



Episode 8-2 - Snakes in the Grass

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Seven of Nine could hear dripping. She did not know where the sound was coming from or why it was there, but that sound seemed to be consistent with the place. The subdued lighting threw harsh lines against metallic brown walls and the room was all sharp angles. If this place was built to convey a message, then that message was 'pain'. Already, fear was beginning to jumble up inside the former Borg's stomach and cause her muscles to throb with unused adrenaline.

Ever since the doctor had removed the fail-safe device that had been placed in her micro circuitry by the Borg, Seven had been free to experience the full range of her emotions. Learning to control them was going to be difficult. Fear was something she had encountered before. When the Admiral had told her she was going to die she hadn't been prepared for the depth of emotion it had raised in her, but this was completely different. Here, with her hands tied tightly and strung up

over her head, she was coming to understand the fear of the unknown in a very real way. Gory visions of endless possibilities marched through her brain and provoked her to irritation at the futility of her panic. The next few hours were not going to be comfortable ones.

Angular doors at the far end of the cold room slid open. A tall, skeletal man walked in. He was Cardassian, species 5731 - a race that had added several dimensions to the Collective's views on cruelty and deception. The man, who walked up to Seven of Nine and confronted her with a wide, cheerless smile, seemed to be the epitome of those two words. When she had heard about the contact that had been made with the Cardassian ship, she had not experienced the involuntary shudder or the knee-jerk anger that others had. But now, faced with this man, their reactions did not seem so illogical.

"Hello again, drone," he spoke in velvet tones. "I never realized that the Borg could look so... tasty." He raised a gray finger and dragged it across Seven's cheek.

Seven recoiled and looked at him in disgust. "I wish to speak to my captain," she stated boldly, although her guts were taut with dread.

The Cardassian clicked his tongue. "That won't be possible. Will I have to tell you again?" Without warning, he raised his arm and savagely struck her face with the back of his hand. His rough skin ripped at her cheek and caused blood to spill down in contrast to her pale skin.

Seven gritted her teeth under his assault, but the physical pain was the easier part to bear.

"We can do this with or without your cooperation, but I will get what I want eventually." The Cardassian cupped her face in his hands and pushed his thumb into the cut on her cheek. He leaned in close so that she could smell his acidic breath and whispered, "I would prefer it if you didn't cooperate."

The man was not at all logical or consistent. Seven paled. She thought that he wanted to use her to gain knowledge of Borg technology. Now, she was uncertain. It seemed that his motives were far murkier.

The Cardassian pulled back abruptly and walked over to the wall. He placed his hand on the wall and a panel revolved around to reveal a small, steel hand basin and faucet. He waved his hand under the faucet and clean water streamed out, and then he rinsed the red blood into the basin that had stained his thumb.

The liquid on Seven's cheek grew cold while the pain of it dulled to an ache.

"It would be my pleasure to continue this conversation at a later time, but for now, I have to play the gallant to your lovely Captain Janeway. I won't be sending your regards, however." The man's smile made her skin prick with discomfort. He turned and walked to the door without looking back at her and Seven knew that the time until his return would be spent in irrelevant anxiety over what he was capable of doing to her.

Captain's Log, Stardate 55006.2:

It's been over a week since the events that have lead us to this accursed place and we still don't know where we are. I have had Seven of Nine work constantly on the astrometric data, but our calculations and charts can make no sense of the stars we see. I don't know whether or not we are in our own galaxy, but surely not even the Borg have arms that stretch into the distant parts of the universe.

Transwarp corridors aside, our situation is dismal. I have yet to address the crew as a whole about where we stand, because I do not even know where that is! The crew we rescued from the Pleiades is recovering from the loss of their vessel and their crewmates as much as from their injuries. I want to reassure them, tell them everything will be okay, but I have been in this situation for a long time; false words are empty. My own crew is tense, but I hope the repairs that Voyager was desperate for have distracted them. B'Elanna has been put on maternity leave, but still manages to get the Engineering staff into action.

Everything, except for the new ablative armor, is back in functional order, if not peak efficiency.

We might be lost, but at least we are not alone. Coming across the Cardassian warship was unexpected and disturbing to some, but I believe it is a good omen that their captain took a non-confrontational stance. I am cautious about trusting Gul Jakat, but, ironically, his presence puts me somewhat at ease. The fact that there is a Cardassian vessel out here could mean that we are not too far from Federation Space. The Gul wishes to discuss things in a 'civilized' manner, so I have agreed to a meeting on his ship. Decisions will be made afterwards, but for now I will hold my breath.

End Log.

Janeway leaned back in her chair and contemplated the calmness of her own voice. She wondered if, years from now, archivists would find the record and marvel at how sure and in control she sounded. Understatement was the cardinal rule in creating a formal log, but, in reality, the universe had gone crazy on her. She was still gasping for air after their last and final encounter with the Borg, and the victory that seemed to be hers, handed to her by herself, no less, and brought out on the shiny platter that was Earth. They had been so close that she could almost smell the salt of the oceans.

Would the Admiral have made her sacrifice if she had known where they would end up? But, how could she know? Her choice had been informed by what she knew and wherever they were now, it probably hadn't been part of the Admiral's future. Or was that past?

Shaking her head at the paradox, Janeway reached for her cup and took a sip of the bitter liquid. Life was becoming a bitter pill to swallow. At least the Admiral's plan to rescue her family had succeeded on several points: Tuvok, after the mind meld with his wife, was on his way to recovery. Seven of Nine would not die on an away mission in the Delta Quadrant and Chakotay... Ever since they had escaped from the destabilized corridor, Janeway had been showing serious signs of First Officer Avoidance Behavior. There were just too many questions that she had no desire to address at this time and, of course, Chakotay was pressing her to make an official announcement to the crew about their current status.

She didn't know what the hell their 'current status' was and there was no way she was going to admit to the crew that Voyager was lost. Again. The irony of it almost made her laugh. She had not laughed at Paris's quip that they had now entered 'The Twilight Zone'.

Janeway reached up to tap her combadge. "Janeway to Seven of Nine." She waited for the former-Borg's response, but none came. She spoke with slight irritation in her voice, "Computer, where is Seven of Nine?"

"Seven of Nine is in Commander Chakotay's quarters," the simulated voice stated blandly.

A sharp frown crossed Janeway's features. It was one thing that this dalliance of theirs was being conducted after hours, but Seven was supposed to be working in Astrometrics. She decided that she needed to confront both of them about keeping their minds on their duties. Now was certainly not the time to indulge in gratuitous self-fulfillment when there were more important things to be done. She could understand why Seven, who really was emotionally immature, could not be blamed, but she thought that the commander should know better.

Throwing back the remains of her coffee, Janeway put the mug down with a decisive thud, and made her way to the side door of her ready room which would take her into the corridor without the trouble of crossing the bridge. Tuvok was already in charge there.

"What may I do for you, Ensign?" Voyager's Emergency Medical Hologram walked out of his office and into the main area of sickbay. Harry Kim was standing in the middle of the room with a slightly distracted expression. "Another bout of that Vulcan flu that's been going around? Or is it a twinge of the gastronomical sort?"

Harry jumped slightly at the doctor's tone. The EMH wasn't considered the best authority on bedside manner, but over the years, the holographic man's program had expanded enough to include sympathy and a touch of tact. Those were subroutines that he seemed to be ignoring lately. "Actually, Doc, I was looking for Seven."

