Gravitas

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Summary

Treachery raises the stakes and changes lives when the leader of the Terran Empire seeks to restore the Federation.

Notes

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Very AU, as this is basically the plot of the film "Gladiator" set in a Star Trek universe. Some scenes and dialogue closely mirror the film. No Maquis, no Delta Quadrant, and hand phasers don't have a vaporize setting. I'll add more character tags as I remember them. Originally written 2002/2003. Although there are some tweaks, the story's contents (and its flaws) are mostly intact. Star Trek and all related characters and concepts are the property of Paramount. Gladiator belongs to Dreamworks SKG and Universal. No infringement is intended or profit made. This is NC-17 for adult themes, violence and sex.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The small forest clearing shimmered in a constantly shifting pattern dominated by shadow as the sunlight was shattered by the leaves. Trees far older than the man admiring them stretched high, their branches flung wide in an eternal gesture of welcome or challenge.

Lower down, where the still figure leaned against one solid trunk, the landscape was less uniform. The gloom had crafted a sparse, loam-scented wilderness of shrubs and mosses, a few long stalks of flowers and grasses poking from the moist ground. Shade-loving varieties were in abundance as they crouched close to the earth, hiding small blossoms under the skirts of their leaves. The carcass of the downed tree that created this tiny forest pocket lay moldering, fungi sprouted like shelves along its tattered bark.

Birds, insects, even small mammals moved amid the dark and green, busily pursuing their next meal. Their hum provided a steady wash of sound that absorbed the swish of the wind in the trees.

"Your world has more than its share of darkness, my son." The voice came from the other side of the tiny glen as the gleam of white hair shone eerily in the half-light. A tall, thin man with a face weathered by time and worry crossed the space, avoiding the plants in his path.

"If this is where the vision quest brings me, Papa, there is little I can do about it." Chakotay roused himself and stepped forward, peering into Kolopak's eyes. "You are troubled."

"*You* are troubled," the older man replied, taking in the weary stance of his youngest son. "This war is not yours, and your spirit pays the price for your involvement."

"This war *is* mine because my people are fighting it." Chakotay snapped as a familiar irritation soured his pensive mood. "I'm not so insular as you. Men and women have put their lives in my hands, and I won't abandon them because *you* only count as family those who are your blood kin."

"That is not the issue and you know it, Chakotay. Your loyalty has never been questioned, nor your wisdom in caring about those outside our tribe." Kolopak's anger was quiet, but obvious, as he moved restlessly. His now-uncaring feet crushed what lay beneath them. "But you are also blinded to the failings of those you revere. You serve an Emperor, an Empire that is far from perfect."

He stopped and stared into dark eyes that mirrored his own. "In your mind, all of the member worlds that once belonged to the Federation are 'your people'. Others are not so enlightened. The Empire has evolved into a hierarchy. Terran humans are the pinnacle. Non-Terrans like yourself are second-class---luckily for them. And consider the way the other species have been treated: conquered, annexed, their dissidents enslaved. Even those who were counted as friends a century ago. This is hardly a utopia."

"I know," Chakotay replied tiredly as he rubbed his eyes with one hand. "But the Emperor cannot work for change within the realm until there is peace. Our enemies are all but gone. One last battle and it is done—I am done. Jean-Luc Picard will be able to rule without petty or perilous threats snapping at his heels. He's an honorable man, and he will finally be free to govern in the way he sees fit. And I will go home and leave all this behind me forever."

Kolopak sighed. "Duty is a jealous mistress, Chakotay. She may not release you as readily as you think."
"So you warned me years ago, Papa. Every time I see you here you bid me to walk away. And I tell you that the Imperial Fleet is my responsibility. I will not send men and women into battle while keeping my own hands clean." Chakotay shook his head. "But it's nearly over. Soon we will all be rewarded with a quiet life."

"I pray it will be so, my son." Kolopak rested his hands on Chakotay's shoulders a moment, then disappeared into the trees. A chill wind rose up and snaked around the trunks, causing grasses to bend and twigs to slap against each other. Chakotay ducked his head and wrapped his arms around his body, shivering.

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting on the floor of his temporary Ready Room, medicine bundle spread before him. He quickly gathered the ceremonial items and closed the bag. He could still feel the icy touch of the breeze, and went to the replicator for a warming cup of tea. He sat on the sofa under the viewports, his eyes on the stars.

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The Enterprise, flagship of the Imperial Fleet, poised gracefully in space. A multitude of subordinate vessels floated in formation, all waiting. Countless thousands of men and women slept or manned their stations aboard the quiet ships. Their thoughts were untroubled, for each of them trusted their leader implicitly.

Chakotay of Dorvan was one of their own, moving up the ranks through his own efforts rather than family connections. Not like the pampered Imperial cronies on Earth, who never left their comfortable hearths and homes. None of *them* had ever set foot in a war zone, even though their battle plans cost the lives of thousands here on the border. They knew that Fleet Admiral Chakotay read the outsiders' orders, then forgot them. He fought, and won, on his own terms. In his mind, the lives of his people were always as important as any victory. Certainly more precious to him than the ruffled feathers of armchair warriors on Earth. And that made every single person under his command willing to follow him anywhere, even to the gates of hell.

Vice Admiral Gregor Ayala, master of the Enterprise and Chakotay's right-hand man, wandered the bridge as he reflected on the condition of the fleet. They'd been fighting the Dominion for over two years. The tide had turned and the Empire was again in control. Their victories now were many and decisive, their losses small and costly to their foes. The alliance of Cardassians, Romulans, and other Alpha and Gamma Quadrant species was failing to hold secure even that handful of planets they still laid claim to.

The reflective man's head shook slowly as he considered his leader. Chakotay's method of closing the Bajoran wormhole had been inspired. The necessity of the action was obvious, as the portal's loss prevented enemy reinforcements from arriving or anyone from escaping. The 'great minds' on Earth had proposed specially designed torpedoes to destroy the phenomenon.

Chakotay, as usual, ignored that plan. First he wrested Bajor from the Dominion's hands. Then he'd piloted a shuttle into the wormhole himself to petition the entities within. He persuaded the Prophets he could not continue to protect their chosen people if their enemies kept pouring through the spatial conduit. Surprisingly, they agreed. From that day forth the Gamma Quadrant troubled the Empire no more. And Chakotay kept his promise to ensure Bajor's safety.

Ayala frowned as he reached the Tactical station. Lieutenant Tasha Yar was scrolling through the types of ships they were up against, checking that no weaknesses had been overlooked. The Gamma Quadrant technologies had been neutralized by the ingenuity of Imperial engineers, but they needed to guard themselves against former allies as well.
The Klingons' defection had been unanticipated. That collection of honor-mad warriors respected Chakotay. *He* was not the problem. Instead they had rebelled against the Empire itself, claiming that their less-than-equal citizenship was not worth the loss of vessels and lives defending Imperial holdings.

Chakotay had given them every chance to reconsider. Before every skirmish with the Dominion Fleet, he sent a small ship under a sign of truce. The unmanned buoy broadcast terms he would accept for their surrender. Ayala thought they were overly generous, but he knew that the Admiral valued peace and harmony and life, even that of his enemies.

Each earlier gesture had been met with torpedoes or phasers blazing. But not now. This time the drone still sat at the edge of sensor range, beaming its message on all channels. So they waited.

The swish of a door opening straightened every spine on Voyager's bridge. The crew absentely noted how well the black-and-red of the uniform suited the Admiral's coloring. The burgundy button-down shirt, black vest and trousers of the Imperial Fleet were practical. They had plenty of pockets and holsters for equipment in case crewmembers needed to beam down to planets or were forced to fight hand-to-hand, yet the overall outfit retained its clean lines. The circular comm badge, a silver field behind a small replica of Earth, gleamed against the vest. Admiral Chakotay wore no rank insignia.

Chakotay shared a glance with Captain Cavit and walked to the Ops station, absentely nodding to Ensign Mariah Henley. "Open a channel to the Enterprise."

Ayala's face appeared on the viewscreen.

"Have all vessels reported in?" Chakotay asked over his shoulder, studying Henley's screens.

"Yes sir," Ayala confirmed promptly. "The battle plans are in place, awaiting your signal."

The Admiral moved to stand near Cavit, staring at the viewscreen. "Still nothing?"

"No," Ayala growled as his fists clenched in irritation. "A people should know when they're conquered."

"Would you?" Chakotay raised an eyebrow. "Would I?"

Ayala shrugged and the two veterans shared a brief look.

"Sir, there's a ship approaching the comm buoy." Ensign Henley automatically split the main screen and displayed the pertinent view of space.

A Klingon vessel stopped a few dozen meters from the communications device.

"I'm detecting a transport." Dalby reported from Tactical, then gasped. "It's human---they're beaming him *outside* the drone!"

The bridge crews watched in horror as the unidentified body flailed a moment, then went still. More ships began to appear behind the Klingon vessel, forming a solid line across the stars.

"That looks like everything they have," Cavit said. "It's a last stand."

"So they won't be accepting my offer." Chakotay's voice was quiet. "Any word from them at all?"

"No, sir," Henley replied.
"Open a channel, fleet wide." Chakotay paused a moment, then spoke. "Our offer of peace has been rejected. I know you are all tired. Of fighting, of conflict, of being far from the ones you love. But I ask for your help one last time. To defend all of our homes, our families. With strength and honor, we will prevail." He gestured and Henley switched back to the private link.

"Strength and honor," Ayala murmured on the viewscreen, no doubt echoed on every vessel in the fleet.

"You know the plan, Greg. Wait for my signal, then unleash hell." Chakotay's order was firm, but he spoke friend to friend.


The screen shifted to a view of the battlefield. Chakotay took a deep breath, staring at the lifeless body drifting in space. Then he looked to Cavit and received a nod of readiness.

"Mr. Dalby, raise shields and ready weapons," Chakotay ordered. His right hand unconsciously raised to touch his chest. In that spot, hidden beneath his shirt, a handful of Dorvan soil was slung around his neck in a tiny sack. It was a gesture familiar to everyone, and the bridge crew tensed in response. "Henley, broadcast to all ships: 'Battle fleet engage'."

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Emperor Jean-Luc Picard watched the Imperial Fleet scatter on the viewscreen of the Phoenix. Five ships remained, including his own and the Enterprise. His eyes sought Voyager, pondering again Chakotay's longstanding practice of randomly choosing a different ship to accompany each time he went into battle. If nothing else, it prevented his enemies from gunning for him effectively. Picard tracked the gleaming shape for a few moments, then lost sight of the vessel carrying the head of his military forces as it surged into the conflict against the collection of Dominion ships. He sighed.

"Do you need anything, sire?" Wil Riker, Captain of the Phoenix, looked to the slender man who alone ruled all of the Terran Empire. He absently noted the lines of weariness marking the chiseled features that seemed older than their years. He instinctively stood to approach, but halted when purple-shirted members of the Imperial Guard stepped closer to the Emperor, hands on their phaser rifles.

"Thank you, but no." Jean-Luc offered a small, appreciative smile, then turned to the viewscreen once more. "Do you approve of the Admiral's plan?"

"It's ambitious, but if it succeeds he'll secure all of our borders from Dominion incursion." Riker grinned. "Do you wish you were out there leading the troops?"

"I'm wise enough to know when to delegate," Picard chuckled dryly. Everyone on the bridge ignored the fact that the Emperor's increasing frailty prevented him from doing anything else. "Any sign of the Mercury?"

"No, sire, but the ship carrying your son isn't scheduled to arrive for several hours."

"Good." The Emperor turned back to the viewscreen that was now lit with phaser beams and exploding ships. "Hopefully by then this will all be over."

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Voyager darted through its opponents like a greyhound, sharp turns bringing it out of harm's way while its armaments spat fire at the Dominion ships it passed. Shields were holding and the crew was
shaken but uninjured.

Chakotay’s eyes were glued to his screen as he shouted out course changes, plotting their path through the enemy forces. He had commandeered a corner of Tactical, preferring not to bump Cavit from the command chair. The marker buoy remained a still blue blip in the center of the schematic. Imperial ships in green danced with Dominion red as the fleets mixed together.

"We’ve reached the outer edge, sir," Cavit called out. "No enemy vessels ahead or engaging at the moment."

"I count six ships with us." Chakotay's voice held an undercurrent of pride in his people. He called to the helm, "Turn us around, prepare to engage any ships looking to jump to warp. Open a channel to our partners."

At Henley's nod he said, "Stay with me and hold the line. Make this our last battlefield. Let no one escape." He signaled the end of his message.

Then he looked at Dalby. "Light it up. Give the signal."

Dalby's hand was steady as he pushed the button. All eyes turned to the viewscreen, where Henley had again displayed the marker buoy. Its position still marked the center of battle. Panels opened as tiny drones swarmed out like locust. The dark objects seemed to pause a moment, orienting themselves, then sped off toward the enemy ships.

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The Enterprise's viewscreen was filled with the image of the rapidly emptying buoy. One small group of machines split off to land on a nearby Klingon vessel, creating a shadow against its bronze-colored hull. Yar hurriedly glanced at her readings. "Contact confirmed. Links in place." She looked toward her captain. "We have the signal, sir."

"Take us in," Ayala said, leaning forward eagerly.

The Imperial flagship swooped through the battlefield, following the stream of objects. Each time an enemy ship was latched onto by the small black invaders, the Enterprise would approach, a strange blue beam shooting from its deflector as its conventional weapons fired on any other Dominion vessels that approached to give aid. One by one, lights winked out on the targeted enemy ship. When it was dark and drifting, the Enterprise would move on to its next quarry while smaller Imperial vessels took control of each disabled ship.

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"This cannot be happening!" Gul Dukat shouted as he backhanded the poor soul at Ops aboard his ship, the DarkStar. He pored over the schematic, watching in disbelief as ship after ship in the Dominion Alliance faded as they registered as no longer battle-worthy.

"You swore that by banding together into one force we could overcome the humans. Yet they are conquering our vessels with ease." General Martok’s growl made even his own men back away slightly from the furious Klingon.

A sudden rocking of phaser fire caused everyone to stagger or grab some support.

"What *are* those things?" That question came from a female Founder, who was staring at the viewscreen’s display of dying ships. "How are they neutralizing our power sources?"
"The objects are some kind of construct that can join to form a more complex machine." This cool answer came from a Romulan at the science station. "They apparently latch on to a ship's hull and work together to create a dampening field. It's strong enough to shut down a warp core." He looked up. "We won't even be able to employ our plan of last resort, to release antimatter into this area of space."

"If we could not have victory, we were determined to have revenge. This entire region would have been uninhabitable for centuries." Martok cuffed the Cardassian at the helm and met his angry stare with a deadly one of his own. "Set a course out of the war zone before those leeches find us."

"Belay that." Gul Dukat's neck ridges were stiffened with anger. "You do not give the orders here, Klingon. *I* do."

Martok strode up to his erstwhile ally and glared into the cold eyes. "Then give the order. To every vessel still able to run. All we will taste this day is defeat. And if we are not swift and careful, Imperial prison rations."

Dukat pushed the Klingon out of his way and strode to his command chair. "Do it," he snapped.

The Cardassian pilot nodded and the DarkStar began making its way to the edges of the battle, trying to avoid the small machines that had managed to destroy all of their plans. As the viewscreen cleared of phaser fire, the image of a smaller but still powerful ship hove into view: Voyager.

"Ah," Dukat breathed, "It looks like we will claim at least one prize before our time is done." His eyes began to glitter with anticipation. "Ready the weapons."

Martok cursed his fate. He should never have agreed to remain on the flagship, away from his own troops. He knew at this moment he would die without honor---unless they could secure this one small victory amidst the overwhelming defeat. "Also ready the self-destruct sequence. We have managed to stay clear of the Empire's neutralizers. At the very least we can make this---what do the humans call it?---a Pyrrhic victory."

The Romulan opened his mouth to protest, then snapped it shut with a shake of his head. All eyes returned to the viewscreen and the rapidly growing image of Voyager.

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"Five enemy vessels still active. The drones are leaving the captured ships as soon as the warp cores are shut down, but they won't catch up to them." Dalby's voice reflected the discipline of training and experience.

"Our partners are moving to intercept and engaging, sir. One Cardassian vessel is heading right for us." Henley looked at the viewscreen as if to confirm the readings on her console.

"Fire at will, Mr. Dalby. We want that ship dead in space." Cavit jumped up to take a few restless steps.

"Keep a close eye on their power levels, Henley." Chakotay's order was quiet. "Shout if there's any sign they're releasing anti-matter or trying to breach their warp core. Warn the others to do the same with their targets."

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The combat between the DarkStar and Voyager resembled an ancient dogfight. They swirled around each other, separating and drawing in. Firing at close range, each trying to overload their enemy's
shields. Cavit was careful to keep crossing the Cardassian's path so it couldn't jump to warp. Each subsequent pass got more dangerous as the vessels moved near enough to scrape shields.

The half-hour of fierce fighting left things not so cool or calm on Voyager's bridge as sparks and smoke clouded the air. Inertial dampers struggled to compensate for the sharp turns, and everyone did their jobs with one hand on their seat or console.

"Damn it, I want that ship destroyed *now*!" Cavit's shout expressed the tension that gripped the crew. They couldn't let this one get away.

"Sir, they're altering course," Henley's voice was a little scratchy from the smoke. "It looks like they're heading back into the battle, putting some space between us."

"Stay alert," Chakotay said, eyes narrowed as he watched the strange actions of their target. "I don't think they're going to give up that easily."

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The DarkStar's bridge was dark red with emergency lighting. Coolant leaked from ruptured conduits and many of the consoles were dark or filled with the static of destroyed sensors. They'd managed to punch through Voyager's shields once or twice, but otherwise their efforts to destroy the Imperial ship were fruitless.

"We're finished. Admit it." Martok's shoulders were slumped in defeat. Apparently it was indeed a good day to die, but a humiliating way to meet his end. As the pawn of his allies rather than master of his own fate.

"Perhaps. But I *will* take at least one of them with me." Dukat gripped the arms of his command chair and leaned forward. "Set a new course—we're going to ram them." He began punching buttons. "I'm also setting the warp core to overload while we still can."

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"I'm detecting an energy surge on the Cardassian vessel," Henley's calm statement belied her sweating face and tense fingers. "I think they're trying to cause a breach."

Dalby's shocked voice overrode his crewmate's. "Reading a new course, sir. They're coming right for us!" All eyes immediately turned to the viewscreen. The image of the Cardassian vessel was still fairly small but growing quickly.

"Evasive maneuvers," Cavit ordered.

"Belay that!" Chakotay snapped. "If we don't stop them they'll poison space for parsecs. Helm, set a course to meet them." He looked at Dalby. "Fire everything you've got. It's now or never."

The two ships sped toward each other in a cosmic dare, lances and bursts of energy preceding them.

"We've got to pull away, now!" Cavit shot a desperate look at his CO.

"Stay on course," was Chakotay's grim reply. "We'll either blow them up or smash them to bits, but that Cardassian warp core *will* be shut down."

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On board the DarkStar, only the Tactical officer moved as he continued to fire on the enemy vessel.
Everyone else watched the screen, awaiting their fate, hoping the warp core overloaded before they were blown to atoms.

They were disappointed. The fiery ball of a photon torpedo grew and grew until it filled the screen. Voyager was close behind it. There was a burst of light and a flash of superheated gases, and the Dominion was gone.

Voyager sailed triumphant through the still flaming debris, rejoining its comrades as the last pockets of resistance were vanquished.

In the vast darkness of space, all was peaceful at last.
Chapter 2

Julian Bashir Picard never allowed anyone to forget his middle name. It was an inheritance from his mother, or more accurately his mother's father. And in his mind, it was a more valid proof of his destined rule of the Empire than the Picard. Infinitely more.

James T. Kirk had been the first Emperor, taking control of the Federation in a time of uncertainty and crisis. The Federation was being attacked from both without and within. Its borders were challenged by Romulans, Andorians, Klingons, and other interlopers. At the same time, a race of shape-shifters sought to infiltrate the highest levels of Starfleet and the Federation Council. After a years-long struggle, he allied with the Klingons, pushed back the others and killed the last of the shape-shifters. But the cost to the Federation had been high, and included the loss of many personal rights and freedoms citizens had previously taken for granted. Kirk then proved himself unable or unwilling to relax the reins of power once order had been restored. Starfleet—now the Imperial Fleet—backed him. So he claimed the title of Emperor and began to consolidate his rule.

Kirk's wife bore a daughter, who wed a Bashir. Kirk ruled so long and so absolutely that his grandson was grown by the time the Emperor died in his sleep. The mantle of Bashir rule then passed from father to son. Each successive generation drew more power away from the Council, now merely a relic from Federation days.

The focus of authority in one Terran human eventually caused other races to fall into disfavor. Their inevitable opposition to this situation was seized upon as a valid excuse to banish their representatives from government. Eventually the reality of Earth's prominence in the reshaped universe was acknowledged. Since then the Terran Empire had reflected an Earth-centric philosophy without shame or irony. The Imperial Guard—a separate force from the Imperial Fleet—ensured the obedience, if not the enthusiastic support, of the subjugated planets that had stood as friends and equals once upon a time.

At some point a rather cold-blooded Emperor realized that it was more practical to make rebellious individuals slaves rather than prisoners. Thus a shameful but extremely profitable industry was reborn. The practice of having men and women of different species battle and slaughter each other for the amusement of others also returned. These rebels-turned-gladiators never survived long. It was an easy way to eliminate threats to the Empire and keep the increasingly apathetic masses entertained.

Then the Bashir line produced another daughter. The Emperor, her father, considered her too weak to be his successor and arranged her marriage. He chose a soldier-diplomat whose roots ran deep in the soil of ancient France. Jean-Luc Picard had not loved the woman he took to wife, but he did his duty to the Empire. His marriage was only months old when he ascended the throne. But it was years after that he could finally rejoice at the news of a son to bear his name and eventually the burden of rule. Jean-Luc had been appalled when pre-natal tests revealed the child's DNA indicated potentially catastrophic defects. The boy would not only be unfit to command a vast array of planets, but also ill-equipped to lead a normal life.

Julian's eyes narrowed as he sighed and stared at his features, the mix of Bashir and Picard reflected in the transparent aluminum of the Mercury's Observation Lounge viewport. As he considered the golden skin and dark hair of his maternal heritage, he contemplated the woman who died at the time of his birth. It was a rare thing in this day and age, and her death was her own fault. To please herself or her husband, she insisted that genetic corrections and enhancements be applied to Julian in utero. The unplanned consequences were massive systemic shutdowns in her own body. She had
"improved" her son to the point where her womb rejected him as an invader, a mere two weeks before her due date. She never saw the child she sacrificed so much for.

Still, it's not as though he grew up without a mother. Julian snorted. Jean-Luc Picard had waited barely a year before marrying Beverly, his childhood sweetheart. A daughter, Annika, soon followed.

Fate had kept the family intact for a little over a decade before claiming another life. Beverly was murdered, collateral damage in a failed assassination attempt. Jean-Luc never fully recovered from the loss of his beloved, and withdrew from much of public life. He preferred to let his appointees manage the day-to-day business of the Empire while he focused on expanding and defending his borders and publishing his works of philosophy.

Julian spent the next 16 years preparing to inherit the Imperial throne. Cool, pale Annika was never a threat to his plans. When she reached adulthood her interests lay closer to home, with her husband and son. In her mind the Empire merely existed to provide her with an unlimited income. Yet her insulated, charmed existence was cut short as well, a victim of a shuttle accident that investigations proved only had bad luck to blame.

Again, Jean-Luc went into mourning. The Dominion threat eventually roused him, but it was clear to any who saw him that the Emperor's strength was waning.

And now, on the cusp of the final battle to secure the Terran Empire, he had sent for his son.

"Do you think he's really dying?" Julian turned from the viewport to direct the question to the man lounging on a sofa. His widowed brother-in-law and friend since boyhood, Tom Paris.

Tom set aside his private thoughts and shrugged. "He's been dying since he lost Beverly."

"I think he's really dying, this time. He barely has the stamina to sit through a battle." Julian's voice held no emotion, just observation.

"How do you know that?" Tom sat up, disturbed.

"I've been so informed," Julian replied flatly.

Tom's frown deepened.

"Besides," Julian waved in dismissal, "if he weren't really dying, he wouldn't have sent a ship for us."

"Maybe he just misses our company," Tom said wryly.

Dubious sable brows rose. "And he also misses the Council members?"

Tom simply shrugged again and lay back down. He wished Julian would cease prattling and let him get back to his musings.

"*I* think he's wrestling with his own mortality," Julian insisted, crossing and plopping down next to Tom's legs. "He's going to name me his heir. His eyes shone with visions of lifelong ambitions fulfilled. "The first thing I shall do is honor him with games worthy of his greatness."

Tom forbore pointing out that Jean-Luc Picard detested gladiatorial games and had banned them on Earth the day he became Emperor. He affected a yawn and said, "When we finally stop gallivanting about, the first thing *I* shall do is drink to his health."
Julian glared at him a moment, then relaxed and laughed. "Of course, he's more a father to you than a father-in-law." He patted Tom's knee. "You're right, once the announcement's made it's only a matter of time."

Tom was saved from answering as the Mercury dropped out of warp. The streaking stars resolved to points of light, and the vague glints of other vessels could be seen in the distance.

A light, cultured voice sounded through the comm. "Captain Eddington to His Highness."


"The Phoenix has informed us that your father is touring the fleet. He has left instructions to await his return."

Anger crossed Julian's features before they flowed into the calm mask of a seasoned politician. "I would prefer to join his inspection of the troops. Have a shuttle prepared and pinpoint the Emperor's location."

"Immediately, Your Highness. Eddington out."

Julian leapt up and headed for the door. He paused to glance over his shoulder. "Are you coming?"

"I don't think so," Tom shooed him out with a vague gesture. "Go have your reunion, and say Hello to the old man for me."

Julian Bashir Picard raced out without another word, his eager steps fueled by anticipation and ambition, and other emotions he preferred to ignore.

