaning on the table, alone. You never could tell with Vulcans. He rose and returned to the dining room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HIS HANDS, gentle and firm, brown against her bare skin. Tracing the contours of her breasts, the fingers circling and cupping, lifting the soft weight and running his thumbs over her nipples...his lips pressing her throat, making their slow way downwards...her own hands in his cropped hair— what would that feel like? He might groan against her neck, lower her to the bed, strip off his own clothing and lie down with her, warm and hard...roll himself under her, seize her hips, and—

“Captain, I am here to take the bridge.” Janeway was seated in the command chair, wearing a blue dress, her mind engaged so deeply that Tuvok’s voice startled her.

“But Lieutenant, you were there hardly half an hour.” She turned and let the illusions flee.

“I have paid my respects to Commander Chakotay and the crew, and this event is in your honor, Captain. It is proper that you should attend it.” Tuvok seemed to be searching for something in her face. Janeway smiled at him and nodded in assent. The music had changed to a tune her mother had liked to sing around the house. She rose and walked to the turbolift, and turned up the speaker so that she would not miss a note.

The second shift of crewmembers was arriving and others departing, and she spent some time greeting the new arrivals in the corridor. The music played as she shook hands and called her people by name. Torres departed for Engineering. Kim was managing a passable imitation of a tin whistle in the upper registers of his alien instrument. Janeway had thought he was just making conversation when asking her about her musical tastes, but he had apparently been taking notes. He certainly knew how to get on her good side.

When there was a lull, she slipped in again and went to congratulate the players. The conversation was loud again, happy and raucous.

“Ensign—I had no idea you were such an accomplished entertainer,” she said to Kim.

“My parents always made me play for family events,” he said with a grin. “We used to have great reunions—”

“Paws off, loser!” came a woman’s shrill voice, slicing through the general noise. Henley, landing a good whack to Dalby’s face. A security guard separated them and spoke earnestly to both. Chakotay moved through the crowd, which was already losing interest, and escorted Dalby to the door. Henley was laughing, sitting down and draining a glass. Janeway saw bottles standing on a number of tables. An unofficial contribution to the festivities? Kim looked shocked. Chakotay came over and spoke to Janeway, stiffly.

“A misunderstanding. Dalby’s drunk, and fell down on her lap when he tried to get up. She’s a little the worse for liquor as well, and overreacted.”

“On synthehol?” asked Kim, his eyes bulging.

“Not exactly,” replied Chakotay, pulling at his ear. He glanced at Janeway sideways, another of his characteristic looks, and folded his arms. His manner was peculiar, a mix of formality and restlessness, very different from his behavior at the start of the evening.

“Where did that come from?” she asked, nodding at the bottles. “It looks home-brewed.”

“Ah...it’s actually not too bad, Captain, but don’t ask what it was made from.” She could smell it on his breath, rather strongly.

“I see you’ve had a sample, Commander,” she replied. He wasn’t in the habit of indulging— was this why he seemed uneasy?

“We should encourage individual initiative into creative channels,” he said with Tuvok’s intonation. And laughed, a little too harshly. Janeway smiled in puzzlement and put a hand on his arm. Something in his eyes, fire glinting through concealment, until it was washed over and quenched.

“Play some more!” someone shouted to Kim. “Do you take requests?” A gale of happy laughter.

“Geez, guys, we’re kinda tired— give us a chance to get our breath,” Kim said.

“Lend me that guitar,” said a bearded officer to one of the other musicians. He began to strum and sing, and some of the crew moved to hear him, while others returned to the replenished buffet and conversed at the tables. Janeway and Chakotay stood together an arm’s reach apart, listening to

folk songs and sea chanteys as one person and then another took up the thread. One of the Native American Maquis left and returned with a skin drum and sticks.

Songs of sailing, of returning home, of loved ones waiting. The tone changed, ebbed and flowed, but came always to those themes again. Carey stood and sang in a rich baritone with a melancholy edge.

*...The night being dark and stormy, and loud the waves did roar,
Our captain cried, "Hold off, my boys, our vessel's going ashore."
Our captain cried, "Hold off, my boys, to deck you one and all,"
And I rued the day I sailed away from the hills of Donegal.*

*Here's farewell unto Castle Rock, and likewise unto Downhill,
And to that spot where we sailed by, they call it sweet Moville,
From sweet Culmore to that foreign shore where waves do rise and fall,
Adieu, adieu, to my wee lass on the hills of Donegal.*

Silence when he ended, the whole room having grown quiet to listen. A core of longing in Janeway's breast, a memory of closeness, of home. A haven to gain, a hand to hold and a breast on which to lean. Chakotay's eyes were closed, and he bowed his head. Another person stood—the young curly-headed lieutenant Janeway had spoken with earlier. Her voice was shaky, perhaps with emotion, but strengthened as others took up the beautiful tune.

*As long as deep within the heart
The soul of Judea lies turbulent and strong,
As long as to the East, forwardly,
The eye toward Zion constantly is turned,
Then our hope it is not dead,
The ancient longing will be fulfilled,
To return to the land, the land of our fathers,
The city of Jerusalem, where David encamped.*

Another pause at the conclusion, and then the low beat of the drum. Three Maquis sat on the floor, placing it between them, and Chakotay joined them, taking a stick and strengthening the rhythm. He started the chant, apparently his

prerogative, and soon the voices throbbed in unison with the drum. The words were simple and repeated many times, but the rise and fall of pitch and the steady pulse were the essence of the sound. More like a ceremonial prayer than a song, and perhaps that was what it was. A prayer for homeland, but also for the souls that inhabited it. A home in the heart, and in the hearts of others. Perhaps *Voyager's* crew would never get home—Janeway allowed herself that small moment of doubt—but if they could forge the connections of home between them, create an abode from the people around them, they might come to rest at last.

At rest. A great silent earthquake shook her, and she knew, however far her travels led, she would find no rest in life except within an easy arm's reach.

Chakotay was absorbed in his task, his clear tenor accompanying the drum, echoed by the others. If she said to him, "My home is with you," how would he react? It might be unexpected, but there was no way to prepare him. If he had not seen the turn of her mind, had enforced a willed blindness on himself, then she could do nothing but say the words to him. At the proper time. She closed her eyes and let the drum fill her thoughts.

"OH, NO, I'm a terrible dancer. I have no desire to make a fool of myself."

"You're the captain. It's your privilege to make a fool of yourself in front of the crew. But I'll refuse for both of us."

"And disappoint Mr. Kim and all those eager faces? Whose idea was this, anyway?"

"He said you liked waltzes, and I said his group should play some, and then someone started clearing tables away to make a dance floor. Then Neelix started nudging me over to get you to lead it off with me. They're all waiting—I'll just say you're too tired." Chakotay turned away abruptly.

"Now hold on there, Mister. I didn't say I was tired. I do like waltzes. I just don't usually dance to them in public. But I'll rise to the challenge."

A very slow smile crept over his face, and he offered his arm. "Just one, Captain. That should satisfy them."

They walked to the cleared area, to the sound of applause, and Janeway stood a little stiffly as Chakotay put one hand on her waist. She touched his shoulder lightly, and they clasped hands and

waited. "I did take lessons, you know. My mother thought it was important for social reasons. I never could stay in time."

"Count the beats—"

Kim gestured, and the quintet began. A beautiful old Irish tune—the guitarist standing in for the harp.

"Oh, don't give me the 'count the beats' lecture—where did you learn this, anyway?"

Chakotay swept her around in a confident arc.

"I always liked to dance. Not this way at home, of course. But at the Academy, this was the kind that the women liked..."

Janeway had to drop her gaze. Years ago, those dimples might have been more casually displayed, the big frame more sparsely muscled, the hair black without any mixture of grey. Would that same calm warmth have shone in his eyes for her?

Half-embraced, they circled the floor, the watchers smiling and swaying to the music. Neelix reached out for Kes and drew her closer. Janeway grew aware that some crewmembers were exchanging knowing glances, but that there was no more than happy surprise in most of them, and in some, a nodding confirmation. The curly-headed lieutenant whispered to Benow, and Janeway could see them clasp hands for a moment, their eyes shining at her. Chakotay looked once again as he had in the corridor, his lips parted, his eyes warm, but with a touch of sadness and resignation as he smiled. He seemed to push that consciously away, and held her closer as they danced. A few more couples moved out on the floor after several minutes, and she began to edge over to the side to escape. Before she stepped on his foot, or threw his stride off too much, or simply lost all sense of the music in her thoughts of his touch. She felt even clumsier than usual.

"Captain, you're leading."

"I never could help doing that, Commander. I'd really rather not continue this any longer than necessary."

"Just until the tune is over."

"All right. I'm only afraid I'm going to make a mess of things."

"You're doing fine." He smiled whimsically at her.

They danced that tune, and the next, another harp piece with a sweet yearning tone and rippling melody. Round and round, the epicycles of their path spiraling in the circle defined by the crew. When the third tune started, Janeway was

thoroughly out of breath, and was surprised that Chakotay continued to dance, cutting smaller figures in the center of the floor to accommodate her slowed steps.

"I really—have to rest. Aren't you tired?"

"Not tonight."

"Well, I need a break." He seemed disappointed, but she threw him a pleading look and he ducked his head in assent. The floor was becoming crowded, and it took a few moments for him to navigate between the enthusiastic waltzers. "I'm sure you can find plenty of partners. You must be one of the best dancers here." They disengaged and stood between the tables.

"No, I won't dance any more tonight," he said, and moved his eyes away from her face. Janeway trembled inwardly, but kept her expression firm.

"I insist. I delegate all my duties in this respect to you. It's getting late, and I'm going to retire gracefully. Good night."

"Good night, Captain," he replied. Janeway went to shake a few more hands and slip away. Neelix heaped her arms with pastries from the remains of the buffet, smiling when he brought out a whole apple tart to present to her. When she looked back, Chakotay was dancing with Lieutenant Benow, her small tawny head tilted up to him.



"OFFICER'S QUARTERS," Chakotay said, and slumped against the wall of the turbolift when the doors closed on him. He'd left Neelix and Kim cleaning up, and Carey following Torres around like a puppy, coming out of his drunk and sniffing. Dalby had crept back in and was passed out under a table with Henley snoring beside him, and Chakotay was fairly sure Jenny Delaney had left at the same time as Tom Paris and with the same destination. *Yes, he thought, that was a damn good party. Maybe the last one we'll have.* Tuvok had informed him from the bridge that two more Kazon vessels were paralleling *Voyager's* course to starboard.

After hours, or the calm before the battle. Torres was heading to Engineering, every shift was on standby, and only four people were drunk enough to need a remedy from Sickbay. He was going to collapse for a while, maybe sleep, maybe

not. The whiskey was only a bad taste in his mouth now and his head throbbed. But although he was still somewhat weak from his injuries, his energy burned hot in him, resisting his efforts to conserve it. Gods knew what he was going to have to prepare for in the next few hours. Chakotay chuckled sardonically and headed down the corridor to his quarters.

After showering and brushing his teeth, he took a long drink of water and felt a little better. He'd abstained more or less strictly for years, but this had been an occasion for cutting loose. Would he ever get another chance? Seven Kazon on their tail, gnawing at their flanks. Although he was tired, his mind was fully alert and restless, his senses sharply heightened. No, he wasn't going to get much sleep tonight, but he had slept in late this morning and thrown his internal cycles off anyway. He decided to dress again just in case of trouble; something was prickling his intuition again, though fear wasn't the word for it. Imminence, perhaps.

Chakotay sat at his desk and turned his monitor on. Reports? Or a book to read. He was off duty, for now, and he might as well enjoy it while he could. He found a text on Humanoid burial practices and began to download it, then hit the abort key and smiled at himself. Why not try something a little out of his usual realm?

"The Baroque Concerto: An Examination of Folk Dance Sources in the Court Music of the Seventeenth Century." Sounded like a tough nut, but he needed one to chew on right now. Janeway would be right next door, probably having already undressed for bed— Chakotay grimaced sharply and put a hand over his face. Damn. Not a thought he wanted to pursue. He stood and crossed to the viewport, looking out at the long diffused streaks of starlight. Was she doing the same, right next door? Could they share their view of the stars, ever, or would they move forever in concentric circles, always in parallel, never meeting?