Out of billions of words, Harry managed to choose the wrong combination and the doctor's less than jovial features soured further. "I'm a doctor, not a Psychic," he said. "She had an appointment with a medical tricorder earlier but I guess she's too busy to bother about common courtesy anymore."

"She didn't show?" Harry asked.

"No, Ensign, she didn't. But who am I to criticize? Obviously something had a greater priority than a meeting with the doctor. I'm sorry, Mister Kim, I would love to chitchat, but I have a sickbay to run. Now, if you'll excuse me..." The doctor turned to go back to his office, but Harry reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Wait a minute. You mean you haven't seen her all day?"

The EMH looked at Harry with an acerbic eyebrow. "I thought that's what I said."

Harry frowned, his brain working at double speed. "That's strange, Doc, I could have sworn the computer said she was here. But if she hasn't been here at all today..."

Shrugging, the doctor said, "What would I know? Run a diagnostic or something."

"Of course," said Harry, "do you mind if I access the computer systems from here?"

The doctor rolled his eyes in resignation. "Why should I? You're probably going to do it anyway." Harry was already punching away at the interface.

Chakotay was whiling away his off-duty hours with writing up a report on crew morale. He suddenly realized how much easier Neelix had made his job with his self-appointed position of Morale Officer. The quirky alien was going to be missed, although Chakotay had to admit that Chell's cooking was a partial panacea to that ill. The Bolian's extravagantly named dishes seemed to appeal precisely to his palate and Chakotay wondered why they had never put Chell in charge of the mess hall before now; his talents had been wasted on the 'minor repairs' team. If he never saw leola root until the day he died, he couldn't live long enough.

Thoughts of dinner suddenly brought to mind the fifth date that had been interrupted. He was still puzzling over what had actually occurred between him and Seven of Nine. Chakotay had been flattered when she had first approached him and suggested that they 'socialize more'. He knew straight away that her request had romantic undertones

and it had been a boost to his ego. He was not getting any younger and Chakotay was too modest to admit that he could still turn a pretty ensign's head, or Borg drone for that matter.

Seven's 'more' had turned rapidly into a whirlwind and Chakotay had just sat back for the ride. He knew that her interest in him was experimental - part of her quest to regain her humanity and he was quite happy to go along with that because it seemed safe and temporary. But seeing Earth again, even if it was only on long range scanners, had changed a lot of things for him. The whole question about 'the rest of his life' had resurfaced and suddenly, he couldn't see her in it. Chakotay had begun to question his motives and what he found there disturbed him.

But, in true Borg fashion and with no tact or recognition of its need in the situation, Seven had quite rapidly come to her own conclusion about things and had told him about it at the next available opportunity. She didn't need him anymore and, quite frankly, he would only hold her back. Out of guilt and perhaps the pain of rejection, Chakotay had tried to contradict her, but the curse of his life was getting involved on some level with women who were stubborn as hell. She would have none of it, and now she was avoiding him in any but the most professional situations.

Fortunately, time lent itself to true retrospective. A relationship between them would never have lasted. At this stage, Chakotay was actually relieved that things had not developed beyond flowers and kisses. In the long run, it was easily forgotten and not too much damage had been done.

What had happened had been... interesting, but now it was time to get on with reality.

The door chime broke in on Chakotay's thoughts. "Enter," he called out.

Captain Janeway walked into his quarters, her brow furrowed and the corners of her mouth turned down. It was not a good expression. Without acknowledging him, she looked around. When she couldn't locate the object of her search, she turned to him and snapped, "Where's Seven?"

"Captain. I don't know. Why don't you ask the computer?" Chakotay stood from his desk and put the PADD that had been idling in his hands aside.

Janeway gave him a look that threatened to lynch him. "Don't be ridiculous. The computer said she was here."

"Well, quite obviously, she's not," he told her. He knew he was being a tad flippant, but her mood irritated him. When she was like this, there was nothing he could say or do to bring her out of it and it irked him. He knew very well she was struggling to come to terms with the situation that Voyager was in now, but if she just bothered to talk to him about it, perhaps they could realize a way to cope with it together. But Kathryn Janeway was in some ways more pigheaded than her protégé and meeting the Admiral had made him realize that she would never change. He had butted heads with her on many occasions, but he knew that he wouldn't be on Voyager, as her first officer, if it weren't for her obstinacy. Quite possibly, none of them would be alive today. Sometimes you had to take the good with the bad.

"Chakotay, I can see that," Janeway said with an exasperated sigh. "For obvious reasons, I need her in Astrometrics. Now, could you tell me where she went?"

Deciding it was best not to anger her more than necessary, Chakotay said, "I can't tell you that, because she was never here in the first place, Kathryn. She's been avoiding me. I don't think I have seen her more than a few times in the last week."

Kathryn raised her eyebrow at this. "I see," was her noncommittal reply.

Chakotay wasn't sure how much she knew about his 'dates' with Seven of Nine. He couldn't really bring himself to call it a relationship. Kathryn seemed to know quite a bit more than he had told her and he wondered if she had been Seven's confidant. He became slightly uneasy at the thought and turned his head to avoid her stare. "If you must know, nothing really came of it. Seven's in an exploratory phase right now."

"What you do in your off time is not my concern, Commander, but Seven has had this problem before where off-duty diversions have influenced her productiveness. I need her in Astrometrics and I certainly don't need her to be distracted. Do I make myself clear?"

Her words made his head snap back up and he looked at her with incredulity. "Have you actually listened to anything I said?"

With an all too familiar gesture, she brought her hand up to squeeze her temples. A pained expression crossed her face. "Chakotay, I really can't deal with this right now. I have a Starship in the middle of proverbial nowhere, a crew that is ready to replace me with the person that scrubs the warp plasma manifolds, and a group of leering Cardassians on my doorstep. I really need your support, right now."

"The crew is not ready to replace you."

"What?"

"They don't hate you, Kathryn, if only you'd just talk to them." He could read her mind sometimes and he could see that she was scared. "We can get through this. We certainly have had a lot of practice." Chakotay tried to lighten the conversation. Unfortunately, his humor fell flat.

"All I need from you is to know that Seven of Nine will be doing her job when and if I need her."

Chakotay sighed. The conversation, if that's what you can call two people talking at each other, had come full circle. When had they let it get to this? "That's something you will have to ask her yourself." He winced as he watched her mouth tighten into a thin line and saw the hands come down on her hips.

Just as Chakotay was preparing for the inevitable backlash, a voice sounded over the comsystem, "Kim to Janeway."

Harry, I could kiss you for your good timing, Chakotay thought.

The captain hit her insignia and barked. "Janeway here. What is it, Harry?"

"Ma'am, there's something you should see - could you come to sickbay?"

"I'll be right there. Janeway out." She gave the commander one last glance, that spoke a whole book on unfinished business, then walked out brusquely.

"This had better be good, Harry, I've got a lot on my plate at the moment."

Janeway stalked into sickbay like an agitated wildcat. Immediately, sirens went off in Harry's head. He had to tell her what he had found, though, otherwise she would actually have his head. The doctor was hovering beside Harry as both of them faced her with grim looks.

"What tells me I'm not going to like this?" She looked from one to the other.

Harry, green ensign no more, had eyes that were wide with concern and determination. If they had reached Earth, he would have been a lieutenant by now. She had sent the recommendation to Starfleet Command and a surprise ceremony as part of the 'welcoming' celebrations had been planned for their arrival. With guilt, Janeway remembered that his parents were going to be there.