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The second the doors slid shut Tom's face lost its mask of genial camaraderie. His brow creased with worry as he considered Julian's words. His friend seemed just a bit too well informed, and morbidly interested in the state of his father's health.

Tom sighed. His own life---and his son, Lucien's---were closely bound to the royal family. There was no escape from the gilded cage they resided in. He wished for a moment that his father had not been Owen Paris, chief advisor to Emperor Picard and head of the Imperial Fleet until his death.

He sometimes imagined a very different background, one that left him free of Imperial entanglements. A thousand different careers had crossed his mind over the years, from footloose pilot to family-man farmer. The reality of his circumstances left him with few responsibilities beyond being charming and decorative. He'd received the finest education and training available, yet he'd never had an opportunity to really achieve something for himself.

Then again, he considered, if he'd been anyone but Tom Paris son of Owen he'd never have met Chakotay. The man who had occupied a special place in his thoughts for over half his 27-year-old life. Despite the fact that they hadn't set eyes on each other in ten years. The person he had really traveled to this war zone to see. A wistful smile crossed Tom's face as he nestled deeper into the cushions and returned to the pleasant memories that had occupied his mind before Julian's interruption.

Tom would never forget the first time he saw Chakotay. Tom's mother, Miriam, had been lost in the same botched plot that killed the Empress. At that time both Picard and Paris were feeling very protective of their children. They also felt an almost compulsive need to get away from Earth. So the two men decided that Tom, Julian and Annika would accompany their fathers on a tour of the
Empire's borders---even the ones in dispute.

That trip held a special place in Tom's memory. He'd never spent so much time with his father, before or after. He'd just turned 11 when their itinerary brought them to a hotly contested area of the frontier. Dozens of colony worlds were claimed by both the Terran and Romulan Empires, and the fleets regularly clashed.

He'd finished his lessons early and gone exploring on the Enterprise, which from the beginning was the traditional name for the flagship of the fleet. He was crawling along a ventilation duct, determined to avoid both his playmates and the Yeoman assigned to look after them. He had amused himself by sneaking glances into cabins and work areas as he passed them. Some of the more private activities didn't make sense to his innocent mind, but he wasn't yet tired of his game.

Then he'd heard his father's rather loud voice up ahead and hurried to a large grate that overlooked a conference room. Tom propped his chin on his hands and settled down to listen. Admiral Owen Paris was outlining a plan for eliminating a Romulan blockade around a disputed planet. From Tom's limited understanding it sounded like they were going to lose a lot of people to take back one ugly hunk of rock. He frowned as he wondered what was so important about this particular planet that it was worth so many lives.

His father had just finished when Tom heard a soft voice requesting permission to speak. He shifted around and scrunched to peer through the metal that formed part of the arch of the ceiling. He tried to identify the speaker, but couldn't get a glimpse from this perspective.

"With all due respect, sir, you're asking your pilots to fly right into a trap. The sensors show the Romulans have laced the surrounding space with mines to deliberately prevent ships from approaching. By sending so many vessels in such close formation, you're practically guaranteeing someone will slip up. And if one ship goes, they all will. They'll be packed so tight that a chain reaction is inevitable."

The voice grew more passionate as the anonymous speaker continued. "It seems unfair, and an unnecessary waste of resources, to use *these* ships as a diversion for the full assault. From what I understand, the Romulans are paranoid enough to disregard the ploy, and a lot of good people will die for nothing."

Tom winced in sympathy when he heard his father's condescending response. "Well then, *Crewman*, since you seem to believe yourself a better strategist, what do you suggest?"

There was a pregnant pause. Tom could easily picture the sneer that the Admiral was using to wither the protester's self-confidence. But then the voice piped up again.

"I would approach the planet using the minefield, but don't send a squadron---just four or five ships. They could come in from different directions and go very slowly through the sector. There's less chance of being detected that way. The crews could either plot paths that avoid the hazards or defuse the mines as they go along. When they reach the planet, you'd have a strike force that the Romulans wouldn't be expecting. They could make a few critical hits and escape. You could use the better prepared, better protected frontal assault as the distraction. Sir."

"Well, Crewman, it's nice to see you have a grasp of tactics. Unfortunately for you, it's only the most basic grasp. So I'll thank you to keep your 'suggestions' to yourself from now on," Admiral Paris sneered.

"Actually, Owen, the youngster's plan makes more sense to me as well." Tom's gasp was drowned out by the ones in the conference room itself as the Emperor's cultured tones entered the fray. "It
saves lives and ships and gives us a more viable element of surprise. He's right, the Romulans would never believe we'd be stupid enough to destroy a squadron on such a hopeless plan. At least, I *hope* we're not."

Picard suddenly came into view as he examined the schematic panel set into the conference table. He began punching some buttons, and the diagram shifted to a new formation. "Is this what you had in mind, young man?"

"Yes, sire. Except I'd probably hide some ships behind the moon until after the strike begins. Once the fighting starts they can come in from below and target the undersides of the Romulan cruisers. From what I understand, they're particularly vulnerable there."

Picard hummed his agreement. "I must compliment you, Crewman---?"

"Chakotay, sire," the voice replied.

"Crewman Chakotay. You're thinking in three dimensions---four if you count the time factor." Picard stared down at the table a few moments, then tilted his head curiously. "Pretty advanced analysis for someone who's obviously not Academy trained. I'm surprised no one's recommended you for admission."

The response was a little muffled. Tom leaned forward, pressing on the grate, trying to catch the quiet words.

"I took the tests and Captain Sulu was willing to sponsor me, but my parents refused their permission." The next bit was clearer. "I enlisted when I turned 17 six months ago. The Captain was kind enough to arrange for my posting here, and he gave me database access so I could study the Academy syllabus."

"It seems you've benefited from the exposure." Picard turned, probably to face Owen.

Tom pressed his nose to the metal, wanting to see the steam he knew was coming from his thwarted father's ears. Suddenly the grate gave way and he was heading face first into the conference room. Fortunately, he was able to spread his knees quickly enough to prevent his whole body from plummeting to the floor. He swung in mid-air as the metal plate landed with a thunk.

Almost immediately hands gripped his wrists, steadying his body and promising a quick safe landing if his legs gave way. The first thing Tom noticed was that the hands were a warm golden brown. He followed the arms down to a slim torso and up to a face that was trying very hard not to grin. Tom couldn't resist smiling into deep brown eyes that were twinkling with suppressed laughter.

"Crewman Chakotay, I presume?" Tom said without thinking.

"At your service, young sir," the youth replied with a nod. His eyes gestured to the hole in the ceiling. "Up or down?"

"Up." Tom knew when to beat feet.

"Down," Owen Paris countermanded through gritted teeth.

Tom was surprised that Chakotay waited for him to confirm the order, giving Tom a rueful quirk of brows. "Down," Tom echoed in defeat and relaxed his legs. As he slid down he was braced by strong arms and neatly flipped to his feet, facing his father and the Emperor set against a background of shocked staff. He felt a quick sympathetic squeeze and then Chakotay was gone, probably melting back into the gaggle of enlisted serving as clerks for the strategy session.
"Well, well, two youthful surprises in one day. So, Mr. Paris, what brings you to our assembly this evening?" The Emperor's eyes were laughing even though his face was grave.

Tom relaxed a little. There would probably be hell to pay later, but at least he was only in trouble with his father, not the leader of the entire Empire. "Um, well, honestly, I was bored, sire."

Owen's eyebrows climbed up to his nonexistent hairline as he heard his only offspring, but it was Picard who answered, "Bored?"

"Yeah---Yeoman Pierson is no fun. The second we're done our lessons he tries to lock us up in our quarters. If he could, he'd make us go to bed at 1800. " Tom could feel his features taking on what Annika called his "Mule Face", which always accompanied his whiny pre-pubescent demands for independence. "We're not babies. We know the rules. But 'Party-Pooper Pierson' won't let us do *anything*.

Tom clapped his hands over his mouth as he realized he'd let slip the private name for the detested caregiver. He could hear chuckles behind him, while many of the adults in front of him had also hidden their smiles behind their fingers.

The Emperor managed to keep control of his mirth by briskly straightening his jacket and approaching the wayward child. "Well, Mr. Paris, we certainly can't have you young rascals *bored*. Look what happens when it's just one of you." He pointed to the gaping hole, then laid the hand on the boy's shoulder. "I don't want to even imagine the damage if all three of you decide to amuse yourselves. If your father has no objections, I think the best solution would be to find someone closer to your own age to look after you while you're here."

Man and boy waited to receive Owen's stiff nod. When Picard turned back, he gestured behind Tom. "Mr. Chakotay."

Tom turned to see his acrobatics partner step forward again. "Yes, sire?"

"I'm sure Captain Sulu can spare you for a while. Will you take our rebellious progeny in hand?" Picard's eyes crinkled but he kept his amusement reined in. "You'll probably get some real training in diplomacy---and discipline."

"Of course, sire." Chakotay didn't look like he minded as he gave Tom a friendly wink.

Owen moved forward. "Jean-Luc, you can't put the children in the hands of this uneducated, backwater-bred---"

"Owen," the interruption was smooth but decisive. "Sulu had the boy tested for early admission. That speaks of potential. And if our good Captain has taken him in hand, I'm sure his education is on its way to being at least the equal of any cadet."

"Of course, sire." Owen's nod this time was even stiffer.

"Now I think it's time you met your new charges, Mr. Chakotay. Thank you for your contributions to this meeting." Picard acknowledged the nod of obedience and turned to Tom. "And thank you, Mr. Paris, for pointing out a serious breach in our security. We'll be sure *nothing* like this ever happens again."

He also accepted Tom's nod, this one of understanding that he was still in pretty deep trouble. "Have a good night, gentlemen."

Tom started practically skipping the second they were in the corridor. "So what's your first name,
Chakotay?

Chakotay smiled down at the fidgety boy. "My people only have one name."

"Really? That's neat. I'd love to dump two of mine." Blue eyes rolled. "Whenever my dad's mad at me he uses the whole thing, 'Thomas Eugene Paris'."

Before Chakotay could do more than offer a sympathetic look the chatter started again.

"I'll have to think about whether you need a nickname, though I like the way 'Chakotay' sounds, like chopping wood or something. My friends have three names too: Julian Bashir Picard and Annika Hansen Picard. Julian's weird. He doesn't like having a nickname. He even makes Pierson use all three. 'Nika doesn't care though. I'm just a little older than 'Nika. Julian's almost two years older than us---and boy does he make sure we know it. Where do you come from, anyway?"

Chakotay's eyebrows had risen at the stream of information, but he merely answered, "A planet on the frontier called Dorvan V."

"Oh, we haven't been there yet. I don't think it's even on the list. I remember all the planets' names we've been to, and there were tons. I figure I'll need to know stuff like that 'cause I'm going to be a pilot someday. Are you a pilot?"

"I'm cleared to fly shuttlecraft, but I don't think I'd call myself a pilot." Chakotay shrugged. "The Captain wants me to learn all of the ship's systems, so my assignments change a lot. I do know I'm going to be training to take the Enterprise's helm at some point."

"Flight sims, oh cool. I used to do them a lot at home. Hey, we could all go to the holodeck and you can teach Julian and 'Nika to fly a shuttle." His chest swelled confidently. "I could be your copilot."

"We'll see," was all Chakotay said as the doors to the children's temporary schoolroom opened.

Tom smiled reminiscently. Chakotay had proved to be more than up to the task of handling three rambunctious pre-teens. He'd apparently had a lot of experience kid-sitting (he never called it baby-sitting) his younger sisters.

He was still close enough to their ages to know how they thought, so most of the time he headed off any trouble before their plans were fully in place. He'd even circumvented Julian's usual stuffiness by calling him 'Highness'.

Of course, there hadn't been much time for trouble-making. Their new caregiver made the effort to learn their interests and plan activities that encouraged them. Chakotay even *did* take them for holodeck flight lessons. He'd taught Annika and Julian the basics of handling a shuttle, and best of all he'd let Tom be his copilot in a few straightforward battle sims.

All three kids were keenly disappointed that their new friend wasn't going to be coming with them when they transferred to another ship for the next leg of their journey. Annika had cried. Tom had felt like it too, but he was 11 and a guy. Still, even he choked up a little when Chakotay gifted each of his charges with a smooth polished stone carved with what he called their totems. Tom had clutched his stone so hard as he transported over to their new vessel the pattern had been engraved onto his palm. He still had the gift, tucked carefully away in a box in a drawer in his home on Earth.
Tom and Annika had corresponded with Chakotay, while Julian had quickly dismissed him as just another servant. For the rest of their trip the two letter-writers had looked forward to hearing from their friend. He shared little funny stories about life aboard the Enterprise and sounded suitably impressed by their own travels.

The blue eyes saddened and darkened with anger as Tom recalled the abrupt end to the exchange when they went home to Earth. The two children were inconsolable, while Julian was smug. It had taken a while to get over the sting of losing their penpal.

Tom shook his head. He didn't find out until years later that Owen had ordered the transmissions stopped. He didn't like the "outworlder" associating with the royal family or his own son, however slight the connection. Chakotay probably had been surprised to stop receiving letters, then basically shrugged it off as kids with short attention spans finding new interests.

In a way, though, Owen had been punished for his interference. The irony was delicious, and Tom savored it a moment. By breaking off the correspondence instead of letting it taper off gradually, Owen had made Chakotay memorable. And it didn't help that Owen himself was often growling the hated name where Tom and his usual playmates could overhear. From what they could tell Chakotay was quite a thorn in the Admiral's side.

Picard had taken an interest in the intelligent, easygoing youth. He kept tabs on his progress, and was pleased with Sulu's reports of Chakotay's development into an officer and gentleman of great promise. Through bravery and often inspired tactics he distinguished himself in battle, helping to snatch victory from defeat. He was given more and greater responsibilities, displaying a natural flair for command.

Much to Owen's dismay, Picard approved Chakotay's regular promotions and made sure his education continued to follow the highest standard. Though Chakotay never set foot on the grounds, he was awarded several Academy diplomas.

So it was more than six years after that first meeting that Tom, Julian, and Annika again followed their fathers into space. They were to meet the Enterprise, currently in orbit around Babel. The Emperor and his staff were there negotiating with the Andorians. The Emperor had decided to conduct the meetings himself rather than send a delegation. He decided he wanted the children to also attend, to give them their first real steps in the careful dance of diplomacy. The Andorians would likely be less conciliatory than the obsequious ambassadors to the Empire the teens were used to dealing with.

Tom had only vague hopes of seeing Chakotay; he dismissed them as a childish wish for familiarity. It had been so long since he'd been among the stars. He wondered if the onetime kid-sitter would even recognize his former charges. All three had finished the coltish growth spurts of adolescence. Tom had sprouted like a weed, his limbs long but thankfully no longer gangly. He looked, and considered himself, very much an adult. Still, he fidgeted a little in his seat as he wished *he* was piloting the shuttle bringing them to the rendezvous point.

The arrangements were top secret; there had been two attempts on the Emperor's life since he'd left Earth some weeks before. Tom looked at his companions: Julian's face was completely composed, but Annika's pale blue eyes were shifting nervously, matching her restless fingers. He used his own hand to still hers and offered a reassuring smile. "We're almost there, 'Nika. Another twenty minutes and we'll be on the Enterprise sensors."

"I know. I'm just worried that we're all alone out here." The girl's full lower lip was trembling a little. "That's part of the plan," Julian shrugged. "Who would expect the Emperor and the head of the fleet
to transport their kids in an unescorted shuttle?"

"It'll be fine, just you wait---" Tom's words were cut off by a sudden jolt that sent all three tumbling.

"What was that?" Annika's voice was high and sharp with fear.

"Shit! We're being fired on!" Tom grappled his way to the viewport as the shuttle continued to dive and rock, systems whining with the strain. "It looks like an Andorian cruiser!"

Julian joined Tom, peering out. "We should tell them who we are," he said, fingers clenched along the edge of the opening. "Maybe they'll just hold us for ransom."

"Are you crazy?" Tom couldn't believe what his friend was suggesting. "We can't just let ourselves be kidnapped."

"It's better than being killed." Julian tossed his head and determinedly made his way to a console. "I'm going to signal them."

"No!"

"You* are not in charge here." Julian's eyes were glacial in their sudden authority. "If you want you can tell the pilot to get ready to drop his shields."

Tom opened his mouth to protest, but pressed his lips in a thin line as he saw the unrelenting expression on his friend's face. He gave Annika's shoulder a squeeze as he passed her on the way to the cockpit door. As it opened he was tossed forward into the tiny space.

"Hey kid, get out of here!" Tom wasn't sure which of the two stolid men flying the ship spoke, but he could see they were a bit preoccupied. The pilot tried another stomach-twisting swoop as his partner fired his few weapons at the looming enemy vessel.

"You're supposed to get ready to lower your shields. We're going to let them know who we are so they don't blow us up." Tom's voice was strangled with tension but he managed to deliver his message.

"What?!" The copilot must have yelled before; the pilot's disbelieving tones didn't sound familiar. "We can't just turn you over to them."

"Look, we're obviously outgunned, and we can't outrun them. In a few minutes they'll cut through our shields and we'll all be toast." Tom sounded convincing, even if he didn't believe his own words.

Tom grabbed at a chair as another blast rocked the small ship. Then the assault abruptly ceased. Julian and Annika also crowded into the cramped cockpit.

All eyes turned to the viewports. The Andorian ship had turned and now seemed to be targeting someone else. The other ship was blocked by the bulk of the alien vessel.

"Shuttle Kirk to unidentified Federation ship, I suggest you get out of here while we keep them busy. Signal for reinforcements as soon as you're clear." The voice was slightly deeper than Tom remembered, but shockingly familiar.

"Chakotay?" Tom said, and looked to his companions for confirmation. Annika's eyes glowed with renewed hope.

The pilot hit the comm switch. "Shuttle Kirk, this is the Cochrane. We're leaving the area. We have
precious cargo that cannot---I repeat, cannot---fall into enemy hands. Thanks, and Cochrane out."

"No!" "You have to help him!" Tom's and Annika's protests blended into each other.

"I'm sorry, but you're the priority here." The older man's voice was not unkind, but the set of his shoulders as he ignored them declared the discussion over.

They watched the Andorian ship slide out of their view as they eased away from the fight between the cruiser and a sleek, oddly shaped shuttle that was about twice the size of their own. The newcomer was swooping and darting like a dragonfly, continually firing on the Andorian's shields while nimbly avoiding its armaments. Then the Cochrane jumped to warp.

As soon as they contacted the fleet a warship was dispatched to aid the Kirk, which turned out to be a prototype of an experimental style of shuttlecraft. Both the Emperor and Admiral Paris were there to meet the Cochrane when it slid into the Enterprise shuttlebay.

"We were lucky, Owen, very lucky," Jean-Luc said, then swallowed and clutched at his children. Tom felt awkward and exposed until Owen also pulled him into a brief embrace.

"Has there been any word from the Kirk?" Tom asked as everyone started moving toward the exit.

"No, but they do have advanced shields and weaponry. And they didn't need to destroy the other ship, just stay out of its tractor beam and line of fire until you could get away."

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It was hours before Tom finally heard that the Kirk had returned. There had been minor injuries when a few consoles overloaded, but both Lt. Commander Chakotay and his copilot, Lt. Gregor Ayala, would be fine. They'd been released to their quarters for a day of rest.

Later, Tom hesitated in the hall outside Chakotay's door, shifting nervously, then abruptly pressed the chime. When the doors opened he strolled inside, trying to project a casual air. He quickly scanned the cabin. The furnishings were sturdy but comfortable, and a few soft pillows and throws gave the place a welcoming air.

Chakotay was standing by a small desk. From the towel around his neck and the casual pants he was wearing, Tom guessed he was heading for bed. Tom looked at him, comparing today's reality with yesterday's memories. At 24 Chakotay was definitely an adult. The muscles of his chest and limbs were filled out, more solid. The smooth skin of his torso glowed in the light. His face had become even more striking, the bones of cheek and jaw made more prominent by maturity. But the eyes were familiar, the brown depths holding a warm smile for their visitor. The dimples were as well.

"Hello Tom," Chakotay greeted as he perched on the desk. "What can I do for you?"

Tom had walked in simply intending to say "Long time, no see," and "Thanks for saving my ass." But now his feelings were jumbled. He felt an overpowering and unsettling swirl of desire, barely recognized hormones flooding his system to arousal. He was acutely aware of his shallow breaths, flushed cheeks, and most importantly, erect and aching cock.

Tom's eyes once more regarded the other man, concentrating on the trim ankles, the carved legs. He continued upward and felt an almost irresistible urge to run his hands up the rippling abdomen, along the solid ribs and over that gleaming chest. Then along the powerful shoulders and down the muscled arms. Tom's fingers flexed, already feeling that warm satiny skin. His lips parted, yearning to touch the fullness of the curved mouth. To seek the sweetness he knew lay within. To have that mouth, that body claim his own.
He shook slightly, uncertain where the images and feelings were coming from but unable to contain them. He only knew that the adolescent fumblings with his friends had never felt like this. This was hot, reckless need. Primitive and demanding and not to be denied. He had to know...had to know what it would feel like. To be wrapped in those arms and pressed against that chest and taken by those lips. And more, so much more. Oh yes, he *had* to know. He couldn't draw another breath without knowing.

Tom swallowed and wiped at the sweat beading his forehead. Looked at Chakotay, who was waiting patiently. "Chakotay. I...I came to see you---"

He felt his mouth drying out. "I wanted to tell you that I want, I want---" He gave up talking, stumbling forward, obeying his fingers and lips and every other part of him that needed to be next to that solid bronze body.

He was stopped an arm's length away by an unyielding palm on his chest. "What are you doing, Tom?" Chakotay asked with a frown.

A shudder ran down Tom's frame. "Kissing you, wanting you. I can't help it, it's like I have to---"

"You Terrans are a strange lot," Chakotay mused, still holding them apart as he searched Tom's eyes. "One or two people have saved *my* life, but I never thought of offering them sex as a thank-you gift."

Tom stumbled back, stunned. "You think that's why I'm here?"

"Isn't it? Shouldn't I be honored to be gifted with your deflowering?" Chakotay stood, his eyes unreadable as he slipped away from Tom and moved to toss the towel through a doorway.

"What makes you think I'm still a virgin?" Tom's spine stiffened with bravado.

Chakotay just turned back and looked him up and down, a hint of heat in his gaze. Then he gave another soft smile and shook his head, ignoring the question. "I didn't even know you three were aboard the shuttle, not that it would have made any difference. I had just taken the Kirk out for a test drive because your father kicked me out of the strategy session. He didn't like my suggestions."

He grinned ruefully for a moment, then sobered. "You were just a ship in trouble. You don't owe me anything. Don't take it so personally."

"Wait a second." Tom was clutching at straws, trying to stop the whirling of his still raging desire and his immense disappointment. "You're saying somebody was here before me? Who---Julian, Annika?"

"Both." Chakotay shrugged. "You're my third proposition this evening."

"Shit!" The humiliation flushed Tom's face even more intensely than the desire had. He paced, running a hand through his hair. "Shit, I'm not even the first."

He raked his eyes along Chakotay's lack of attire then turned away. "Did you find one of the others more appealing? Take them up on their offer?"

Tom was stopped by a warm, solid grip on his arms and turned around. His chin was lifted until he was staring into liquid brown eyes. "Of course not, Tom. Three offers, three refusals." The full lips quirked just a little as Chakotay regarded the younger man. "But only one regret."

"Me?" Tom whispered.
"You," Chakotay confirmed, rubbing his thumb along Tom's lower lip. "But I'm not a man to take advantage of an innocent." His smile widened, turning a little wicked. "Even such a tempting one."

"But I want you." Tom's voice gained strength at the knowledge he wasn't alone in his feelings.

"Tom, even if I could forget that you're just a little too young for any of this, think about the consequences." Chakotay shook his head. "For whatever reason, Julian, Annika and you all think you want to be with me. If I chose you, the others would never forgive, or forget. You'd lose friends you've had all your life."

A sigh announced Tom's defeat. He ran his hands along the smooth skin of Chakotay's forearms, then stepped back. "I guess I'd better go."

Chakotay's voice stopped him just before the door. "Remember Tom, three refusals, but one regret."

Tom nodded and walked tall out of the corridor and back to his own cabin. As he came through the doors he was shocked to find the Emperor sitting behind *his* desk. "S-Sire?" he stammered.

"Less than five minutes," Jean-Luc Picard said cryptically as he stood and crossed to stand in front of Tom. "I tried to tell your father that Chakotay would no more take advantage of you than he would my children, but Owen refused to be convinced."

The older man offered a warm, knowing smile. "Let's sit a minute, Tom. I need to talk to you, man to man."

When they were settled on the sofa, Jean-Luc tilted his head and stared at the youth before him. Tom was indeed no longer a boy. "You did go to see Chakotay, yes?"

Tom just nodded, fidgeting uncomfortably.

The next question was delicately offered. "For a...private discussion?"

"Yes, sire." Tom met the wise eyes. "But he wouldn't...he didn't...he said no."

Jean-Luc nodded. "Why did you go to him?"

"I just wanted to thank him. And see him. It's been a long time. Then when I got there, every single thought flew right out of my head."

"And went south," Picard finished for him. He sighed. "You look disappointed. Annika had the same reaction, a little more emotional, of course. She's cried herself out and gone to sleep."

The lines on the Emperor's face deepened as he continued, "Julian is another matter entirely."

"Why?" Tom's body tightened with anxiety.

Jean-Luc's voice dropped. "He came to me to accuse Chakotay of accosting him. Of assaulting him, sexually."

Tom leapt up in protest. "Chakotay would never do that! You can't think he---"

"No, I know he didn't." Jean-Luc replied as his sure grip returned Tom to the seat. "Even if I didn't trust Chakotay implicitly, the computer logs show Julian was evicted even faster than Annika was."

Jean-Luc's mouth thinned. "Apparently it's not a woman scorned we have to worry about."
Tom noticed the weary slump to the strong body. He didn't have the first clue how the Emperor was dealing with a father's disappointment. "I'm sorry, sire."

Jean-Luc gave a small grateful lift of his lips. "No need to be."

