Title: Chrysalis
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Series: VOY
Rating: [R]
Codes: K/7, J/C, P/T

Summary: Voyager has found a wormhole that leads them home to the Alpha Quadrant – with one small catch. In *this* Alpha Quadrant, the Dominion won the war.

Author's Note: This story begins where Possession ended. If you haven't read that first, it is recommended that you do, just for continuity's sake. This is an unfinished work in progress. Special thanks to my beta readers, Henry Lee (grammar) and Thomas Lee (technical).

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Part I: Wormhole

"Captain's Log, Stardate 52215.8: We have just finished a mining operation on an class-M planet that we discovered four weeks ago, which was christened "Henrion" by Gamma shift. Our food stores, and dilithium supplies have been replenished, and the crew got a little R&R planetside." Captain Janeway paused, sipping her coffee, before continuing. "We had a moment's scare when Lt. Paris and Seven of Nine crash-landed their shuttle on the northern continent, but thankfully they were unharmed and we were able to rescue them once the storms cleared in that area. Neither were much worse for wear from the experience, although we've lost yet another shuttlecraft. It amazes me sometimes that for being such a hotshot pilot, Mr. Paris has crashed more than his fair share of shuttles." Janeway smiled. "Computer, strike last sentence. At 0800 hours today we resumed our course towards the Alpha Quadrant." She sighed. "End Log." The computer chirped in compliance. Janeway leaned back in her chair, watching the stars race by the viewport in her ready room, enjoying the rest of her coffee.

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Seven of Nine, late of the Borg collective, stepped out of her alcove, regeneration cycle complete. She turned and pressed a few commands into the console next to her, initiating the shutdown sequence in her alcove. The green lights dimmed in response. She stepped across the cargo bay to her terminal and stopped abruptly, looking at her console in surprise. A single rose in a crystal vase was sitting on the console, and there was a small card next to it. Curious, she picked up the card and opened it, scanning its contents. It was from Harry.

*****Good morning, Seven.

Have a most perfect day.

-Love, Harry ******

Seven picked up the rose and smelled it. The fragrance was pleasing to her senses. It struck her, then, to wonder why she had gone through the action to smell the rose, when her memory had catalogued the scent previously. Logically, since this rose was of the same species as the rose Harry had given her previously, it should smell the same to her. Illogically, the rose did not. It smelled sweeter to her. She smelled it again, and then replaced the bloom in its vase, unaware she was smiling. It was nearly time to begin her shift.

The scent lingered in her senses for the next few hours, distracting her from her work on the current star system she was charting. It conjured up thoughts of Harry, and the last few nights they had spent together. Seven found her cheeks growing warm in the cool air of Astrometrics.
"Seven, are you all right?" Megan Delaney asked, looking at the Borg with some concern. Seven's usually serious and unreadable features had undergone some extreme change. Megan could swear that Seven's cheeks had never been so pink and flushed, her eyes never that bright. "Are you running a fever?" She placed a cool hand on Seven's forehead.

Seven flinched at the casual touch, causing Megan to pull her hand back quickly.

"Sorry," Megan murmured, still looking concerned. She had never seen Seven look like this.

"I am functioning properly," Seven answered, her color fading a little as she brought her thoughts back to the present. She was angry for letting herself get distracted. It was an inefficient way to use her time.

"If you're sure," Megan said doubtfully.

"Thank you for your concern. I am all right now," Seven reassured the other woman. "What is the status of the sensor relay?" Seven's question brought the conversation back to a professional level.

"Sensor relay is performing at maximum. We should be receiving readings from our latest scans in just a moment." Megan moved back to her station, thoughtfully filing away the encounter for later examination.

The main screen in Astrometrics displayed the latest scans of their area. Seven and Megan looked up at the large view screen. Megan's mouth dropped open slightly. "Is that what I think it is?"

Seven looked at her, slightly amused by Megan's expression. "I will verify your assumption, Ensign." Seven ran a few cross scans on the anomaly that had appeared on the screen; satisfied with her verdict, she tapped her combadge.

"Seven of Nine to Captain Janeway. Please report to Astrometrics."

"On my way,"

Seven looked at Megan, noticing the Ensign's funny expression. "Is something on your mind, Ensign?" She inquired, lifting an elegant eyebrow.

"You're the only one on the ship that orders the Captain to report any where." Megan smiled, turning back to her console to finish the preliminary readout.

"I stated 'please' ".

Megan turned, looking back at the Borg, but Seven had already turned away to begin further analysis of the data they were receiving on the anomaly. Megan smiled, and then returned to her own task.

Several moments later, the doors to Astrometrics opened and Captain Janeway entered. Her bemused expression quickly disappeared as she started scanning the information presented on the giant screen before her. "It's a wormhole," she said, grinning.

Seven tilted her head. "Yes, Captain." Her lips twitched briefly. "It appears to be stable. Sensors have also detected subspace transmission echoes we believe are being generated from the other side of the wormhole." Seven pushed a few buttons on her console and a frequency scale appeared on one of the smaller display panels. "I ran a cross reference to the transmission frequencies in the ships database and came up with a match: they are Cardassian." The frequency scale was overlaid by a database schematic of a Cardassian transmission signal.

“Can you tell me why the frequencies don’t match precisely?” Janeway asked, comparing the original transmission to the database signal.

"We believe the frequency variance is the result of distortion caused by reflections from within the wormhole. In essence, what appears as a variance is actually the sensor echo of the reflected signals,” Seven explained, using the smaller view screen on her console to demonstrate how the signal traveled from the other side of the wormhole to their sensors.

Janeway nodded, accepting the explanation. "Launch a class 4 probe. I want to know for certain before we go any further." Janeway's eyes showed her excitement. "This could be just the break we've been looking for.”

Seven looked at her, smiling faintly at her enthusiasm.

Janeway waved her hand at Seven. "I know, I know. I shouldn't be so optimistic." She sighed. "We've been here before," she said, referring to their situation, not necessarily their location. "Contact me when we start receiving telemetry from that probe." She turned on her heel and started to leave. "Good work, you two," she called over her shoulder before the doors closed behind her.

Megan grinned at Seven. "This is it! I know it! We're going home!"

"Ensign, we have not yet launched the probe. It could be false telemetry. It would be premature to begin celebrating." Seven ignored the uneasy quiver in her stomach. She would not spend time worrying about her future until returning to the Alpha Quadrant was a certainty. It was an inefficient expenditure of energy.

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From his Ops station on the bridge, Ensign Kim couldn’t quite hide the excitement in his voice. "Captain, we're getting readings back from our probe."

"On screen."

A star system appeared on the main view screen in front of them.
For several moments, the computer compared the probe’s readings to known star systems in its database. Its search concluded, it displayed its findings on Harry’s console.

“Captain, the computer has verified that the readings the probe has sent back are from the Alpha Quadrant,” Harry said with excitement.

Paris gave an enthusiastic whoop.

"Mr. Paris," Tuvok's reprimanded. "Need I remind you that your behavior, while understandable, is entirely inappropriate for the bridge?"

Tom looked properly chastened, though his blue eyes gleefully met Harry's across the bridge. Harry's grin answered his own.

Captain Janeway sat motionless, staring at the star system on the screen. Her eyes glittered with emotion. They had come so close in the past, only to be deceived. Was this yet another situation where something looked too good to be true, and in reality it was?

“Mr. Kim, I want you to work with Seven of Nine to verify this data. I want to make absolutely sure this isn’t some kind of trick, or trap, or alien induced hallucination,” Janeway ordered crisply. “And don’t be afraid to enlist help. I want to be sure we look before we leap.”

“Aye, Captain!” Harry left the bridge for Astrometrics.

Janeway sat pensively in her chair, her eyes roving the familiar star system displayed before her. She could sense Chakotay looking at her unobtrusively, casting sidelong glances in her direction. She knew he wouldn’t question her orders here, on the bridge, but she could tell that he definitely had something on his mind. She stood up, straightening her uniform.

“Mr. Tuvok, you have the bridge. Commander, would you accompany me to my ready room?” Janeway looked at Chakotay.

Her first officer stood and walked after her. The doors to the ready room swooshed shut behind them. Janeway took a seat at her desk, Chakotay his customary place across from her.

“What’s on your mind, Chakotay?” Janeway said without preamble.

He smiled. “Am I that transparent?”

She shook her head. “No, I just know you well enough to tell when something is bothering you.”

He sighed softly, leaning back from the desk that separated them. “I’m not sure what it is, exactly. Call it a premonition, maybe. I just have a bad feeling about this.” He shrugged. “Maybe it’s because we’ve been offered a way home so many times before, and it’s never been exactly what it seemed.” He leaned forward again, his brown eyes intense. “I know that what I’m saying isn’t anything that hasn’t already gone through your mind, Kathryn.”

Janeway held her hand up. “No, your thoughts are important to me. It helps me to know that we’re on the same wavelength.” She smiled. “We might be behaving in an overly cautious manner, but I don’t think any crewmember on this ship will fault us for it.”

Chakotay nodded. “However, I know I’m not alone in thinking this might just be the opportunity we’ve been searching for these past four years.”

“Do you think we’re being too cautious? We have the telemetry from our probe, reinforced by signals from the other side which are proven to be Cardassian.” She sighed.

Chakotay reached out and touched her hand, enfolding it in his much larger one. “You’re doing exactly right, Kathryn. We’ll wait and see what Harry and Seven come up with. If anyone can verify the data, it’s

those two." He smiled, seeing the tension in shoulders relax a notch. He continued to hold her hand, his thumb stroking her palm.

Janeway didn't pull her hand away. She looked at Chakotay, a dozen warring emotions crossing her features. He released her hand, finally, filing her reactions away in the back of his mind for future reference.

"Chakotay," she began.

"I know," He said softly, ruefully. "I know."

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Harry and Seven of Nine stood next to each other in Astrometrics, shoulders touching occasionally as they worked to verify the data from the probe.

It had become so much more pleasant to work with Harry since they became romantically involved, Seven thought to herself, watching Harry's graceful hands move fluidly over the console. However, it could also be quite distracting at times. She tended to work less efficiently when she was working with him, constantly sidetracked by thoughts, which were not relevant to their work. Harry, on the other hand, didn't seem to be affected at all. She frowned, realizing that this train of thought had distracted her from the complex algorithms she had been entering for approximately 13.5 seconds. She returned to her task. She would have been inordinately pleased if she had only known that Harry found her just as distracting.

Harry scanned the final results of their work. He looked up at Seven and smiled. "We make a good team, you know."

Seven smiled her special smile she reserved for Harry alone. "Yes. We do."

Harry tapped his combadge. "Ensign Kim to Captain Janeway."

"Go ahead, Mr. Kim."

"We're entering the results of our verification now. You should see them on your console."

"Spare us the suspense, Mr. Kim. What were your findings?" Janeway said wryly, scanning the data he was sending on her console.

"Ma'am." Harry tried to sound calmer than he felt. "All data indicates that the wormhole leads to the Alpha Quadrant."

Janeway smiled at Harry's use of "Ma'am". He hadn't called her that since he was a green Ensign on his first shift.

"Thank you, Mr. Kim. Please report back to your station on the bridge as soon as you can." Janeway sat back in her chair on the bridge, a slow smile gracing her features.

"Captain?" Chakotay asked, his smile matching hers.

"Mr. Paris, lay in a direct course for that wormhole, warp 3," Janeway said smoothly.

"Aye, Captain!" Tom turned, entering the commands that would bring Voyager to the mouth of the wormhole, that much closer to home.

"What's our ETA?" Chakotay asked.

"14 hours, 11 minutes. Give or take," Paris answered, grinning.

Several moments later, the doors to the turbolift opened and Harry stepped out, immediately taking his position at Ops.

The captain smiled when she saw he had returned. “Mr. Kim, give me ship-wide broadcast,” Janeway commanded.

“Aye, Captain. Channel open.”

“All hands, this is the Captain.”

In Astrometrics, Seven of Nine listened to the captain speak, listening with only half of her attention. The gnawing feeling in her stomach had not lessened any with the discovery of the wormhole's destination. With each word the captain spoke, her trepidation increased.

"In approximately 14 hours, Voyager will be entering a wormhole that, barring any unforeseen delays, will shortly deliver us to the Alpha Quadrant. We're going home!" She paused, sensing the cheers throughout the ship. She shared a smile with her first officer and continued. "We're battening down the hatches, so I want all departments to finish any necessary projects and all department heads to report to me or Commander Chakotay within the next 14 hours. All unnecessary stations are to be closed down for the remainder of our journey. There will be an additional announcement when we enter the wormhole."

Seven began initiating the sequence to reroute some of the Astrometrics data to the bridge so that the data could be accessed there once her shift ended. She finished her shift by realigning the sensor arrays, verifying that all were working at maximum efficiency, feeding new information to Voyager as they traveled closer to the wormhole and their final destination.

Seven left Astrometrics at her usual and customary pace. None of the crew who passed Seven on her way to cargo bay 2 would have suspected the panic and anxiety she was feeling. She entered cargo bay 2 and stood in front of her alcove. Her gaze was unfocused, her mind working out scenarios and possibilities for her future. None of them seemed promising to her, and all of them included her losing Harry.

Seven moved to her console. She reached out and picked up the rose that Harry had given her this morning, and tried to address her fear.

She was afraid that Harry would leave her once they reached Earth. Seven tried to be honest with herself in addressing her fear. It came from uncertainty; she was uncertain that Harry would still desire to be with her once they reached his home. She feared he would find her humanity lacking, once he had an entire planet of human females to compare her to. She also was uncertain that his family would accept her as his choice of mate. She feared that he would terminate their relationship to prevent displeasing them if they did not approve of her. It was also possible that his previous relationship with his former fiancée, Libby, might be re-established, leaving Seven out of the picture entirely. All her fears and uncertainties stemmed from the same source: Seven feared she wasn’t human enough for Harry.

She reviewed the possibilities and scenarios, all of them leading to her despair. She stood alone in the cargo bay, trembling with emotion.

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Harry finished his shift with impatience, anxious to find Seven and celebrate.

"Kim to Seven of Nine."

He waited for her to answer, frowning as the seconds passed.

"Computer, locate Seven of Nine."

"Seven of Nine is in cargo bay 2," The computer informed him coolly.

Harry redirected the turbolift to take him to the cargo bay deck. He exited the lift as soon as the doors opened, walking down the corridor to cargo bay 2. The giant doors opened and he stepped inside.

"Seven?" He didn't see her in her usual spot around her alcove. He'd thought perhaps she'd be working on further sensor analysis at her console here. "Seven, where are you?"

Harry stepped around the large stack of recently mined Henrion ore, which was now stored adjacent to the alcoves. He spotted her, sitting in the corner of the room with her knees drawn close to her chest. The empty expression on her face frightened him. He crouched down next to her, trying to catch her eyes with his own.

"Seven, what's wrong?" Harry finally touched her face, bringing her gaze to his.

Seven swallowed, trembling. "I am afraid," She admitted. She felt him gather her in his arms, holding her closely to him.

"Talk to me," Harry said softly, pulling her head to his chest, stroking her back.

Seven felt better with his arms around her like this, more like herself. She took a deep breath and began. "In less than 24 hours, we'll be in the Alpha Quadrant, on our way back to Earth. Voyager will dock, its crew will be debriefed, and then released to reunite with family and friends." The knot in her stomach grew worse, and she realized she was shaking again. Swallowing, she continued. "Will the Kim family be present to greet you?"

Harry could feel her trembling and tried to soothe her. "They will."

"And will they think I am human enough for their son?" She asked quietly. "Am I human enough for you?" She couldn't hide the pain in her voice.

He placed a kiss on her forehead, holding her closely for a moment. "I understand, Seven." He paused for a moment, searching his heart for the words he wanted to say. "I think my parents will love you, as I do, once they get to know you. You are intelligent, beautiful, honest, and, most importantly, you love their only son."

He could feel the tension in her body start to fade. He continued. "As for being human enough for me or for them?" He paused, placing another kiss on her forehead. "Your own human nature causes you this self-doubt. I find your honest and forthright nature refreshing; you do not succumb to many of the personality

failings many humans can. I find you to be more human in so many ways than many other “fully human” beings I have met.” He held her close to him.

“You will not attempt to re-initiate your previous relationship with Libby? You will not abandon me once we get to the Alpha Quadrant?" she asked, voicing the last of her fears.

"After all the work I put into seducing you?" He chuckled as he felt her sit up indignantly.

once more? Would he greet Starfleet officials with Lt. B'Elanna Torres on his arm, or would he be alone? The last one was his biggest fear.

Tom didn't think he could handle being alone again.

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In her own quarters, Voyager's Chief Engineer was also suffering her share of anxiety. Her future suddenly seemed much less certain. While she was relieved that they would be returning to the Alpha Quadrant, she didn't know what would become of her and the other former Maquis on Voyager. Would Starfleet arrest them as terrorists, the original reason for Voyager's mission into The Badlands? Or, would Starfleet pardon them all for their service these years under Janeway?

B'Elanna sat on her bed, looking around the walls of her quarters. These walls had been home to her for the past 4 years. They represented duty and security to her. She had reached a point in her life where she felt pride in what she was doing, pride in serving a Captain as fine as Janeway, and in serving on a ship as fine as Voyager.

Her mind wandered to thoughts of her relationship with Voyager's helmsman, Tom Paris. Things had been somewhat rocky between them lately. When he had returned from the last away mission, after having been trapped on the planet with Seven, he had immediately sought her out, seeking to apologize for his previous behavior.

She let him into her quarters. Tom immediately wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly to him, his face buried in her hair.

"Tell me one thing, " he said quietly, his voice cracking. "Have I totally messed up this relationship, or do we still have a shot?" He pulled back to look at her. His eyes were bright with emotion. "I did a lot of thinking these last few days while I was stuck on that damned planet. I realized that I was so afraid to give myself completely to another person, I was pushing you away." He paused, searching his heart for the right words to say. "I realized that I love you, B'Elanna. I have always loved you, even when I was being stupid and acting like a jerk."

She reached up and touched his cheek, wiping away the single tear that had escaped. "I love you too," she answered softly, with great feeling. "I have always loved you." B'Elanna let herself smile at him. "Especially when you were being stupid and acting like a jerk."

They had spent the night together in her quarters, making up for all the misunderstandings that had occurred between them.

Now, she was afraid of what the future held for them, and more than anything else, B'Elanna hated to be afraid. A growl escaped her. She would not give into her fear. Regardless of what happened to either of them, she would face it with honor.

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Captain Janeway sat in her ready-room, going over last minute details and reports. She wanted everything to be in order before they reached the Alpha Quadrant.

Her door chimed, interrupting her work. "Come in."

Her first officer walked in, carrying a stack of padds. He set them on the corner of her desk and smiled at her expression.

"More details?" She asked, looking at the stack with a woebegone expression.

Chakotay nodded. "More details." He took the chair across from her desk. "You know I'd be happy to help you with these. You don't have to do them all on your own."

Janeway smiled gratefully at him. "You would?"

Chakotay took the first padd from the stack and began to scan it, correcting information when necessary, adding information as needed. He set it aside when he finished. All it required now was for Janeway to approve it. He pulled the next padd down. "What are you working on?" He asked, his eyes intent on the padd.

"A letter to Starfleet requesting the Maquis members of my crew be granted a full pardon. I'm also requesting that those officers who have been given field commissions be reinstated in Starfleet, if they should so choose."

Chakotay watched as Janeway got up from her desk and walked to the replicator.

"Coffee, black." Janeway took the coffee back to her desk, sitting down with a sigh. She sipped her coffee, grimacing slightly at the taste. "I'm looking forward to having a real cup of coffee in my mother's kitchen in Indiana." She smiled at Chakotay. "What are you looking forward to?"

He put the padd he had just finished on the table, obviously giving her question some serious thought. "Well, " He sat back in the chair, folding his hands across his middle. "I think what I'm mostly looking forward to is a change from being in space. I want fresh air. Real, Terran air and sunshine." He smiled. "I have a cousin on my mother's side who owns a horse ranch in Arizona. I think I may go and spend some time with him."

"Are you going to stay in Starfleet?" Her eyebrow lifted in query.

Chakotay nodded. "I would like to teach at the Academy: anthropology or archeology." He smiled at her response. "I just think what I need the most right now is a break from all this." He gestured vaguely around the room.

Janeway smiled over the rim of her coffee cup. "I think we all could use a little break from 'all this'. I'm sure Starfleet won't mind giving it to us, considering all we've been through in the last four years."

"What are you going to do after your break?" Chakotay asked, picking up another padd.

She shrugged. "Probably take whatever assignment they give me, so long as it's not flying a desk." Janeway smirked. Her smile faded and she turned to look out the viewport of her ready room. "I need the stars, Chakotay," she said softly. "I'm happiest when I'm out here."

Chakotay didn't say anything. He didn't really need to, he inwardly mused, returning to the padd in front of him. Janeway knew his heart better than her own. She knew how he felt about her. She'd known since they'd been left behind on New Earth. He'd given her his heart, telling her he loved her the only way he knew how. She had chosen to accept his love, but not return it. It left him bitter at times, but he knew that nothing would change her mind. Janeway was the most stubborn of women.

Kathryn looked out of the viewport and watched the stars streak by her ship. There were only a few hours remaining before they entered the Alpha Quadrant and left the Delta Quadrant behind them. In her mind she pictured the crewmembers she was responsible for, and spent a moment remembering those who had died to help Voyager reach her final destination. So close to their objective, Janeway hoped that she would be able to finally make good on her promise to all of them: she would get them home.

She turned, sipping her coffee, watching Chakotay out of the corner of her eye. She realized, as she watched him work, how fortunate she had been to have as a first officer and, more importantly, as a friend.

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There was an impromptu celebration scheduled in the mess hall. A gathering of all crew, to eat, drink, and be merry in their last hours in the Delta Quadrant. Captain Janeway had prepared a small speech to commemorate the occasion. Seven and Harry stood next to each other, their hands linked together. B'Elanna and Tom were near them, his arms around her shoulders.

The Captain made sure everyone had a glass of champagne, or the beverage of his or her choice. She raised her glass and began to speak.

"Members of Voyager's illustrious crew: I salute each and every one of you this day. Without your hard work, dedication, and loyalty, we would not be standing here. I wanted to take this moment to thank each of you and to tell you that, while the last four years have been difficult ones, they have not been without their rewards. Starfleet. Maquis. We have become one great crew. It has been my deepest honor to have served you, and to have served with you."

Janeway paused, her eyes glittering with emotion. "Some of you have been like family to me." She searched the crowd for the familiar faces of her senior staff, her gaze resting momentarily on each one. "I will miss each, and every one of you. I hope that, whatever our individual futures may hold, our paths will cross again." She raised her glass high. "To the crew of Voyager!"
She raised the glass to her lips and took a generous sip of champagne.

"To Janeway!" The crew shouted back in unison. Each hand held their glass aloft in salute to their captain.

Overcome with emotion, Janeway let her tears flow freely. Chakotay put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. He stepped back, allowing Tom and B'Elanna to do the same. One by one, each member of the senior staff hugged their captain. Tuvok's embrace of her was the biggest surprise of all. As hugs went, it was fairly stiff, but for a Vulcan, it was exuberant by comparison.

She blinked back the tears. "I kept my promise," she whispered to Tuvok as he hugged her. "You'll see your family once more."

He released her and gave her his equivalent of a smile. "Thank you, Captain."

Janeway's combadge chirped. She tapped it. "Janeway here."

"Captain. We're approaching the wormhole. We'll be entering the event horizon in approximately 2 minutes," Ensign Davies said.

Janeway raised her hands for quiet, effectively hushing the crowd. "Give me ship wide broadcast, Ensign."

“Channel is open, Captain,” Davies replied.

“All hands, this is the Captain. We are about to enter the wormhole. Please return to your stations and standby. Go to yellow alert!”

At the resulting explosion of cheers and clapping in the messhall, Janeway grinned at Chakotay.

He raised his hands, trying to hush the crowd. “All right, all right. You heard the captain!”

Good naturedly, the crowd dispersed, each crewmember heading for his or her station. The yellow alert lights began flashing. The senior bridge staff made their way back to the bridge for their final shift in the Delta Quadrant.

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Part II: Capture

Voyager entered the wormhole so smoothly it was anticlimactic. Lieutenant Tom Paris carefully guided the Intrepid-class ship through the curves and bumps within the brilliantly colored passage. The remaining bridge staff, with the addition of Seven of Nine, waited breathlessly for their exit into normal space.

“We should be reaching normal space in approximately 30 seconds, Captain,” Seven said, scanning the constant stream of information the sensor array was sending her.

Time seemed to stretch for an eternity, the thirty seconds seemed to last much longer thtch t7Ible. On the main view screen at the front of the bridge, the bright colors of the wormhole gave way to black as the ship exited into normal space once more.

“Mr. Paris, drop us down to impulse. I want to get our bearings before we go any further,” Captain Janeway ordered.

“Aye, Captain.”

“Mr. Paris, set a course for DS9, Warp 2.” Janeway leaned back in her chair, watching the stars of the giant screen in front of her begin to race by.

Chakotay reached out and touched her hand, briefly. “You did it,” he said softly, for her ears alone.

Janeway gave him a quick smile. “We did it,” she replied quietly.

Harry Kim was frowning at his console. Tuvok, at Tactical, was frowning at his. They both spoke at once.

“Captain!”

Janeway laughed, startled. “One at a time!” She looked at Tuvok. “Mr. Tuvok?”

“There are two ships headed on an intercept course to our location. Time to arrival is approximately 9 minutes. They both have Cardassian warp signatures.”

“Well, well. Looks like a welcoming committee,” Chakotay said, losing his smile. He turned to his console and began touching the controls. “I’m not recognizing the ships.” He frowned at his display. “They don’t look like anything Cardassian I’ve ever seen.” He looked up at Janeway. “Maybe they’ve hired new and better ship designers,” he said with dry humor.

“Possibly,” Janeway considered, turning to Harry. “Mr. Kim, you have something to report?”

“There has been no reply to our message from Starfleet,” Harry replied.

“Are they not receiving the signal?” Janeway asked quickly, mounting the stairs that separated Ops from the lower area of the bridge. She leaned over his shoulder to look at his readout.

Harry shook his head. “The signal isn’t being blocked and we are well within range.” He tapped a few keys. “There is just no reply.”

Janeway frowned, tapping her cheek thoughtfully. “Try hailing DS9.”

Harry complied. “No response.”

“Captain. Perhaps the wormhole has damaged our communications array in some way we have not detected,” Seven offered.

“Possibly. But I won’t dismiss the fact that something just doesn’t feel right about this.” Janeway stepped back down to the lower bridge, standing behind Tom. She looked pensively at the view screen.

“Mr. Tuvok. How much time until our Cardassian guests arrive?”

“4 minutes, 22 seconds,” the Vulcan replied.

Janeway rubbed her forehead, feeling the beginnings of a headache between her eyes. She sighed and looked at Chakotay a moment.

“I guess we’ll just play it diplomatically and see what happens.” The corner of her mouth twitched briefly. “But I don’t think we should make it too easy for them.” She sat down in her chair beside Chakotay. An all too familiar “Janeway smirk” played about her lips. “Mr. Paris, increase speed, warp 7,” she ordered.

“Aye, Captain,” Tom replied, entering the appropriate commands.

Seven of Nine looked up from her console at Harry. He was still working on the message to Starfleet, with no apparent success, if his expression was any indication. His hair had become mussed from his hands repeatedly running through it in frustration. His black locks were standing up in an unruly fashion that Seven found charming. As if sensing her stare, Harry looked up and caught her eye. He smiled briefly, before turning back to his work, obviously troubled. She returned to her own work, finishing the last of her most recent scans.

They were all thrown abruptly forward as the ship rocked and shuddered.

“Red Alert!” Janeway barked. “Report!”

“Captain, the Cardassian ships are firing on us,” Tuvok reported smoothly. The ship jolted again. “Shields are down to 86%.” There was something almost like surprise in his voice. He read the shock in Janeway’s expression.

“On screen!” Janeway ordered. Two ships appeared, one significantly smaller than the other. Both ships were firing on them. “I guess they improved their weapons along with their ship design,” Janeway growled. “Mr. Paris, evasive maneuvers, pattern Delta five! Mr. Tuvok, target their weapons array and fire!”

“Firing phasers,” Tuvok replied. He scanned his Tactical readout, blinking in disbelief. “No effect.”

The ship bucked and shuddered, throwing Janeway nearly out of her seat.

“Shields are down to 67%.”

“What are they hitting us with?” Janeway demanded, clutching her chair to keep from being thrown to the deck as the ship lurched sideways.

“I can’t seem to shake the smaller ship, Captain! Its right on our tail!” Tom reported, his hands flying over the controls rapidly, trying to keep Voyager from being struck again.

“Photon torpedoes, full spread!” Janeway ordered. “Fire!” She watched in growing dismay as the Cardassian shields deflected their torpedoes.

“Mr. Paris, maximum warp. If we can’t out gun them, maybe we can outrun them!” Janeway spun to face Tuvok. “Mr. Tuvok, you want to explain why our torpedoes just bounced off of their shields like that?”

Voyager jolted violently, throwing the bridge staff completely off of their feet. Janeway’s head struck the unyielding metal of her console. She collapsed, lying in a limp heap on the deck.

Chakotay rushed to her side; he felt the pulse at her neck and breathed a silent sigh of relief. “Mr. Tuvok, status!”

“Our shields are down to 22%. I estimate that one more hit like the last one will take our shields out completely,” Tuvok reported with calm efficiency.

“Mr. Kim, lock onto the Captain’s signal and initiate a site-to-site transport to sickbay.” He touched his combadge. “Chakotay to sickbay. The captain’s been injured. We’re transporting her now.”

“Acknowledged.” There was a moment’s pause. “We’ve got her now.”

Chakotay stood. “Mr. Kim, open hailing frequencies!”

“Channel open, sir.”

“This is Commander Chakotay of the Federation Starship Voyager. Why are you firing on us?”

“No response, sir.”

Another blow rocked the ship. Sparks flew from several consoles.

“Shields are down!” Tuvok shouted above the din.

“Mr. Paris!” Chakotay sat heavily in his chair, worry stamped deeply on his features.

“I’m sorry, Commander. Warp engines are off-line,” Tom reported, his face gray.

“Mr. Tuvok, I want you to fire everything we’ve got at them. Phasers at maximum, torpedoes, full spread! Now!”

Tuvok complied. As before, their weapons were deflected by the Cardassian shielding.

“Captain, I’ve got Cardassian life signs all over the ship. We’re being boarded!” Harry reported.

Chakotay’s face registered disbelief. “They transported through their shields?” He shook his head; it didn’t matter now, he had to deal with the problem at hand. “Erect a level-10 force field around the bridge, engineering, and sickbay.”

Harry frowned. “Engineering isn’t responding. I’m showing at least 20 Cardassians in the main engine room.” The power on the bridge dimmed radically. “We’ve lost main power.”

“Re-route emergency power to the force fields,” Chakotay snarled. “Everyone, arm yourselves.” He pulled his phaser out from the compartment beside his chair.

Harry’s fingers flew furiously over his console, desperately trying to find any extra power to route to the force fields. The computer chirped at him. His face white, he looked up at his commander.

“Force fields are down. We don’t have any power left to maintain them.” He picked up his phaser and crossed the bridge to stand next to Seven.

She looked up at him, her own phaser already set for battle. Her calm expression belied her concern for the welfare of the crew and for Harry.

Tuvok and Chakotay took strategic positions on the bridge, Tuvok crouching next to the commander, waiting for the attack.

12 Cardassians beamed directly into the bridge. Four of them were immediately disabled by phaser fire from Tuvok, Chakotay, and Harry. Tom's shot missed, and Seven's hadn't struck a disabling blow. The remaining 8 Cardassians swiftly attacked, firing stun weapons at the crew. Harry tried to cover Seven, to protect her from the shot that was aimed at her. The nature of the weapon enabled it to strike them both. Harry and Seven collapsed together, unconscious.

"Drop your weapon!" The lead Cardassian aimed his own weapon at Chakotay. The ex-Maquis and commander of Voyager looked desperately about him. The Cardassians had rendered all of his officers unconscious. He saw his defeat in the eyes of the Cardassian leader. His phaser dropped from his hands to the deck.

"Very good. Now, place your hands behind your head, and walk slowly over here." The leader smiled, his eyes cold.

Chakotay complied, stepping over the prone form of Tuvok. He reached the Cardassian and waited, staring defiantly into those cold, gray eyes.

A slow, cruel smile spread itself across the Cardassian's features. He raised a scaled fist and struck Chakotay across the jaw. Chakotay fell, unconscious, at the Cardassian's feet.

The Cardassian leader looked at him for a moment, then smiled. "Take them to the cargo ship."

"What do you want to do with the ship?" The leader's second-in- command asked, supervising the removal of the unconscious prisoners.

"Tow it back to Terok Nor. I want to go over their database, ship logs, and star charts. I want to know how a new Federation Starship could have escaped our notice all these years," the Cardassian snarled.

"Yes, Dukat." The second in command bowed slightly in compliance.

Gul Dukat, the Cardassian leader, with great satisfaction sat down slowly in the captain's chair. He viewed Voyager's bridge possessively. He didn't know how the Federation had managed to hide this ship from the Dominion and the Cardassian Empire, but it belonged to him now. He vowed to make its secrets his; he would use them to further his own personal glory, as well as the glory of the Cardassian Empire.

* * * *

The crew of Voyager woke to find themselves in surroundings that, while familiar to most, did nothing to dispel their uneasiness. The walls of Deep Space 9's cargo area had taken on a new air; gone were any signs of Federation occupation. The dark and grim walls bore testament to Cardassian rule.

Gul Dukat, flanked by his most trusted first officer, Glinn Katarin, inspected the group of prisoners taken from the Federation Starship Voyager. Most were human, with a few Bajorans, Bollians, two Vulcans, a species that Dukat didn't even recognize, and a Klingon-human hybrid. There was also one member of the crew that had Borg implants. She would require further investigation, Dukat thought. He had never heard of a Borg being away from the collective, and he certainly didn't believe that one would be traveling with a Federation starship. He suspected she had been separated from the collective, the way that the Federation Captain, Jean-Luc Picard had. He recalled reading that Picard had retained a few implants, briefly, until they

were successfully and completely removed. Dukat mentally shrugged. It wasn't currently important, so he put the puzzle aside for contemplation later.

He'd had the prisoners separated, males on one side, and females on the other. Most of the male prisoners would be sent to the mining camps around Cardassia. The female prisoners would be evaluated and sold to Cardassian households, labor camps, manufacturing facilities, or military brothels.

Dukat had already spent several hours reading through the ship's database and the Captain's logs. After initial disbelief, he began to understand, as he read, that the ship and his prisoners came from an alternate timeline. He'd read about temporal distortions and vaguely understood the possibilities of time travel. He had never personally been involved with it before. He was secretly relieved at the explanation; it also meant that the remaining Starfleet rebels weren't trying to build new ships. There were only a few ships left, and he planned on catching them all eventually.

He identified the Captain now, standing in line with the other female prisoners. She had been found in the ship's sickbay, being treated for a head injury. They had allowed the holographic doctor to finish his work, and then deactivated him. Until they could figure out a lucrative use for the hologram, they would leave him in the computer.

He stopped in front of the Captain; Kathryn Janeway, he recalled reading, was her name. Dukat knew that he needed to make an example of her in front of her crew. It was the best way to ensure their complete and total submission. He could tell by the look in her eyes that she was a woman of fiery spirit. He liked fiery women; moreover, he liked to break them.

Dukat pulled Janeway out of line and threw her roughly to the deck. "Kill her!" He ordered the guard that had been assigned to her.

The Cardassian guard charged his weapon and took aim. Janeway's face paled. Her eyes flashed to Chakotay, standing across the room from her. She tried to put her heart in her eyes, to tell him goodbye.

"Wait!" Gul Dukat ordered, having noticed the entire exchange. He had never intended on killing Janeway: it might make a martyr out of her - and he hated martyrs with a passion; their influence was almost impossible to fight. No, he had planned this little charade to begin the process of subjugating the crew. He intended to break her, make her surrender to him, in front of her entire crew. Besides, he rather enjoyed these little games. Dukat looked at Katarin and nodded, smiling cruelly.

Katarin handed his weapons to the guard behind him and stepped towards Janeway, who had gotten rather unsteadily to her feet. She watched him warily as he approached, nothing in his manner indicating which direction his attack would take. Nothing could prepare her for the speed with which he struck, slamming his fist into her stomach.

A pained "oof" escaped her lungs as the breath was knocked out of her. She landed heavily on the floor.

Katarin was extremely proficient at his job, having spent a good portion of his career torturing prisoners in just this manner. He knew exactly how much force to use without knocking his prisoner completely unconscious, or worse, killing them prematurely. He grinned nastily as Janeway staggered to her feet, as if appreciating her fighting spirit.

Janeway nearly lost consciousness from the next blow. Katarin's fist connected squarely with her jaw, knocking her to the deck once more. Bright blossoms of pain exploded in her head and she felt her jaw crack under his fist. She gagged, feeling nauseated from the blow.

Katarin struck her with his boot, kicking her viciously in the ribs. Janeway screamed in agony, curling her body in a tight fetal position, trying to protect herself from the blows. She could feel her ribs break under his next onslaught, and she screamed again.

Panting, Katarin paused, looking up at Dukat for further instructions. They were walking the thin line now - any further blows at this point could cause permanent damage to this woman, greatly reducing her value as a marketable commodity.

Dukat nodded and Katarin stepped back from the woman who was whimpering and sobbing painfully at his feet.

Gul Dukat smirked down at Janeway. "I want to hear you beg, Captain." He used her title mockingly. "I want your crew to hear you beg me to stop," Dukat snarled. He nodded to Katarin, who kicked her once more in the ribcage, eliciting another gasping scream from her.

Janeway felt the blood mix with the tears on her face. It hurt to breathe and she was afraid that a broken rib had punctured one of her lungs. She curled her body tighter, trying to become as small a target as possible. She didn't care if they killed her. Her pride would be intact; something she knew would give her crew hope. Her vision grew black and she lost consciousness.

Furious, Dukat could sense she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction he wanted. He could have Katarin beat her to death - in fact, he suspected that was her goal - he snarled, gesturing for Katarin to back away from Janeway's prone form. Dukat stared down at her for a moment, an idea forming in his twisted brain.

Coolly, he surveyed her crew. All wore expressions of fear, dismay, and horror, but one man's face was mottled red with restrained fury.

"Bring me that one!" Dukat demanded. "Bring me Janeway's first officer!"

Chakotay fought his captors like the bear he resembled, trying desperately to reach the battered, still form of his captain. He bellowed in rage as Katarin struck him behind his knees, forcing him to kneel on the hard deck in front of Gul Dukat.

The Gul sneered. "How long do you think your captain will hold out if we use you as persuasion?"

Chakotay's eyes were flinty, his mouth a grim line. Dukat studied him for a moment, reading into the first officer's fury at the treatment of his captain. Dukat was exceptional at reading between the lines, and it didn't take him a moment to figure out that the man was in love with his captain. He was almost gleeful at the discovery. He turned to Katarin.

"Wake her!" Dukat snapped.

Leaving Chakotay easily restrained by three guards, Katarin reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a small glass vial. He opened the vial and waved the powerful stimulant under Janeway's nostrils.

The woman stirred, groaning painfully. Grabbing a handful of her hair, Katarin used it to leverage Janeway to her knees. She was forced to watch in horror as Dukat brought his knife to Chakotay's throat. The moment had an unreal clarity to it; she could see the pulse in Chakotay's neck beating wildly beneath his skin. She swallowed, tearing her gaze away, and met the cruel gray eyes of Dukat.

"What do you want?" Janeway rasped, her voice thick with fear.

"Your complete surrender. You're going to tell me how you got here: about the Delta Quadrant, the wormhole, everything! You're going to give me the command codes I need to completely access Voyager's computer!"

Janeway's eyes flashed to Chakotay's. She could see he was silently begging her not to give in, not to let them use him to get to her. She also saw his fear for her. Janeway swallowed again, forcing herself to look back at Dukat. She hated the Cardassian in a way that she had never hated anyone before.

Like the predator he was, Dukat sensed her weakening. He brought his knife up to Chakotay's face and cut his cheek; a thin trickle of blood dripped slowly down Chakotay's face. Dukat looked at Janeway.

"Shall I cut a matching one on the other side?" Dukat asked mockingly.

"Stop it!"

"Or should I just kill him." He slowly brought the knife back to Chakotay's throat, savoring the game.

Janeway looked into Chakotay's eyes and knew she couldn't watch Dukat kill him. She couldn't bear the thought of him hurt, dying, or dead. A world without him in it was not one she wanted to live in.

"Well?" Dukat demanded harshly. "I'm losing my patience!"

Unable to trust her voice, Janeway nodded mutely.

"Oh, no," Dukat chided. "You must say it, my dear Captain." He gestured to the crew, who had watched the scene with terror and growing despair. "Your crew must hear you surrender to me!"

Some of the old Janeway bristled at his tone. Her gray-blue eyes snapped to Dukat's angrily. She read the cold, cruel, and calculating depths there, and saw no hope. Her shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I surrender," she said quietly.