The doctor also showed concern, but there was something else in his stance that she couldn't quite figure out. Both of them deserved more than her brusque words, so she pushed aside the unsettled feeling that her speech with Commander Chakotay had roused, and said in a less abrupt tone, "What is it?"

Moving into action, Harry activated the terminal he had been working on and pointed to the algorithms that scrolled up the screen. "Take a look at this code in the computer's internal sensor net."

Janeway moved over to look at the screen. "That's not supposed to be there. What's it doing?"

Harry pulled up a different screen. "It's sending false information to the computer core. Look at this." He pointed to the relevant data.

"Seven's bio signature... Her combadge signal?"

"Exactly. The program's quite clever. It's designed to fool the computer into believing someone's on board when they're not," Harry explained. "It's also designed to fool the rest of us." He spoke to the computer, "Where is Seven of Nine?"

"Seven of Nine is in Astrometrics."

Before Janeway could reply, Harry held up his hand and asked again, "Computer, where is Seven of Nine?"

"Seven of Nine is in the mess hall."

"You see, it's using the computer's logs to generate the most likely locations. It's given sickbay, Engineering and the bridge as well. Oddly enough, it's mentioned Commander Chakotay's quarters a few times, too."

Janeway stopped him from going further. "I get it, Harry. Now, why is it there?"

The doctor pushed in between them and said, "Isn't that obvious, Captain? Seven's been kidnapped!"

"Now, wait a minute, Doctor," Janeway held his arm. "I know it looks bad, but let's consider the alternatives."

"What alternatives?" the doctor exploded. "Seven's playing hide and seek with Naomi Wildman?"

"I'm just saying we shouldn't jump to conclusions. Let's look at the facts again. When was the last time anybody saw her?"

"I've been working with her in Astrometrics lately," said Harry. "I saw her before she went to regenerate last night."

Janeway gave the doctor a questioning look. "I haven't seen her today," he said gruffly.

"Neither have I," said Janeway. "Show me those algorithms again, Harry, I have a hunch."

Harry obliged his captain, and they scrutinized the information on the screen. Janeway asked Harry to scroll through the portions of programming several times before something caught her eye. "There," she said, pointing to the piece she had been looking for.

"What's that?" Harry frowned. To him it looked like part of the code.

"If I'm not mistaken, it's a signature; something that was left by the author of the patch. Run it through the computer to see if it comes up with any matches."

The search results came up with dozens of positive matches. Harry whistled. "It's definitely Cardassian. They've taken Seven."

"So it would seem," Janeway said grimly. "Good thing I wasn't planning on trusting them, anyway."

The doctor couldn't restrain himself any longer. "Captain! We've got to get her back! You know the Cardassians have unorthodox methods for getting what they want, and I can only guess at what they want with Seven."

"Oh, we'll get her back... and Doctor, I know very well what they are capable of," she said tightly. The words bit at him.

"Yes, Captain, of course," he stammered.

Harry turned towards the door. "We'd better call a senior staff meeting, now, Captain."

Janeway's words halted him. "Hold on there, Mister Kim. I've got another plan. I want you to find Tom and bring him to the mess hall in one hour. Apart from that, you're not to breathe a word of this to anyone, is that understood?"

The ensign looked at her with puzzlement, but reflex made him reply, "Aye, Captain."

"Good. See you in an hour, then."

Harry knew when he was dismissed. He left sickbay with a strong sense of foreboding as he went in search of his friend and colleague, Tom Paris.

As soon as Harry was gone, the doctor turned to Janeway.

"Say what you want to say and be done with it," she said to him when she saw his expression.

"I don't know how to put this politely, Captain, so if you will excuse me, I won't." Janeway nodded and the EMH continued, "I think I know you well enough by now to say that whatever game you're playing at, remember that Seven's life is on the line."

"I didn't realize you'd been promoted to first officer, Doctor," Janeway said sourly.

"Someone's got to do the job since you're not letting the commander do it," the doctor said quietly. The words hung in the air and Janeway's face went cold. She was about to speak when the doctor said, "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"You're damn right it isn't!" Blood boiled just under the surface of her words.

"It's also beside the point." The doctor sighed, "I just want you to promise that you won't let anything happen to her."

The vulnerability in the doctor's voice served to soften Janeway. She shook her head and said, "I will hunt down every last one of them if they so much as lay a finger on her, that's a promise."

"I see we are in agreement, then."

"If you did know me, Doctor, you would know that I fight to protect my cubs." The doctor smiled at that, although it was a sad one. "I'll get her back, but I want you to prepare for the worst scenario, if you get my meaning."

The doctor nodded without trusting himself to respond. She turned to go, and he caught a glimpse of her face before she left sickbay. For a nanosecond, he pitied the Cardassians.

Tuvok walked shoulder to shoulder with his captain to the mess hall. "Do you think it's wise to keep this from the crew?"

"I know what you're thinking, old friend, but they are all on edge. Something like this could send them over. If we deal with this quickly, Seven will be back on board before anyone else has had a chance to miss her and we can decide then what to do with our 'friends'. If there is a fight, we are certainly more than a match for a Galor class vessel." Janeway smiled bleakly. "Jakat is going to regret the day he decided to mess with me."

"And what about the commander?"

Janeway blinked and looked up at the Vulcan. For a moment, she wasn't sure what he was talking about. When she realized that Tuvok was referring to his previous question, she said with her voice low, "I have my doubts about the commander's ability to act rationally in this situation." Tuvok's expression remained stoically bland. "You don't agree?"

The Vulcan kept his eyes on their destination. "The commander has had a long time to exorcise ghosts. He is not the same man he was seven years ago."

"Maybe," was Janeway's noncommittal reply as they reached the mess hall entrance. The two walked into the partially deserted room. A few crewmen were catching quick meals between shifts and were dotted alone or in pairs around the mess hall. At the far end, as per instruction, a table had been kept in seclusion. The starlight filtered in from the viewport and highlighted the pristine tabletop as the lights inside were subtly subdued. Three figures were standing in the corner waiting for Janeway's arrival.

Tuvok and Janeway made their way over to the table and the three waiting for them. The captain gave acknowledging gestures to the crewmen that noticed her arrival, but as soon as she passed them, they went back to contemplating their food or continuing whispered conversations.

"Tom, Harry, please, have a seat," Janeway said when she reached them. She turned to Crewman Chell, who had taken it upon himself to keep the mess hall going after Neelix's departure.

"You won't be disturbed here, Captain," Chell said.

"Thank you, Crewman, I'll let you know if we need anything."

The pleasant-faced Bolian did not take the hint. "I've also prepared some fresh better-than-regeneration-coffee for you."

"Leave it on the table, Chell."

"And, if you get hungry, I have a new dish of the day - lost-again-lasagna, which you can top off with the where-the-hell-are-we-waffles and ice cream."

"Chell..." Janeway's voice was a low growl. She knew the Bolian was only being lighthearted, but she didn't appreciate his humor.

"Okay, Captain, I'm gone. Watch me leave." The blue man scooted out from under his captain's glare with a cheeky grin.

After Chell had returned to the galley, which had been Neelix's domain for so long, Janeway joined her assembled staff at the table. "Gentlemen, we have some business to take care of, and it needs to be done quickly and quietly."