This isn't your call, he reminded himself.

Tuvok, damn him, knows her better by many years, and she wouldn't compromise her duty for anyone, not him, not you, never. Don't sit here and make it worse all by yourself. Maybe he shouldn't sit and read just now. Something more physical, like a holoprogram.

"Computer, is the holodeck in use?"

"NEGATIVE, BUT IT IS RESERVED UNTIL 0800."

"All night? Great," he muttered. "So who's checked it out and not even turned it on?"

"Janeway to Chakotay."

For a moment he didn't register that the computer was no longer speaking to him. A controlled female voice, but one filled with sweet warmth. He thought he might melt down on the spot when he realized who it was.

"...Chakotay?"

"I'm here."

"I...I'm in need of a talk. I think you are too. Care to go for a walk?"

"Captain?"

"I'm right outside your door."

He shot to open it, and there she was. Hair loosened, though not let down, and wearing something soft, leggings and long tunic. The lights were dimmed for the night cycle, and faint gleams dwelt on her hair and in her eyes.

"I do this late at night sometimes," she said, and smiled whimsically at him. "It helps me think."

Chakotay was not thinking at all clearly, but he stepped out and closed his door. "Where to?"
"Everywhere. Let's tour the ship."

He walked beside her, neither of them saying much, while she led him to the dining hall, empty and dark. Janeway peered in and smiled, and went on. Corridor after corridor, as if she were inspecting every bulkhead with him at her side, looking at every centimeter of her realm through new eyes. In Engineering, Torres blinked at them, and Benders shot Chakotay a thumbs-up, which he ignored. Jonas sidled past with a crooked smile.

The great column of the warp core, energy in shifting colors and patterns, liquid fire reflecting on Janeway's face and in her eyes. She leaned on the rail, watching it for several minutes, and Chakotay watched her. The power under her hand, the lives on her shoulders. Some of that burden his, as much as she would let him carry for her. The pit of his stomach ached with the sight of her. He could have no more share of her than any of the crew received, and she could not give him more than a fraction of what he wished he had. She had given him too much already, and he prepared himself to be told that. But she said nothing still, just watched and walked slowly, circling the core, and he followed.

"Let's go back up," she said, and they took a turbolift to Deck Six. Janeway walked even more slowly here, and spoke for a moment to three maintenance techs who were replacing conduits

behind a wall panel. One of them glanced at Chakotay with a scowl and meaningfully at the others, one of whom shrugged slightly. Chakotay dropped his eyes and grimaced. As they walked on, he fell farther and farther behind Janeway, slowly as she went, and finally stopped altogether. He was beginning to feel like a dog trailing along at her heels. She looked back at him leaning against the wall, his arms folded, and retraced her steps. "Come on," she said. "We're nearly there."

"Where?" he asked, looked up, and saw the door of the holodeck.

Janeway opened it and waited, and he walked up to her side and looked in. The bright grid of the emitters lit up the room, as there was no program running. "I thought this might be a good place to talk." She looked up at him with a question. "But we could go to the airponics bay, or back to the dining hall."

Chakotay stared into the room, his face working.

"Perhaps the airponics bay, then," Janeway said softly, and began to close the door. He made a gesture in her direction, but did not touch her, and she halted. He stepped inside first and she followed him inside the room, and the door shut, the neutral emitters bright and impersonal, outlining a potential space. Janeway walked a few steps beyond him and stopped.

"Please, Chakotay," she said with her lilting pronunciation, that made something cherished from his name. "Will you choose the program for us?"

He cleared his throat, bowed his head for a moment, and said a prayer to himself, asking for the strength he knew he was going to need. "Computer, run program: Chakotay, Delta Four." The emitters dimmed, the walls fell away into distance, the hills rose on the horizon.

And the violet-leaved trees sprang up all around them, silently.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HE STOOD JUST BEHIND HER, on her right side, and she could not see his face. But his presence wrapped around her, the sound of his breathing, and her awareness of him was like a beam of sunlight on her back, warm, and growing warmer. The emerald lake rippled before them, nestled in the pale hills, circled with the violet trees. Janeway felt a little dizzy with the scent of flowers, and with the memory the scent brought back so strongly. Chakotay was close enough to touch, if she turned, and she caught a hint of him, part of her awareness and even more evocative than the flowers. She took a deep breath and let her head roll back, her loosened hair nudging her shoulders. Oh, the precious knowledge of his life, linked to hers. He knew that as well as she, but he did not know how she felt about it, or what she intended to do. Until this night, she had not known either. In the sight of her crew, she had realized what really held *Voyager* together, and the potential of the bonds she could not afford to ignore.

If this was their last opportunity to speak before the Kazon closed in, it was also their first, in a way. Each of them knew the full implications of what might be said here, and there would be no accident, no buried revelations, no substitution of one connection for another. Janeway turned to look at Chakotay, and he looked back, a little hooded, his eyes steady, but his defenses up. His courage touched her; he was ready for anything now, and with his choice of setting he had just given her the most direct challenge of their service together. Laid himself open for any blow, because he needed to have the truth, no matter what. How could she give it to him?

"Will you walk with me?" he asked, and turned along the lake shore. Janeway let him lead now, because this was his creation, his place, although he had made it for her and for the whole ship. Perhaps it would be best for her to wait for him to set the tone. Chakotay did not get far before stopping in the shade of a weeping tree like a willow, and Janeway ducked her head under the branches to stand beside him, and sat near the trunk when he hunkered on the grass. A twig

between his fingers, and he stripped the bark and bent it in a circle, tying it idly, gazing at the sunlight on the water.

"You told me," she said in a near-whisper, "that this reminded you a little of where you grew up."

"A little." He smiled faintly at the circlet in his hands. "The berry bushes, that's all." He tossed the circlet with a snap of the wrist, and it landed in the water and bobbed, drifting. They watched it, and it soon washed ashore in the small ripples the breeze brushed across the lake.

"Tell me about your homeworld."

"That's more than one place."

"Earth?"

"That's my real home, when it comes right down to it. I'm Human, and my ancestors were bound very strongly to certain spots. We took some of that power with us when we left, but my father used to say that Earth would remember us when we returned."

"Did she remember?"

"Yes. She did." He looked up into the branches and suddenly grinned. "She wanted a piece of me, I think, because at least every other mosquito and stinging fly in the Amazon took out a good big chunk."

"A trip?"

"With my father. That was my first step on the land my people came from. I didn't know it at the time, but that was also what made me realize how precious my other home was to me, because I wanted to go back so badly. I thought I didn't want roots anywhere. I wanted to live in the stars."

"And now you do."

"Yes. My home is here with me." He twisted to look at her, then took a deep breath and dropped his eyes. After a long silence, Janeway realized that he was not going to say more, and wondered why. He was so tightly restrained, his surface cool, the fire glowing through only rarely. There was more here than uncertainty. Had he—oh, God, had he made some decision? Would she hear something she had never expected from him? Janeway trembled, and hugged her knees close to herself. They could talk around this all night. Would it be better to leave some words unsaid?

"You defended your home." She meant the colony on the Cardassian border, and his stint in the Maquis, but he seemed to take it differently.

"This was one fight I couldn't afford to lose. There's nowhere else to go now, for any of us."

"And if there were another home to go to, someday?"

"I'll defend this one until I die. No one is going to move me from where I make my stand."

Chakotay's expression darkened, and he rose.

"Who would do that?"

He let out a short bark of a laugh. "Someone who'd like to make that stand himself—" He stopped and clamped his lips together.

"Chakotay?"

"You don't know, do you?" he asked, and studied her face. "No, you do, somehow, and it's all right. That must be it. You wouldn't think of it as anything disgraceful. That's not you." She watched anger smooth out of his face, and fall into resignation. "Never mind. Don't ask, because I won't answer. He's too proud, and so am I, and there's still a piece of him in my head. There are a lot of things he'll never let me say."

"Who will never let you say them? Are you talking about a person, or a moral principle?"

He startled her with a full-throated guffaw. "That's—a damn good question! He seems to have taken up residence like an extra conscience..."

"Chakotay, you seem to be taking some delight in confusing me."

"Sorry." He stopped laughing and shook his head with a smile. "I'd better drop the subject." The smile turned grim, and he pulled his cheeks in for a moment, resigned again. "I'd better drop every subject, because it's your turn. What do you have to say to me, Captain? Let's hear it. I can't rest until this is closed." He raised one hand to touch the curtain of violet leaves, then dropped it abruptly.

"I'll tell you, then." Janeway rose as well. Chakotay turned his head halfway towards her, but stopped short of looking her in the face. His eyes were trained on the ground, motionless, though his features were twitching.

"Do you—oh, Chakotay, I want so much to make love with you," she whispered, and stepped in front of him where he must see her. His face did not change for a long moment, and then a puzzled frown creased his brow, as if he had not quite heard her and was trying to make out her meaning. Janeway put one hand on his cheek and the other on his chest, her gaze meeting his, her body going soft and warm as the slow realization burned into his expression. She felt the interrupted

intake of breath, the slump of his shoulders in shock.

"No—" Chakotay said, and Janeway kissed him.



OH GODS. Her lips, her lips on his—oh gods, her fragrance...no. In a moment, in one moment more he would lose his grip, slip under. Drowning. His own panic was heavy as shackles.

Chakotay took Janeway by the shoulders and put her away from him with the greatest force he could muster, which wasn't much. He was going to faint if he touched her any longer—her shoulders were slim through her tunic, cool, but burning him like fire— He stepped back, almost tripped over his own feet, his eyes shut tight. Not her face just now, not her eyes. He turned, and came up against the tree, and grabbed it for support, and let his eyes open again for equilibrium's sake. He thought his legs would lose all strength.

"Chakotay—" He pressed his forehead against the bark. Guts on fire. A supernova in his belly. "Please, Chakotay, let me tell you—"

She wanted to thank him. It was gratitude. She knew it would never work, but she would let him have her body once or twice, because he had saved her life. After putting it in danger in the first place. A gift of thanks, on the eve of battle, when tomorrow we might die— Gods, didn't she realize? "No. Not for that," he whispered.

"Chakotay?"

"I—can't. It's...not like that. If I ever—if we ever—"

"Like that? How?" Her voice was soft and gentle, concerned. Concerned for her officer. A member of her crew, the crew she was devoted to. He couldn't let her.

"Not to thank me. Not to give us a good send-off to the fight. You might as well shoot me now."

"To thank you? I've already thanked you, Chakotay. You did your duty as a Starfleet officer, and as only you could have done it."

He could not answer. Janeway's voice went on, shaky and husky. "This is not about gratitude, and it's not temporary. How could you think I could ever make love with you and treat it as an indulgence?"

No ground beneath his feet. Dissolved, washed away, the deepest of cold waters closing

over him. The soft cool arms dragging him under. What he would have lost his soul to have, here in this illusionary forest a few days ago, and for which he would have pulled Janeway into the dark depths with him. Chakotay turned and cried out desperately, fighting the tremendous blaze of emotion rising in him at her words.

"That's what I'm telling you! I won't ever be able to let go of you, no matter how bad the consequences are. It's wrong, and I won't let you make the same mistake I made!"

"Mistake...?" she said softly, her face pale when he met her eyes. "But we've each just said we want this more than anything..."

"I can break the rules, for you and for *Voyager*. I walk my own path. I'm not the captain. But you break them for me?" He had the strength to stand and face her now. "I can't let you."

She was shaking, her hands going to throat and chest, her color alarmingly white. "...Tuvok," she whispered, to his surprise.

"What?"

"Tuvok violated my principles to get the space-folder. At Sikarius. Because he knew I couldn't." She swallowed hard. "No matter how much I wanted to."

"You...wanted to break your own rules?"

"God!" she cried, and covered her face with her hands. "If only I could have! He did a terrible thing for my sake, and I punished him for it..."