"NO!" Chakotay surged forward, almost taking Dukat down by surprise. He tried to get the Cardassian to kill him. Laughing, the stronger man held off Chakotay's attack, while Katarin and the two guards hauled the furious man away from Dukat. The Gul looked momentarily amused. Finally, irritated, he drew his phaser and shot the struggling man. Chakotay went limp in his captor's arms. They released him, allowing his body to slide to the floor.

"Well, " Dukat said, tucking his weapon away. "That was fun." He turned back to Janeway, who had gone a shade whiter than death.

"Take her to my office for interrogation," Dukat ordered, highly amused by the empty expression on her face.

He waited until she had been removed before turning back to Katarin.

“Take him to a holding cell. Have a physician check him over before you release him to the mine supervisor.” He smirked at Chakotay’s unconscious form. “He’s going to be grouchy from the stunner when he wakes up.”

He continued to issue orders to the remaining guards.

“All of the males need to be given a health status check before being sent to the mines. Any unfit for labor are to be brought immediately to my attention.”

Dukat rubbed his hands together slowly as he turned to face the remainder of Janeway’s crew. All the female crewmembers had been lined up for his inspection. Slowly, followed by Katarin and two other guards, he walked down the line. He issued commands as he walked, assigning each woman a code understood only by the guards. The guards then separated them by the code they were assigned.

Seven and B’Elanna were standing next to each other, watching with mounting apprehension as the Cardassians moved closer to their position.

“I’m not going to go quietly!” B’Elanna muttered under her breath to Seven. “I say you take out the petaQ that beat the Captain, and I beat in the face of the Gul.”

Seven wasn’t listening. Her mind was frantic. She had watched, helpless, as first her captain, and then Chakotay were both beaten into submission. Then, they had led Harry away from her. Her mind kept seeing the fear in his eyes, fear for her, as they dragged Harry away. An icy hand clutched her heart, and she felt like she might weep. She finally heard B’Elanna’s words and a cold fury swept through her, sending adrenaline rushing through her system.

B’Elanna elbowed her in the ribs. “Seven!” she hissed. “Now!”

Seven acted purely on instinct. With Borg enhanced speed and strength she struck, feeling the jaw of a Cardassian guard shatter beneath her blow. She heard B’Elanna roar, heard bones crack, and the distinctive sound of a body hitting the floor. She wheeled, swinging her fist to connect with the back of Katarin’s head. He grunted and grabbed her arm quicker than she could have imagined. Seven lashed out with her leg, attempting to kick him behind the knee and drop him to the floor. Far more used to hand to hand tactics on a practical level than Seven, who had only the assimilated knowledge of hand to hand fighting, he used her own body weight against her, using the arm he captured as leverage. He let her overbalance and overextend her strike. She lost her balance and fell, the arm Katarin still held twisted painfully behind her. He moved in quickly, his other arm snaked around her throat. Seven’s eyes watered in pain.

B’Elanna’s rebellion was just as short lived. She initially had taken their guards and Dukat by surprise, breaking her guard’s neck and tackling the Gul to the ground. However, a half-Klingon woman was no match for a Cardassian male in his full prime, and he quickly turned the tables on her, pinning her down. Dukat struck her twice across the face, just hard enough to stun her. He pulled his knife and put it to her throat, his eyes gleaming.

Seven continued struggling against Katarin until he increased the pressure on his neck hold; Seven went still as her vision began to blacken about the edges.

Guards moved in, having secured the remaining prisoners during the fray.

Dukat pulled B'Elanna by her hair, bringing her to her feet. He shoved her roughly at the waiting guards. "Put this one in a labor camp." He wiped the blood on his lip, which had been struck by the back of B'Elanna's head during their struggle. "She might be tempting enough for the brothels, but I doubt she'd be well behaved enough to serve there." He watched, lips twitching briefly in amusement, as B'Elanna was dragged away. It took three guards to properly subdue her.

Dukat turned his attention to Katarin, and to the barely conscious Borg-woman Katarin held.

"Now," He mused coldly. "What should we do with you?"

Title: Chrysalis
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Series: VOY
Rating [R]
Codes: K/7, J/C, P/T

Part III Time on the Line

Voyager was completely empty. All unnecessary systems had been shut down while it was docked at Terok Nor. Only the ship's computer and minimal life support remained online.

In sickbay, a lone man appeared as if out of nowhere.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency," he said automatically, although before the sentence was complete he knew something was terribly wrong. He accessed his memory, recalling the events prior to his shut down. Voyager had been attacked and boarded, the crew captured by Cardassians and taken away. Only the EMH remained behind. He had allowed them to believe they had 'deactivated' him after he had finished treating the captain's injuries. However, he had temporarily disabled his autonomy protocols beforehand, and also had secretly programmed a time delay into the computer, asking it to automatically reactivate the EMH program 48 hours after there were no Cardassian life signs on board. The Cardassians, evidently thinking he was merely a computer program, assumed that once his program was shut down, he wouldn't pose any difficulty to them.

How wrong they were, the EMH thought angrily. He accessed the computer and began simple modifications to his program. He accessed the tactical and strategical warfare database and added its information to his matrix. The EMH paused a moment to assimilate the information. Satisfied, he tapped a few more keys on

“There are no crew members aboard Voyager.”

He’d thought as much, but knew he had to ask. “Can you locate any of Voyager’s crew aboard Deep Space Nine?”

“Negative.”

Well, that could mean any number of things, he thought crossly. The most obvious was that the crew was no longer on the station. Equally obvious was that their combadge signals were either masked, or they had been relieved of their combadges entirely.

The EMH didn’t quite understand what had happened here. It didn’t make sense to him that Cardassians would attack their ship and tow it to DS9, which was occupied by Bajor and Starfleet. Unless, he thought, suddenly inspired, Cardassia had re-captured the station. But, however, that didn’t explain why Voyager hadn’t received any reply to their messages to Starfleet. He didn’t realize he was pacing as he worked out the puzzle until he nearly ran into a biobed. He stopped, gripping the edge of the bed, thinking.

There was really only one way he could find out what was going on if he had any hope of finding and rescuing the crew. The EMH checked for his mobile emitter, thankful that the Cardassians had not bothered to take it; they had not known what it was and it had not been a priority to investigate.

The EMH tapped a query on his console, checking the status of the ship’s power system. It appeared that all of the ship’s systems were intact. He tapped in a few careful lines of instruction to the computer, wanting it to restore main and auxiliary power on his command. He also instructed it to initiate a silent alert to his combadge if the Cardassians boarded Voyager while he was off ship. If the computer read any Cardassian life signs on board, his combadge would vibrate. Once those steps were in place, he was ready to initiate the rest of his plan.

“Computer, alter the appearance of the EMH to resemble a Cardassian male in his prime.” His appearance changed abruptly. He was taller, and heavily muscled, taking on the physical aspects of a Cardassian. The EMH looked at his reflection, satisfied with his appearance. “Now, dress EMH as a Cardassian Vardek.” The computer supplied the deep burgundy velvet-like robes of a Cardassian monk. The EMH had accessed the Cardassian history and knew this was probably the safest disguise for him to take. The Order of Vardek were warrior monks that traveled widely throughout this sector. They had not taken part in the conflict between the Dominion, Cardassia, and the Federation allies. They had remained neutral, defending their monasteries as necessary, but avoiding conflict if possible. Because they traveled so widely, the EMH knew his presence on the space station was unlikely to arouse suspicion. Or so he hoped.

“Computer, download EMH program to the mobile emitter.” He attached his emitter to his arm underneath the voluminous sleeve of his robes. He tapped a few more commands into the computer, setting up an emergency escape program, just in case things got out of control. All he needed to do was tap his combadge, and the computer would beam him back to sickbay. He hid his combadge underneath his robes, settling them in place.

The doctor knew he needed to make one small errand before leaving the ship. He only hoped that the currency hadn’t changed in the last four years.

After tucking the latinum that he had ‘borrowed’ from the Captain’s vault into one of the pockets in his robe, the EMH finished his preparations by pulling his hood up over his head.

“Computer, locate a hallway on the space station that is not currently occupied.” The computer chirped in compliance. The EMH plugged a hand phaser into the sickbay’s power system. He knew that it would suffice as a power source for his next command. “Computer, beam the EMH to that location.” He waited tensely as the computer searched the space station for the transport site. He felt the transporter take hold, sickbay disappearing from his vision in a haze of blue-white sparkles. He reappeared in an empty hallway on DS9.

It took him a moment to access his memory of the space station’s layout. He would have liked to have brought a tricorder with him, but he didn’t feel he could take the risk of being caught with it. The EMH straightened his robes, and began walking towards the center of the station, to an area known as the “Promenade”.

Disguised as a Cardassian monk, he managed to pass through several guarded areas into the main center of the station. The Promenade, when he compared it to his downloaded memory, still appeared fairly much the same as it had during the Starfleet occupation of DS9. The Cardassians had generously allowed the Ferengi, Quark, to continue to do business with the visitors and residents of the station. A few of the Bajoran shops remained open, although their stock appeared to be quite limited. The EMH thought that the place definitely had a darker feel about it.

The doctor found a table at Quark’s and sat, waiting patiently. He didn’t have to wait very long before the owner of the establishment himself came to his table to take his order.

Quark looked nervously about him, then looked back at the large Cardassian monk sitting at the table. “What can I get you? A nice Romulan Ale, perhaps?” He flashed his pointed teeth in a well-oiled smile.

The EMH nodded. “That would be fine.”

Quark moved away from the table and returned to his bar to retrieve the drink for his customer.

The EMH scanned the establishment carefully. There were only 3 other customers present; a rather large and mournful looking alien sitting on a stool at the end of the bar, and two Cardassian officers who appeared to be deep into their cups if their behavior was any indication.

The Ferengi returned with an electric-blue colored drink, placing the glass in front of the EMH. The doctor tried not to gasp when Quark told him how much the drink was, but silently handed him some of the currency he had taken with him from Voyager. He had felt slightly guilty about raiding the Captain’s vault for the latinum, but he knew that he had little choice if he wanted information.

Quark’s eyes gleamed, catching sight of the purse that the EMH carried. “You should be careful with that,” he mentioned casually.

The EMH allowed himself to smile, “Why, I have more where that came from.” He met the Ferengi’s eyes meaningfully. “I’m hoping you might help me with something.”

Quark nodded, catching on. This was the sort of business that he did regularly: customers looking for something besides a drink. Whatever it was, Quark could usually supply it. “Are you looking for any thing in particular while you’re visiting?”

The EMH nodded, continuing the game. “I’m looking for some old friends who might be visiting here. They were supposed to meet me a few days ago.” He looked at the Ferengi sharply.

Quark spared a glance at the two Cardassian officers. One of them had passed out on the table and was snoring softly. The other appeared fascinated by the bubbles rising in his glass of beer. He looked back at the Cardassian monk in front of him. His sixth sense was telling him that all wasn’t what it appeared to be. He proceeded with more than his customary caution.

“Well, “ he said with warmth that didn’t quite reach his eyes, “Did these friends of yours have names? Maybe I’ve seen them or heard where they might be.”

The EMH pretended to sip the ale, regretting that he didn’t have the ability to appreciate its flavor. He’d heard it was quite good, if a little potent. He looked back at the Ferengi, placing his glass carefully on the table.

“Maybe you have,” the EMH replied. He carefully placed 2 pieces of gold pressed latinum on the table in front of him. His fingers rubbed the latinum idly. He could practically hear the Ferengi drooling.

“H-how many friends are you looking for?” Quark asked, watching the Cardassian monk closely.

“142.”

Quark’s eyes opened in surprise. “One-hun...” he paused, looking closely at the monk. It couldn’t be coincidence that the monk was looking for 142 people, and Gul Dukat had just processed 142 prisoners, Starfleet rebels, just a few days ago. Quark didn’t believe in coincidences. What he was trying to grasp was what possible purpose a Vardek monk would want with 142 Starfleet rebels. He looked shrewdly at the monk and cleared his throat.

“That’s a lot of friends,” he said, non-committed.

The EMH slid two more latinum pieces out onto the table. “They’re colleagues.” He hoped he hadn’t misjudged the character of this Ferengi.

“Fellow monks?” Quark asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Something like that.” He slid one more piece of latinum onto the table. “Can you tell me where they went?” He kept his hand near the small pile of latinum and looked at Quark. “I’d be willing to pay for passage so I can catch up to them.”

Quark rubbed his chin, as if thinking where he might have seen 142 monks. “I’m sure I can arrange something to your liking,” he replied. He dropped his bar towel on the pile of currency sitting on the table, and then went to pick it up, latinum and all.

The EMH dropped his hand on the towel and leaned forward, eyes narrowed. “I think I need a little more information than that before I let you have your towel back,” he said softly, with enough menace to make Quark jump back.

The Ferengi swallowed, eyes darting about the bar nervously. “I think I saw one or two of your friends visiting the old security station; perhaps they are guests of the security chief.”

So the EMH knew that at least two of his crew were still aboard the station. He released his hold on the towel and allowed the Ferengi to pick it up along with the latinum. He wasn't worried that Quark was lying to him. It was something he would be able to verify easily.

"What about the rest of them?" the doctor asked quietly.

Quark had quickly palmed the latinum, feeling much better already. "Well, passage might be difficult."

"I have my own transport."

Quark's eyebrow lifted, and he grinned. "Then perhaps a star chart to take along as a souvenir?"

The EMH nodded. "Done."

"Wait here." Quark scurried off, disappearing through the door behind his bar.

The EMH reached into his pockets and fingered the remainder of his latinum. He wondered how much Quark was going to charge him for his 'star chart'.

Several moments later, Quark returned, a small metal disk in his hand. He put it on the table in front of the EMH. He looked at the Cardassian monk.

"This is the star chart," he said quietly. "I'll cost you 25 bars of gold pressed latinum. Or," he paused, his expression tense as he looked around the bar once more. The drunken officers had finally shambled off to their quarters, leaning on each other for support. Only the strange, mournful alien at the end of the bar remained. "I'll give it to you at no charge if you answer one question."

The EMH was amused, wondering if the Ferengi's tense and nervous expression was due to the question or his admitting he'd be willing to give something away for free. He pulled his hood back up over his head, playing his role to the hilt.

"Ask your question, Ferengi."

Quark licked his lips, sweat breaking out on his brow. "If you knew that there were more monks than your friends out there, would you go to them?"

The EMH studied the man in front of him, wondering what lay behind the question. If he understood the hidden message, it meant that Quark knew where there were more Starfleet people. The Ferengi worked in a Cardassian occupied space base. However, that didn't necessarily mean he liked working with them. If Quark thought that the EMH, as a Cardassian monk, would be an ally against the current occupants…the doctor shook his head. He couldn't get distracted like this.

"I might be interested in contacting them later," the EMH allowed.

Quark studied him a moment, then nodded, as if finally reaching a decision. "Let me know when you decide to do that." He turned to leave.

"One other question." The doctor leaned forward, pocketing the disk. He laid half of his remaining latinum on the table. He looked up at the Ferengi. "I need access to a computer terminal."

Quark smiled, revealing a mouthful of pointed teeth. "My friend, I have just what you need."

Two hours later, the EMH finally understood what had happened to Deep Space 9 and Starfleet. His eyes were grim as he walked down the corridor that led to the Cardassian security detention center. The octagonal doors swooshed open as he stepped through. The Cardassian guard behind the main desk looked up as he entered. The EMH pushed his hood back, revealing his Cardassian features.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" the guard asked politely.

"I was told you have two prisoners here that are seeking to enter the Order of Vardek," the EMH said quietly; he unconsciously imitated the body language he had observed in Tuvok many times.

The guard looked uncertain. "I just came on shift a few moments ago. I wasn't informed of this."

The EMH put on his peaceful monk's expression, full of patience that he didn't truly feel. "I simply wish to be allowed to talk to the prisoners. Should they decide to join the Order, I will request their release from the appropriate authorities." He spread his hands open to show that he carried no weapon, although it was common knowledge that the warrior-monks of Vardek carried no other weapon except their hands.

The young, inexperienced guard smiled, convinced by the EMH's performance. "I apologize. I'm sure it was just an oversight, s-sir." He was obviously uncertain how to address a monk. "I will open the doors, just a moment."

The guard tapped the security code on the console before him and the two doors that led to the detention center opened.

"They are the only two prisoners in the holding cells, a human woman and a Vulcan male." The guard gestured for him to proceed.

"I would ask for privacy to talk to these prisoners, my son," the EMH said softly, drawing the guard in. "If you don't mind waiting out here, just lock the doors behind me. I can use the intercom when I am ready to leave."

The guard, uncertain what he should do, chose to take the easiest course and agreed.

The doctor smiled, and placed his hand briefly on the guard's forehead in blessing, inwardly feeling quite smug at his performance. He stepped away from the guard and through the doors that led to the detention area. He heard them whirr shut behind him.

Before him lay a long passage which was flanked on either side by holding cells. He could see that the last two cells were occupied, he just wasn't positive by whom. The doctor walked down the passageway until he reached the last set of holding cells. One of them held Tuvok. The Vulcan knelt on the bare metal floor, his hands folded in front of him and his eyes closed tightly. He was meditating. The other cell held Captain Janeway. She was lying on her bunk, one arm thrown up over her eyes, and she appeared to be sleeping. Her face and arms were covered in bruises.

The EMH knew that there were monitors in the detention area. He hoped that he could play the game long enough to rescue his friends. He moved in front of Tuvok's cell and cleared his throat loudly.

Tuvok's eyes opened and he looked up at the tall Cardassian monk standing in front of his cell. He stared for a moment, his dark eyes squinting into the gray ones of his visitor. The EMH waited, wondering if Tuvok would recognize him even in his disguise. If he did, the doctor hoped he would be able to keep from giving him away.

Finally, Tuvok raised his eyebrow in query.

"I have come to ask if you would be willing to join the Order of Vardek. We are a sect of warrior Monks who do not involve themselves in the affairs of men," the EMH stated for the monitors.

"Indeed," Tuvok replied, noncommittally. There was something familiar about the monk in front of him. But he couldn't place what it was.

The EMH had considered for quite a period of time what he could use to let Tuvok know his true identity without alerting whoever was monitoring them. He met Tuvok's gaze squarely. "I am called Tuvix. It would be illogical for you to refuse."

Tuvok's eyebrow rose even higher as he made the logical connection. He then replied calmly. "I would be honored to join your order." His eyes met the doctor's, letting his knowledge of the ruse be read there.

The EMH sighed silently in relief. "Will your companion require any persuasion to join our order?"

The Vulcan nodded, his face betraying nothing, though his eyes became clouded. "She is in a state of grief. I will try to persuade her to accept a life of peace and prayer."

The doctor carefully kept his face as neutral as Tuvok's, but inwardly he was worried. He hoped that Tuvok didn't mean someone had died.

Tuvok called to Janeway, trying to wake her from her depression. "Kathryn!" he finally called, using her given name. That roused her out of her stupor. She sat up slowly, a low groan escaping her. Her eyes squinted as she looked across the room at Tuvok and their visitor. Her mouth thinned as she realized their visitor was Cardassian.

"Captain. This is Tuvix. He has come to ask us to join the Order of Vardek, a holy order of warrior monks." Tuvok looked at her calmly, his expression belying the pain he felt for her. He hoped her wits were about her enough to catch the name and make the connection.

Janeway blinked and slowly brought her gaze up to the tall Cardassian monk standing in front of Tuvok and her cell. Gray eyes met hers with familiar warmth. She shook her head, not believing, not daring to believe.

"If you wish to join the order I can take both of you with me right now." The EMH spread his hands persuasively. Janeway caught the flash of a Starfleet combadge hidden carefully in the Cardassian's palm. The doctor had slid his arms up his voluminous sleeves and removed the combadge, hiding it in his hand as final proof to his captain of his identity.

Janeway stood painfully. The Cardassians had healed the most life threatening of her injuries, but she was still very bruised and aching. "I will gladly join your order." Her voice had a raspy quality.

The EMH muttered quietly under his breath, touching his portable emitter beneath the sleeves of his robe. He made a quick adjustment to the emitter. "Stand back," he said quietly. He reached up with both hands

and touched the force field at the entrance of Tuvok's cell. There was a quick spark and hissing pop before the force field came down. Quickly, he turned and did the same to Janeway's force field. Once the force fields were down, he adjusted the emitter again, before grabbing both Tuvok and Janeway. "Hold onto me, both of you!" He could hear the detention center doors opening and shouts coming towards them. With Janeway hugging him on one side, and Tuvok on the other, the EMH tapped his combadge twice and hoped that his crazy plan would work.

The detention cells faded into a haze of blue and white sparkles, and sickbay reappeared before them. He let go of them both.

"I don't think I need to mention that a speedy exit would be our wisest course of action!" the doctor said dryly, as he dashed to the nearest computer console. "I will get the power back on line."

Captain Janeway smiled, a ghost of her old customary grin. "I'll take the bridge, Tuvok, you take helm. Doctor, you take engineering."

Before separating from Tuvok and the Captain, the EMH remembered the disk Quark had given him. "Captain, wait!" He handed her the disk. "This contains information on where our crew was sent, as well as the location of some remaining Starfleet ships."

"How on Earth did you…" Janeway took the disk from him. "Never mind. I'll talk to you about it later." She followed Tuvok to the turbolift. The doctor transferred to engineering and began working on bringing the warp drive back on line. He would have given his portable emitter to have B'Elanna with him right now.

On the bridge, Tuvok accessed the data on the disk the EMH had given them. Not only did it contain the location of their crewmembers, it also included a current history, with a brief synopsis of weapons and shielding upgrades. He scanned the information quickly, knowing how very precious little time they had before the Cardassians figured out where they had been transported. Tuvok's first priority was to prevent the Cardassians from beaming aboard again. He devised a rotating shield harmonic that would make it nearly impossible for anyone to transport in. Once main power returned, he could implement it. Tuvok also studied the weapons commonly used on Cardassian fighter ships, looking for ways to modify Voyager's weapons system to penetrate their enemy's shields.

Luck was with them. The doctor was able to bring the warp drive back online and restore main power. The damage to the main power grid had been negligible; the Cardassians had used a dampening field to drain its power. Once the field had been removed, it was a simple matter to reinitiate the power grid. The warp drive had been damaged by the earlier attack, but it appeared that engineering had been in the process of repairing the warp drive when they were boarded and abducted. Using information he downloaded from the main computer, he merely finished what they had begun.

Janeway felt the ship surge to life around her. She turned to her tactical officer. "Tuvok?"

"I have enhanced our shielding and our weapons. We should be better able to withstand any attack they bring against us," he replied calmly. "I have also targeted the docking clamps with phasers. I can fire at any time."

"Do it!" She commanded, sitting down at the helm. Janeway felt the ship rock as the explosion released the docking clamps and Voyager broke free. "Setting a course away from DS9, maximum warp!" Her fingers flew over the controls and Voyager surged forward, leaving DS9 behind them. "Any signs of pursuit, Mr. Tuvok?"

"Negative. There is an incoming message, shall I put it on screen?"

Janeway nodded, looking up from the helm at the main view screen.

A familiar looking Ferengi face peered back at her. "Tell your monk friend that reinforcements are headed your way. I managed to disable the shuttle bay doors so they couldn't launch the short-range fighters, but they will be after you." He turned away from the screen for a moment. They could hear angry shouting in the background. Quark turned back and smiled quickly. "Good luck." The view screen went black.

Several moments later, the turbo-lift doors opened and the doctor stepped onto the bridge. His appearance was back to normal, something the Captain was grateful for.

"Doctor, what is the status of the engines?"

The EMH smiled as he walked towards her. He held a medical tricorder in his left hand and began running scans of her while they spoke.

"Engines are operating at peak efficiency. I'm not an engineer, but I don't foresee any difficulties with them for now." He frowned at the readings the tricorder was giving him. "You, on the other hand, are not operating at peak efficiency. I need to get you to sick bay."

"Doctor, I'm fine," she protested firmly. "I promise when this is all over I will go to sick bay. But I need to be here now. I need to find my crew."

The EMH glowered at her, knowing it was useless to argue with her about her health. He sighed, putting the tricorder away.

"I want to know everything that happened since we were abducted," Janeway demanded, making minute course adjustments as she listened.

The EMH described how he had set up a timed delay in the computer to activate him once the Cardassians had left the ship. He described his conversation with Quark on the space station, and how he had learned about their presence in the detention cells. He also told her what he had discovered after he had accessed the computer terminal Quark had in his office.

"We're in the Alpha Quadrant, Captain. But it's an alternate universe. This Alpha Quadrant separated from our own timeline during the Dominion War. In our timeline, Captain Sisko in the USS Defiant closed the wormhole leading to the Gamma Quadrant, after he persuaded the wormhole inhabitants to intervene on his behalf. The Dominion forces trapped inside of the wormhole disappeared completely, before they could cross through it into the Alpha Quadrant." The EMH shook his head. "In this timeline, the Klingon forces that were so instrumental in the Defiant's success never arrived, and the Defiant was destroyed. With the minefield at DS9 dismantled and with no one to stop them, the Jem'Hadar ships came through the wormhole. Cardassia was instrumental in winning the war against the Federation and its allies by preventing the Klingon Allies from helping the Defiant reach its goal. After completely disbanding the United Federation of Planets and Starfleet, The Dominion then defeated the Klingon Empire. With the Klingon's defeat, the Dominion made Cardassia the ruling power in this Quadrant. Their ships and weapons were greatly enhanced by Dominion technology and once Starfleet fell, all of that technology was theirs as well. We saw evidence of that when they first attacked us. Gul Dukat is currently the overlord in this sector. Deep Space Nine, or Terok Nor, is Dukat's station now. His job there is to track down the last of the Starfleet "rebels".

Those he captures he sells into slavery for a tidy profit." The doctor's face was grim. "According to Quark, that is what happened to the rest of our crew."

Janeway fought for control of her emotions. Inwardly she railed against the cruelties of the universe, against the fates that had once again brought them the promise of home, only to take it away.

"Captain, I do have one question," the EMH interrupted her thoughts.

Janeway turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow in query.

"Why were you and Commander Tuvok in prison? Why weren't you sent with the rest of the crew?"

Janeway sighed heavily, returning her attention to the helm. She was silent for so long the doctor feared she wasn't going to answer his question.

"I was...injured during interrogation. Dukat had planned on my assistance in getting Voyager's command codes. When I didn't help him, he…. had me beaten senseless." Neither the doctor nor Tuvok seemed to notice her hesitation. " I woke up in the cell across from Tuvok. They had healed some of my injuries, so

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Janeway forced herself to deal with one thing at a time, and her first priority was to escape the ships that were following them.

“Doctor, I need you to take the Ops station.”

“Aye, Captain,” the EMH replied, moving to take position on the upper level of the bridge.

“Are there any natural formations we can use to hide our warp signature?” Janeway asked, reading the data the sensors were sending them. “A planet or a moon or asteroid?”

“I’m reading a debris field approximately 1.2 light-years from our position.” Tuvok reported.

“How far away are our pursuers?”

“At our current speed, they will intercept us in 26 minutes.” Tuvok replied.

Janeway made her decision. It was the best chance they had. “Laying in a course to the debris field.” Voyager smoothly changed course under her direction, heading for the debris field. As they approached it, she slowed the ship’s speed to impulse power, bringing the debris field up on the bridge view screen. It took her eyes a few moments to register what she was seeing.

“They’re ships.” The EMH clarified, looking somewhat surprised.

“They ‘were’ ships,” Tuvok corrected.

Janeway covered her mouth with her hands, trying to control her dismay. Her throat tightened as she looked at the vast field of broken and destroyed ships, many of them the familiar white of Starfleet. She saw other ships of various makes and designs, but there were far too many to count. All this destruction, this testament to a war that Starfleet and its allies had fought, filled her heart with a despairing ache. She knew that in this timeline, Starfleet had been defeated, but it hadn’t really registered until now. The sight of it all horrified her.

“Captain,” the EMH said softly, having watched the play of emotions across Janeway’s face.

Janeway shook her head, bringing her thoughts back to the moment at hand. “Plotting a course into the debris field.” She concentrated on the helm controls, trying to bring her emotions back under control. The ship moved easily between obstacles. Satisfied with their position among the debris, Janeway brought the ship to a full stop.

“Cut all power, and shut down the engines. Shut everything down except passive sensors and minimal life support on the bridge. I want us to look like just another piece of debris out here,” Janeway ordered, tapping in the final commands to the helm.

“The engines are now off line, and main power is down,” the EMH reported from his station at Ops.

In a few moments, the bridge was dark. Janeway shivered inadvertently.

Tuvok monitored the sensors as they waited.

The Cardassian ships had followed Voyager's warp signature to the debris field, the site of the last great battle between Starfleet and the Dominion. One of the ships entered the debris field, leaving the remaining four to guard the perimeter.

"Captain, one of the Cardassian ships has entered the field," Tuvok reported.

Janeway sat tensely at the helm, thinking. Did they stay here and hope that their enemy's sensors wouldn't detect them, sitting here like a derelict, or did they try to run, using Voyager's maneuverability to escape through the debris field? She stared at the helm, torn between hiding and fleeing.

"Can we power the main viewscreen?" Janeway asked.

Tuvok nodded, rerouting the minimal power appropriately. The viewscreen displayed the debris field surrounding them. They could see the Cardassian ship searching the field for Voyager, moving slowly among the derelicts. Its search pattern was bringing it close to Voyager's location.

Janeway's hands paused over the helm controls, ready to bring Voyager to life in an instant if necessary.

"Captain, sensors are picking up a ship off of our port bow." Tuvok reported, his eyebrow rose in disbelief. "It's registering as a Starfleet vessel."

Janeway turned, reading the sensor input. "Its not a design I'm familiar with," Janeway noted.

"We're being hailed." The Vulcan paused, "It's a low-powered, directed transmission."

"Put it through," Janeway ordered, watching as the Cardassian ship moved slightly away in its search pattern.

"Voyager, this is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise. Please respond."

Janeway's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "On screen!" she demanded.

The familiar face of Captain Picard looked at her from the main view screen of Voyager's bridge. His expression was grim. Picard looked much thinner than Janeway remembered him being. He had also grown a beard. Those details aside, he looked to be the same man she had met years ago. In her own timeline, she mentally amended.

"I'm Captain Kathryn Janeway," she began, before he interrupted her.

"You are currently being cloaked by our ship," he informed her. "The Cardassian warship that is hunting for you is not able to detect either of us. I'm going to lock on a tractor beam in a moment and tow you out of here to some place safer."

Janeway's expression was one of amazement. The last she knew, the Federation was forbidden by treaty with the Romulans to develop cloaking technology. Of course, with the fall of the Federation, the treaty was no longer in effect. "Understood," she replied, and their communication was terminated.

Voyager trembled slightly when the Enterprise's tractor beam took hold of it. Janeway, Tuvok, and the doctor watched in dismay, as, instead of guiding the around the debris, the Enterprise simply guided them towards the large group of derelicts in front of them.

“What is he doing? Tuvok, hail the Enterprise!” Janeway ordered, her eyes fixed on the obstacles in their way.

“No response,” he replied.

“Brace for impact!” Janeway barked, thinking that Picard had totally lost his mind. She watched in disbelief as the derelicts grew large in their view screen. The impact they braced for never came, as Voyager and The Enterprise passed harmlessly through the debris like ghosts. The insides of the ships became visible as they passed through them and Janeway became fascinated by the process.

“It’s a phase cloak,” she whispered, watching her ship slide effortlessly through yet another wreck. She knew they were scientifically possible, but she hadn’t known that the technology for them had actually been developed. Janeway found herself dying to know the details of its design and how it had become implemented with a Starfleet ship.

The Enterprise, with Voyager tucked neatly at its side, exited the debris field, and set a course for a distant sector of space.

Title: Chrysalis
Author: Khylaren
Contact: Khylaren@yahoo.com
Rating: [R]
Codes: K/7, J/C, P/T

Part IV Resistance

The Enterprise-E hovered gracefully above a barren planet, its streamlined bulk overshadowing the smaller form of Voyager holding position next to it. Both ships continuously monitored the area for any signs of enemy ships, even though neither ship was detectable by Cardassian sensors due to the larger ship's phasing cloak. Inside the smaller ship, four people sat at Voyager's conference room table, Janeway and Tuvok on one side, Picard and Data on the other.

"How did you know where to find us?" Janeway asked Picard without preamble.

"We detected your ship after it came through the wormhole. The USS Galaxy had been studying its development and had left the area about 12 hours prior to your arrival. They detected your hail, but weren't able to answer you because of your proximity to the Cardassians. You were using the standard Starfleet communications bandwidth, which, of course, is how the Cardassians located you so quickly. They monitor those frequencies, hoping to catch us unawares. Before the Galaxy could reach you, your ship had already been captured. Captain Albreight passed along the message that a Starfleet vessel of unknown origin had passed through the wormhole and had been captured and taken to Deep Space 9." Picard took a deep breath, pausing briefly in his narrative. "The Enterprise monitored the station, waiting for the opportunity to help. That is how we were able to facilitate your escape." He smiled. "A fortunate turn of events, indeed."

Janeway nodded. "I cannot thank you enough for your help, Captain."

Picard sipped his tea, cradling the cup in his hands. "I only regret we were unable to reach you sooner." He sighed quietly. "When Voyager disappeared four years ago, it was assumed that she had been destroyed. I am relieved to see that you were not," Picard stated, his gray eyes keenly observant. "I am interested in your explanation of where you have been all this time."

Janeway looked down, taking a deep breath.

"This ship and her crew were lost four years ago when we were sent after the Maquis Captain, Chakotay." She saw Picard's nod, and was relieved that in this timeline, the reasons for Voyager's mission were the same. "We were thrown over 70,000 light years from the Badlands by an entity known as The Caretaker. We have spent the last four years in the Delta Quadrant, trying to get home." Janeway paused, taking a sip of the coffee she had replicated almost immediately after Captain Picard and Commander Data had beamed aboard Voyager. While Picard had no difficulty in helping them escape the Cardassians, he expected some answers in return. Janeway was more than willing to give him those answers, but it was difficult for her to formulate them in her rapidly deteriorating state. The coffee gave her the focus to continue.

"We came upon a spatial anomaly seven days ago, a wormhole, and after comprehensive scans we concluded it led back to the Alpha Quadrant, back to our home." She paused, finding it difficult to speak. "After exiting the wormhole into the Alpha Quadrant, we were almost immediately attacked by Gul Dukat." His name was ashes in her mouth. "Our EMH rescued myself and Commander Tuvok just a short while ago. The Cardassians chased us, and, thanks to your timely intervention, we escaped," she concluded, trying to smile. "I'll have to ask you about how you managed to do that."

Picard could tell from her body language that she was leaving out something. "There's more you aren't telling me, isn't there?"

Janeway nodded tiredly, taking a deep swallow of her coffee. "The wormhole led us from the Delta Quadrant to the Alpha Quadrant, but to a different timeline. In my timeline, the war between the Dominion and the Federation was still being fought. The USS Defiant stopped Jem'Hadar forces from coming through the wormhole from the Gamma Quadrant."

"In ours, of course, it did not succeed," Picard acknowledged smoothly. "I understand."

"Captain Picard, I have on file a record of events since we left the wormhole. You have only to check our quantum signature to verify that we are telling the truth," Tuvok stated, sliding two padds across the conference room table towards Picard and Data.

Picard nodded. Picking up the first padd, he began to read. Data quickly scanned the second.

"Speculation," stated Commander Data, tilting his head sideways, his expression thoughtful. "If the Janeway in our own timeline disappeared, perhaps she was also taken by the Caretaker entity. It is even probable that she could have found a wormhole in the Delta Quadrant which led to the Alpha Quadrant of your timeline."

"Mr. Data, please." Picard held up his hand to stop the android from going any further with his speculation. "None of this is relevant to our current situation, though I will admit that the prospect is intriguing." He smiled in his quick fashion. "However, our concern is with the situation at hand." He leaned back in his chair and looked at Janeway. Picard read the exhaustion and the worry for her crew plainly in her expression.

"As a Starfleet Captain, I am obliged to help you," Picard paused. "As a fellow human being, I know beyond certainty that I will do everything in my power to help you rescue your crew and return to the proper timeline."

Janeway's sigh of relief was quite audible. "Thank you, Captain." She smiled wearily. "Where do we start?"

Picard shook his head, pointing his finger at her. "First, you must get some rest. You are of no use to me if you are so exhausted you cannot think clearly." His expression softened briefly. "You are safe here." His lips twitched briefly in humor. "We are currently phase cloaked and are virtually undetectable." Picard held up his hand to stop her when he saw the question forming. "No, I will not discuss it with you right now. Get some rest first, and I'll fill you in on the 'newest' Starfleet technology."

Janeway shook her head. "My crew..." she protested weakly.

"Your crew needs their captain's wits about her," Picard said gruffly. "No arguments. I am the senior officer here, and I order you to get some sleep!"

"Aye, sir," she agreed grudgingly.

"I will meet with the other officers in the fleet. That will take a couple of hours." Picard stood, offering his hand to her. Janeway took it, pulling herself rather unsteadily to her feet.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, softly.

He patted her hand, and then released it. "Get some rest, " he said kindly. "I'll see you in a few hours." Picard tapped his combadge. "Picard to Enterprise. Two to beam over."

Janeway left her conference room and walked beside Tuvok as they made their way towards the turbolift. She had no doubt that the doctor would have monitored the meeting with Picard. Rather than try to face down the EMH, she decided she would take Picard's order to heart. She stopped at the turbolift and smiled wryly.

"Mr. Tuvok, on the advice of both my doctor and my senior officer, I am going to rest for a few hours. The bridge is yours."

The dark-skinned Vulcan nodded. "Aye, Captain. I will contact you if there is a problem I cannot handle," Tuvok replied, his tone implying that he wouldn't wake her up unless the ship was under attack or facing imminent destruction. Tuvok paused and then said, in a softer tone, "Sleep well."

Janeway smiled, knowing her ship was safe in Tuvok's hands, and entered the lift. When she reached her quarters, she headed straight for the ensuite. She wanted a quick shower before she slept. She still felt dirty after her encounter with Gul Dukat.

Janeway stepped into the shower, turning it from the sonic setting to the hydro setting. She turned the temperature setting up as high as her skin could tolerate and stepped into the spray, leaning into its heat and feeling the water cleanse her skin. She wished she could cleanse her soul as easily. Janeway closed her eyes as the water ran over her hair and across her face. She raised both hands to wash her face, and found herself sobbing into them instead.

All this time, she had been strong, in front of Tuvok, the doctor, and Picard. Only the doctor knew exactly what Dukat had done to her. She hadn't wanted anyone to know, but the discovery was made while he healed the remainder of her injuries. Even then, she had maintained her captain's mask, hadn't surrendered, and hadn't given in to the pain that ate at her soul.

Finally alone, Janeway felt her strength crumble. She let her tears mingle freely with the water.

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Gul Dukat nodded as the messenger relayed the news of Janeway's escape and subsequent loss of Voyager in the debris field. Dukat's features were neutral as he listened to how the ship managed to elude a task force of five modern warships. Inwardly, he was fuming. Calmly, he dismissed the messenger, who was grateful to escape the sight of Dukat's coldly furious eyes.

Glinn Katarin idly watched the other man sitting across from him, waiting for Dukat's anger to turn on him.

"Interesting how we completely missed the fact that Voyager has cloaking technology, don't you agree?" Dukat's hooded gaze was directed across his desk at his Glinn. "Unfortunate that the woman escaped before I could finish questioning her."

Katarin shifted in his seat, looking across the room at some point over Dukat's shoulder. "They did just come from an unknown quadrant of space. It is possible that their cloaking device was based on a technology so different from our own that we did not recognize it as such." His eyes slid over to meet the still angry gaze of Dukat. "However, I would question why they didn't use their advanced cloaking technology to escape from your initial attack on them."

"Yes, that is puzzling." Dukat nodded, his expression never warming. "Perhaps the monk who facilitated their escape had access to a portable cloaking device, one capable of defeating our enhanced sensors." He watched Katarin's eyes shift nervously away from him. "Such devices are available for purchase from the right sources, I am told."

Katarin studied the tips of his boots briefly. "The Dominion is certain that starship cloaking devices of such capability, especially portable ones, do not exist, Dukat."

"I don't share that certainty, Katarin." Dukat's voice was frigid. "I will have to hold someone responsible for allowing their escape." The Gul moved fluidly from his chair to stand next to the window that overlooked a vast canopy of stars against a black sky. His back was to Katarin. "Perhaps you have an idea of whom?"

Katarin stood up from his chair in one quick, catlike movement. "I know I can find out."

Dukat turned, nodding slightly. "I'm sure you won't disappoint me." He didn't bother watching as Katarin left his office, his mind occupied with thoughts of finding Voyager. Even if the monk had managed to obtain a portable cloaking device of such performance, it wouldn't last for long. Its small size prevented it from functioning for extended periods of time, especially against modern Cardassian sensors. It would only be a matter of time
before it burned out, and Voyager would be found once more.

Dukat turned his thoughts to more pleasant things. Namely, the tidy profit he stood to make on the sale of one former Borg. When Katarin returned, they would have to pay a little visit to their prisoner and prepare her for the journey to the Gamma Quadrant, where a buyer for her implants waited.