Tom picked his way past the sleeping duo: mother and child. It was the most tranquil scene he had seen the two of them in since Miral was born. B'Elanna was sprawled out on the couch with her uniform jacket tossed aside on floor, but she had not made the same effort to remove her boots. On the floor next to the big chair was a blanket on which their daughter was sleeping, surrounded by pillows. Miral was only a week old, but had already proven herself to be an extremely vocal child. Sometimes, the only thing that would calm her down was to pick her up and walk around the room with her, all the while rubbing her back. At first they had been concerned about her health, but the doctor had said that she was as healthy as a Kazon and that some babies were just colicky.

Unfortunately, Miral's temperament was draining on her parents. Tom felt that he and B'Elanna were taking shifts. He would watch her all morning, then he would pass the baby over to B'Elanna and set off for whatever errands he had to run. Sleep may or may not have figured in the schedule.

But now, with Miral having exhausted herself into slumber, B'Elanna was making full use of the downtime. Tom and the dark circles under his eyes envied his wife. Not wanting to wake her, he leaned over her and gently placed a delicate kiss on the top of her hair.

As he reached the exit to their quarters, however, her voice drifted to him from the couch. "Where are you going, helmboy?"

"Sorry, B'E, I didn't mean to wake you," Tom said ruefully.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. "That's okay, I managed to get an hour in. Should keep me going for the next 48."

Tom was about to mention that they should try and find someone to help look after Miral, but he knew where that conversation would lead and he didn't have time to deal with it now. "I'll be back in a few hours, I think. Maybe we could have a late supper together?"

B'Elanna didn't look too enthused at the idea. "We'll see. What's Janeway got you doing now?"

Wincing, Tom didn't like the sound of B'Elanna's tone. She had become very possessive of his time lately. "I can't tell you," he said quietly. "It's need to know, only."

She stood up and walked over to the replicator. "I don't like the sound of that, Tom," she said as she ordered a warm drink for herself.

"It's captain's orders, B'E, she doesn't want the crew to get wind of this."

She shot him a feral look. "I'm not the crew, Tom, I'm the Chief Engineer! If something's going down with the Cardies, I should know about it."

Tom saw Miral whimper in her sleep. "You'll wake the baby, keep it down."

Incredulity passed over her face, without changing her tone, she said, "That's it, isn't it? Janeway's quite happy for me to do grunt work in Engineering, but now that I have a child, she doesn't think I'm capable of handling the real thing!"

Tom used his long legs to reach his wife in a few steps. He wanted to shake her, but instead, he held her shoulders reassuringly. "That's not it at all! Look, Seven's been kidnapped and we want to get her back without sending everyone into a panic. The captain's going to that diplomatic dinner and she'll try to locate Seven. When she's done that, she'll transmit the coordinates to me and I'll just zap her out of there. Before anyone can say 'resistance is futile' I'll bring her back on the Flyer."

Several expressions passed over B'Elanna's face, until finally she grinned. "We should just leave her there."

Tom laughed and pulled her into a hug. "Think of everything that would go wrong if we did? How would Voyager survive without Seven's special brand of ingenuity?"

B'Elanna bit her tongue to avoid the cruel reply that had formed in her mind. She leaned back from Tom to get a look at him. "What kind of rescue plan is that, anyway? The Cardassians will have some kind of back up to deal with this scenario. You know how sneaky they can be. What did Chakotay say about this?" Tom went rigid at the question. He continued to look uneasily at B'Elanna without saying anything. "Out with it, Tom. What's really going on here?"

"Chakotay's not on the 'need to know' list," he said, reluctantly. He knew that B'Elanna would probably have beaten it out of him, anyway.

She was silent this time, and that was worse. He could imagine what she was thinking. It was probably similar to his own thoughts when he had expressed his concerns about this with the captain in their unofficial mess hall meeting.

Miral started to make mewling noises to let her parents know that she was awake and B'Elanna took the opportunity to avoid Tom's questioning look. She went over to pick up the baby. "You'd better not keep them waiting," she said blandly but he could hear the sarcasm lurking in her voice.

"B'Elanna," he said with a warning tone. "Look, if it helps any, I didn't agree with her."

"Just go," she whispered.

Tom did not like what he saw on her face at all, but he left, anyway. If Janeway ever found out that he'd told her, he was toast.

The dripping was coming from somewhere behind her, she was certain. With Borg aural acuity, Seven should have been able to state the exact location of the sound, but over the past few hours it had eluded her. She could feel the vibrations through her feet as

every drop hit the ground. Each one had a different frequency and duration - there was no coherent pattern or logic to it. It was maddening.

Trying to ignore the randomness of the sound, Seven had worked at freeing her hands from their restraints. The Gul had not returned after his first introduction, leaving only his underlings to look in on her every so often. During this time, she had managed to loosen her bonds, but she remained in the position she had been originally trussed up in, so as to avoid suspicion.

She would be ready for him when he came back.

The waiting proved to be the actual torture; not knowing when the moment would happen, but having to keep the senses alert and the muscles ready for action.

The moment came with no warning and he walked into the room, leering as before. Seven of Nine knew just where his weak spots were. As he came forward, she used her intimate knowledge of Cardassian physiology and brought her foot up to make contact where it hurt most. Next, as he doubled over in pain, she rammed a hand into his face. He landed on the floor. Before he could cry out, she had a foot on his neck and a look that said 'scream and I truncate your oxygen supply'. She bent down to retrieve his weapon, set it to stun, and fired at her abductor.

At least, that was her plan, but just as she was about to take aim, a hand came up and gripped her wrist, squeezing. When she felt the bones and cartilage in her wrist begin to crack, she cried out in pain and fired the weapon randomly. The weapon's energy beam spent itself uselessly on the floor, and the Cardassian used his strength to force the phaser out of her hand.

He was a lot quicker than she had realized and a lot more agile. In a single movement, he was on his feet. He used his body to force her up against the nearest wall. Seven felt cold fingers sneak around her neck and for a moment she was paralyzed. The fingers continued to grip her neck tighter and she found it difficult to breathe.

"That was not a good idea," said the Gul. His tone was ominous but his expression was eager. "It's time to see just how much your captain values your company, Seven of Nine. Not half as much as I do, I am sure. Unfortunately, we can't have you running around to spoil the plan, as much as I like to keep you hanging..." With one sudden movement, he pulled her head forward, then slammed it back into the wall. He used just enough force to send her into oblivion.

Tom's words were sitting very uncomfortably with B'Elanna as she nursed her baby. She was in two minds about what he had told her. She decided she needed someone who was impartial to talk to, as Miral wasn't much help in that area. Wrapping the baby up, she left her quarters and went to find Tuvok's wife.

B'Elanna found the Vulcan woman in a deserted observation lounge. Miral's quiet whimpers made T'Pel turn from her contemplation of the stars to see who it was that had disturbed her.

"Excuse me," said B'Elanna. She was slightly in awe of T'Pol, who seemed as wise as she was mysterious ever since she had joined the Voyager crew.

"Greetings B'Elanna Torres," T'Pol welcomed her. "I greet your newborn, too." "The computer said that you were here." B'Elanna wasn't quite sure how to approach her topic.

T'Pol cocked her head to one side. "Do you wish to know why I am here?"

"I guess so," B'Elanna said as she shushed Miral. For some reason, T'Pol's presence had a calming effect on both of them.

"I have utilized the limited access that I have to discover that this lounge is not often used by any of the crew members. It seems to me that it would serve better with another function." T'Pol turned back to the observation port. "The view is tranquil."

B'Elanna frowned. "What do you think we should do with it? It's just a lounge."