Then he squared his shoulders and faced Tom once more, his expression serious. "Unfortunately, your father is willing to back Julian, regardless of the evidence. He wants Chakotay discharged and punished."

Neither of them mentioned that Owen's temper was the real motivator in this search for "justice".

"What are you going to do?" Tom asked anxiously.

Jean-Luc sighed. "Certainly not what Owen wants. But Chakotay *isn't* a suitable companion---for any of you. I'm going to give him a commendation for bravery and six months' leave. Let him go to Dorvan, find a spouse and start building a home for himself. He's definitely earned it."

The depth of the ache that formed at those words shocked Tom into stillness, but he understood. Everyone had their duty to the Empire, and Jean-Luc could have saved face by accepting Julian's lie. "Thank you, sire."

Jean-Luc laid a hand on Tom's shoulder and squeezed it gently in understanding. Then he stood, adjusting his jacket. "I hadn't realized how mature you'd all become. It's like you turned into adults overnight. I guess it's time I started treating you as such."

He crossed toward the door, but paused and turned back a moment. "Tom, I realize you've been through a lot today, but Annika---"

"I'll keep an eye on her." Tom responded without prompting. Of course he would look after his friend. "Thank you, Tom. I know I can depend on you." Then Jean-Luc was gone.

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And so Tom had never seen Chakotay again. He was off the ship by the time Tom woke up in the morning. Tom spent the next few weeks pretending not to know why Annika was so sad and Julian so surly. He simply played his role as the charming and witty best friend to them both.

That tactic had some unexpected consequences as eventually Annika turned her innocent blue eyes on him. Again he did his duty to the Empire. He found himself wed two years later to his childhood friend. It wasn't a bad marriage, but neither of their hearts was truly in it. They were always more like friends than lovers. Their shared past and later their son, Lucien, kept them together.

Through the years Tom had learned to be content with his lot. Until her death he'd had a wife he loved even if he wasn't in love with her, and he still had a son he adored. He often wondered about Chakotay's life...rumor had it that he'd married a Bajoran.

One thing Tom was sure of was Chakotay's unfailing ability to piss off Owen. Tom would hide his smile when he'd hear the name growled in barely restrained irritation whenever the Admiral returned from whatever border war was currently on the agenda. Jean-Luc was kind enough not to make Chakotay Owen's official second-in-command, even though it was clear he'd been groomed to be the Admiral's successor.

So no one was surprised that when Owen Paris was killed in a Dominion battle over a year ago,
Chakotay had been named Admiral of the Imperial Fleet.

Tom stretched and rose to get ready. Not only because he wanted to make a good impression on a man he hadn't seen in a decade. He needed to get cleaned up before heading to whatever official unofficial function would be taking up the evening. He guessed that it would be a raucous victory celebration. And even though he wasn't in a party mood, he'd make an appearance, decorative and charming.

No one escaped their obligations to the Empire.
Chakotay was bone tired, but no one looking at him was allowed to see it. He appeared, as always, alert and strong and sure as he wandered among the wounded in the Enterprise's temporary Sickbay, set up in a shuttlebay.

It was his last stop in a long circuit, a tradition that had begun with his very first command. After each battle he would visit every ship that fought for him, to walk a few decks and personally thank the people who risked their lives for him and for the Empire.

All Sickbays and morgues were a permanent part of the itinerary. Chakotay took care to spend time with both the living and the dead, honoring their sacrifices. Because he rotated his own posting, he had traveled on every ship in the fleet. As a result of spending time with so many of his people, he often greeted those he met by name, which endeared him even further to them. In his mind, to know who fought and died for him was simply his duty. It was a tribute all of his crews deserved, and this individual expression of gratitude was a responsibility and honor he would never shirk or pass off to a subordinate.

But it made for a very long day, especially on top of a tense battle marking the end of a grueling campaign. He was relieved that so few had fallen in this last conflict with the Dominion. If fate was kind no one else would die in his service. He hoped it would be so.

Chakotay paused by a crewwoman's bed. The brunette's eyes were blinking slowly, on the edge of sleep, but they brightened at the sight of the beloved Admiral. A stunned, grateful smile spread across her wan features when Chakotay took her hand a moment to lean in and murmur, "Thank you for all that you did, Ensign Kaplan. You have served your people well this day."

The patient struggled to speak but Chakotay simply lifted a finger to his own lips and smiled gently. "Sleep well, Ms. Kaplan."

"They can all sleep peacefully from now on, Chakotay, thanks to you." Jean-Luc Picard's smooth voice echoed the warmth in his eyes and smile as he remembered an outspoken youth and regarded the man he'd become, the commander of the Imperial Fleet.

"Indeed, sire, there is no one left to fight." Chakotay acknowledged his leader with a small bow. At a beckoning gesture he quickly moved to the Emperor's side and they began to cross the spacious shuttlebay.

Picard's staff of aides and guards fell in behind them. The Emperor noted that Chakotay had arrived alone, and still wore the sooty uniform he fought in. The older man broke the silence. "Surely you don't believe that, Chakotay. There is always someone to fight. More glory."

The seriousness of Chakotay's tone and expression revealed the depth of his belief. "There is no glory in death, sire, either your enemy's or your own."

"If there is no glory, then how am I to reward the Empire's greatest Admiral?" Picard listened carefully for the reply.

"Let me go home." The fervent wish breathed through Chakotay's lips like a prayer.

Picard's face softened. "Ah, home," was all he replied. He laid a hand on the younger man's arm, partly in empathy and partly for support. His own steps were flagging after traveling to several ships himself, to survey the damage and boost morale.
They had reached an area where those with minor wounds were being tended by Fleet medics. As the Admiral and Emperor came into view, every man and woman stood in silence and saluted in a time-honored gesture of respect.

"They honor you, sire," Chakotay said.

"No, Admiral Chakotay, I believe they honor you." Jean-Luc caught Chakotay's glance of surprise.

Chakotay turned back to the troops and returned the salute. At the gesture the assemblage burst into cheers.

At that moment Julian strode into the shuttlebay followed by his own coterie. He stopped and stared, stunned at this ovation for an *outworlder*. It offended him—these people owed their allegiance and approbations to the Emperor alone. And, of course, his heir. But his face returned to its usual mask by the time he reached his father. "I've missed the battle," he said in dismay.

"You have missed the war." Jean-Luc turned to greet his only son.

"Father, congratulations." Julian awkwardly embraced the Emperor, noticing the frailty of his form. "I shall prepare a grand celebration in your honor."

"I have no need for more celebrating," Jean-Luc said quietly. "And you should honor Chakotay. He won the battle."

Julian gritted his teeth as he turned to clasp the Admiral's arms. "All the Empire salutes you, and I embrace you as a brother." He quickly dropped his hands and stepped back, but kept his aspect genial. "How long has it been, old friend? Ten years?"

"Highness," was all Chakotay said as he bowed.

Jean-Luc compared the two men a moment, the one who was his son and the one he wished could have been. The disheartening thought sapped his remaining energy, so with a last pat to Chakotay's forearm he signaled for his staff. "I'll leave you now." Without another look at Julian he exited the room.

Chakotay stared after the Emperor a moment, his heart aching. He knew the old man was not long for this world. Despite the best medical care and technology, his body continued to weaken for reasons unknown. Over the years Chakotay had drifted from Jean-Luc's protégé to confidant, even when Owen was still alive. He felt privileged to have been trusted as the Emperor's sounding board. Also profoundly grateful for the wisdom he had gleaned just listening to this soldier-philosopher's thoughts. When the time came, he would grieve for Jean-Luc as he had for his own long-departed father.

Julian fumed for a minute, angry that Jean-Luc had simply dismissed him. The Emperor should have called his son to accompany him, a public invitation to a private conference. His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared, then with an abrupt turn he too swept out of the shuttlebay.

Ten Forward was alive with laughter and loud conversation, men and women celebrating victory and simple survival. This was the gathering of the elite, the bridge crews who had led their ships into battle under Chakotay's command. Sprinkled among them were the Council members the Emperor had called to the war zone. Their lack of uniforms stood out among the black-vested throng.

Chakotay maneuvered through the bodies as surreptitiously as he could. He'd managed to clean up
and grab a quick meal, but all he wanted to do was sleep. He was here only because he knew his
people would be disappointed if he didn't make an appearance at the festivities. He smiled and
classed hands and arms, greeting his officers, listening to war stories that were already embellished in
the first recounting. He noted that the Emperor had claimed a corner of the large room for himself. It
was set off by some draperies so Jean-Luc could have privacy in his conversations, and transport
inconspicuously to his suite on the Phoenix when he chose.

"Chakotay! Over here," called Gregor Ayala, waving his longtime friend and commander over to a
tiny group of captains. He grinned as the Admiral raised his glass in acknowledgement and
approached. "I thought you'd never give that damn signal today, *sir*. You probably wanted all the
excitement for yourself."

"There was plenty of action to go around, Greg," Will Riker chided as he also gave his CO a warm
smile. "So, Admiral, what are your plans now? Off to Earth to be paraded before a cheering
populace?"

"No, the second the Emperor releases me I'll be heading home to Dorvan." Chakotay's eyes glowed
with the images as his hand unconsciously brushed his tattoo, the sign of marriage and manhood
among his tribe. "To wife, to son, to crops ready for harvest. There's a lot to be done."

"Chakotay the farmer. I've never been able to picture it," Joshua Cavit said and sipped his wine,
squinting at Chakotay as if trying to imagine him wearing overalls and a straw hat.

"Dirt washes off easier than blood, Josh," Chakotay said softly, "and I prefer a quiet life."

The men were shaking their heads in bemusement as Julian and two Council members approached.
The captains immediately melted into the crowd.

"Here he is, the man of the hour," Julian said as he stopped next to Chakotay.

"Highness," Chakotay said and bowed, displaying no reaction.

"Councilor Elizabeth Shelby, Councilor Geordi LaForge," Julian introduced the newcomers with a
flourish. Then he sidled even closer to Chakotay and warned, "Beware of Mr. LaForge. He'll
whisper sweet nothings in your ear, and one day you'll wake up and all you can say is 'Federation',
'Federation', 'Federation'."

They all chuckled, but Geordi's earnestness was clear as he insisted, "Why not? The first community
of planets was a Federation."

"And in the Federation, the Council members had all the power." Julian's full lips formed a mock
pout. "Of course Mr. LaForge is above such petty considerations."

"Where do you stand, Admiral?" Shelby's narrow features tried to pin Chakotay. "Empire or
Federation?"

"Soldiers have the advantage of seeing their enemies clearly displayed on their sensors," Chakotay
replied cryptically, ignoring the game.

Geordi thoughtfully assessed this hero he had heard so much about. Ironically, though Chakotay had
been a wildly successful Admiral of the Imperial Fleet for over a year, he had kept a pretty low
profile outside his own troops. People on Earth and other planets had read about his exploits, but no
personal information or pictures had been sent to be splashed on the news services or used in
propaganda campaigns.
The reports of the man's charisma and intelligence were easily confirmed with a single glance into those magnetic dark eyes. The honor and integrity were not so easily checked, yet Chakotay's answer did suggest an unwillingness to play politics. Perhaps he was as he seemed, uncorrupted by power. The thought gave Geordi hope for the future. "Yet with the Fleet behind you, you could be extremely political," he noted.

Julian laughed again, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "You see, Chakotay? I warned you, but now I'm going to rescue you." He took the Admiral's arm and led the man firmly away.

Unnoticed by anyone, a pair of blue eyes peered around one of the Emperor's drapes. They stayed glued to Chakotay's form until he again disappeared into the crowd.

Julian stopped in a quiet corner and turned to Chakotay. "Times are changing, Admiral. I'm going to need good men like you."

Chakotay's gut tightened, but he only said, "How can I be of service, Highness?"

"I will need strong and intelligent people on my side." Julian held Chakotay's gaze. "People who know what it is to command. To give orders and know they will be obeyed without question or hesitation."

He made a gesture of dismissal. "The Council members squabble and fight among themselves, while it is the Imperial Guard who protects Earth and the Fleet who preserves the Empire. Whoever leads these groups must know how to wield power, and keep it."

Julian' focused on Chakotay. "When the time comes, can I count on you?"

"The moment your father releases me, Highness, I intend to return to Dorvan." Chakotay decided not to add "permanently", preferring to keep that information to himself.

"Yes, to take some leave," Julian said heartily. "Well of course, you must go home awhile. You've certainly earned it."

His expression turned sly. "Just don't get too comfortable. I may call on you before long." He raised his wine in a silent toast.

Chakotay remained outwardly calm as he clinked glasses, but his spirit was filled with foreboding. Julian waited until Chakotay had almost taken a sip to remark casually, "Tom's here, you know."

He wasn't sure if there was a flicker in the brown eyes but he did note the steadiness of the Admiral's hand. "He still remembers you, of course, especially now that you've come so splendidly into your own."

Chakotay simply nodded and finished his drink. He indicated the empty glass. "I believe it's time for me to return to Voyager, Highness. May I bid you good night?" He barely waited for the slight nod before smoothly making his exit.

Julian turned to find his father, intending to be seen in the Emperor's company on this historic day. His eyes narrowed as he noticed the draperies had been pulled back, leaving the reserved area empty. "The Emperor retires early," he murmured, then went to get another drink. And search for more
allies among this fortuitous gathering of Imperial officers.

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Tom Paris sat bemused as he piloted a shuttle out of the docking bay of the Phoenix. He'd been relieved when Jean-Luc asked for his company on the trip back to the Emperor's current vessel. He had been both dreading and anticipating meeting Chakotay after so many years, and hadn't really wanted the occasion to occur in public.

He'd felt that old undeniable pull just at the sight of the man. The years had been kind to Chakotay, gifting him with greater dignity and an aura of quiet confidence. He was even more attractive, but now his appeal reflected the complex beauty of seasoned maturity.

Tom had been torn between a bold approach and ignominious retreat when the Emperor had requested his presence. He'd been surprised when they beamed to the shuttlebay instead of the Imperial suite, but was pleased to be piloting again. Even if it was only a short exterior tour of the Fleet ships.

Jean-Luc relaxed in the copilot's seat, glad to be temporarily free of staring eyes. He was alone except for his son-in-law, having abandoned his entourage on the Enterprise. He looked at the slim but strong man whose effervescent spirit had brightened many a dreary day on Earth. He sighed. Here was another he would have been proud to call son. "What an Emperor you might have made."

Tom glanced at his elder, startled, but said nothing as Jean-Luc continued.

"I know you would have been fair, but would you also have been strong?" Jean-Luc hadn't expected a reply to his rhetorical question, but he got one.

"I would have been how I was raised," Tom said honestly, "and if I found myself lacking I'd have sought another to balance me."

Jean-Luc caught the flash of old regrets in the blue eyes and changed the subject. "How was your journey?"


"I need your help. With Julian." Jean-Luc laid a thin hand on one shoulder.

"Of course." Tom tried to hide his sudden tension.

"He regards you like a true brother. He's going to need you now more than ever." Jean-Luc's voice was sad but certain.

Tom merely nodded, not knowing what to say.

The Emperor straightened, reclaiming his hand and looking out the viewport. "Enough. Tonight I have no stomach for politics. I just want to look at the stars and remember that even the greatest empire comprises just the tiniest speck of an indifferent universe."

So Tom plotted a course and the men drifted in the silence of space.

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A strange sight greeted Chakotay as he crossed the shuttlebay of the Phoenix after landing his craft
for a morning meeting with the Emperor. Julian Bashir Picard stood surrounded by members of the
Imperial Guard. He was swinging a broadsword as his similarly armed men defended themselves as
best they could. It was a close approximation of the routines practiced by successful gladiators in
arenas throughout the Empire.

Julian didn't notice the Admiral's arrival, so deep was he into his exercises. He was obsessed with the
Empire's rebels turned reluctant warriors. Despite this era of clean technologies, the gladiatorial
games were still fought with weapons of edged metal. The crowds loved the sweat and blood and
gore of the spectacle. Despite being the inhabitants of a modern age, their appetites were stirred by
the most primitive forms of violence. And the handlers of the gladiators always gave the people what
they wanted.

Julian liked the idea of the games, the test of strength and skill that had a clear winner and most often
a dead loser. He'd started sneaking to Mars and other planets to watch the gladiators in person when
he was a teen. It was his secret dream to one day take his place in the arena, to pit himself against a
worthy opponent. To prove his superiority. Of course, it was an absurd notion his father would never
approve. So Julian stayed silent on the matter and continued his practice in the ancient art of combat.

Chakotay noted the fighting men, then ignored them. He too had often wielded sword and mace and
axe, but only on the holodeck. And it was never such a rigid ritual. Instead it was amid the muck and
ruin of ancient battlefields, deep in the melee of men fighting for their lives and a desperate cause. He
killed in those scenarios, and it wasn't clean or honorable. It was cruel and nasty and necessary. It
had to be.

Chakotay used the holoprograms to remind himself that even though he rarely saw the faces of the
enemy dead, as Admiral of the Imperial Fleet he *was* a killer. He could never forget that, lest he
slip and begin to think victory was worth any cost to the lives of others.

He had been told Julian was obsessed with fighting and physical prowess. He had also heard rumors
of darker activities, including assaults and atrocities involving slaves. Those stories chilled
Chakotay's soul, though he desperately hoped they were simply character-bashing by rivals to the
royal family.

Chakotay had never seen a slave. Jean-Luc Picard had banned them from military vessels long
before Chakotay enlisted, and none of the frontier worlds where he had spent his life and career
allowed them. Now that there was peace in the Empire, Chakotay hoped Jean-Luc would institute
social reforms, with the abolishment of both slavery and gladiatorial games at the top of the list.

He sighed when the doors closed behind him, shutting out the clang of swords. Swift steps brough
him to the Imperial suite, nodding at Phoenix crew and Imperial Guards as he passed them. At last he
stood before the final set of doors. Taking a deep breath, he entered.

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The Emperor's living space was simply but richly decorated. Antique furniture of wood and velvet
was scattered about the room, sharply contrasting the modern bulkheads and viewports. Jean-Luc
was seated at a millennia-old oak desk, writing in his journal. He preferred the pen, feeling that the
ink and paper somehow made his thoughts more permanent, more real. Besides, no one could hack
into his book to invade his privacy before the manuscript was ready for publication.

At his Admiral's entrance he paused in his writing and looked up. "Why are we here, Chakotay?"

Chakotay couldn't read the Emperor's enigmatic eyes, so he answered literally. "To save the Empire
from Dominion forces."
"Perhaps...but what have I really saved?" Jean-Luc rose and indicated a wall panel that displayed the vast territory under his rule. "I have spent decades spilling blood and sacrificing my people. In leading this greedy empire I have become its slave."

He gestured toward the volume on his desk. "I have merely pretended to be a philosopher, a man of reason. In all my decades on the throne I have had barely a handful of years of true peace. I am nothing more than a bully drawing lines in the sand and stomping those who dare to cross them. Is this all the legacy I leave behind? Why then did I bother?"

Chakotay sought to reassure his longtime friend and leader. "To secure our borders. To bring safety, justice, learning---"

"I have brought nothing but war!" Jean-Luc spat. "And while I worried about the wolves snipping at the edges, the very heart of my Empire fell prey to decay and corruption."

A need to offer support brought Chakotay forward. "But sire---"

"Don't call me that." Jean-Luc's eyes blazed with a strength his body no longer possessed. Then they quieted to mingled challenge and warmth as the Emperor regarded Chakotay. "We must talk now man to man, without title or pretense. Can you do that?"

Chakotay's unsettled emotions decided for him. "If you want the truth then I will give it to you. This self-pity is unworthy of the people who have given their lives for your Empire---for you. They went into battle believing their cause was just and good, and your doubts spit upon their sacrifice. You make it sound as if they died for nothing."

"Then what did they die for, Chakotay?" Jean-Luc demanded.

"For you, for the Empire, for their homes, for Earth. I've lived on the borders all my life, Jean-Luc. Much of the universe is cold and brutal and dark. Earth is the light."

"But you have never even been there," Jean-Luc pointed out, some private resolution settling in his expression. "You've not seen what it's become."

The emotion and its temporary burst of energy seemed to drain from him, and he reached out for Chakotay's support. His arm was immediately secured in a strong but tender clasp and he was guided to a sofa.

The Emperor's voice was filled with the burdens of a long rule as he began to speak. "I am dying, Chakotay. When a man reaches the end of his life he wants to know his loved ones are taken care of. All of the people of the Empire are my responsibility, and I know now that I have failed them. I don't want to be remembered as a man who perpetuated indifference, Chakotay. I want to be the Emperor who gave Earth back her true self."

Chakotay remained silent, confused and concerned. After a few moments Jean-Luc continued in an even softer voice, his eyes filled with visions of times long gone.

"The Federation was a dream that came true once, Chakotay. The ghost of its past and its promise still lives, but it's so fragile anything more than a whisper would kill it. I must leave it guarded and locked within my heart, for I'm no longer strong enough to bring it to life or keep it safe..." Jean-Luc's voice cracked as he groped for Chakotay's hand. Feeling his own fingers cradled gently in a warm, powerful grip calmed the emotions that had briefly overwhelmed him.

He smiled, recovering. "Let us just whisper here a moment, you and I. You have a son, yes? You must love him very much."
Chakotay, struggling with his own feelings, simply nodded.

Jean-Luc relaxed against the cushions. "Tell me about your home." He was stunned by the softening of his fierce warrior's eyes and face as Chakotay parted his lips to speak.

"It's a green and quiet place, a farm on Dorvan V outside the village where I was born. The soil is rich and black and fertile. The house is simple and the yard enclosed by a separate wall, all golden stones that reflect the warmth of the long days. The fields are small but full of variety, like a patchwork quilt. Inside the wall there's grass and gardens, the scent of herbs and roses in the daytime and jasmine at sunset. We have olives as well, and arbors bursting with grapes. There are orchards, but also wild fields and forests in the hills where my son watches the butterflies dance." Chakotay's voice was hushed with the wonder of the memories.

"And how long since you last stood upon it?" Jean-Luc asked sympathetically.

"Terran standard one year, two hundred and fifty-three days, and eight hours." The response was accurate and automatic.

Jean-Luc smiled, then gave Chakotay's hand a last squeeze and let it go. "I envy you, Chakotay. It sounds like a good home. One worth fighting for."

Chakotay's gut clenched in warning as the soft light in the Emperor's eyes hardened into the steely glint of command. "I have one more duty to ask of you, Chakotay, before you go home."

"What would you have me do, sire?" was the immediate response.

"Before I die, I would return the worlds under my rule to the wisdom and integrity of the past. The Empire will become a Federation once more, with power vested in a duly elected Council and President."

Chakotay's jaw dropped in shock. "But to give up your power will have all people reaching for it. The result could be anarchy and chaos."

"That is why I need you to become the Protector of the new Federation. To see it through its labor pains and first vulnerable days. I will empower you to a single mission: To give the people back their voice and vote, and end the corruption that has crippled the Empire from within."

Chakotay was stunned speechless. Such an incredible dream, such an impossible task was beyond his imagination.

Jean-Luc reacted to his Admiral's silence. "You do not accept this great honor I offer you?"

Chakotay could hear the clink of the prison door, forever trapping him in the cage of this duty. "With all my heart, no."

Jean-Luc smiled sadly. "That is why it must be you."

Chakotay made a desperate protest. "But why not a Council member or one of your own staff? Someone who knows Earth and all the intricacies of Imperial politics."

"Because you have not been corrupted by those politics," Jean-Luc replied simply.

Chakotay stilled, sought Jean-Luc's gaze. "And what about Julian?"

"Julian is not a moral man." Old eyes and young locked as they remembered the past. "You have
known that for more than a decade, Chakotay. He is not fit to rule."

Jean-Luc shuddered in imagined horror. "He *must not* rule."

He looked down a moment, then gazed at Chakotay once more. "You are the son I should have had, that Julian should have been. But I fear it was too late for him the moment he was born. The Bashirs have lived so long immersed in power and depravity it seems to have even tainted their blood, or their very souls."

Jean-Luc took a deep breath and straightened his jacket. "Julian will accept my decision. And if not, he knows you command the loyalty of the Fleet and the respect of the Guard." He stood to return to his desk, the matter settled.

"I need some time, sire." Chakotay's plea was heartfelt. He was lost in the whirl of words and what they meant for his life.

Jean-Luc looked down at the man who had just been named to an office he never sought or desired. He gave a knowing smile and small nod. "Yes, but I hope by this time tomorrow you will have granted me your acceptance. Now come, let me embrace you as a son."

Chakotay rose and returned the hug as they simply stood for a few minutes, both of them knowing that the universe had changed. When they parted, honor and honesty and respect for Jean-Luc forced him to speak. "You should take the time to reconsider your decision as well, sire. My vision of the Federation is not the same as yours. There would be freedom and an equal place for all, not just those lucky enough to be born on Earth or in a human skin."

Jean-Luc smiled. Chakotay had passed his final test. "That is what I most sincerely hope, Chakotay. Now help me return to my scribblings."

Chakotay assisted the Emperor back to his chair, heart and spirit already dreading the thoughts to come. He rested his fingers a moment on a frail shoulder.

Jean-Luc nodded and sighed. "There is much to do, my friend, and no matter what our rank we are all slaves to time. And duty."

Chakotay bowed and left, his last sight the starlight revealing the veins in a thin pale hand lifting a pen once more.

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Chakotay entered the corridor, practically stumbling past the Imperial Guards stationed there. He turned, walked past a few other junctions and slipped into a small Observation Lounge. Overwhelmed by conflicting feelings, he leaned his arm on the wall and bowed his head. He was so deep in his thoughts he didn't hear the portal open behind him.

Tom Paris quietly stood by the closed door a moment. He had asked the computer to let him know the moment Chakotay exited the Imperial chambers, but had barely been able to catch up to the quickly moving Admiral. When his breathing calmed he broke the silence. "It's been a long time, Chakotay."