Dukat moved from the window to the small bar and poured himself a glass of Bajoran Spring Wine. He sipped the wine, enjoying its smooth and fiery taste. Once the transaction was complete, he could focus his energy on finding Voyager once more.

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Seven of Nine was dying. It was the only rational reason her mind could come up with to explain why every fiber of her being, down to her eyelashes, screamed in agony. She forced her eyes open, squinting under the harsh light illuminating the room. It took several moments for her tired and aching mind to register her location. She was in a detention cell on Terok Nor.

The walls of the room were a dark, almost metallic color. She was lying on a narrow metal table in the center of the room. From what she could see, the rest of the room was empty. Carefully, she turned her head, logically noting that the room could not be spinning the way her mind evidently thought it was. It took her a few moments to reorient herself. It took a few moments more before her memory supplied the reason for her pain.

Gul Dukat's surgeons had tried to remove her Borg implants. Seven remembered the Cardassian telling her that he had a possible buyer for them, but the buyer only wanted them if the surgeons could remove them from her body without killing her.

Seven felt straps covering her across her shoulders, abdomen and legs; noting that her wrists and ankles were restrained as well. She couldn't visually examine the extent of the damage to her body that she could feel. What she couldn't see frightened her.

The attempts to remove her implants had almost resulted in her death. At first, Dukat's surgeons had not understood her physiology well enough to know that her implants were a vital part of her body. She could not survive without them any more than the surgeons could survive without their vital organs. It had taken several attempts before they had understood that concept. Seven questioned whether, in her weakened state, her nanoprobes would be able to heal the extent of the damage the surgeons had inflicted, especially since she knew she probably wouldn't have access to a regeneration alcove any time in the future.

Dukat had not been pleased by the failure, but he hadn't become terribly upset by it either. Seven suspected that he would simply weigh the value of her alive with her implants intact against the value of her implants alone. If he could reap a greater gain by her implants alone, then Seven knew he wouldn't hesitate to kill her.

Seven tested the strength of the straps that confined her, hating the weakness and pain she was feeling. She closed her eyes, knowing she didn't have the strength or the leverage to break free of them.

Seven opened her eyes when the door to her room opened. Gul Dukat entered, followed closely by Katarin. She turned her face away from them, looking upwards at the ceiling.

"Ah, good, you're awake," Dukat purred as he stepped next to the table. "I have some good news."

Seven studied the ceiling, refusing to show him any emotion. She heard Katarin move to the opposite side of her and tried to ignore the fear that gripped her heart.

"I found a buyer for your implants who is not only less 'squeamish' than the last one, but offered almost double in latinum as well. He wants to see you first, so we're taking you to him." Dukat gripped her face, forcing her to look at him. His fingers purposely touched the wounded areas of her face, above the eye where her ocular implant was, and next to her ear, where the starburst shaped implant lay on her cheek. A pained whimper escaped from her before she could prevent it. He smiled in response and released her face. "Katarin doesn't trust you to behave on the trip."

Seven felt something cold press against her neck and heard the familiar hiss of a hypospray. She felt consciousness slip from her.

"I happen to agree with him," Dukat's voice followed her into the abyss.

* * * *

Janeway did not sleep peacefully; her dreams were unsettled and haunting. When she finally awoke, after six hours of sleep, she felt only slightly better. Emotionally, she was still exhausted.

She dressed in her uniform quickly, running a brush through her sleep-tangled hair. Satisfied that she looked presentable, she left her quarters for the bridge.

Tuvok took one look at her and frowned. "Captain, you do not appear to have had enough rest." The black circles under her eyes concerned him.

"Save it, Tuvok," Janeway answered, her voice still rough from her emotional outburst in the shower. "I've had all the sleep I can stand for now." She smiled a ghost of her old smile at her friend. "I know I look bad, but believe me, I feel much better now."

Tuvok didn't believe her for a second, but merely raised an eyebrow in response. Vulcans, if anything, had notoriously good judgment.

Janeway took her seat at the helm and hailed the Enterprise. Their response was immediate.

"Ah, Captain Janeway. I trust you are well rested?" Picard asked politely from the bridge of the Enterprise.

"I'm feeling better," Janeway lied smoothly. "Have you talked with the others?"

Picard nodded. "I have and they have agreed to assist us in our endeavor." He paused, looking at his console briefly. "They have agreed to meet on board the Enterprise at 1100 hours to discuss strategy. Is that acceptable?"

"Quite. Thank you, Captain." Janeway ended the transmission and sighed, leaning back in the chair. The ship's computer stated that it was 0945. She had time to finish a few tasks before beaming over to the Enterprise.

"Captain," Tuvok interrupted her thoughts. "I would like to accompany you to the Enterprise, if I may."

"Only if you help me run these diagnostics. I want this ship to be in ready condition for rescuing the crew." Janeway swallowed, feeling an empty pang in her stomach. She realized it had been over 24 hours since her last meal. "I'll be in my ready room."

Tuvok nodded, his attention focused on the task of checking the ship's systems, making certain that all was within working order.

Janeway entered her ready room and made a beeline for her replicator. "Coffee, black." She would eat breakfast later, she promised herself. For now, coffee would suffice.

One hour later, both she and Tuvok were satisfied that the Cardassian attack hadn't done any permanent damage to their ship and that all systems were functioning at full capacity. Before leaving for the Enterprise, Janeway asked the doctor to take charge of the ship while they were gone. The EMH looked surprised for a moment, then pleased. Janeway hid her smile as she left sickbay for the transporter room. With the disk they had gotten from Quark, she signaled the Enterprise that they were ready to transport.

They rematerialized in the transporter room of the Enterprise. Captain Picard and Commander Data greeted them politely. Janeway and Tuvok looked around them in interest.

"This is the Enterprise-E," Picard explained as they began walking towards the turbolift.

"What class is it?" Janeway asked, her sharp eyes taking in every detail. It was reminiscent of Voyager in many ways, only on a much larger scale. She wondered if it was as maneuverable given its immense size.

"Sovereign," Picard replied as they entered the lift. "Deck one," Picard ordered.

"Tell me about the phasing cloak, if you will," Janeway requested as the lift began to move. "I'd like to know how you managed to equip Starfleet ships with a cloaking technology that had defied the best efforts of the Klingons and even the Romulans to master."

Picard nodded, smiling briefly. "You have heard of the... unusual circumstances surrounding the mutiny on and loss of the USS Pegasus nearly two decades ago?" At Janeway's nod, he continued, "What was *not* made public at Admiral Pressman's court-martial was that the cloaking device fitted to the Pegasus was also capable of altering a ship's atomic structure so that it could pass through normal matter. As it was, the prototype was a complete technical success - the Pegasus was lost because the mutineers didn't know how to properly shut the cloak down."

Janeway frowned. "So it *wasn't* an unstable corridor of dark-matter that caused the Pegasus to be embedded within that asteroid in the Devolin system when the crew tried to decloak - or enabled you to bring the Enterprise-D out of that same asteroid after the Romulans had sealed you inside of it." Janeway shook her head slowly in amazement. "Over a decade of failed efforts by the Klingons and the Romulans to develop a phasing cloak, and during all that time, the technology had already been perfected by a small group of Starfleet officers with *no* prior experience in developing cloaking devices."

Picard nodded and continued, "For that reason, it was agreed by all knowledgeable parties that it was in the Federation's best interest if the phasing capabilities of the Pegasus's cloak were simply buried and forgotten, with even the top heads of Starfleet and the Federation kept unaware of them. But when the Dominion War began, Starfleet Intelligence revived the phasing cloak project and began producing as many of the devices as they could in the increasingly likely event of the Federation's defeat." He smiled grimly. "When the Defiant was lost and the wormhole re-opened, Starfleet Command was instructed to recall our largest and most advanced ships back to Earth, ostensibly to scuttle them inside fully-enclosed dry-docks. Instead, as they were loaded with as much fuel and supplies as they could take on, most of the recalled ships were fitted with phasing cloaks. After that, the ships phase-cloaked while still inside the docks, and the docks were blown up to provide the appearance of our scuttling."

Picard paused, shaking his head grimly. "As it was, only a few of the recalled ships actually had to be scuttled for lack of a phasing cloak to fit them with. Once the Jem'Hadar were able to bring their reinforcements through the wormhole with impunity, the allied forces were overwhelmed through sheer numbers." His voice was bitter. "By the time the Federation surrendered, we had lost practically the entire fleet."

"I'm sorry," Janeway said softly. She knew what a terrible feeling it had to have been for Picard and the other captains to not been there when their comrades fell.

He straightened his uniform self-consciously, wanting to change the subject. "Most of the other captains have already arrived, and I have apprised them of your situation. They have agreed to help."

Janeway let out the breath she didn't realize she had been holding. "Thank you, Captain."

Picard nodded. "We'll do whatever we can."

They exited the turbolift, walking to the main conference room, Tuvok and Commander Data following on their heels.

Janeway looked around the conference room, recognizing one or two familiar faces, puzzling over the dozen or so new ones who were standing or sitting at various locations. She took the seat the Picard offered, and Tuvok sat in the chair next to her. Commander Data sat on her other side, next to his Captain, who sat at the head of the table.

"Introductions should be in order," Picard began. "Captain Kathryn Janeway of the Starship Voyager, this is my tactical officer, Commander Worf." Picard gestured to the tall Klingon male who sat to his right. "Next to him is Captain Riker of the USS Challenger, Captain Guinness of the USS Sovereign, and Captain Albreight of the USS Galaxy." Picard continued with names of Captains and the ship names until everyone had been introduced to her. She was surprised to see how young both Captain Guinness and Captain Albreight were.

Picard caught onto her expression. "We lost most of our seasoned officers during the war. Advancements in rank were rapid to compensate for the loss." He paused, looking grim. "What these men lack in age, they make up for in experience."

Janeway nodded, feeling saddened by this further evidence of the war. Silently, she handed Picard the disk she had brought with her.

The disk she had given Picard displayed its information to them on the large screen at the end of the conference table.

"The men were taken here." Picard pointed to the fourth planet in the Cardassian system. "There is a dilithium mining camp there." He touched a few buttons on the console next to the screen and the image changed, showing the mine location on the continent. "The camp will be heavily guarded with both land troops and flyers. Any successful rescue will have to include both air and ground assault."

"Voyager is capable of landing on the planet and could easily carry a large assault crew," Janeway said. "I volunteer to help support the ground assault."

Commander Worf disagreed. "The Cardassians are searching for Voyager. Your warp signature would give our position away without being cloaked."

Janeway shook her head stubbornly. "This is my crew we are trying to rescue and vl1.ibm (ng)9.o(.)-0.i8(ng)9.4(to he(

Captain Guinness answered, "It is possible, but tactically it's a bad idea. The ship covering you would have to use extra power to expand its cloak enough to cover you, not to mention the tractor beam to hold you in place. Any complex maneuvers would be practically impossible with that arrangement."

Picard agreed. "It is better that Voyager stay here. You, of course, are welcome to join me on the Enterprise."

Janeway didn't like being separated from her ship. She had spent four years on Voyager and had faced impossible odds many times. Voyager had never let her down. It just didn't feel right to leave her ship behind; however, she knew the others were right.

Riker smiled charmingly at Janeway. "Of course, if you prefer livelier company, you are certainly welcome aboard the Challenger."

Janeway returned the smile, appreciating Riker's attempt to lighten the tense mood. "I think I will have to respectfully decline, Captain Riker. Perhaps another time."

Carefully, Picard outlined what he had in mind for the rescue of her crew. It was a fairly straightforward plan: The Enterprise and the Sovereign, both phase-cloaked, would orbit Cardassia IV. They would launch their runabouts, reinitiating the phase cloak once they were launched. Conventionally cloaked, the runabouts would land on the planet next to the mine, 50 or so armed rebels would disembark the ships, attack the mine, free the prisoners, and escape back onto the Enterprise and the Sovereign. Once all of Voyager's crew were aboard, the rebel ships would re-phase cloak themselves and rendezvous with the Challenger and the Galaxy.

"And what about the other half of my crew?" Janeway asked, deeply worried. "Won't the Cardassians tighten security around my people, once they discover the rescue? They'll know we would try to rescue them."

It was Worf who had solved that dilemma. "If we detonate a photon torpedo in the mine after we rescue your crewmembers, the mine's destruction should obscure any evidence of their escape."

"It will also keep the authorities from looking too deeply into the situation. We want to draw as little attention as possible. If the Dominion suspected we had phase-cloaking technology, they might take retaliation measures on the civilian population to flush us out," Picard said gruffly.

Janeway's eyes widened in dismay. "I'm putting all of you at a terrible risk with this rescue, aren't I?"

"What is the point of skulking about the Alpha Quadrant if we can't hurt the Cardassians some way?" Riker replied. "We can't fight them in a straight out battle, so we have to resort to guerrilla tactics." He smiled at her. "It's nothing we haven't already done at one time or another."

Picard nodded in agreement. "Please do not concern yourself about this. We all know the risks, and we have still agreed to help you."

"We'll get them back, Ma'am," Albreight said quietly, his young face earnest.

"And then we'll track down the remaining members of your crew," Guinness continued.

Janeway looked at them, smiling with something akin to relief, and nodded. "Let's get started, then," she said quietly.

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Ensign Harry Kim wiped the sweat from his forehead that was threatening to run into his eyes. He grunted, lifting the heavy sack of ore once more and balanced it carefully across his left shoulder. He could just make out the outline of Tom Paris ahead of him in the dimly lit tunnel. He knew that Commander Chakotay walked somewhere behind him, similarly burdened with ore.

This was their tenth day in the mines, and Harry was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. He didn't know which was heavier, his burden or his heart. For what might have been the hundredth time, his mind went over the events of the last few days.

The male crew of Voyager had been taken, examined, and processed. Tuvok and Vorik had been separated from them, and the remaining men had been shipped to the mining camp on this planet. Not one of them had put up any fight. Harry felt a wave of self-loathing hit him. He was deeply ashamed of his cowardice. Tom and Chakotay had argued that it was better to stay alive, to try and escape when the opportunity arose, but Harry couldn't help feeling that he had betrayed Seven and his Captain by not trying to fight their oppressors.

Harry dropped his sack of ore in the cart that was manned by a Cardassian guard, trying not to wince as the movement reopened the barely healed lash marks on his back. He tried not to see the contempt on the guard's face as he turned and trudged heavily back into the depths of the mine.

The days were long and rest periods were far too brief. Their guards made sure that communication between each other was at a minimum. There had only been one escape attempt so far, leaving Ayala and Joe Carey gravely injured. Tom had used all his field medic's knowledge to treat them, but Harry knew that unless Carey and Ayala received real medical treatment soon, they would likely die from their injuries. The rest of the men had been beaten and lost two meal privileges as punishment for their rebellion. Chakotay did his best to keep their hopes up, but Harry knew that the odds of escaping from the mines were almost impossible. They were almost equal with the odds of being rescued.

Harry forced himself not to dwell on negative thoughts. Instead, he focused his mind of Seven, using the memory of her image as a beacon in the darkness that threatened to engulf him. His thoughts were so deeply focused on her that he didn't hear the phaser fire at first. It wasn't until Chakotay grabbed his shoulder and shook him out of his blue funk that he realized there was a rescue attempt in progress.

"Come on!" Chakotay pulled his arm. "This way!"

The men of Voyager turned back towards the entrance of the mine, heading steadily upwards towards the outside world. The phaser fire grew louder and the shouts of men could be heard over it.

An unbelievably welcome sight greeted them at the entrance of the mine. Armed men in gray and black Starfleet uniforms were firing on the Cardassian guards.

Harry and the others surged forward out of the mine and attacked the distracted Cardassian guards. It was a short-lived battle. Between the armed Starfleet rebels and Voyager's crew, the Cardassian guards were

starships reengaged their phasing cloaks, speeding away as the mine exploded in a brilliant fireball, the subspace shockwave surging outwards in a spectacular display.

Hours later, the three ships met with the other members of the 'ghost fleet', having successfully escaped detection from the Cardassian warships patrolling the area. The Sovereign's doctor was glad to report to Janeway that both Ayala and Carey, while still critical, seemed to have stabilized and would, in all likelihood, survive. The rest of Voyager's male crew were transported back to their ship. Janeway met them in the cargo bay.

It was an extremely emotional moment for Janeway and her crew. She didn't have words to express how glad she was to see them. She merely looked at all of them, blinking back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. Silently they regarded her, feeling the connection with their captain grow stronger than ever. Many of them had used her image as solace during moments of despair.

One in particular had kept her image close to his heart and had prayed every day that he would see her face again. His dark eyes met hers over the crowd, and he smiled for her alone. He could tell by the way she held herself that, although her body had been healed of its physical wounds inflicted by the Cardassians, her spirit was still injured deeply. He ached to cross the room and hold her, to comfort her, and to give her spirit ease. Instead, he settled for the welcoming smile she gave him, knowing there would be time enough for words later.

Title: Chrysalis
Author: Khylaren
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Rating: [R]
Codes: K/7, J/C, P/T, Vorik

Part V Interlude

Commander Chakotay rang the chime for entry and waited tensely outside of Captain Janeway's quarters. He had been unable to sleep, as his need to see and speak with her was too strong to ignore. So he had risen from his bed, dressed in his comfortable shirt and trousers, and left his quarters to visit her.

"Come in," Janeway's voice came through the door. She sounded awfully awake despite the late hour, Chakotay thought. He entered her quarters, hearing the doors automatically swish shut behind him.

Janeway sat in the far corner of her couch, silhouetted by the light coming through the viewports behind her. The lights in her quarters were low, but he could easily see that she was dressed for sleep. She was clad in a simple black nightgown, her bare feet tucked underneath her as she sat. She held a cup of tea in her hands.

"Trouble sleeping?" Chakotay asked gently, crossing the room to sit on the opposite corner of the couch. He angled his body so that he was facing her.

Janeway silently nodded, turning her face away from him. She watched the stars glimmering through the viewport directly behind her. It was easier to talk if she didn't have to look him in the eyes.

"Kathryn," Chakotay began, sliding closer to her. "Have you talked about what happened to you to anyone since you were rescued?"

"The Doctor, some," Janeway's voice came softly.

“You could talk to me about it,” he offered, watching her profile closely.

She looked down at her lap, taking a sip of tea. “I don’t think I need to talk about it, Chakotay,” she said quietly.

He disagreed with her decision, but wisely kept silent. Instead, he reached out and enfolded her right hand in his much larger one. She looked up at him, her blue eyes searching his face in the dim light.

“Chakotay,” Janeway began before he hushed her.

“I need to tell you something. You might not want to hear it, but I think you need to hear it. It’s something I should have said to you a while ago.” Chakotay watched surprise and another emotion pass quickly across her features. It happened so fast that he wasn’t sure he had seen what he thought he had seen. He only hoped his instincts were right.

Chakotay took a deep breath. “I love you. You know I have loved you for a long time. Once we left New Earth behind, you made it quite clear to me that your duty to your ship and crew came before your own personal needs.”

Janeway started to protest and he silenced her by placing a finger across her lips. She looked startled. He smiled at her, enjoying the feel of her lips against his finger.

“Let me finish,” he scolded softly, before removing his finger. She looked at him mutely for a moment, and then nodded slightly.

“When I realized you had been taken from us, I felt like I wanted to die. The only thing that kept me going in that mine day after day was you. It was the thought, and the hope, of seeing you again. I promised myself that if I ever saw you again, I would tell you how I feel, and I would make you see how you feel.” He reached out, touching her face softly, gently caressing her cheek.

Janeway closed her eyes, hearing his words touch her, struggling to maintain her control. Tears slipped unbidden down her cheeks, and she felt him brush them away with his thumb.

“We’re far from our homes,” he said huskily, “and the crew needs their captain to be at her best. How can you expect to save your crew, when you won’t save yourself?”

Janeway finally opened her eyes and looked at him. Chakotay smiled gently at her, his dark eyes held her. She tried to speak, and her voice was strained with emotion.

“I can’t, Chakotay,” she protested weakly. “I...”

His warm hand cupped her face and he silenced her protestations with a kiss. His other hand slid up her neck and into her hair, cradling her head gently as his lips softly moved against her own. Janeway felt all her arguments fade to nothing as his mouth persuaded and cajoled, enticed and promised. When he finally released her, she realized she was trembling.

“Tell me,” Chakotay demanded softly, “that you didn’t feel the same thing I did just now. Tell me that you don’t love me, and I’ll leave.” His dark eyes glittered with emotion, but he didn’t touch her. Chakotay felt like his heart was in his throat.

Carefully, Janeway set her tea on the table next to the couch. Her hands were shaking, and her lips still burned from his touch. Ever since New Earth, where she had discovered she had feelings for him, she had pushed him away from her, not wanting to admit to herself that she could be in love with someone besides Mark. She had held onto the hope that they would get home, and that she would see her fiancé once more. She had been afraid of the feelings that had surfaced when she and Chakotay had been left together on New Earth, in all probability, for the rest of their lives. In a state of denial, she had worked desperately to discover a cure for the virus that she and Chakotay had been infected with. When a storm destroyed all of her equipment, leaving her without any means of finding a cure, she had to face the reality of their situation, and the fact that she had felt some attraction for her first officer all along.

When Voyager had contacted them, she had been greatly relieved; not only was she back in command of her ship, but she hadn't given into temptation on the planet, and was therefore able to resume her duties as captain without feeling guilt. Her conscience regarding Mark was still intact. What she hadn't counted on was that, once discovered, her feelings for Chakotay didn't simply disappear. As time progressed, each day she spent working with him revealed to her the true depths of her attraction for this man. Janeway blamed it on the fact that they were stranded far from home, and Chakotay was the closest, most likely candidate for her affections. Janeway had continued to ignore her heart, focusing on her love for Mark, not willing to admit that her feelings for her fiancé had faded and paled in comparison with what she felt for Chakotay.

Janeway had been dreading this confrontation ever since Chakotay had told her how he had felt using the parable of the angry warrior. She had known it was coming, but was desperate to avoid it nonetheless. By confronting her, Chakotay was forcing her to analyze her own feelings, and to be honest with herself and with him. It might be a very long time before they reached their destination. Mark had already moved on and had married another woman almost a year ago. Was she really willing to lock her heart away for the next 60 or more years?

Janeway met Chakotay's eyes once more and knew, deep in her heart, that her answer was no. Here was a man who could be the strength she needed at her weakest moments; he already served in that capacity on a professional level. How wonderful it would be to have him on a personal one as well. She couldn't deny how much she wanted him, and how much she needed him.

When Dukat had shot him in front of her, she had thought her heart would break, convinced Chakotay had been lost forever. As she had lain in the detention cell later, thinking that Chakotay had died never knowing how much he meant to her, her spirit had fallen to its lowest point. When Tuvok had informed her that Chakotay was still alive, the sudden surge of joy that had filled her went well beyond that of what a captain should expect to feel upon hearing a crewmember was still alive. Janeway had made a promise to herself that if she ever saw Chakotay again, she would tell him that she loved him. But when that moment had arrived, it had been easy for her command mask to slip back into place, and easy enough to forget that promise. Janeway swallowed, knowing the man in front of her would not let her go as he had before. He deserved her answer.

Chakotay watched the inner battle his captain was waging. He knew how torn she was between her duty as captain and her own personal needs. He prayed to the spirits that they would help her see how happy he could make her, if she would only let him. Her eyes lifted and she looked at him, and his breath caught in his throat.

Trembling with emotion, Janeway reached out for him, touching his face as gently as he had touched hers. Her blue eyes met his dark ones and she found the strength to speak in their depths.

“You’re right, Chakotay,” she said simply. “I love you.” She felt the tremor that went through him at her confession. “We’re a long way from our homes, and this crew needs their captain to be at her best.” She felt him smile at his own words coming from her mouth, and felt her spirit lift in response. It felt liberating to finally give voice to her heart.

Chakotay could hardly believe what she was saying. Her hand was touching his face, her thumb tracing the outline of his lips. He felt his heart surge with a happiness he had never thought possible. Smiling, he captured the hand that was exploring his face and kissed it, pulling Kathryn into his embrace.

Once more his lips touched hers. They were more possessive this time, exploring her mouth with intent. His tongue gently parted her lips, darting in to taste the sweetness of her mouth, feeling the velvet smoothness of her own as it tangled with his. He felt a familiar fire building within him, a fire long denied, and reveled in the feel of her hands on his skin, and her lips under his.

Janeway felt a moan build up and escape her as Chakotay’s mouth worked its magic on her senses. How many times had she dreamed of kissing him like this? The reality of his kisses was beyond her fantasies, and she cursed herself for denying her heart for so long. Her hands explored him in a way she had always wanted, touching his face, his hair, sliding down to feel the hardness of his chest under the soft texture of his shirt. She tugged at the material, wanting to feel more of him, needing to know the feel of his skin beneath her fingers.

Chakotay released her mouth and kissed a trail down her jaw to the white softness of her neck. He lingered there, licking and biting softly, hearing her gasp in pleasure. He felt her hands pulling his shirt out of the waistband of his trousers, so she could touch his bare skin. He smiled against her neck, his own hands initiating an exploration of her flesh. He slid his fingers under the straps of her nightgown, caressing the sensitive skin along her collarbone and down to the hollow of her neck.

“Chakotay,” Kathryn moaned throatily.

He took that as an invitation. In a swift motion, he scooped her up off of the couch, and stood. “The bedroom?” he inquired softly, loving the feel of her in his arms, the way her own arms had twined themselves around his neck.

Chakotay carried her to the bed, laying her gently on the mattress. She looked so beautiful lying there, her hair was mussed and her lips were slightly swollen from his kisses. She watched him with hunger as he pulled his shirt off over his head, baring his flesh to her gaze. She moved to kneel at the edge of the bed in front of him, her face tilted upwards and he couldn’t resist the offer, plundering her lips once more with his own. His hands slid the straps of her nightgown off her shoulders and down her arms, feeling her shiver as his hands lightly touch the skin he exposed. He pulled the nightgown the rest of the way off of her and tossed it over his shoulder, not caring where it landed. His eyes devoured her hungrily.

Her own hunger building, she helped him unfasten his trousers, sliding them down his well muscled legs until he stepped out of them, kicking them away from him along with his shoes. She repeated the process

“Oh yes,” Janeway’s voice was husky with passion. “I most certainly do.” She reached up for him as his body covered hers.

Chakotay began a tender seduction that lasted well into the early morning hours. Again and again he showed Kathryn the depths of his love and his passion for her. She, in turn, gave herself utterly and completely to him. It was a gift neither of them would ever forget, Chakotay thought as he gently cradled the woman he loved in his arms, watching her sleep peacefully, and deeply. He kissed her softly on her forehead, and closed his eyes, finally letting sleep claim him.

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Harry lay on his bed, staring at the familiar ceiling of his quarters and unable to sleep. Thinking back on Janeway's explanation of the current situation, Harry snorted to himself and rolled onto his side. Some cynical part of his mind wasn't the least bit surprised that this wasn't the right timeline for them. He only hoped that, when all was said and done, they would be able to go back through the wormhole to their own reality. Being in the Delta Quadrant was much better than being in an Alpha Quadrant ruled by Cardassia for the Dominion.

Captain Janeway had also briefed them on the suspected locations of the female members of their crew, as well as a possible location for Vorik. Tomorrow, their rescuers would begin their attempts to recover them as well. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough, as far as Harry was concerned. Each minute that passed was another minute that Seven was in the hands of the Cardassians. His stomach tightened with anger at the thought of his Seven being subjected to their cruelty.

Harry finally got up, knowing that sleep would not be something he would be getting any of tonight. He dressed in a freshly replicated uniform and left his quarters, heading towards the mess hall. The ship was unnaturally quiet and its corridors lacking in personnel, even at this early hour. Harry knew the emptiness was due to the missing crew, and found the relative quiet to be depressing.

Neelix was working in the mess hall, even though his normal shift didn’t start for another three hours. He looked as if he hadn’t had much sleep either, Harry thought as he greeted the Talaxian.

“Can’t sleep?” Harry tried to make his tone light and failed.

Neelix handed him a hot stimulant and a plate of something Harry didn’t bother to try to identify. “I thought perhaps I would feel better if I was doing something,” Neelix replied. He noticed the expression on Harry’s face. “Keeping busy helps,” he said quietly.

Harry nodded, taking a seat at a nearby table. The mess hall was empty at the moment, but it wasn’t too long before Tom stumbled in, looking as if he’d gone 13 rounds with his pillow and the pillow had won. Neelix silently handed the lieutenant a cup of stimulant, which Tom gratefully accepted.

“Well, I see that you’re keeping company with Voyager’s finest,” Tom attempted to joke as he took the seat across from Harry. Tom noticed his friend looked the worse for wear. “What’s on your mind, Harry?”

Harry snorted darkly. “What do you think is on my mind?” he said with bitter sarcasm.

“Hey, hey!” Tom held up his hands in protest. “I was just trying to help. You look terrible.”

"Thanks." Harry took a sip of the stimulant and grimaced at its taste. He used his fork to poke experimentally at the plate of food Neelix had given him.

"I see you've decided to punish yourself by eating Neelix's food," Tom observed dryly, sipping his own drink. He made a face and set the cup down. "Harry, talk to me." Tom sighed, hating to see the misery on his friend's face. "I know you're worried about Seven. I'm worried about B'Elanna too. But they'll be okay."

Harry frowned. "How can you say that?"

Tom smiled persuasively. "You know those two. You think anything is going to get to them?" He saw Harry shake his head, slowly wavering. "You have to stay positive, Harry. You can't let yourself think the worst."

Harry's hands gripped the edge of the table. "I can't help it, Tom." His voice was low and strained. "If we had only fought them, but we just let them take us."

" 'If only we had fought them'? Harry, with what? They might not have had us outnumbered, but they certainly had us outgunned, and they didn't let us outsmart them." Tom shook his head. "Listen to me, Harry. You saw what they did to Chakotay and the Captain, and how easily they stopped our escape attempt at the mine. What do you think they would have done to the rest of the crew, to Seven or B'Elanna, if we had fought more than we did?"

Harry knew Tom had a point. Still, the guilt ate at him. He felt guilty that Seven had been taken. He should have protected her, somehow.

Tom could read by his friend's expression what was bothering him the most. "It's not your fault, Harry. Hell, if it's anybody's fault, it should be mine."

"Yours?" Harry asked in disbelief. "How could it be your fault?"

"I didn't fly the ship well enough to prevent the Cardassians from catching us," Tom replied challengingly.

"Oh, come on, Tom," Harry began.

"Well, it makes just about as much sense as you blaming yourself for not protecting Seven," Tom retorted.

Harry sat back and sighed gustily. He looked at his friend with a combination of irritation and humor. "Fine. I feel better. Happy?"

"You won't feel better if you eat that," Tom replied, his lips curled in his customary smirk.

Harry looked down at his plate, finally noticing what he had been chasing around with his fork. "Scrambled eggs with leola root hash," he said, grimacing as the smell finally reached his nose.

"Come on." Tom stood up, carrying his hardly touched drink to the disposal unit. "Let's go get some real food. I've got replicator rations enough for both of us."

Smiling, Harry followed his friend, grateful that Tom always knew how to make him feel better. Shortly afterwards, they returned to their table, Harry carrying a plate of pancakes with bacon and a cup of tea, Tom carrying a similar plate with sausage links instead of bacon and a cup of coffee.

“It’s kind of funny,” Tom remarked, cutting into his stack of pancakes.

“What is funny?” Harry asked around a mouthful of bacon.

“Starfleet essentially became outlaws in this timeline. They became the *new* Maquis.” Tom observed with a snort, lifting his mug to take a sip of his coffee.

Harry nodded slowly, continuing to eat. “I suppose you could see it that way,” he said, swallowing. He glanced meaningfully at the messhall’s viewports where two Sovereign- and three Galaxy-class starships could be seen cruising in the distance. “But they’re much better equipped than the Maquis ever were.”

Tom grimaced, draining the last of his coffee in a single swallow. “Harry, if the Maquis had been anywhere near as well equipped as these Starfleet rebels are, I don’t think we’d be here right now.”

Harry nodded, following Tom’s reasoning. “There would have been no mission to the Badlands. The Maquis wouldn’t have had to hide from the Cardassians, let alone do so in the Badlands.”

“Ah, yes. No mission to the Badlands, no being abducted by the Caretaker, no being lost in the Delta Quadrant,” Tom said, smiling briefly, his blue eyes glinting with amusement.

“No Seven of Nine, and no B’Elanna.” Harry retorted, stabbing a piece of pancake with his fork for emphasis. “I don’t think I’d like that very much, Tom. Would you?”

Tom snorted, cutting a sausage in half and spearing it with his fork. “Hell, no, Harry.”

They finished their meal in silence, each occupied with their own thoughts.

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Picard was sitting at his desk in his ready room, studying the latest surveillance reports collected by various and scattered rebel agents, when his door chime announced a request for entry.

“Come,” he called, placing the padd away for further study at a later time.

The door to his room opened, admitting his first officer.

“Sir,” Data said, handing his captain the padd he had brought with him. “Captain Janeway has sent us a copy of Voyager’s female crew manifest, as you requested.”

“Thank you, Mr. Data,” Picard said as he accepted the padd from the android. “Let’s have a look.” He gestured for Data to take the seat across from him, scanning the padd as he did so. His eyes passed over the names of Janeway’s crew, noting the species of each as he did so. His scanning stopped when he reached Seven of Nine’s name and species designation.

Data had been waiting patiently for Picard to read the information on the padd. His keen eyes noted the change in Picard’s posture immediately.

“Is something the matter?” he inquired politely.

“Janeway has a *Borg* among her crew.” Picard’s voice was flat. He placed the padd on the desk in front of him and turned his chair, tilting it back as he looked out the viewport. He brought his hands up, folding them under his chin pensively.

“Oh, you are speaking of Seven of Nine, the human formerly known as Annika Hansen,” Data supplied helpfully, not quite understanding his captain’s reaction to the news that a former Borg drone was a member of Janeway’s crew.

Picard turned his head to look at Data, his brow furrowing. “Yes.”

Data assumed a puzzled expression. “What is the nature of your reaction?”

“There is reason for concern here, Mr. Data,” Picard finally answered, turning his chair back towards his desk. “I require more information regarding this ‘Seven of Nine’, who has apparently elected to keep her Borg designation *after* being severed from the Collective.” He placed the padd into Data’s hands. “I need to know everything about her: how long was she in the Borg Collective, does she retain any implants, and how trustworthy is she? The Cardassians have her, and I need to know if she’s a threat to our rescue operation.”

Data nodded. “Very well. I will gather the information you requested.” He stood and turned to go, then paused. “Forgive me, Captain. I do not understand why you are uncertain of Seven of Nine’s trustworthiness.” The android tilted his head slightly, studying his captain’s reaction. “You yourself were once Borg. While the Federation mistrusted you initially, their mistrust of you was in error. Had it not been for your previous involvement with the Borg, you would not have had the knowledge that was necessary to destroy them.” Data regarded his captain a moment longer. “Perhaps you should take that into consideration when you evaluate Seven of Nine,” he said quietly, and then turned, retreating from the ready room.

Picard allowed himself a faint smile at his first officer’s comment, and then got up from his chair, walking to his replicator

“Tea, Earl Gray, hot.”

He took the cup of tea back to his desk, sipping it carefully, asking himself why he was really so troubled about one former Borg drone. If this ‘Seven of Nine’ was truly separated from the Collective and an individual once more, then Picard’s only concern was whether or not she still retained any implants. If the Cardassians had access to Borg technology, then it wouldn’t be long before the Dominion had access to it as well. He could only imagine the sorts of things the Dominion could do with that kind of technology.

The Dominion didn't know how many of them were truly out here. Gul Dukat suspected that there were two or three minor starships unaccounted for now, but he knew nothing of the twenty-two explorers that made up the ghost-fleet. It was agreed among the ghost-fleet captains that, if the upcoming effort to rescue the remainder of Janeway's crew was carried out correctly, there would be no need for the Cardassians or the Dominion to suspect any differently afterward - the recovery of Janeway's crew would instead be attributed to the determined efforts of Janeway via the starship Voyager.

Picard sighed, feeling the familiar frustration well up within him. Still, Captain Riker had spoken words that could have come straight from Picard's own heart when he questioned the futility of skulking about the

Alpha Quadrant and doing nothing. After over a year, the Cardassian hold over the Alpha Quadrant was growing stronger, not weaker. But as the Federation's disastrous war with the Dominion last year had proven, to try to confront the Dominion directly would be like trying to kill a giant with a small stone.

Her body still recovering from her initial beating, B'Elanna could only nod, hating how powerless she felt.

Scowling, B'Elanna looked away from the Glinn, focusing on her empty plate, rubbing her fingers over the greasy residue and sucking on them. Once again, her volatile Klingon nature had put her in a situation she could have avoided had she remained clear and levelheaded. 'If I only had a weapon,' she thought for the hundredth time. It was wishful thinking on her part. Even if she was armed, she was far too weak to lead any type of escape.

Silently, B'Elanna handed her plate to the woman assigned to clean-up duty for the night. She crossed the room with several others, entering the sleeping area of their barracks - an enormous dormitory lined with tri-level bunk beds. B'Elanna climbed to the top bunk of her assigned bed and sat on its edge, dropping her head into her hands and closing her eyes.

B'Elanna had tried to keep her spirits up, but the thought of remaining a slave for the rest of her life was deeply depressing. Never see Tom again? Never hear his voice, his laughter, or see the sparkle in his eyes? Never to feel his touch, his lips on her skin, his strength and passion? B'Elanna had never been one to give in to hopelessness, but she found herself fighting to stay above the depression that threatened to overwhelm her.

The lights dimmed in the dormitory, signaling that it was time for them to rest. B'Elanna lay back on her bunk and pulled a thin blanket over her weary frame.

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Naomi Wildman worked quietly alongside her mother, her small fingers deftly folding and sorting clothing. She placed the pile of neatly folded clothing in the chest of drawers, closing it carefully. A gray hand reached over her to re-open the drawer. Naomi looked upwards uneasily at the owner of the hand. The Cardassian was an older female, her long hair mostly gray and her face lined with wrinkles. She examined the contents of the drawer, made a noise of satisfaction, and closed the drawer once more. Naomi's breath caught in her throat when the Cardassian looked at her, but the woman merely smiled, pleased with Naomi's work.

Samantha had caught the exchange and felt relief surge through her. While their situation was far from good, it was perhaps better than she could have hoped. She watched her daughter, her face still pale and uncertain, smile tentatively back at their Cardassian mistress. 'This is not the life I wanted my daughter to have,' Samantha thought, and turned to continue folding clothing. 'But her spirit will prevail'.

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Mariah Henley stumbled, nearly crashing into the woman walking in front of her. The woman turned and offered her a steadying hand.

"Careful there!" Ensign Kaplan's features were barely visible under her dirt-streaked face. Her gaze darted around nervously, looking for any nearby guards. "You okay?"

Mariah nodded, feeling wearier than she ever had before. She had no idea how long her shift at the manufacturing facility had been, but she was definitely looking forward to her rest period.

They arrived at the slave quarters and went directly to the communal eating area to get their dinner. Mariah consumed hers with wolf-like speed, anxious that the meager amount of food she was given not be taken

from her by one of the more aggressive females that were kept here as well. Mariah lifted her cup to finish her water and was shoved violently to the floor.

An impressively large Klingon female stood over her with Mariah's cup gripped in her left hand and her teeth bared in challenge.

Hands touched Mariah's shoulders and she turned her head to see who was behind her. She was greatly relieved to see Kaplan and Harper helping her to her feet.

A smile that was more of a sneer lifted the corners of the Klingon's mouth. "Did you drop something?"

Fights like this were not uncommon. Mariah and the others had seen several break out since their captivity began here eleven days ago. So far, none of their group had been involved - something that might change at any moment, if the Klingon in front of her had anything to say about it.

The Klingon, Klursa, had taken an immediate dislike to Mariah, and on several occasions had personally made the human female's life more difficult. Mariah crouched, her eyes scanning the room for the guards that were supposed to prevent problems like this.

Klursa shifted her stance slightly, and Mariah caught a gleam of something metallic in the Klingon's right hand. She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry, as she realized that Klursa meant to really hurt her this time or, more likely, kill her. Mariah tried to recall all of her training in hand-to-hand fighting from the Maquis and Tuvok. She gestured Kaplan and Harper back, sensing that others of her group had formed a semi-circle behind her - as had Klursa's followers.

"Wait!" Ensign Kyoto, a diminutive female who was the smallest of their group, pressed forward slightly, her expression one of distress. "Please, we're all in here together. We shouldn't fight."

Both Mariah and Klursa ignored her, however Mariah silently hoped someone would keep Kyoto out of the way. Her muscles tensed, ready for the attack.

The Klingon snarled, dropping the cup and bringing the hand with the knife to the front. "Are you ready to die, human?" She uncoiled like a spring, lunging forward at Mariah, swinging her knife viciously.

A small form blurred across Mariah's vision, causing her to momentarily lose sight of her adversary. The Klingon stumbled and pushed something away, her momentum gone.