T'Pol had an almost wistful look. "I begin to regret leaving behind my garden on Vulcan, although that is illogical when I have regained a husband. However, I believe it would be a beneficial thing to bring some of what was left behind to Voyager."

"If you want plants, there's the hydroponics bay."

Turning her frank stare to B'Elanna, T'Pol said, "A garden's function is completely different to that of a hydroponics bay. One is used to supply our physical needs. The other can enhance our mental and spiritual states."

B'Elanna shrugged. "Have you spoken to Tuvok about it?"

"Of course, but my husband does not see the logic in it." B'Elanna could swear she almost saw the Vulcan smile.

Smiling in response, she said, "I could always bring it up in a senior staff meeting."

T'Pol inclined her head. "That would be appreciated, B'Elanna Torres. Now, what is it you wish to discuss with me?"

Feeling a lot more relaxed, and perhaps a little manipulated, B'Elanna began to reveal to T'Pol what Tom had told her. She hoped that speaking to Tuvok's wife would bring her some kind of clarity.

"Captain Janeway, it's a pleasure to meet you in person!"

The voice sent icy fingers up her spine as she stepped off the Cardassian version of a transporter pad. Looking around the interior of the ship brought back memories. They were not pleasant ones, and would only serve to drag her attention away from the task at hand. Suddenly she was afraid for herself more than she was for Seven. Janeway had once volunteered herself to be assimilated by the Borg, but somehow, that was

insignificant when faced with this old dread. The Cardassians had been a childhood terror come true in her early adult life.

Stiffening her back and her resolve, Janeway pushed her chin out and looked the Cardassian in front of her in the eye. "Let's qualify something here; there's no love lost between our peoples and I hope there never will be."

The Cardassian had the gall of his race to smile. "Well, I would hope that we could put our differences aside, Captain. I see that you are as blunt as any other human I have met."

Janeway inclined her head. "I don't like false talk and pretty speech. It's a waste of time that would best be spent discussing our current situations."

"Perhaps, but I don't believe that you would ride roughshod over our customs, Captain. It's not the nature of Starfleet to ignore what is culturally important."

This time, it was Janeway's turn to smile. Her lips curled up in the corners, but her eyes remained deadly. She didn't think she would break it to Gul Jakat that she had been so far from Starfleet for so long that she was now a law unto herself. "What is culturally important to the Cardassians nowadays?" Thinking that a small victory was his, Gul Jakat offered the captain his arm. "Let's begin with a breaking of our fast. We could get to know each other a little better over a meal. As a rule, Cardassians never 'make beds with strangers'."

"Lead the way to your dining hall. And I should add that I am hungry." Turning to her security officer, Janeway nodded. "This is Tuvok of Vulcan. He will be joining us."

Jakat bowed shortly. "Of course."

Reluctantly, Janeway took the Gul's arm. Tuvok remained behind her as Jakat lead them through the passages of his ship.

Harry kept his eyes on the ops console. Janeway had left him to coordinate the rescue mission and he wasn't happy. It wasn't that he feared failure, on the contrary, he thought the plan was a good one, but it was the first officer's eyes that haunted him.

Unable to keep to his chair, Commander Chakotay had decided it was a good idea to peer over the bridge crew's shoulders as they worked. It was fine for Jenkins, whose job at the conn involved nothing more than keeping Voyager in range of the Cardassian vessel. Ayala wasn't too busy, either, but Harry, on the other hand, was trying to surreptitiously keep a transporter fix on the captain and Tuvok, while sending progress reports to Tom, who was at the moment out on the Flyer. That was another thing Harry had had to mask from Chakotay's prying - Tom's launching of the shuttle and his current position behind them, out of view of the Cardassians. Harry was trying his level best, as per his captain's instructions, to keep Chakotay out of this, but if all hell broke loose, he didn't think the commander would be enamored with what he was doing.

Not for the first time Harry felt like he was stuck in the middle of a parental row.

Chakotay kept on staring at him, but he managed to report to Tom that the captain was now on board the Cardassian vessel and that he should stand by to receive Seven's coordinates.

"Torres to Chakotay," the comsystem sounded.

The commander slapped his combadge. "What is it, Torres?"

"I need to speak to you."

Running a hand through his hair, Chakotay said, "Can it wait? We're in the middle of something here."

"I've probably waited long enough, sir." B'Elanna's voice came across as edgy.

Chakotay hesitated, then said, "I'll meet you in the captain's ready room." He turned to Harry. "Keep that transporter locked on our people, I don't trust those snakes."

Harry tried to keep his jaw from hitting his console as Chakotay went to make use of Janeway's ready room.

Gul Jakat frowned in mock concern. Janeway found herself seated opposite him, across a block of a table, in an austere furnished room. The Gul's decorators seemed to favor black and gray and uncomfortable furniture. Her chair back was hard, and the effort of sitting through the meal listening to the Cardassian expound on his many exploits, some against the Federation, was torture in itself.

"You've hardly touched your sem'hal stew, Captain. Perhaps you would like some more yamok sauce with that?" Jakat motioned for one of his servants to bring the tureen over to Janeway, but she shook her head.

"The stew is fine. I was just wondering when we were going to get to my questions."

"All in good time, Captain. We haven't even started the fifth course." Jakat blatantly ignored Janeway's look of irritation and turned to Tuvok. "Commander, how are things on Vulcan these days? I've missed so much interplanetary news out here."

One of Tuvok's eyebrows twitched involuntary as he continued to shovel what the Gul had termed as food into his mouth. In-between spoonfuls, he said, "Vulcan is unchanged."

"Yes," Jakat said blandly, "I am sure it is. Tell me, what do you think about the Federation's alliance with us?"

Janeway's head shot up, but fortunately, Tuvok kept digging away at his plate and Jakat's eyes were trained on him. "I have no opinion on the matter."

"Of course, you wouldn't. I think it's quite strategic, though." He glanced across at Janeway. "I believe you've already made your opinion of us clear."

Putting her spoon down, Janeway leaned forward. She wasn't going to tell this Cardassian that the alliance was in tatters and Cardassia Prime was in ruins. "My personal beliefs are not important. I will uphold Federation policies. But, just out of curiosity, how long have you been out here?" Wherever 'here' is, she added silently.

Jakat leaned back in his chair. "Not too long, Captain, several months. You?"

If she were eating, she would have choked. Janeway made a few quick calculations and none of them added up. She filed the paradox away for future reference. "We've only just arrived."

The Cardassian's eyes gleamed. "Tell me about your ship. You seem to have some interesting modifications for a Starfleet vessel."

Janeway decided that she did not need to tell this man anything. With exaggerated care, she rolled her eyes back in her head and slid off her chair and onto the floor. In an instant, both Tuvok and the Gul were out of their seats. Tuvok rushed over to Janeway and knelt down next to her. He removed a vial from his sleeve and waved it in front of her face. Seconds later, she was coughing and struggling to rise from her position.

"What's going on?" Jakat stood over them with a pained look on his face.

Looking up at them, Tuvok said, "My captain is unwell. She has been experiencing these fainting spells ever since we arrived here. I insisted that she stay on Voyager, but she did not think it appropriate for anyone else to attend this meeting in her stead."

Jakat's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps we should continue this at a later time?"

Shaking her head, Janeway said, "No, I'm fine. Just give me a few minutes to collect myself. There's too many important things we need to discuss for us to delay." Tuvok helped her to stand. As he did so, he slipped her the vial.