Chakotay stared at her, her slender body trembling, head bowed. *Gods*, he thought, *Tuvok destroyed himself for her, just the way I've done. And rebuilt himself without her help. I'm damned if a Vulcan is going to handle that better than I can...* He knew suddenly that he was the master of his own soul, no matter the power of Janeway's gift. With her help or without it, he would carry his duty for the rest of his life. She looked up at him and saw his resolve, but reached out to him, almost touching him before he moved aside.

"You were right to push me away," he said hoarsely. "You were tempted to do something you knew wasn't proper, and the worst thing I ever did as a captain was to give in to that. I couldn't help myself, or I didn't want to, and I let a spy deceive me because I wanted someone to love me..."

"Chakotay..." Janeway reached out again and put her hand on his arm. "There's no reason to be ashamed of that."

"How can you say that after all we've been through? My wanting what I shouldn't have

caused all this, and could have destroyed everything I value."

"That didn't happen. We won out, and we're alive and well."

"For now. The Kazon pack is chasing us, and this is my fault." He stepped back and spread his hands. "*She* was my fault. My mistake as a commander, and I was only the captain of an old clunker with defective engines and a lot of desperate people for a crew. You're the captain of *Voyager*. I never realized what that meant until I thought I might have to take over. There isn't any job more important in Starfleet, or to your crew. You're all there is for us, our last resort."

"And who is there for me?" she whispered. Her hands were out to him, pleading, her narrow palms upturned, her whole heart in her face. Chakotay shuddered with the effort not to embrace her, enfold her, stoop and sweep her up into his arms, give her every gift he held for her...

"You...you belong to this ship, not to me. It would destroy you to break your principles..."

"And you belong to this ship too," Janeway said, her beauty radiant, her voice husky. "You've just told me that. This is your home, and your people. Maybe the only one all of us will ever have again. How can we hold ourselves apart from each other?" He was silent, mesmerized. "We'd be lying to say we should, and would have to force ourselves to build walls between us. There's greater danger in barriers than there could be in any kind of bond. The bond is what will keep us alive. It's happening now – couldn't you feel it tonight?"

He felt her power and her eloquence, something overwhelming forming in his mind. The limitless universe – and the unbreakable ties against its dangers. Some dark shreds of fear still to burn away, to throw deliberately into the white furnace before he could embrace the light as his own... would it consume him itself? Was he proof against the full blaze of the sun?

Janeway was watching him, her eyes intent on his. "There's a change taking place, and this isn't just a ship and crew any more. They saw us together, and so many of them knew we were drawing closer, and they applauded it. It feels right to them. It's the logical result of the joining of the crews, and it can only strengthen that joining."

"Not all of them were applauding –"

"No. You'll never find perfect consensus. You can't wait for that in any course of action. You

know that, Commander, since you've been a captain. Sometimes you simply have to lead the way and trust them to follow."

"I'm a defector. A contrary — You have no idea how contrary I can be. I...I don't deserve this."

"Dear God. You didn't deserve to be treated like a piece of equipment, and worse. She couldn't see any of the best qualities in you. Only the surface, and hers is a lie. I won't lie about what I feel. How can anyone who is living a lie ever see clearly?" There were tears in her voice, and in her eyes, and the truth rang in them for him, forever.

This was her road, straight and clear before her, conviction and inclination pointing the same way. She was the guardian of her own soul, as he was of his...

"I think I can see now..." As if through her eyes, for a moment. Her head was down, her eyes closed, her hands holding her own arms. "...Thank you." At his words, she looked up, and nothing separated them. The conduit, the movement of one spirit to the other. No defenses left on either side. Janeway put out her hand, and Chakotay took it, and although he had full command of his strength, he fell to his knees before her.



HIS ARMS AROUND her waist. Her hands on his head. Bowed over him, her tears falling in his hair. A long time like that. A very long time. Forever, perhaps.

She tried to raise him up, finally, and he stood and enveloped her, embracing her slender body with his bulk. Cradled and supported, her face pressed to his chest. Chakotay stooped and put his arm under her knees, and swung her up to carry her. For a few steps, only one pair of footprints. Out of the holodeck, out of the world of illusion and into the solid corridor of her ship.

The turbolift hummed upwards, the two of them wrapped around each other, silent and still. She led him out and to her door, and was swept up again in her sitting room. Chakotay turned slowly with her in his arms, his face hidden against her throat, around and around in the gradual dance of inexpressible joy, their rhythm the harmony of their unspoken thoughts, singing together like harp and drum. In the bedroom, he put her down and lay with her, both still fully clothed, full-length on the bed. Just listening to the breath, finding the

beat of the heart, the weight of his arm over her side, the pressure of his hand against her back. One leg thrown over hers, her arms around his neck. He pulled back, eventually, and looked into her face, and she had never seen his expression before. An echo of it, perhaps, when he had stroked a stray lock from her cheek, and when he had held her eyes as she sat chained in a small compartment. He kissed her, and the sum of her desire washed over her again, undiminished. With her now, with him at last. Chakotay turned and brought her under him, and lay between her thighs, their lips moving slowly, whispering against each other's mouths. She still had her shoes on. She never wore her shoes to bed. And his boots on her quilt — Janeway covered his back with the gradual circles of her hands. The motion of their hips together, she lifting and cradling him, he rolling his pelvis in gentle surges. Their tongues slipped together, the soft sounds of parting and meeting. His penis was pressing firmly against her pubis, through the layers of clothes, and his weight was spreading her legs out to welcome him. The tunic unfastened down the back — oh, well. She reached down and stroked over his buttocks, pulling him against her, opening her lips to him. Melting, feeling her insides go liquid with heat. The pressure of his shaft — and the roll of his hips — she heaved under him, arched her torso and rolled her head back with a cry. His movements gained more purpose, pushing harder, and then he was kissing her jawline and throat, groaning, his arms scooping under her and lifting her closer. Janeway felt his urgency echo her own, wanting his skin under her hands, wanting his body inside hers.

They had trouble letting go of each other to unfasten their clothing. She sat up and felt his hands moving down her back, the air striking her skin as the tunic fell away, and she shrugged out of the sleeves and turned to him. Chakotay looked at her naked torso, reaching for her, holding and stroking, pressing one breast and then the other up to his lips as he crouched forward, kneeling on the bed. They fell backwards together, and he lay over her again, his hands sweeping over her, dragging her clothes over her hips with a noise of parting fabric. Janeway managed to kick her shoes off, and he rolled to the side to draw the leggings over her feet and push them away. She got the front of his jumpsuit open, and struggled with the fastening of his shirt while he shrugged off the shoulders of his uniform and wrestled it halfway down, then

remembered his boots and yanked impatiently at them. Almost. Just the shirt, and her underwear—and she swept all the garments off the spread. Nude, his skin smooth and tan in the low light. Oh, he was beautiful. Kneeling on the bed before her as she reclined, his erection stiff, just for her. The other tattoos, blue on his stomach and hip, lines arcing across his broad body. Chakotay was staring at her, almost in disbelief. He moved forward and over her on hands and knees, stopped at her stomach, laid his face there and rolled it across the soft flesh, kissing the skin. But she was impatient, and she had waited so long for him that she pulled at his shoulders and brought him up to her immediately. He kissed her softly on the mouth, and she locked her legs over him, and the head of his penis stroked between the lips of her vulva. “Captain,” he said, and she realized he had never really called her anything else, and she was smiling when he pressed forward, and inside her.

His body within hers. Joined, and moving deeper, withdrawing slightly, surging forward again, filling her. Chakotay poised still at the deepest point, resting on his hands, face intense and gentle, eyes closed. Every breath he took expanded his chest against her breasts. The very

stillness, the quiet strength inside her, caused her to contract and grip him, feel the most subtle of changes. His breath, his pulse—and he withdrew again slowly, plunged back with a grimace, visibly trying to restrain himself. Holding still again. Janeway felt orgasm approaching, and concentrated on his face, on the feel of communion, holding him within her, rocking her pelvis slightly. It was like a luxurious stretch, a ripple of release throughout her. Her cry was long and quivering. Before it faded, Chakotay accelerated his movements and found a rhythm of smooth thrusting. Her wetness allowed him to move freely and vigorously. Lowering his weight onto her, embracing her hard and dropping his face into the hollow of her shoulder, he let his restraint go and made fierce love to her until she began to heave under him, moaning. Over the edge, so sudden he seemed taken by surprise. His arms contracted around her so tightly she could barely breathe. So deep. Janeway called out to him again, and Chakotay answered her, hoarse and loud.

They lay until long after the sweat cooled, each breathing into the other’s mouth, kissing endlessly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MORNING ON *VOYAGER* did not come with a sunrise. Stars all around them, perpetually visible in the constant night, or the constant day, of space. No change from hour to hour, except for the lower lights in the corridors and the quieter activity of the night watches. No dawn in the literal sense; but in the minds of people used to the rhythms of planets far from here, this was a new day. A day lit with a universe of suns.

Chakotay was snoring, not very loudly. Janeway lay with her eyes still closed, listening to him with as much pleasure as she did to music. The bed was not really large enough for two to sleep comfortably, unless the two were embracing, side by side. That was fine with her. He took up a lot of room, but she had half her body lying over his, and had slept that way, hardly shifting for hours. Her left leg was a little numb below the thigh. When she moved it, her knee gave a pop, the way it always did on first stirring. Chakotay made a little sound in his throat, then took a hard sniffing breath through his nostrils. A quick waker. She tried to be, but lying and ruminating in the half-sleep of early morning was so luxurious... He moved and stretched, shifting her arm that lay over his chest, then scratched under his jaw, judging from the slight rasp and vibration. Janeway opened her eyes to the gentle illumination of the programmed time of day.

And to her lover's face. He was stretching again, one arm curled above his head, his chest arched up, his face in profile to her. The beauty of it struck her again as she watched his soft grimace of effort. Long heavy bones, a definite nose, but with a refinement and gentleness of feature and line, a warm glow of complexion; a happy combination. Above all, the expression of his spirit in every movement, the energy held below the quiet surface, the warmth of his humor and the fire of his courage. The spirit that had met hers as an equal, although their positions could never be on a level. One captain and one only, one first officer. The protocol of the two waking in the same bed

was one that she would have to create from scratch, but she was going to be creating a lot of protocol from scratch out here. The Delta Quadrant was new, inescapably so. The roads and signposts were different, though Janeway would walk them always with her head held high as a Starfleet captain. With a navigator to help point the way, another pair of hands to build new roads.

Janeway turned to look out the viewport, the rainbow streaks of the spectral shift at warp blurring out each individual point of brightness. Tiny comets of essential color, the components of the light spread out, the elemental nature of the fire. The truth revealed in beauty.