Chakotay turned to face the man who from long ago had haunted his dreams. Flashes of the innocent youth echoed in the face and eyes, but Tom had definitely matured. His slender body was still long-limbed, but a learned elegance had supplemented its inherent grace. His hair had darkened to reddish-gold, and the boyish curls had been discarded for a close-cropped style. Faint lines of laughter or sadness gave his pale features a strength and wisdom that only experience can award.
He felt a strong need to gather Tom into his arms and finally learn the wonder of the younger man's kiss, the beauty of his spirit. It was a moment he felt born for, as if the only true purpose of his life was to find and love this man. But instead he briefly raised his hand to his tattoo and reminded himself that all Fate would allow them to share was regret. "Hello, Tom. You've changed."

"Many things have changed," Tom agreed. "Everything." He knew now that the feelings of a decade ago were not some adolescent crush or base sexual drive, but the true recognition of his soulmate. The still-vibrant connection between them confirmed it: The universe had crafted a home for Tom within the circle of Chakotay's arms. Tom's throat tightened as his eyes fell on the unfamiliar tattoo. Since no ring glimmered on the strong bronze fingers, he guessed the graceful indigo lines were the sign of marriage among Chakotay's people. Even if Tom might be free to love, Chakotay definitely was not. He swallowed down his despair.

Chakotay stared at Tom for a long moment, as if memorizing his face. Then he bowed and moved to leave.

"Chakotay, wait!" Tom reached his quarry in two quick strides. "Let me look at you."

Chakotay sighed and turned, trying to keep his expression serene.

Tom examined the tense features, the shadowed eyes. "You're upset," he said, desperately wanting to lay a comforting hand against a bronze cheek.

"Too many people have died," Chakotay snapped in automatic response. A bit too quickly. He winced as Tom's aristocratic features shifted into lines of concern.

Tom settled against a bulkhead, crossed his arms. "What did the Emperor want with you?"

"To wish me well before I return to Dorvan," Chakotay replied.

Tom smiled wryly. "You should just give it up, Chakotay. You never could fool me."

Chakotay stiffened. "I never was comfortable with lies."

"And you think I am?" Blue eyes narrowed. "Maybe you think I've acquired a taste for them."

Chakotay shrugged. "I think you have a talent for survival."

Tom couldn't deny that truth. He starightened and shifted closer, staring into the depths of a troubled gaze. "Is it so terrible to see me again, Chakotay?" he whispered.

Yes, Chakotay thought, because despite ten years and my family I can't seem to forget you. And this is ripping open a wound that may never heal. But he said, "Of course not, I'm simply tired."

"And it shocked you to see Jean-Luc so frail." Tom nodded, knowing the Emperor held a special place in both their hearts. "Julian thinks he's going to be officially named heir, that it's only a formality."

He tilted his head curiously. "Will you serve the son as you've served the father?"

"I will always serve my people," Chakotay said stiffly. The question was too close to the confusion in his mind and heart. He hesitated, then reached a hand to Tom's shoulder. "I was so very sorry to hear of Annika's death."

Tom felt a small ache at the loss of that sweet soul. He nodded, and resisted the urge to cover the
hand on his shoulder with his own. Instead, he shifted a little and was immediately freed. "Thank you for your letter. For a long time Lucien read it every night. I never realized 'Nika had talked to you about her mother's death."

Chakotay's lips twisted ruefully. "She didn't feel she could have those kinds of conversations with you or Julian. I'm surprised nobody ever figured it out. It's not like I would have been much good at teaching ballet."

Tom grinned. "We were kids. We thought you could do anything."

Chakotay returned the smile, then sobered. "How is Lucien?"

"Getting better. He kept Annika's stone too. I think it comforts him."

A brief smile crossed Chakotay's face. "How old is he now?"

Tom smiled at thoughts of his son. "A very mature 8. He's certainly better behaved than I remember being at that age."

His former kid-sitter guessed that was Annika's influence. "My son is also 8. He teases his mother by pretending the Spirits and the Prophets are one and the same."

"So you did wed a Bajoran?" Tom's voice rose slightly, confirming the rumor.

"Yes. Ro Laren. Feisty and beautiful, with hair and eyes as black as the night." Chakotay smiled softly, then looked at the man he would have married if he'd had the chance. Suddenly the emotions he was feeling, the decisions he had to make, were too much to bear. He was caught in the press between what was and what might have been.

"Good-bye Tom," Chakotay whispered and escaped.

Tom watched him go, the powerful figure blurring before his misty eyes.

Chakotay sat in his bedroom aboard Voyager, staring at the objects spread out in front of him. There were many items in the medicine bundle, including a knotted braid made of three strands of dark hair: his, his wife's, and his son's. He picked up the object and ran it through his fingers.

The spirit plane eluded him this night. He had spent the day in silent argument with himself as he read damage reports and assigned ships to secure the last Dominion planetside strongholds. Duty demanded he honor Jean-Luc's request, but so many things pulled him toward the path home. Love of his family, his tribe, the green fields and forests of Dorvan. The call to peace.

Chakotay sighed and set down the braid. He also felt himself hopelessly inadequate to the task the Emperor set before him. He'd never felt at ease with politicians; he didn't understand how people could lie with so little effort. And he detested pandering and flattery.

He lifted a small sapphire, faceted and sparkling. He wished he could take back his harsh comment to Tom. He knew the younger man was trapped by Imperial demands, the same as he was. And Tom had learned to skillfully navigate the shifting seas of politics, maintaining his integrity and refusing to be sucked under by petty power games. Chakotay would do well to have such an able guide if he went to Earth.

Chakotay shook his head in confusion and quickly gathered up the bundle and set it aside. He would
sleep on things and hope his course of action would come to him in dreams. He stretched and walked
to the living area for a soothing cup of herbal tea.

Ensign Harry Kim looked up from the desk at the sound of the opening door. He scrambled to his
feet when the Admiral appeared. "I thought you had retired for the night, Sir."

Chakotay smiled at the eager young officer. Harry was one of a handful of young men and women
Chakotay had selected to follow the command path he had walked so many years ago. There was
one on each large ship, mentored by the captain, learning all of the jobs on each vessel while
continuing their academic studies.

Harry right now served as his and Captain Cavit's personal attaché, learning administrative tasks and
reviewing battle tactics. Although Harry was from Earth, he'd never lorded the advantages of his
birth over his crewmates, most of whom were recruited from the frontier. Chakotay admired his
forthright nature. He thought Harry was a good man who could grow into a great one.

Chakotay walked to the replicator. "I decided to have a cup of tea." He raised his brows and at the
Ensign's nod ordered two mugs. He motioned for the younger man to join him on the sofa. "Why are
you burning the midnight oil? The battle is won. You should be in your own quarters sleeping---or in
someone else's celebrating."

Harry blushed at the gentle teasing and buried his face in his mug. When he'd first arrived from the
Academy he'd had a big crush on and case of hero-worship for the strong and handsome Admiral.
He knew Chakotay had been aware of his feelings and tried in his own subtle way to make things
easier on the star-struck Ensign. Eventually Harry had grown out of it and now regarded Chakotay
as simply a friend and mentor. "I was just finishing up my last report on the dampening devices."

He sensed Chakotay was unsettled. "Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

Chakotay regarded him a moment. "Harry, do you ever find it hard to do your duty?"

Harry gave the question some serious thought. "Well, most of the time I do what I choose, or my
duty is something I want to do." He set down his mug and looked at Chakotay. "But sometimes I just
do what I have to, because that's the oath I took when I accepted the uniform."

Chakotay nodded, finished his tea and rose. He briefly laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "We may not
be able to go home after all, Harry." His voice was heavy with regrets. "Even though the battle is
won, the war may not be." He left for bed without another word.

Harry walked to back to his quarters and settled down to sleep, but lay in the darkness a while
pondering Chakotay's words. And trying to dispel the chill in his soul.
Chapter 4

Julian Bashir Picard strode into his father's suite, triumph glittering smug and golden in his eyes. The Emperor had sent for him, requesting a private meeting. Finally, it was time. To claim his legacy, his birthright, his destiny.

Jean-Luc was staring out at the stars. He saw the pleased, avid expression on his son's face reflected in the viewport and sighed. The proud shoulders slumped infinitesimally a moment, then straightened in determination. "You will do your duty to the Empire, my son."

Julian's features quickly rearranged themselves into humble acceptance while the heady, beckoning scent of power filled his nostrils.

Jean-Luc turned. He would look his child in the eye as he dealt this death blow to his ambitions. "But you will not be Emperor."

The words careened through Julian's brain as he desperately tried to control his reaction. Even so, his voice was a little shaky. "What paragon have you chosen to take my place?"

"My powers will pass to Chakotay, who will hold them in trust long enough to re-establish the Federation. The Council and Guard must be cleared of corruption and all of the member worlds reinstated to full citizenship."

"Chakotay." The name turned to ashes in his mouth, acrid and stinging.

"My decision disappoints you," Jean-Luc remarked, not unkindly. This was a bitter draught for his privileged son to swallow. For a moment the Emperor was simply a father aching for his offspring's shattered dreams. But he was also a disillusioned parent who knew Julian's flaws would only be magnified by great power, for his son could not be trusted with the equally grave responsibility. Julian had shown too clearly and too often that his thoughts were never of serving the people of the Empire...he focused merely on his own pleasures and status.

Julian's synapses were firing frantically as he mustered his arguments and sought an alternate route to his goal. When the answer came to him he quieted---mind, body, soul. He mused reflectively, "I've read everything you've written over the years, Father, trying to understand you. To help me fulfill your expectations. To make you proud of me. I remember once you listed the four chief virtues: wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance."

He sighed. "As I read them I knew that they were beyond my grasp. But there are other virtues that I *do* possess. Ambition, the drive to excel. Resourcefulness. The guts to do what must be done, no matter how distasteful. Devotion to my family, to the Bashir history."

Julian's eyes pinned his father with a mix of sorrow and accusation. "But none of my strengths were worthy of your list. Even then, it seemed as if you were ashamed I was your son."

"You go too far," Jean-Luc protested, stung.

"And you break my heart." Julian stepped forward, palms open. "What is the purpose of my life if not to walk in your footsteps? I have trained, studied, worked---*lived* for this---since the day I first understood what it meant to be a Bashir. To be the child of Emperor Jean-Luc Picard. Never, never have you given me kind words, or even honest ones. You left me to believe I would be your heir in all things. Until this moment, when you lay waste to my future."
Tears glittered on Julian's long dark lashes. "Now you inform me I will not rule, but you do not tell me why. What is it in me you hate so much? Is it that my eyes are my mother's, my skin not like yours? Did you ever love me at all?"

Jean-Luc gathered his son into his arms, stroking the curly dark hair and murmuring soft sounds of comfort. "Your faults as a son are my failing as a father," he whispered, more moved than he could say.

Julian clasped his arms around his father's back, seeming to sink further into the embrace. In truth he was simply maneuvering into position. His face was frighteningly blank as he regarded the extra-slim hypospray he slipped out of his sleeve. Moving the device to the back of his father's neck, he pressed the release. It hissed faintly into the silence.

Jean-Luc felt the momentary contact. He stepped back, letting his arms fall away as he felt a weakness spreading along his limbs. He opened his mouth to speak but could make no sound.

Julian dispassionately regarded the man who had loomed large in his life since he drew his first breath. "I've just injected you with a dose of a very rare Cardassian poison. One that has thus far escaped the notice of Imperial doctors and sensors. You've been ingesting it in small amounts for months on Earth. I would have let you linger a while, to let you finish weakening into the soft sleep of death. But you've changed my plans."

As Jean-Luc's eyes widened in horror, his legs began to give out. Julian swept his father's frail form into his arms and carried him to the sofa. He sat beside Jean-Luc and stroked a hand against the pale forehead, answering the questions he knew would never be voiced. "You shouldn't have warned me, Father. My plans have been in place for some time. I was content to wait another year or two to ascend the throne, but now you've forced my hand. The Empire will mourn your passing, as will I."

His face hardened. "But I will not let your feeble attempts to reshape the universe keep me from my destiny."

The light died in Jean-Luc's eyes. Julian stared into them another moment, then gently closed the lids. He leaned forward and kissed the old man's brow. "If only you had recognized my greatness."

Julian stood and turned away. There was much to be done.

*****************************************************************************

Chakotay had fallen into bed fully dressed. He tossed and turned for hours, struggling to reconcile the demands of honor with the promptings of his heart. He finally fell into an exhausted sleep, but the swish of his door opening had his battle-trained reflexes reacting instantly.

Greg stopped before taking even a step, frozen at the sight of a phaser aimed at his chest. "Admiral---Chakotay---come at once! The Emperor needs you."

Chakotay blinked and returned the phaser to its resting place. He threw back the covers, shifting to the edge of the mattress and immediately sliding on his boots. "Why didn't you just signal from the Enterprise? What's wrong?"

"I haven't been told anything," Greg said, falling into step with his Admiral as Chakotay swiftly moved through his cabin to the corridor. "But there's a communications lockdown. Only internal systems are operational."

"It's serious then. Has Cavit or any of the other captains been alerted?" They entered a transporter room and Chakotay quickly ordered a beamover to the Phoenix.
Greg was shaking his head as they took their places on the platform. "I don't think so. I was ordered to just wake you."

Chakotay nodded grimly and they dissolved into a sparkle of blue.

***************

His gut churning with foreboding, Chakotay followed Greg into the Imperial suite. He stopped short at the sight of Julian, his face wan and tear-stained.

Julian spread his arms. "Lament with me, brother, for our great father is dead." He stepped aside to reveal Jean-Luc's body arranged on the sofa.

Chakotay stared at the corpse. A flash sent his eyes to the viewport, where Tom stood with his back to the room, head bowed. Brown eyes snapped back to Julian. "How did he die?"

"It was very peaceful," Julian assured him. "The doctors say his breath simply gave out as he slept."

Chakotay was finally able to move. He walked around Julian and knelt beside the body of one of history's great men. His dear friend and mentor, the man he would have followed anywhere. His soul sank under the weight of his sorrow. He reached one hand to rest upon a cold cheek, and leaned in to press his lips a moment to the pale forehead. A single tear fell, leaving a glittering trail. "When a great light is extinguished the universe is left far darker, and diminished," he whispered. "You helped me to walk a path of strength and honor. Farewell, Jean-Luc."

Then Chakotay's features hardened as he slowly rose and turned to face the murderer of the man he considered a second father.

Julian watched Chakotay, his expression calm and eyes frozen. He put out his hand. "Your Emperor asks for your loyalty. Take my hand, Chakotay."

Chakotay's gaze flicked toward the desk to see book and pen had disappeared. Then he resumed his stare, his own eyes darkened with anger and grief.

The moment stretched. Julian's mouth thinned. "I only offer it once, Admiral."

Chakotay bestowed a single, disdainful glance on the slim outstretched fingers, then abruptly left the room without looking back.

Julian turned and nodded to Greg.

The Enterprise Captain swallowed. He had very specific instructions. Deadly ones. Regardless of Greg's personal suspicions or long-standing loyalties, the new Emperor had issued the commands. Right or wrong, for good or ill, Julian Bashir Picard was now owed the absolute allegiance and obedience of every member of the Fleet. And he had met Greg's price for this loathsome task. Greg straightened his shoulders and followed Chakotay.

The sound of the door closing a second time roused Tom from his stupor. He stumbled back to the couch to rest his fingers on Jean-Luc's cold hand once more. He said his own silent good-byes, then straightened to face a man he had known all his life, yet knew not at all.

He walked over to a waiting Julian. Tom knew that his own son, Lucien, was now the next in line for the Imperial throne. Lucien was vital to Julian—-at least until Julian sired a child of Bashir blood--but Tom had no doubts he himself was expendable. Especially to someone who could murder his own father in cold blood. Tom's face was calm as he raised a hand and slapped Julian hard, twice,
enjoying the shock that crossed the sallow features.

Then before the new leader of the Empire could say a word, Tom sank to one knee. "Hail, Emperor," he intoned.

Julian smiled.

Chakotay swept into his office and to his desk, where Harry stood waiting. He had commed the Ensign the second he hit Voyager's deck.

"Harry, we have much to do and little time. We have to awaken the Council members who traveled aboard the Mercury." Agitation drove the Admiral to pace the room as he gave his orders. "We also need to find a way to locate a media service that can't be bribed or intimidated."

Harry was already jittery from a nearly sleepless night, and his movements were jerky as he sat and typed on a padd. He reached a hand toward the computer terminal, but his arm knocked over a stack of finished reports. He leaned down to gather them up.

At that moment Greg entered the room.

Chakotay, whose circuit had brought him near Harry, made a small hand gesture behind his back. When the Ensign had obeyed and slipped completely under the desk and out of sight, he approached his longtime friend. "Has that dishonorable whelp sent you to find me?"

"Chakotay, please be careful," Greg said, face grave. "Such words risk the Emperor's wrath."

"That man is no Emperor. Jean-Luc Picard was *murdered*, Greg. We need to launch an investigation to figure out how." Chakotay snorted. "I already know why."

Ayala's hand casually drifted to his side. "Picard died of natural causes."

Chakotay stepped back in shock at the sudden sight of a phaser in an unsteady hand. "Why are you armed, Greg?"

Harry had been about to abandon his cover and help the Admiral when the door slid open again. Four purple-shirted Imperial Guards, phasers already out, filed into the room. They quickly surrounded Chakotay.

"Don't fight," Greg said.

"Greg, don't do this." Chakotay tried to catch his old friend's eyes, to no avail.

"The Emperor has spoken." Greg watched as Chakotay's comm badge was removed and his arms pulled roughly behind his back, then wrists cuffed.

"Greg, look at me," Chakotay pleaded. "Promise me you'll protect my family."

Greg blanched and dropped his gaze.

Chakotay roared "No!" and flung himself at his betrayer. The Guards leapt after him, catching his struggling form. Then a phaser sang out and the Admiral of the Imperial Fleet crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Greg put away his weapon and watched as the man he'd followed for a decade was pulled upright.
The limp body hung from two Guards’ arms. He gave his orders to the leader. "I've authorized two shuttles for you. Everything else—including communications—will stay locked down until the Emperor is ready to leave for Earth." He jerked his chin to the body. "Take him to the Badlands, then kill him and let the plasma storms destroy his ship. I'll finish here."

Harry had taken advantage of the distraction to slither from the desk to behind the couch. His heart was pounding, and his hands clenched tightly around the padd he'd been typing orders into. He knew there was nothing he could do.

Even if he could break the communications lockout, whom could he contact? He didn't know whom to trust. Captain Cavit? Riker? They seemed like honorable men—but so had Ayala.

He blinked furiously as tears of regret and frustration stung his eyes. Chakotay was as good as dead already. Without transport Harry couldn't follow to stop the assassins from their deadly mission. As it was, he would be lucky to escape with his own skin. He hoped Captain Ayala wouldn't search or scan the rooms. If he did, Harry knew he'd be another casualty of these mysterious events. He heard an order to the transporter room and the execution squad disappeared with their prisoner.

Greg stepped behind the desk, flicking on the terminal. He pulled up Chakotay's file, and stared a moment into the dark eyes of the man who had been his friend, comrade-in-arms, and one of the finest commanders the Fleet had ever known. Taking a padd out of a pocket, he transferred the virus contained on it to the terminal. Immediately the information on the screen began to disappear as the record of Chakotay's life and career was erased from the computer bit by bit.

When the screen was completely blank, then Greg flicked off the machine. The invasive program was already making its way to Voyager's computer core to destroy any backup copies of the file. He would travel to each ship in the fleet, delivering the news of Picard's death and infecting each computer in turn. A copy of the virus was already on its way to the major information networks, where it would jump from computer to computer, ship to ship, planet to planet. The entire Empire would be wiped clean of any database record of Chakotay's existence.

So the Emperor had ordered.

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The four members of the Imperial Guard traded desultory comments, marking time until they reached the chosen execution site. They had shifted Chakotay's cuffs so his hands were now bound in front of him. He hadn't moved for hours, his eyes glassy, his body a defeated lump in its seat.

The leader of the murderous quartet was Rollins, a tough veteran who regarded his prisoner with satisfaction. He had been with Julian for some years, and was used to doing the royal's dirty work. He had also been promoted to the point where he felt the actual act of dispatching Julian’s victims was beneath him.

"We're approaching the designated coordinates, Sir." The black-haired pilot, Max Burke, turned for instructions.

"Release the tractor beam on the other shuttle. We'll transport over while you and"—Rollins jerked his thumb at a sprawling William Chapman—"him take care of business."

Rollins then gestured for the remaining Guard, Larson, to join him in the transporter area. "When you're done, point the autopilot toward the plasma storms, lower the shields, and signal. We'll beam
you aboard and be back in time for a late breakfast." Rollins glanced at the still-unmoving Chakotay, taking in the betrayed man's dispirited air. "Shouldn't take too long."

The second the two men were gone Chapman jumped up and grabbed Chakotay, dragging him to the aft section. Burke followed, one hand nonchalantly slung over his phaser.

Chakotay was placed in the center of the clear space, then Chapman moved behind him. Brown eyes stabbed Burke as Chakotay drew himself up, a dignified Admiral once more. "At least give me a clean death. A soldier's death." His voice was calm and the words came to rest somewhere between a request and an order.

Both men paused. Chapman, who had drawn his weapon to shoot Chakotay in the back, peered over the prisoner's shoulder at his fellow Guard. At Burke's nod he walked around to stand in front of the Admiral and once more prepared to fire.

Chakotay struck the instant Chapman's finger moved to press the firing button. He twisted, bending and sinking and swinging his upper body to the right, desperately trying to throw himself out of the line of fire. A burning pain in his left shoulder forced a scream from his lungs. But he didn't hesitate, continuing the controlled fall, shifting his weight to his right leg. His left swept out to knock Chapman off *his* feet, while Chakotay's bound hands grabbed the unsuspecting Guard's wrist, shoving the arm with the phaser toward a stunned Burke.

As the tangled bodies landed on the deck Burke reached for his own phaser. Even as he pulled the weapon out of the holster he saw a beam shoot from the one still being fought over by Chapman and their suddenly not-so-docile prisoner. As Burke's heart exploded into scorched flesh, his last thought was to wonder if he died by the Guard's accident or the prisoner's intent.

Chakotay grappled with Chapman, using his legs to neutralize the Guard's free arm. His own hands were still wrapped tight around the phaser and wrist of his would-be executioner. Out of the corner of his eye he'd seen the pilot's body fall---the odds were now more even. Unfortunately, the phaser was still firing, its wild beams shorting consoles and sparking panels. This had to end soon or the ship itself wouldn't survive.

Chapman was young and strong and trained, but no mere Guard was a match for an experienced Fleet officer who'd fought in the field. Chakotay shifted his body slightly, freeing his left leg and knee. With no warning he slammed them hard into his opponent's chest, feeling the other man's bones break under the impact. He pushed his body back once more and cut off the Guard's scream of pain with a merciless strike that shattered Chapman's nose and jaw. Another quick push and the nasal bones sank into the Guard's brain, killing him.

Breathing heavily from the exertion and the pain of his phasered shoulder, Chakotay slid away from the Guard's unmoving form. He put the hard-won phaser into a pocket and picked up the pilot's. Then he searched the bodies, finding the key to his cuffs in the black-haired man's vest. He also grabbed a commbadge.

Chakotay freed himself and quickly moved to assess the damage. Sensors and shields were non-operational, and the scuffle had taken out the weapons guidance system and threatened the stability of the warp core.

The comm system buzzed to life with Rollins' voice. "Burke, we're reading only one lifeform and heavy damage over there. What's happened?"

Chakotay sat in the pilot's seat and fired up the impulse engines. He plotted a course into the Badlands and set the autopilot, then quickly pulled up the weapons. He intended to shoot without the
usual charging sequence so his actions wouldn't show on sensors. He knew he wouldn't be able to get aboard that gleaming undamaged vessel, so he had to destroy it. Using the computer to disguise his voice with static, he frantically replied, "...jumped us. Couldn't stop...is dead. Prepare...transport."

The moment the other ship's shields were down he sent a volley of phaser fire along their hull, targeting their shield generators and engines.

When Chakotay passed the other shuttle he restored manual helm control and increased speed, heading at full impulse toward the Badlands. He swung his shuttle in a twisting, zig-zagging path, avoiding the fire from his pursuers. Then the fatal beauty of the Badlands filled his screen as he dived into the swirling, electrified energy field.

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Rollins growled and muttered as he banked his ship, barely avoiding an arc of plasma. He cursed his own stupidity. He had been lulled into a false sense of security by the cuffs and the prisoner's acting. Now he was navigating a space-born sea of fire. It was still less dangerous than returning to the new Emperor with his mission unfulfilled.

He was only a fair pilot, and had already seen the effects of the Badlands' deadly caress against the shuttle. Shields were down 80%, and several consoles were shorted out, some still sparking. His surviving Guard, Larson, was tracking the fleeing shuttle.

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Chakotay's face was grim as he carefully adjusted his flight path. He relied on old instincts to guide him, as much feeling his way through the plasma as flying. He was tense, anxious to make his way to Dorvan. Fear for his family blotted out everything else: concern for the state of his shuttle, worry over his pursuers, even the throbbing pain of his wound. Seeing a large, wildly spiraling tornado ahead of him, he turned his vessel into the heart of the storm.

***************

Even Larson knew they were dead. Or seconds away from it.

Rollins had done his best, trying to follow his wounded quarry to finish the job. He'd been nurturing dark visions of being face to face with his prisoner, of choking the wretch to death for daring to escape.

Even a tiny loss of focus meant death in the Badlands. The plasma ripped through their ship, plunging into the nacelles and setting off a chain reaction.

Of course, no one could hear the explosion in space.

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A blur of twisting, bobbing and weaving filled Chakotay's mind as he dodged the lightning reaching out for his tiny vessel. Chakotay flew as he hadn't in years, one with his craft, nothing existing except the path ahead. When he reached an area of calm and checked his sensors, he was alone.

Chakotay quickly cleared the plasma field and greeted the stars once more. The passage of each second beat in his mind the way his pulse pounded in his throat. He quickly set course for Dorvan and engaged the unstable warp engines. He didn't have time to waste. His family was in danger.