Everything seemed to stop, frozen in time. Mariah's gaze was drawn to the small, still form on the floor in front of Klursa, then to the knife the Klingon still held. The blade was red with blood. Rage filled Mariah's heart, fury that the smallest and most helpless of their number had been so carelessly killed. With a cry, she launched herself at Klursa, determined to avenge Kyoto's death.

Her attack was short-lived. Their guards chose that moment to arrive and separate the combatants. Chained and with weapons trained on them both, they were taken before the supervising Glinn, who studied them carefully.

"Fighting is expressly forbidden among slaves," he stated, his reptilian features harsh. "Since you both have excess energy, you're being sent to ore processing."

“Sir, this one was responsible for stabbing the small human female,” Klursa’s guard reported. “The injured slave is being treated and is expected to recover, but she will not be able to work her shift for at least another 20 hours.”

Mariah closed her eyes briefly, silently grateful that Kyoto was still alive. She only hoped that she would see the rest of her crewmates again.

The Glinn frowned, his expression darkening. “No food and no rest periods for the Klingon for the next 24 hours. I want her to be an example to any others that think they are in control of their own little domain. *We* are the masters here.” He paused a moment, thinking carefully. “Search the slave quarters. If any are caught with weapons, confiscate them, and send those slaves to ore processing.”

With that, they were dismissed. Klursa was taken away, and Mariah’s dismal world took on a much darker edge.

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“I’m not going to do this,” Susan Nicoletti said as shook her head, backing away from the rest of the women in the room they had been assigned to on Empok Nor, a sister station to Terok Nor.

“You want to go to the labor camps?” hissed Willa Felk. She had been introduced to the women as a human liaison between the Cardassians and themselves, and her job was to ensure their cooperation. Willa’s pretty features twisted with anger as she continued, “They’ll send you to there if you don’t cooperate.”

With an expression of distaste, Susan flung the costume she had been assigned to wear to the floor. She and the others had been chosen for the dubious honor of serving in the capacity of ‘comfort women’. They had been brought here after nearly 12 days of travel, cramped and dirty in the bowels of a cargoo,nj0 5rs. I3u7 Tw[(Wue h

“It *is* Susan’s choice,” Megan stressed firmly, looking at both Jenny and Willa. She turned away from them and bent to pick up the costume Susan had thrown, placing it carefully on the dressing table.

“Does that mean you’ve changed your mind?” Jenny asked her sister, her hands shaking as she tried to pull her gown over her bare flesh.

Megan shook her head, already finished with her own gown. “No. I won’t leave you alone.” She helped Jenny fasten the clasps.

Tal moved out of the shadows towards the other women, reaching for her own costume, which lay on the dressing table. Like Jenny’s, it was of simple design, yet it had a beauty all its own. She tried to ignore the trembling of her fingers as she pulled the dress over her head and buttoned it, shivering as the soft fabric touched her bare skin.

“I can’t believe you three are doing this,” Susan stated harshly, crossing her arms in front of her.

The Bajoran lifted her head up and faced Susan. This woman really had no idea what she was facing, she thought, and Tal felt moved to pity her. “There is no shame in wanting to live,” she said softly. She pulled the towel from her hair and began drying it.

Quietly, the three of them finished dressing under the supervising gaze of Willa. Jenny helped to braid Megan’s hair, plaiting it carefully and letting it rest between her shoulders. Tal’s own dark locks had been brushed and left soft and loose around her face. They ignored the dark looks that Susan gave them.

Moments later, the door to their room opened and two Cardassians entered. The leader of the pair, previously introduced to them as Gul Girok, surveyed them, his gray eyes noting that while three of them seemed dressed and ‘ready’, the fourth was still wearing the filthy uniform she had arrived in. He frowned in displeasure.

“Am I to understand that she is refusing to accept our offer?” Girok’s gravelly voice made the women flinch. He turned to Willa, who nodded uneasily.

He scowled and gestured to the subordinate Cardassian who had accompanied him. “Get her out of here. Process her and send her to Camp Seven,” he said, referring to one of the many labor camps scattered throughout the Trivas System, the system that surrounded Empok Nor.

Tal, Jenny, and Megan watched mutely as Susan was led away, silently relieved that the Cardassian’s anger had not extended to them. However, Jenny and Megan experienced second thoughts about their decision to remain when the Gul turned his attention back to the three of them. His gaze lingered briefly on Tal, becoming an appreciative leer.

“I expect you three will not disappoint me this evening.” Girok turned towards the door. “If you ladies will follow me?”

Uncertainly, Megan, Jenny, and Tal followed the broad-shouldered Cardassian out of their room towards whatever future lay in store for them.

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Seven tried to open her eyes; the harsh light above her forced her to squint, temporarily blinded by the glare.

“She’s awake,” a muffled voice came from behind her. “I thought you said the sedative would last until we got her there.”

Nanoprobes, she thought, fighting the nausea that threatened to overwhelm her. Whatever they had sedated her with was giving her a vicious headache. They apparently had not calculated the effect her nanoprobes would have on the sedative.

The light above her darkened abruptly.

“I’ll sedate her again. We’re nearly there.”

The voices were familiar, but her brain refused to process her thoughts properly. She could barely register the sound of warp engines humming smoothly in the background. Her head hurt terribly. Someone was missing.

“Harry?” she mumbled, trying to bring her thoughts into focus.

She felt the hypospray against her neck, hearing its familiar hiss as the sedative was released into her bloodstream.

Her eyes closed in the darkness.

Harry

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Janeway had scheduled a meeting with Picard and several others of the ‘ghost-fleet’ at 0800 hours to discuss their strategy for rescuing the remainder of Voyager’s crew. Chakotay and Tuvok accompanied their Captain to the transporter room, beaming over to the Enterprise-E. Once again, Picard and Data met them in the Enterprise’s transporter room, and escorted them to the main conference room.

“Good morning, Captain Albreight, Captain Riker,” Janeway nodded at her fellow captains. Captain Guinness greeted her warmly, handing her a cup of coffee. She smiled gratefully at him, appreciating the gesture. “This is my first officer, Commander Chakotay.” She noted the startled looks being passed between the Starfleet captains in recognition of the former Maquis. Chakotay tensed under their scrutiny, and she moved closer to him, not quite touching shoulders. He glanced down at her and smiled, his shoulders relaxing a notch.

Captain Guinness nodded, his expression reserved. “Commander.”

Captain Albreight's greeting was slightly warmer. "I've read all about you in the report Captain Janeway compiled," he said as he offered his hand to the former Maquis, smiling slightly.

Albreight’s gesture broke the ice, and most of the other captains made their way over to greet him. He mentally catalogued the names: Jorval from the Independence, Avery from the Swiftsure, and O’Malley from the Shinano. He was appalled at how young most of them were.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you all to be seated so that we may get started,” Janeway raised her voice over the general noise of conversation. All the seats at the long conference table were filled, and several chairs placed against the wall were occupied as well. Twenty-five pairs of eyes directed their attention to Janeway.

“First, I want to thank you for your assistance in the effort to rescue the remainder of my crew. This rescue attempt wouldn’t be possible without all of your help.” Janeway smiled at the eager expressions on most of the younger captains’ faces. The older, more experienced captains’ expressions were more cautious. “Captains Picard and Riker have gathered intelligence on the most recent movement of prisoners from Deep Space Nine to several areas within Cardassian space. This mission is going to take several days of reconnaissance, as the majority of my female crew has been scattered throughout the Alpha Quadrant.” Janeway turned, standing aside to allow Captain Picard to take the floor.

Picard touched the console in front of him. The screen behind him lit up, displaying a map of the Alpha Quadrant. Unconsciously straightening his uniform, he cleared his throat to speak. “Our best chance at success is to split the fleet up into pairs, each pair searching a potential area. Once the crewmembers are located, it will have to be a rapid rescue operation. Get in and out as quickly as possible.” He smiled grimly. “Typically, you can expect to find several crewmembers together, if our intelligence serves us correctly. However, two members of Captain Janeway’s crew were separated from the others.” He paused. “One is Ensign Vorik, the other is Seven of Nine.”

“Excuse me, Captain Picard,” O’Malley interrupted with a raise of her hand. “Isn’t that a Borg designation?” The other captains muttered at the question, several of them casting frowns in Janeway’s direction.

Picard held his hand up for silence. “Yes. Seven of Nine is a *former* Borg drone. She is a human who was assimilated as a young child. She’s been severed from the Borg Collective for over a year now and is a trusted and valued member of Janeway’s crew.” His words eased their concerns.

He tapped the console to display the images of both missing crewmembers. “Ensign Vorik was purchased by an entertainer named Bural. He owns an amusement ship that operates around Risa. We can expect to find him there.” Picard paused again, frowning. “Our intelligence tells us that Seven of Nine hasn’t left Deep Space Nine. However, I cannot guarantee that this news is still accurate. I have not heard from our contact there in several days.” His expression was worried. “Our main concern with Seven of Nine is that she retains approximately 18% of her Borg implants, a type of technology I’m sure the Dominion would like to examine more closely. Dukat may even have found a buyer for her already.”

Captain Riker stood, taking over for Picard. “You will each be paired off and assigned an area to search. Also, two ships need to remain behind with Voyager while we are gone in order to cloak the ship and to move her to the next rendezvous point. We can’t allow ourselves to think for a moment that Gul Dukat isn’t trying to figure out how Voyager escaped. He knows that she’s out here. He just doesn’t know about us yet.” He grinned slyly. “We still have some surprises left for him.” There was laughter at his comment, and the tension in the room dropped slightly. “I have your assignments here,” he said as he held up a stack of padds. “Anyone who has questions, please bring them to me right away. All ships are to report to the new rendezvous point in one week. We’ll go from there. That’s all, ladies and gentlemen!” Riker grinned. “Good luck!”

Janeway and Chakotay stood next to Picard as Riker handed out assignments to each captain. Picard and Albreight had been paired together, as had Riker and Guinness. Whenever possible, the more advanced Sovereign-class ships were paired with their lesser brethren, the Galaxy-class ships.

“Is there any ship in particular you would have me assigned to?” Janeway asked, studying the map of the Alpha Quadrant.

Picard smiled briefly. “The Enterprise and the Galaxy are going to Cardassia Prime. We have reason to believe that a larger portion of your crew was sent there. You are most certainly welcome aboard either ship.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Janeway answered gratefully. “I believe I’ll take you up on that offer.” She nodded to Tuvok and Chakotay. “First, however, I need to brief my crew on these plans.”

Picard nodded. “Very well. I’ll see you shortly.”

Janeway, Chakotay, and Tuvok beamed back aboard Voyager.

“Captain, have you considered taking another member of your staff with you on this mission?” Tuvok inquired as the three stepped into the turbolift.

“Possibly,” she answered, knowing what was on the Vulcan’s mind.

“Might I suggest that I accompany you, leaving Commander Chakotay to command the ship until your return?” Tuvok asked with a lifted brow.

“Captain, I would prefer to accompany you myself. As a former Maquis, I have experience in guerilla tactics that could be valuable to our mission. Tuvok can certainly handle Voyager while we are away,” Chakotay protested.

“While your suggestion is admirable, I must point out that tactically, I would be the better choice for this mission, having spent a large portion of my career in operations such as the one we are about to embark upon.” Tuvok replied smoothly.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen!” Janeway stopped them from continuing. “While I would like nothing more than to have you both accompany me on this mission, I cannot leave my ship behind without knowing she is in experienced hands.” She paused, touching her first officer’s arm. “Chakotay, I am leaving you in charge of Voyager until I return. Tuvok will accompany me on the Enterprise.” She saw the words of protest forming on Chakotay’s lips and held up her hand to stall him. “I have a reason for asking you to remain behind with Voyager. This is something that I have considered ever since Picard first explained to me about the ghost-fleet, and I think you are the best suited for the job.”

They stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge, walking directly across to the door to her ready room. Janeway sat at her desk, Tuvok and Chakotay positioned across from her, each awaiting her explanation.

Janeway leaned forward, focusing her attention on her first officer. “I want you to start teaching these people how to operate like the Maquis.” She paused briefly, her expression earnest. “There are very few experienced captains in this fleet, and most of them have no idea how to wage guerilla warfare.” She sat back slightly, looking at Chakotay.

“I see your point, Captain,” Chakotay said. "They can't free their Alpha Quadrant just by hiding. They're going to need to learn how to fight."

“That is why it is vital we help these people. The rescue operation we are planning involves more than just two or three ships. The Cardassians will hopefully attribute the disappearance of our female crewmembers to Voyager and/or the few ships they already suspect exist. However, we have to anticipate that the ghost-fleet might be exposed by helping us.” Janeway paused, shaking her head slightly for emphasis. “They are going to need to know how to defeat their enemy, despite the overwhelming odds against them. I think you and the other Maquis are the perfect teachers,” Janeway concluded. “That is why I need you to remain here.”

Chakotay nodded, his smile grim. “Very well, Captain. I will endeavor to teach Starfleet crews how to fight like the Maquis.”

“I will talk with Captain Picard. Please summon the remainder of my senior staff. I need to speak with them before we leave,” she said, turning to her computer to initiate a comlink between her ship and the Enterprise.

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Janeway regarded her senior staff, trying to ignore the empty chairs where Seven and B’Elanna would have sat. Neelix, Tuvok, Harry, Tom, the Doctor, and Chakotay watched her patiently, waiting for her to speak.

“Commander Tuvok and I will be embarking shortly to the Enterprise. I’m leaving Commander Chakotay in charge while I am gone,” she began, looking at each of them in turn. Her gaze finally rested on Harry and Tom, both of whom looked the worse for wear.

“I have requested that some of my crew accompany each of the ships on their mission, ostensibly to help identify our female crew members. Truthfully,” she paused, smiling briefly, “it was a way for me to include Mr. Paris and Mr. Kim in this rescue operation.” She knew both men well enough to see the look of relief in their eyes and smiled. “As if I could leave you two behind.” Her expression became serious. “I want suggestions as to the other members who should be included.”

“Billy Telfer,” Tom spoke up suddenly.

“What about him?” Chakotay turned to face Tom.

“I think he should be included. I know he’s not much of an officer, but he’s Crewman Celes’s best friend,” the blond helmsman replied.

Janeway nodded, “Fine. Any other recommendations?”

“Lt. Baxter, Ensign Mulchaey, Lt. Rollins,” Tom replied, running through a mental roll call.

“Mr. Paris, what are your reasons for selecting these individuals?” Tuvok inquired.

Tom shrugged. “None of them hold key positions on Voyager.”

“Good thinking, Mr. Paris,” Janeway said, agreeing with his reasoning.

Chakotay handed her a padd with several other names listed. “These are my recommendations, Captain.”

Janeway looked over the list. “Excellent. Notify these crewmembers at once that they are to meet in Transporter Room One in 10 minutes. Same goes to you,” she said, directing her comments to Harry and Tom. Janeway turned to the Doctor, smiling quickly.

“It seems you will have the opportunity to fraternize with your fellow EMHs aboard the Shinano and the Swiftsure,” she said, handing the EMH a padd. “It has been requested that you work with them and hopefully help expand their potential the way you have your own.”

The Doctor managed to look both pleased and embarrassed at the same time. “I will do my best,” he said, “Although their EMHs didn’t have the advantages I had, I’m sure I’ll be able to extend their boundaries.”

“Very well,” Janeway hid her smile. “Dismissed.”

Janeway and Chakotay stood, waiting for the others to leave the room. As soon as everyone had exited the conference room, she crossed the distance between them and stepped into Chakotay’s embrace.

He held her fiercely for a moment, hating the thought of being apart from her, even for a week. Chakotay relaxed his arms and pulled away slightly so he could see her face.

Janeway reached up and cradled his face with her hands, bringing his face closer to hers for a kiss. When they broke apart, Chakotay smiled ruefully.

“It isn’t fair, you leaving me behind like this,” he growled, squeezing her to him. “What am I supposed to do with myself while you’re gone?” He placed a small kiss between her eyebrows.

Janeway snuggled into his embrace, loving the feel of his arms around her. “You’re supposed to keep my ship and crew safe, and teach the ghost-fleet how to fight dirty. Isn’t that enough?” She felt him smile into her hair.

Finally, regretfully, they drew apart. He watched as her captain’s mask slid back into place.

“Take care of my ship, Chakotay,” Janeway said softly.

He nodded, knowing she wasn’t one for long and emotional farewells. Janeway smiled, her love slipping through the mask she wore briefly, then turned and left the conference room.

Chakotay stood a moment longer, staring at the door that had just closed behind her. He sent a silent prayer to the good spirits. *Bring her back to me*.

Title: Chrysalis
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Rating: [R]
Codes: K/7, J/C, P/T

Author’s Note: See part I for summary and disclaimer. A special thank you to Thomas Lee for his technical explanations and ideas. I couldn’t have done this without him.

Part VI Gathering Stones

On Voyager's main viewscreen, a convoy of nearly a hundred freighters and tankers cruised through a supposedly clear area of space, bringing supplies and weapons to a distant sector of the Dominion's domain. Spaced at regular intervals along the convoy were three Type-5 Galors and nine Type-6 Hidekis, their presence a safeguard against possible attack. Chakotay shifted his attention from the convoy to a single cloaked ship that was closing in on it at high speed, and watched as undetected, it began its attack.

A dozen bright explosions marked the destruction of the convoy's escorts and heralded the success of the Swiftsure's hit-and-run strike. As Chakotay silently applauded the directness of the strike, Avery turned his weapons to the tankers and freighters, using the starship's torpedoes with deadly accuracy. With almost casual ease, the Swiftsure evaded the blind-fire of the convoy ships' low-powered disruptors as it destroyed several of the transports.

The Swiftsure was commencing its third attack on the convoy when, as anticipated, reinforcements called in by the convoy arrived from a nearby system. Chakotay counted not only a squadron of Cardassian cruisers, but also a full wing of Cardassian fighters, all bent on discovering and destroying the convoy's mysterious attacker. Confident in his ultimate success, Avery turned the Swiftsure away from the convoy and began engaging the reinforcements, the starship's weapons stabbing out at the enemy ships and leaving explosions and destroyed hulks in its wake.

As the Swiftsure finished destroying the Cardassian warships, a second wave of reinforcements arrived in the form of a Jem'Hadar armada. Far larger in both numbers and tonnage than the first wave, the Dominion fleet included hundreds of attack ships, wings of cruisers, squadrons of battlecruisers, and even several of their new battleships. With so many Jem'Hadar warships now sweeping the space around the convoy with their sensors at full power, it would only be a matter of seconds before one of them found and identified the Swiftsure if the ghost-fleet ship didn't phase-cloak or fall back...

The Swiftsure did neither. Chakotay cringed as Avery dropped his cloak and charged at the Jem'Hadar armada, the starship's weapons blazing and its ECM jamming all communications in the area. Heavily armed, armored, and shielded as the enemy's ships were, they were no match for a ship that could reliably destroy Borg Cubes. In less than a minute, all of the Jem'Hadar capital ships had been obliterated by the Swiftsure's barrage of torpedoes, and the last of the attack ships were vaporized a few minutes later by the starship's unerring phaser gunnery. What few hits the enemy managed to land on the Swiftsure were easily brushed aside by the ship's powerful shielding. The Jem'Hadar fleet annihilated, the Swiftsure turned back to the hapless convoy...and then abruptly halted its attack.

While the Swiftsure had been preoccupied with destroying the last wave of reinforcements, the attack ships of the doomed fleet had managed to draw the starship far enough away from the convoy for one of its freighters to transmit an identification of their attacker through its jamming. Instead of continuing to send ships in a futile attempt to destroy a starship as powerful as the Swiftsure, the Dominion had simply sent orders to the Jem'Hadar garrison on Earth to begin preparations for reprisals on its civilian population. Their demand to the Swiftsure's crew was simple: surrender both themselves *and* their ship, or be responsible for the deaths of untold millions of innocent civilians.

"Computer, end program."

The simulation ended, and the scene of the Swiftsure's defeat faded from Voyager's viewscreen, leaving a view of the Swiftsure and Shinano holding position close to Voyager against a backdrop of stars.

Chakotay sat back in his chair with a heavy sigh. Decloaking when detection was imminent was practically a rule-of-thumb among those who commanded cloak-capable warships - not only did it free up power for

weapons, shields, and propulsion, but it enabled the starship to seize the initiative from its pursuer. Effective as the tactic was in conventional warfare, however, it had disastrous long-term consequences when used against an occupational force that was willing to use the captive population as hostages. As Chakotay had anticipated, one of the most difficult things to teach these new Starfleet captains about guerilla warfare was the paramount importance of concealing their identity from the enemy, even at the expense of delaying or abandoning their original mission objectives. Although they understood such tactics and the reasoning behind them readily enough on an intellectual level, "sneaking around" was just not second nature to the former explorers and scientists of the ghost-fleet, to say nothing of "sneaking around" while fighting. It was a difficulty he could relate to from personal experience.

This was only the first exercise, however, and Chakotay was surprised that the new captain had done as well as he had. Captain Picard had been pleased at Janeway's idea to train their captains in the Maquis way of battle, and, by his report, the other captains in the fleet had been responsive as well. O'Malley and Avery had been left behind with Voyager to both protect the Intrepid-class ship and to participate in the training. In the span of the next few weeks, Voyager and its Maquis members would continue to train a new pair of ships until the entire ghost-fleet had been instructed in the art of Maquis warfare.

It had been O'Malley's suggestion that they use the holodecks as a training ground instead of running simulations in actual space. By allowing the computer to control the variables, they were given a much more realistic simulation of what might happen, not to mention it was infinitely much more secure. While it didn't give the entire ship's crew the experience, the bridge crew, who ultimately made the crucial decisions, did gain the knowledge and experience necessary for their success. Both Voyager and the Shinano had monitored the Swiftsure's progress on the holodeck, with Chakotay controlling the exercise from his position on Voyager's bridge.

Chakotay had split his Maquis crew up evenly between the two ships, with Voyager's Starfleet crew staying behind to help him operate Voyager. The capabilities, resources, and technologies of the ships they transferred to awed the former-Maquis, with more than one wistfully remarking about the sort of operations they could have run with such phased-cloaked starships against the Cardassians in the early days. Some found a dark humor in the situation - Maquis teaching Starfleet how to fight the Cardassians - but their laughter was hollow. The irony wasn't lost on the old-time Starfleet personnel who had at one point actually assisted the Cardassians in pursuing and capturing the Maquis. It was, indeed, a very unique situation.

Chakotay looked back at the main viewscreen, and the image of the sheepish faces of Avery and his bridge crew that was now on it, and knew that a valuable lesson had been learned today.

"The key to this style of warfare is simple: remain hidden at all times, regardless of how quickly you are able to accomplish otherwise by revealing yourselves." He looked at the members of Avery's bridge crew in turn, willing them to understand the magnitude of this most important lesson. "As soon as you decloak, your opponent's theories about your identities become hard conclusions, and no amount of firepower can guarantee that you will be able eliminate every last witness in time." Chakotay shook his head at them. "Remember, your successes are not necessarily measured by the standards of traditional warfare; guerrilla warfare is not as tidy as that. For one thing, it is counterproductive in guerilla warfare to try to accelerate the process through direct confrontation alone, especially given how easily the Dominion can replace its losses in both ships and soldiers. As some of your fellow crewmembers know from previous experience with... the other side of guerilla warfare, the continued existence of the guerilla is in and of itself a victory." The Commander rubbed the bridge of his nose, feeling the tension between his eyes building. "You lack sufficient forces to protect every occupied world of the Alpha Quadrant from retaliatory attacks by the Dominion. Because of that, it is important that your enemies have no opportunities to either gain knowledge

of your identity or use the civilian population as leverage against you. If that happens, your rebellion will be short-lived indeed."

Avery nodded slowly at him, absorbing the lesson. "It will take a long time that way."

Chakotay smiled briefly, humorlessly. "Against an opponent as large as the Dominion, it will take you years. But as long as you survive with your identities unknown, and you prevent your ships or crew from being captured or destroyed, the Dominion will always be losing this war. Given how little you can afford to lose ships or crew, you must see to it that such losses are few and far between." As he looked at each of them, he saw the truth of his words registered on their faces and knew that they were ready to begin again. Despite their difficulties in adopting some habits of guerilla warfare, the Starfleet officers possessed several invaluable advantages of their own as would-be guerillas. Not only did they possess an impressive range and depth of skills and knowledge, but also their former careers as interstellar explorers meant that the unexpected and the impossible were already a normal part of their lives. Most importantly, Chakotay knew that - as the crew of the Swiftsure had just shown in their failed exercise - he could count on these men and

"Dukat, I believe you no longer have any concerns regarding this drone. You have received the payment I promised, have you not?" The voice was raised slightly, the threat subtle.

There was a moment of silence.

"Very well, I'll leave you to your scientific pursuits, Dr. Charven." Dukat's voice was contemptuous. "Try not to disappoint the Founders this time."

Seven heard a quick intake of breath from the man above her and the rustling movement as Dukat left the room.

"Bastard."

Seven could feel the stimulant taking hold. Feeling as if a fog were lifting from her brain, she slowly opened her eyes. The man above her gazed at her appraisingly.

"Ah, good to see you're coming around," the dark-haired human said as he smiled slightly. "I'm Dr. Max Charven. You are Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero One." He placed an arm behind her shoulders and carefully assisted her into a sitting position.

Seven brought both hands to her head, trying to control the spinning sensation she felt.

"That will pass in a moment. When you're feeling up to it, we'll walk to the quarters I have assigned to you. I have a device there that will allow you to regenerate." Charven moved away from her for a moment to reach for another hypospray containing nutrients and additional electrolytes. "Your systems have been greatly compromised during your captivity," he continued, shaking his head. "Gul Dukat doesn't realize how close he came to killing you with his ignorance of Borg systems."

Seven heard the hiss as the injection was released into her system. "I do not understand," she said wearily, allowing him to help her to her feet. "Dukat stated that you have purchased me for the sole interest of my implants. The state of my health should be irrelevant."

"The state of your health is quite important to me, I assure you. Now, that's enough talking for now. Let's get you to your quarters." Charven helped her walk down the corridor into another room, significantly smaller than the previous room. He guided Seven's steps until she reached the edge of the bed.

"Lay down," he instructed, adjusting her limbs so she lay with her hands resting on her belly. Charven turned to the computer terminal next to the bed and tapped out a few commands. An electronic arm swung out and over the bed, aligning itself so that it was parallel to Seven's body. He attached a small, box-shaped device to the end of the arm, positioning it closest to Seven's head. "This device will allow you to regenerate and regain some of your strength," he explained as he entered commands into the box. "I'm afraid you won't be up to your full potential, but your life should no longer be in danger."

Seven looked warily up at him, unsure of what she should be feeling at this point. Too exhausted to contemplate further, she closed her eyes, feeling the regeneration cycle take hold of her.

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Seven was not on Deep Space Nine.

Harry swallowed, trying to dislodge the knot that had formed in his throat. He pushed the report away from him, turning to look at the space station that was framed by the viewport in his quarters. His fingers curled around the edges of the padd and gripped it convulsively.

He had known, of course, that there was a good chance that Seven would no longer be on the station. However, the discovery of that fact had hit him like a blow to the stomach, leaving him weak and shaking. Knowing that she was in the Gamma Quadrant was not comforting in the slightest. Quark had only known the general details of Dukat's transaction with the buyer, not the specifics.

Harry felt a sharp pain in his hands and realized that he had gripped the edge of the padd so tightly he was hurting himself. He dropped the report back on the desk and stood, moving across his quarters to the doors leading out into the corridor. He paused in front of them, triggering the automatic opening response, staring blankly out into the empty corridor.

Captain Onoshi had ordered Harry to report to him once he had finished reading the report. The Liberty and the Musashi were currently phase-cloaked and orbiting Deep Space Nine. Their primary mission had been to recover Seven of Nine and the crewmembers that had been relocated to Bajor. The report from Quark had been a mixed blessing; they were relieved that their operative on Deep Space Nine had not been caught; however, not all of the news he had imparted was what they had hoped for. As Harry made his way down the corridor to the turbolift, he realized that Onoshi had purposefully delayed their mission to Bajor, waiting until Harry had finished reading Quark's report. Harry hoped it meant that the Liberty's captain had an alternate plan.

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"Eventually," the hologram replied. "The information is somewhat vague, and I get the feeling that the Founders are very careful who learns the details about their illness," the EMH replied dryly.

"Interesting. There has got to be some use we can make of this information," Chakotay said. "Anything else?"

"With your permission, I would like to resume working with the EMHs on the Shinano and the Swiftsure."

"How is that progressing?" Chakotay asked curiously.

The Doctor sighed. "Well, let's just say that they aren't quite up to anything beyond their original potential

Guinan nodded, her attention momentarily distracted by the entrance of Captain Picard. "I'll make sure you get them." She could see he was headed straight for Janeway's table. "If you'll excuse me?" Politely, she withdrew, knowing that sooner or later, Kathryn Janeway would need to talk.

Janeway watched the woman leave, puzzled by her abrupt departure. Her puzzlement was short-lived as her eyes finally spotted Captain Picard approaching her table.

"Good Morning, Captain," she greeted him, lifting her cup. "Care to join me in a cup of coffee? Guinan was just explaining that you grow the beans here on the Enterprise." She raised an eyebrow playfully. "I'm jealous."

Picard smiled quickly. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline your invitation. I'm a tea drinker myself." He settled himself comfortably in the chair across from her. "I'm here to give you an update."

Janeway's smile faded as her expression turned serious. "You have some news?" she asked anxiously.

He nodded, sliding the padd he had been carrying across the table towards her. "We rendezvoused with an intelligence ship at 0430 this morning." At Janeway's blank look, Picard elaborated. "They're starships that were refitted with phase-cloaking technology and are small enough to move back and forth between the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants undetected. It's the only way we can keep track on what is happening on the other side of the wormhole." At Janeway's nod of understanding, he continued, "We finally heard from our operative on Deep Space Nine. I'm afraid your escape made things difficult for him for a bit." Picard fell silent, allowing Janeway a moment to read Quark's report.

Janeway's face paled as she read. "They took Seven of Nine to the Gamma Quadrant?" Her eyes were wide with dismay. "The buyer for her implants is working for the Founders?"

"Captains Onoshi and Subok have also received this report, as the Liberty and the Musashi were assigned to Deep Space Nine and Bajor. Onoshi may try to catch an intelligence ship on its way back to the wormhole and ask its crew to look for your missing crewmember in the Gamma Quadrant." Picard leaned forward, dropping his voice slightly. "Some of the crews on the intelligence ships are former Starfleet Intelligence. If anyone can find and rescue Seven of Nine, they can."

Janeway swallowed her emotions and nodded, returning to the report in her hands. "The Founders are ill?" She looked up from the padd in surprise.

Picard nodded. "The disease has been spreading among them for the past several months. At first, it was only rumors." He smiled humorlessly. "The Founders were extremely careful about outsiders finding out. However, our agents have finally confirmed the rumors." Picard leaned forward, his hawk like features intense. "If our information is correct, they have yet to find a cure, although they have their best scientific minds working on it."

Janeway's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Is it enough to make them withdraw from the Alpha Quadrant?"

Picard shook his head. "I'm afraid not. The Alpha Quadrant occupation force is able to sustain itself from the Dominion's Alpha Quadrant infrastructure. It will take a much more immediate threat to the Founders to make them recall the Jem'Hadar support here."

Janeway nodded. "Then that is what we'll have to accomplish next."

Picard had to smile at the confidence in Janeway's voice. "Do you have something in mind?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure we'll come up with something." Any member of her senior staff would have recognized Janeway's smile and known it boded ill for those who stood against her.

Picard stood easily, pushing the chair back in a fluid movement. "We expect to arrive at Cardassia Prime in approximately four hours." He tugged at his uniform, straightening it, and was about to leave when Janeway spoke up.

"Captain... your fleet's plans for rescuing my female crew involves beaming them up whenever possible. Given the capabilities of Dominion sensors, how do you expect to do so without the transporter beam being detected by their orbital outposts or patrol ships? In our case, the Cardassian system must have been on alert ever since the explosion on Cardassia IV."

Picard smiled. "Some time before the Dominion War, Starfleet Intelligence developed a new type of transporter system that renders transports invisible, inaudible, and untraceable to both sensors and people - even those of the Dominion. This transporter system was installed in the ghost-fleet ships shortly after they escaped the fall of the Federation, and it should allow us to beam aboard all of Voyager's crewmembers without detection. However, since the special-operations transporter system is no better than the traditional system at beaming through shields or security grids, stealth and speed remain of the utmost importance."

Janeway shook her head. “Phasing cloaks, undetectable transporters - what other technological tricks does your fleet have up its sleeve? I don’t suppose you happen to have a replicator that can forge latinum by any chance, do you?” The corners of her mouth twitched upwards.

Picard smiled briefly. “How did you guess?”

As he spoke, Picard could see that, despite her attempts at levity, her eyes remained haunted. He glanced behind them where he could see Guinan working, and back at the troubled woman before him. He had hoped that the El-Aurian would have a chance to talk to Janeway by now. Apparently the opportunity had not yet presented itself.

Clearing his throat to catch her attention, he glanced meaningfully at Guinan, then back to Janeway, and spoke softly. "I have found that, when situations occur where I am deeply troubled by an event, it has been invaluable for me to have someone who can listen with complete objectivity."

Janeway looked startled at his statement, her eyes returning to where the hostess of Ten-Forward was working.

Picard left her quietly, hoping that the seed he'd planted bore healing fruit.

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"Bridge to Captain Riker."

Captain William Riker blinked, his concentration broken, and looked up from the padd he had been studying in his ready room. The York had rendezvoused with them several hours ago, and Captain Lewis had delayed just long enough to have a quick meal with Riker and deliver the latest intelligence report to him before leaving once more to continue his route through the Alpha Quadrant. Riker rubbed a hand over his tired

eyes, suddenly grateful for the interruption, and placed the padd on his desk, tapping his combadge in response to the hail.

"Captain here."

"We've arrived at the perimeter of the Trivas System," Lieutenant O'Neil, his Ops officer, replied.

"Thank you, O'Neil. Set a course for Trivas IV. I'll be there shortly." The Trivas system was where their operative on DS9 had told them to search for four of Voyager's crew - and, from the latest intelligence reports, there had been a recent transfer of prisoners from Empok Nor to the mines on Trivas IV.

"Aye, Captain."

The doors of his ready room closed behind him as he stepped out onto the bridge. Commander Jerzen, his first officer, nodded in acknowledgement of his arrival, smiling faintly. The rest of Alpha shift looked up briefly from their tasks to note his presence on the bridge before returning to their work. Taking his seat in the center chair, Riker leaned back and accessed his computer console, tapping in the appropriate commands to bring up a view of Trivas IV.

Trivas IV was a Class-L planet, which meant it was marginally capable of supporting life and had a moderately breathable atmosphere. Although several planets and moons of the Trivas system still boasted of enormous deposits of ore, Cardassian replication technology had eventually rendered mining and processing of the system's ore uneconomical a few years ago, and the mines, along with the refinery station, Empok Nor, had consequently been abandoned. However, after the fall of the Federation, the Cardassians had reactivated the Trivas system mines to serve as prison camps. Empok Nor was towed from its orbit around Trivas III to serve as the system's administrative center and central defense station in lieu of ore processing which was now done in the prison camps.

"We're arriving at Trivas IV, sir," O'Neil reported.

"Helm, place us in orbit. Hail the Sovereign."

"They're responding."

"On screen."

Moments later, Captain Guinness looked back at the crew of Challenger from the viewscreen.

"We'll dephase and begin our scans of the planet's surface. Once we've located the women, we'll beam them aboard," Riker explained. "I need you to hold position above us and remain phased."

Guinness nodded. "We'll watch for any sign that you've been detected." The Sovereign's captain turned to consult briefly with his first officer before turning back to face the screen. "We're picking up only passive sensors from the planet, however Empok Nor is close enough to provide protection from any detected threat." Guinness left unspoken that the Challenger would be vulnerable to detection by the planet's sensors while conventionally cloaked. Only by stealth and speed would they manage to remain undetected during the rescue operation. "We should be able to spot anything headed this way before it reaches you." Guinness smiled briefly. "Good luck, Captain."

Riker nodded at O'Neil to terminate the communication. "Are the sensors and transporters ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dephase to conventional cloak, and begin scanning for Voyager's quantum signature," Riker ordered, feeling the tension stiffen his shoulders as O'Neil confirmed that the phase-cloak no longer protected them. He thought back to the days when the very notion of a Federation cloaking device had filled him with righteous indignation, and silently chuckled at how dependant he and his fellow Starfleet captains had become on a device they had once despised.

"Yes, sir. Initiating scans now," O'Neil replied, his hands imputing the commands into the console. Several moments later, the computer made a satisfied sounding beep. O'Neil frowned, looking up from his console at his captain. "Sir, I'm only detecting one signature on the planet, not four."

"Captain, perhaps only one woman was sent to this particular labor camp," Jerzen said. "There are several other possibilities in this system, perhaps even the station itself."

Riker nodded. "We'll keep that in mind. In the meantime, the one crewmember may know the location of the other three." He swiveled slightly in his chair to turn towards O'Neil. "Do you have transporter lock on her?"

"Aye, sir." He tapped a few commands on console. "She's not alone, however. I'm showing two other life signs with her." O'Neil looked up worriedly.

Riker frowned, tugging carefully at his beard. This was not the best situation for them to beam her aboard if there was any hope of not drawing any attention to themselves. If the woman disappeared in full view of witnesses, it was bound to raise questions, not to mention immediate sensor sweeps. In addition, simply beaming aboard any witnesses along with the woman, aside from raising the question of what to do with them, would only make the discovery of a missing prisoner more likely. The question was: could they afford to wait for a better set of circumstances to retrieve her? Or could they hope that a witnessed disappearance of the woman be attributed to Janeway's Voyager?

"Captain, I would recommend we wait until she is either alone, or nightfall," Jerzen said quietly. "The less attention we draw, the better."

"I have to agree, as much as I hate to wait," Riker said. "Reinitiate the phase cloak and inform the Sovereign of our situation, but maintain this position and a sensor lock on her. The moment she's alone, dephase again and beam her aboard."

"Aye, sir," O'Neil replied, his expression intent on the readings before him. Nearly 20 minutes passed before a slow smile crossed O'Neil's features. "I've got her, sir. She's in transporter room one," he reported, relief coloring his voice. "And the phase cloak has been reinitialized."

"Transporter room one to bridge," Chief Warrant Officer Tower's voice came across the comsystem.

"Bridge here," Riker replied. "Go ahead, Chief."

"Our guest is in pretty bad shape and in need of immediate medical treatment."

"Notify sickbay and transport her directly there. Bridge out." Riker turned towards Ops. "Mr. O'Neil, send a message to the Sovereign. Let them know we've got her, and we'll contact them as soon as I've finished debriefing her." He stood. "Mr. Jerzen?"

The commander stood, falling in step behind Riker as they walked inside the turbolift. "Forgive me for saying so, Captain, but that went smoother than I expected."

Riker smiled briefly as the turbolift doors shut. "Deck 12." He turned slightly to face Jerzen. "Perhaps, but we're not out of this yet. We have only one woman out of four, and we're counting on her knowledge to locate the other three. There are a lot of chances for things to go wrong between now and then."

The turbolift doors opened, and Jerzen silently followed his captain to sickbay.

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Vorik rolled from his sleeping mat and stood, allowing his muscles to stretch slowly. He was slightly sore from sleeping on the mat, but it was not something he normally gave much thought to. After stretching, he settled himself comfortably back on the floor, tucking the black sleeping robe around him. Kneeling back so that his heels barely touched his backside, Vorik closed his eyes, bringing his hands up in an attitude of mediation. Perhaps today he would be able to complete his morning ritual without interruption.

"Good morning," the overly cheerful voice greeted him, causing him to wince slightly.

He sighed and opened his eyes reluctantly. "Good morning, Dama," Vorik greeted her politely.

"So serious," she teased. She sat across from him, folding her legs in front of her instead of kneeling. She smiled, waiting for Vorik to acknowledge her further.

Sighing, the Vulcan gave up trying to meditate. "What can I do for you today, Dama?"

"We're nearly at Uncle Terik's. I thought you'd want to know." Dama smiled, her golden skin dimpling.

Vorik shook his head, unable to understand how the parents of this half-human, half-Vulcan woman in front of him had allowed her to be brought up without any discipline whatsoever. He merely hoped that her Uncle Terik, brother to her Vulcan mother, lived up to the usual Vulcan standards of decorum.

"That is well," he replied, blinking his dark eyes solemnly. "I owe your family a debt of gratitude. Without your assistance, I would no doubt still be working for Bural on Risa." Vorik barely controlled his wince at the memory.

Dama shook her head, sighing at his somber demeanor. A sudden thought brightened her expression considerably. "What were you doing there, anyway?"

A greenish flush crept up Vorik's cheeks as he attempted to tactfully evade her question. For all his poise and control, he was still quite young in terms of Vulcan age. "That is irrelevant."

"Well," Dama sighed again, disappointed. She stood gracefully, looking down at him. "At least your costume was nice." She noted that Vorik's face had taken on a rather alarming shade of green. "Are you feeling all right?"