"Of course, Captain." Jakat was all courtesy. "Would you like to use the facilities of a rest room? Glinn Kajarel would be pleased to escort you." He indicated to one of the officers who were standing at attention against the wall.

"I would be grateful, Gul. Your hospitality has been nothing but gracious."

The Gul smiled at this. "In the meanwhile, your Vulcan can entertain me as I eagerly anticipate your return."

Janeway nodded. She followed Kajarel out of the room with only a brief glance at Tuvok. Praying that Harry and Tom were keeping their eyes on the ball, she knew she would have to work quickly.

B'Elanna stood uneasily before her friend, Miral in her arms, as he leaned against the captain's desk. Chakotay looked calm, considering what she had just told him. But B'Elanna knew him well. She knew that on the inside he was seething. He would never

be one to show that anger, unless in times of extreme stress, but now and then the fire escaped through his eyes.

Chakotay's eyes were blazing.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? You should have come to me the moment you found out," he said.

B'Elanna shifted the baby in her arms to a more comfortable position. Miral was awake, but content to be close to her mother. "I didn't feel it was my right to interfere in this. She's the captain, she can do what she damn well wants."

"No, B'Elanna. No, she can't!" Chakotay pushed himself away from the desk and began to pace the room. He was reaching a level of agitation that B'Elanna had not often seen in him. "We have a system, an order to the way things are done on this ship. It's there for a reason. She's been on the verge of this for a long time, but she managed to keep herself in check. Now, she's finally gone off on her own."

"She's not on her own, Chakotay," B'Elanna pointed out. "Tuvok's in on this, too. So is Harry and Tom, although Tom didn't like it, either."

Chakotay stopped pacing and turned to face her. "I don't believe Tuvok has supported her in this. He doesn't have any reason for wanting me shoved aside - he has no aspirations for my job. What it boils down to is that she has decided she doesn't trust me."

"That's ridiculous!" B'Elanna exploded. "We left the Maquis behind long ago. She's seriously deluded if she thinks you can't be trusted to deal wisely with the Cardassians. Even I know that it's important to get Seven out of there without going berserk - as much as I would love to spread some Cardassian molecules over several light years."

Hesitating, Chakotay rubbed at his eyes. Suddenly, a headache was forming - he wondered if he'd contracted it from just being in her ready room. "I don't believe she's been thinking about my lack of love for Cardassians, here." Kathryn had always believed that emotional entanglements impaired your judgment.

"Then, what is it?"

He shook his head and told a white lie. "Damned if I know. The question is, what do I do about it?"

"Whatever it is, Chakotay, you know I'll back you one hundred percent, and so will the others," B'Elanna said fiercely.

Smiling ruefully, Chakotay stretched out a hand to pat her shoulder. "We're not forming a mutiny, here. I'll just have to get her to talk about it - however much she may hate me for it." He moved his hand down to touch Miral's cheek. "She grows bigger every time I see her."

B'Elanna growled, "You're changing the topic."

"We're a family, B'Elanna. I'm not giving up on that. There's nothing I can do with Janeway already halfway through her rescue plan. Let's just hope she doesn't underestimate the people she's dealing with." He wasn't only referring to the Cardassians.

"Kim to Chakotay," Harry's voice interrupted them.

"Go ahead, Harry," Chakotay replied.

"Something's not right. The Cardassians have just raised their shields."

Chakotay threw a startled look at B'Elanna. "I think we know what that means. You and Miral better get to a safer deck," he said as he moved quickly towards the bridge.

As soon as Kajarel had taken Janeway a certain distance down the dark passage, she crushed the little vial that Tuvok had slipped her in her palm. There was no-one else around, so she turned with cat-reflexes and brought her hand up to smother the Cardassian's face. The vial contained a chemical which caused Jakat's second in command to choke and clouded his vision. As Kajarel was trying to react to Janeway's attack, she quickly relieved him of his weapon and stepped back to point it at him.

"Don't even breathe," she threatened. Glinn Kajarel was having enough difficulty with the task as it was. "Move in the wrong direction and I fire. You know whether or not this thing is set to stun, so I wouldn't take any chances."

"You do that and the whole ship will be alerted," Kajarel said between gasps.

Janeway shrugged. "You'd still be dead." The Glinn seemed to value his life and remained silent. Motioning towards the wall with the Cardassian's weapon, she said, "Open that panel."

Reluctantly, Kajarel kept his eyes on the trained phaser, but moved towards the wall panel to do what Janeway wanted.

"Now, step back." As Kajarel moved cautiously away from the wall, Janeway single-handedly reached for her tricorder. She scanned the circuitry and then grinned. "Technology from the future comes in handy sometimes," she remarked, "and your systems are quite antiquated." She kept her eyes on the tricorder, which she was using to interface with the ship's environmental systems.

Suddenly, her eye's glinted. She tapped her combadge. "Janeway to Paris."

"Been waiting for you, Captain," was the lieutenant's chipper response.

"I've got her location. I'll send you the coordinates through the communication's link - get ready to beam her out." She cut off the voice link to Paris and prepared to interface her advanced tricorder with her combadge. She didn't notice the smile on Kajarel's face.

"Red Alert," Chakotay snapped as he strode out onto the bridge. "Can you transport our people out of there?" His question was directed at Harry.

"No Sir, not while their shields are up." Harry shifted uncomfortably, then finally said, "Commander, there's something you should know..."

The commander cut him off with a hand. "Have they managed to locate Seven?"

Harry did not want to know how he knew. He answered the question reflexively. "Tom's got her coordinates. He couldn't beam her out though - their shields cut him off."

"Please refresh my memory, Ensign," Chakotay said with a dark look. "Where exactly is Mister Paris?"

"Uh, he's out on the Flyer, Sir. He's hiding in our shadow."

Chakotay nodded. "Of course he is. You'd better answer that, Harry," he said matter-of-factly, referring to the bleeping emanating from the ops console.

Kim flushed a little, but managed to regain his composure. "We're being hailed by the Cardassian Vessel, Sir."

Sighing, Chakotay said, "I'm not really in the mood to talk. Put it on screen."

The viewscreen changed from an external shot of the Galor class vessel to an internal one. The crew on Voyager's bridge, with Chakotay standing in the center, looked up at the image of the Cardassian, Gul Jakat and their security officer, Lieutenant Commander Tuvok.

Before the Gul could open his mouth, Chakotay said, "Where's Captain Janeway?"

"She'll be here shortly," Jakat said with a trace of irritation. "You really don't have any manners, Commander, no wonder Janeway didn't want you here."

The commander's eyes blazed. He knew it was irrational, but he had a sudden desire to lunge at the viewscreen and remove the smirk from the Cardassian's scaly face.

"It's time to start the negotiations in earnest," Jakat continued. He turned to Tuvok who was standing grim-faced at his side. "What do you think, my Vulcan friend?"

Instead of answering the Gul, Tuvok spoke to Chakotay, "Do not attempt anything rash, Commander. There is more going on here than you are aware of."

"Sorry, Tuvok, I don't have time to debate." Chakotay signaled to Kim to cut the transmission. "Shields up," he stated as he walked purposefully towards tactical. "Jenkins, prepare for evasive maneuvers and Harry, I want you to let Paris know that it's going to get hot out there."

Both Kim and Jenkins, the conn officer, called out, "Aye, Sir."