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His wound finally stopped bleeding, but Chakotay didn't notice. His eyes were focused on the engineer's console, watching the numbers and tapping in his countermeasures. The warp core was at the moment delicately balanced on the edge of explosion. He needed to constantly monitor the matter/antimatter reaction and adjust the coolant and constrictor settings to prevent an overload.

Chakotay didn't eat, didn't sleep, didn't even bother to flick the charred pieces of his uniform out of his burned flesh. The single-minded drive to Dorvan possessed him, body and mind. He hoped that he would be in time. That Ayala's reaction hadn't meant what he dreaded. A death warrant bearing the names of his wife and son---and the signature of Julian Bashir Picard.

The village of Trebus on the planet of Dorvan V drowsed in the morning sunshine. People rested in chairs or daybeds under shady trees, awnings and arbors, enjoying a lazy day. Even the barking dog didn't sound very committed.

Then the unfamiliar whine of a ship cruising overhead raised the interest of a child or two. They tumbled into the main square, staring up, hands shielding their eyes. When the noise got louder, adults began to appear, poking their heads out of doors, now seeing the glint of sun flashing off metal.

They never knew what hit them.

Phasers and photon torpedoes began firing from a handful of shuttles. Buildings exploded as the weapons did their work, leveling the village. Phasers were used to take out groups of people, the carnage immense and immediate. Destruction rained down until no lifesigns were left.

The ships then regrouped and headed east out of town to their next target.

Ro Laren smiled at her son; the dreamy expression on his face was very reminiscent of his father. She slung an arm about the boy's shoulders and showed him the pail she carried. "I have all the berries I want."

Her Bajoran nose crinkled even more as she observed his purple-stained mouth and fingers. "And you've had more than your share, so it's time to head home."

Dark eyes pleaded as a young voice wheedled, "Just five more minutes." He hated to leave this field. The bushes and flowers drew dozens of species of butterflies, and he was mesmerized by their colorful wings and whimsical flights.

"Well, if you don't want me to make---" Laren broke off at the sudden shriek of weapons fire. When she turned toward the sound she saw the black clouds of smoke rising from the direction of the village. More plumes soon filled the air, but these were coming from the direction of---home.

"Run!" Laren screamed to her son as she saw the silhouettes of approaching shuttles. Woman and boy sprinted across the field, heading for the refuge of the forest.

A shadow swept over them as a ship glided above their heads to settle a half-dozen meters in front of them. Two more soon followed, closing them in.

Laren's chin tipped in defiance as her black eyes blazed at these intruders. She gripped her son's shoulders, holding him close as his arms encircled her waist. They both watched as a hatch slowly opened.
"Is it Papa?" The boy had glanced over his shoulder and recognized the uniforms, but then registered the unfamiliar color. Purple as the berries he'd been eating, not his dad's usual red. Then more grim-faced men began to appear, each holding a phaser pointed right at them. He looked up at his mother for reassurance. "Mama?"

Laren had known the second she smelled the smoke on the wind. The sickly sweet odor of burned flesh was unmistakable, but gave her only a moment's warning of her fate. The implacable stares of her captors told her the rest. What she didn't understand was why members of the Imperial Guard would kill the family of the Admiral of the Imperial Fleet. She sent a quick prayer to the Prophets for herself and her son, and asked her husband's Spirits to watch over him if he were still alive.

She looked down at her son, smiling sadly into his tear-stained gaze. "Close your eyes, baby," she whispered, and pressed his head into her midriff. Then she looked at the leader of these thugs and spat, "Get it over with."

****************************

The shuttle was far too unstable to try and land. Chakotay set the transporter coordinates and rigged a self-destruct so the ship would explode high enough in the atmosphere to avoid causing damage to the planet. He closed his eyes as he felt himself dissolve.

He opened them again to find himself in hell.

He had beamed into the middle of the village, hoping to gather some back-up before he attacked the house. Except there was no more village. He was standing in the center of a field of smoking craters filled with black ash and glass shards formed by the intense heat. Smoke was still rising from spots where buildings once stood. His eyes watered, his throat choked with the sooty air.

Chakotay stood a moment, panting and coughing. When his breathing quieted he listened desperately for any sign of life. But there was nothing. No dogs barking, no shrill cries of children or harsh groans of adults. Just the popping of fires that still burned.

He turned toward the east, to see more plumes of smoke staining the clear blue sky. The black columns matched the locations of his neighbors' homes. And his own.

A whimper of fear forced its way past Chakotay's lips. He moved, lurching into a stumbling run toward his home.

He came across the bodies in the road first. Twisted, charred corpses of field hands who probably came to investigate the unfamiliar ships and got caught in their crosshairs. He barely spared a glance at them, knowing that there was little left to help him identify the people who had worked for him for years.

Long minutes passed as he traversed the road that once led to a modest but happy household. He should have been able to see the flash of the sun against the windows, its golden glow against the stones. But there was nothing.

He finally reached the wall and leaned on the gate a moment, his chest heaving from the run. More bodies, but somehow Chakotay knew that these were other workers who had tried to escape the death they had done nothing to deserve.

Chakotay wandered the area, peering at the smoking ruin that had been his home for a decade. Incongruously, a bee droned past his ear, lured by the strong scent of the scorched roses. His eyes followed it a moment, then were drawn irresistibly to the hills. A faint hope stirred in his heart. He or
Laren would often accompany their son to a particular wildflower field, a gathering place for native butterflies.

He headed for the footpath at a swift walk, which shifted to a run as the field came into view. He tripped at the edge and fell into an ungainly sprawl. He groaned at the jarring to his wounded shoulder. As he rolled to get to his feet he froze. A pail glistened in the grass, berries spilling from it in a splash of purple. Chakotay stood, swaying, scanning the terrain for some clue. He saw large patches of grasses and flowers flattened, the footprints of landed shuttles.

As he stepped into the cleared space he froze, his breath catching. His fists clenched, nails cutting into his palms. It was the only way to keep his focus as he dragged himself step by step to the two figures lying in the field. He fell to his knees beside them.

Grasses waved in the breeze as butterflies fluttered around Ro Laren and their son. They were on their sides, eyes closed, arms around each other. They could have been asleep, except for the multitude of scorched holes in their torsos. Everything from the neck down had been charred to the bone by merciless phaser fire.

Chakotay’s hand was shaking as he reached out, running his finger down his wife’s nose ridges, resting his hand on the boy’s dark hair. Then he dug his fingers into the turf and started howling, the wail of an animal in mortal pain. Tears streamed down his face unnoticed as he sobbed out his very soul.

His eyes burned, his throat was raw and sore, his hands bruised from digging. At some point his shoulder had started bleeding again as he tore up the earth to make graves for his family. Chakotay didn’t care. Hours had passed as the sun reached its zenith and began its afternoon journey and still he toiled at this final task. But finally the two precious ones lay safe in the soil that had nurtured them, in the field that his son had so adored. Chakotay touched each mound with reverence as his mind whispered a last farewell.

Then he collapsed between the graves, closed his eyes and waited to die.
Chapter 5

Death never came. Fate was not finished toying with its latest plaything. Instead, the only arrival was a ship of Ferengi, drawn by the residual signs of major weapons' fire. Where there was tragedy there was opportunity to exploit the living and scavenge from the dead.

Nog glanced at his chronometer nervously as they stood on Dorvan V in the last hour of daylight in front of a house and garden reduced to ash. "We're going to be late, Father. Uncle Quark won't be pleased that we made this stop with nothing to show for it."

Rom looked up from his tricorder. His head bobbed in a nervous agreement. "You're right, there's nothing here...but there is one lifesign." He pointed to a field some distance away. "It's faint, so we'd better hurry."

"Yes, Father." Nog's shoulders hunched as he trudged behind his swiftly scampering parent. A lifesign meant some unfortunate victim had survived this holocaust merely to end up a slave.

Nog *hated* being a slaver. He was happier before, when they merely traded in machines, exotic animals, and other contraband. But he couldn't deny their fortunes had risen considerably since his uncle had added this very lucrative sideline.

His boot made a metallic sound. Nog glanced down to see a knocked-over pail of purple berries. Squatting, he selected one and popped it into his mouth. The burst of sweetness pleased him. He quickly scooped the spilled fruit into the container and lifted it, hurrying to catch up with his father.

Rom was standing before two freshly covered graves, staring at the figure lying unconscious between them. He prodded the stranger with his foot, to no response. He turned to his son as the young man came up beside him. "Male human. Early 30s, I think. We're lucky, his DNA doesn't raise a flag in the Empire registry. There's probably no one to protest if we take him." He gestured. "That's a pretty bad shoulder wound. It will take a lot of energy if we don't want it to scar."

Nog looked at the stranger's face, handsome despite the lines of pain etched upon it. "He's pretty enough to fetch a good price as a bed slave, Father. I think it would be worth it." He didn't mention that such a thorough regeneration would also ensure the wounded man retained the full use of his arm.

Rom just grunted. He knew his tender-hearted son was concerned with more than potential profit. Quark was constantly griping that Nog needed to toughen up and forget these foolish stirrings of pity for their living trade goods.

Of course Rom would allow Nog to heal the stranger, though the likelihood the man would be purchased for bedroom use was slim indeed.

"I wonder what happened here," Rom mused a moment, then signaled for a beamout.

The butterflies departed for their rest and the fireflies picked up the dance as the three men disappeared from the field.

************************************************************************************************************************************************************************

Over the next few days, Chakotay never truly woke. He was lost in a nightmare populated by the faces of his many dead. He burned with fever and the pain that accompanied the regeneration of the
ravaged tissues and skin of his shoulder. His strength was so depleted though, his struggles were brief and weak.

Occasionally unfamiliar sounds and images penetrated his fog. Ferengi, their faces shifting from frowns to smiles. A dark man with grave eyes and gentle hands. The howls of animals he didn’t recognize, and voices speaking languages he knew but could not name.

Eventually his body recovered and his mind calmed. Chakotay knew he was on a ship moving at warp even before he opened his eyes. He blinked a few times to clear his vision, then cast his eyes upward to the vaulted ceiling of what looked to be a freighter. A few meters above him hung a series of large cages. In them, strange animals growled or hooted their anger at being restrained. Others lay listlessly, inured to their captivity.

Chakotay’s eyes drifted down to the deck. Men and women of various species reflected much the same mix of resistance and resignation. They sprawled on pallets or stalked at the end of short chains. All wore collars about their necks.

The same weight encircled his own. He propped himself up on his elbows, but paused as the room swung dizzily.

"You are still somewhat dehydrated and weakened from your wound. Caution would be advisable."
The voice held the barest hint of concern in its calm tones.

Chakotay turned toward the speaker. He vaguely recognized the Vulcan from his dreams. He swallowed to ease the dryness of his throat as his brow furrowed, attempting to remember.

"We are aboard a slave ship, bound for market." The Vulcan's tunic and trousers rustled as he stood and lifted a jug, crossing the small space to Chakotay. He slid an arm around Chakotay's shoulders and assisted him to sit against the bulkhead.

Tuvok wordlessly offered water to the stranger he had tended since their captors had dumped the wounded man beside him. He'd held the weakly thrashing figure down as the young Ferengi—Nog—cut away burned cloth and cleaned the scorched flesh. It had taken some time for the layers of muscle to be regenerated, as well as for the antibiotics to clear the infection. Although the injured man had protested the painful treatments, he'd never actually regained consciousness. Until now.

Tuvok regarded his companion. He was human, fairly young, with black hair, golden-brown skin and a strong physique. His rugged looks were accented by an exotic tattoo over his left brow.

But the eyes dominated. They sent a very un-Vulcan chill down Tuvok's spine. The deep brown eyes were dead, void of expression. It was as if the stranger's katra—his spirit—had departed but the body remained. Tuvok wondered what horrible vision had passed before those eyes to drive the soul behind them into such darkness.

The human simply drank and watched as Tuvok stood and returned to his own pallet. Sensing there would be no conversation with this stranger, Tuvok retreated into his own thoughts. His yearning for home, for wife and children, swept through him. He tamped down the emotions, reminding himself that to lose the stoicism and logic of his people was to lose himself.

His reverie was interrupted by Nog's entrance. The Ferengi had introduced himself rather awkwardly while they were healing the human. The young man's discomfort with his role as a flesh-peddler was clear as he timidly stepped across the deck toward them. Occasionally one of the still-lively prisoners would make a grab for Nog, only to be brought up short with gasps of pain as their collars glowed.
Tuvok had ascertained that the more aggressively one approached the Ferengi, the more agonizing the collar's response. Yesterday one Cardassian had broken his chain and leapt at his captor, only to drop to the deck a half-meter in front of Nog, writhing and howling. The slave had eventually slumped into unconsciousness and remained that way for hours. When he woke, he joined the other vanquished spirits in lying listlessly on his mattress. He no longer needed a chain to restrain him.

Nog had asked for Tuvok's word that he would not attack while they worked on the stranger, and Tuvok had given it. It was illogical to attempt an escape while on a ship; there was nowhere to run and no way to gain control. Nog had pressed a command into the wristlet he wore so Tuvok's collar would not punish him for simply being near the Ferengi. The same routine had occurred every twelve hours as they healed the human. This time instead of rising to meet Nog, Tuvok remained seated and nodded toward the next pallet.

Nog hesitated as he looked into dark human eyes that were chillingly blank, then shook himself and briskly approached his patient. "I see you're finally awake. This should just be a quick checkup, since everything is already repaired." He set his case down and opened it, pulling out a medical tricorder. He turned it toward the human.

Without warning the black-haired man struck, reaching out one hand to grab Nog's arm and spin him, pulling the Ferengi to sit in his lap, back to the human's chest. The other pulled something from the medkit. A laser scalpel immediately made its way to the youth's throat. Nog panicked, dropping the tricorder and punching buttons on his wristlet. He heard a hiss of pain behind him, but he wasn't freed.

That knowledge sent a stab of fear through Nog. The human's closeness should have sent the pain settings skyrocketing, yet the man was either not feeling or simply ignoring the waves of agony shooting along his nerves. The Ferengi tensed as he saw the scalpel move out of his range of vision.

"Get rid of the tattoo." The voice was soft, but like the eyes the beauty was stripped from the melodic sounds by their utter coldness.

"What? Why? I'm just supposed to heal your shoulder." Nog was gripped by the throat and whirled to face the human. His soul froze with terror at the glacial gaze.

"The dermal regenerator will also remove the ink. Do it." The bronze hand holding the knife lifted, coolly cutting through the dark blue lines, sending blood trickling down a calm, implacable face. "Or I will."

The second Nog nodded the scalpel was switched off and returned to him as casually as if it had simply been borrowed to slice off a dangling thread. He continued to stare as the human simply closed his eyes and laid back against the bulkhead once more, bleeding, his collar still glowing. It was as if he simply lost interest.

The Ferengi swallowed, then put the scalpel back into the medkit. He picked up the dermal regenerator and, in a sudden refusal to be intimidated, switched off the human's collar. He set his jaw, straightened his shoulders and began to work, closing the new cut, then beginning the process of lifting the ink from the tawny skin. "Why do you want this gone?" he asked curiously, proud of the steadiness of his voice. There was no answer.

"Perhaps he wishes to cut ties to some old allegiance, or maybe it represents something that no longer is true." Tuvok noted human's eyelids twitched at the end of his statement. His own brow rose as he considered the reaction.

He chose the direct approach. "Sir, it is curious that you did not try to gain your freedom, despite the
weapon and opportunity. Yet you went to great lengths to ensure that your tattoo would be removed. Your appearance suggests a tribal heritage, one that would place a great value on symbols. I prefer not to speculate, so I will ask: Who are you, and what is the meaning of those lines?” Tuvok was also greeted with silence.

Nog’s nerves were jumpy, despite the human's complete bonelessness as he worked. "His designation is the Dorvan. That’s where we picked him up. We don't know anything else about him except he had two weapons and a phaser wound when we found him unconscious." Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the Vulcan nod. The man under his hands didn't give any indication he was listening.

Finally Nog erased the last brushstrokes on the temple. He switched the regenerator off with a sigh. "It's finished, there's nothing left." The brown eyes opened again for a moment as the human nodded once before resuming his silent ruminations. Nog shuddered at the inadvertent truth of his words, then hastily packed up his kit. His voice was full of false cheerfulness as he began backing away. "A few meals and some sleep and you'll be good as new."

Tuvok didn't think Nog would return. He was right.

Chakotay sat slumped at the base of a squared-off column in a corner of DS9's promenade, his face resting against his raised knees and his arms wrapped around them. The chain on his collar was secured to a ring set in the pole. He was still wearing his tattered uniform, but between the burns and the dirt it wasn't recognizable as much more than scraps of cloth.

Not that he cared. For his remaining days on the Ferengi ship he ate and drank what was put before him, and spent the rest of his time staring into space until he slept. Now he was about to be sold, probably into a lifetime of hard labor in some landowner's field or bored sadist's bed. He felt no anxiety, nothing at all, when faced with either prospect. Where a week ago he was planning to free the Empire's slaves, now he was an unresisting slave himself. It simply didn't matter anymore.

He was nothing more than a shell being passed from one owner to the next, to be used until he was finally granted the release of death. He no longer even thought of himself as Chakotay. Chakotay had been a man proud of his heritage and the tribal mark he bore. That name belonged to a farmer, a family man who had done his duty to the Empire by leading its fleet to victory. The person who had tried to honor the final request of Emperor Jean-Luc Picard, was betrayed, and paid the ultimate price. Chakotay had died in a field next to his murdered wife and son. This body simply hadn't caught on and stopped breathing yet.

Now, he was merely a lump of flesh called the Dorvan. One slave among the many who would be poked and prodded by prospective buyers until one met the Ferengis' price.

Benjamin Sisko eyed all the creatures for sale---four-legged as well as two. He sipped raktajino at a private table outside the replimat on the opposite side of the promenade from the market. Young Andorian slaves knelt on the floor on either side of his chair, waiting to be sent on errands great or small.

His eyes sharpened as he saw a Ferengi wave at him and eagerly hurry across the space. "Mr. Sisko, it is a fortunate day indeed that finds *you* here." The greed was clear in Quark's expression as he scurried to the richly dressed man's side, ready to flatter and haggle over the price of his wares.
Quark's next words suddenly strangled in his throat as a large ebony hand snaked out and grabbed his genitals in an unrelenting grip. He panted, "Old friend, why do you---"

"Those harkens you sold me turned out to be two males," Sisko said calmly as he slightly twisted the delicate tissues. "Not only could I not breed them, one ate the other before the day was out." His eyes noted with satisfaction the greenish tinge to the Ferengi's face. "I want my money back."

"No refunds," Quark snapped automatically, then screeched as the hand around his privates became a vise. "But I'll offer you a special discount---an unbeatable price---on my new merchandise. You won't get a better deal anywhere."

"Count on it," Sisko said as he released the trader, set down his cup, wiped his mouth and hands and stood. The slaves jumped up immediately, ready to follow.

Quark was still catching his breath as he limped across the promenade to where he'd staked his claim on a corner of the marketplace. He should have known better than to try to pull one over on the wily, dangerous human.

Sisko wandered among stacked cages of snarling examples of known and unfamiliar species. He rattled the cage of a listless lion. "I'm surprised you don't have maggots crawling on your *new* animals, Ferengi. They're half-dead already."

"Nonsense," Quark's spine stiffened at the slight to his stock. "We just fed them before bringing them in, that's all. We couldn't have them taking bites out of the customers." He sidled up to the big man. "Let them starve for a few days and they'll eat their own mothers."

Sisko simply snorted, then moved to a different section. "What about the slaves? I have a bout coming up. Any fighters?"

Quark shrugged. "Some are good for fighting, some for dying. You need both." His eyes grew speculative. "There are also a few that you may want to bed before sending them into the ring. To personally...break them in."

Sisko's over-the-shoulder glare silenced the Ferengi as he walked around a column. Like the others, it held four figures, one chained to each side. He would occasionally grip open a chin to examine a woman's teeth, or prod a man to stand so he could get a better idea of his musculature. His examinations were met with stares that blazed with defiance or pleaded for help. He ignored both types.

At the end of the row, closest to the viewports, were the last two poles. He dismissed three of each set of slaves as useless, but was intrigued by the two men facing each other across the aisle. He pushed his toe into a dark-skinned Vulcan's thigh. "Stand up," he ordered.

Tuvok stood and suffered through a thorough handling silently.

Sisko liked this one's slim but muscled build; Vulcan strength was usually unrelated to bulk. "What were you before?" he asked.

Tuvok met the questioning gaze of his possible purchaser. "A security officer."

Sisko's brows rose with interest.

Quark insinuated himself between the two men. "He was caught aiding the escape of two terrorists."

"I was assisting the victims of a shuttle crash. At the time of the incident there was no opportunity to
inquire after their political ideologies." Tuvok sighed when he realized that they, like everyone else, were uninterested in his plight.

"Guilty by association is still guilty," Sisko said dismissively and turned to the other man who had caught his attention.

Chakotay opened his eyes when a toe nudged his calf. He lifted his head, pushing his legs out straight before him.

"Get up," Sisko gritted. His temper flared when the human simply stared at him with dead eyes, unmoving.

"He'll jump soon enough," Quark said and tapped a few commands into his wristlet. His smug satisfaction turned to stupefaction when the slave just closed his eyes and ignored both them and the pain from the collar around his neck.

The Ferengi was reaching to deliver a devastating blast to the disobedient human when Sisko's hand stopped him. "Turn it off," he commanded.

Sisko noted the human reacted as little to the end of the pain as to the start of it. His eyes narrowed as he took a closer look. The power of the seated man's frame was obvious despite the dirty, singed clothes that covered it. He stared at the black-and-red outfit a moment, then squatted to grab the human's shirtfront as he demanded, "The uniform of the Fleet, yes? What are you, a deserter?" The only answer he got was another trip into the bottomless pits of the silent slave's brown eyes.

Quark leaned over Sisko's shoulder. "Who cares? He doesn't show up on any Imperial listing. He's from Dorvan, I'm told."

Sisko dropped the dirty cloth and dusted his hands on his outer robe. He stood and turned to address the Ferengi. "I'll take six. Him, the Vulcan, and four others." He pointed them out. "Five hundred bars of latinum for the lot."

"What? They're easily worth two hundred apiece. Why, that's an insult to my---"

"Five hundred. Or do we need to 'discuss' the harkens again?" Sisko's eyes gleamed with unveiled menace.

Quark gulped, his hands moving to protect his most precious possessions. "Five hundred it is."

The Andorian slaves handed over two padds containing a standard purchase agreement with all the details already typed in. Sisko set his thumbprint to both, then waited for the Ferengi to do the same. "Have them beamed aboard my ship. I've already made my other purchases, so I'll be leaving within the hour."

"Thank goodness," Quark muttered to Sisko's departing back. He then turned to summon his own people to collect the chosen slaves for delivery. He looked at the strange, silent human a moment more, then shrugged and went in search of his next customer.

After a few days in a smaller, rather better class of freighter, Sisko and his new acquisitions arrived at his home base. He had chosen a small planetoid that had no self-sustaining life more advanced than
plants and a few rodent-like creatures. His gladiator school was an oasis in a desert of grasses; it meant there was nowhere for his slaves to run.

Still, there were forcefields and towers and plenty of guards with energy weapons. They ensured the obedience of the slaves, since Sisko knew he couldn't leave the collars on if he wanted them to fight. Even training exercises with wooden weapons triggered the standard punishment programming. It was even worse when the men and women used metal armaments.

He was already in position atop a small platform when the newcomers were transported to a cleared spot in the middle of a vast training field. He stood and looked down on the dozen men and women he had bought to serve him for the rest of their lives. However short or long a time that would be.

Sisko gave them a moment to settle into silence, then spoke. "There is no escape from this compound because there is nothing outside these walls. Leave if you wish, if you prefer to die of thirst or the madness of isolation."

He grinned down at the scruffy group. "Let me make something clear. I did not buy *you*. I have no interest in your minds, your talents, or even the pleasures of your flesh. I paid for your deaths. Brutal, gory ends will you meet, alone or with your fellow slaves. This much is certain: Death will look you in the eye."

His arms lifted. "But you do have one choice: to cower away, shivering and shrinking from that final sleep, or to face it with courage, weapon in hand. You can challenge Death to claim you, and fight it till the bitter end."

His arms came down, palms together. "If you can mark your passing with bravery, I promise you this much." He clapped slowly, in demonstration. "We will remember, and salute you—gladiators."

Sisko settled into his seat with a satisfied sigh. The comfortable chair under a canvas awning was his usual spot for watching the training. He was eager to see his new crop winnowed by his formidable instructor. This first test would determine if a slave would be marked with red or yellow. Those whose tunics were awarded a crimson daub were potential fighters; they would receive a day or two of weapons training before the scheduled bout back on DS9. The other color marked beasts for slaughter; they would be given a small shield just before entering the arena. Their only purpose was to bleed and die for the entertainment of the crowd.

Sisko's gladiator school was fairer than most. Every man and woman he purchased was tested only after they'd been given a sonic shower, fresh clothes, a full meal and a good night's sleep. As level a playing field as possible for these deadly serious games.

His ears picked up the sounds of experienced gladiators beginning the day's workouts as his keen eyes watched the new slaves file from the dormitory onto the training ground. Limbs of every shade and texture flashed under the morning sun. Most of the men and a few of the women were getting used to their unfamiliar outer attire of sleeveless knee-length tunics and sandals. Many years ago, when the games were reintroduced, traditional clothing was adopted to accompany the traditional weapons. Sisko grinned to himself. He'd bet this was the first time a lot of them had ever worn a dress.

The guards prodded the newcomers into a line against a stone wall near a small fenced-in area of packed dirt. The first man was pulled to the gate, handed a wooden sword and pushed into the ring. The slight human whirled, looking for an opponent.
A door to another dorm opened, drawing all eyes. Out of the rectangle of shadow strode a small but formidable figure, also carrying a wooden sword. As the woman drew closer the ridges on her forehead became visible. She was B'Elanna Torres, a half-Klingon gladiator of fierce reputation. She was also Sisko's chief armsmaster.