Vorik looked away, alarmed that his control was slipping this badly. He jumped when he felt her warm hand touch his cheek, turning to meet her inquisitive brown eyes. Her face was inches from his. He swallowed. "I am fine," he lied.

"Okay," she smiled and took her hand away. "Breakfast is ready, if you want to eat." Dama stood up and offered him a hand up.

"Thank you, Dama," he declined the offer of her hand. "I will join you shortly. I would like to finish my meditation."

"Oh, very well." She turned and walked to the door, pausing at the frame to look over her shoulder. "I'll see you shortly."

Vorik was grateful when she finally left the room. Illogically, something about Dama never failed to unsettle him. Meditation was merely the excuse he needed to regain his composure and calm.

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"Come in," Captain Hiro Onoshi answered to the chime on his ready room door, looking up from his computer screen expectantly. His eyes narrowed slightly as Ensign Harry Kim stepped through the door, assessing the younger man as he walked purposefully towards Onoshi's desk. Onoshi noted the stiff, formal posture and the eyes-straight-ahead attitude, and adapted his own behavior accordingly.

"You have read the report from our operative, Ensign?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said with more calm than he felt. "I am reporting to you as instructed."

Onoshi hid his smile. The man was so stiff, the captain thought, that Mr. Kim was probably about to break.

"At ease, Ensign." He gestured to the chair across from him. "Please, have a seat. I need to discuss a few things with you, and I'm getting a headache from looking up at you."

Unused to any other captain's demeanor, Harry had resorted to his academy training and felt that formality was the safest course to take. As he took the seat that Captain Onoshi offered, he stole a look at the other man's face, trying to judge the right approach to take with this captain.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, resting his hands across his lap. He looked expectantly at Onoshi, wondering what the Captain needed to speak with him about.

As he regarded the Ensign sitting anxiously before him, Onoshi admitted to himself that he was grateful for his habit of coming straight to the point. "I cannot take the Liberty into the wormhole to rescue your crewmember in the Gamma Quadrant," he began, folding his fingers in front of him. "None of the ghost fleet ships dare risk themselves in that manner."

Harry's expression fell and he swallowed. "I understand, sir."

Onoshi smiled briefly, his expression sympathetic. "That does not mean we will abandon Seven of Nine, Ensign. On the contrary, I have already contacted an intelligence ship en route to the Bajoran wormhole. The Avalon will rendezvous with the Liberty in approximately one hour. I expect you to be packed and ready to leave with them by then."

Harry couldn't hide his surprise and confusion. "I don't quite understand, sir."

"Intelligence ships are small starships that have the ability to cross the wormhole without detection. They are a vital source of information about the Founders and the activities in an area of space that we would otherwise know nothing about."

At Harry's nod of understanding, Onoshi continued, "You will go with the intelligence ship through the wormhole. The ship's crew will help you find your missing crewmember, rescue her, and return to the fleet once your mission has been accomplished." Onoshi saw the relief flood the other man's features.

"Thank you, sir." Harry's shoulders straightened subtly.

"You're welcome, Ensign. I wish you luck in finding her." Onoshi was sincere in his wishes, knowing that the task the young man faced would be immense. "I'll notify you when the Avalon arrives. Dismissed."

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The woman lying on the biobed was dark-haired, fair skinned, and filthy. Her brown eyes fixated on them as they entered sickbay, although Riker wasn't certain if it was their faces or their uniforms she was staring at. He tried to ignore the bruises and scratches that covered her face and arms, and the way she flinched whenever the doctor touched a particularly sensitive spot.

"I'm Captain Riker of the USS Challenger," he introduced himself. "This is my first officer, Commander Jerzen." He saw her eyes slowly move upwards to his face and she blinked, as if suddenly aware of her situation. Her throat moved convulsively as she tried to make the words form.

"I'm Susan." Her voice quavered slightly. "Lieutenant Susan Nico..Nicoletti." She jumped involuntarily when the doctor moved closer. "Sorry."

The doctor shook her head. "No apology needed, Lieutenant. Relax. You are safe here. I'm just going to mend your collarbone. It's been fractured."

Riker could see the effort it took for the woman in front of him to tolerate the doctor's proximity and questioned whether he should debrief her at this point. Her eyes had never left his face and he could see the fragile strength that held her and kept her from snapping. Despite her state, he knew that any delay in finding out as much information as possible could lead to the further mental and physical abuse for the other three members of Voyager's crew. He knew he had to ask.

"I apologize, Lieutenant, but I need to ask you a few questions." Riker took a seat on the biobed across from her, modulating his voice to project a soothing, and non-threatening tone. He noted that Jerzen had carefully moved to stand behind the biobed he was sitting on. "Do you feel up to it?"

Susan nodded. "Yes."

"Just a moment," the doctor interrupted, finishing the last of the bone knitting over Susan's collarbone. She reached for a hypospray and pressed it firmly against Susan's neck. "I've given you a relaxant. It should help."

Riker could practically see the drug working on the woman before him. Her posture on the biobed changed from being stiff and high-strung to a more relaxed and languid pose. Silently, he thanked the doctor for her consideration.

"There were three other women with you when you were sent from Deep Space Nine to this system. Do you know their location?"

Despite the relaxant, a shiver wracked Susan's body briefly in response to his query. She closed her eyes and nodded. "We were initially sent to Empok Nor. They are still on Empok Nor, as far as I know." She didn't open her eyes.

Riker cast a quizzical look at Jerzen, who shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but I don't understand. Why would they still be on Empok Nor? Have the Cardassians reactivated the station's refineries?"

Susan slowly opened her eyes and focused them on his face. Her expression was strange, angry, and yet sad at the same time. "We were chosen for the dubious honor of becoming 'comfort women' on the outpost. I declined, while the others did not."

Riker didn't quite understand the nature of her expression. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Please rest now. If we require any further information, I will send Mr. Jerzen to consult you." He stood slowly and nodded to the doctor, who was busy preparing to heal the rest of Susan's injuries. He turned to exit sickbay, but a hand on his arm stopped him. He looked down with surprise.

"Thank you, Captain." Susan looked up at him, struggling to maintain the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. Her hand gripped his uniform fiercely. "I never thought I would be rescued."

He patted her hand until it relaxed its hold. He gently moved her hand away to lay it next to her body. "You're welcome, Lieutenant."

The grateful look in her eyes continued to haunt him as the doors to sickbay closed behind him.

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Harry waited anxiously in his quarters, staring out the viewport and waiting for the order to report to the transporter room. At Captain Onoshi's suggestion, he had replicated civilian clothing; a pair of black pants and dark blue turtleneck had come first, followed by a black utility vest and boots. It wasn't wise to wear a Starfleet uniform where he was headed, so he had wasted no time in changing into his new clothing. Still, he hoped he would be wearing his uniform again sometime soon. His combadge was currently pinned to the outside of the vest, which had various pockets both on the outside and inside. In one of the inside pockets, next to his heart, was a tiny holoimage of Seven.

He touched the picture and brought it out of its hiding place, wanting for just a moment to look upon her image. Seven had given him the picture of her as a gift; uncharacteristically uncertain, she had explained that she had read in the ship's database that it was very common, if not expected, for people involved romantically to share reproduced images of themselves with the object of their affection. The picture showed Seven posed next to her alcove, a small smile playing about her mouth. The image took his breath away and made his heart ache.

Carefully and reverently, he tucked the picture back into its hiding place next to his heart.

"Bridge to Ensign Kim." The hail startled him.

Relieved, he tapped his combadge and responded. "Kim here."

"Report to transporter room two. The Avalon is standing by."

"Acknowledged," he replied, already moving towards his door, which opened automatically for him.

"Good luck, Ensign." It was unmistakably Onoshi's voice.

Harry smiled briefly. "Thank you, Captain," he called out as he headed for the turbolift that would take him to his destination.

Less than a minute later, Harry walked purposefully into the transporter room, a sense of intention filling him as he stepped onto the raised platform. He tapped his combadge once more.

"Kim to Avalon. Standing by for transport."

He saw the familiar whitish haze and sparkles as the transporter took hold, transferring him from the Liberty to the Avalon. His vision cleared once the transport was complete and he could see there were two people waiting for him to step down from the transporter dais. Neither wore the uniform of Starfleet, their clothing reminiscent of what the Maquis once wore.

One was a woman, and although she was petite in stature, she radiated an aura of power similar to Captain Janeway. The man beside her was stiff, and unsmiling, and though his demeanor was one of polite interest, his eyes were cool and assessing.

The woman stepped forward and offered her hand in traditional Terran greeting, and Harry could see she appeared to be human.

"I'm Ayoko Mishu," she introduced herself with a wry smile. "Captain of the Avalon." She shook his hand firmly and released it, stepping back to introduce the man beside her. "This is my executive officer, Sito Evram."

Harry exchanged a nod with Sito, noting the ridges across his nose and the earring dangling from his right ear.

"We need to depart immediately if we're going to catch a transport ship through the wormhole, so I hope you don't mind if we assign you quarters after we get to the Gamma Quadrant?" Mishu asked politely, gesturing for Harry to accompany her out of the transporter room. Harry fell in step beside her, nervously glancing behind at the silently following Sito.

"No, I don't mind. In fact I wanted to thank you for helping me to rescue Seven," Harry replied honestly.

"Captain Onoshi is an old friend of mine." Mishu smiled as they made their way to the bridge. "And I owed him a favor." He followed her onto the bridge and stopped, uncertain of where he should be.

"You're an Ops officer, right?" Mishu asked, settling herself comfortably in her captain's chair.

Harry nodded, watching Sito move across the bridge with catlike grace to sit next to his diminutive captain.

"I'm short an Ops officer at the moment. Turk has been pulling double duty for both tactical and ops. I'm sure he'd appreciate the break." Mishu smiled, gesturing to the dark skinned man standing at the tactical station.

Turk smiled, his teeth flashing impossibly white against his ebony skin. "I will transfer the controls back to the Ops station, Mr. Kim. You're most welcome to it."

Relieved to have something useful to do on the trip, Harry took a familiar position behind the Captain at the Ops station, mindful of a pair of cool gray eyes on him, assessing his performance carefully.

"Helm, take us to the edge of the wormhole and hold position," Mishu ordered.

"Aye, Captain."

Any lingering doubts Harry had about the ability of Avalon's phasing cloak to mask it from detection was eased when he realized that the wormhole wasn't opening in response to their presence. Several moments passed before Harry caught sight of a Dominion cargo ship headed straight for the wormhole.

"There is a ship headed straight for us, ma'am," he reported.

"On screen," she ordered.

Obligingly, Harry tapped in the appropriate commands, and the Dominion ship was in full view on the main screen of the bridge.

"Perfect." Mishu smiled. "Amos, bring us in and phase us through."

Harry watched as they approached the cargo ship and felt his stomach lurch as they slowed, and passed through the outer hull of the cargo ship. Carefully, with the skill of much practice, Amos brought the ship to a stop amidst the cargo crates in the ship's hold.

"Hold position."

"Aye, Captain."

"Ensign Kim, monitor the progress of the cargo ship and let us know when we've passed through the wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant. The sooner we can leave the belly of this ship, the better." Mishu made an expression of distaste.

An appreciative chuckle resounded on the bridge. Obviously it was an old joke with them, Harry thought. He monitored their cargo ship's progress through the wormhole, and though he was careful not to let it show, he was amazed at the whole process. Once the cargo ship had exited, he reported their presence in the Gamma Quadrant.

"Take us out, Mr. Amos. Nice and easy." Mishu said calmly.

Harry felt another twinge as they passed through the hull of the cargo ship and back out into space, feeling a release of tension he didn't realize had built up.

"Welcome to the Gamma Quadrant, Mr. Kim," Sito said quietly, his voice low and even, his expression slightly more relaxed. Apparently, Harry had passed whatever qualifications the Bajoran expected and he was now accepted as a temporary member of Avalon's crew.

Harry nodded slightly, his attention taken by the sight of an enormous fleet of Jem'Hadar warships from attack ships to battleships, grouped together in a sort of parade formation. He swallowed, awed by the vast number of ships visible on the Avalon's view screen.

"Behold the *real* source of Cardassia's power over the Alpha Quadrant," Sito said quietly, disturbing the silence that had built on the bridge. "This is but one of thousands of such fleets the Dominion currently has at its disposal throughout both the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants. Even during the war, when the Dominion was effectively restricted to the resources of the Cardassian Union alone with less than six months of preparation, it was able to out build both the Federation *and* the Klingon Empire." The Bajoran shook his head slightly. "Combine that with the unbreakable morale of the Jem'Hadar and two thousand years of institutional experience in being a successful interstellar occupational force, and I think you'll see how difficult it will be to push the Dominion out of the Alpha Quadrant, even with guerilla fighting tactics and our edge in technology."

Harry swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. If the force before him represented only a small fraction of the Dominion's fleet, he could only agree with the Bajoran's bleak assessment.

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Janeway looked onward from her position in the counselor's seat on Enterprise's bridge. Picard had known she would want to be there, even as just an observer. They had reached Cardassia Prime and were now in orbit under conventional cloak, the Enterprise's sensors sweeping the planet for Voyager's crew while the Galaxy swept the stations and moons in orbit around the planet. As hoped, the system’s attention was focused on the cleanup of the ruins of a certain mine on Cardassia IV. Even so, both ships remained ready to phase-cloak at a moment's notice. Janeway could feel the tension on the bridge as if it were a tangible thing.

"I've located the labor camp where Voyager's crew is," Data reported, "All 18 women are present there."

"Very well, Mr. Data. Can your sensors tell if they are alone?" Picard asked.

Data nodded. "Given the close configuration of the sensor readings, and the fact that it is late evening on the continent, it is safe to conclude that the prisoners are alone. However, I can verify that assumption in a moment." He tapped a few commands on his console, studied the readout, and nodded in satisfaction.

"Bridge to transporter room four, begin beam out," Picard ordered crisply, raising a brow in Janeway's direction.

"We have them, sir," Data reported. "All 18 women are on board. The Galaxy reports that no further quantum signatures have been detected in the vicinity."

"Helm, rephase and lay in a course to the rendezvous point."

"Aye, sir!"

As the Enterprise and the Galaxy rephased, Picard relaxed visibly. He regarded Janeway a moment, not needing to be empathic to read her thoughts. "Would you like me to accompany you to the transporter room, Captain?" he inquired softly for her ears alone.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and stood in a fluid motion. She followed him to the turbolift, leaning weakly against the wall once the doors had shut her away from the eyes on the bridge.

Picard smiled wryly at her, knowing she needed a moment to gather her thoughts. "Deck eight," he ordered, feeling the lift move in response.

Janeway looked at him, obviously searching for words. "You have a ship's counselor on board?" she asked finally, straightening her shoulders.

"We actually have two, if you count Guinan." His lips twitched briefly in humor. "Counselor Baudrau is young, but quite competent. I will make sure she is at your crew's disposal for the remainder of your stay in our Alpha Quadrant," he said kindly.

Janeway closed her eyes and swallowed, feeling momentarily overwhelmed. They weren't finished yet, but their goal was a lot closer. She opened her eyes and smiled gratefully at Picard. "Thank you, Captain. For everything."

Picard matched her smile. "You're welcome. I only hope the other rescues go as smoothly as this."

Janeway nodded slightly, her thoughts turning to her crew and the hardships they had undoubtedly faced. It would probably take more than just a few weeks with a ship's counselor to undo all the damage the Cardassians had inflicted upon them. Silently she vowed that if she could find a way, she would make Gul Dukat pay for the anguish and suffering he had caused.

If Picard noticed that her smile had taken a bitter edge, he wisely chose not to comment.

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Guinness accepted the cup of coffee that Riker handed him, taking a deep sip before placing the cup on the table before him. "Did you learn anything else from Lieutenant Nicoletti?" Guinness asked, fixing his gaze on the man seated across from him.

Riker slid a padd across the desktop towards him. "Only what the doctor found from a physical examination. She's been beaten, starved, overworked, and," he paused, his expression both regretful and angry, "Just recently assaulted by two of her fellow laborers."

Guinness didn't comment, having read Riker's report on the chain of events that lead up to Susan's rescue. He could understand his fellow captain's anger, however, at not having prevented the last atrocity from being committed. He nodded slightly, his eyes scanning the padd in front of him, internally wincing at the list of injuries.

"She says the others are still on Empok Nor?" Guinness asked, looking up from the padd briefly.

Riker shrugged, taking a sip of his own coffee. "As far as she knows. She hasn't seen or heard from them since she was taken from Empok Nor three days ago."

Guinness pushed the padd away with an expression of distaste. "Comfort women. What an appalling thought."

Riker merely raised an eyebrow. "Appalling or not, they are members of Voyager's crew and we have been charged with rescuing them." He tapped a few commands on the padd Guinness had pushed away, and then slid it back to the other man. "Here is what I'm thinking."

Guinness studied the padd for a moment, his eyebrows rising in alarm. "That is awfully risky."

Riker nodded. "Nevertheless, it is the most feasible approach for this rescue. We cannot depend on all of the women being left unobserved for significant lengths of time, and we must anticipate that Nicoletti's disappearance will be discovered during the rescue attempt."

Guinness returned his attention to the padd and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Use a shuttlecraft to scan the station. Pinpoint the location of the women and beam them aboard."

"The shuttlecraft will be refitted and remarked to appear to be from Voyager. If the sensors on Empok Nor pick her up, they'll think it's Janeway. Of course, ideally, we don't want them to detect anything, but we must be prepared for any contingency."

Guinness nodded slowly. "Barring any difficulties, it should be a simple matter of beaming the three women aboard the shuttle and returning the craft to Challenger. You'll be vulnerable to detection only when you dephase to allow the shuttle on board, which is less than five seconds." He looked up at Riker. "Where do you want the Sovereign?"

Riker smiled. "Right in the middle of the station to monitor its operations center. If something happens, you'll be in the best position to help. With both of our ships phased, we won't be able to communicate with the shuttle, however, you'll be closest to them if there is any trouble."

"If there is trouble?"

Sighing, Riker took another deep drink of his coffee before forming his answer. "We'll have to be prepared to sacrifice the shuttle." Both men knew that the cost of losing a shuttle was far outweighed by the need to protect the presence of the ghost-fleet from their enemy.

Finishing the last of his drink, Guinness stood up, tugging at his uniform to straighten the wrinkles that had formed. "Very well. I await your message to initiate the rescue plan." He tapped his combadge. "Guinness to Sovereign. One to beam aboard."

Riker watched the last of the sparkles from the transport disappear before he moved from his desk to exit his ready room, hearing the doors swoosh shut behind him as he entered the bridge.

"We're arriving at Empok Nor, Captain," O'Neil reported.

"Yellow alert," Riker ordered, taking his seat. "On screen."

He watched the main viewscreen as they continued their approach to the space station. Traffic around the station was light, as Empok Nor had only recently been reestablished as a going concern. "Helm, all stop. We'll hold position here. Mr. O'Neil, open a secure channel to the Sovereign and hail them."

"Aye, sir." O'Neil tapped the appropriate commands. "They're responding."

"On screen."

"We'll hold our position at one megameter from the station," Riker said, looking up at the viewscreen.

"Aye, Captain." Guinness nodded. "We'll move in to monitoring position as you specified."

"Acknowledged," Riker paused before adding, "Good luck."

"You too, Captain."

Riker nodded to O'Neil who terminated the transmission. "Mr. Jerzen?" The Captain swiveled slightly in his chair to look at his first officer.

The Trill smiled slightly as he reached forward and touched the computer console next to him, bringing the floor plan of Empok Nor onto the small screen. "Comfort women quarters are located here. We'll strike at an hour when, hopefully, they will be back in their rooms."

Riker nodded his approval of the plan before directing his next question to O'Neil. "Is the shuttle ready?"

O'Neil briefly consulted his console. "Yes, sir. Refit crews report that the required sensors have been installed in the shuttlecraft and are online. We should be able to detect Voyager's quantum signature and locate the exact location of the women," O'Neil replied smoothly.

"Good. Our goal is to cause as little disturbance as possible. If the women are without company when we beam them away, so much the better."

The console in front of O'Neil chirped. "The Sovereign has taken position inside the station, sir."

"Very well. Assemble your away team, Mr. Jerzen."

"Aye, sir." The Trill stood, heading for the turbolift. "Mr. Sharp, Mr. O'Neil, you're with me."

The members of Commander Jerzen's away team followed him to the shuttle bay, each taking their appointed positions. After initiating the preflight sequence and the shuttle's cloaking device, Jerzen tapped his combadge to contact is captain.

"Shuttle to bridge. We're ready here, sir."

"Very well, dephase to conventional cloak on my mark," Riker replied, turning to his tactical officer. "Mark!"

"Launching shuttle," replied Jerzen, giving the thumbs up to Sharp.

Smoothly, the cloaked shuttle left Challenger. As soon as they were clear, Challenger's phase-cloak reinitialized, leaving them out of communications with the shuttlecraft. O'Neil ran a scan of their immediate area to see if they had been detected in that brief moment of vulnerability. There was no change in any of the traffic around them to give him any indication that they had been detected.

Sharp carefully guided the shuttlecraft to its destination directly underneath the station, where there was very little traffic. The need for a relatively traffic free parking place for the shuttle was mandatory, as Jerzen didn't want to risk an accidental collision. Sharp piloted the shuttle into place, holding position with the station.

Jerzen looked questioningly at O'Neil.

"I have sensor lock on all three women. They're alone."

Jerzen smiled briefly. "Better than expected. Let's get a transporter lock on..."

"Commander, we have a problem," Sharp interrupted, his voice rising slightly in dismay. "I've intercepted a message from Trivas IV. They've just discovered Nicoletti's disappearance." He looked up at Jerzen. "Empok Nor just went on alert..."

O'Neil felt his stomach drop at Sharp's next words.

"We've been spotted."

Title: Chrysalis
Author: Khylaren
Contact: Khylaren@earthlink.net
Series: VOY
Part: 7
Rating: [R]
Codes: K/7, P/T, J/C

Summary: This series follows after the events that occurred in “I Grieve” and “Possession”. Voyager finds a wormhole leading to the Alpha Quadrant. The problem is, it's not the ‘right’ Alpha Quadrant. The crew of Voyager finds themselves in an alternate timeline, where the Federation lost the war to the Dominion.

A special thank you to Thomas Lee for all his hard work beta-reading and editing. Without his technical knowledge on phase-cloaking technology, ships, and just about everything else Trek, this story would not be possible. So this part is especially dedicated to him.

Part VII Suspicions and Suppositions

Tom Paris lay restlessly on his bed in the quarters he'd been assigned aboard the USS Freedom. His fingers, laced together and lying across his stomach, twitched anxiously in the semi-darkness. He'd never been good at waiting, and he had been unsuccessful in his attempts to occupy his mind while he waited for Captain Evans to notify him that they had arrived at Harvat I. That planet had several large ore processing plants and manufacturing facilities on its surface - and, if the ghost-fleet's intelligencce was correct, was also the destination for a number of Voyager's crew.

The Freedom boasted of several dozen holodecks, and Tom had attempted to engage one of them to keep his mind occupied, but even the simulation of flying a Sovereign-class starship, something Tom had wanted to do since he first stepped onboard the Freedom, couldn't occupy his mind for long. The personal holographic

viewers in his room didn't hold much appeal either. Tom found he was unable to enjoy much of anything as long as he knew that B'Elanna and others of his crew were still out there.

He rolled over to his side and closed his eyes, trying to quiet his restless thoughts. Since arriving in this alternate Alpha Quadrant, Tom hadn't had a decent night's sleep. Despite his brave words to Harry in the messhall on Voyager, Tom's worries were every bit as pervasive as Harry's had been. While he tried to keep an optimistic front, his confidence was false. Hidden from the galaxy was a heart that ached painfully, a fearfulness that left him wiping his eyes surreptitiously in the darkness of his quarters.

"Bridge to Lieutenant Paris."

Tom's eyes snapped open and any trace of sleepiness vanished with the communication. He tapped his combadge in response. "Paris here."

"We're entering orbit around Harvat I. Captain Evans thought you might want to come to the bridge."

"I'm on my way." He sat up and slid to the edge of the bed, standing and stretching his muscles briefly. A quick check in the ensuite's mirror assured him that his brief 'resting period' had not mussed his appearance too badly. He ran a hand through his hair to straighten it, and across his jaw checking for any trace of stubble. Satisfied that he looked presentable, he left his quarters for the turbolift.

When Tom stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge of the Freedom, he couldn't help but look around the starship's command center, taking in its size and newness with no small amount of envy.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," Captain Evans greeted him politely. "We're about to initiate our scans of the planet." He gestured to the empty seat on his left, where normally a ship's counselor would sit. "Please have a seat."

"Thank you, sir." Tom moved to comply, settling himself not a bit too comfortably in the chair. He turned his gaze to the main viewscreen, his eyes widening slightly as he took in the planet that moved beneath them.

"The Columbus is moving into position, sir," the Ops officer reported. Tom blinked, remembering that on large starships like the Galaxys and Sovereigns, the Ops officer sat next to the helm in front of the captain instead of behind.

"Dephase to conventional cloak, Mr. Barrows," Evans ordered, shifting slightly in his chair. "Initiate the quantum signature scans."

"Aye, sir," Mr. Barrows replied. "Conventional cloak is on-line. Twenty-four quantum signatures have been detected in several areas on the planet."

"Begin scanning their surroundings. We have to beam them out without alerting anyone." Evans sat back in his chair, his fingers gripping the arms slightly. He knew that as long as the Freedom remained conventionally cloaked in order to find and recover Voyager's crew, the planet's active sensors could detect her, something he wanted desperately to avoid. The Columbus, still phased, held position above them, her sensors sweeping the area around them, ready to dephase at a moment's notice to warn them. Evans knew that there was more on the line here than just their ships and the Voyager personnel they were attempting to rescue - the secrecy of the ghost-fleet hung in the balance during these maneuvers.

Tom moved restlessly in his chair, fighting the urge to get up and pace the bridge. He hated feeling so useless.

"Sir, I've got transporter lock on 17 of them. Beaming them to transporter room one now," Barrows reported smoothly, his hands moving in continuous motion over his console.

Evans nodded. "Mr. Barrows, reengage the phase-cloak and maintain sensor lock on the remaining Voyager personnel." He redirected his attention to Tom, who looked ready to explode from tension. "Lieutenant, the other seven will be retrieved as soon as we can do so without any witnesses being present. In the meantime, I'm sure your crewmates would be happy to see you in transporter room one."

Grateful to have something useful to do at last, and hoping with everything he had that B'Elanna would be among the women just recently rescued, Tom practically leapt to his feet. "Aye, Captain." As he moved to the turbolift, he heard Captain Evans order Barrows to notify the Columbus of the progress of their rescue attempt.

"Transporter room one," Tom ordered, fighting the urge to pace in the confines of the lift. The doors slid shut and the lift began to move to his requested destination.

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"We've been spotted!" Sharp's voice broke harshly. "Empok Nor has raised its shields and three enemy fighters have been launched and are closing in on our position."

"Disengage cloak and raise shields!" Jerzen barked out, grateful that the shuttle had been re-marked as a Voyager auxiliary craft prior to the mission. From a stationary position barely outside of the station's shield perimeter, they couldn't hope to run away before being hit by either weapons fire or a tractor beam, and Jerzen remembered how the late USS Defiant had been crippled on its first mission when its station-bound commanding officer had waited too long to drop his ship's cloak and raise its shields.

"Aye, sir." Sharp's fingers fairly flew over the shuttle's console. As the shuttle's cloaking field dissipated, its shields energized - just in time to disperse an onslaught of disruptor bolts from the fighters that would have struck the shuttle's port warp nacelle.

"Shields down to 88%," O'Neil reported. "They're targeting our engines."

"Maneuvering thrusters ahead! Return fire, attack pattern delta nine." Jerzen sat back, thinking furiously. They couldn't beam the women off the station while its shields remained raised - yet. The Sovereign, phase-cloaked and hidden within the very center of Empok Nor, was supposed to scan for the station's shield frequency in case the shuttlecraft was discovered, so that Jerzen could beam the women out of the station through its shields if necessary. Guinness would move the Sovereign far enough away from the station so that he could try to dephase, transmit the frequency to them, and rephase fast enough to avoid being caught by the station's active sensors - without the cloak blowing out the ship's plasma relay system in the process (the fate of the USS Pegasus being a graphic reminder of the ultimate consequences of such a malfunction). But for Jerzen and his away team, the trick remained to keep the shuttlecraft and its engines intact long enough to accomplish the rescue. As another blow shook the small craft, Jerzen realized how difficult that might be.

"Shields at 80%," O'Neil said. "The station is trying to get a tractor beam on us."

Jerzen smiled tightly, his brow furrowed. "Let them."

"Sir?" O'Neil's look was uncertain.

"They don't want to destroy us. They're trying to capture us. Let's make it easier for them." The Trill nodded at Sharp. "Evasive maneuver delta one," he ordered, knowing that the pattern would bring them back directly within range of the station's tractor beam emitters. Jerzen hoped his gambit would pay off.

The shuttle bucked wildly for a moment, and Sharp shook his head. "They've locked the tractor beam on us."

"Sir, I'm receiving a directed transmission from the Sovereign." O'Neil paused, a smile flashing across his boyish features. "It's the station's shield frequency."

Jerzen glanced at the shuttle's tactical display, and breathed a sigh of relief that the Sovereign had neither been caught by the station's active sensors nor had overloaded its phasing cloak in the process. In addition, as he had hoped, the fighters had stopped firing on the shuttlecraft when it had been captured by the station's tractor beam. "Mr. Sharp, full impulse power. We need to hold them off as long as we can. Mr. O'Neil, can you get a lock on the women?"

"Adjusting our transporter and shield frequency to match...I've got a lock!"

Jerzen watched as three forms appeared in the space behind O'Neil. The women were obviously dressed for bed, the filmy material that made up their sleeping gowns leaving little to the imagination. Grateful for all his training in matters of propriety, Jerzen was able to ignore the sheerness of their clothing as he addressed them. "Ladies, I'm Commander Jerzen of the USS Challenger. We're in a bit of a tight spot at the moment, so I'm going to have to ask you to stay back here and hang on. It may get a bit bumpy in a moment."

Numbly, Jenny, Megan, and Tal nodded as they sat down, leaning on each other for support as the smell of their perfume invaded the small craft.

Satisfied that the women were all right for the moment, Jerzen returned to the pressing problem at hand. "Mr. O'Neil, send a plasma surge back through the tractor beam. We need to break their hold on us before they rotate their shield harmonics." Jerzen turned to the pilot as he took his seat next to him. "Mr. Sharp, the moment we're free, take us to warp six."

O'Neil tapped in the commands, sending a surge of plasma from the craft through the tractor beam that was now towing them to a docking port. The shuttlecraft shuddered violently, pitching him forward on his console as the tractor beam lost its hold.

"Now, Mr. Sharp!" Jerzen cried.

The shuttlecraft seemed to elongate momentarily as its warp engines kicked in, bursting away from the station and disappearing among the stars.

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Janeway found that she was grateful for all of her training and previous experiences as she followed Picard into the transporter room. They helped her to hide her shock and anger from the dirty, ragged-looking women who stood together, their gazes uncertain, some even frightened despite what should be familiar surroundings, most bearing testament to weariness beyond anything she had ever seen before. To say they

were filthy was an understatement. To describe them as cowed was insufficient. The silence between them was unnerving.

They hadn't seen her enter, and even with all of her training, Janeway was grateful for that extra moment to make certain her features were composed before she stepped into their line of sight, captain's mask firmly in place. Picard hung back, watching as Janeway's female crew registered her presence among them.

"Captain?"

Janeway turned to see who had spoken, recognizing Ensign Jenkins underneath the thick layer of dirt and bruises. As each woman came forward, she spoke their name, murmuring comforting words which, she hoped, expressed her sympathy and happiness to have them back. She could see the medical staff of the Enterprise beginning to move among her crew now, scanning for injuries, treating them on the spot if necessary. Several were immediately beamed to sickbay for treatment of extensive injuries. As Janeway scanned the faces that turned to her, faces that wore expressions of profound relief and something else she knew would stay with them for the rest of their lives, her silent vow to somehow, in someway, strike back at the man, no, the *creature*, responsible for their suffering strengthened.

"We'll be rendezvousing with Voyager in three days," Picard said quietly into her ear, startling her slightly. He gestured slightly with his chin at a young woman across the room from them who was listening to one of the rescued women with an expression of intent sympathy. "Counselor Baudrau has offered to transfer to your ship for the remainder of your stay in our timeline."

Janeway nodded slowly, feeling her mask slip slightly as she spotted Ensign Lang supporting a weak and pale looking crewman Jor. Lang was weeping freely. "Thank you, Captain," she replied. Her eyes followed Lang and Jor as a medic quickly assessed them and indicated that Jor be transported directly to sickbay.

"Captains?"

Dr. Beverly Crusher, chief medical officer of the Enterprise, had moved to stand next to them, watching her team working with a critical and caring eye. When the captain of Voyager turned to focus on her, Beverly smiled and extended her hand.

"We haven't met yet. I'm Dr. Beverly Crusher." She noted that Janeway's grip was firm and her handshake brief, typical enough of a Starfleet captain.

"Kathryn Janeway," she smiled quickly, familiar with Dr. Crusher’s name. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I've read several of your papers, and our EMH speaks highly of your work in xenoimmunological research."

Putting her curiosity about Voyager's EMH aside for a more appropriate moment, Dr. Crusher nodded her thanks. "I wanted to brief you about your recently recovered crewmembers."

Something in Dr. Crusher's voice gave Janeway pause, and her expression became serious once more. "What is it?"

Dr. Crusher handed Janeway a padd containing what information her team had gleaned from the rescued women. "These women all were working in a manufacturing facility labor camp. All of them are suffering from malnutrition and fatigue, however there are a few cases of more extensive injuries: broken bones from fights and infections caused from unhealed cuts and abrasions. The good news is that physically, these women should be fine in a week or so." She paused, waiting for the captain to look up from the padd she

was scanning. When Janeway did so, she continued in a much softer tone. "The bad news is that most of them will mentally suffer the effects of their captivity for some time. I'm sure Captain Picard has offered the services of Dr. Baudrau? Please encourage your crew to talk to her. Posttraumatic stress disorder is one of the most common side effects of captivity, and its debilitating effects should not be underestimated."

Janeway nodded. "I understand, Doctor."

Dr. Crusher met her gaze with a critical eye, noting the tightened lines about her mouth, the dark circles under her eyes, and the general look of bruised fatigue. "That goes for captains as well." She moved quickly away before Janeway could retort, knowing that her words would probably bounce off the shell that all captains seemed to have when it came to their own well-being.

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Gul Dukat found it difficult to concentrate on the report the obsequious little Vorta was giving. Dukat's expression remained neutral, almost pleasant, as he regarded Weyoun, maintaining an attitude of an intent listener - the only sign of the impatience that seethed below the surface was the idle drumming of his fingers against the arm of his chair. In reality, Dukat's thoughts were on the other side of the Bajoran wormhole.

He heard the armor of Katarin's uniform creak behind him, bringing his thoughts back to the present immediately. He focused on Weyoun, noting with some satisfaction that the Vorta looked annoyed. "Yes?"

"Is your attention span so short that you cannot bother to listen to the words of the Founders?" Weyoun asked, his voice dripping with disdain.

"Forgive me, Weyoun. My mind was on other matters," Dukat said mildly. He heard Katarin shift irritably behind him once more, uncomfortable in the small room that the Vorta had selected as a briefing room onboard the Vorta's battleship.

Weyoun blinked his strange gray eyes at the Cardassian. "What matters are more pressing than those of the Founders?"

"None, I'm certain." Dukat's smile was hard.

"But something is occupying your thoughts," Weyoun pressed. "Please, I insist you tell me."

"It is nothing of importance to the Founders," Dukat insisted.

"Let me be the judge of that." Weyoun's smile fled as his eyes narrowed coolly.

Dukat studied the man sitting across from him, disliking the Vorta immensely. He briefly toyed with the idea of killing him, then dismissed it. The previous Weyoun had died in a transporter accident only last month, and the Founders would be suspicious if his cloned replacement died too suddenly.

Instead of explaining, Dukat slid the report Katarin had handed to him just prior to their boarding of the battleship. He folded his hands and watched the nearsighted Vorta's eyes squint as he strained to read the data. After several agonizingly long moments, Weyoun scowled and pushed the report away, sliding it across the table. For a moment, the two adversaries regarded each other silently, until Weyoun's eyes watered and he was forced to blink.

"It appears you have a problem, Dukat," Weyoun said finally. "This 'Captain Janeway' escapes from Terok Nor with her ship, apparently with the assistance of a Cardassian renegade and an unknown form of cloaking technology that was either missed during the inspection of the ship following its initial capture - or was smuggled onto *your* station. A few days later, at the Cardassia IV mines you opened to place the male members of Janeway's crew in, there is a 'catastrophic industrial accident' - one that was destructive enough to preclude the finding of any organic remnants. And just now, we not only have an escaped prisoner on Trivas IV who just happens to be a member of Janeway's crew, but one of Voyager's shuttles was discovered, cloaked no less, performing a successful rescue of three other members of Janeway's crew from Empok Nor." Weyoun spread his hands out on the table, smiling condescendingly at Dukat. "I don't believe I need to tell you that this 'Captain Janeway' is creating an unacceptable amount of disorder in the Alpha Quadrant. What I want to know is, *what* are you going to do about her? Or do you need the Jem'Hadar to deal with her instead?"

The corners of Dukat's mouth lifted in a sneer. "I wouldn't worry about that, if I were you. It is nothing that I can't handle. It sounds as if the Founders have a much more serious problem on their hands." He shook his head in mock dismay. "Have they found a cure yet for their mysterious ailment?"

"The best scientists in three quadrants are working on it at Veltis II, as you should know. It is only a matter of time before the Founders are well and whole again." The Vorta was all too aware of Dukat's feelings about the Founders. Only the fact that the Cardassian Empire needed their support and seemingly endless supply of troops and ships to keep the Alpha Quadrant in its fist prevented Dukat from being overtly disrespectful of the Founders - and their representatives.

"I'm sure," Dukat agreed with false pleasantry, impatient for this meeting to end. "Is there anything else?"

Weyoun nodded slightly. "I expect a full report on what you intend to do about this problem in the Alpha Quadrant, despite the fact it is in your capable hands," he said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. Weyoun stood, his hands folded in front of him, waiting for Dukat to rise as well.

Biting back a curse, Dukat stood and moved away from the table, hearing the squeak of armor as Katarin moved to flank him.

"Your report will be in my terminal tomorrow morning, then?" Weyoun's voice was deceptively mild.

Dukat didn't bother to turn back as he made his way to the door. Only Katarin could see the sudden, vicious look that crossed the Gul's face before he replied in his customary, smooth tones.

"Of course."

Weyoun wasn't fooled, and as he watched the armored backs of Dukat and Katarin disappear down the hall, he considered the possibility that it was time to replace Dukat as Commander of the Cardassian/Bajoran sector with someone easier to control.

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When Tom entered the transporter room, his expression never revealed the war that was waging inside him emotionally. Approaching the small grouping of people, men and women alike in both styles of Starfleet uniform, he wanted badly to let his optimism rise to the surface, to feel the surge of joyous adrenaline at the hope that B'Elanna might be among those rescued. His pessimism won out, however, and he didn't allow it, afraid that he wouldn't be able to cope with the devastating disappointment of not seeing her face among

those recently beamed aboard the Freedom. It was far easier to expect the worst and be surprised by the best than the other way around.

Counselor Fick met him at the door, her black eyes raking his appearance over, taking in the mussed hair and gray shadows under his eyes, the overall exhaustion that was readily apparent to even the untrained eye. "Lieutenant, I don't have to use any empathic abilities to tell that you're exhausted," she said with a frown, placing a restraining hand on his arm, concern coloring her voice. "You're walking in your sleep."

Tom carefully removed her hand from his arm. "I am aware of my current state, Counselor. I need to be here right now. I can sleep later."

Counselor Fick stepped out of his way, falling in step beside him. She sighed, knowing that he was right. Emotionally, he most definitely needed to be here right now.

As they drew closer, Tom recognized several faces among the group, and forced a cheerful smile in response to the tired yet relieved smiles of the women once they spotted him. Ensign Kyoto. Ensign Kaplan. Crewman Swift. Lieutenant Anderson. Tom was glad to see them, though none were the one he sought. "Have any of you seen B'Elanna?" He tried to keep his expression from falling as each shook her head no.

"She was taken with a few others to ore processing," Ensign Kaplan volunteered. "I know because we were on the same transport together when we were taken from Deep Space Nine. I overheard our guard tell the Gul that he had two groups, one for the manufacturing facility, the other for ore processing."

Ensign Kyoto nodded. "Mariah was sent to ore processing when she got in that fight with Klursa. A Klingon who shared our barracks with us," Kyoto explained, seeing Tom's puzzled look.

"How many of you were on the transport, do you remember?" Tom asked.

Kaplan was silent, then looked at Lieutenant Anderson. "Lydia, do you know? I think it was 24."

Anderson nodded. "That is right, I remember counting to see how many of us had made it off of the station."