Ayala moved away from his station after one look from the commander. Without preamble, Chakotay brought Voyager's powerful weapons system online and fired at the Cardassians.

"Paris, have you got her?" Janeway called through the comlink. She slapped the badge again when there was no answer. "Paris? Tom, are you there?" She looked over at the grinning Glinn Kajarel.

"Seems your technology's no match for old-fashioned deceit." He lunged at her.

Janeway's reflexes kicked in and she aimed the phaser at the Cardassian. He was at point blank range when she fired.

Something went wrong. The phaser's energy wasn't directed at the Cardassian as intended, but rippled over the defunct weapon until it struck Janeway's hand. Recoiling, she dropped the weapon with a grunt of pain. In the next instant, the momentum of the Cardassian made him barrel into her and knock her to the floor.

Janeway cried out as his weight crushed her chest. With ease, Kajarel pinned her down on the floor. Unexpectedly, the ship lurched under them. Using the opportunity, Janeway began to wriggle out of the Cardassian's grasp, but he was quick enough to grab her wrists. Struggling to his feet, he hauled her up with him.

The ship rocked again, nearly sending them both back to the floor, but Kajarel was able to keep his grip on her. He dragged her back through the passage, but this time towards the ship's main bridge.

"What the hell is going on, Jakat?" Janeway growled as Kajarel pulled her onto the Cardassian bridge. His one hand was clamped around her waist while the other clutched her hair like a vice, pulling her head back.

"I see you've recovered from your indisposition, Captain. Won't you have a seat?" Jakat mockingly pointed to his own chair. Tuvok was standing next to it with bound hands.

Janeway shook with suppressed rage. "What kind of game are you playing?"

Clicking his tongue, Jakat said, "I am innocent here - It's your trigger-happy commander who decided to shoot at us, completely unprovoked. I have no choice but to defend my vessel."

"That doesn't sound like my first officer at all. You pushed him. Let me warn you that your ship is no match for Voyager. You're going to lose this battle."

Jakat turned his dead stare onto her. "If that were the case, then you'd also lose, Captain. We'll both go down with the ship, if we have to."

Janeway's eyes hardened to dangerous points. "Don't count on it, Jakat. My first officer's extremely resourceful."

"So am I, Captain. I have to be."

Harry's message reached Tom Paris in the Delta Flyer just in time. With sharp reflexes, Tom pulled the Flyer back as Voyager ducked to evade weapons fire from the Cardassian ship. If he could keep in the shadow of the big ship, there was still a possibility that the Cardies wouldn't realize he was there. Tom always liked the element of surprise in a space battle.

Voyager was doing well enough on her own, Tom noted. The other vessel's shields were not going to hold up too much longer, but Tom did not think that the commander wanted to destroy the Cardassian ship outright just yet.

"Harry," Tom called to his friend over the comlink. "Tell Chakotay to disable their main shield generator. I'll dive in and get Janeway, Tuvok and Seven out of there before they have time to switch to back-ups."

After a moment, Harry replied, "He says that's what he's aiming for."

"Could have fooled me!" Tom quipped.

Suddenly, the Flyer was rocked by phaser fire from behind. Tom watched, shocked, as the orange beam of energy missed his port side and slammed into Voyager. Tom realized that they had been too busy concentrating on their front shields to worry about reinforcing the aft ones.

"What the hell...?" he muttered as another bolt ripped past him and into Voyager's stern. Quickly swinging away from Voyager, Tom brought the Flyer around to see who was shooting. "Harry, you've got another Galor class vessel on your tail. They've just dropped from warp out of nowhere! I'll try and draw some of their fire."

"I don't want any heroics, Paris." It was Chakotay over the comlink this time.

"Worry about your own butt, Chakotay, I can handle myself." But Tom wasn't so sure of that as he bore down on the newcomer.

"Our shields are at 43%, Sir. They're not going to hold for long with phaser fire from both ships," Ayala reported to Chakotay, who had moved back to the center of the bridge to let the lieutenant do his job at tactical.

"The other vessel is trying to penetrate our shields and disable the primary phaser couplings. Tom's doing his best to distract them, but if they turn on him, he won't stand a chance," Harry added.

Taking all the information in, Chakotay slapped his insignia. "Engineering," he barked, "Can we get the Borg Shields up?"

"Excuse me, Sir, I am not sure what you are referring to," said Ensign Vorik from Engineering in a bland voice.

"The new armor, Vorik! We are going to need something between the Cardassians and our imminent destruction once the our regular shields fail." Chakotay paced restively across the deck.

"We have not yet been able to restore ablative armor capabilities, Sir," was Vorik's response.

"That's not what I want to hear," growled Chakotay. "Get me Nicoletti, let me speak to her."

"She's too busy trying to route extra power to the shield generators to speak to you, Sir."

Harry saw the look that this brought out on Chakotay's face and was suddenly glad he wasn't Vorik, although the full effect of it would have been lost on the Vulcan.

Before the commander had a chance to respond, another voice resonated over the comsystem. "It's okay, Chakotay, I'm here now. We should be able to give our regular shielding a boost in the next few minutes and I'm damned if I can't get the armor online as well."

It didn't sound like Susan Nicoletti. "B'Elanna! I thought I told you to get Miral to a safer deck. Last time I checked that wasn't Engineering."

"She's safe. I left her in sickbay with the doctor. Now, I have work to do." B'Elanna cut the link.

"Okay, Jenkins, keep evading the fire from the first vessel. Let's hope Tom can draw away the second one until B'Elanna has a chance to do her magic."

Harry was keeping an eye on the Flyer. "Commander, he's got their attention all right, he's preparing to ram them!"

"What?" exploded Chakotay. "That's not going to help us. Paris? What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"He's ignoring us," Harry said.

"Put it on screen," Chakotay ordered.

They both watched as the Delta Flyer, nothing but a minor irritation to the second Cardassian ship, hurtled towards them with ferocity. "He's aiming for their primary power couplings," Harry commented. "He's not trying to commit suicide - just forcing them to back down."

"He will be if they shoot him down."

Without warning, the second vessel bloomed into a fireball. The Flyer was thrown back with the shock wave and debris from the explosion rapidly spread out from the center of

the blazing wreckage. The ring of shrapnel caught up with voyager and slammed into her shields.

"Shield integrity at 27%... And holding," reported Ayala.

"Tom," whooped Harry, "What kind of shooting was that?"

The lieutenant's reply was shaky. "I wish I could take the credit. They must have had an internal malfunction or something - I certainly didn't do that."

Jenkins turned around from her position at the conn. "Sir, the primary vessel has ceased fire."

"Let's act," Chakotay ordered. "Paris, get ready to take our people out. Harry, I want you to give our phasers everything we've got - let's get rid of the last vestiges of their shields. Put them back on screen."

Harry diverted power to the phaser banks while Ayala took aim.

"Fire!"

"Our shields are down, Sir," one of the Cardassian crewmen reported to her captain.

Jakat whirled around to face her. "What just happened? I thought we had the advantage here?"

"I'm not sure, Sir. Our other vessel was destroyed."

Turning to Janeway, who had watched the entire scene from the Cardassian bridge, he said, "Your ship isn't capable of doing that, Captain."

Janeway raised her eyebrows and remarked casually, "It's been a pleasure knowing you, Jakat, I hope that..." Her words were cut off as she and her Vulcan officer were encased with the blue lights of a Federation transporter beam.

"Where's the Borg drone?" Jakat asked angrily.