She took personal pleasure in these tests, enjoying the look of terror on her opponents' faces as she knocked the wooden weapons out of their clumsy grips and bashed the hapless newcomers to the ground. As she vaulted over the fence and landed in the ring she bared her teeth at the human already there.

Durst, the unfortunate facing this pint-sized terror, swallowed and grasped his sword with both hands. Two heartbeats later his weapon was outside the ring and he was flat on his back in the dirt, B'Elanna's sandal on his chest and her own sword at his throat. She backed off and sneered as he shakily exited, receiving a yellow streak on his blue tunic.

The next few bouts were identical. The only exception was Tuvok, who held his sword in a firm and ready grip and swung with both power and knowledge behind the blows. Klingon and Vulcan sparred for a few minutes, their weapons meeting with sharp clacks as each one blocked the other's strikes.

Sisko stopped the fight with a hand signal, nodding in pleasure as the dark-skinned alien relinquished his weapon. Perhaps the Vulcan *had* been a security officer after all.

As B'Elanna took a break for a drink of water Sisko's eyes wandered down the line of bodies, coming to rest upon the only seated figure. The one Quark had called the Dorvan had settled down cross-legged with his back against the wall. He looked half-asleep.

Sisko caught B'Elanna's eye and pointed to the black-haired man.

Torres nodded and her voice rang out. "Dorvan!" She'd heard rumors of the slave who had ignored the pain of the collar. Having very clear memories of her own acquaintance with the device, she was looking forward to a challenging opponent.

Chakotay opened his eyes and looked around. He slowly got up and at the guards' prodding approached the ring. He stepped into the combat area and accepted the sword. He hefted it a moment.

Everyone nearby perked up with interest. Something about the way this man held the sword, his relaxed yet ready body language, shouted that he knew how to use this weapon. The look in his eyes proclaimed that he also knew how to kill with it.

Then the Dorvan lifted a brow, and with a contemptuous glance at both Sisko and Torres, tossed the sword into the dirt. His arms fell to his sides as he stood in the ring, unarmed and unconcerned.

A murmur ran through the watching slaves. The gladiators stopped practicing to see what would happen. B'Elanna looked to Sisko for instructions.

Sisko nodded as his eyes flicked to the waiting slave.

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B'Elanna's mouth formed a grim line. She hefted her sword in both hands and hit the man squarely in the stomach.

Chakotay doubled over a moment, then straightened and looked at B'Elanna. His expression was completely blank.
B’Elanna took another swing, this time landing her strike across the slave's back. He lurched forward a step under the blow, resting his hands on his knees for a breath before returning to his original stance. As she circled back to face him he stared directly into the half-Klingon's eyes. Something in that steady gaze sparked her ready temper. She raised her arms high, preparing to do some real damage with her next attack.

Sisko spoke just before the sword began its downward motion. "That's enough for now. His time will come." As the silent man left the ring, Sisko gestured for the yellow paint to be used. But his curious gaze followed the muscular figure until the Dorvan returned to the wall, sinking down and closing his eyes once more.
Chapter 6

The voyage back to DS9 was a little different than the trip out. The new slaves selected to fight in the coming combat were mixed with experienced gladiators. They all occupied the freighter's cargo hold in a space surrounded by forcefields. Within the enclosure were sleeping mats, food, drink, and the usual facilities. Also weapons, wooden training swords for the red-marked novices to get in some extra practice before the bout.

Tuvok and B'Elanna had sparred several times, both at the compound and on the ship. Now that he was officially chosen to become a gladiator, he found the gruff half-Klingon full of advice and insightful critiques. In their few days' acquaintance Tuvok's technique had significantly improved, earning him the feisty woman's grudging respect.

The gladiators had also deigned to form a casual connection with the newcomers, sharing their histories and listening to the inexperienced slaves' tales of woe. But it was clear to all that while they may be on the same team, survival was the real name of the game. And those who had prevailed in the arena thus far wouldn't hesitate to kill their new comrades if they got in the way.

Only the Dorvan remained a mystery, passing the time watching and listening. His yellow mark for refusing to defend himself labeled him a loser like Durst and some others, undeserving of training or weapons. Even so, both Tuvok and B'Elanna had attempted to persuade him to fight---or at least talk---but to no avail. Eventually they'd given up, the half-Klingon with a surly growl and the Vulcan a disappointed sigh. Another strong arm could have tipped the balance between dying or living another day, but it seemed the silent man had already decided his fate.

The group of new and seasoned representatives of Benjamin Sisko's gladiator school were separated by their color codes and lined up in two rows, one set on each long bench in the waiting area underneath the arena's bleachers on DS9. The noises of the restless crowd filtered down to them, sounds of bloodlust and anticipation. The eager spectators knew men and women would die this day. So did the slaves. The gladiators looked across the space to their yellow-daubed counterparts, who were the most likely victims of the coming bloodbath.

B'Elanna rolled her eyes as she was paired with Durst.

Tuvok carefully watched as the Dorvan was pushed into the seat across from him. They would be a team, a four-foot chain linking them together just before they entered the ring.

Sisko's physical presence and expansive personality dominated the space as he entered and paced a moment before his people. His eyes cataloged them as he wondered which faces would be rigid with the chill of death before the day was out. He spoke, his booming voice ringing through the room.

"Some of you are thinking you won't fight---some of you that you can't. All of that will change the second you step into the arena." He cocked his head, hearing the cheers of the crowd. "Listen. They call you to battle. To live—or to die."

He picked up a sword, tilting it to let the light spill along the blade. "Your sole purpose is to use this weapon. To thrust it into your opponent's flesh. If you fight well, the crowd will applaud you for it. Even love you. Maybe you will come to love them, their adulation."
His dark eyes swept over them, the fighters and the fodder, one last time. "You will all face Death
today. Only you can decide how you will meet it. Those of you who are to taste blood for the first
time, I tell you this: When you come back---*if* you come back---you will not be a mere slave,
faceless among thousands scattered across the Empire. You will be the rare, the prized, the elite. A
gladiator."

Handing the sword to B'Elanna, he swept from the room. At a command from the guards the slaves
stood as one, walking in formation down a short passageway. As they passed a table set in the center
of the corridor, a burly bearded human chained the designated pairs together. A cuff was placed on
the gladiator's left wrist, the loser's right. Fighters were handed heavy metal swords, while the token
defenders were tossed round wooden shields only slightly larger than serving plates.

They stopped just before the closed gate. Through the lattice they could see the crowd, a multitude of
races packed tight into the stacked seats. The gazes of the anonymous throng were bright with
excitement as their bodies shifted with impatience.

Durst's eyes were wide with terror as sweat streamed down his face. His voice was high and tight
with panic. "I shouldn't be here. I'm a *reporter* for pity's sake. I was just doing my job."

"You have a new job," B'Elanna replied bluntly. "To die." She knew she wasn't going to stay
chained to this walking corpse for long. She gripped her sword and prepared to enter the ring. They
were second in line.

Chakotay's hand automatically reached up to the base of his throat, a gesture fraught with meaning.
His fingers lifted out and closed around the tiny bag of Dorvan soil he had unconsciously protected
all this time. He took a shuddering breath as images washed over him. Of his mother, his brothers
and sisters. All of his friends and neighbors. His wife. His son. Some small spark, still struggling to
survive, rose up from the depths of Chakotay's soul. It fought its way through this tiny crack in the
shroud of grief and pain, betrayal and despair, to fill him with conviction.

He couldn't die this way. Not wearing the yellow mark of a coward.

And not as a passive victim. In this moment, holding his last link to the past, Chakotay understood.
He was the sole survivor and indirect cause of the massacre of innocents. His people had been given
no warning, no time to fight, no choice. *He* was being granted all three. To throw away an
opportunity to live---even if he now despised that life---was an insult to their memories. He could not
dishonor his dead by joining them in such a demeaning manner, as little more than a beast butched
for sport. He would die a man at least, on his own terms.

Chakotay's head lifted as the light of battle returned to his eyes.

Tuvok didn't understand the odd ritual the human seemed to conclude by tucking a small bag back
underneath his tunic, but he was grateful to see his enigmatic partner come to life. He knew the
moment the Dorvan rejoined the universe at large. The broad shoulders settled, the back and legs
straightened from their slump. The shield was shifted in suddenly knowing and experienced hands.
And the face and eyes hardened into a portrait of fierce and focused concentration.

The gate opened. It was time.

***************

Benjamin Sisko suppressed his anxiety and excitement as he entered the owners' box overlooking
DS9's arena. He was eager to see if any of his new gladiators would survive this first dangerous
encounter. They were going to be tested under harsher conditions than most. Sisko knew the odds
were stacked heavily against his people. There was no guarantee that the experienced fighters—even his prize, B'Elanna Torres—would walk away from the ring this time.

The owner of a rival gladiator school, Miles O'Brien, had come to him more than a week ago with an unexpected offer. For a much higher than usual fee, Sisko's gladiators would go up against O'Brien's, but under unusual terms. O'Brien's men and women would have some armor and a variety of weapons. Sisko's would have their swords—nothing else. The clearly unequal battle was designed to stir the jaded appetites of the frontier people who sought entertainment at DS9. If the underdogs could win—or at the very least, go down swinging—it may excite crowds tired of the usual one-on-one duels or carefully balanced melees.

Sisko had refused at first. He didn't want to risk skilled, valuable warriors in certain defeat. Then O'Brien had raised the price even higher—and added a percentage of the betting action. The wily Irishman had also suggested Sisko toss in a set of "defenders", worthless men and women to be sacrificed buying the gladiators a little more time.

Now the proposition was intriguing. O'Brien had Sisko's interest.

So of course there was a catch. Sisko's crowd-pleasing Klingon, B'Elanna Torres, had to be on the list for the combat, or no deal. The haggling continued.

In the end, Sisko couldn't resist the money or the challenge. He agreed to his fellow slave-owner's terms, making sure he would be well compensated if he lost Torres.

Sisko took his seat and peered into the arena. O'Brien's fighters entered—and Sisko knew he'd been had. They were all men, heavily muscled humans, Terellians, Cardassians, even a Klingon or two. And their helmets and armor-covered tunics left very little vulnerable to his gladiators' blades. His people would have to strike hard enough to pierce the hammered metal covering the brutes' torsos, or find ways to slip under the protective surfaces.

He gulped, and hoped his face didn't reveal his worry. Or his anger. O'Brien would definitely pay for this perfidy. But now all Sisko could do was watch and wait. To see who, if anyone, survived.

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The first pair of Sisko's team, two male Betazoids, took one step through the gate. It was their last. Lon Suder, the fighter, had come out charging and screaming in the berserker rage he was known for. His young, terrified partner was dragged along with him helplessly. They walked right into the swinging battle axes of two Cardassians who had hidden on either side of the portal waiting to strike.

B'Elanna saw a flash and trusted her instinct, dropping and rolling underneath the weapon aiming for her head. A yank sent Durst sprawling to the floor beside her with a yelp. From her position on the ground she launched her sword underneath the skirted armor of the Cardassian. The blade circumvented both metal and cloth to pierce the pale alien's vitals. He screamed and went down thrashing. She pulled out her dripping weapon with a pleased grunt and rose, seeking her next opponent.

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Tuvok dashed to the right, avoiding the Cardassians. He felt the chain swing slackly from his cuff as the Dorvan kept up with his quick strides. Suddenly two Klingons came charging toward them. He managed to stop a descending bat'leth with his sword, but knew that left him vulnerable to the other opponent's blade. He mentally prepared for the bite of steel in his flesh.
Instead all he heard was the thud of metal hitting wood. He didn't have time to look over his shoulder as he sparred with one big Klingon warrior, desperately seeking an opening around the deadly curved weapon dancing before him. Tuvok could spare no thought as to how his unarmed partner was faring. His focus narrowed to avoiding the bat'leth's deadly prongs as he continued to trade blows with his opponent.

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Chakotay watched his Klingon warrior's eyes, using them to gauge where to next position his small shield. He'd managed to block the gladiator's sword so far, but knew it was simply a matter of time before one of the Klingon's comrades noticed Chakotay's vulnerability. His movements were precise and measured as he shifted position with each of the Klingon's blows, moving off-center to his foe. After absorbing a half-dozen more strikes, he made his move.

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Tuvok finally saw his opening when his Klingon lifted his arms for an overhead blow. He thrust his sword in a fierce lunge, aiming for and piercing the eyehole in his opponent's helmet. The Klingon's roar of pain was brief as the blade sank into his brain, killing him.

The Vulcan whirled to help his partner but froze in shock. The Dorvan blocked another thrust from his Klingon, the blade sliding off the human's shield as he twisted to the right. As the Klingon was bringing the weapon back up for another strike, the human tilted his arm and swung it sharply to the left. The shield, now held parallel to the floor, smashed edge-first into the Klingon's vulnerable throat. The force behind it shattered the alien's windpipe and the bulky warrior dropped like a stone. The chest heaved a few times, seeking air, then the body was still.

The Dorvan abandoned his shield and grabbed up the Klingon's sword. He turned to meet Tuvok's gaze.

Tuvok could see anger, a controlled fury darkening the brown eyes. He took an instinctive half-step back from this fierce warrior before the Dorvan gave a sharp pull on the chain. As Tuvok stumbled forward trying to keep his balance he expected to be spitted on the human's newly acquired sword. It flashed toward him, but instead passed him and plunged into the chest of the Terellian about to strike the Vulcan from behind. The thrust was so powerful the point of the blade pierced both the enemy gladiator's armor and his massive torso to stick out his spine.

The Dorvan nodded at Tuvok, then leaned down to close his hand around the Terellian's weapon, leaving his own buried in the corpse. Tuvok returned the acknowledgement, then scanned the area for the next threat.

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Sisko had sent out a dozen men and women in six chained pairs. He winced as he lost Suder along with the man's worthless partner. One other team had also gone down almost immediately. Another of the defenders was just a corpse being dragged around on the end of a dying Andorian gladiator's chain. Six of O'Brien's men were also still fighting; the other half-dozen lay still, scattered on the arena floor.

His attention was drawn to Torres, and he was surprised to see her partner still breathing, cowering at her back as she battled the other Cardassian by the gate.
B'Elanna's teeth gritted in frustration as she felt another jerk on the chain. It shifted her grip a fraction, once more changing a certain block to a precarious one. The decision was difficult, but she made it. She lowered her sword, freeing one hand as her keen eyes watched the Cardassian prepare for another strike. As the scaly gladiator began his swing she reached over her shoulder and grabbed Durst. She whirled behind him and shoved the human into the Cardassian's axe. As the two men tangled together she darted behind them, slashing across the Cardassian's bare legs. He went down with a groan, blood pouring from his severed arteries.

She looked at Durst, frowning a moment at the horrified expression frozen on his face. "You were warned," she said grimly, then raised her sword to cleave the dead man's hand from his body. As the wrist bones separated the chain swung free. She quickly wrapped its length around her own arm to keep it out of the way and provide some meager protection.

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Sisko watched in shock as the crowd surged to its feet, urging on his remaining gladiators. The savagery and skill displayed by Torres was well known in this arena. And indeed, some voices were shouting her name. But the majority of the stamping, screaming spectators were cheering on newcomers to this bloody game. The one garnering the most applause was---incredibly---the Dorvan. The way he and the Vulcan moved together was a deadly ballet, but the bronze-skinned slave was clearly the more compelling of the two.

"I thought the yellow mark meant a dead man." The gravelly voice belonged to Miles O'Brien.

Sisko turned to shrug at his fellow gladiator-owner, who was sipping an ale and frowning as he counted the corpses below them. "It does," he confirmed.

"Well he must have disagreed with you. He fights like a very devil. Who is he?" O'Brien had a gut feeling that he wouldn't be taking any victors or prize money home with him today.

"The Dorvan," Sisko said.

"That's it? The Dorvan?" The Irishman's brow furrowed.

"Yes..." Sisko's eyes brightened with impromptu plans. "A mysterious warrior from the frontier. No one knows anything about him, except he's a gladiator. *The* gladiator. He'll be bigger than Torres."

O'Brien grunted. "I'm sure he will, Sisko. *If* he survives today." He tilted his head to the side. "And if he does, you'll need challenges worthy of the build-up you're going to give him."

"We'll talk. Later."

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Chakotay was flushed with rage at the injustices he'd suffered, the sorrows he still bore. But he focused the feelings, let them burn steadily like the tempering fires of a forge. He refused to let the emotions flare out of control, for that would be certain death.

He and the Vulcan---Tuvok---stood back to back, moving in precise concert like a team that had practiced together for years. Tuvok was sparring with a thickset human sheathed in armor from neck to knees. Chakotay was trading blows with another Terellian, this one armed with a trident. Chakotay was shifting from side to side, dancing away from the barbed points of the weapon then moving close to the long wooden shaft, trying to divert its forward course. He didn't want an
unexpected lunge to get past him and reach Tuvok's back.

The Terellian made just such a move, extending himself to strike at least one of his targets. Chakotay instantly leapt, descending squarely on the weapon, snapping it in half as he landed in a crouch on the arena floor. He leaned away from the sharp edges of the broken haft approaching him. He shifted his sword, wrapping one hand around the pommel and bracing the weapon against his own body. The burly alien impaled himself, unable to stop his forward momentum. Chakotay grunted and held fast against the weight bearing down on him.

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Tuvok saw shock in the armored human's eyes at some spectacle behind him. He heard wood breaking and low sounds of pain, but didn't lose his concentration. Taking advantage of his opponent's temporary distraction, he put his whole body into a swing that drew an arc starting under the human's left arm, slicing upward into the exposed flesh at the armpit of the human's metal sleeve and amputating the limb. The warrior dropped his own weapon and screamed as he sank to his knees, cradling a bleeding stump.

With no further attackers, Chakotay and Tuvok stood a moment, breathing heavily. Then they saw two of their team thrashing on the ground, trapped in a heavy net. Two humans and a Cardassian were raising their swords for killing blows. Chakotay snatched up what was left of the trident and they rushed to help.

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Torres watched in surprise as Tuvok and the Dorvan ran across the arena toward their trapped teammates. Usually individual survival was the rule, but apparently those two hadn't listened to the advice of the more experienced gladiators. They quickly engaged the trio of opponents ready to gut their prey through the net that entangled them. Tuvok immediately struck swords with the Cardassian in a slashing one-on-one.

Her eyes widened as the black-haired human took on the two remaining foes with only a broken trident. He held the weapon like a staff, perpendicular to his body, as he blocked both the hits against him and any attempts to harm the struggling bodies on the floor. Automatically she evaluated his performance---the mysterious gladiator was obviously both well-trained and experienced.

Suddenly the Dorvan shifted from defense to offense. He ducked under a swing designed to decapitate him, shifted the shaft in his hands and thrust. The trident's points sank into a bit of thigh exposed by the metal strips forming the enemy gladiator's skirted armor. At the same time he landed a solid kick in the other human's middle, sending the helmeted man sprawling while the Dorvan pulled his weapon free.

Torres gripped her sword with a fierce grin and ran to throw herself into the fray. Her fellow gladiators needed her.

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Sisko sank back into his seat in shock. The newcomers had flung themselves at O'Brien's remaining trio, but not just to finish them off for their own safety. They were clearly protecting their fallen comrades, ignoring the unwritten rule of self-preservation that held sway in the arena.

He watched the Dorvan continue his dazzling debut, this time taking on two sword-wielding opponents with nothing but half of a broken weapon. The Vulcan was also acquitting himself well against a Cardassian.
Then one of the O'Brien's humans went sprawling, and Sisko was even more stunned to see Torres leaping forward to engage the man as he rolled to his feet. Apparently the madness was contagious. He leaned forward, eyes thoughtful, certain of the outcome.

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Tuvok turned from the dying Cardassian to check on his comrades. Torres was giving one of the attacking humans a coup de grace across the throat, while the Dorvan was regarding his trident, now protruding from the last man's stomach. Satisfied they were all out of danger, Tuvok dropped his sword to help the trapped team, a Cardassian man and an Andorian woman.

Unbeknownst to them, the wounded gladiator had risen and grabbed his sword with his remaining hand, determined to get some revenge for the death about to befall him. He approached his destroyer's vulnerable back.

The change in the tenor of the roar of the crowd alerted Chakotay. Instinctively he whirled to seek the unknown danger. Seeing a one-armed human in a final death charge, he grabbed for Tuvok, pulled him close and wrapped the Vulcan's cuffed hand around the chain. He did the same with his own. At just the right moment he tossed the Vulcan and also moved, stretching the metal taut between them.

The Dorvan's move had put both Tuvok and himself out of immediate danger from the wildly swinging sword. Tuvok automatically tightened his grip and yanked the links as the maimed gladiator ran into their chain, the metal digging into the attacker's vulnerable throat. The Dorvan did the same and they garroted their bleeding opponent. The Dorvan easily disarmed the dying man as he staggered. Then all struggles stopped. They unwound the chain and let the corpse drop to the floor.

The crowd went wild. Torres raised her bloody sword and brandished it, accepting the accolades. The freed gladiators and Tuvok bowed slightly, not quite sure what to do.

Chakotay looked at the sea of avid faces, at the morgue the floor had become. He flung his sword away in disgust and moved to leave the arena without another glance, Tuvok trailing behind him.

The audience cheered even louder, anointing their new champion.

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The Enterprise, flagship of the Imperial Fleet, sailed into orbit above San Francisco. The great warship had not been to the Sol system since it had been commissioned. But these last few weeks had seen it pressed into service as the new Emperor's personal transport.

All of the news services had carried word of the final Imperial victory, followed by the tragic announcement of Jean-Luc Picard's death and burial in space. The loss of that noble man and beloved leader had left a great hole in the hearts of the Empire's peoples. It was quickly filled by worry, for the details of Picard's arrangements for a successor had still been sketchy when he left Earth for what turned out to be his final journey.

What the average citizen didn't know was that plans had been in place for months to ensure Julian Bashir Picard's place on his father's throne. He'd nursed the ground carefully for a long time, eliminating potential rivals and wooing Council members with promises of wealth and favor. Others he neutralized with meticulously collected blackmail materials.
His hard work paid off. Even before he arrived on Earth Julian was declared his father's heir and sole claimant to the Bashir legacy of Imperial rule. Now all he had to do was convince the people of his worthiness to lead them.

The arrival of the Enterprise was part of that. It demonstrated that Imperial borders were so secure that the main defender was better employed returning the Emperor to his home. The impressive vessel would stay a day or two, a symbol of Imperial might, before departing once more for the frontier. Its new captain, Will Riker, would be in the command chair when it returned to duty. Although no official announcement had been made, Riker was for all intents and purposes the new Admiral of the Fleet.

Will stood before the viewport in his still-unfamiliar Ready Room, watching a dozen small ships darting around the Enterprise's hull like a swarm of bugs. He didn't understand what had happened that first day after the battle with the Dominion. The Emperor he had served for years died, his Admiral and good friend Chakotay vanished without a trace or word of explanation. Chakotay's own second-in-command, Gregor Ayala, declined the top position in the Imperial Fleet. Instead, he accepted leadership of the Guard, which rarely ventured outside the core Imperial worlds.

A great honor, to be sure, and an easier job for certain. But a transfer from one military branch to the other was unheard of, especially when the head of the Imperial Guard was alive and well and summarily retired before her time.

Will sighed as he stared at the planet he rarely called home. The glimmer of the ships now heading for Earth was soon absorbed in the light reflecting from the blue sphere. He felt very much alone.

The cameras were out in full force, along with a sizable contingent of spectators. They milled about the sidewalks of the main thoroughfare of San Francisco. The broad avenue led directly to the imposing Imperial complex, which included the palace and Council building.

Suddenly excitement rippled over the crowd as a parade of gleaming shuttles began. Although nowhere as impressive as the Enterprise in orbit far above them, they still made an impact. In the middle of the procession the shuttles gave way to hovercars filled with Guards. They stood straight, their commbadges and weapons gleaming in the sunshine.

Then came the Emperor himself. Besides an anonymous driver, Julian's vehicle also held Greg—the recently appointed Chief of the Guard—and Tom Paris, brother-in-law to the new leader and a familiar fixture from prior Imperial events.

The crowds did applaud, but not too enthusiastically. Their new Emperor was a man of uncertain reputation and untried ability. They would withhold judgement until they saw what he could do.

Julian waved to the throng, his pleasure unaffected by the lukewarm welcome. He knew he possessed the intelligence and cunning it took to hold the throne. His easy conquest of the Council already proved it. He had ways to win over his people as well, and soon he would put those plans into motion. He craved adulation, and he would have it. The Empire *would* recognize his greatness—or else.

On the steps of the palace a handful of representatives awaited the arrival of the young Emperor. At
the front of the group were LaForge and Shelby, freshly arrived from the Mercury. With them was the leader of the Council, Kathryn Janeway. Sitting on the steps in front of the trio was a group of children holding flowers for their new leader. Among them flashed the golden-brown hair of Lucien Picard Paris, Tom's young son.

Kathryn smiled as she regarded the boy. He'd been staying with her for the last few weeks, since Tom didn't like the child to be left alone with only servants in the huge palace. Then her eyes wandered down the steps to the people loosely packing the pavement awaiting the triumphal parade. "He returns to Earth a conquering hero," she mused, "but what has he conquered?"

Shelby, whose belief in the Empire put her firmly in Julian's camp, bristled at the question. "Give him time, Councilor. I think he will surprise you and do very well indeed."

"For the Empire? Or for you?" Kathryn's blue-gray gaze flashed with knowledge as one brow arched. She herself was the primary proponent of a return to the Federation. She disliked the amount of power vested in a single individual, and the fact that non-Terrans were openly discriminated against.

Fortunately for her, Kathryn had first expressed her opinions years ago. Jean-Luc Picard was at the height of his power then, and both liked and respected her. At the time his tolerance of her ideas was the only thing that kept her from slavery or assassination. Now both she and her position were well established, a shield of publicity that kept her safe even in this new regime. Kathryn also knew her hopes for a return to better ways of governing were shared by many of her colleagues, but only a few brave souls like LaForge were willing to say so openly.