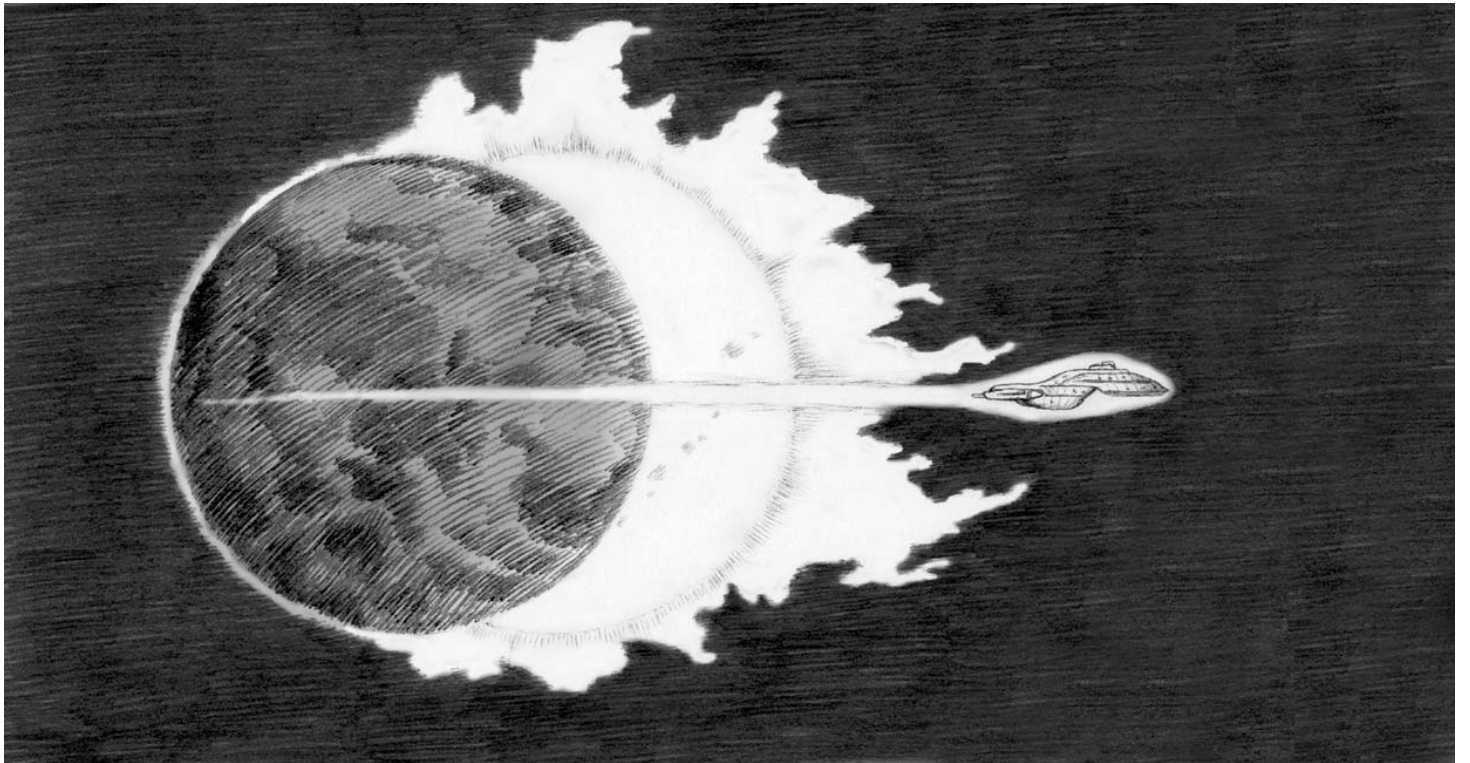
There was a warm hand on her stomach, leisurely in its movements, examining the texture of her skin. It stroked the little line of hairs below her navel, slid across and cradled her belly, spread out and gently pressed her abdomen. Chakotay shifted and brought his body against her back, rubbed his nose against her shoulderblade and kissed it, then craned forward and placed another kiss on the angle of her jaw. She turned her face so that her lips came across his, and his hand moved up to her breasts as the good-morning slipped into the memories of the night. Janeway's turn to arch her spine and sigh a little, as his fingers cupped her and he rolled closer. Yes, she was definitely going to spend another portion of the morning in bed.

"APPLE TART makes a perfectly good breakfast," Janeway said, and took a pot of coffee out of the replicator.

"I suppose it does," Chakotay replied, eating a large wedge in two bites. "I guess it didn't get too stale sitting out all night." He glanced at the wall chronometer. "Damn, I'm due on the bridge in two minutes, and I have to go to my quarters to get a clean uniform."

"Oh, just wear what you've got on. I certainly wouldn't mind," she teased, swatting his bare shoulder as she passed.

"Sure, if you wear that dressing gown—" He reached for her and pulled her down on his lap, kissing her with his mouth full. Janeway tasted apples and herself, and was glad she hadn't rushed him this morning. Her body began to relax against his again, and Chakotay swallowed what he was chewing and embraced her.



"Watch out, this pot is hot—" Janeway could not quite reach the table to set it down, and he took it from her and put in a safe place. Returning his hand to her waist, he stroked the silky fabric of her wrap. The passion was undiminished with fulfillment; Chakotay was trembling as he kissed her, Janeway was recalling what she had felt only a few minutes before and moving her bottom over his lap, parting her still-damp thighs. They indulged themselves for a few moments more, then Chakotay reluctantly pulled back and looked at her.

"No time. Someone has to go take charge. And if there were time—"

"We should spend at least a little of it talking," Janeway said. "I know." She leaned her forehead against his and took a deep breath, her eyes closed. Their lips met again, slowly and tenderly; she was reminded of the first moment they had kissed.

"Goodbye," Chakotay said, rose, yanked on his jumpsuit without putting on his shirt first, poured himself a cup of coffee and drained it, kissed her once more, and was gone. Janeway drank her own cup slowly, seated at the dining table, and watched the passing stars.



HE WAS A BIT out of breath, having had no time even to shower, and was seven minutes late for duty, a fact he knew Tuvok would have noted. Chakotay could not see the Vulcan's face, but felt his eyes from behind, and shifted in the command chair with some self-consciousness. Could Tuvok tell? If he came any closer—Vulcan senses were very sharp, and Janeway's scent hung around him like an aura. He could smell her even now, her warmth and faint spiciness blending with his own perspiration all over the surface of his skin. Even if he had had time to wash, he might have skipped that this morning. The sunlight blazed within him, the warmth lifted his heart and filled his lungs so that he felt no desire for oxygen. She could sustain him for the rest of his life, the only nourishment he would ever need.

Chakotay closed his eyes for a moment and thought of his captain's face, flushed, beautiful, her hair strewn around her, her lips open as she sighed in long liquid draughts. And she was all heat against his mouth, fragrant heat, her warm fingers

running over his head. A little later, her hair brushing his face as she leaned down, her weight on him, he lifting her easily in the slow rhythmic surge like oceans. The water of life, that had closed over his head, but had not drowned him. His fire unquenched. How could he have feared her? What would he ever have to fear again?

"Commander," said Tuvok, "There are two Kazon ships approaching to port, just within range of our sensors."

"You don't say," replied Chakotay. "What's their trajectory?"

"Intercept, Commander," said Paris. "Within forty minutes."

"Damn. This is it, then."

"In all probability. Shall I inform the captain?"

"Well, I hate to interrupt her breakfast, but I'd say this definitely calls for it—"

Paris turned around with a speculative grin. "Interrupt her breakfast?"

"She...the captain usually eats breakfast at this time of day," said Chakotay, and smiled blandly. "She likes a regular schedule. Any change in the courses of our escort squad, Lieutenant?"

Paris wheeled back to his console. "Ah...yes, sir. The pairs to starboard and above us have turned to intercept." His fingers darted over the display. "The three behind us are still coming straight ahead."

"And now two more to port. Keep your eye peeled for any more approaching from below or along our course. Mr. Paris, alter course to one-forty-five mark six, and increase speed to warp seven." He sat up straight, then rose to look over the pilot's shoulder. "Report any changes in the Kazon's course as it occurs."

"All ships are accelerating, and turning to a new heading to maintain relative position, Commander," said Tuvok. Chakotay took a deep breath and touched his com badge.

"Bridge to Janeway." There was a pause before she answered, and her voice was sweet and husky.

"Janeway here, Commander. What can I do for you?" Chakotay felt his lips smile helplessly as he replied.

"I...ah, Captain, we have a new visitor. Two Kazon, still distant, but heading straight for us. Everyone in our escort's taken their cue." He tried to keep his voice crisp, but Paris turned just then, about to add something, and stopped, mouth open

and eyebrows raised. *Oh, damn.* Was he ever going to have a prayer of keeping this a secret?

"I see," replied Janeway thoughtfully.

"Culluh must be calling in every favor he's owed, or promising a great deal. He keeps a grudge a long time."

"I'm nursing something of a grudge against him myself," said Chakotay. "But there have been Kazon trailing us for days. These are the first that have really made an aggressive move."

"Something's different now. Perhaps he's located his personal transport—"

"Or its remains," said Chakotay, and he was no longer smiling.

"I'll be on the bridge shortly, Commander. Janeway out."

"Uhh...Commander," said Paris. "The three behind have accelerated to warp eight."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Chakotay tightly, and sat back to wait for the captain.

SLEEK AND TIDY, her hair freshly pinned, her uniform faultless. Not to touch her seemed monstrous, unnatural, especially when she smiled with sweet warmth as she took her seat, responding, it seemed, to the heat his body had left for hers. Chakotay concentrated on her collar pips instead of her eyes as he gave his report, conscious of Tuvok's gaze, and of the seemingly casual glances Paris directed over his shoulder.

"At current relative speeds, Captain, the three directly aft will overtake us in forty minutes," he said. "The others will get here a lot sooner than that."

"Deep scan, Mr. Tuvok. Are there any other ships in the area?" Janeway glanced at the PADD Chakotay handed her and gave it back.

"Scanning. None aft, or below—"

"There have to be more," said Chakotay. "The box is missing one side, and the bottom."

"Two ahead."

"There's your missing side," said Janeway grimly. "Tactical display to main viewer." The screen showed a schematic view of *Voyager*, centered in a gridded sphere. Five converging sets of ships drew steadily closer, red symbols on the black background.

"I get the feeling this has been carefully planned." Janeway looked at Chakotay. "Red Alert, Commander."

"Shields up. Battle stations." He saw the light change on her face, and the glow of her monitor threw her cheekbones into high relief.

"It would seem our options are narrowing. Janeway to Engineering."

"Torres here."

"Lieutenant, we need a good burst of speed. Can the engines handle it?"

"I wish you hadn't asked me that just now, Captain."

"B'Elanna?"

"The damage to the port nacelle from our battle with Culluh has been repaired, but there are a lot of subsystem instabilities we've been trying to track down. I wrote a report on that two days ago—"

"Yes, but you said it wouldn't affect the ability to achieve high warp factors."

"It doesn't. But I was just running another set of diagnostics, in between crawling through the Jeffries tubes with my toolbox, and it won't be safe to maintain above warp seven for more than thirty minutes. I—I'm sorry, Captain, but there has been enough stress on the drive and the whole power conduit system, and so many jury-rigged bypasses and deferred maintenance all around the ship, that the odds of blowing something critical are getting pretty high."

"B'Elanna, I'm counting on you to reduce those odds. Janeway out. Warp nine, Mr. Paris. Get us out of this box."

"Aye, Captain. Course laid in."

"Engage." The display shifted by ninety degrees as *Voyager* went into a nosedive.

"At this speed, Captain, the sensors will not give us as much warning of obstacles ahead," said Tuvok.

"Enough warning for Mr. Paris, I'm sure."

"You got it, Captain." Janeway nodded at the pilot, and sprang up to look at Tuvok's console.

"They're all accelerating, but they can't match our speed. We'll lose them in half an hour if we can keep our pace."

"Why did they try this in the first place?" Chakotay said. "They know that we're faster."

"We're not faster indefinitely." She glanced at him. "The Kazon know we've suffered damage recently. They've probably gained a great deal of knowledge about *Voyager's* workings from Seska, and they may have been waiting for us to weaken for a long time. And now the incident at the planet

to set them off – but they didn't come after us right away. This has been laid out very carefully."

"Doesn't seem characteristic of the Kazon, somehow."

"No, Commander, it is not," said Tuvok. "This is a classic Cardassian envelopment and redirection technique. It is known as jal-gurak, and was employed to some extent in their war with the Federation, until they developed more powerful battleships that could contend with Galaxy-class vessels. It is a tactic that neutralizes the superior speed and firepower of a single vessel in enemy territory, or of a small group in convoy."

"Cardassian," said Janeway.

"Yes, Captain."

"What's their next move, if they follow the pattern?"

"The aim is to direct us along a course of their choosing, and either into ambush by a large force or into an obstacle such as a nebula or solar system that will provide them with the means to confuse our sensors."

"Keep scanning," said Janeway. "Mr. Kim – I want any unusual celestial objects reported immediately. And, Mr. Paris – keep your eyes open for anything that looks like a cloaked ship up ahead. What's the position of the Kazon now?"

"They are falling astern, but are still well within sensor range." The display on the viewscreen confirmed Tuvok's statement.