Tom turned to Fick. "The Captain said that there were seven more on the planet." He could almost dare to hope.

Fick nodded slowly, feeling the surge of emotions emanating from him. "I'd say that's pretty good odds for you, Mr. Paris."

Tom nodded, a sudden smile breaking across his face at the counselor's betting metaphor. Anyone who knew Tom could honestly say that he was always one whom good odds favored.

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Light-years distant from Empok Nor, in the depths of open space, a small shuttlecraft flew a steady course away from the station at warp six, hidden from enemy eyes once again by its cloaking device. As Lieutenant Sharp made a slight adjustment to their heading, he heard his fellow crewmates talking with the three women they had just risked their lives - and the ghost fleet's secrecy - to rescue. He cast a glance behind him, admittedly curious to see what was happening. Commander Jerzen had replicated uniforms for each of the women and was talking with them while O'Neil was scanning them with a medical tricorder to make sure their health was not in jeopardy. Sharp's console chirped, bringing his attention back to his task at hand.

"Commander, Challenger is hailing us," Sharp reported.

"Slow to impulse," Jerzen replied. "Return the hail." He turned and handed the last pile of clothing to the young Bajoran woman, noting that, of the three, she looked the least worse for wear. "Here, you ladies might want to change back into uniform before we reach the Challenger." A small area in the back of the shuttle had been cleared and a replicated curtain hung for the sake of privacy.

Tal Celes held the uniform against her chest, turning to Jenny and Megan. "You two can go first," she said softly. Since being taken by the Cardassians, the twins had become almost inseparable, each refusing to leave the other alone unless they were forcefully separated. She watched them move together towards the back of the shuttle, Megan pulling the curtain shut behind them.

"We're safe here for the moment, Captain. All three were recovered despite the station discovering us," Jerzen was saying as he moved towards the front of the shuttlecraft. "We'll see you shortly. Jerzen out."

"Anything further on Empok Nor?" O'Neil asked, taking his place behind the ops console.

"Just before we warped out, the Sovereign resumed its monitoring of Empok Nor's operations center," Jerzen said, turning to look at O'Neil. "Captain Guinness reports that not only are they blaming Susan's disappearance on her fellow inmates, but they also believed our shuttle disguise, so now they are blaming the whole thing on the 'renegade Captain Janeway'."

"Captain Janeway is alive?" Tal asked, having overheard the report. Her expression was hopeful. "She's free?"

Jerzen nodded, smiling. "So is over half of your crew," he answered. "I'll be happy to fill you in on all the details once we get out of this sector and back with the rest of the fleet."

"What details?" Megan and Jenny Delaney asked simultaneously, having returned from changing. The dullness in Jenny's expression had lightened a bit, and Megan's hands drifted over the material of her uniform as if she couldn't quite believe she was dressed in a Starfleet uniform once more.

Tal hugged her uniform tightly against her, unable to keep the smile from her face. "Captain Janeway is alive and free. And so is much of our crew." She watched as a little more life crept into their expressions, their eyes brightening with the news.

"Sir, Challenger is in position." Sharp said quietly, not wanting to interrupt the moment with the mundane.

Jerzen nodded. "Take us in, Mr. Sharp." He watched the Bajoran woman, Tal, hug the other two women briefly before entering the makeshift dressing room to change into her uniform. Despite the good news, the twins unconsciously clung to each other, leaning on one another for support. As he sat down at his console, Jerzen wondered if they would be able to function in the command structure of a starship ever again.

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A strange sensation tickled the back of Harry's neck, causing him to look up from the Ops console in front of him. Sito and Mishu were both looking at him, their expressions identically bemused. Harry flushed with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, did I miss something?"

The tall Bajoran stood, moving easily across the bridge to where Harry was. "Captain Mishu has asked twice now if you would like to be shown your quarters." Sito's smile was crooked. "You have been concentrating very hard on reading those intelligence reports, young Mr. Kim. You didn't respond."

"I don't expect you to read all of them, Mr. Kim," said Mishu with a chuckle. "I only wanted you to look them over to see if you saw anything that might look familiar and help provide us with some further insights on where to begin looking for your Seven of Nine."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, I haven't found anything yet. But I would like to keep reading. I can wait to see my quarters, if that is all right."

Sito nodded congenially. "We're breaking for a meal in an hour. I expect you're hungry?"

As if on cue, Harry's stomach growled at the mention of food, causing his fellow bridge members to chuckle.

"I'll take that as a yes, young Mr. Kim." Sito turned and moved back to his chair beside Mishu. "It's Turk's turn to cook."

Harry cast a glance over at the large, dark-skinned human manning the tactical station. Turk's teeth flashed in an impossibly white smile.

"Hope you like chili, little man."

Harry smiled uncertainly at Turk. "Never had it." It was difficult for him to get used to the informal structure on this ship.

Turk chuckled, a low rumble that echoed across the bridge. "You'll like it, I promise."

For some reason, Harry was not reassured, especially since both Mishu and Sito were trying unsuccessfully to contain their smiles. As he turned his attention back to the reports in front of him, Harry vowed to eat the *chili*, no matter how bad it tasted. He was confident he would succeed. Compared with Neelix's concoctions, how bad could Turk’s chili be?

The Ops console beeped.

"We've reached relay station C-47, Captain," Harry reported dutifully, hunger forgotten momentarily.

"On screen, Mr. Kim. Mr. Amos, bring us in," Mishu ordered.

Harry complied, looking up to watch as the Avalon approached the Dominion relay station. Deep inside the relay's computer core was a modified Class-V reconnaissance probe that was invisible and immaterial to normal space. As Turk had explained to him, these probes had been placed by the intelligence ships in relay stations throughout the Gamma Quadrant - especially the ones close to the recently-discovered Founder's homeworld - and were a vital source of information that gave them the ability to monitor Dominion activities and communications. Having been placed by phase-cloaked ships, the probes themselves remained phased and were detectable only to other phase-cloaked ships. However, they were far too small to carry full-fledged phase cloaks of their own, and thus they were programmed to propel themselves to a safe distance and self-

"I'd say that, of those three planets, Veltis II is the best place to start looking," Sito said. He looked at Harry. "Although the Veltis system is pretty far removed from any of the Dominion's major cybernetic and nanotechnological research facilities, there is a large medical/science research station there. The majority of the facility is currently being used for finding a cure for the disease that is infecting the Founders. A small part of the station, however, is still being used for the station's original purpose - to study other species."

"Efficient little xenophobes that they are, the Founders like to study the 'solids' inside and out. It helps them understand how to better avoid, control, or destroy them," Mishu added with a touch of bitterness. "Seven of Nine would definitely be of interest to them, as they have never before seen a Borg up close and personal."

Harry swallowed. He didn't need Mishu to spell out what the Founders most likely intended for his Seven.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Mishu apologized, seeing the young man's face pale considerably. "I just wanted you to know why we felt that was the best place to start looking for her."

Harry nodded, his stomach full of knots. "I understand."

Mishu looked at him a moment longer before turning back and settling herself once more in her chair. "Helm, lay in a course for Veltis II, warp nine-point-nine."

"Aye, Captain," Amos replied, his hands imputing the commands into the helm.

Turk grumbled, "Veltis II is a fortress. It's always been one of the most secure and protected planets in the entire Dominion." The giant man chuckled ruefully. "Getting in, to say nothing of getting out with a subject just brought there, is going to be very tricky."

The diminutive captain of the Avalon smiled. "Very tricky is what you're best at, Turk."

The bridge fell silent as the small starship made its way towards Veltis II. In that quiet moment, Harry visualized what it would be like to see Seven of Nine once more and tried to believe that it might actually happen.

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B'Elanna crouched next to Mariah, pressing her hands over the wound that was seeping blood through her fingers despite the pressure she was applying. If she could get it to stop bleeding long enough for her to bandage it, she could go to one of the guards for help. Her mind instinctively recoiled at the thought of having to seek out a Cardassian for help, but if she wanted to save Mariah's life, then that was what it would take.

A low groan made her look across the floor, and she saw with unease that Mariah's attacker was beginning to regain consciousness. B'Elanna looked frantically around her, but for once, there was not a guard in sight, nor was there anything readily available for her to improvise as a weapon against Mariah's assailant. She and Mariah had pulled kitchen duty this evening, and as they had finished with the last of the dishes, Mariah had been attacked. B'Elanna had been able to surprise and knock out the assailant, giving B'Elanna time to attend to Mariah's stab wound. Movement from the woman who had attacked Mariah forced her decision, and with one hand still pressing on the wound, she ripped a large piece of fabric from the least filthy part of her uniform.

"Here." She took Mariah's hand and put the fabric in it, putting the wounded woman's hand against the injury and holding it there. "Press as hard as you can. Don't let up," she instructed harshly.

Mutely, Mariah nodded, grimacing in pain.

A blow struck B'Elanna from behind, knocking her across the room and into the divider that separated the eating area from the cooking area. Pain radiated from her shoulder where it had struck the unyielding metal of the divider. B'Elanna moved quickly, getting back to her feet. A low growl resonated behind her and B'Elanna whirled to face her attacker, a growl of her own rising from her throat.

A quick look told B'Elanna that Klursa hadn't had any better luck than she had in finding her shank, which she had dropped when B'Elanna had knocked her away from Mariah. Unfortunately, the woman in front of her was a full Klingon and nearly a foot taller than her, both definite disadvantages. B'Elanna didn't wait for Klursa to move, but instead used her smaller size and speed to her best advantage, striking the woman dead center and taking her by surprise. B'Elanna's momentum carried them both to the ground, and as the back of Klursa's head struck the metal floor, B'Elanna quickly rolled away, getting to her feet once more.

Klursa snarled angrily, picking herself up from the floor and readying herself for another attack. As the two circled each other warily, B'Elanna hoped that the noise would attract attention. Suddenly, Klursa lunged at her, and she was unable to move away in time. The blow struck her in the chest, knocking the wind out of her lungs and sending her skidding across the floor.

A quick glance at the corner where Mariah was lying showed B'Elanna that her crewmate was doing much worse. Blood had already soaked the material and Mariah was unable to keep enough pressure on it to be effective. B'Elanna's jaw set resolutely. Klursa had to be dealt with now or Mariah was going to die right there on the floor.

A blur of movement told B'Elanna that her opponent was charging her again, intent on bashing her against the wall behind her. B'Elanna rolled out of the way, kicking out with both legs and catching Klursa behind the knees. As the bigger woman stumbled, B'Elanna leapt for her back, snaking an arm around her neck and using her weight as leverage against her. Klursa howled in rage, trying vainly to break B'Elanna's grip. B'Elanna tightened her hold and squeezed with all of what remained of her strength, feeling triumphant as the other woman dropped to her knees, then fell forward on her face, nearly crushing B'Elanna's hand in the process. As she felt consciousness slip from Klursa, B'Elanna was able to relax her grip and sit up, a howl of triumph escaping her throat.

She never saw the perfectly aimed blow from behind that knocked her senseless. Darkness closed her eyes, and she slumped forward across the body of her recently beaten foe.

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Vorik kneeled on the mat, his backside barely touching his heels, blowing gently on his tea to cool it before taking a cautious sip. Finding the temperature acceptable, he proceeded to take a regular swallow, noting the fruity flavor of the tea, before placing the small, delicate cup beside him on the floor. He looked across from him expectantly, watching his partner in this tea ceremony. Dama picked up the teacup from the floor and mimicked his earlier actions, taking that first careful sip, then a deeper swallow, before placing the cup next to her on the floor. She caught his eye and smiled.

Vorik didn't exactly sigh in exasperation as that would have been un-Vulcan of him, but his whole attitude expressed his disapproval.

Dama's smile slipped. "I'm sorry, Vorik. It is difficult for me not to smile when I am happy."

"But that is the point, Dama."

She carefully schooled her features into the calm, emotionless mask she had practiced earlier in her mirror. When she felt she had attained it, she carefully took another drink of her tea. "Do Vulcans experience happiness, even though they don't express it?"

Vorik tilted his head slightly as he considered her question. He was not a teacher, nor did he have the level of experience in the Kohlinar that Tuvok had, but he thought perhaps he could help guide this young woman until she reached Vulcan and could be taught by those more knowledgeable than he. "We do not experience happiness the way that other species experience happiness. We can find a kind of satisfaction in things, or even a sense of contentment in some cases. Of course, none of these emotions are expressed openly."

"Except during the Pon Farr."

The tips of Vorik's ears colored slightly and he carefully placed his cup next to him. "That is a very private matter, not to be discussed casually, and certainly not among mixed company during a tea ceremony."

Dama was silent a moment as she contemplated the young Vulcan in front of her. His eyes were averted as he seemed to find some interest in the tapestry rug that lay between them. "Uncle Terik has not spoken to you yet, then." Dama sighed, giving up all pretense of being as Vulcan as Vorik would like her to be.

Vorik blinked, bringing his attention to focus on the woman across from him. "What do you mean?"

Dama stood quickly, brushing the wrinkles from her skirt and wrapping her robes around her tightly. "It's nothing, never mind. Thank you for the tea ceremony." She turned quickly on her heel and fled the room, leaving a very puzzled Vorik in her wake.

Since they had arrived at Terik's home, a simple dwelling located on a mixed species colony several light years from Risa, Dama's behavior had been even more...Vorik searched his mind for the right word...erratic than usual. While Terik lived in the usual Vulcan manner, he was strangely indulgent when it came to his niece's behavior. Dama's father had left them shortly after they had arrived, saying he needed to get in touch with his contacts to find out if there was any news regarding Voyager and her crew. The human had shook Vorik's hand before leaving, and Vorik had gotten the fleeting impression that the man was running from something. He would supposedly be returning once he had news.

Vorik sat back on his heels and brought his hands up, index and middle fingers pointed outward, thumbs touching. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and focused his thoughts, his forgotten tea growing cold beside him.

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Max Charven sat on his stool next to the biobed and watched the steady rise and fall of Seven's chest as she breathed, still deeply asleep, the regeneration machine whirring softly above her head. The padd he was working on sat on the table next to him, momentarily forgotten as he studied his patient.

His eyes traced over her ocular implant, which arched gracefully around her left eye. He admired the fairness of her skin, the faint blush to her cheeks even as she regenerated. His eyes fell to the full curve of her lips,

lush and pink, and open slightly, giving him the barest peek of her white teeth. His gaze shifted to the golden strands of hair that lay in disarray against her pillow, having worked loose from the complicated twist they had once been pinned in. Their color reminded him of a picture of wheat fields on Terra that he had once seen.

The doctor sighed, picking up the padd once more. Seven of Nine had 12 more hours to regenerate before he felt it was safe to wake her. Until then, he would have to content himself with watching her, studying her, and speculating.

The Founders expected him to study her, learn as much as he could about the Borg as a species, and then remove her implants if he was not able to study their function while they were still part of her. Charven hoped that would not be the case. He found her fascinating, a living paradox of beauty and machine, and it would destroy something inside of him to kill her. Surely he could discover a means to study the implants and keep this cool beauty alive.

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"You have visitors," the doctor said softly into Susan's ear. "Do you feel up to it?"

Susan nodded, struggling to sit up. With the doctor's assistance, she managed to sit upright, feeling stronger than she had in days. After tucking a pillow behind her back for support, the doctor nodded at her assistant.

"Send them in."

Susan's eyes pricked with tears as Megan, Jenny, and Tal Celes walked into sickbay, each carrying flowers for her. Jenny and Megan held back slightly, but Tal sat on the edge of Susan's bed, handing a small bouquet of daisies to her. Still fighting tears, Susan looked down at the bunch of yellow and white flowers.

"Thank you. They're my favorite." She looked up at Tal and found only compassion in her eyes.

"Are you all right?" Megan asked hesitantly. "Captain Riker told us what happened to you after you left Empok Nor."

Susan was unable to prevent the bitter laugh that escaped her at the thought. "I should have stayed with you three. You tried to tell me, Tal, but I didn't want to hear it." A sob caught in her throat and she clutched the daisies tightly to her, accidentally crushing the small blooms against her chest.

"It's all right," Tal touched her hand gently. "You couldn't have known."

The irony of the situation was not lost on any of them, and Susan was both touched by and ashamed of the sympathy she read in their eyes.

Megan and Jenny moved closer, their flowers forgotten as they tried to comfort the woman who cried softly into her hands.

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Captain Janeway sat, her hands folded around a steaming cup of coffee, her thoughts another quadrant and timeline away from the small table in Ten-Forward she currently occupied. A shadow crossed the table and a

dish of ice cream, covered with chocolate sauce and whipped cream, was placed in the center. Two spoons stuck out from either side of the dessert. Startled out of her reverie, Janeway looked up.

Guinan smiled down at the red-haired Captain. "This is a remedy from an old friend of mine for whatever ails you." Guinan gestured to the seat across from Janeway. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Shaking her head, Janeway cast a quick glance around the lounge and noted that they were currently the sole occupants, which made her wonder what time it was.

"It's 2230, in case you were wondering," Guinan said as she sat, arranging her robes around her comfortably before reaching for one of the spoons. "Dig in, it melts rather quickly from the hot chocolate syrup."

Smiling bemusedly, Janeway took the other spoon and scooped up a bit of the ice cream and chocolate, closing her eyes as the delightful concoction melted on her tongue. Surprisingly enough, the dessert did make her feel slightly better and she found herself reaching out with the spoon once more.

"This is wonderful," she admitted, smiling. She placed her spoon next to the dish and watched as Guinan continued to take small bites from the dessert. "Thank you for sharing it with me."

Guinan shrugged, finally tired of eating, and placed her spoon on the table. "You're welcome. You looked like you could use a little cheering up, and I have it on good authority that chocolate can go a long way in the cheering department." Guinan looked at her, dark eyes warm and open.

Janeway got the feeling that those eyes missed very little, despite their friendly appearance. "I think it would take an ocean of chocolate for me," she said softly, taking a sip of her coffee.

Guinan nodded, sticking her finger in a bit of whipped cream sticking to the edge of the dish and licking it off. "Some troubles are like that. You just can't drown them deep enough."

Janeway smiled at that, taking another sip of her coffee. "Sometimes it is not just a question of drowning them," she said wryly, "but of keeping them drowned."

Guinan nodded knowingly. Pushing herself away from the table, she stood up, her voluminous robes falling about her gracefully. She reached out and picked up the dish and the two spoons, looking down at Janeway with a small smile. "There are sometimes things that won't stay down no matter how deeply we bury them, and there is usually a reason for them to keep popping up to the surface. Maybe if we know the reason why they keep rising up, we're halfway to discovering a way to get rid of them altogether."

Watching the hostess of Ten-Forward walk away with the mostly eaten dish of ice cream, Janeway felt momentarily puzzled, confused at what exactly the El-Aurian had been hinting at. She knew, from Captain Picard, that the woman had a reputation for being a good listener, and occasionally doling out good pieces of advice. What Picard hadn't told her was that Guinan's advice was usually delivered in a less than straightforward fashion.

Thoughtfully, Janeway finished the last of her coffee. The longer she thought about what Guinan had said, the more she seemed to understand what the woman had meant. Perhaps, she thought, it was time to stop carrying everything inside of her, especially since there was someone in her life who would be more than happy to help her carry the load.

Janeway stood, carrying her cup with her to the recycler, suppressing a yawn. She felt the last few days' excitement catching up with her, and suddenly, sleep seemed like a very good thing. She nodded farewell to Guinan, who returned it with a smile, busily wiping the countertop of the bar.

The doors to Ten-Forward opened and Janeway stepped through them, nearly colliding with Tuvok in the process.

"Captain," Tuvok stepped back slightly, allowing Janeway to regain her equilibrium. "I need to talk to you."

So much for going straight to bed, Janeway thought ruefully. "What is it, Tuvok?" She began walking towards her quarters, Tuvok falling in step beside her.

"I have some disturbing news," he said without preamble. "After studying the information that the Galaxy gathered on the wormhole that brought us here, Commanders LaForge and Data have come to some distressing conclusions."

Janeway felt an all too familiar sinking sensation in the general vicinity of her stomach. "I'm almost afraid to ask," she said dryly.

Nonplussed, Tuvok continued. "It appears that the wormhole became dormant immediately after our arrival in this quadrant. Mr. Data calculates that we have approximately 37 days, 4 hours before the wormhole becomes active again, at which point we have 1 hour to cross it back to the Delta Quadrant and our own timeline before the wormhole resumes its dormancy."

Janeway stopped still, turning her head to look at Tuvok. To a person unfamiliar with Tuvok's expressions, the Vulcan looked as impassive as always. But Janeway, more familiar with Tuvok's expressions than anyone, could easily read how worried he truly was.

"37 days?" she asked, her voice cracking slightly.

Tuvok nodded. "There are also risks to crossing the wormhole that were not present on our previous crossing."

Janeway looked at him a moment longer before resuming walking. "Risks? What kind of risks?"

"In order for the wormhole to take us to our correct reality and quadrant, all members of the crew who were aboard during the original crossing *must* be present. It is likely that if we were to attempt crossing the wormhole without the entire crew, the wormhole will eventually destabilize into an infinite number of alternate realities which will cross over into this one - or our own."

"I wasn't planning on leaving anyone behind," Janeway said, frowning as they stepped into the turbolift together. "Has Captain Picard been informed yet?"

"Deck three," Tuvok ordered before turning back to Janeway. "Commander Data is on his way to inform Captain Picard now."

The lift stopped at the appropriate deck and the doors hissed open. Janeway stepped out, Tuvok moving to walk beside her once more.

"We're supposed to be rendezvousing with the rest of the Ghost Fleet in three days," Janeway said, her brow furrowed with thought. "That only gives us 34 days if we haven't gathered up all of Voyager's crew by that point."

Tuvok merely nodded, knowing that Janeway didn't want an answer at this point; she was merely thinking out loud.

"What if we don't make it, Tuvok?" Janeway stopped in front of her quarters, turning to face him once more. "What if we don't have everyone rescued in time before we have to cross the wormhole?" Janeway rubbed her forehead, feeling the beginnings of a headache starting to form between her eyes. She dropped her hand and looked up at Tuvok. "Will the wormhole cycle again? What are the repercussions if we have to stay here?" she asked softly.

Tuvok met his friend's gaze frankly. "I don't know, Captain," he replied, his voice grave. "But we can only do as much as we can do, and nothing more. Worrying about the things we cannot change is illogical."

Janeway nodded slowly, feeling the sudden burst of energy she had begin to wane. "I don't know what I'm going to do about this yet," she said, running a hand through her hair. "Right now I'm so tired, I can hardly think straight."

"Rest, then. Nothing can be done until we rendezvous with the rest of the Ghost Fleet," Tuvok said.

Janeway turned, triggering the door of her quarters open, and looked back at Tuvok as she stepped inside. "Good night."

"Sleep well, Captain." Tuvok turned on his heel and walked away, the door of her quarters shutting with a hiss after he left.

Placing her uniform into the recycler, Janeway pulled the comfortable long flannel nightgown she had replicated over her head, enjoying the feel of the fabric against her skin. After completing her ablutions, she tucked herself into bed, pulling the blankets up around her shoulders. Reaching for the extra pillow, she curled herself around it, thinking ruefully that the pillow was a poor substitute for the man she was missing.

Three more days, she thought sleepily, closing her eyes. Within moments, she was asleep, the stars racing by the viewport above her as the Enterprise flew towards her destination.

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B'Elanna opened her eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. Whatever they had used to hit her head with had given her a vicious headache. She squinted slightly, taking stock of her surroundings, and, not liking what she was seeing, closed her eyes once more.

"Get up, petaQ!" A voice hissed harshly from across the room. "I know you're awake, half-breed. Hab SoSlI' Quch!"

"No," B'Elanna answered mildly, rolling over to glare at Klursa across from her cell. "My father does." Head still throbbing, she managed to pull herself into a sitting position. The cell in which she sat was fairly small, approximately two meters wide and three meters deep, and its forcefield-covered entrance led out into an open corridor that separated her cell from Klursa's. She noted with some satisfaction that Klursa's neck was bruised.

B'Elanna opened her mouth to hurl an insult back at Klursa when Glinn Daral stepped between their cells, looking none too pleased. He looked at B'Elanna for a moment before turning his attention fully to the woman in the cell across from her.

"This is not the first time you have tried to murder another slave, Klingon, but it will be your last under my jurisdiction. You are being sent to the mines of Trivas IV. I'm sure Gul Girok can find some use for you there." He cast one last look at her before nodding at the four guards who had stepped up to flank him. One of them moved to Klursa's cell and deactivated its forcefield.

With quick efficiency that spoke of much practice, the other three guards entered Klursa's cell, overpowered the Klingon, and sedated her before she could even howl a protest. B'Elanna watched as they carried her comatose body away and swallowed, suddenly frightened of the gray eyes that turned in her direction.

"While fighting is expressly forbidden among slaves, you did succeed in saving the woman Klursa attacked without causing any further damage or disorder. You will be given one day to rest and then will return to your duties. I expect no further trouble from you." Daral's gaze was stern.

"Mariah is okay?" B'Elanna had to ask.

Daral nodded slowly. "She's in the infirmary and will be unable to work for a day. She is the one who explained what happened in the kitchen."

Naomi walked down the corridors of the Galaxy-class starship, marveling at its size, its differences from Voyager, and how much brighter everything seemed. Her mother had tucked her into bed an hour ago and left, thinking her daughter was sound asleep in the temporary quarters Captain Subok had assigned them. Once certain her mother was gone, Naomi had slipped out, curious about the ship that had rescued them from their captivity on Bajor.

Not that their captivity had been all that bad, as compared to what she had overheard the others speaking about. Their mistress had been incredibly kind to her and her mother, and they had been treated exceptionally well. The others on Bajor had not necessarily been so lucky, a fact that Naomi knew her mother was trying to protect her from.

Moving nimbly around the crewmembers that were moving up and down the corridors on their way to and from tasks, Naomi found herself in front of a turbolift whose doors automatically opened for her. Throwing caution to the winds, Naomi stepped into the turbolift alone and surprised herself by giving the command in a fairly firm voice.

"Bridge."

The doors shut and the lift obligingly began its movement towards her destination. When it stopped and the doors opened, Naomi couldn't quite imagine she had been brazen enough to think she could just step out onto the bridge and talk to the captain. She stood nervously just inside the lift, not daring to speak to tell the turbolift another destination for fear of discovery.

A head popped into view, looking quizzically inside the lift before it spotted the small, half-Katurian female that stood frozen to the left of the lift doors.

"Hello," the voice said kindly. "Are you lost?"

Looking up at the friendly face, Naomi found her voice. "No. I just wanted to see the bridge."

Lieutenant Commander Jeval smiled at the little girl. "You're one of the people we rescued from Bajor, aren't you?" She held out her hand to Naomi. "I'd be happy to show you the bridge."

Tentatively, Naomi took the proffered hand and stepped out into the bridge, her eyes widening in surprise and delight as she took in her surroundings.

The bridge was much larger and laid out somewhat differently than Voyager's bridge. Naomi particularly liked the domed ceiling, the oval window in the center giving her a peek of the stars streaking by them. As the woman led her over to the command center, Naomi's eyes flew up in surprise. "Captain Subok isn't here?"

Jeval sat comfortably in the captain's chair, motioning Naomi to sit next to her in Counselor Bjorn's seat. "No, Captain Subok isn't here right now. But he won't mind if you sit here with me for a moment. What's your name, little one?"

Naomi continued her examination of the bridge with awe. "I'm Naomi Wildman, Captain's Assistant."

Jeval schooled her features to look serious. "Lieutenant Commander Tavi Jeval, Executive Officer, USS Musashi."

Naomi offered her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Jeval took her hand and shook it firmly. "And I am pleased to meet you. I didn't know there was a position for Captain's Assistant." Jeval smiled, releasing the small hand. "How long have you been in that position?"

"Oh, for about a month now. It's a special position on Voyager because we're lost in the Delta Quadrant," Naomi said importantly. Her brow creased in momentary confusion. "Or we were, until we got lost here. Do you think we'll get back to the Delta Quadrant?"

Jeval put on her best smile, patting the small arm with confidence she hoped was well founded. "Of course. Your captain is a clever woman, and she has all of us to help her."

Naomi nodded, satisfied with that answer, swinging her small legs comfortably in the too-large chair. "Is Captain Subok nice?"

Jeval could see the shoulders of Lieutenant M'ltis shaking slightly with restrained chuckles as she tried to think of the best way to describe their Vulcan captain. "Yes, he's nice."

"I heard he's Vulcan. Is that true?"

Jeval nodded again, "Yes, Captain Subok is Vulcan."

"We have two Vulcans on Voyager, Vorik and Tuvok. Tuvok is nice too, although he's not supposed to show it."

Jeval smiled. "Well, Captain's Assistant Wildman, I think it's time I get you back to your quarters. I'm sure your mother doesn't know where you are, am I right?"

Naomi had the grace to look embarrassed. "I did kind of sneak out."

"If I promise to let you meet Captain Subok, will you promise you'll go back to your quarters and not sneak out again? You could get lost or hurt, and you wouldn't want your mother to worry about you, do you?"

Naomi shook her head. "I guess not." She sighed, getting up from the chair. She held her hand solemnly over her heart and said with great seriousness, "I promise."

Jeval nodded. "I will take you to meet Captain Subok tomorrow right after the morning briefing, agreed?"

Naomi nodded, not quite able to stifle the yawn that had crept up on her.

Jeval looked at M'ltis, who was not quite successful at hiding his grin. "Lieutenant M'ltis, you're in charge until I get back."

"Aye, sir."

Yawning widely, Naomi followed Lieutenant Commander Jeval into the turbolift.

"Deck five."

The doors closed and the lift moved swiftly towards its destination. Jeval counted four yawns between stops and had to help Naomi the last few meters to her quarters.

When Jeval rang the door chime, it slid open almost immediately to reveal a worried and anxious mother. Knowing that scolding her daughter was an exercise in futility, Sam vowed to have a serious talk about what was allowed behavior with her daughter in the morning. After tucking the half-asleep child into her bed, Sam kissed her cheek, stroking the blonde hair that tumbled in disarray over her pillow before turning and leaving the sleeping area, making sure the lights were dimmed for comfort.

"Thank you," Samantha said to Jeval, who had waited in the living room area of their quarters. "I appreciate you bringing her back. She's not wearing a combadge, so it could have been difficult to find her."

Jeval smiled. "It was my pleasure. We actually would have been able to locate her easily on this ship. Because of the war, we have better security protocols than what you would be used to." Jeval's smile faded momentarily at the memory. Shaking her head slightly to push that darker thought away, Jeval's smile returned somewhat apologetically. "Your daughter is extremely bright and inquisitive. I enjoyed meeting her. With your permission, I would like to take her to meet the Captain tomorrow morning. She seemed quite intent on accomplishing that."

Sam sighed and smiled, shaking her head. "I don't know why I was even worried. Can I offer you anything to drink? Coffee? Tea?"

Jeval shook her head. "No, I have to get back to the bridge. I'm actually on duty right now. But I wanted to make sure Naomi made it back okay." Jeval turned to go, pausing briefly before the doors that opened automatically for her. "Children are amazing creatures. They are very resilient, especially when they have someone who loves them." With a quick smile, Jeval left, the doors swooshing shut behind her.

Sam smiled, moving into the sleeping quarters to prepare for bed, Jeval's words a comforting balm for her soul.

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The woman sitting up on the biobed resembled the woman he loved very strongly, and, despite the large purple-black bruise that was forming on the side of her face, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Tom watched the doctor finish her scans of B'Elanna, anxious to return to her side. He wanted to touch her, to verify to himself that she was indeed real, that her rescue wasn't just a wonderful dream he was having. He had hardly believed what his eyes were telling him when he had seen her at last, lying peacefully on the transporter pad, sound asleep. Tom didn't recall ever crossing the room. One moment he was staring at her, the next, he was holding her in his arms, his face buried in her hair, relishing the way her arms clung to him tightly.

Because she had minor injuries, the doctor had insisted that B'Elanna report to sickbay. Reluctantly, Tom had relinquished his hold on her enough so he could escort her there. He had half-expected B'Elanna to protest his help, but she had said nothing, accepting the arm around her shoulders and leaning on him for support. The fact that she had accepted his help without qualm spoke volumes of what she had been through recently.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant?" The doctor was waiting patiently for his attention.

Tom snapped out of his reverie and focused his gaze on the kindly woman who was the Chief Medical Officer of the Freedom.

"I'm Dr. Stephens," the woman in front of them introduced herself with a small smile. "I just wanted to let you know that I have examined Lieutenant Torres and I can release her to your custody, Lieutenant Paris, if you promise me she'll get plenty of rest. She's exhausted and undernourished, but other than a few contusions and bruises, physically she is fine. Nothing that plenty of sleep and food won't cure."

Tom nodded. "I promise."

The doctor laid her hand on B'Elanna's arm for a moment. "When you've rested and had a meal or two, you come back and see me for a check-up. Probably about the time you're feeling better, we'll be rendezvousing with your ship again. Captain Janeway will want to make sure you're all right before she lets you go back to work."

"Thank you," B'Elanna said quietly, slipping off the biobed to stand next to Tom. "I will."

Dr. Stephens nodded and, satisfied that her patient would be well taken care off, moved away from them to prepare for her next patient.

It took them less than a minute to reach Tom's quarters. Tom had no intentions other than what the doctor had ordered and he was doing: putting B'Elanna to bed and letting her rest. He planned on stretching out on the couch while she slept; he didn't think she would really rest if she had to share the bed with him, as much as he missed sleeping with her and holding her while she slept. It was one of those rare moments when she was completely unguarded and her face was relaxed.

B'Elanna sat up on the bed, pulling the blankets up to her knees, watching as Tom fussed around her, suddenly uncertain of what to say.

"Tom."

He looked up from tucking the covers around the edge of the bed. "Will you be warm enough? Or should I get another blanket?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "No. I'm fine. I just wanted to talk for a minute." Her voice was soft. She reached out and touched his hand, folding her fingers around his and pulling him down to sit next to her on the bed. "I just need to talk to you."

Tom settled himself next to her, enjoying the feel of her fingers in his, and feeling relieved and happy beyond all words that she was here with him now.

B'Elanna took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. It was a wonder to her that she was here, in Tom's quarters, holding his hand. Her emotions threatened to overwhelm her, and her exhaustion wasn't making it easier to keep herself in check. One wrong thought or word, and she felt she would fly apart and weep until she was empty inside. She didn't want to lose control of her emotions that way, not without saying what she needed to say first.

Tom waited patiently, knowing that whatever B'Elanna needed to talk to him about, she felt it was important enough to delay the sleep she obviously needed. As he waited, his eyes noted details he had missed

previously in his happiness to have her back again: the thinness of her arms in particular struck him for some reason. But it was her eyes that bothered him the most. Something was missing in them that he couldn't quite find a name for. Pushing that thought aside, he placed his other hand on top of hers, stroking his thumb across her knuckles, waiting for her to speak.

"I often thought that I would never see you again," she began, her voice low and soft. "I had to keep telling myself otherwise." B'Elanna focused on their hands, her small brown one sandwiched between his two large pale hands, watching the almost mesmerizing way his thumb moved across the back of her hand, over and over. "I told myself every day that I couldn't give up because you wouldn't give up on me. I made myself believe I would see you again. It's what kept me going at times, when I felt like just laying there, when I didn't care if the guards beat me to death or not." B'Elanna shook her head. "When I saw them take you away," she stopped, looking away from him, taking another deep breath. "I always thought I could live through anything, that I could stand anything that life threw at me."

Tom couldn't sit there and simply hold her hand any longer. He reached out and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms completely about her, wanting to protect her with a fierceness that almost scared him.

"But the one thing," B'Elanna's voice was a hoarse whisper as she tried to hold herself in check. "The one thing I couldn't stand was the thought of never seeing you again." Tears held back finally escaped her eyes, and she buried her face in his chest to hide them.

Tom rested his chin on the top of her head, looking out through the viewport over the bed, holding B'Elanna in his arms and rocking her slightly, although he wasn't even aware he was doing it. He gazed at the stars for a few moments, letting the silence fill the air, feeling the heat of her tears soaking his shirt.

"I cannot imagine living a single day without you," he said finally, his voice breaking slightly as he tried to keep his own emotions in balance. "All I could think about, from the moment I was separated from you, was how to get you back." He placed a tender kiss in the center of her hair. "You are the strongest person I know, B'Elanna. Stronger than I am, most times, and I don't mean physically," he teased gently. A short, muffled bark of laughter escaped her, causing him to smile briefly while he searched for the words he wanted to say. "Knowing how strong you are, that you would survive no matter what the odds, gave me the greatest hope of all that I would see you again."

B'Elanna pulled back slightly, letting him know she wanted him to release her, wiping her eyes with the backs of her fingers, sniffling slightly. She didn't meet his eyes until she had wiped the traces of her tears away.

"I think it goes without saying," Tom said softly, touching her cheek where she had missed a tear, wiping it gently away with his thumb, "that I am profoundly grateful to have you back again. I don't think I have words to express how much I need you."

B'Elanna leaned into his touch, closing her eyes for a moment.

Tom looked at her, his heart so full of gladness that it hurt. *I'm going to marry this woman*, he thought with something akin to wonder, knowing he would never feel complete until he did so.

Knowing that the timing was wrong for what he was thinking, instead he gently reached out and pushed B'Elanna back until her head touched the pillow. Like a prince in fairytales of yore, he bent down and softly brushed his lips with hers.

"I love you."

"Mmmm," B'Elanna smiled sleepily. "I love you too." Her eyes fluttered shut.

"Go to sleep now," he said, tucking the covers up around her. Satisfied that she would be warm enough, he moved to stand up, thinking that the couch was a poor substitute for his bed with her in it.

"Tom?" B'Elanna's eyes flew open.

He turned his head, looking down at her, smiling. "What?"

"Stay with me."

"I'll be with you, right over there. Just on the couch."

"No," she shook her head. "Stay here," she patted the edge of the bed next to her.

"The bed isn't really big enough..." he began until he saw the look in her eyes. It unnerved him to see fear in them. "All right, scoot over."

She obliged, pulling the covers back and rolling over onto her side so he could easily curl up behind her, spoon fashion. His hand rested comfortably on her stomach and she put one of her hands on top of his. "No funny stuff, helmboy," she whispered, closing her eyes, feeling safe for the first time since she could remember. And loved.

Tom placed a kiss on the tender skin just below the nape of her neck. "Wouldn't dream of it," he whispered back, closing his eyes.

Within moments, the two were asleep.

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Harry didn't need his sensors at Ops to tell him when they had reached their destination. He could see that Turk's description of Veltis II as a fortress was, if anything, an understatement. His eyes widened as the viewscreen aboard the Avalon revealed an indication of what they were up against.

Over three thousand Jem'Hadar warships of all types cruised on patrol throughout the entire system with another thousand in orbit around the planet itself, some of the attack ships shuttling back and forth between several dozen strategically placed battle stations. In a pair of ellipsoid shells around the planet and its star was a network of several thousand Cardassian orbital weapon platforms - unmanned stations that, according to Turk, each grossly outclassed a Romulan Warbird in shielding and firepower despite their small size.

Beneath these highly visible defenses lay a bright bluish-green planet that reminded Harry of Earth. He felt a brief pang of grief that he and his Voyager shipmates – especially Seven - had been so close to home, yet actually a reality away.

"I don't recommend we shift to conventional cloak," Turk said from Tactical. "Those stations' sensors are on active, as are a quarter of the ships present." He looked down at his console, briefly consulting what the sensors were telling him. "I'm also reading a shield around the planet itself, as well as active transport scramblers around the facility."

Sito nodded in agreement. "We're not going to find out what we need to know from up here, Captain. I recommend we enter the planet's atmosphere and take a close look at the facility itself." Sito tapped the monitor between them to bring up a view of the large research station on Veltis II – and a dozen nearby planetary disruptors. "If the system's defenses are any indication of what the facility will have for its internal security, we're going to need as much information as possible before we attempt a rescue."

Mishu's eyes narrowed as she considered his words. She turned her head and looked up at her security officer. "Turk?"

The large man nodded. "If we bring the Avalon into and through the facility itself, our sensors should be able to pick up their security measures fairly accurately. It will take a while, but I don't like the idea of going in there blind."

Harry was surprised to see Mishu turn her gaze at him, raising her eyebrow questioningly, obviously wanting his input as well. He looked down momentarily at his console, considering exactly what he should say.

"Would the sensors tell us if Seven of Nine is there?" he asked slowly. He was worried about the time involved in any type of reconnaissance mission, time that Seven might not have to spare – especially if she wasn't at Veltis II. However, he had to admit that going in blind and failing in rescuing Seven wasn't going to help her much either.

Sito shook his head. "We can't scan for her quantum signature without dephasing. We will be able to scan for indications of Borg technology." Sito left unsaid that the sensors would not be able to tell the difference between Seven with her Borg implants, and the Borg implants by themselves - or inside a decoy.

Harry nodded. "I agree with Turk and Sito, then. We need to know everything about the facility before we attempt any kind of rescue."

She looked at the three of them before turning back to face the view of the heavily guarded planet beneath them. A slow, almost lazy smile crossed Mishu's features. "Well then," she said evenly, "It looks like we're going in."