Shelby's narrow lips thinned further, but she held her tongue. Glancing down at the children she called, "Lucien!"

The 8-year-old gave her a wary glance from hazel eyes, but stood and approached the adults. He automatically headed to the spot between Janeway and LaForge. "Yes, Councilor?" he asked politely.

"It's a proud day for us all, isn't it, young man?" Shelby's smile was edged. "I bet Councilor Janeway never thought she'd live to see such a grand display."

"I'm just happy my father's back," Lucien replied, remembering his parent's advice to not engage in word games with people he didn't trust. Lucien thought Shelby looked like a blonde ferret, and he definitely didn't like her. He felt Geordi give his shoulder a quick squeeze of reassurance.

Janeway smiled at the boy, then glanced to where the Imperial hovercar was settling at the base of the steps. "Go to your father," she said, giving him a little push. "He's dying to see you."

Lucien happily sprinted ahead of the flower-bearers, throwing himself into his father's open arms. "Dad!" he shouted ecstatically, hugging Tom tight.

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Tom crouched down to Lucien's level then began a second embrace, clutching his son, blinking back tears. He knew that for the moment they were safe. His bold move had seen to that. By striking Julian and then acknowledging his right to rule, Tom had ensured that the new Emperor realized that Tom was aware Julian had murdered Jean-Luc, but supported his childhood friend anyway. It eliminated him as a target for Julian's paranoid suspicions.

Tom pressed his face against the child's neck and squeezed his eyes shut. He still ached for
Chakotay, but knew that he couldn't grieve openly for the missing Admiral. He hadn't heard Julian ranting or spouting dire threats when Chakotay rejected Julian the night Jean-Luc died, so he had assumed the new Emperor intended to woo his Admiral back into the fold.

Instead Chakotay had disappeared. Worse still, all record of him had been completely wiped from the database. That was enough for Tom to understand that Julian had foreseen Chakotay's stubbornness and decided to remove a powerful threat to his rule. And from the shift in positions in the military, Julian must have had some help.

In his role as fervent follower of Julian Bashir Picard, Tom was unable to do any research or ask questions about how the revered leader of the Imperial Fleet vanished overnight. So he would keep his silence and make his own plans. He knew Lucien was only Julian's token heir. There was no way that arrogant, ambitious bastard would let anyone but his own child succeed him to the Imperial throne. Fortunately for Tom, Julian hadn't even picked out an Empress yet. The one thing Tom did have on his side was time.

He glanced up as Julian and the giggling children passed him, then looked around and caught Janeway's welcoming nod and smile. He returned the greeting, glad that he also had a friend or two. He would need them.

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Julian swept up the marble steps, surveying the Council delegation. Some, like Shelby, he knew were securely in his pocket. Others, like Janeway and LaForge, were courteous but clear opponents. The rest were sheep who followed whoever was in power. Right now they, like the populace, were giving Julian a chance to prove himself.

Shelby stepped forward, her voice raised. "Earth greets her returning Emperor," she said with a bow. "Your loyal subjects bid you welcome."

Julian tossed the flowers he'd been given to a waiting slave. "Thank you, Shelby, for the welcome and the loyal subjects." He grinned. "I trust they didn't cost too much." He focused on Janeway as the elegant woman moved in front of her associate.

"Sire, we grieve at your loss and rejoice in your return." Her gaze was somber as she regarded the young man entrusted with the power of an empire. "There is much to discuss."

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Tom kept a careful eye on Julian from his seat on the steps of the palace atrium. It did not bode well for relations with the Council that its members were not even welcomed into the formal reception rooms. He saw a well-concealed expression of annoyance flash across Julian's features as Janeway held out a padd toward the new leader.

"To ease the transition, sire, the Council has prepared a series of protocols to guide you and outline the current status of the Empire." Janeway paused. "We thought you could study it at your leisure and---"

Julian decided to take hold of the reins of power, now. To start strong and show that he meant business. "My father *studied* thousands of missives from the Council during his tenure on the throne." He stalked around the room, running his eyes over his audience. "At home with his children, in space in the midst of battle, even on his deathbed he was plagued with protocols---his people were forgotten."
Janeway appeared unruffled. "The Council members *are* the people, sire. Elected from among them to serve as their voices."

Julian raised a brow. "I doubt all of our people eat as well as you, Janeway." He glanced at Geordi, "Or have cybernetic eyes like Councilor LaForge. I have listened to and learned from my father all my life. I am sure I know my own people."

"Perhaps then you would care to share your wisdom with us, sire, and let us know your plans." Janeway's smile and voice had acquired a bit of an edge.

"I intend to love them, as a father loves his children. Holding them tightly in my embrace." Julian's chin tilted. "The details are unnecessary at this time."

"Communication between the throne and the Council chamber is the lifeblood of the Empire. You cannot simply cut us off," Janeway protested.

The Emperor's eyes narrowed. "It is not the *Empire's* lifeblood that will be spilled if you continue to---"

"I think that we are a bit tired from the journey, Councilors," Tom smoothly intervened. He walked up to Janeway and grasped the padd. "If you leave your list with me I will ensure it makes its way to Julian's desk. The Emperor plans to meet his obligations in full."

He gestured to a house slave. "Please escort the Councilors out."

Janeway bowed to her new leader but addressed Tom. "As always, a Paris is a most able aide to a Bashir. We will look forward to hearing from the Emperor." She led the way out.

Julian barely restrained himself until the last Councilor departed. "Damn them, especially that meddling witch! Who are they to make demands of me!"

"Please, Julian, don't let them bother you. The Council has its uses," Tom soothed.

"They are nothing but a bunch of impotent windbags. I hold the Guard and the Fleet. I should dispense with the Council's services." His eyes gleamed with ideas.

"There has always been a Council." Tom shook his head. "The people would not accept such a shock to their---"

"Illusions?" Julian mocked.

"Traditions," Tom answered firmly. "They would balk at such an abrupt change. It would...detract from their vision of the Empire."

"Unless they truly believed that the Empire *is* the Emperor. That I am the sole source of their wealth, comfort, security---greatness." Julian's face suffused with excitement as he turned to Tom. "So I will change their vision. They will see me. And love me."

Tom's knuckles whitened on the padd as Julian lost himself in dreams of glory.
Geordi LaForge carefully picked his way through San Francisco's largest open-air market, enjoying the kaleidoscope of sights, sounds, and scents. He reached the edge and paused by one wall to let a troop of schoolkids pass by. He grimaced as the electronic advertising board near him began its latest cycle. Light flashed off metal on the screen as men and women in armor fought and fell into bloody heaps. Animals attacked helplessly bound people whose mouths were stretched wide in silent screams. After a minute the images faded to black and the words, "150 days of glorious gladiator games brought to you by..." appeared. Then Julian's portrait zoomed into view with his name, Emperor Julian Bashir Picard, flashing beneath it.

The Council member shook his head in disgust as he stepped into the finally clear street to cross to a café with tables scattered outside under a gaily striped awning. In a seat near the wrought-iron fence enclosing the section Kathryn Janeway waited, sipping from a large mug. Her thoughtful eyes were still on the ad, which had started again.

Geordi slid into the chair across from her, where a cup of chamomile tea and half a plate of lemon biscotti awaited him. "Can you believe those graphic ads?" he asked in a mix of disgust and outrage. "They're on every street corner. And I've heard that media linkups are already being arranged to reach every corner of the Empire. 'Glorious gladiator games'---more like wide-scale slaughter."

"Yes, he's more clever than I expected," Kathryn mused, her slender fingers cradling her cup.

"Clever? What's clever about killing people for entertainment?" Geordi was puzzled by the Council leader's low-key reaction.

"Not entertainment---distraction." She set down her drink and leaned forward. "Geordi, think about it. For one hundred and fifty days every eye in the Empire will be glued to their vidscreens. Or people will be clamoring for the favor of seats in the arena itself. It's like the bread and circuses of ancient Rome. No one will be paying attention to Julian Bashir Picard except to cheer him on and thank him for his generosity."

Kathryn's frown deepened. "I just wish I could figure out *why* he's doing this. He already has control of the Fleet and the Guard. And a good part of the Council was either bribed or silenced by our new Emperor before the old one was even in his casket."

"Maybe it's his way of showing you up, Kathryn, proving he *does* know his people. At least the lowest common denominator." Geordi took a bite of the biscotti, but he'd lost his appetite worrying about their Machiavellian leader's hidden agenda.

"You may be right, Geordi. Julian *does* know what the Empire is. The people have become an unruly mob. Especially Terrans. They've been seduced away from their morals and principles by their easy lives and privileged positions. They're jaded souls. So he will encourage their lusts with blood and combat, and they will love him for it." Her face was grave. "And then they'll let him do whatever he wants."

The two finished their drinks in silence. Unbeknownst to them, a woman who'd been sitting with her back to their table rose to leave. Despite their low voices, she had memorized every word of their conversation.
Chakotay waited for the gate to DS9's arena to open. He adjusted the black mask on his face so his vision wasn't blocked. The disguise, now as much a part of his outfit as the red mark of a gladiator, was Benjamin Sisko's idea. The wily slave-owner had advertised the Dorvan as an enigma, and making sure no one figured out his new star's identity preserved the mystery. Chakotay was relieved the covering kept his enemies from realizing he was still alive. Otherwise he was as indifferent to the mask as he was to the rest of the hoopla surrounding him.

He and Sisko's other fighters spent most of their time on the small planetoid that held the gladiator school. But every week or so they were loaded into the freighter and brought to DS9 or one of the other frontier arenas for bouts. Chakotay, now a main attraction, fought by himself most times. He noticed that whoever made the arrangements kept raising the stakes. The last time he faced five armored foes. It hadn't been an easy victory, but so far he'd survived unscathed.

The crowds followed him from match to match, looked for him, cheered him, shouted his name, worshipped him from afar. He couldn't care less. All he was doing was making sure he died a warrior, fighting to the last. To that end, he lightly touched his talisman, placed it back under his tunic, gripped his sword and waited. The gate swung open.

Arrayed in two rows were six burly fighters brandishing a variety of weapons. Chakotay sized them up, decided his strategy and attacked.

His first target was neither the closest nor the most vulnerable. Instead he chose the tallest, strongest gladiator, a heavily muscled half-Romulan or Vulcan wielding a mace. He knew that as soon as this man went down the others would lose part of their confidence.

Chakotay quickly shifted around his target, forcing the man to turn away from his comrades. That move ensured none of the other warriors would be able to stab Chakotay in the back. The hybrid fighter was swinging his mace in a carefully practiced routine, the spiked ball's broad sweeps tracing an intricate pattern in the air. Chakotay found the weak spot and without trading a single blow with his opponent raised his own sword in both hands and pushed it point first through the gladiator's unprotected throat. He kept hold of his green-stained weapon as the dead man's body fell away. Chakotay ignored the gasps of the crowd as he turned to his other five opponents.

They were standing in place, dumbstruck that their strongest teammate had been killed so...efficiently. Chakotay cut through them like a scythe slicing through wheat, each corpse toppling behind him as he slashed them down. As the fifth man fell he grabbed the dead man's weapon. Now wielding two swords he turned to the last rival gladiator standing.

The fellow looked like a statue, waiting with his eyes and arms and mouth open in shock. He didn't even raise his net or trident as Chakotay bore down on him, sinking both swords deep into his torso. Chakotay ignored the gasps of the crowd as he turned to his other five opponents.

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Chakotay released the weapons and turned away, then spun back to retrieve the swords. He pulled them out, and as the body folded to its knees, he crossed the blades at the front of the corpse's neck. A quick pull and the head separated, bouncing and rolling across the floor.

The entire match had taken no more than five minutes. The crowd cheered wildly at the brutal display, chanting "Dorvan! Dorvan! Dorvan!"

Chakotay looked at the sea of shouting faces and gleaming eyes and his bile rose at their enjoyment. He noticed that Sisko was just exiting the owners' box. The slave-owner's face held a hint of anger. That sparked Chakotay's own temper and he threw one of his swords.

People milling in the owners' section shrieked and startled back as a blade came sailing through the air to clatter across Sisko's usual---and currently empty---table.
Silence fell over the arena. Now the violence had come a little too close. The audience got the hint they could become participants, not just spectators.

Chakotay’s disdain was clear as he spread his arms wide, indicating the bloody, corpse-strewn floor. "Are you not entertained?" he shouted as he turned in a small circle to reach every section of seats with his question.

There was a pause, and then the crowd's wild hoots filled the space with even louder sounds. They stamped their feet and clapped their hands and started chanting "Dorvan!" again. By despising them Chakotay had somehow become even more their darling.

He stood a moment, stunned by their reaction. The he tossed his remaining sword to the ground and left the arena. The applause continued for a long time.

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Tuvok was surprised at the gentleness of the bronze hands on his flesh as the Dorvan kneaded away the lingering soreness in Tuvok's back. He'd taken a solid hit from a staff-wielding Cardassian during his group combat earlier today, before the Dorvan's own bout. The bone-knitter and regenerator had healed the fractures and bruising, but they couldn't eliminate the tension ache. But this relaxing massage did. A light healing meditation before sleep and Tuvok would be as good as new.

He was also impressed by the lack of emotional upheaval he sensed during the treatment. Like many Vulcans, Tuvok was a touch telepath. Contact with other species usually required strong shielding to prevent the bleeding through of the other person's thoughts. This enigmatic man, however, was as self-contained internally as he appeared on the surface. Tuvok didn't catch any glimpse into the Dorvan's mind while strong hands ran along Tuvok's skin.

He felt the edges of his tunic drawn back up to his shoulders, then the Dorvan appeared out of the corner of Tuvok's eye as the human returned to his own pallet aboard Sisko's freighter. "Thank you," Tuvok said, rising to sit with much greater ease than he had lain down.

Broad shoulders shrugged. "No problem. You need to get a better sense of who's behind you, though, if you want to survive."

Tuvok nodded. "I will ask Ms. Torres for her assistance." He sighed and wondered in which direction Vulcan lay, and if he were traveling even farther away from it. "I must survive. My wife and children are out there. They need me, wait for me."

"Does your wife know that you're all right? Through your marriage bond?" The Dorvan's voice was soft, almost musical, now that the coldness had abated.

Tuvok looked into dark brown eyes that were filled with sympathy and ever-present sorrow. "Yes. But the touch of our minds is tenuous. Just enough to know we are all alive." He paused a moment, then a memory drew his brows together. "I never thanked you for saving my life that first day in the arena. I am most grateful."

"You're welcome." The Dorvan swallowed a moment, examining his hands. "I also never thanked you for helping the Ferengi heal me."

When those liquid eyes returned to Tuvok's, the pain in them was as vast as the universe itself. "At the time I didn't want you to succeed. My wife and son...my family...they no longer wait for me."

"And you wanted to die as well." It wasn't a question.
"Yes." The Dorvan sighed. "But now it seems it will be some time before my life is ended in the arena."

Tuvok nodded, understanding his companion's ambivalence. "It is hard to fight when there is nothing to fight for."

They sat for a while in silence, remembering those they'd loved, and lost.

Sisko read the message again as he waited for the slave he had summoned to be brought to him. His office on this unnamed world was richly appointed, real wood furniture softened by plump damask cushions. But he was going to abandon it in less than a day, leaving behind a small contingent of guards to protect his fortress. He could hardly wait.

He straightened to a casual stance as four guards brought in the Dorvan. Sisko grinned. He'd sent only two, but apparently they didn't feel capable of handling the brooding star of his gladiatorial stable. Despite the fact that they were well-armed while their charge had nothing but his bare hands.

But they had proven to be very deadly hands. Sisko's eyes lingered on them a moment as he waved the guards away. Two left, the other pair retreated to stand on either side of the doorway, silent sentinels.

He circled his calmly waiting slave, measuring the strength of the bare limbs and admiring the smooth golden-brown skin that covered them. Sisko pictured the proud, powerful figure naked in his bed. He sighed regretfully and let the enticing image dissipate. Sisko had sworn years ago he would never sexually indulge himself with his fighters, and despite this temptation he would keep to his vow.

Sisko ended his circuit two paces away from the Dorvan's blank face. "So, Dorvan, what is your pleasure? What do you want?" he asked. "Girl...boy?"

He noted with a raised brow the distinct cooling of the strong features as the dark gaze acquired a hint of disdain. "You sent for me?" It was the question of an equal, not a slave, a mere piece of flesh Sisko owned and controlled.

Sisko regarded his disrespectful property, shifting to the real subject of this meeting. "You're good, Dorvan...but not that good. You finish off your opponents too quickly. Add a little suspense and you could be magnificent."

The slave's expression became even more remote. "You want me to kill, I kill. That is enough." He turned to leave.

"Good enough for the frontier, perhaps. But not for Earth." Sisko was pleased to see the faint hint of tension in the powerful back before the Dorvan turned, suddenly interested.

"Earth?" Chakotay's entire being was poised, awaiting the reply.

"Yes. The contract was waiting for me when we landed. The new Emperor, Julian Bashir Picard, has called every gladiator school in the realm to the human homeworld to participate in 150 days of games in honor of his father."

Sisko's lips twisted wryly. "No one seems to have noticed the irony that Jean-Luc Picard was the one who kicked us off Earth in the first place."
He shrugged. "But that is the way of the living, they can do whatever they want with the memory of the dead."

"Yes," Chakotay grated, unable to hide his bitterness.

"After years of scratching around on the fringes, we're finally going back to where we belong---San Francisco's Colosseum!" Sisko paced, unable to contain his excitement. "Ah, Dorvan, wait until you fight in the Colosseum. The holorecorders beaming your actions across the Empire. The eyes of millions pinned to your every move. The crowd's silence just before you strike, and when you win...the cheers rise up, a furious storm. As if you weren't just a man, but a god." His eyes shone with memories.

Chakotay's own face reflected his sudden realization. "You were a gladiator?"


"You won your freedom?" Chakotay guessed.

"A long time ago. The day Jean-Luc Picard ascended the throne." Sisko moved to lift a small wooden carving from the desk, handing the object to the Dorvan. "The Emperor gave me this---just a wooden sword, but the symbol of my freedom. I stood before him in the arena after I won the last match ever fought on Earth. He touched me on the shoulder and I was free."

Chakotay turned the wooden sword so its small plaque caught the light. Etched into it were the words Benjamin Sisko, a Free Man by Order of Jean-Luc Picard. "You knew Jean-Luc Picard?"

"No---he simply touched me on the shoulder once." Sisko stared at the slave who was no mere slave.

Chakotay set the sword down and stared at Sisko. His voice was deadly serious. "You asked me what I want. I, too, wish to stand in front of the Emperor. As you did."

"Then listen to me, Dorvan," Sisko said urgently. "I did not become the best by killing quickly. I learned to be a fighter who could make the crowd love me. Win the crowd, and you will win your freedom."

"Then I will win the crowd." Chakotay's eyes glittered. "I will show them something they've never seen before."

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The woman from the café knelt at the foot of Julian's chair. They were in the office/sitting room of the Imperial suite, which boasted an impressive array of anti-monitoring devices. She had entered through a secret panel in the wall, and had just finished her report on Janeway and LaForge.

"It's clear they plot against you, sire," the Bajoran woman said urgently. "You must neutralize their meager powers as quickly as you can."

"My dear Seska," Julian's voice was cold despite the endearment. "Do not forget who gives the orders here." His hand stroked through her long auburn hair, then gripped it and hauled her head back to expose her neck. A stiletto knife rested against her beating pulse. "You have served me well, especially in poisoning my father. For that I rewarded you by taking you into my household instead of selling you off like the rest of his slaves."

The knife slid higher, grazing her jawbone. Julian's handsome features clenched in anger. "But you..."
*will* remember your place." His eyes narrowed as his tone turned silky. "Or I just might have to remind you."

Seska was a strong, determined woman. She was a Cardassian Obsidian Order operative altered to look like a Bajoran. Her orders were to infiltrate the Empire and keep tabs on Cardassia's enemies. She resented being a slave, but it was the only way to get into the Imperial household. She had taken her life in her hands some months ago by propositioning Julian. She would feed his father miniscule amounts of a poison only she could create, hastening Jean-Luc Picard's death and Julian's rise to power. She knew the son would send the Empire into ruin, and the resulting internal instability would aid her own people's efforts to reclaim their territories.

When Dominion forces fell in Jean-Luc's last battle, her focus shifted from helping Cardassia to saving herself. The cause was lost, but she was still secure inside her Bajoran skin. She now hoped to become a power behind the new Emperor's throne, but so far her influence had been shaky at best. It was time to fall back into the role of humble servant.

Seska didn't hide her trembling at Julian's threat. She had seen him rape, torture, even butcher his slaves. His attendants lived in constant fear of his temper.

Lately, though, his...appetites...had calmed somewhat. Whispering among themselves, the slaves theorized that the blood and gore of the gladiator games somehow sated his bloodlust. They figured they were safe, at least for the 150 days of the celebration.

They also decided that if he did start up again, that unfortunate first victim would probably beg for death long before Julian granted it. Seska knew at that moment she would do anything to forestall the monster's re-awakening.

"I serve you, sire, in all things. I crave only your continued safety and greatness." Her voice was shaking as badly as her limbs, and not all of it was acting. She kept her eyes cast down until the knife disappeared and the hand in her hair moved to her chin to lift it.

"My...greatness." Julian oozed satisfaction, his good humor restored at the scared slave's choice of words. His pleased smile beamed forth as he chuckled the Bajoran under the chin, then released her. "Very well, Seska, return to your duties. Let me know if Janeway and her cohorts do anything more than talk."

Seska pressed her forehead to the floor a moment in abject obeisance, then rose and backed toward the secret passage, still bowing. As she entered the narrow corridor and the door shut behind her, her expression shifted to one of speculation.

Someone else must have achieved the position of influence she hoped to fill. This was unacceptable. Her eyes narrowed as she decided to expand her spying to the Emperor himself.

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Lucien Picard Paris slept peacefully in his bed within the Imperial Palace. He was unaware that he did so under the inscrutable gaze of his uncle, Emperor Julian Bashir Picard. A slim golden hand stretched forth to smooth the hair back from the boy's brow.

The door opened and Tom walked through. He froze at the sight of Julian touching his son. He hurried forward as Lucien began to stir.

"Papa," the eight-year-old said plaintively as his sleep was disturbed.

Tom leaned down and replaced Julian's hand with his own. He kissed Lucien's forehead. "Shhh...it's
nothing, mon petit cher. Go back to sleep."

As the boy returned to his dreams Tom straightened and looked at his brother-in-law, containing his anger and anxiety with difficulty.

Julian still stared down at the cherubic, freckled face. "He sleeps so well because he knows he is loved."

"And we need to leave if we want him to stay asleep," Tom said firmly. His shoulders released their tension when Julian turned to exit. He quickly caught up outside the door. "It's late," he said.

Julian was silent as they made their way down the long corridor separating the Paris rooms from the Imperial suite. As the two men entered Julian's quarters, Tom automatically went to the sideboard. He mixed a tonic, surreptitiously stirring a sedative into the glass.

The Emperor walked to his desk, which was littered with padds full of his plans. He pushed them into piles, muttering, "I will remake this Empire in my own image. That's what the Council has yet to understand." His fingers rose to press against his temples. "All of my dreams and ideas are exploding in my head."

"Peace, sire." Tom's voice was soothing as he approached Julian. He offered the drink. "This will help you sleep." When one dark brow rose Tom shrugged and lifted the glass to his own lips, taking a healthy sip. He held out the glass again. This time Julian accepted and drained it.

Tom matter-of-factly took hold of Julian and assisted him to the bedroom. Julian stood still while his brother-in-law stripped him to his boxers. Then he slid under the covers, reaching to grip Tom's arm.

Given no choice, Tom gingerly sat on the side of the bed. He used his free hand to stroke the dark hair back from Julian's forehead, watching for signs the sleeping powder was taking effect.

Julian blinked slowly. "You always take such good care of me. Annika was so lucky to have you," he murmured, then perked up. "Tell me Tom, do you think it's time yet? Are the people ready for me to take complete control? To dissolve the Council and throw those jackals to the lions?" He chuckled at his own wordplay.

Tom swallowed down his fear at the Emperor's words. "You would know better than I, sire, but it does seem odd to have it happen on the forty-second day of celebration."

"You're right. It should be a milestone. We'll have to pick the perfect date." Julian's words were beginning to slur as the sedative began working its way through his system.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Tom said, preparing to ease away from the bed. He was startled when Julian's hand renewed its clasp.

"Will you stay with me?" Julian asked plaintively.

"Still afraid of the dark, old friend?" Tom asked, hoping his smile looked fond and not sickly.

"Always." Julian answered.

"You know I won't." Tom hoped his refusal wouldn't wake the Emperor's uncertain temper.

"Then kiss me," Julian commanded sleepily, releasing his captive.

Tom hesitated a moment, then pressed a firm kiss to the golden brow. He immediately stood and
made his way to the door, but heard Julian's last words just as he crossed the portal.

"If the people could see my nightmares, their screams would echo throughout the Empire," Julian whispered.

Tom's skin shivered with the chill in his soul.

Sisko's gladiators saw very little of Earth as they arrived there. The almost three-week trip had been spent in constant speculation. Many of the warriors, like B'Elanna, had never seen the human homeworld. Tuvok and a few others offered their anecdotes and impressions, but no one really knew what would await them. The Dorvan, as usual, kept his opinions to himself.

The ship was in orbit, dwarfed by an enormous Imperial Guard vessel. Sisko was in his tiny office off the bridge, narrowly watching two purple-shirted thugs scrutinizing his ID and cargo manifest. Another dozen were wandering the ship, manhandling his slaves and his prized artwork with equal brazenness.

The gladiator-owner had not set foot on Earth since he left it decades ago, soon after he had been set free by Jean-Luc Picard. But he had heard rumors that under the new regime the Fleet was kept far on the frontier guarding the borders against non-existent threats, while the Guard became Julian Bashir Picard's personal musclemen. They extorted "tribute" from anyone they pleased---which was everyone. Apparently those stories were true. Sisko sighed and gave in to the inevitable.