"Could this have anything to do with our Kazon prisoner?" Janeway mused.

Chakotay shook his head. "I don't think they would go to any trouble to rescue him, if they even know we have him. At least you persuaded this one he wasn't going to be tortured or interrogated, and he's still alive. Though I don't know if handing him back to his friends will do him any good."

"You may have a point there, Commander. We'll have to drop him off in neutral territory."

"What will we do with the ones who committed suicide in our custody? They may be Kazon –"

"But you'd like their people to deal with the bodies in their way. I agree. Though I don't know if returned prisoners get any consideration dead or alive."

"We're getting something of a lead now, Captain." Chakotay gestured to the viewscreen.

"Mr. Paris. Can you change course yet?"

"In a few minutes, Captain. Then I'll have enough leeway to avoid coming within weapons range when I turn."

"They couldn't have hoped to keep us on one course very long. This has to come up soon, whatever it is –"

"Captain, there is a trinary system directly ahead," said Kim. "One red supergiant star and two giant blue-white stars. The charged gas spirals from all three create a huge area of corona around them – there could be anything hiding in there."

"There we go. There's the ambush. Mr. Paris, can you plot a course to give a wide berth to that system?"

"Yes, Captain, but that will bring us in range of one of the pairs, no matter which way we turn to avoid the stars."

"Better two than Lord knows how many. Plot a course and engage."

"Aye, Captain."

"Now's about the time I'd appreciate having a mysterious alien super weapon," said Chakotay. Janeway laughed, and he smiled puckishly. "It's too bad that was just a story." They looked at the viewscreen and grew sober again.

"The Kazon are moving to intercept – no, they've halted. There's a disturbance in subspace, traveling towards us from the direction of the system – I think it's a cloaked ship, or more than one."

"Engineering to bridge."

"Go ahead."

"We've got ten minutes of warp drive left, maximum. I'm reading a critical imbalance in the cooling mix in section eight. There's a blockage we have to clear, and we have to power down to do it. Running is not an option, Captain. Warp six is all I'll be able to give you, and they can beat that any day. And that's if you slow down now. Warp nine for even five more minutes is going to blow the damaged nacelle, and we'll be reduced to impulse until we can repair it."

"All stop, Mr. Paris."

"Captain?"

"If we've got to fight, I'd rather do it now while we still have some chance of maneuvering. B'Elanna, take the warp drive off line, and get cracking."

"Yes, ma'am."

"The subspace disturbance is approaching."

"On screen." Space – and a slowly emerging image of a huge beetle-like form.

"That's Culluh all right. He set this up for us," said Paris.

"I think he had some help," replied Janeway.

"She could have told him about Cardassian tactics at any time, Captain. He might be doing this on his own."

"That's possible, Commander. I'm not sure if it would be better if you're right." They looked at each other.

"Hail them, Mr. Kim."

"Hailing frequencies open, Captain."

"This is Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship *Voyager*." There was a long pause, and the screen showed only the ship. Then Culluh's face appeared, sporting a smug smile.

"I am Culluh, First Maje of the Kazon-Nistrim."

"How pleasant to see you, Culluh. Get out of my way."

"We will finish our business here, Captain. Then we will depart."

"You have no business with us, Maje. But I do have something of yours to return." Janeway spoke to Chakotay. "Tell the doctor to ready those bodies for transport." He nodded. She turned to the viewscreen again. "I'm not interested in any transactions with you, Culluh. I'm going to eject a casing into space which you might want to pick up, and then I'm going to go. Move aside."

"You destroy a ship belonging to me, and an installation that has been of great usefulness, and you kill Kazon-Nistrim, and you say I have no business with you, Captain?" Culluh shouted. "I am going to punish you for that, Federations. I will seize your ship in compensation for mine, and I will kill ten of you for every warrior you have slain, and I will burn you alive, Captain. You will die in agony —"

"Where have I heard that one before? I'm sorry you lost your ship, Culluh. But we didn't destroy it, and we didn't kill any of your people. If you want compensation, you're knocking at the wrong door. There's a so-called friend of yours who has apparently been punished already —"

"Are you referring to me, *Captain*?" said a low, ironic voice, and a long slim arm clothed in greyish flexible armor draped around Culluh's neck. Janeway heard Chakotay's teeth click together, and her own hands clenched. She couldn't help crossing her arms protectively over her chest. Kattell leaned into the field of the viewscreen and whispered into Culluh's ear. Her hand wriggled up into his rat's nest of matted hair as he listened, and scratched in leisurely circles.

"Excellent," he said when she drew back and smiled. "I will leave the deployment to you." Kattell turned to the viewscreen and looked at Janeway, her eyes half-hooded, then at Chakotay. Both of them gasped, for her skin was pearl grey, and hints of Cardassian cartilage mottled her forehead. Chakotay was standing a pace behind Janeway, and he took a stride forward and stood beside her. She could hear his breath hissing.

"Like the new face? Luckily I got some of the best equipment out before the base went up in smoke." Kattell smiled, the tiny scales that had replaced her eyebrows twitching with her amusement. "Hello, Chakotay. Seems both of us are blessed with luck." She dipped her head, her hair slithering over her eyes, glanced up teasingly, and slipped away.

"Mr. Kim, close the channel," Janeway managed to say. He complied instantly. She put a hand on Chakotay's arm, and he turned and looked at her.

"I had thought I hoped she wasn't dead," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“IT’S TIME for some good news about that warp drive,” said Janeway over the comlink to Engineering.

“Fifteen minutes, Captain. Carey’s in radiation gear and hanging by his toes recalibrating a whole row of coolant ducts, I’ve transported the blocked junction here and it’s in pieces all over the consoles, and—”

“Don’t talk to me, then. Janeway out.” She looked at her first officer. “We’ve got to delay them. What’s Seska up to?”

“Another one of her Obsidian Order parlor tricks, I suppose. And she learned a lot from B’Elanna about rigging things up from scraps. That anti-transport field she had, for instance. She didn’t let me see any of that.”

“They want *Voyager* in one piece. What would she do?”

“They’ve pinned us in place—”

“There is another Kazon vessel decloaking off the starboard beam, and one aft and below,” said Tuvok.

“Three spread around us, and they were waiting. Mr. Paris, move us—”

“I’m reading an energy surge on all three, Captain,” said Kim. A striated greenish beam shot out from Culluh’s ship and washed *Voyager*, and was instantly joined by similar ones from the other two ships.

“Tractor beams! Mr. Paris, full impulse—”

“Aye, Captain!” *Voyager* rocked violently to port, and the bridge crew staggered, seizing railings and consoles. Chakotay gripped Janeway’s shoulders and she his, and they braced each other as the ship bucked against the pull of the beams. A horrible groan began to rise from the deck plates, louder and louder.

“Structural integrity is threatened, Captain—”

“Can we break free, Mr. Paris?”

“Engines at full power, Captain. We’re not moving.” The groan was so loud she could barely hear the pilot shout.

“Hull breach imminent on Deck Ten—breach has occurred. We’re open to vacuum, Captain!”

“All stop!”

“Engines all stop, aye, Captain.” *Voyager* shuddered like a wounded animal and the groan trailed off, loud cracks detonating in the bulkheads as the panels and struts realigned.

“Repair crews, Deck Ten, and EVA team to the breach,” barked Chakotay.

“That’s not a Kazon tractor beam. Even with three, we should have been able to pull away. Damn her.” Janeway nearly spat in fury.

“Phasers are locked on target, Captain.”

“Try to knock out the beam generators, Tuvok.”

“Firing phasers.” The red light lanced out and wavered, dissipating before it reached its target.

“Tuvok!”

“Analyzing—”

“An anti-phaser field. Turnabout,” growled Janeway.

“Can’t say she doesn’t learn from her mistakes,” Chakotay replied.

“This is indeed a damping field, Captain.”

“But that means they can’t fire either.”

“Captain, the Kazon vessels are powering up weapons.”

“Or perhaps they can.”

“If they modified the phase frequencies sufficiently, and tailored the field to those specifications, it would block only our weapons and not theirs.”

“She learns very well from her mistakes. Tuvok, try another phaser frequency.”

“Compensating.”

“Fire!” The red beam dissipated once more, and a blue bolt shot out from one Kazon vessel, and then another. *Voyager* shuddered again, and Kim dodged a spray of sparks from his console.

“Captain, they’re targeting the shields. Down by thirty percent.” Another flash of blue, and another. “Fifty percent. Eighty percent.”

“Photon torpedoes, fire!”

“Torpedo away. Hit on second ship. Their beam is no longer functioning.”

“Casualties among EVA team, but breach has been sealed. Shields gone. We have no protection now.”

“Kazon are locked on target, but have not fired.”

“We are being hailed.”

“Open a channel, Mr. Kim.”

"I have you at my mercy, Captain. Fire again, and I will destroy you." Culluh's voice oozed triumph.

"The second ship has reactivated its tractor beam."

"Cease fire," said Janeway, with a deadly flatness in her tone. "Close the channel." She turned and looked at Chakotay.

"Now what? Ultimatum?"

"We'll be boarded."

"Very probably. Engineering, this is the captain. What's your ETA on the warp drive?"

"Ten minutes. There's quite a mess down here. And you have to get us free of the tractor beams before we can go to warp."

"What were you saying about an alien super weapon, Commander?"

"Bad joke. Sorry."

Janeway darted her eyes to his. "But do the Kazon know the punch line?"

"What?" Chakotay's brow creased.

"We've been in that base. They know we were at the planet for days. You said a lot of the base had been sealed and contained storage."

"Yes..."

"And Seska's found something there —"

"— that's allowed her to begin transforming herself back to herself." They looked at each other. "There must have been some incredible things —"

"So, we found something there too.

Something that would do us some good here. Something that the Kazon would find plausible." She brandished a fist and pressed it to her lips.

"What would persuade them to drop the tractor beams?"

"Captain," shouted Torres over the com link, "tell them there's a carrier wave being fed into the tractor beams."

"Yes. That's it," said Janeway. "Something a Romulan ship tried once on a Federation vessel that had it in tow."

"Seska would have heard of that," said Chakotay. "She knows it's possible, and so perhaps Culluh does too."

"I'll take care of the rest, Captain. All I have to do is temporarily confuse their internal sensors. Tell them it will destabilize their warp cores. And tell her she's a — well, never mind that." Torres laughed.

"B'Elanna, what would I do without you?" A bright hope in both their gazes, and faith in Chakotay's eyes as they met hers.

"Captain, we are being hailed."

"On screen, Mr. Kim."

Culluh, with Kattell smiling lazily beside him. "We have you, Captain. You are in the net, and helpless. Our boarding parties are making ready. I will enjoy watching you die."

Janeway took a deep breath, and looked at Chakotay's poker face. If she were to die today, it was a good day to die. And the worst day of all to die, with all her life before her. He smiled faintly, and she echoed it. To the Kazon she gave a slow defiant smirk, and then spoke to the Cardassian.

"You've outsmarted yourself this time, Seska. Leading us to an arsenal before attacking. Is it standard Obsidian Order procedure to equip your opponents with the best countermeasures available?"

Kattell stared contemptuously. "What are you babbling about?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Janeway out —"

"Just a minute, Harry," said Kattell. "Hold that channel open."

"I don't take orders from you," Kim snapped, and moved to cut the link. Janeway waved a hand.

"No, Ensign, that's all right. We'll let her talk."

Culluh looked at Kattell, and then at a Kazon who leaned over and said something to him. "How serious?" he asked the man, and then looked at Janeway. "What is this countermeasure you speak of?"

"Reading a slight destabilization of your warp core? It's going to get worse, unless you release those tractor beams."

Culluh's jaw clenched. "What are you doing? Cease at once, or I will fire again."

"You want *Voyager* in one piece, Culluh. You'd really rather not do that. And you haven't said anything that would convince me to surrender quietly. Rather the opposite." The Kazon leaned over again, looking alarmed.