Part VIII In Plain Sight

Author's Note: For summary and disclaimer, see part I. A special thank you to Thomas Lee, who did so much more than beta for this part. All of the in-depth descriptions of technical nature - from the defenses of Veltis II to the PPC, were his work and he rightfully deserves credit for their very important presence in this story. Every writer needs an editor, but he has gone well beyond the expectations of a beta-reader and for that, I sincerely thank him.

The Avalon smoothly descended towards the surface of Veltis II, the ship's phasing cloak allowing it to bypass the planet's turbulent atmosphere as well as its defenses. Harry could tell from the ship's sensor readings that a non-phased ship of similar or lesser tonnage would have been jarred and batted around like a toy by the abundance of wind shears and dense air pockets that cluttered the atmosphere of the blue-green planet beneath them. Part of him wondered facetiously if the Dominion had deliberately manipulated the planet's weather to serve as another means of defense against attack.

"Bring us in, Mr. Amos," Mishu ordered quietly from her seat as their target - a dark gray building sprawling seven hundred meters in length and rising 48 levels high - filled the main viewscreen. "Thrusters only."

"Yes, ma'am." The quick fingers of the flight controller skillfully brought the Nova-class starship to the end of the building nearest them. Harry looked up from his console to watch the main viewscreen as the ship passed through the facility's outer wall and into a corridor, his eyes widening as he took in their initial view of the facility's interior.

The corridor was busy. Vorta men and women walked purposefully up and down the hallway, entering or exiting from doors that lined either side of the corridor as far as Harry's eyes could see in the viewscreen. He could also see Jem'Hadar patrols walking in pairs down the hallway, dressed in battle armor, with their disruptor rifles resting easily in their hands. As he watched, a pair of patrolling Jem'Hadar walked straight at the Avalon as it cruised slowly through the corridor, and he wondered what he would see on the viewscreen when the ship actually passed through them. Harry winced as the Jem'Hadar quickly disappeared from front to back, the viewscreen progressively showing their innards until they passed from the viewscreen. Shaking his head to rid himself of the image, Harry concentrated on reading the information the sensors were giving him as the ship continued to slowly cruise through the facility. His eyebrows raised in amazement as the facility's internal defenses became apparent.

In addition to the paired Jem'Hadar guards currently visible to the Vorta in the facility, pairs of shrouded Jem'Hadar held strategic positions along the corridors. Both the visible and invisible Jem'Hadar were heavily armed with an assortment of directed-energy, projectile, and melee weapons in addition to their disruptor rifles and pistols. Half of the Jem'Hadar - one in every pair - carried portable phased plasma throwers, while their partners had polearms with shock blades.

Backing up the Jem'Hadar in repelling internal threats, in every corridor and room of the facility, were constantly monitored internal sensor nets and an abundance of concealed counter-intruder defenses. The latter included automated sentries armed with directed energy and projectile weapons, emplaced mines of various types, chemical and biological agent dispensers, and deflector clusters in regularly spaced intervals in the ceilings, walls, and floors. Harry mused that the deflector clusters existed in the facility in such quantities and positions that, even by Starfleet standards, they provided redundancy to the point of gross inefficiency as firefighting equipment. No doubt the deflector clusters were meant to deliberately project containment forcefields around intruders as well as fires, with anyone trapped within the airtight prison without their own life-support equipment quickly consuming all of the breathables inside of the field and losing consciousness - if not actually suffocating. Likewise, the facility's heavy-duty gravity generator network was almost certainly intended to help immobilize intruders as well as provide accommodation of species from heavy-gravity worlds. The walls, decks, doors, and deployable barricades were also reinforced

apologetically. "These fist-sized devices are all over the facility and appear to be antipersonnel mines with microscopic chemical-energy warheads, but they are buried in subspace deeply enough to prevent physical interaction with normal-space objects."

"They are," Sito replied, looking up from his own console. "Those 'Houdinis', as the Ghost Fleet's ground forces have taken to calling them, are the latest in Jem'Hadar mine technology, and are extremely difficult to detect with normal-phase sensors. When a Houdini is in standby mode, any number of normal-space objects could pass right through where the mine is and never know about it until the mine emerges into normal space inside of a victim. Even if the Houdini's warhead fails to go off, the mine's emergence from subspace alone is violent enough to instantly kill any cellular-based humanoid that it materializes inside of." Sito smiled with cool humor. "Very effective, especially at terrifying any nearby witnesses."

Harry nodded his agreement, focusing his attention on the sensor readings once more. Finally, he saw what he had been looking for. "I'm detecting biomechanical implants with a Borg signature 480 meters to starboard and 27 meters above us," Harry reported, his fingers flying over his console to adjust the sensor sweeps.

"Mr. Amos?"

At Mishu's unspoken command, the Avalon's flight controller adjusted the ship's course through the facility. The ship passed slowly through several floors of laboratories and corridors like a ghost until Amos brought the ship to a halt at the point Harry had given him, where the viewscreen rewarded Harry with the sight he had longed for with all his heart.

In the room shown on the viewscreen, Seven of Nine lay on a modified biobed along the far wall. From the sensor readings, she was apparently regenerating. Harry swallowed the lump that had grown in his throat, gripping the sides of his console so tightly his hands hurt. She was there. Whole. Alive.

"Mr. Amos, hold position here for the moment. Mr. Kim, is that her?" Mishu's voice came quietly across the bridge.

Harry nodded slowly, not really wanting to take his eyes away from the screen, anxiously taking in every detail of Seven's face and form. Her face, he noted, held a pallor beyond the normal fairness of her skin, contrasting harshly with the blue-black shadows beneath her eyes. The state of her body alarmed him as well. An unhealthy thinness had fallen on her and her collarbones and ribcage stood out in sharp, angular relief beneath the burgundy material of her biometric suit. Her hair lay in tangled disarray, the blond strands lying limply against her pale cheeks. He felt a stirring of anger within him for the beings that had brought Seven to such a state. At the thought, his eyes were drawn to another being in the room with Seven - a human male who was reading a padd as he sat on a stool next to the biobed.

Harry sighed quietly, deliberately bringing his focus back to his task at hand. He could not afford to be distracted at this point, no matter how strong the temptation was. A completed scan of the room showed much the same intense security measures he had detected in other parts of the facility, but with a few differences. All of the Jem'Hadar present in this room and (except for the one that apparently served as the complex's security foyer) the other rooms of this particular lab complex were shrouded. Furthermore, the Jem'Hadar with shock blades had them ready - while their partners had energized monomolecular bayonets mounted on their disruptor rifles. There was also one particular addition that, upon his discovery of it, made him shake with anger and fear.

Hovering inside of Seven's skull was a Houdini. Compared with the other Houdinis Harry had seen in the rest of the facility, this one possessed augmented sensor and propulsion systems - no doubt to ensure that, no matter where Seven moved, the mine would move with her. As a security measure, it was ingeniously simple, yet its presence was the ultimate failsafe against Seven's escape or rescue.

Turk looked up from his own console and cast a quick glance at Harry, watching the struggle on the younger man's face with concern. He too had seen all of the facility's security measures, including the Houdini in Seven's cranium, and understood the other man's reaction.

As Harry continued to examine the sensor readings, he noted that Seven's vital signs were beginning to change and he looked up at the viewscreen, bringing the others' attention to it as well. As they watched, Seven began to stir, her eyelids fluttering as she tried to open them. The human in the room with her immediately showed an interest in her activity, putting his padd on a table next to him and standing up with a tricorder held in his left hand.

Mishu's expression was intent. "Mr. Kim, can we get an audio signal? I want to hear what is going on."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied, moving quickly to initiate the appropriate commands. Within moments, the sounds of the scene before them were heard on the speakers of the bridge.

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Harry's face was indistinct, fuzzy, and unfocused at first, as if her ocular implant was malfunctioning. Slowly it came into focus, the beloved features appearing clearly to her. She could tell he was speaking, but could not discern the words. His expression was unhappy and worried. Seven tried to reach out and touch him, to bring him closer to her, but he always seemed to be just beyond her reach. Time and again she reached for him, only to find he had moved further away.

Harry!

Seven's eyes flew open and, for a moment, she was completely disoriented. Her surroundings were unfamiliar, as was the human male that was staring down at her with concern.

"You're awake!" The man smiled in relief. "I was beginning to become concerned."

Seven blinked, wincing at the gritty sensation her eyes were experiencing. She blinked rapidly several times, trying unsuccessfully to clear her eyes of the debris that had formed there while she had regenerated.

"Here, use this." A small, dampened cloth was thrust at her, and she accepted it weakly, wiping her eyes carefully.

"Where am I?" Seven asked quietly, her throat feeling dry and scratchy from disuse.

"You are in a medical facility in the Veltis System," the man said as he took the cloth from her hand and held up a device that resembled a tricorder. When he began running it over the length of her body, Seven suspected that its functions were similar. "Do you remember who I am?"

Seven shook her head. Her memories were fuzzy, vague, and full of pain.

"My name is Max Charven. I am a doctor in this facility. I am here to ensure your health and continued well-being." He put the scanning device down and smiled at her in a friendly fashion.

"You are human," Seven stated with a frown, trying to make her thoughts function properly.

"Yes," Charven replied pleasantly, his expression carefully neutral.

Seven stared at him, her memories starting to focus more clearly. "You bought me from Gul Dukat for my implants." She struggled to sit up.

Dr. Charven reached behind her to help her into a more upright position, adjusting the biobed to accommodate her. "Not entirely true, Seven," he replied. "Better?"

Seven shook her head, closing her eyes against the wave of dizziness that overwhelmed her briefly from the sudden change in position. She hated the weakness she could feel throughout her body.

"Are you hungry?"

At Dr. Charven's question, Seven's stomach lurched painfully against her ribs. It had been a long time since she had consumed any solid food. Carefully, she nodded, silently relieved that no further wave of dizziness accompanied the action.

"I will have to start you out with something light. You haven't had anything solid to eat in over two weeks," Charven said. "I think a vegetable broth will be good to start with."

Seven opened her eyes and watched him as he left the room, assessing him freely while his back was to her. He was an average-looking human male with dark hair worn just past the collar of his shirt. She approximated his height to be 180 centimeters, and his build was lean rather than muscular. During his absence, she debated her ability to overpower him and attempt an escape.

The door opened, and Charven walked back into the room with a bowl on a tray he held in both hands. "Feel up to feeding yourself, or should I help you?"

Seven frowned. "I am able to feed myself." She reached for the tray.

"You wouldn't get very far, Seven," Charven said in a conversational tone as he handed her the tray. "This place is more heavily guarded than you can possibly imagine." At Seven's startled expression, Charven smiled. "No, I'm not telepathic. But it wasn't difficult to guess what you might be thinking of at this time."

Deciding it would be best to avoid addressing the subject, Seven looked into her bowl, lifted a spoonful of broth towards her mouth, and took a cautious taste. What the vegetable broth lacked in substance, it made up for in flavor. Her mouth responded to the much-needed nutrients, awakening taste buds that had long lain dormant under nutritional supplements and Neelix's cooking.

"It's my mother's recipe," Charven said quietly, watching her eat. "'Comfort food', she called it."

Seven looked up from the bowl, swallowing the last mouthful with a satisfaction she had not come to associate much with food. Her blue eyes rested briefly on his face before looking down at the now empty bowl.

"An apt description," she said finally, pushing the bowl and tray away from her.

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Vorik walked down the bricked path through the garden behind Terik's house. He did not stop to admire the roses that climbed up the side of a trellis next to the path, nor pause to enjoy the seductive fragrance of the lilac trees across from it. His thoughts were occupied with the news he had just been given by Dama's father regarding Voyager. Vorik acknowledged the feeling of relief that had come when John Morten told him that Voyager and her captain were no longer in Cardassian hands, and that he had a way to get Vorik back to his ship. Tomorrow, a ship whose owner John Morten knew would be stopping by their colony to deliver merchandise from other parts of the quadrant. John Morten had arranged for Vorik to travel on that ship on his way back to Voyager.

While pleased with the news, something about John Morten's message bothered Vorik. The man was being honest, that much Vorik was certain of, but it was still apparent that he was holding back something relevant. Attempting to find a logical reason why Dama's father would do so was what had brought Vorik to Terik's garden in the first place.

As he approached the small courtyard at the center of the garden, a strange sound brought him out of his thoughts, causing him to slow his walk. It took Vorik several moments before he could identify the sound. Having heard it before, he hesitated, not wanting to intrude on the individual who was crying softly in the courtyard, especially since he had a fairly good idea who the individual was. His guess was confirmed when he reached the end of the path and looked around the large flowering shrub at the edge of the courtyard to see who it was.

Dama sat on one of the courtyard's stone benches with her back to the path where Vorik stood uncertainly, reluctant to involve himself in her emotional display, yet strangely touched by it just the same. It troubled him that she was here alone and obviously unhappy, something he had not come to associate with her carefree and cheerful personality. While he was repulsed by her emotional display, he found he was unable to walk away, and instead found himself approaching her, intent on offering some form of comfort, though he wasn't certain how.

Dama heard Vorik's steps behind her and stiffened slightly, wiping her eyes and face quickly with the small white cloth she had been twisting in her hands in an effort to hide the evidence of her loss of control.

Vorik sat down beside Dama on the bench with his hands resting on his thighs, and turned his head slightly so that he could look at her - although at the moment, all he could see was the top of her head as she looked down at her hands, still occasionally wiping at her eyes. Not certain of what to say, Vorik remained silent for a moment, his eyes resting on her, noticing for the first time the unusually fine texture of Dama's hair - which was more of a dark brown than black. As the sound of the fountain in the center of the courtyard filled the silence between them, Vorik finally spoke. "Are you alright now?"

Dama nodded, then shook her head and sighed. "I'll live, Vorik."

"I wasn't aware that your health was at risk, Dama," he said seriously. "What was wrong?"

"It is nothing anymore. I just lost control." She finally looked up at him and smiled, with only her reddened eyes betraying her true emotions. "I'm fine."

Vorik looked at her a moment longer before turning his head to look at the fountain. His eyes followed the arc the water took from the jets out into the catch basin. The sound was soothing, and Vorik contemplated the idea of meditating here before he left.

Dama shifted slightly next to him, her leg accidentally brushing against his, causing a mild shock to run through him and startling him. He had felt that sort of thing only once before, when he had tried to take B'Elanna Torres for a mate and had touched her face to initiate a bond with her. Vorik flushed uncomfortably at the memory, shifting so his leg no longer touched Dama's. That was a part of his life that he would most like to forget.

"Papa told me you're leaving," Dama said quietly. Her gaze focused on the fountain as well, admiring the artistry of the stonework and the pleasantness of the sound of the water splashing in the catch basin.

"Yes, that is true. Tomorrow, I will be departing on a ship that your father has said will be able to take me on my way to Voyager," Vorik replied.

Dama sighed again as she looked down at her hands, trying to collect her thoughts. "Do Vulcans love, Vorik?"

Dama's question startled Vorik, the soft hesitancy in her voice striking a chord deep within him that he didn't know existed. It took him several heartbeats before he could form an adequate reply. "As children, we are raised, protected, sheltered, taught, and given the necessities to survive as an adult. It could be said that all of these aspects are forms of 'love'."

"I didn't mean the love a parent would have for a child. I meant the love of a man and a woman." Dama turned her head, looking at him as he continued to gaze at the fountain. "Maybe I should have asked, 'Do Vulcans fall in love?'"

"We form an attachment to our bondmates based on respect. Humans would term it as a fondness for each other, but not love." Vorik paused in his recital, thinking truthfully and logically about her question. "We do not 'fall' in love, as that would require a deliberate lapse in emotional control."

"Then how do you know when you've found your mate?" Dama directed her gaze at him, a single dark eyebrow lifted in typical Vulcan fashion.

Vorik noted that his mouth had suddenly felt dehydrated as he attempted to answer Dama's question truthfully. "Parents of children arrange their bondmates early in childhood so that no choice is necessary by either partner. However, in an instance where that has not been done, mates are often chosen by similarities of interests and mutual respect. Physical attributes are significant as well, but they are secondary to the other qualities I mentioned."

Dama looked at him a moment longer before dropping her gaze. Released from her eyes, Vorik found it easier to breathe - something that was completely illogical but somehow true nonetheless. The situation between him and the young half-Vulcan woman sitting beside him puzzled Vorik. He didn't understand how someone as emotional and erratic as Dama could continue to...he paused, searching for the right word...intrigue him. Aesthetically, her predominately Vulcan features were pleasing. Her ears were shapely and nicely pointed, he noted, and her hair was longer than how most Vulcan women wore theirs, with its ends just barely touching her shoulders. Without thinking about it, he raised his hand out towards her just as Dama looked back up at him and his breath caught in his throat. Suddenly, the irrational made a lot more sense.

Acting purely on instinct, Dama reached out with her own hand and brushed Vorik's fingers with her own, closing her eyes at the contact and the pleasure that coursed through from the touch. Vorik's eyes closed briefly as well as he felt the same shock he had felt before as Dama's fingers softly touched his in the most innocent of caresses. Withdrawing his hand from her touch was difficult, Vorik had to admit, but he knew that what was happening should not happen between them.

"Dama," Vorik said, clearing his throat slightly.

Sighing, Dama placed her hands back in her lap and smiled gently at him. "I know, Vorik. I know you have to leave."

"Then why..." he trailed off, honestly puzzled by her actions.

"Because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life not knowing what it would be like to touch you that way." She looked down at her fingers, smiling faintly. "I'll never forget it, Vorik."

Vorik looked at Dama a moment longer before giving into the temptation he had been resisting since he had first sat next to her on the bench. Carefully, gently, he reached out and touched one of her hands once more, threading his fingers through hers. Together, they sat in companionable silence, enjoying the fountain and the garden around them.

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Gul Dukat sipped his glass of kanar, briefly enjoying the taste of the thick liquid before swallowing it and placing the glass on the small table next to him. His gray eyes were focused on the braided dark brown hair of the Bajoran woman rubbing his feet, but his thoughts were a quadrant away. On his lap was a padd with several reports on it, but he had lost interest in reading them for the moment. Instead, he contented himself with the fine touch of the woman's hands on his feet, the slow fire of the kanar in his stomach, and his plans for capturing the renegade Janeway and making her pay for his embarrassment in front of Weyoun.

The door to his quarters chimed for entry, bringing him rudely out of his reverie. A glance at the chronometer on the bulkhead told him that at this late hour, his visitor could only be one person.

"Come in!"

Glinn Katarin, looking oddly underdressed in a simple tunic and pants, entered and paused at the threshold,

detected in the area." Katarin took a swallow of the kanar, enjoying the warmth that immediately spread throughout his limbs.

"That doesn't necessarily mean that they've left the planets' surfaces." Dukat frowned, turning to walk across his quarters to the large viewport across from Katarin, the padd held loosely in one hand.

Katarin nodded, lifting his glass once more to his lips, watching as Dukat paused to read the reports. Despite his own verbal report on their content, he knew Dukat preferred to examine them for himself. Finally, the tall Cardassian looked up from the reports, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Keep Cardassia Prime, Bajor, and Harvat I on alert. I want additional ground searches conducted on them and additional ships brought in to help patrol their space. Furthermore, remind Gul Givot that, his faith in his subordinates notwithstanding, the fact remains that not only over 20 slaves under his jurisdiction managed to disappear off the face of Harvat I within a few hours, but they also engineered a supposedly impossible power failure that enabled them to break out both a dangerous companion who was incarcerated in a holding cell *and* a seriously-injured patient in an infirmary's intensive care unit as well." Dukat fell silent for a moment, contemplating the liquid in the bottom of his glass. "Janeway can't be everywhere at once. Most of the escaped prisoners have got to be still waiting for Voyager to come rescue them," he said contemptuously. He knew from reading Voyager's logs that the ship's crew was one of Janeway's biggest weaknesses. She would never leave them behind willingly. He took a sip of his drink before looking up, fixing Katarin with a sharp gaze.

"A thought has occurred to me, Katarin," Dukat said, his voice dangerously mild. "During all these lovely, daring escapades of Captain Janeway, one constant has remained: the ability of Voyager to hide from our Dominion-enhanced sensors." Dukat's eyeridge lifted and a small smile curled the corner of his mouth. He set down the padd on top of the one he had been reading earlier and lifted his now-empty hand, raising a single finger as he recounted events. "Voyager disappears from the debris field without a trace." Another finger was raised. "The mine where the majority of Voyager's male crew is sent has an accidental explosion which, incidentally enough, would destroy any evidence of a rescue." Now a third finger joined the pair, and Katarin could see that Dukat was truly warming up to his subject. "At Empok Nor, a shuttle bearing markings of Voyager's shuttlecraft is discovered during its rescue of three of Voyager's female crew far closer to the station than its observed cloaking capabilities ought to have gotten it without prior detection. And even after being discovered, they still manage to beam the women aboard and escape!" Dukat set his glass down on the table next to him with such force that the kanar sloshed precariously close to the glass's edge despite its viscosity. His raised fingers closed in, curling to form a fist. "Everything that has happened points to one thing: Voyager has cloaking technology beyond anything we have ever seen."

Katarin said nothing, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he regarded the contents of his glass. He had his own theories about Voyager, but he didn't know if Dukat would heed them.

"I want you to start researching the cloaking technology of the late Klingon Empire," Dukat continued with a quiet intensity. "Before the Dominion War, the Klingons had been at the cutting edge of cloaking technology for over a century. I want you to investigate a little further. Perhaps discover the means by which Janeway has been eluding us." Dukat gestured at the padds lying on the table. "Empok Nor's sensor readings have given me reason to believe that there is something more going on here than just clever cloaking technology - especially since none of the investigations aboard Voyager came across anything that we recognized as a cloaking device!" Dukat took a deep breath, looking away from his Glinn for a moment. "I'm not ruling out the possibility that Voyager and Janeway are getting help from someone. If they *are* using a portable device, they must have obtained a supply of them since it has obviously been operating well past the life expectancy of such a device." He reached out and picked up his glass once more, holding the fragile-looking

glass with both hands. Taking a thoughtful sip, he turned his gaze once more to the stars. "I want to catch her. Studying the Klingons' research efforts in cloaking technology may give us just the edge we need, Katarin." He turned back to face his Glinn, his expression predatory.

Katarin nodded, setting his glass on the table next to the mostly empty bottle of kanar. "I will do as you ask."

"How long until we reach the wormhole?"

"Three days at our current speed," replied Katarin, regarding the bottle with interest. He was briefly tempted to pour himself another glassful of the potent drink. He looked up from the bottle to watch Dukat pace energetically in front of the viewport.

Dukat paused in his movements, his gray eyes alight with purpose. "Send a message ahead to Terok Nor and put them on alert. I want my personal fleet ready for when I arrive." He turned and smiled dangerously at Katarin. "I think it's time we did a little hunting of our own."

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"Why am I here, Dr. Charven?" Seven asked quietly. "If you did not purchase me for my implants, for what reason am I being detained?"

Charven glanced up from his padd, into which he was tapping commands that would bring up his information on the Borg. It was primarily composed of autopsies done on Borg drones taken in the Alpha Quadrant and technological analysis of their recovered equipment, and was supplemented with Terok Nor's medical records on Seven of Nine as well as the logs of the late Captain Jean-Luc Picard on his experiences as Locutus. Mainly, Seven needed what every organic creature in the universe needed to survive: food and sleep. For the Borg, food was energy taken from their ship, and sleep was regeneration - but for a Borg who was no longer a member of the Collective, the needs were slightly different. Charven understood the need for regeneration still applied to this former drone, and thanks to the schematics of the regeneration alcoves taken off of the last Starship Enterprise just prior to the Dominion War, he had been able to construct a device that would allow Seven to partially regenerate. He had been unable to obtain or totally recreate a Borg alcove, mainly because his employers did not wish Seven of Nine to recover all of her strength and abilities for security reasons.

He had been greatly relieved to find out that she ingested food as a human being would normally do. That made his care of her that much easier, with much less special demands on the facility's resources. The less such demands he made, he knew, the longer the Founders would be willing to allow him to study her alive. As for the rest of her physical needs, Charven did not know all of the answers. He was determined to study her and find out as much as he could before his employers demanded he start removing her implants for more 'in-depth' study.

Finally, aware of Seven's penetrating gaze, Charven looked up.

"I work for the people who purchased you from Gul Dukat, who are curious about you - they have never before heard of a former Borg who was also significantly cybernetic," the doctor said carefully. "I am here to take care of your health, which will occasionally require me to study you in order to confirm the efficacy of my care."

Seven's eyebrow arched in skepticism. "Who are the 'Founders'?" Seven asked, recalling Dukat's scathing comment to Charven before he left.

Self-consciously, Charven glanced up at the corner of the room above Seven's biobed, where a sensor cluster was located. "A race of people who live in the Gamma Quadrant," he replied with careful neutrality. "They are interested in studying and learning about new races of people. They are the people who bought you from Gul Dukat." He made no mention of their role in the Dominion, hoping she would not make the connection between the two. Taking the tray away from her, he carried it to the room's recycler, well aware of the keen regard of the woman behind him. He knew she would start asking questions very soon, questions he wasn't supposed to answer. Charven turned, entered the commands that would recycle the tray and bowl, and walked back to Seven's biobed. "Can you stand?"

Seven's eyes searched Charven's face, looking for some clue that would tell her what sort of man he was, whether he was here of his own volition or some type of prisoner of the Founders. But she was not experienced at reading emotions on faces she was not familiar with, and his features held only the most pleasant and neutral of expressions. Carefully, she swung her legs over to the side of the biobed and stood, feeling her knees tremble as they tried to support her weight.

Charven looked pleased. "Very good. Would you like to freshen up a bit in your quarters' ensuite? I'm afraid the facilities here are not very fancy, but they are adequate."

Seven looked down at her biometric suit, feeling for the first time the griminess of the fabric against her skin. The suit was designed to handle normal body functions such as perspiration and shed skin cells, but that was with regular regeneration and replacing the suit at least once every three days. The suit was in no way equipped to handle two weeks of her body's normal functions, and as she considered the burgundy material, she became aware of a rather unpleasant odor emanating from it.

"I should be able to replicate another biometric suit for you," Charven supplied. "But I would recommend a sonic shower first."

Seven nodded, taking an uncertain step away from the biobed, feeling her knees wobble as she moved. She took yet another step and felt her legs buckle beneath her weight. Her arms flailed out for purchase and found none.

A pair of strong arms caught her before she fell completely to the floor, supporting her.

"Are you okay?" Charven asked with concern, his voice close to her ear. His arms tightened perceptibly about her as she struggled to regain her balance.

"Thank you," Seven said politely, hating the weakness she could feel throughout her limbs. She pushed his arms away from her, determined to show him her strength. "I will try again."

Charven stepped back, watching as she took another step, and then another across the floor towards the other side of the room. He could still feel the warmth of her body where it had pressed against him as he held her. As he watched, his expression briefly betrayed him, revealing the longing he had felt since he had first laid eyes on her.

Seven reached the far wall and leaned against it next to the open ensuite, feeling her limbs tremble from the exertion as she closed her eyes. In her mind's eye, she pictured Harry as she loved him best, laughing, tender, his brown eyes regarding her lovingly. She considered, as she felt an unbearable ache spread from her heart throughout her entire body, that being sedated had not entirely been a bad thing. If she was unconscious, she could not be aware of how much her heart was figuratively breaking.

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The sun had long since passed out of the sky and the second moon was halfway to its zenith, casting its luminosity across the courtyard of Terik's house. Vorik sat alone, listening to the water in the fountain with a different appreciation than he had before.

"Am I disturbing you, Vorik?" John Morten asked quietly from the path across from the bench where Vorik sat. "I was hoping I could talk with you a while before you retired for the evening."

The young Vulcan inclined his head slightly, gesturing at the empty spot on the bench beside him. "Not at all, John Morten." He watched the man walk carefully across the courtyard, placing the torch he was carrying in a bracket next to the bench. The flames from the torch flickered in the evening air, casting shadows against the stones of the courtyard.

John took the empty seat beside Vorik, sighing softly as he gathered his robes around him and cast a glance up at the night sky with appreciation. "My daughter seems to have taken to you quite a bit, Vorik. I appreciate your kindness to her." He smiled fondly, his eyes still on the stars above them. "She is young, and has not had her mother's discipline. Terik and I have indulged her terribly, I'm afraid."

"She shows an interest in learning her mother's ways," Vorik ventured, earning a quick and searching glance from her father.

"Indeed?" John replied with a raised eyebrow. "Well, perhaps a visit to her mother's parents on Vulcan would help her cultivate that interest." He regarded the young man sitting next to him frankly, knowing that most likely Dama's sudden interest in learning anything Vulcan had more to do with Vorik than anything else.

"Perhaps," Vorik agreed. "Although it might be wise to allow her to learn from Terik first before she enters a more rigid household."

John nodded thoughtfully. "I'll speak with Terik." He shifted slightly on the bench, adjusting his robes around him once more.

Vorik once again sensed that the man was holding something relevant from him, but he was uncertain how to broach the subject in a manner that would not be offensive. After all, John Morten and Terik had been extremely kind and generous to him, asking nothing from Vorik in return. As Vorik considered his best and most logical approach, the problem of what John Morten was withholding solved itself.

"We knew to look for you on Risa, Terik and I," John began quietly, glancing at the torch to check the height of the flame still burning there. Satisfied that it still had a while to burn, he continued, "My contacts had sent me a message that one of Janeway's crew had been sent to a licentious entertainment ship owned by Bural, and we were asked to buy your freedom with the latinum they supplied."

Vorik stirred slightly, uncomfortable with the memory of his time served aboard Bural's Pleasure Palace. He had been a waiter in one of the ship's many eating rooms, and had been forced to wear a costume designed after one of Earth's mythological characters. His pointed ears and arched brows naturally gave his face a physical disposition that easily lent itself to the horns and beard of a satyr - the only parts of his costume above his waist. He had been covered with replicated goat hair from his hips to his ankles, his feet had been disguised as goat hooves, and a mock goat's tail had hung from the base of his spine. The ludicrousness of

the costume itself was not enough to disturb his disciplined mind, but the character he was dressed to represent elicited many enthusiastic reactions from the female patrons of the eating establishment and Vorik was ill equipped to handle their advances.

"There was concern that your purchase would be noted, especially after the escape of your captain," John continued. "It was one of the things that I investigated when I left here, after I spoke with my contact and arranged for your transport ship." He paused. "It is a very good thing I did. Your captain has been a very busy lady recently."

John stood up, motioning for Vorik to join him. "I'd like to take a quick walk through the gardens before I turn in for the evening." He reached for the torch and lifted it carefully out of its holder before walking slowly towards the outer edge of the courtyard, Vorik falling easily in step beside him.

"It is going to occur to Bural that he received a rather large amount of money for one, insignificant slave," John continued as they walked, the gravel of the path crunching quietly under their sandals. "When he is questioned by the Dominion's agents, and believe me, he *will* be questioned - he's going to remember selling you to someone who didn't bother to haggle with him." John grimaced slightly, reaching out to pull a cobweb off the leaves of a nearby rose bush. "A mistake, I admit, but I didn't want to waste what could be crucial time on bargaining with a flesh-peddler."

Vorik nodded at this less than flattering, yet figuratively apt, description of his former employer. "Do you think this has already occurred?"

John shrugged his shoulders. "Without spending time and resources questioning Bural or his employees, it is difficult to confirm. At this point, it is certainly possible." He stopped in front of the lilac trees and turned, looking directly at Vorik. "I am concerned that your departure from this colony may be endangered. If Bural has been questioned, then it is only a matter of time before they track you here. Given the recent liberations of Janeway's crew, they most likely will believe that if you haven't already left the colony, you will most certainly be attempting to do so. They will correctly assume that you will be going back to Janeway, and they will try to use you to unknowingly lead them to her."

They walked in silence a few meters more, passing through the last archway of the garden and onto the patio behind the house. John paused before the entryway, turning to Vorik once more. "I wanted you to be aware of the potential risk involved when you leave here. They will check the house first. Terik and I will be taking you to the colony's transport station. Dama will be staying at a friend's home, so there will be no one here to answer their knock."

Vorik looked gravely at the man standing before him. "I have put your family in danger, and for that, I ask your forgiveness."

Surprisingly, John smiled. "We have always known the dangers of working against those who are currently our masters. We have done what we have willingly, and with full knowledge of the possible consequences. But you needed to know what you might be facing, and what might happen at the transport station or even afterwards. They will be looking for you, Vorik. Make no mistake about that." He sighed gently, extinguishing the torch and placing it carefully in the bracket next to the house. "It is time to move on, now. And perhaps now we will visit Vulcan, as Dama wishes." He turned back to Vorik and smiled once more. "Good night, Vorik. Sleep well."

"And you, John Morten. Thank you." Vorik stood silently as John stepped through the back door and left him alone with the night and his thoughts.

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Standing at the briefing room's small viewport, Harry Kim watched the steady rise and fall of Seven's chest as she lay peacefully on her biobed outside of the viewport. She was regenerating at the moment, and his fingers ached to touch her. The actuality that she was so close, yet still not rescued, was wearing greatly on him - he had only managed to sleep a nightmare-haunted five hours the previous night.

Their earlier observations in the laboratory complex had been informative, although difficult for Harry to sit through. Watching Seven struggle to perform the simplest of efforts, like walk, had been distressing - even without considering the Houdini that kept itself centered within Seven's cranium. His whole being cried out in torment, and he fought with the urge to do something foolhardy, like try to rescue her all on his own. He was could only watch helplessly as Seven struggled, and his anger at the forces that had separated them grew stronger.

"Mr. Kim?" Mishu's query brought Harry's attention back to the matter at hand. He turned, reluctantly leaving his view of Seven and took a seat next to Sito. Across the table from him sat Mishu's chief engineer, William Tucker, and her Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Brian Derringer. Tucker nodded politely at Harry before turning his attention to Sito. Derringer regarded Harry with interest momentarily before he too gave his full attention to the Avalon's first officer.

"We have a plan," Sito said simply. "And we request your involvement."

Harry nodded. "What do you need me to do?"

"You and Turk are going to investigate the lab complex and Seven of Nine. We want as much information as possible before we proceed with a rescue attempt." Sito turned his head to look at the Avalon's security officer. "You'll need to get the relevant information in the lab's computer system and, in a follow-up scanning with the ship's sensors, the facility's computer network. We need to find out the release commands for the regeneration system, and how to disable the security measures in the laboratory complex without the rest of the facility learning of it." He turned his attention back to Harry. "I want you to verify that the subject outside of this room's viewport is not some elaborate decoy - holographic, biological, or otherwise - set up to draw us out of hiding. While Turk is investigating the lab's computer system, you will run medical scans of Seven of Nine."

"I'll be able to compare them to Seven of Nine's medical records that Captain Onoshi was so kind to forward along," Derringer said with a soft drawl. "I will be happy to show you how to use the medical tricorder if you aren't familiar with it."

Harry frowned. "How are Turk and I going to get inside the facility undetected, let alone perform the scans we need?"

"We will reposition the ship to place her gangway right outside the lab complex where Seven is being held. Because the ship is phased, everything inside of her, including you and Turk, will also be out of phase with the rest of the facility. You should be able to walk right off the ship and around the complex to investigate what you need to without fear of detection," Sito explained.

"That means the scanning equipment will be phased as well." Harry nodded, his mind rapidly putting the pieces together. "Turk should be able to scan inside the computer system, similar to the way the probes scan the communication relays?"

"Send a message to Legate Damar. I'd like to have a meeting with him at his earliest convenience. Include this report, the reports on Janeway's rescue operations - and our suspicions regarding a certain interstellar empire that had given the Klingons their cloaking technology in the first place."

Katarin nodded once, dropping his arms to his sides and taking a less relaxed pose. "I have made inquiries to our agents within the Romulan Government. If the Romulans have been assisting Janeway, we will soon find out."

Dukat's face broke into a smile, although there was nothing friendly about his expression. "I hope for their sake they are not. I'd hate to think that the Romulans have violated their treaty with the Dominion - as the Bajorans did." His voice dripped with false concern. Both men knew that Dukat would enjoy seeing the fall of the nonaggression treaty between the Romulan Star Empire and the Dominion.

"Dismissed," Dukat said finally, picking up the report once more.

Katarin turned on his heel and exited Dukat's office, his mind already forming the message he would send to Legate Damar.

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Harry tugged experimentally at his black turtleneck sweater, making sure it was tucked in the waistband of his pants before donning the matching wraparound jacket. Although the material of the uniform was outwardly similar to that of the jacket Tom wore as the title character in his "The Adventures of Captain Proton" holodeck programs, it was far more sophisticated than the black leather it resembled. He recalled Turk's explanation of how the uniform was, in essence, a sensor web-equipped isolation suit - capable of not only defeating the sensors of technologically sophisticated forces through cloaking and holographic fields, but of also frustrating attempts by said forces to detect the wearer by forensic evidence, despite the physically unsealed nature of the uniform. In addition, instead of any pockets of its own, the jacket contained a miniature molecular transport buffer that, despite being compact and even flexible enough to fit inside the jacket's liner, could literally hold a few hundred kilograms of equipment and supplies without encumbering the wearer with their bulk or mass. Turk had listed a small arsenal of tactical equipment contained within the buffer along with a few weeks worth of survival supplies for the undesired possibility that situation could warrant it.

To control all of the uniform's capabilities, the wearer operated the uniform with his or her thoughts through a limited telepathic interface instead of any external physical controls. Likewise, instead of a heads-up display that could be accidentally snagged on an object, the uniform used the telepathic interface to project the information directly into the wearer's thoughts, so that he or she would be aware of the information without it cluttering the wearer's senses - much like the 2260s sensor web garments that some sensory-handicapped Federation citizens still preferred over bioimplants.

Turk and Tucker had insisted he become familiar with operating the uniform in such a manner, and they had helped him practice for several hours to achieve that end. As he closed the fasteners on his jacket, it occurred to him that Turk and Tucker had carefully avoided giving an exact explanation of the uniform's technology - some of which, while he had attended Starfleet Academy, wasn't expected to even reach the proof-of-concept stage for another decade or two. Not that Harry had any intention of pushing for answers - he could readily guess at and agree with their reasons for doing so.

"What do you think?"

Harry looked up at Turk's question. He glanced down at his feet, which were encased in black knee-high levitation boots that were every bit as flexible as the pants that covered them down to his ankles, and back at Turk, who was dressed in an identical uniform to his. Harry inwardly mused that their uniforms resembled those worn by Starfleet officers at the turn of the century - except for their material, coloring, and lack of any decorative accessories such as a belt or even insignia.

"I think I could get used to dressing like this."

Harry's comment seemed to amuse Turk greatly, and the bulkheads of the gangway echoed with his laughter. Shaking his head slightly, Harry tucked a medical tricorder into a pouch attached to the front right-hand side of his jacket at waist level. Opposite of his tricorder, resting within easy reach, was a type-2 phaser. As the primary mission equipment, the tricorder and phaser (both of which featured far lower audio and visual signatures than their standard-issue counterparts) would be stored on the jacket's exterior for more convenient access as opposed to within the jacket's transport buffer. Like the suppressed (but still-noisy) levitation boots, it was preferable not to have to use the phaser at all, but it was unwise to go into the facility without a ready weapon.

"You ready?" All trace of amusement had fled from the big man's face, and his expression was one of seriousness. The other away team, led by Dr. Derringer, had already departed to study the current status of Veltis II's primary research project. They had been similarly attired, although each had also carried a backpack made of - or covered in - the same material as their uniforms. Harry had wondered about what their packs contained, but had not had the opportunity to question any of them.

At Turk's question, Harry nodded, feeling the tension between his shoulders tighten perceptibly as the gangway's hatch opened and they moved out into a storage room adjacent to the lab complex where Seven was being held. Any doubts Harry had about his or Turk's imperceptibility to the Jem'Hadar were assuaged by his uniform's extensive readings of the vital signs of the guards present in the room, which indicated that none of them suspected that anything was out of the ordinary. Nonetheless, it had been agreed beforehand to keep talking to a minimum once they left the ship - just in case. Likewise, his uniform kept him aware of the current inactivity (not to mention locations and capabilities) of the counter-intruder defenses concealed within the facility's structure as well.

Turk moved slightly ahead of him, raising his tricorder in the direction of the farthest wall to scan it. Nodding, he motioned for Harry to follow him as they walked directly into the wall.

To Harry's surprise, there was no tactile sensation as he entered the wall - it was as if the wall was merely an intangible illusion. Still, he couldn't suppress the urge to close his eyes, and he stepped through quickly, unwilling to have the process last any longer than it had to. A touch on his arm let him know that he had reached the other side successfully, and he opened his eyes.

Turk looked at him for a moment before nodding, satisfied that Harry was not about to panic.

Harry gave a thumbs-up gesture in return, his eyes already focused on his goal lying peacefully on a biobed barely 3 meters (2984.7 millimeters according to his uniform's sensors) away from him. Noting the easily visible, though slightly hazy, forms of the four Houdinis and the two shrouded Jem'Hadar in the room with Seven, Harry remembered Turk's explanation that any unphased cloaking device was ineffective against the senses of a sufficiently phased being or object.