Glinn Kajarel stepped up to a panel to access the ship's computer. "They've taken her, too, Sir," he said with unease.

Jakat's lips tightened with the knowledge that he had failed, but he wasn't going to berate himself for being greedy and wanting more than just the drone, but Voyager as well. "It's time to retreat."

"Sir, there's a vessel decloaking above us."

An all too familiar feeling swept over the Cardassian Gul. Dread wasn't something that Cardassian's readily admitted to, but the unveiled ship, sleek and black, would put terror into a Klingon. "Get us out of here, now! Let Voyager deal with them!"

"It's too late, sir. They've already loosed a torpedo..."

Voyager's stunned bridge crew watched as the de-cloaked ship sent a crimson ball of energy towards the remaining Cardassian vessel. Jakat's ship seemed to swallow the ball and then, in the same fashion as its partner, it erupted into fire and shrapnel.

Chakotay did not stop to take pleasure in the sight. "Paris?"

"I've got them, Commander. I'll bring us in now, but we should transport Seven to sickbay - she's not in good shape."

"Do it," Chakotay ordered, then he turned to Harry. "Hail that other vessel. Send them our thanks."

Harry nodded as he worked at his console. After a moment, he said, "I'm not getting any response. In fact, our scanners aren't picking up anything from the ship - no life signs, no energy signatures - nothing!"

"But, we can see them?"

"That's because they want us to, Commander. They were cloaked before - and were able to fire on the Cardassians that way, too."

Chakotay looked at the vessel on the viewscreen - it looked like a hole in the starscape. "If they believed we were a threat, they would have done to us what they did to the Cardassians. Keep hailing them on all frequencies. I'm going down to the shuttlebay. You have the bridge, Ensign."

Before Harry could protest, Chakotay had made his exit.

Seven's vision swam before her eyes and then clarified into the bright walls of sickbay. There was a dull but bearable ache in the back of her head and her limbs seemed to be encased in viscous liquid. Trying to shake off the disorientation, Seven willed her body to move.

A hand pressed gently down on her shoulder. "Lie back, now. You've been through quite an ordeal."

She didn't want to lie back. She wanted to be able to move freely, to control her own actions. "I am undamaged. Let me go."

The face of Voyager's EMH moved into her line of sight. "On the contrary, Seven, you have several contusions that I need to take care of as well as that blow to your head. I am not going to let you out of my sight soon - or ever if you insist on letting strange people steal you." He walked over to pick up a dermal regenerator from the trolley. "Let's fix that nasty cut on your cheek, shall we?"

Seven flinched as he brought the device close to her face. The doctor leaned back, surprised, and noted a haunted look in her eyes. "Doctor, I want you to replace the fail-safe device in my micro circuitry."

Sighing, the doctor said, "The procedure's not reversible, Seven."

"You have to fix it! I cannot function like this." Seven's face became contorted as she tried to hide her anxiety.

The doctor, feeling guilt and pain on her behalf, reached over hesitantly to touch her shoulder. "What did they do to you?"

Breathing rapidly, Seven showed clear signs of distress. "I am afraid..." she whispered.

"They can't hurt you anymore, Seven. They've been destroyed."

She looked up at him with hardness. "That is good," she stated.

For all the tension that had been between them lately, most of it his own making, the doctor knew that he would be able to forgive her anything, even the fact that she didn't return his feelings. There was something about her that made him want to protect her and comfort her nonetheless. He reached forward to drag her into a compassionate hug, but she did not respond to his arms around her shoulders. Her mind was filled with the sound of dripping.

Chakotay waited outside the shuttlebay as it re-pressurized. The Delta Flyer had just come in and he was eager to speak to his captain. A storm was brewing under his brows. As soon as the doors slid open, he pushed through them and into the shuttlebay. He was still walking towards the Flyer when the shuttle's hatch opened.

The first to exit was Tuvok, looking unruffled as usual. The Vulcan security officer noted the commander's expression and stepped aside.

Tom followed Tuvok and he was high on adrenaline. One look at Chakotay curtailed any comments he was about to make and instead, he looked at Tuvok and nodded towards the exit. "I think our wives are probably wondering what we've been up to. Perhaps we should let them know we're all right."

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. "I concur, Mister Paris. Fatherhood has made you wise." The two made their way rapidly out of the shuttlebay, hardly noticed by Chakotay.

After a moment, Janeway appeared. She knew he would be waiting for her and she knew he would be angry. She stepped down to the floor and looked up at him, not scared to face him – at least that was what she told herself. She was the captain. But, she already knew there was no way to justify her actions to him.

Time continued to flow in their area of space, but neither of them moved or spoke.

Chakotay was the first to turn his head. "I never want to be put in that situation again. You had no right to do that to me, Kathryn."

Janeway's face turned to stone. "I had my reasons, Commander. I am not above reproach, but I'd like to think that I still have your respect."

"If we're going to talk about respect, I would say you gambled that when you lost your faith in me," he said bitterly. "I had to walk out onto the bridge and take charge of a situation which Harry was more familiar with than I was. Not only was it degrading, it put our crew in danger!"

Keeping her voice low, Janeway growled, "And what would you have done if you'd known about Seven's abduction? Run off on your own like some misguided hero to save her? You would have risked your own life as well as hers and compromised Voyager at the same time."

Chakotay shook his head. "I can't believe it, Kathryn. That's exactly what you did and now you're accusing me of..." He looked at her in exasperation. "I'm not even sure what you're accusing me of!"

Kathryn fidgeted with her hands while she locked her eyes on the floor. She bit her tongue to keep from saying the words that were in her mouth.

"You don't trust me, anymore," he said. "We cannot be an effective command team if you don't trust me. I can't do my job properly."

"I know how you feel about the Cardassians," Kathryn said quietly.

Chakotay looked at her intently. "That doesn't really have anything to do with it, does it?"

Before Janeway could respond, Harry's voice interrupted. "Captain, Commander, you'd better get to the bridge, we're receiving a message from the alien vessel."

"We're on our way, Harry," Janeway replied. She stepped past her first officer towards the door. Before she reached it, she looked back at him with a questioning glance. "Are you with me?"

"Yes," he nodded and moved to join her, but there was no promise in his voice.

Janeway strode onto the bridge with Chakotay close behind her. Tuvok was already there and had taken over his station at tactical. Paris was getting comfortable at the conn. The viewscreen in front of her showed an image of their saviors. Janeway noted the elegant design of the vessel - it was smaller than Voyager was, more compact; its hull was a seamless black.

Turning to Harry at ops, Janeway said, "What do they want?"

"I'm not sure, Captain," said Harry. "They sent a coded message, only I can't make any sense of it."

"Have you tried to hail them?"

Harry nodded. His attempts to rouse the alien vessel had been frustrating. "On every frequency I could conceive of, and some that I couldn't". Janeway turned back to the screen. As she did, the image of the dark ship dissolved and was replaced by an alien visage.

"I didn't do that..." Harry explained but then his voice trailed away as he looked up at the screen.

An involuntary shiver curled its way down Janeway's spine as the alien on the viewscreen transfixed her. Its skin was rough blue and there were sharp white horns protruding from its face like an ancient devil. The eyes that looked out at her were completely inhuman, dark holes cut by yellow slits, and they seemed to want to eat away at her.

The bridge crew was silent; each of them enthralled by the alien's appearance.

Then, the creature spoke. The hollow tones were somehow translated for their benefit.

"We are Sernaix, Defenders of this Realm."

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