"Maje —"

"Quiet," Culluh snarled to the man. "Captain, you have no capability to affect my engines at this distance. This woman has informed me of all your weapons systems."

"All the ones we had when she was on board, perhaps. She hasn't taken new acquisitions into account."

"Carrier wave functioning normally," said Kim blandly. Kattell darted her eyes to him, then back at Janeway.

“And where the hell would you get anything new? If you can’t even buy a space-folder when it’s offered to you –”

“From the base, of course. Some very interesting items in there.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You wouldn’t have had time to get anything –”

“Woman, you said they blasted their way in and set charges to destroy the base. It seems to me they would have had ample time.”

“Oh, that’s what she told you, did she? Perhaps we should compare accounts, Culluh.”

He frowned at Janeway, then at Kattell, whose eyes had lowered, flicking from side to side, a slight snarl on her face. His frown deepened in confusion, and he looked back at Janeway.

“What have you got to lose, Maje?” Chakotay said with the hint of a taunt. “Besides the rest of your ships...?” Culluh’s jaw jutted out.

“She said you fired on my ship, and destroyed it with all of my men aboard. We found her in the life pod, orbiting the planet, the only survivor.”

Janeway smiled, putting her hands on her hips. “Mr. Tuvok, arrange for our Kazon prisoner to be transported to the bridge, under guard.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“You have one of my men a prisoner?”

“We have. Purely by accident. We caught him in our transporter while evacuating our party from the base. We were there, but we didn’t set charges. Your Cardassian friend sabotaged the reactors in an attempt to kill us all.” The air shimmered beside her, and the Kazon materialized between two guards.

“Krast,” said Culluh. “I greet you.”

“I greet you, Maje. My shame is great –”

“You may atone for it, Krast. Tell me everything this alien woman has done.” He jerked his head at Kattell, who drew in her chin and bared her teeth, another Kazon appearing on the viewscreen behind her with a watchful air.

“Maje, she plotted to take this ship. She captured officers as a bait to take the captain prisoner, and persuaded the marked one –” he pointed his chin at Chakotay – “to aid us. But he betrayed us into the hands of the Federations and we were forced to fight for our lives. She abandoned the fight, like a coward, and the Federations told us she had meant to keep the ship for herself and not hand it to you. We did not know what to make of that, and refused to be taken prisoner. Then the marked one returned

after pursuing the woman, wounded, and warned us all to flee. The base was destroyed. I was told the woman had done it, and I believe that is the truth, for they did not seem to have planned it themselves. I do not know what happened to my brothers, because the transportation device seized me along with the Federations and brought me to their ship.”

“Your brothers are all dead, Krast. I mourn for them as you mourn for them. But you say she had the Federation captain a prisoner?”

“Y-yes, Maje. For three days. She amused herself with her and would not let us execute her for her crimes as she deserved. She promised us that the rewards would be worth it. But my brothers are all dead?”

“That’s the reward they have, Krast,” said Janeway, and looked at Culluh. “I think you can see that the word of your friend isn’t worth much. She’s lied to you as she lied to us for her own ends. You’ve entrusted a traitor with your property, and this is the result. Here’s a theory for you, Seska. I think your Kazon crew put two and two together after you escaped the blast, and mutinied. Your ship was destroyed in the struggle, killing them all – you probably had charges hidden all over – and you got in the life pod, knowing Culluh would return soon to get you. Then you blamed it all on us. You didn’t realize we had a witness – probably thought he hadn’t made it out of the base.”

“Maje, the engine readings –” blurted out a voice.

“Silence!”

“It’s a trick, Culluh,” cried Kattell. “It’s Torres and her damned particle beams –”

“Silence, woman. Krast, do you swear on your life that you have told the truth?”

“Yes, Maje. On my life.”

“I release you, Krast.”

“Thank you, Maje,” said the Kazon, and the security guards seized his arms. He did not resist, but Janeway saw him twist his head, bite down hard, and suddenly relax to the floor. Kim gasped, and Chakotay knelt down to take the man’s pulse.

“Dead,” he said.

“I mourn for you, Krast,” said Culluh.

“I’m sure you do, you bloodthirsty son of a –” Chakotay burst out. Janeway looked in horror at the body as the guards carried it to the turbolift, then stepped forward.

“Release those beams, Culluh. Three simultaneous core breaches will take *Voyager* with

them, but that's better than falling into your hands. How are your readings now?"

"Maje, the other ships are reporting critical levels. We must break the tractor beams now."

"Radiation from the Kazon ships is fluctuating sharply," Kim put in, tapping at his console with sweat running down his face. "Breach imminent."

"Culluh, it—it has to be a trick. Don't listen to them!"

"Does this look familiar to you, Culluh?" Chakotay stepped back to his command chair, popped open a storage alcove, and brandished a flat card of bronzy metal. "The front door key."

The Kazon stared at the card, then at Janeway, and finally at Kattell. "Disengage the tractor beams," he said, in a low voice.

"You idiot! You're letting her make a fool of you again—"

Culluh gestured, and a guard stepped forward and put a weapon to the Cardassian's side. "You will be silent. Order the other vessels to disengage."

"Yes, Maje."

"Tractor beams have been released, Captain," said Kim after a moment.

Kattell turned to the viewscreen again, her lips in a rictus of fury. Her sharp teeth gnashed, and she spoke once more, despite the prod of the weapon. "Have a good time fucking her, Chakotay. I'll see you again, and I may just keep what I need of you, and throw away the rest. After all," and she smiled suddenly, "the face is the least important thing." The Cardassian features framed the familiar eyes.

"The Kazon are powering up weapons—"

"Mr. Kim, close the channel," said Janeway. "Engineering. Warp. Now."

"You've got it, Captain."

"Mr. Paris—"

"Engaging."

"You're learning." The stars drew out to streaks.

"Warp eight. Warp nine. Nine point five. Out of sensor range. We've lost them."

"Thank you, Mr. Paris."

Chakotay turned to her with a smile of genuine awe. "Captain," he said, "you know, that is a very old trick." He was quoting something she had once said to him, and she raised a brow, looking into his radiant face.

"One good thing about being in the Delta Quadrant—" she shot back at him,

"—old tricks are new again," they finished in unison. With the exception of Tuvok, the entire bridge crew burst out laughing.

"And if you believe that one," said Torres, emerging from the turbolift and down the steps, "I've got a load of corbomite I'd like to sell you—" Chakotay turned, caught her up in a bear hug, spun her around, set her down again, and kissed her formally on both cheeks.

"Lieutenant," he said, and gave her a brisk military nod while Janeway gripped her shoulder. Kim stood by, beaming, and Chakotay shook his hand. "Good thinking, Ensign. Bucking for a promotion?"

"Why not, Commander?" Kim replied, and Chakotay gave him his broadest grin.

"I'll put in a good word for you with the captain." He turned to look at Janeway again, and she held out her hand, and he took it in both his. Everyone grew quiet, the happy noise fading away. The captain and the first officer stood in their own world for a few moments, their crew watching the silent communion, until Chakotay released her and they sat, side by side.

"Reduce to warp six, and steady as you go, Mr. Paris."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, *both of them?*"

"Is the expression unclear, Lieutenant?"

"Uhh...no, sir, but I mean..."

Paris radiated a mixture of surprise and barely suppressed glee. "I mean, it's not too usual to have both the captain and the first officer off the ship at once."

"That is correct. However, since this system is well defended and the inhabitants friendly to us, the risk is slight."

"Depends on what's at risk." Paris rolled his eyes at Kim, who glanced back in confusion.

"Captain Janeway is well able to assess risk," said Tuvok grimly, and returned to his work.

"Ooo-kay. But who's going to sign off on this diagnostic of the navigational array?"

"The captain will return to the ship in approximately four hours and ten minutes. Until then, I will authorize all progress reports on our repairs." Tuvok took the PADD Paris held, glanced at it, and rose from the command chair. "Carry on, Lieutenant."

"Yes...sir." Paris did not immediately return to his seat, but went to lean on the console of the Engineering station manned by B'Elanna Torres.

"So...they're taking a little shore leave together?" Tuvok heard before the door of the ready room closed behind him. He put the PADD down on Janeway's desk and stared at her empty chair for some time. Six and a half minutes later, he still felt mental disorganization, and took a seat before the desk, bringing his forefingers together in front of his chest at a steep angle in the traditional pose of a meditator.

"Become aware of your thoughts," he said quietly to himself, and closed his eyes.

○

"I'M GLAD there are still gardens somewhere..."

"So am I." Chakotay smiled at Janeway, and picked up a handful of colored earth from the bag on the ground before him.

"Is that another component of the painting?"

"Yes. I need to draw in four colors." He began to crush the lumps into powder with mortar and pestle. "Red, white, black, and yellow. I'll lay it out under the trees where the earth is bare, and destroy it when I'm finished."

"This looks like a good spot for it." They looked out at the lake and the expanse of green; meadow and forest, the rolling hills in the distance. Neelix had directed *Voyager* here, backtracking along their route to this well-populated planet with technological resources and large tracts of parkland in the temperate zones. "Almost familiar, isn't it?"

"All but the color of the leaves. And of course it's a little less well-planned." Chakotay smiled up at her again, then looked thoughtful. "I've never seen anything like those gardens, and I don't suppose I ever will again."

"That was almost the worst thing she did." Janeway knelt on the soft grass and ran one hand over the small flowers mixed with the turf.

"Yes. I can heal, but they are gone forever. And I doubt the Kazon give a damn about that. They've lost a refueling station, that's all. The Talaxians appreciated it, at least, and the people here—I thought the ambassador was going to cry when you told him what happened."

"All the technology that was in there, and they had never deciphered most of it, and never told anyone else about it. Who knows what there might have been?"

"Not much point in wondering now." Chakotay sighed and looked up into the tree tops. "She's probably back in Culluh's arms already," he said with an attempt at humor, "and all is forgiven."

Janeway glanced at him. "He's not the sharpest leader I've ever met."

"No, he's not." Chakotay smiled sourly. "And he's certainly more forgiving than I am if he hasn't killed her yet."

"You mean you—"

"No. I won't get her blood on my hands. I wouldn't shoot her if I had a bead on her right now. But I'd do anything to stop her. Anything. That's a promise." She had rarely seen him look so quietly ferocious.

"I know why you feel that way. But forgiving a little might help."

"Help with what?" He struck the pestle fiercely into the mortar.

"Chakotay..."

"I haven't got that kind of forgiveness. Does anyone?" Janeway did not answer, and he kept grinding earth with passionate application.

"Maybe someday. Not yet. I'm sorry."

"If I can help..."

"This — is something I'm going to have to do on my own."

"Commander."

Chakotay stopped working and met her eyes, then dropped his gaze to the ground.

"We will almost certainly meet her again.

When that happens, I am going to count on you to do your duty."

"I will." His expression was distant, and grim. The mortar and pestle lay idle in his hands.

Janeway did not quite like the sound of that, but she let it pass, wanting him to cast off his mood. "This is a beautiful place, and I hope your ceremony will help you heal yourself. It's safe here, and at least we can stop looking over our shoulders."

"For a little while." He looked at her, too solemn, and Janeway leaned over and kissed his mouth. When they parted, he was smiling again. "Thank you. I should just think about the view, and the ceremony."

She smiled back. "Please tell me more about the significance. It sounded fascinating."

"It's based on a very old ritual from the southwestern part of North America. I've only read about it myself — my people have had to reconstruct so much that was lost." Chakotay shook the powdered earth onto a cloth and put another lump in the mortar.

"A cleansing?"

"Yes, to cast out evil spirits and heal the body. I'll do it for you, and then we'll repeat it for me. As best as I can manage with limited time and only us — it should take days and involve the whole community. Have to make do with the resources I've got." He picked up a PADD and showed her a diagram of stylized human and plant figures arranged in a circle.

"I always thought you could do wonders with what you had, Chakotay. Is there anything else you want to find?"

"I asked about pollen to use in the blessing, and one of the merchants told me I could find a good plant growing wild around here. It's spring, so it's the season. I'm going to go look for some."