Seven's eyes opened as her regeneration cycle ended, the box above her retracting on its extended arm. She watched as the regeneration box swung away from the biobed and came to a stop next to the wall, its lights flickering briefly before it shut down. For several moments she lay quietly, assessing her body's state. She noted that she felt a little stronger than she had before, and that the aches and pains that had plagued her before were now no more than lingering twinges. Only her heart continued to ache unbearably, although it had nothing to do with her physical state and everything to do with her mental one.

"Feeling any better?" Dr. Charven peered down at her, his hand reaching to help her move into an upright position.

Carefully, Seven nodded, slightly pleased that her head did not seem to swim in the nauseating fashion it had before.

"Hungry?"

At Seven's nod, Dr. Charven gave a small smile. "How about some rice with your broth this time?"

"I would also like some water," Seven said, wondering again how much of her strength had returned. "Please," she added, as an afterthought. As Dr. Charven left the room, Seven took a look at her surroundings, noting details that had escaped her previously. Her eyes lingered on the doorway, wondering what else lay outside of her room besides the examination room she had first awoken in.

Dr. Charven walked back into her room with a tray holding a bowl of broth and a glass of water, and placed it on the table beside her. Seven reached for the bowl and began to eat, interspersing bites with long sips of water. "How long have I been here?" she asked between bites. Her blue eyes focused on Charven as he sat down on a stool next to her biobed, although her hand continued to bring the spoon to her mouth.

"You have been here for three days," Charven answered easily. "Your last regeneration cycle was 10 hours long."

Seven dropped her spoon back into the bowl and placed it on the tray next to her. She picked up the glass of water and finished it, setting it alongside the bowl. Finished with her repast, she fixed Dr. Charven with a penetrating gaze. "What will happen to me?"

Charven shifted slightly in his chair, wishing he could answer her truthfully. "I do not know, Seven. I can only ask that you cooperate with me."

"And if I do not?" she asked warily, uncertain if it truly mattered, but wanting to know nonetheless.

Charven looked away, glancing upwards at the sensor cluster in the corner of the room before answering, "You don't want to know, Seven. Please. Just cooperate."

Seven followed his glance to the small sensor cluster and understood immediately what it was, and what it meant. They were being watched. She did not know by whom, but she suspected that it was the "Founders" the doctor had told her about.

"Very well. I wish to walk again," Seven replied, seeing the relieved look cross Dr. Charven's features before he composed them carefully once more. She moved her legs over the edge of the biobed and stood, noting with some satisfaction that her legs were much stronger than they had been before, and that her sense of balance seemed to have returned. Cautiously, she took a step away from the biobed, seeing Dr. Charven

move closer out of the corner of her eye, ready to catch her in case she fell. With carefully measured steps, she crossed the room once more, growing more confident with each step. When she reached the wall, she turned around and began her trek back towards the biobed.

"If you're feeling up to it, I'd like to run some general tests," Charven said, watching her progress keenly as she walked towards him.

Seven nodded, although she was focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. She was beginning to feel a weakening in her knees, and her legs were starting to tremble from the exertion of walking. It only made her feel more determined. As the doctor got up and left the room, she followed him outside of the door - and then turned away from him and headed down the corridor in the opposite direction, focusing her gaze on the door at its far end.

"Seven," Charven moved to try to prevent her from reaching the door that lead to the complex's security foyer. "Wait." He wasn't quick enough, and she reached the door before he could stop her.

The air in front of the door shimmered strangely and Seven took a couple of steps backward, startled by the unexpected appearance of a pair of armored humanoids. Seven watched the approach of the reptilian-looking men with trepidation, noting that the weapons they held were pointed at her. They were not of a species she recognized from her history with the Borg, so she began scanning the nearest one with her ocular implant in an attempt to discern any familiar characteristics in the scaled and horned features. The rifle-armed humanoid quickly reacted to her scanning, striking out with the butt of his weapon at her left eye. Only Dr. Charven's quick reflexes saved Seven from having her left eye socket crushed beneath the blow.

Fourth Ikul'Ikan glared down his nose scales at the human who had pushed aside the butt of his disruptor rifle in mid-swing. With a grunt, he quickly flipped his rifle around in his hands to point its emitter and bayonet back at the cybernetic female. Only Ikul'Ikan's look of warning stayed his companion from moving in to attack as well with his kar'takin. The Fifth moved back into his previous position beside the door, his gaze watchful and his attitude one of grim readiness.

"Why are you here?" Charven demanded, unsettled at the sudden appearance of the Jem'Hadar guards. "And why were you going to strike my patient?" He moved protectively closer to Seven, pulling her behind him so that he stood between her and the Jem'Hadar Fourth. He was no match for either of the guards, even if they had not been armed, but he wasn't about to permit them to harm his patient without a struggle.

Ikul'Ikan regarded the woman who was standing behind Charven a moment longer, noting the frightened expression in her blue eyes as his fingers curled possessively around his rifle. Satisfied that she was no longer using her technology to scan him, he turned his attention to the human. "This woman is not permitted to wander outside of her designated areas, Dr. Charven."

"I understand. She would not have gotten the door open at any case," Charven replied angrily. "You didn't answer my question."

"My orders are to make sure she doesn't leave or commandeer this laboratory complex, Dr. Charven." The Jem'Hadar's lips thinned and, casting another look at Seven, he leaned forward, his scaled visage centimeters from the doctor's. "And you are to make sure she keeps her scanning to herself. Or I will."

Charven's eyes narrowed and he took a deep breath, pushing his anger away. It served no purpose at the moment and only hindered his thinking. "Yes, of course," he replied in a reasonable and appropriately

respectful tone. However, his anger flared once more when he realized that the Fourth was resuming his guard position opposite the Fifth.

"Thank you, Fourth. I don't need you to remain," Charven said coldly. "I will not permit my patient to wander where she is not allowed."

Both Jem'Hadar fixed their gaze on the doctor, but only Ikul'Ikan spoke. "We are to remain and ensure you do not."

Outrage flooded Charven's face. "The Founders do not trust me to carry out their orders?"

The Jem'Hadar Fourth regarded the doctor frostily. "The Founders expect you to carry out their orders, of course. We are merely here to ensure that you do." With a significant look at the pale-looking woman standing behind the doctor, Ikul'Ikan initiated his shroud, shimmering from their view. The Fifth accompanying him quickly followed suit.

The doctor stared at the place where the two guards had been visible for a moment longer, then sighed, turning back towards Seven who was regarding him steadily. He held his hand out to her and, surprisingly, she accepted it, placing her own hand within his. Turning away from the shrouded Jem'Hadar, he led her down the corridor into the laboratory, and motioned for her to sit down on the nearest biobed.

Seven sat, feeling more uneasy and frightened than before and still feeling the chilly eyes of the guards on her as Dr. Charven reached for a hypospray. She turned her head slightly away as he pressed it against her neck, releasing the contents of the hypospray into her bloodstream.

"This is a tracer compound that will allow me to study your nanoprobes as they move throughout your body," Charven explained in a low tone, pitched for her ears only.

Seven nodded, trying to hide the shudder that wracked her body. "What species are they?" Her voice sounded small to her. Despite Ikul'Ikan's warnings, she had tried to scan the corridor after he and his companion had disappeared, and had found no trace of either of them. Her sense of helplessness deepened and she shuddered again.

Charven looked up from his tricorder, seeing her wan face and trembling arms. "They are called Jem'Hadar. They are soldiers who live only to serve the Founders in battle." Knowing that the lab was being monitored, he resisted the urge to add that the Jem'Hadar were also biologically engineered beings that depended on a narcotic for their sustenance. There was nothing Charven could say to either Jem'Hadar that would persuade them to leave the complex - they had been ordered to stay, and until a higher-ranking Jem'Hadar, a Vorta, or a Founder said otherwise, the Fourth and his companion would remain, shrouded from view and waiting.

The nearby workstation chirped at him, informing him that it was beginning to receive feedback from the tracer compound in Seven's bloodstream. As the lab's computer system began analyzing the information it was receiving on Seven's nanoprobes, Charven turned his gaze back to the subject herself, allowing himself to study her while her attention was occupied by thoughts of the Jem'Hadar. As his eyes wandered over the cybernetic features of her face, he wondered how long the Founders would actually give him to study her alive before they demanded her life for reasons of security.

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Harry took his seat once more next to Sito in the briefing room, his hopes and expectations readily apparent on his face. With the information he and Turk had gathered on the station more than half a day before, Harry couldn't help but feel somewhat optimistic. Although Seven's encounter with two of the lab complex's guards while he had been asleep definitely worried him, he firmly told himself that it was only a matter of hours before Seven was rescued.

As the other members of her senior staff settled themselves around the table, Mishu wasted no time getting straight to the point, directing her first question to the leader of the other away team. "Dr. Derringer, what do you have for me?"

"The Vorta have staffed the project with their best and brightest medical scientists," Derringer said in his soft drawl. "We estimate that they may be ready to test a cure within four months. However, based on what we know of the Founders' illness and the current progress of the Vorta research, we think it's highly unlikely that the endeavor will be successful at that point. Indeed, given the understandable inexperience of the Vorta scientists with illnesses that can affect the Founders, they may not have enough time before their efforts become moot."

Mishu raised an eyebrow at this, but she did not ask any further questions on the subject. Derringer's report would be on her desk shortly, and that was enough for the moment. "What about the medical readings that Harry took?"

"They are a perfect match with the provided medical records of Seven of Nine," Derringer said easily. "It is my opinion that, medically, that woman is indeed Seven of Nine and not a decoy, holographic or otherwise."

Mishu nodded. "Very well. All that then remains is to verify her quantum signature. What is the rescue plan?"

Harry leaned forward with interest. Turk and Sito had been working on a rescue plan ever since Turk and himself had returned from the lab complex, but Harry had not been privy to the details. In addition, the Avalon had completed its interior scanning of the facility - particularly its computer cores - while he had been asleep, and Harry was curious as to what had been uncovered.

"The best way to get Seven of Nine off Veltis II without alerting the facility or the entire Jem'Hadar fleet there to our presence is to beam her out of there." Turk flashed his grin at Harry. "Sounds easier than it is. We can't dephase in the middle of the facility, and we don't dare dephase anywhere within standard transporter range of the facility. We have to move the ship away from those sensors and the enemy fleet patrolling both in- and outside the system - which will take us quite a distance away from the Veltis system itself."

Sito leaned forward, directing his gaze at Harry. "Once we are far enough away from the system - say, 40 light-years or so - we can dephase the Avalon long enough to beam two people into the facility by subspace transporter." At Harry's sudden expression of alarm, Sito added, "Granted, this is inherently less reliable than a normal-space transport, but we do have experience in compensating for this to the point where the system is as dependable as the transporters in Kirk's day." As Harry's expression relaxed somewhat, Sito continued, "The facility's transport scramblers and planetary shields will make it a little trickier than a straight beam-in, but with our analysis of said defenses and the subspace transporter's ability to defeat them, it is nothing our people can't handle. We should be able to get the team within the general vicinity of Level 17," Sito added. "Possibly even into the complex itself, although transporting through defenses of the power and sophistication of those on Veltis II at such a distance will make it a little harder to be dead on accurate." He flashed a grin at Tucker. "But the boys in engineering are pretty good these days."

There was general laughter around the table, and Harry realized the teasing was quite familiar and good-natured despite Tucker's crossed arms and raised eyebrow at Sito's jibe. He didn't realize that Sito was greatly understating the difficulty and skill necessary in beaming through the scramblers and shields around Veltis II, even with a subspace transporter.

"It is the away team's job to disable the sensors and automatic defenses of the room Seven is in and remove her from the facility without setting off any alarms or triggering any failsafes," Sito continued as the laughter quieted. "The best time to attempt any type of rescue is going to be while Seven is regenerating, since the doctor usually rests at some point during her regeneration period. This is the lowest level of supervision that Seven is ever allowed, since the Jem'Hadar are careful to have at least two guards supervising her at all times."

"Although our study of Veltis II's internal sensor nets has allowed us to optimize the away team's uniforms' abilities to resist them, the team's primary means of remaining undetected will be the prototypes we have of a personal phasing cloak, or PPC," Turk picked up the thread, sliding a padd across the table to Harry, who picked it up with great interest. "Derived from the starship phasing cloak we use on the Avalon, the PPC likewise alters the wearer's atomic structure so that he or she can pass through solid matter and evade normal-phase sensors. Although the current PPC prototypes aren't yet compatible with the starship phasing cloak - hence the need for both the ship and the away team to be dephased during transport - they should allow the team to reach Seven of Nine without threat of detection."

"This reminds me of a device used by a Delta Quadrant species called the Voth," Harry ventured, his eyes still fixed on the padd, which gave him a general description of the device and its capabilities. "They used a portable interphase field generator to keep them out of phase while they studied other species - but I detected their interphase fields during a routine scan with Voyager's internal sensors. Will this device be more effective?"

Tucker nodded. "Without a doubt. Compared with the atomic phase inverters behind the PPC, interphase field generators are technological dinosaurs as phasing cloaks."

Harry had to smile. "Well, the Voth *were* dinosaurs, as a matter of fact." His face reddened slightly as he realized everyone in the briefing room was staring at him. "Evolved Hadrosaurs, specifically."

It was Mishu who finally broke the silence. "I'd love to hear the details about that little episode when we get finished here, Mr. Kim," she said dryly, her brown eyes twinkling with humor.

Harry felt his embarrassment fade and he chuckled quietly with the rest of the staff, enjoying the momentary camaraderie. "What will happen when we get to Seven?" Harry asked when the laughter quieted. "How will the team be able to extract her without alerting the facility?"

"Ah, now," Turk sighed. "That will be the tricky part." He smiled briefly at the general laughter his statement provoked. "First of all, Seven of Nine's quantum signature must be verified with a tricorder that has been equipped for such a task. In order to do that, one of the team members must dephase to conventional cloak, scan her, and rephase to inform the other team member. If Seven of Nine's quantum signature is verified, the other team member should be able to override the complex's sensors and automated defenses from its lab by using what we picked up from our scans of the lab's computer system and the facility's main computer cores. That includes the alarms on the regeneration box *and* the Houdini in Seven's cranium. For that purpose, a countersecurity interface sheet has been prepared to initiate those

commands from one of the laboratory's workstations as well as bypassing the facility network's firewalls without alerting the rest of the facility.

"After the complex's security measures have been subverted, the first team member must dephase once more in order to retrieve Seven and substitute a holographic decoy. Given her constant supervision by the Jem'Hadar, her rescuer will have to use his uniform to generate and maintain a holographic field around him and Seven right in front of the Jem'Hadar who are keeping watch on Seven," Turk continued. "The uniform should be able to establish the holographic field subtly enough to mislead both of the Jem'Hadar present into believing that nothing is amiss during the rescue. If that is not the case, however, the rescuer's priority should be to immediately rephase with Seven without setting up the decoy.

"Once the rescuer has rephased with Seven and puts a life-support armband on her, he will engage the internal transporter node integrated with his PPC - which should be undetectable by normal-space sensors and unaffected by normal-space shields and transport scramblers while it is phased. Thus, the PPC's internal transporter node should suffice to beam the rescuer and Seven out of the facility into orbit above the facility, outside of the interference generated by the facility's shields and transport scramblers. Indeed, these transports will serve as the away team's signals to the Avalon to dephase for their retrieval. Once the rescuer has dephased himself and Seven in orbit, the Avalon's subspace transporters should be able to lock onto and beam them back safely, along with his partner as soon as he recovers the interface sheet and beams himself into orbit as well. If not, they'll have to rephase to avoid detection and periodically dephase to allow Avalon to retrieve them - or, in the event that they aren't recovered before their life-support forcefields begin to fail, they'll have to beam themselves down to a sparsely populated part of the planet. If it comes to that, it's likely that their trip home will have to be by another intelligence ship."

Harry sat back, silently digesting all the information he had just been given. The plan seemed fairly sound overall. There were obvious risks, of course, and the timing of everything was going to have to be very close to perfect for it to work. But every rescue mission would have its risks, and Harry knew from working with them that Turk and Sito's plan was most likely the fastest one that didn't abandon stealth in the process. "Who is going to be on the rescue team?" he finally asked, looking from Mishu to Sito, barely daring to hope.

Mishu raised an eyebrow, folding her small hands in front of her. "Turk speaks highly of you, Mr. Kim. He has suggested that it would be in our best interest if you were to be the one to directly retrieve Seven."

Surprised, but very pleased, Harry looked at Turk, who flashed him his toothy grin. "Seven of Nine's regeneration cycle will be interrupted, and she may awaken confused or disoriented. Once she sees her rescuer, she's going to be very aware that something unusual is going on - especially since, due to the uniform's sensor-defeating properties while it is active, she's not likely to be able to see her rescuer with her cybernetic eye. It would be best if her rescuer had a familiar face," Turk rumbled. "Tucker and I will go through everything with you before we go down. You'll do just fine."

Realizing that Turk was the other member of the rescue team, Harry nodded, feeling excitement and anxiousness build almost unbearably within him. He gripped the edge of the table, mentally focusing himself the way that Tuvok had taught him to long ago. Finally, he felt the anxiousness recede, leaving only an eager readiness in its place.

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Seven finished the small meal that Charven had prepared for her at her request, pushing the empty plate and bowl away from her and physically feeling much better than she had since she first awoke here. She swung her legs over the side of the biobed and stood up, gathering the tray with her dishes on it carefully to her.

Charven looked up from his padd, his fascination with his study momentarily broken as he watched Seven walk from the biobed to her room's recycler. He noted how much stronger her walk was and how much steadier she was on her feet, and was pleased. Dukat had come very close to killing her with his ignorance of her Borg and human systems, and he was surprised to see her recovering this quickly. His eyes narrowed as he mentally calculated how long it would be before she attained the limits of what his regeneration equipment could support. He only hoped that she would not do anything as foolish as trying to escape.

Seven turned, having finished recycling her tray, and walked over to where Dr. Charven was working, doing her best to ignore the sensor cluster from which she knew someone watched her every move in the room - and the hidden units that no doubt existed if the invisible Jem'Hadar were any indication. She had spent a serious amount of time contemplating her potential for escape and had realized several things. Physically, she was no match for the Jem'Hadar guards, armed or not, and even if she could get past them, she was in no condition to seriously consider trying to force the doors they guarded open. Furthermore, Dr. Charven had already warned her that trying to subvert any control panels with her nanoprobes would be both futile and hazardous - the facility's computer systems were designed to repel any unauthorized tampering. And even if she did succeed in getting past those obstacles, as well as any others in the facility that she did not yet know about, there would be nowhere for her to escape to. Practically the entire sector, according to Dr. Charven, was devoted to the Founders. She would find no allies among them. To be honest with herself, she thought, she was in a situation that she wasn't going to be able to get herself out of.

She leaned against the side of the biobed, watching the doctor examine the readings of the tracer compound he had earlier injected her with to study her nanoprobes. Her eyes followed his movements, but her mind continued to process and analyze her situation. She realized, as she stood watching the doctor, that she was truly considering something that went against both her human and Borg natures: giving up.

Giving up meant that she was giving up on Harry. Giving up on everything he meant to her. Giving up on his love. Giving up on hope.

Seven blinked f0007 Tc0.0007.3(warned her oted orce 9)Tj Gi9em'Hadar so they would not see her weakness, trying to hide the tears that burned beneath her eyelids. If she had been alone, she would have weptTjnkedape96espair that moved through her, makrned her otedache fnkedape9pain of it. But she would not allow herself to break96own in fnknt of them, to lose that small amount of control she had left.

Seven lifted her chin, forcing her tears to recede, swallowing past the lump that had formed in her throat. She focused her thoughts and brought her memory of Harry's love to the surface, drawing it to her like a comforting blanket. They might take everything elsee 9ht, moving back to lie96own on the biobed, but they couldn't take 9 her memories of Harry.

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shouldered it. As he glanced sideways at his mirrored reflection on the smooth metal of the transport station wall, he started slightly at the transformation he saw there.

The eyes were still his, but the rest was unfamiliar. Gone was his short, blue-black hair - in its place was blond hair of considerable length, kept away from his face in a braid that hung well past his shoulder blades. His eyebrows were no longer angular above his brown eyes, having been replaced by gently curving eyebrows whose shade matched his new hair perfectly. Even the angled planes of his cheekbones had been softly rounded out, and a dark blond beard covered his lower chin and upper lip.

The disguise was holographic in nature, its source a small metal band around his left upper arm underneath

attention to yourself if you can avoid it. Your disguise should fool anyone looking, but your actions may give you away."

Vorik took the forged padd from Terik and tucked it in his right coat pocket as they reached the end of the hall, where it joined again with the main corridor. Vorik could see large groupings of people of several different species milling around the corridor where the shuttlecraft and transports were docked. He could see no sign of the Cardassians.

Both John and Terik watched the docking area for several long moments, keeping Vorik well away from the main area of traffic. Finally, John shook his head.

"They may not have been to the house yet, and those three were only here as a precaution," John muttered, searching the crowd. "I don't believe that they would be this careless if they were truly searching for you." He turned back to Vorik and sighed. "We're going to have to leave you now. The name of your transport ship is the Artemis. She's currently berthed at Docking Port 19, which is over towards the left side of the docking array." He pointed in the direction Vorik would need to take. "Her captain's name is Brian Wallace. Tell him your cover name and, when he asks you where you're headed, tell him you wish to observe the asteroid belt of Rousseau V."

Vorik nodded. Looking in the direction John had indicated, he spotted the sleek transport ship berthed at the docking port numbered 19. Taking a deep breath for calm, he held up his hand, fingers spread in the traditional farewell gesture of his people, his gaze on both of the men. "Peace and long life."

Terik raised his hand in return. "Live long and prosper."

John Morten nodded. "It was a pleasure to have met you, Vorik. I wish you well."

Vorik bowed his head slightly in response. "Thank you." He turned away and began walking towards the docking port when he paused, turning back to look at John Morten once more. "Tell Dama..." he began, and paused, uncharacteristically uncertain of what he wanted to say.

Dama's father smiled. "I will, Vorik."

Vorik regarded the human for a moment and then nodded, satisfied that the message would be passed along. Because, despite every logical argument he could come up with, Vorik was going to miss her very much.

He turned and, without a backward glance at the human and Vulcan watching him leave, he made his way to the sleek ship that was docked and waiting at Port 19.

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"Gentlemen, are you ready?" Sito asked, entering the transporter room where Harry, Turk, and Tucker were waiting. "We're nearly at the beam-out point." He stopped, gave Harry a quick visual inspection, and nodded with approval.

Harry and Turk were outfitted once more in what Turk referred to as 'standard away-mission gear'. Harry was getting used to the feel of the fabric against his skin, although the levitation boots still took some getting used to. However, there was one major change that Turk and Tucker had implemented for this mission.

"Just about," Turk replied, stepping next to Harry to adjust the straps on the latter's PPC, tightening the black backpack-like device so that it fit snugly against Harry's spine. His own PPC was already appropriately adjusted so that the nine-kilogram device did not rub or flap when he walked. He gave Harry's PPC a finishing tug. "Try that, Harry."

"It feels pretty good." Harry shook his torso, twisting and bending, checking how the PPC was adjusted. It rested slightly below his shoulder blades, the straps running over his shoulders and around his waist to hold the device snugly against his body. Satisfied that there was no movement or slippage, he nodded at Turk, trying to ignore the nervous twinges in his stomach as he realized the moment was drawing near. Like the uniform he now wore, the PPC lacked any external controls, being operated through the uniform's telepathic interface, and Harry had taken a few hours to practice operating the device in that manner. As soon as they materialized on the surface of Veltis II, they would engage their phasing cloaks before the special-operations subspace transporter beam dissipated beyond its ability to cloak them.

Tucker and Sito exchanged a quick glance, the engineer nodding at his commander's unspoken question. "He'll be fine. I'd better be getting back to my engines." Tucker turned and raised a hand in salute towards Harry and Turk as he and Sito walked towards the exit.

"Good luck you two," Sito added just as the door to the transporter room hissed shut behind them.

"Bridge to transporter room one, we're ready to dephase," Mishu's voice startled them, coming clearly over the intraship comm system. "Mr. Turk, Mr. Kim. Stand by for transport."

Turk grinned suddenly, and Harry felt some of his anxiousness fade despite the danger of the situation. He couldn't help but envy the large man his confidence, his ability to act as though this was merely another routine away mission. Of course, Harry amended as he took his place alongside the Avalon's security officer on the transporter pad, Turk didn't have as much personally at stake here as Harry did.

The transporter chief tapped his combadge. "Transporter room one, standing by."

"Dephasing to conventional cloak." There was a pause before Mishu added, "Whenever you're ready. Good luck, gentlemen."

Turk's expression faded into a more serious one, and he nodded at the transporter chief to indicate that they were ready. Harry felt a rush of adrenaline surge through him at Turk's next word.

"Energize."

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Vorik stepped aboard the transport ship, silently acknowledging the relief he felt to be aboard the vessel without having been stopped by anyone. He had passed two sets of Cardassian soldiers on his way to the docking port, but neither had even paused in their search to look at him closely. Their gray gazes had passed over his blond hair and beard without hesitation, and Vorik had to admit that the disguise was a success.

The captain of the Artemis, Brian Wallace, had been properly suspicious of Vorik until he had given the correct identity and request. Vorik had then noted a definite change in the captain's demeanor, and Wallace had welcomed him aboard, ushering the young Vulcan onto the ship quickly.

"I've been waiting for you. If you'd been any later, I'd have probably left without you," Wallace said as he walked rapidly down a corridor, checking periodically to see if Vorik was still behind him. "I'm supposed to be only transporting cargo, with no passengers. They'll inspect me before I leave, so you will need to be hidden before they board."

Wallace stopped in the middle of the corridor and briefly pushed against a particular area on it with his open hand. Vorik was barely able to suppress his sense of surprise as a narrow doorway appeared in the seemingly solid bulkhead and Wallace pushed him through it into a small, closet-like room. He turned around, eyebrow rising in query, but wasn't given any chance to voice his question as Wallace pressed a thumbnail-sized isolinear optical chip into his hand. "Insert this into the emitter for your disguise - this will instruct it to hide your appearance and biosignature altogether instead of altering them. Also, stay here and don't make a sound. As soon as we leave the system, I'll come and let you out, okay?" Wallace anxiously glanced down the corridor the way they had come before looking back at the startled Vulcan. "You're not claustrophobic, are you?"

Vorik had to admit the room was exceedingly small - in fact, it was barely large enough for him to sit down cross-legged. However, he was disciplined enough to not let the smallness of the room bother him. "I will be fine," he reassured the human as he took off his coat and inserted the provided isolinear chip into his disguise's emitter. Over the next second, Vorik saw his hands - and the rest of what he could see of himself and his possessions - vanish from his eyesight.

Wallace nodded once. "Good. See you again very soon - hopefully under the desired circumstances." The last was added quietly, as if the human hadn't wanted Vorik to hear it. Wallace touched the panel on the bulkhead once more, and the hidden door slid shut, leaving Vorik in total blackness.

With nothing to do, Vorik felt the best use of his time would be to meditate. He sank carefully to the deck, crossing his legs and placing his coat and duffel bag in his lap. He closed his eyes, effectively blocking out any thoughts of the small room, the blackness, his invisibility, or the risk of being discovered, and took a deep breath. He brought his hands up in front of him, index fingers meeting in a point, and began to focus his mind. Images flooded his brain, and Vorik was greatly startled by them. He struggled for several moments, trying to banish the images, taking deep breaths to clear his mind. The images continued to bombard him, images of his crew being separated and subjugated to the will of the Cardassians, images of Bural's seedy restaurant, and finally, images of Dama, smiling and gentle, the joy in her expression when her mind brushed against his. Vorik clung to this last image, bringing it forward and concentrating on it, using it to push away all of the negative images his mind was bombarding him with.

In this manner, he found he was able to tolerate the small quarters and the uncertainty of his situation, a feeling of calm settling over him that he had not experienced since long before Voyager had even crossed the wormhole.

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Three seconds after he had heard Turk's command to the transporter chief, Harry's view of the Avalon's transporter room was silently and abruptly replaced by that of his destination - without even the intermediate haze of sparkles typically associated with transporters, he noted. Harry immediately brought his personal phasing cloak online, and his companion in this rescue mission responded just as quickly. Together, they stood in a corridor of the research facility with six Jem'Hadar in sight - two of whom had been gazing in the direction of the beam-in. Yet, Harry thought, none of the Jem'Hadar present even suspected that anything was out of the ordinary if his uniform's readings of their vital signs were any indication. The corridor's

counter-intruder defenses likewise remained unresponsive, leading Harry to conclude that the insertion had been a success - even if it hadn't gotten them directly into Seven's lab complex.

Turk pulled out his tricorder and began scanning their surroundings. "I'm going to have to have a word with Tucker about his transporters," he said quietly. "We're eight levels above and four sections away from the target area."

Harry took a deep breath, giving Turk a somewhat more nervous version of his usual smile. "At least they got us in the facility."

Turk nodded with a quiet chuckle. "True enough." His face then took on a more serious expression. "We need to go down," Turk said. "Are you ready?"

Harry grimaced slightly, knowing what was in store. With the PPC's telepathic interface, it would be a simple matter of following Turk's lead by deliberately thinking of following his movements and the PPC computing the specific reconfigurations of the phasing cloak, and it would be much faster than using the stairs, but it still made him slightly uneasy. Passing through walls was much like walking, but passing through floors would be like falling. *At least it would be better than being below Level 17 and using the levitation boots to fly head-first through the ceilings,* Harry thought. As he nodded, Turk began to sink into the corridor's floor.

Harry took a deep breath and quickly followed suit, his stomach turning uneasily as his deliberate fall began. As his head reached the point where it would phase through the floor, Harry briefly closed his eyes. By the time he floated through the center of the corridor that had just recently been the floor beneath him, his rate of descent was accelerating at a notable rate, and he passed through the following two floors much more swiftly. By the time he reached his fifth floor, Harry was no longer closing his eyes every time he passed through a floor. He had accidentally passed through a Vorta on the third floor down and the experience had left him startled and queasy, but he was no longer bothered by the images of the floors passing by him. As he entered Level 17, Harry restored his PPC to its default configuration, and it initiated a rapid inertialess deceleration that left him standing firmly on the floor below him. As he released a small sigh of relief, he saw Turk grinning at him.

"Good job. I knew you could handle it."

Harry glanced up at the taller man and grinned in reply. He was surprised to feel that his nervousness about this mission had faded. In its place were calm resolve and a belief in the impending success of their task.

Turk's face became uncharacteristically solemn as he consulted his tricorder once more for their location. "This way." He pointed at the wall across the corridor from them.

Together they moved, passing swiftly through hallways and rooms, Turk setting the pace and leading the way. Harry was so intent on keeping his focus on the back of Turk's head that when Turk stopped moving forward, Harry nearly ran into him. Harry came to an awkward halt beside him, slightly breathless from their quick pace. He looked around, taking in their surroundings. It took him a second to realize that they had reached their destination, but there was no mistaking the woman on the biobed across the room from him. A hand touched his shoulder and he turned, reluctantly tearing his gaze away from Seven.

As previously discussed, once they reached the lab complex, all verbal communication would cease. Until they were off the planet or discovered, the rest of the mission depended on pre-arranged details, hand signals, and nonverbal comm signals. Turk pointed at Dr. Charven's resting area and, upon seeing Harry's nod, left

the room to confirm that Dr. Charven was still asleep. Harry moved towards Seven's biobed, noting the specific positions of the four Houdinis and two shrouded Jem'Hadar guards present in the room. He had just taken out his tricorder and its specialized scanner peripheral in preparation for the final confirmation of Seven's identity when he saw Turk step back into the quarters and give him the thumbs-up signal.

On his mental command, Harry's PPC shifted from phase cloak to conventional cloak, and he quickly lifted his tricorder and its scanner peripheral. As he began his scan of Seven of Nine's quantum signature, he noted that he could still detect the Houdinis and the shrouded Jem'Hadar through his uniform's sensors despite their current imperceptibility to his unphased senses. The moment his scan was complete, he rephased and examined the tricorder's comparison of Seven's quantum signature with the ones of himself and Turk he had taken back on the Avalon as a base of comparison. Harry grinned as he looked up from the tricorder to give the thumbs-up to Turk, signaling that the rescue attempt would proceed past its failsafe point.

In response, Turk silently nodded before he turned and walked out of Seven's quarters and into the laboratory. Once he was behind the lab's nearest workstation, he sent a mental command to his uniform's transport buffer. On the palm of his left hand, a flat, rectangular object made of a clear, flexible substance materialized - the countersecurity interface sheet that he would use to subvert the lab complex's sensors and

comprehend why this would be so, but considered that her ocular implant was no longer functioning properly.

With her organic eye, Seven could see that Harry was dressed in an unfamiliar fashion and his face bore several days worth of facial hair. However, the warmth of his hands on her arms and the light in his eyes did much to convince her that this *was* Harry.

Harry wrapped his arms securely around Seven, pressing her face against his chest. He felt Seven's arms encircle him tightly and felt her tremble against him. There was no time to hold and comfort her as he would have liked to at this moment. Every second that passed increased their risk of discovery, and Harry knew that they were not out of danger yet.

Seven felt Harry reach behind her and place something on the biobed before wrapping an armband-like device around her left upper arm - although she thought his hands had been empty while Harry had been holding her with them. She looked up at his face as he held her securely once more and saw his mouth smiling down at her before the room and everything in it disappeared in a haze of blue-white sparkles.

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Upon his tricorder's detection of Harry and Seven's phased self-beamout, Turk put away his tricorder and scanner peripheral, placed his right hand on the interface sheet, dephased, and triggered its disengagement sequence to restore the lab complex's sensors and automated defenses. As soon as the interface sheet signaled its success, Turk quickly rephased, lifted the interface sheet off of the console, and dematerialized it back into his jacket's transport buffer. He walked back into the room where Seven had been regenerating, and smiled with satisfaction. Harry and Seven had already beamed away, but the illusionary Seven of Nine generated by the tricorder-sized decoy Harry had left on the biobed continued to "regenerate." The decoy paired an automated sensor transponder with its hologenerator to mimic Seven's biological lifesigns to both the facility's sensors and the reactivated Houdini hovering inside of the hologram's head, and both had received a last-second update from the sensor web of Harry's uniform. Neither the doctor nor the Jem'Hadar guards would discover the deception until it was far too late - at which point, the decoy's negative matter destruct package would silently annihilate its more sophisticated components, leaving behind a far cruder device that would baffle the Vorta as to how it could have fooled their facility's sensors and defenses for as long as it did. Hopefully, the nonstop surveillance by both guards and sensors that Doctor Charven was under would suffice to protect the doctor from any accusations of collaboration.

With that thought, Turk sent a mental command to the internal transporter node in his PPC, and his view of the room disappeared in a showery haze of blue-white lights.

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The door to his hiding place slid open and Vorik blinked against the sudden intrusion of light into his dark sanctuary. A shadow stood silhouetted in the doorway.

"It's safe now. You can remove the chip from your disguise and come out." The voice of the shadow belonged to Brian Wallace.

Vorik felt his muscles protest slightly as he moved to stand. Picking up his coat, he slung his bag over his shoulder and removed the chip from his disguise's emitter. He had no idea how long he had been meditating in this hiding place, but it had been long enough for his leg muscles to begin to cramp from the position he had held them in. He took a moment to allow his body to become accustomed to standing once more before

he moved out of the darkness and into the light of the corridor, where he noted that he - or, more precisely, his disguise - was visible again.

"Sorry I had to leave you in there so long. My ship was inspected three times before they would let me depart - they were definitely looking for you." Wallace began moving down the corridor of the ship, and Vorik fell in step beside him.

"I am grateful for your assistance, Mr. Wallace," Vorik replied evenly. "I am relieved you did not incur any further difficulties on my behalf."

Wallace cast him a quick look, as if judging the sincerity of the remark. He stopped in front of a door, gesturing to Vorik as it opened automatically for him.

"Your quarters, Vorik."

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Harry hugged her closer. "I promise it will be all right. As soon as Turk gets here, we'll be transported back to the ship. He should be here any moment."

Seven nodded, leaning against him and glancing down where the planet moved slowly beneath their feet, trying to ignore the kilometers of empty space between them. As a Borg, she had participated in many maneuvers that had taken her outside of a ship with nothing between her and the vast vacuum of space but a life-support forcefield similar to the one she wore now. As a Borg, the immense size of space had not caused her any fear: fear was irrelevant. However, without the security of her emotionless Borg state, Seven found the empty space between them and the planet unnerving. Closing her eyes, she buried her face in the material of Harry's uniform, grateful for his arms around her and still not quite believing that he was here with her.

Soundlessly in the vacuum of space, a dark-skinned human who must be the 'Turk' Harry referred to appeared in a transporter beam three meters away from them - and, just as with Harry, she could only see him with her organic eye. Five seconds later, Seven felt the familiar sensation of a transporter once again, but this time, it came without the typical audio and visual signatures of a transporter beam. Instead, her view of the planet and stars was simply replaced with a view of a transporter room that was the comfortingly familiar design of Starfleet. Harry and Turk stood on the transporter dais beside her and, to Seven's further relief, both of them became visible to her ocular implant as well as her organic eye. Together they stepped off the dais, Harry's arms supporting her as they walked.

"Transporter room one to bridge, we've got them." The young man operating the transporters gave them a nod as they crossed the transporter room.

"Acknowledged," another man's voice responded over the intercom. "Mr. Turk, we're setting course for the Alpha Quadrant immediately. Please report to the bridge as soon as possible."

"On my way," Turk replied, flashing a quick grin at Harry. "Take her to sickbay, Mr. Kim. I'll take care of the report to Sito and Mishu." Turk stopped and turned, his large hand reaching out to clasp Harry on the shoulder as his teeth flashed white against his skin in a smile. "You did good back there, little man. I'm glad we got your lady out safely. You go take care of her now, and don't worry about anything." His hand dropped easily to his side as he smiled in turn at Seven, and he left them staring at his retreating back.

Seven turned to look at Harry, even as she felt her limbs begin to shake with the effort of standing. "Thank you for rescuing me, Harry," she said softly. It sounded so terribly inadequate, but in her state, she could not find the words she wanted to express. Unbidden tears clouded her vision.

Harry touched her hair softly as his other arm tightened around her. "Let's get you to sickbay."

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Seven opened her eyes and looked carefully around the room she was lying in. Her eyes slowly passed over familiar-looking instruments and panels until they rested on the occupant of the chair next to her biobed. As she gazed at him, her heart filled with a sense of relief intermixed with joy that was almost painful. Sitting beside her, completely asleep with his cheek cradled by his hand, was the one person she wanted most to see, and the one person she feared she would never see again.

Her eyes made careful, loving inspection of Harry as he slept, noting that he was now dressed in casual clothing instead of the uniform he had worn when he rescued her. Furthermore, he had removed his excess facial hair since she had last seen him, and his cheeks were smooth once more. His face was relaxed and

peaceful as he slept, but there were shadows beneath his eyes that told her that his rest had not been adequate lately, a thought that both saddened and angered her.

As she watched his face, his eyelashes fluttered and he stirred, as if feeling her regard. Slowly, his eyes opened, and Seven felt as if her heart had begun to beat again.

"Harry." Her voice was soft and hesitant, as if to speak too loudly would shatter the vision before her.

"Hello, Seven." His mouth curved into the smile she loved so well.

"Am I dreaming?" The memory of her captivity, the pain and the hopelessness of her situation at the facility, the sad kindness of Dr. Charven and her rescue: all of it seemed unreal, almost as if she had dreamed it all. She feared that she would awaken to find herself once more strapped to a biobed with Dukat's leering visage leaning over her.

Solemnly, Harry reached out and took her right hand in his own, folding her fingers gently through his. He brought their entwined hands to him and placed them over his heart. "Can you feel that?" he asked softly, his dark eyes intent upon her face.

Seven closed her eyes, concentrating on the feel of him beneath their hands. Gradually, she became aware of the beat of his heart, thumping slowly and steadily underneath her fingers. She opened her eyes, blinking suddenly against the unshed tears that formed in response to the sudden, overwhelming emotions that crashed over her. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "Yes," was all she trusted herself to say.

Harry stood, his hand still holding hers over his heart, and wrapped his other arm around her shoulders, holding her tightly. He buried his face in the softness of her neck, drawing her closer to him. He could feel her shaking in his embrace.

He had thought of a million things he had wanted to say to her once he saw her again, once he held her in his arms. All of them seemed terribly inadequate now, and it was enough to hold her, to feel her other arm twine about his waist and return his hug, to smell her skin, to know that she was here with him.

He raised his head and gently brushed her lips with his own, intending the kiss to be light and reassuring. He was not prepared for the intensity with which she returned his kiss, her arms winding up around his neck to hold him close. He found himself kissing her with growing passion and felt her respond with a hunger and need that matched his own.

Seven did not have the words to express every emotion that was moving through her, but she sensed that talking was not necessary at this time. It was simply enough to be held, to feel the strength in his arms, the sweet warmth of his body as it pressed against hers, and to know the touch of his lips once more. It was enough to know that she was finally back, safe in his love, where she always wanted to be, for as long as she lived.

There would be time for words later.

End Part VIII