"I'll come with you." They left Chakotay's bags and bundles on the ground and walked off around the lake, hand in hand.

"When we get back to the ship, will it be anything like this?"

Janeway had nearly dozed off in the warmth of late morning, but Chakotay's question, half-whispered into her hair, brought a faint chill to her skin. She didn't answer for a moment, wondering what she could possibly say, and then he answered for her.

"Once in a while, maybe. Beyond that..."

She shifted against his chest, her cheek damp with his perspiration, and mentally began to pick up her clothes and put them on again. She'd had time to hang her blouse on a tree limb, but her pants were crumpled on the ground and her underwear tossed on top of them to keep it clean. Her shoes...she wasn't sure what she had done with her shoes...

"I'd like to stay with you here, forever. Or some place like it, just the two of us, all alone," Chakotay whispered. "I could live like that for the rest of my life."

"I think I'd be worried about the crew in a case like that."

He sighed. "All right, so would I." His lips quirked. "But I think I could get over it."

"Maybe I could too." They laughed a little, and his arm tightened around her.

"Not like that's ever going to happen."

"I wouldn't presume to know what's going to happen to us, Chakotay. I do know that we'll be busy a great deal of the time, as always, and that we are going to have to be circumspect. Not clandestine, but discreet and professional. It's an open secret, obviously, but we can't behave as if we don't care for anyone's opinion."

"Damn, I don't. Right now, I couldn't care less if Tuvok was standing right over us and giving me the evil eye." He rolled and put both arms around her, cradled her head in one hand and looked into her face. "Tell me that you don't care. Just at this moment."

Janeway understood his meaning, and reached up to touch his lips. "At this moment, I

wish there were some way to stay like this forever." He closed his eyes in gratitude, and leaned forward to kiss her, blind. Janeway opened her lips to him, and he gathered her closer, still passionate, but no longer with the urgency that had left their clothes scattered over a four-meter radius, her hair full of tiny flowers, his knees raw and their backs streaked with grass stains. And her lips soft and tender, her whole body luxuriously warm, wrapped in and around him. In a few hours, they would be back on *Voyager*, such whims, or storms, nearly impossible to indulge. For now, no one called them to duty. Janeway let herself relax into him, listening only to her deepest wishes.

Finally they parted, and looked at each other. Tenderness, a bond inexpressible in words, something that could find true voice only in the glance and touch. More, even, than she had imagined was there when it could not be acknowledged. Chakotay put his fingertips to her cheekbones, very lightly, framing her face in the curve of his hands, and smiled just enough to bring out the dimples. "You are beautiful out here under the sky. I'm going to memorize you like this, so that I can see you when I close my eyes." Janeway closed her own, briefly, and turned to kiss his palm. Chakotay was trembling slightly when she looked at him again, his lips parted. "Captain, I..."

"Chakotay. I do have a name, you know. Some things that you might say, I would rather not have a title attached to." He started, and seemed taken aback, then laughed.

"I...well, I have to admit it's a little hard for me to think of you as 'Kathryn'. It still seems—like a liberty, believe it or not."

"We'll just have to get you used to it. From you, I plan to solicit intolerable liberties."

Chakotay's smile broadened into a grin that made her dizzy. "All right, I'd better get started. Kathryn Janeway, I love you."

"And I love you. No matter what happens, and even after we get back to the ship." She kissed him, sat up and looked around. "What on earth did you do with my shoes?"

"I threw them pretty far away," he replied, still grinning, and pulled her down to him again.

"SIT HERE, KATHRYN, and put your hands on your knees—like so." Chakotay guided her to the center of his large circular sand painting and

settled her cross-legged on it. "Now don't move, or speak. This is a kind of meditation, and you need to keep your mind clear of evil thoughts."

"If you want me to avoid evil thoughts, you shouldn't have worn that open shirt, or those leggings. Those do fit you awfully well—"

"That's not evil. That's perfectly all right. Perhaps even beneficial. This is a reaffirmation of life, and a move to another stage of it, and sex has a lot to do with life and its stages."

"It's hard to think of sex in conjunction with ceremonial practices."

"Why not? It's part of life, and a very important one. It passes life to the next generation, and it lets us touch the infinite in each other, sometimes. There's nothing more religious than good sex. I've been feeling very religious lately." Chakotay smiled slightly, but he seemed serious, and Janeway suppressed her quip and sat still. He brushed a stray strand of hair off her forehead, kissed her lightly between the eyebrows, and stood up. The dappled shade of leaves fell on his face, and the breeze off the lake stirred his clothing and her hair. He stood quietly for a while, his eyes half closed, his hands raised at waist level, moving in a slow rhythm through the warm air. Then he began to walk around her, circling the painting on which she sat four times. He picked up the bag in which he had gathered the pollen and continued walking in circles, dipping up the feathery powder from the bag and letting it fall over her head: a symbol of life, and a blessing. When she was covered in a fine drift of yellow, he put down the bag and sat in front of her, and began to chant. The words were unfamiliar, but she caught her name repeated, and he had told her that he would be asking the spirits of this place to help, and to call the wind and water to purify them both. Janeway preferred to think of spirits as a metaphor, but the high sweet sound of his voice and the sight of his face, glowing with serene joy and concentration, washed over her, warmer than the air. Draped in a veil of renewal, she sat with her companion and let all fear, all stain, all hatred dissolve away. The trees arched over their heads, the grass rippled around them with the breeze, the sun danced on the water.

"TIME TO HEAD BACK into town. They'll be waiting for us." Chakotay swept a leafy branch across the ground, blurring the colors of his sand painting into the earth. The symbols he had drawn

so painstakingly with a trickle of powder between finger and thumb vanished.

"Why do you do that?"

"It's absorbed a lot of things that need to be banished. This releases them."

"How do you feel now?"

"Better. I...think I'm going to be pretty happy for a while." He smiled at her.

"I think I will be too. I'm glad that helped you."

"And I'm glad you helped me with it. I might have done something alone the way I used to, but this was much better." He rose and held out his hand. Janeway took it, then drew him closer, and Chakotay slipped his arms around her waist.

"Kathryn..." he whispered, and kissed her.

"Let's walk back the whole way. It will take a little longer than the transport..."

"Yes. As long as possible. Nothing lasts forever." He picked up his bags and looked at the sweep of colors in the earth. "Nothing."

"Some things will," Janeway said, and touched his face, lightly.

The sun gradually declined as they walked along the road, the shadows lengthening in front of them, the colors deepening in the sky. A stream followed on their right-hand side, paralleling the road, sometimes winding closer to its edge, sometimes pulling away. The noise of the water barely rose above the sound of their boots on the gravel. A little bridge arched over the stream at one point where the road forked, and they paused to look down into the water. Two shadows, one straight and slim, the other broad and tall, carrying a burden that stooped him. Chakotay put a hand on Janeway's shoulder, and she turned to him.

"Look at the leaves."

"Where?"

"Down the road, about a hundred meters. The other fork, the one that doesn't go to the town. It ends there, and there's a grove."

She looked where his chin pointed, and saw the warm light on thick foliage, the trees so dense along the roadside that they seemed a solid hedge, hemming it in on both sides.

"Is there something unusual?"

"That color—I don't think it's a trick of the light." His eyes were wide, his lips parted, some kind of hope in his face.

"I don't—oh."

Violet. Deep purple-blue, dancing in late sunlight, and in the sunset breeze.

"I've got to go take a look at that grove."

"I'll come with you."

In ten minutes, they stood under the shade, looking up into the darkening shadows.

"These are very old, I think, though they are not that tall." Janeway put a hand on the thick silver bole of the nearest tree. "A natural dwarf variety, slow-growing and long-lived."

"I had been wondering why the garden hadn't become overgrown in all that time..."

"Are they the same?" She took out her tricorder.

"I...think so—yes." Chakotay had walked on ahead. His voice had the ring of absolute conviction, and she glanced up, surprised.

"How can you tell? I'd have to do a comparative DNA sequence—"

"There." He pointed to the center of the grove. Janeway moved up to join him as he strode in that direction, and saw an obelisk on a pedestal, one stray shaft of sunlight grazing it through the trees. Bronzy metal, and on it, a worn diagram of a solar system, the fourth planet highlighted. A star map surrounded it, and a route was drawn through the constellations, a route they had taken themselves.

"Come here, and feast..." Chakotay muttered.

"I'll record the inscription so we can decode it," said Janeway, pushing tricorder keys. "But I think you must be right."

"Some of them survived, at least. Some of them were able to leave to look for a new home, or just to place signposts for others."

"They had exhausted all their resources." Janeway remembered the depleted asteroids, the great barren desert sprinkled with ancient ruins. "But they still left an oasis behind, and treasures..."

Chakotay's eyes were brimming with tears. "The last thing they built. An apology to the planet, as perfect and fruitful as they could make it, and an offering to every traveler. Hiding the burial goods of an entire civilization."

"Dear God." She watched the tears roll down his cheeks. "Chakotay—did we desecrate a grave?"

"Not us. Not even the Kazon, really—it's been burned in a pyre now. A few tomb robbers, more or less, are only to be expected. We only saw the upper part of the labyrinth, and the sarcophagus is usually in the inner chambers. Whatever it might have been."

They stood so long under the violet leaves that the sun set, and Tuvok called her, worried.



"PLEASE, TUVOK. Sit down." She patted the sofa beside her, but he could not move. "All right, then. I'll stand." Janeway got up and leaned on the railing, her features tight, looking at him from under her brows.

He remained by the desk, his arms rigid at his sides. "Do whatever you believe is appropriate." Unfortunately, there was a detectable trace of bitterness in his intonation, which he regretted. "I apologize, Captain. I realize I must take your emotional state into account in this case."

"It's not a 'state', my friend. It's me."

"Truly?" His voice was carefully neutral now. "This seems highly uncharacteristic—"

Janeway sighed deeply, a long breath in, a long breath out, and Tuvok stopped, knowing she was about to speak.

"What you sense is a difference in me, I don't doubt. No one could fail to be changed by such an experience. Though the change had started before I ever knew it was taking place. Now I've been forced to turn and look it in the eye. It would have caught up to me eventually, one way or another." His captain was not speaking to him so much as to an unseen judge, an abstract ideal with whom she pled a case. "I never consciously intended this to happen. I didn't let myself realize what was going on, because it was not appropriate, and I don't think of myself as someone who indulges in inappropriate lines of conduct. I might have seen the signs earlier, and perhaps been able to turn the course of events. But I doubt it. And now, I wouldn't give up what I have for anything." She stood up straight and looked over his head, her eyes clear and bright. "If that's weakness, then it's one I share with every living thing. I feel the pull of another life— Tuvok. Your wife...do you think of her often?"

He was puzzled at her words, and at her apparent change of subject, then made the connection between the threads of thought. "Yes," he said, and fell silent.

"I'm glad. Not that you are a part from her, or that you miss her, but that you have that connection, and that there is a place in...in your heart for another person. You haven't closed it off,

even though missing her causes you...discomfort. Everyone needs that, even someone with responsibilities and principles that she must uphold. Even if she never fills that place, she has to hold it open, and know it is there, and know that she has the capacity to feel that connection. I cannot close it off, because I will suffocate if I do so. I have to have vulnerability if I am to feel at all. So I am vulnerable. But unable to do my duty? No. I try to look ahead and see my own stumbling-blocks, and so steer around them. That's the logical thing to do. Wouldn't you say?" She was smiling at him, and put her hands on her hips.

"Eminently logical. We must all work with the capacities and shortcomings we possess."

"And emotional states, Tuvok. Don't forget emotional states." She had her familiar air of suppressed humor.

"You have told me that emotional connection is a principle for a Human, Captain."

"Yes," she replied after a moment, and the laughter was gone from her voice. "One principle among many." She looked out the viewport again. "But one that gives meaning to all the others."

"As is logic for a Vulcan?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps the highest meaning, the framework without which everything is senseless."

"I cannot verify the analogy from personal experience."

"I've got plenty of experience of my own." She looked at him. "Are you going to give this— give him—the benefit of the doubt?"

"I...must. I know that his emotions are sincere." He recalled a moment when he had felt them himself, in a memory so vivid he had lived it with the rememberer.

"Do you? I'm glad— though why do you put it that way? You sound as if you had some kind of independent proof."

Tuvok paused a long time to consider his answer, and gave none.

"Tuvok?"

"I am not at liberty to speak of it."

"You know he is sincere. You *know* it—and you don't use that word lightly."

Again he did not reply, and willed his mind to stillness.

"And...you realized that he carried a transmitter when he was sent back...and he somehow managed to tell you about the plot without her overhearing anything."

"Kattell's error in allowing you to convey your coded message was the turning point."

"Yes, she was feeling overconfident, to say the least—good God."

"Captain?"

"You just called her Kattell." Her eyes were wide and bright, blazing realization, and Tuvok felt his face stiffen at another memory, no less vivid.

...Sweating, desperate, sick with fear, and the woman demanding a service they knew they could not perform. She told them a secret; she told them a solitary truth about herself; for what purpose, they could not say...

"There's only one way you could know all that, and especially her name— He never would have told you, and I certainly haven't." She retreated to the couch and sat down heavily. "My God." Neither of them spoke for several minutes, and Janeway stared out of the viewport, her face trembling.

Tuvok could not resist the memory, though he shuddered slightly in the effort to do so. Their captain with them, though not in body, the woman crying out in anguished pleasure. She was shackled to the wall, but the power of their connection put her in their arms across the compartment, spirits embracing, interpenetrating. The gift was made, and it was the kind that could never be recalled.

Finally Janeway took a deep breath.

"That...that couldn't have been pleasant for either of you."

"At...that...juncture, it had become essential."

"And you know what happened with her, with us. How much else did you see?"

"With respect, I cannot answer that question. The privacy of the meld is a sacred trust." The words tasted dry in his mouth.

"You saved his life. You knew, and you saved his life."

"He was wounded and unconscious, and I was present."

"Oh, no, Tuvok. It was a little more than that, I think. You shielded him..."

"Yes," he admitted, and turned away from her gaze, from her eyes filled with tears and gratitude.

"For my sake...?"

"It would not have been logical to allow *Voyager's* first officer to die if I could possibly prevent it."

"No, of course not." She smiled, and closed her eyes. "When logic and emotion point to the same conclusion, who can evade it, or even say what the justification really is?"

"I believe it is still important to make the distinction."

"Thank you, my friend," she said. "I'll keep that in mind."



"HOW ARE THE NEW trainees working out, B'Elanna?"

"They're hopeless," Torres growled as she brushed past Chakotay, dragging lengths of conduit. "Can't tell a laser probe from a sonic drill. And Parsons welded herself inside a bulkhead by mistake while she was replacing circuits. It took me twenty minutes to get her out, because that idiot Price knocked the transporters off line."

"Sounds like they're trying hard." She caught one of his puckish smiles.

"Oh, hell, they'll be fine in a couple of weeks." Torres smiled in return. "I suppose I must have been like that once."

"Not likely."

"Not at all likely," she shot back, and Chakotay smiled as if he wanted to light up the entire engine room.

"I'll get out of your way, then. I wouldn't want to trip over anything and knock the plug out of the wall while you're still working on repairs."

"Knock the plug out? Just *how* long ago did you go to the Academy, Chakotay?"

"About a lifetime," he replied, and swung down the ladder to the lower level. "See you tomorrow."

"Good night. Sleep well."

He looked sharply up at her, then his face lit up again. "You mean that?"

"I do. Go away."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, and flipped her a mock salute.



FUNNY how he hadn't noticed that before.

But then, he hadn't ever been in her quarters until two weeks ago.

That closed door, the one in the connecting bulkhead, an unobtrusive line in the wall, had a counterpart. He hadn't even thought of it as a door, since it had never been open in all the months he had lived here. There was a passage between the rooms, if the door were to be unlocked on both sides. He recalled that she had a bookshelf against hers. His had a weaving hung on it, but it wasn't obstructed.

"Umm...computer, locate Captain Janeway."

"*Captain Janeway is in her quarters.*"

He decided to knock.

After a moment, he heard an answering rap, and he tapped out a little rhythm he had learned at the Academy.

"Janeway to Chakotay."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Why are you playing 'shave and a haircut' on my wall? I *am* trying to read, you know." She was not succeeding at keeping the amusement out of her voice.

"I was just wondering where this door led."

"Right into my sitting room, of course. Need proof?"

"Why not?" He heard a code sequence being entered, and entered his own on the panel next to his hand. The door slid open, sticking slightly at the midpoint, and they stood facing each other. She wore her rosy nightdress and gown, and her cheeks were as pink as the satin.

"Don't I get *any* privacy off duty?"

Chakotay ran his eyes over her. "Just as much as you ask for."

"Oh, come in, for heaven's sake. I'm not going to make any headway thinking about you standing forlornly on the other side of the door."

"Thanks." They smiled at each other, and he stepped through after moving the bookcase aside. "This looks awfully convenient. When did you have it installed?"

"It's standard. Check the blueprints."

"Oh, of course. You had a premonition, and told the design committee—"

Janeway had picked up her cup of coffee to take a sip, and spluttered. "I'm not known for that kind of premonition."

"I've got one right now."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Let's see...it's taking shape...I'm going to move a little closer to you, and touch your hair..." He did exactly as he said, and her lips curved in a smile. "Then I think I'm going to take this coffee

cup and put it down on the table, and take you in my arms, and feel you there, ahh, and then, I'm going to kiss..."

Neither of them said a word for several minutes. Then he whispered, "Kathryn," and put his lips to her forehead.

"Chakotay...I wish there was something special I could call you, just in private."

"The way you say my name is all I'll ever need to hear."

"Does that mean you've got some kind of terrible nickname?" Her eyes sparkled wickedly.

"My lips are sealed."

"Mmmm." They kissed again, and she moved to seat them on the couch. "Now, I really did want to finish this book before bedtime. Can we behave ourselves that long? There's only a few more pages to go."

"Certainly." She settled back against the armrest and put her bare feet on his lap, and he began to rub them with one hand while idly turning over the ornaments on her end table. She had quite a few little objects of her own—a bronze fish, a spired golden sphere on a stand, and a dark oval stone, not unlike one he had carved—

"Gods."

"What?" She looked up, startled.

"Where—where did you get this?"

"It was here. On the floor. Didn't you leave it here? I thought it must be some kind of charm."

"I...oh, gods, I didn't even remember dropping it." He leaned over with it in his palm, staring at the marking. Janeway sat up and put a hand on his back. "I shouldn't have been in here, not then..."

"Chakotay—it's all right. I know you had a good reason. I don't understand these things, but I know they are important to you."

He gripped the stone tightly and dropped his head. "It...I was meditating in here— Just after the Maquis asked me to run away..."

"I heard some of that meeting on the transmission."

"I never thought I would be fighting them and you at the same time. I defied your order and I told them to go to hell."

Janeway let out a hard breath and stroked his back, looking into the distance. "You did what you felt was right. You were in command at the time, and you had to follow your own convictions. I'd hardly say I regretted the outcome—but next time, do keep the welfare of the whole ship in mind."

"I did. I kept your welfare in mind, and that's the welfare of the ship. If I'd said I was leaving, she would just have shot you." Chakotay embraced Janeway, lifting her to his lap and pressing his face into the silk between her breasts. Her hands went to his head and cradled it, and they sat silent and entwined for a moment.

"She almost did shoot me after the meeting. I don't know how I kept my head...I was thinking of you and what you must have been going through."

Chakotay quivered, and held her closer. "I felt something a little while later, while I was in here," he said, turning his cheek to rest against her chest. "I thought you were dead—I knew you were dead, for a moment."

"What?"

"Tell me what she did after she heard the Maquis." Chakotay pulled back to look into Janeway's face, a feeling like trance stealing over him; intense clarity, charged peacefulness.

"She—Kattell—she was furious." Janeway moved restlessly in his arms. "She tried to force me to admit that I'd told you to take *Voyager* out of her reach. She got angrier and angrier, and she was waving that phaser around...I told her to calm down and listen to you, but there was hardly a sound that made sense. I had no idea what was happening."

"I hadn't much idea myself..." he said softly.

"She seemed frightened, and she said something about getting the shivers when you pulled your 'tricks'. But she started laughing after a minute and told me you had no choice anyway, because she had covered for every contingency. That all your efforts to save my life were going to come to nothing, and that everyone you sent down was going to die with me. Then she just put the phaser to my head and pressed the trigger. The safety was on, but I didn't know that." She shuddered suddenly, and he sat back and laid her head on his chest, soothing with one hand on her forehead.

"I thought that must have been what happened..."

"You knew that?"

"Somehow."

"Oh, Chakotay." She was almost crying, and he wrapped both arms tightly around her, the intense peace suffusing him.

"It killed every doubt I had." He kissed her hair, brought out his hand and looked down at the stone. "She made sure I would never leave you."

"Even at risk to the ship?"

"Yes. It may be a weakness, but you, personally, are my reason for serving here." He traced the lines of the carving with his thumb. "I can't deny that any longer. Though now I'm here for life, no matter what happens."

"What does the symbol mean?"

"I guess I know now. Two in mutual orbit, balancing each other's movements. You are the center of the system, and my path brought me in to join you. That may have perturbed the rhythm, but we've found a new one." Janeway stroked his cheek, and he kissed her fingers.

"I'm glad we have. Oh, now I'm all wound up. I need some music—computer, play program Janeway Epsilon Seven." A delicate sound of harp and fiddle, buoyant and yearning. She sat up, stroked her hair back, and retrieved her coffee. "Can I get you anything? Some tea?"

"No, nothing. I'm sorry, Kathryn. I didn't mean to disturb your quiet evening."

"There will be a lot more disturbances before we're through with our lives, Chakotay. All we can do is try to settle them as they come."

"I'll help you in every way I can."

"I know. I'll try to accept it as it's meant." She rose and held out her arms. "This is one of my favorite waltzes. And there's no one else here to see me do it in a way all my own. Care to dance?"

He looked up, a grin preceding his laugh. "Of course. Thank you for asking."

"Can't let you do all the work around here."

Chakotay rose and embraced her, then shoved the table to the wall with his foot and moved a chair. "There, we've got some space to work with." He took Janeway's hand and spun her around, her gown spiraling out, then put his hand on her waist and took her into the rhythm of the music. Around and around, slow and floating, circling the room as they drew closer and closer to each other. On the third pass, they brushed the wall by the bedroom door, and Chakotay laughed.

"Captain, you're leading."

"Yes, Commander, I am," she replied with a smile, and he smiled back like pure white sunrise, and the dance went on.





MAQVIS



I had not thought you aught but proud;
The cause you fought for vain though just,
When we were forced in awkward trust
I found your courage spoke too loud.

Your sword was what you had in life,
All your command to save my own;
Could I divide and still have grown
If I had such a choice as knife?

Now higher in my sight you stand
Than many who did never fall;
O do not solely noble call
Who fight for law and not for land.

Until my home was lost to me
I could not fathom that same pride;
Until you settled at my side
The love of place was strange to me.

So as the foreign void we roam
To one another we may be
A compass point, a light to see
The path that draws the wanderer home.



L. R. BOWEN, JUNE 1996

PLEASE EMAIL ME at LRBowen@aol.com or write me at the address below to tell me how you liked "The Cardassian Mask". Or talk to me about my fanfic, artwork or Star Trek and creative work in general. Visit my web site at <http://members.aol.com/lrbowen/lrbowen.htm>.

If you would like to purchase high-quality laser prints of any of the illustrations from "The Cardassian Mask", email or write for a list and prices.

For additional copies of "The Cardassian Mask", you may order from me. Send check or money order payable to L.R. Bowen for \$20.00 to:

CM Orders
215 Bret Harte Ct.
Santa Clara CA 95050-6606

Postage is included. Canadian addresses, \$23.00; overseas, \$26.00. Please include your complete mailing address.