"Gentlemen," he said expansively, his smile dazzling. "You look like you've had a hard day in the Emperor's service. Allow me to offer you some refreshment." He opened a cabinet and drew forth two bottles. "A spot of Cardassian canard, perhaps, to ease your dry throats?"

The two leaders looked up from their discussion, interest in their eyes. One spoke. "I've heard it's the closest thing to ambrosia...but what does one eat with such a fine liquor?"

"Ah, I've always found some caviar, and goose liver paté to be quite complementary," Sisko said, relieved that these men craved the better things in life. They could be bribed. "Some Andorian spritsin cake should round out things nicely."

"Your offer is so generous, I hate to ask a small donation for the Imperial Relief Fund as well," the spokesman said smoothly, "but of course we can't make any exceptions." He exchanged a glance with his fellow squad leader. "Say...three hundred bars of latinum?"

Sisko nodded his agreement, secretly relieved to be getting off so cheaply. The two Guards set their thumbs to the padds and returned them to Sisko's desk. Then they signaled their men to transport back to their own ship.

"My chef has already given the package to your subordinates," Sisko reassured. He handed over the canard and a case he'd quickly filled with the cash. "Pleasure to meet you, gentlemen."

"The pleasure was ours, Mr. Sisko," the head Guard replied smoothly. "Welcome to Earth." They disappeared in a shimmer of blue.

Sisko's smile vanished the second they did.
The gladiators were transported directly into the courtyard of Sisko's recently purchased San Francisco compound. They squinted in the sunlight, noting the high walls, towers and forcefields enclosing the space. The training grounds were clear to see, as were the barracks. Sisko's residence was a separate four-story building across the quad, a garden with several fountains softening the ground in front of it.

But as impressive as their surroundings were, all eyes were drawn to the enormous Colosseum not three blocks away. The roar of hundreds of thousands of people could be heard rising from the massive structure.

B'Elanna's eyes were wide. In her life on the frontier she had never seen such a large building.

Tuvok regarded the Colosseum impassively and wondered if it would be different fighting there than on DS9.

The crowd's unformed sounds resolved into a chant. "Hail Emperor!" "Hail Emperor!" Julian Bashir Picard had arrived to watch the games.

Chakotay's eyes narrowed as he focused on the structure that held the man he now lived to kill.
Chapter 8

Sisko decided not to transport his fighters directly from his compound to the Colosseum. Instead, he forced them to walk the three blocks.

The gladiators would have preferred to forgo this little trek. They were collared, as they had not been since the day Sisko had purchased them. A phalanx of guards surrounded the group, keeping them to a sedate pace so the throng of people in line to enter the arena could get a good look at the fresh meat. The display increased the likelihood they would bet for or against Sisko's slaves. Either way he got a slice of the action.

Chakotay was careful to avoid the holorecorders as he made his way with the others. Since now he was just one among hundreds of unfamiliar warriors entered in the games, he was no longer masked. He hid himself in the middle of the pack, careful to keep taller gladiators around him.

B'Elanna's eyes narrowed as she amused herself deciding the best way to kill each of the guards. It was simply a way of passing the time. The band around her neck ensured she would get no more than a few steps away from her keepers before being paralyzed by pain.

She switched her musings to the Imperial Guardsmen, however, after she saw the purple-shirted bullies stealing from vendors and knocking over old men, women, and children. They picked on anyone who couldn't fight back. It reminded B'Elanna of the way she'd always been treated as a member of a "lesser species". Now apparently the humans were turning on their own. Such sympathy for the downtrodden was an unfamiliar feeling---she wasn't sure that she liked it.

Tuvok noted the Dorvan's careful maneuvering, the opposite of his own. He was hoping that his image *would* appear on a vidscreen, proof that the reassurances he projected to T'Pel were not exaggerated. Of course, whether he survived this first combat on Earth had yet to be seen. He shrugged off his fears as illogical as he passed with his companions under the 15-foot-high arch that marked one of the "performer" entrances to the Colosseum. Their collars were removed as they crossed the threshold.

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They were led to one of the street-level holding cells so the crowds could continue to inspect the new gladiators. Chakotay was quick to retreat to the far wall, sliding down to sit and make himself as inconspicuous as possible. From his position he could hear Sisko arguing with a strange-sounding man in the corridor he had just left.

"This is unacceptable!" Sisko was trying to keep control of his volume and temper but it was a losing battle. "My fighters are the best, skilled in single and small-group combat with multiple weapons. Now you tell me you want them for a melee?"

"Not all of them, sir." The android Data once again wished he was still at the Academy. He---and all other non-Terrans---had been expelled soon after the new Emperor took the throne.

Only the merest chance caused him to avoid slavery by becoming the orator and organizer for Julian Bashir Picard's gladiatorial games. He'd kept barely a step ahead of the Guards seeking his arrest as a possible threat to the Empire when he happened to see the Imperial hovercar in a nearby street. Using his mechanically enhanced vocal apparatus he'd recited verbatim a complimentary piece on the Emperor that had appeared in a recent news report. Julian had been curious enough to seek out his loud admirer. And flattered enough to spare Data deactivation or a life in chains by ordering him to
serve in the Colosseum.

So Data arranged and provided introductions for combats that had so far resulted in the deaths of 543 people. Some were trained warriors, but most were prisoners, political and otherwise. The Emperor was cleaning house by cleaning out the Empire's jails. Although his conscience bothered him, Data couldn't see any other option but to continue as he had begun. At least he knew the celebrations couldn't last forever. His attention returned to the irate slave-owner.

Sisko fumed, "But they're my top five fighters. I've seen the set-up you have planned. You might as well ask me to go in there and slit their throats myself. It would be kinder but no less inevitable."

Data knew his strange golden eyes could be unnerving, so he stared. He also allowed his voice to become flat and truly mechanical. "Your people will report to the weapons room as scheduled. They will be joined by slaves from three other schools and they *will* perform as expected or you, sir, will suffer the consequences of defying the Emperor's will."

Sisko knew when he was beaten, but still complained, "If I'm wasting these prime gladiators I want more money. I'll need it to buy replacement slaves, or I won't be able to fulfill the rest of my contract."

"You will receive the agreed-upon compensation, nothing more." Data's expression offered a hint of sympathy as he admitted, "There *is* no more money." He tilted his head. "Hopefully the betting will provide the extra funds you require."

Sisko watched the android leave and regretted ever returning to Earth.

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Chakotay leaned his head back against the rough stone, wondering what exactly was in store for him and his teammates. He watched the shifting sea of people pass before the wall of bars across the room, their eyes running over the captives.

A slim boy wrapped both hands around the metal and peered in, staring at each person in turn. Finally his eyes rested on Chakotay. "Gladiator!" Lucien called, "Are you the one they call the Dorvan?"

Something about the child's eager face brought the faintest smile to Chakotay's own. He pointed at his chest and raised his brows. At the boy's excited nod he lazily got to his feet and approached the bars. Leaning against them, he regarded his young fan. "Yes."

"They told me you were a giant," Lucien said. "They said you could crush a man's skull with one hand."

Chakotay extended his arm and spread his fingers. "A man's skull? No." He eyed his hand and then the boy's head, as if comparing their widths. "A boy's? Perhaps." He winked.

Lucien grinned and wriggled, pleased that this adult would banter with him. He leaned back, light-brown hair gleaming in the sun. "Is it true that you're from the frontier?"

"Yes," Chakotay answered, sinking into a crouch to put him on the child's level. Something about the boy's smile stirred vague memories. "I've never been to Earth before."

Lucien nodded to himself, then looked up. "I like you, Dorvan. I will cheer for you."

"They let you watch the games?" Chakotay concealed his horror---the child was obviously not even
Lucien Paris was 10 years old.

"My uncle says it makes me strong," Lucien said matter-of-factly.

Chakotay's eyes narrowed. "And what do your parents say?"

Lucien shrugged. "My mother's dead. My dad---"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, young Master Paris, but you must take your seat now." The servant, Gerron Tem, bowed respectfully to his small charge.

"Your name is Paris?" Chakotay's eyes widened at the realization that he was talking with Tom's son.

"Lucien Picard Paris," the boy said proudly before he skipped away with his Bajoran attendant.

Chakotay quickly darted back into the shadows, his eyes now constantly scanning for his enemies.

Chakotay, Tuvok, B'Elanna and two others had been moved to a staging area underneath the bleachers. They could see the people beginning to file in, quickly filling the vast array of seats.

Chakotay stepped up to one of the arena workers. "Is the Emperor here?" he asked.

The old man, Boothby, shrugged. "If he isn't he'll be here soon. He never misses a day."

Chakotay nodded his thanks and moved to where his teammates were gathering their equipment. They were being provided with light chain-mail to slide over their tunics, and helmets with face guards reminiscent of animal visages. Chakotay chose a cougar; it covered everything but his eyes, mouth and chin. He was handed a spear with a narrow leaf-shaped blade at the tip and a long, rectangular shield that curved like half of a column.

The five assembled in front of the gate, armed and ready. Boothby's voice rose behind them as he gave final instructions. "You have the honor of fighting before the Emperor himself. When you salute him, you speak and move as one. If he deigns to address you, make sure you never turn your back on him."

The gate opened and they filed out, watching three other quintets emerge from different entrances. They gathered into a loose group at the center of the vast arena and waited.

B’Elanna’s head tilted back as she strove to see the top rows of seats. The sheer scale of the building made her shiver. She'd never seen so many people gathered in one place in all her life.

Tuvok stood with his eyes closed, communing for a few precious moments with his beloved wife before the fighting began.

Chakotay kept his eyes on the Imperial box, which sat in solitary splendor atop a black marble wall fifteen feet high. At least fifty Imperial Guardsmen formed a barrier of flesh and phasers on three sides of the handful of velvet-cushioned seats.

He heard the murmur of excitement sweep through the crowd. The Emperor had arrived.

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Geordi winced at the raucous cheers that filled the stands as Julian entered, the Emperor's arms raised...
in acknowledgement and a benevolent smile on his face. He was followed by his brother-in-law and nephew. The Emperor's six personal bodyguards moved to stand in the back of the box, while the head of the Imperial Guard waited beside the Emperor's seat. As Julian sat the sounds died down. There was no mistaking the apparent popularity of the Imperial leader.

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Harry Kim tried not to look toward the Imperial box as he settled morosely into his own seat amid the crowd. The sight of Gregor Ayala attired in purple and black turned his stomach.

The last few months had been a hard struggle with the burden of his secret and the fear of its discovery. Even now, most conversations on Fleet ships whirled around the disappearance of the much-missed Admiral Chakotay. Or speculation on how his records vanished from all the Imperial databases.

Morale was at an all-time low throughout the Fleet. Riker's suggested remedy was to send ships one at a time to places like Risa or Earth for some extended R&R. When his plan was rejected, he "arranged" for each vessel to require upgrades that could only be done at core-Empire shipyards. That's how Harry ended up in the Colosseum this day. The Enterprise was back in the Sol system, being serviced in the Utopia Planitia shipyards while its vast crew scattered to enjoy their time off.

Harry appreciated the leeway shown by both Cavit and Riker. He'd been a bit of a wreck those first few days after Jean-Luc Picard's death. The two officers had thought he needed a change of scene, so he was transferred to the Enterprise to work with its new Captain. It didn't entirely ease his grief or anxiety, but it was enough to get him back on an even keel.

He sighed and got comfortable to experience his first gladiatorial games in person.

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Chakotay's jaw clenched as he gazed upon Julian. On one side of the man stood Greg Ayala; on the other, Tom and Lucien. His eyes narrowed at the cozy tableau. He calculated distances, angles and trajectories, but there was no way he could reach the Emperor for a killing blow from the arena floor. He looked away, breathing slowly and struggling to regain his focus. Now was not the time for vengeance—he needed to concentrate on survival.

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Lucien bounded to the edge of the Imperial box, pulling his father with him. Tom smiled and stood behind his son, wrapping one arm around the boy's shoulders and using the other hand to ruffle his unruly hair. "So where is your valiant champion, hmm?" he asked.

Keen eyes swept the now helmeted fighters, then with a triumphant "There!" Lucien pointed to a figure in the front of the group.

Tom looked down at the gladiators. "Are you sure he's the one you want to root for, mon cher? He's not as big and brawny as some of the others." Still, Tom conceded, his son's choice did have an aura of strength and power obvious even at this distance.

"Yes, him, the Dorvan. He's funny, and nice." Lucien's emphatic nod confirmed his decision.

"The Dorvan?" Tom murmured as his heart seized with memories of another native of that frontier planet, a man who was lost to him forever. His eyes returned to the gladiator as he silently wished the Dorvan luck.
Julian settled into the cushions of his throne-like chair, gazing at the adoring crowd. His eyes shifted to watch Tom's figure for a few moments as he eavesdropped on the father-son conversation. When the Paris men turned to take their seats he greeted them with a smile. Everything was going according to plan.

Data took his place at a small box that was on the same level as the Emperor's. At Julian's signal he gestured to the gladiators below.

The twenty warriors formed themselves into ragged rows facing the Emperor. They lifted their weapons and in traditional fashion shouted, "We who are about to die salute you!" The crowd roared its approval as Julian gave a gracious nod.

Chakotay raised his spear so he wouldn't stand out, but remained silent.

When the cheers died down Data sent his mechanically enhanced voice echoing throughout the vast arena. "We gather here today to celebrate the memory of Emperor Jean-Luc Picard. Today we reenact in gladiatorial fashion one of his great victories: the siege at Armanden. There he personally led the Imperial forces to victory against the Andorian fleet by encircling their vessels and picking them off one by one. Until there was not a single ship or enemy left."

His outflung arm swept over the gladiators below. "Emperor Julian Bashir Picard gives you, ladies and gentlemen, that barbarian horde!"

Boos and catcalls thundered forth and hisses also snaked from the spectators' throats. The warriors ignored them; they were on alert for the first appearance of their opponents.

Data pressed a button on the console hidden beneath his box's ledge. The gates slid open as he roared, "And the valiant Imperial Fleet!"

Eight horse-drawn chariots flashed into view from the opened gates. Each vehicle had a single horse and two people: a male driver and a woman who wielded a complex crossbow. The chariot itself was dangerous as well, with foot-long serrated blades sticking out from the wheel hubs.

It was clearly a fixed fight. The warriors on foot would get one chance to throw their spears at the speeding vehicles, but themselves were vulnerable to being shot, slashed, trampled or run over. Data had made certain that the representatives of the Imperial Fleet would win, as the Emperor expected.

The chariots plowed through the group of gladiators, scattering them before their deadly wheels. Then the vehicles headed for the edges of the arena. They galloped along as if they were on a racetrack and started picking off the warriors trapped in the center of the ring.

Chakotay watched the man beside him go down, a crossbow bolt in his throat. If he didn't act soon they would all be dead. His voice rang across the arena. "Join me! If we work together we can win!"

Tuvok and Sisko's two other male fighters immediately came to his side. The remaining gladiators,
hearing the authority in the stranger's tone, also obeyed. Only B'Elanna remained outside, still too used to fighting alone. She raised her spear, determined to strike down her enemies.

Chakotay quickly arranged the fighters in a diamond formation. "Close shields! Lock them into position! Get down behind them! Heads and limbs in! Use your shoulders in the curve to hold them steady!"

The charioteers were stymied. The overlapping shields formed a solid wall that their bolts couldn't penetrate. One dared to set its blades against the protection, sparking and scraping along the united front. The driver failed to break the fighters' positions and returned to circling with the rest.

***************

The crowd had never seen teamwork on such a large scale in the arena. They were wildly cheering the apparent leader of this impromptu battle group.

Lucien joined them, shouting for the Dorvan and waving his arms. Even Julian was on the edge of his seat.

Other voices were shouting for B'Elanna, who stood alone still waiting for the right moment to attack.

***************

Two chariots left the outer ring, plunging straight for the tightly packed group of gladiators.

At Chakotay's command the fighters closed even more. The men and women in the center lifted their shields parallel to the floor. When they also were set into position, the group's defenses formed a solid shell with the people huddled within.

As the first chariot's left wheel hit the new arrangement, the gladiators tilted their shields slightly. The wheel ran up the slight incline and tipped over, crashing the vehicle to the ground and flinging out the two occupants. The horse stood trembling, its eyes white-ringed with fear.

B'Elanna ran over to sweep up an abandoned crossbow. She shouted in pain as a bolt from another chariot's archer sank into her calf. As she looked down to assess the wound, she lost track of the other vehicles.

The second chariot veered away from the apparently dangerous shield formation and headed for the lone gladiator.

Chakotay leapt from behind the protective barrier and ran toward B'Elanna with a shout of warning. He pushed the half-Klingon to the ground, and pressed himself as flat as possible. He felt the whoosh of air as the spinning blades passed mere inches above his back.

***************

The arena seats were empty. Everyone was on their feet, yelling and straining to see every second of this stunning spectacle. As Chakotay helped B'Elanna to stand they cheered his gallant, foolish act of bravery.

Tuvok saw an archer aiming for his friends. He desperately flung his spear. It struck the woman, going through her body and wounding the driver.

The horse went wild as the reins fell from the injured man's slack hands. As it veered around the
arena, the chariot banged against the wall, disgorging the wounded and dead. The animal kept running until it crashed into a third chariot and both vehicles plummeted through one of the gates, never to emerge again.

***************

Five full chariot teams still circled the ring. Chakotay ran to the white stallion standing by the crouched gladiators. He used the blade from a broken spear to cut the animal from its harness. Leaping on its back, he wheeled to chase after one of the remaining pairs.

The archer saw him first, a helmeted figure swinging his horse from side to side, a difficult target. She fired her four bolts and knelt in the chariot, scrambling to reload her crossbow.

Chakotay urged his mount forward until he was even with the driver. Swinging the half-spear like a sword, he sliced the man's neck and rode away. As the cart crashed into the wall, the archer grabbed her weapon and ran for cover.

***************

Chakotay halted his mount near the center, calling to the gladiators who were emerging to engage the opponents who had been spilled from their transports. He shouted, "Split into two columns! Drag the wrecks into the track! It'll keep the others from circling!"

Tuvok grabbed two abandoned spears as the men and women rushed to obey. B'Elanna took charge of one of the groups, using her shield to protect them as they moved the wreck. Tuvok tossed one weapon to the Dorvan and gripped the other, seeking a target.

***************

B'Elanna hefted her spear as one of the remaining four chariots flashed by. Her mighty throw penetrated the side of the vehicle and sank into the pelvis of the archer, killing the woman instantly. B'Elanna grunted in satisfaction as she saw the Dorvan's spear pierce the driver. The chariot with its two corpses continued to roll around the arena.

The other gladiators used their spears to target the remaining vehicles. They quickly dispatched one team.

Chakotay leaned down from his running horse's back and snatched up another spear. He flung it toward the chariot in front of him, hearing the thunk as it impaled the driver, pinning the corpse to the front of the vehicle. The archer soon fell before the other warriors' weapons.

***************

The last chariot's driver slapped the reins against his horse's back, focused on catching up with the cursed gladiator who had turned certain victory into utter defeat. He leaned forward, urging his mount on, drawing closer.

Chakotay glanced behind him, measuring the rapidly decreasing distance between himself and his opponent. When the other horse's nose was at his mount's tail he galloped his stallion toward one of the wrecks. The powerful animal jumped over it as Chakotay clamped his legs against its heaving sides.

The chariot driver pulled back desperately on the reins, but it was too late. He crashed into the broken chariot. He went sailing over the wreckage to land heavily on the floor, while the archer was slammed into the inside of the chariot. Both of them dazedly staggered to their feet only to be
chopped down by the rival gladiators.

Chakotay stopped his horse and looked around. The few remaining "Imperials" were being mopped up by his "Barbarian" comrades. As he slid to the ground he was swept into the midst of the gladiators, B'Elanna and Tuvok in the lead. His back was slapped, hand pumped, and his ears were filled with grateful thanks and victorious shouts.

Their voices were drowned out by the roaring spectators. And thanks to the holocams, those cries of jubilant appreciation echoed throughout the Empire.

***************

Julian watched Lucien pounding his excitement into the ledge surrounding the Imperial box. He'd been standing there since the gladiators had knocked out the first chariot. A glance sideways revealed a stunned Tom, whose eyes were still riveted on the arena.

The Emperor caught the attention of his orator. "My history is a little fuzzy, Data, but didn't the Empire win the siege of Armanden?" he asked silkily.

Data nervously answered, "Yes, sire. I'm sorry, sire." He wondered if he would be sold into slavery or melted into scrap.

"I don't mind. It's been a most exciting surprise," Julian remarked, noting the android's human-like slump of relief. He pointed to the gladiator leader. "Who is he?"

"They call him the Dorvan, sire," was the immediate response.

Julian set slim fingers against the arms of his chair and pushed himself to his feet. "I think I'll meet him."

***************

The sweaty, exhausted, and in some cases bloody gladiators trooped toward an opened gate. They froze in their tracks when two columns of Imperial Guards appeared, marching in brisk formation onto the arena floor. They quickly boxed in the fighters.

A small door in the black marble wall slid open and Greg Ayala stepped forth. He quickly crossed to the group. "Throw down your weapons," he ordered the gladiators, who quickly dropped their spears and crossbows.

"You, Dorvan," Greg focused on the helmeted man. "The Emperor has asked for you."

"I am at Julian Bashir Picard's service," Chakotay replied. He saw a broken crossbow bolt laying on the ground in front of him. He quickly went to one knee. The rest of the gladiators followed suit. In the flash and clank of chainmail, he palmed the weapon, hiding the remains of its shaft behind his arm as he waited.

He watched Julian catch up with Ayala and continue his approach. Chakotay counted the strides left until he could strike.

Just before the Emperor was within range, a small figure dashed through the portal and ran across the arena. Lucien reached his uncle and grabbed his hand.

Julian indulgently swung the boy around to stand in front of him as he entered the living enclosure created by the Imperial Guards. "Rise, Rise!" he jovially commanded, then waited as the gladiators
stood. He focused on the leader. "Your reputation is well-deserved, Dorvan. I don't think there's ever been a gladiator to match you. This fellow," he laid his hands on Lucien's shoulders, "swears you are as good as James T. Kirk would have been if he'd ever played in the games."

The Emperor regarded the man's hidden features. "So why doesn't the hero remove his helmet and tell us his name?" he asked.

After a moment of silent stillness Julian's voice and expression cooled somewhat. "You do have a name, don't you?" he inquired, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes.

Chakotay swallowed down his rage. He couldn't strike with Lucien in the way. "My name is Gladiator," he said and turned to walk away.

The crowd gasped. No one dared insult the Emperor by turning their back on him.

As Julian fumed, the Dorvan continued his exit. He gestured, and the Guards blocking the way drew their phasers. The defiant man stopped.

"Slave!" Julian commanded, "You *will* show your face and tell me your name."

Chakotay took a deep breath, then raised his hands to his head and drew off its covering. He turned to face his the man who destroyed his life.

Julian's face paled to the color of parchment. Greg Ayala gasped.

In the stands, Harry and dozens of other Fleeters held their hands to their gaping mouths.

Tom rose to his feet, his face reflecting his shock.

Data surreptitiously raised the volume on the speakers.

Chakotay's voice rang clearly throughout the Colosseum. "I am Chakotay of Dorvan V. Admiral of the Imperial Fleet and loyal servant to the *true* Emperor, Jean-Luc Picard."

His voice roughened. "Sole survivor of the massacre at Trebus. Husband to a murdered wife. Father to a murdered son." His gaze focused on Julian. "And I will have the justice their blood cries out for."

He and Julian locked eyes.

Then Julian gestured again. Greg Ayala swallowed a few times, but finally ordered, "Phasers set to kill."

The crowd erupted in cries of rage and denial, booing and holding their thumbs up for their new champion to be spared.

The Emperor looked at the hundreds of thousands cheering for his mortal enemy and knew their shouts echoed across the realm. Julian schooled his features back into their benevolent mask and stuck out his own hand, thumb up. The gladiator would live.

The people went wild, cheering and dancing. Then the chant began. "Chakotay! Chakotay! Chakotay!" It showed no signs of stopping soon.

Tom, Geordi, and a few other attending Council members looked at the mob turned into a coherent force, drawn together by their admiration of a single man. Their eyes kindled with mingled hope and speculation.
Chakotay turned away again and left the arena floor. This time the Guards didn't try to stop him.

Julian waited until his enemy disappeared into the shadows under the stands, then turned to make his own way back to the palace. He had plans to make.

He swore this time Chakotay would not escape.
"What do you mean, there's no record of him?" Jake Sisko leaned over his fellow researcher's shoulder, staring at the computer screen.

"I'm telling you, Jake, there's nothing here. Not one iota of data. Not a single reference in the whole freakin' database." Billy Telfer flung himself back in his chair in frustration. "It's like the entire Empire was wiped clean of his name."

"But that's impossible!" Jake dropped into his own seat, his expressive hands waving his disbelief. "He's been around for what, fifteen years?"

"Seventeen" came the automatic correction.

"And he's been the Admiral of the entire Imperial Fleet for almost two years. Heck, people remember his name because it wasn't until he took command that we actually started winning against the Dominion." Jake rested his elbows on the desk. "How can all that just disappear?"

Telfer shrugged. "What I want to know is how *he* disappeared. If I remember it right, he dropped out of the dispatches at about the same time Jean-Luc Picard died." His gaze grew speculative. "I wonder if there's a connection."

"All I know is I can't even begin to gather some facts for the senior reporters if there's no research to be had." Jake hunched over his hands morosely. "I was hoping I could find a hook for a story assignment of my own."

"Ah, ever the aspiring writer," Billy teased his ambitious friend, then relented. "Why don't we pay a visit to the Mouse? Maybe he can dig something up for you."

Jake rolled his eyes. "All we'll get from him is another conspiracy theory."

Billy shrugged. "In this case, a wide-flung, nefarious plot doesn't sound all that far-fetched."

The other man nodded and they rose, stretching their long frames. The two Imperial News Network employees crossed the large, bustling room, dodging graphics personnel dashing around with data crystals. Veteran scribes were busily typing out commentary for the striking, incredible footage of gladiators united in combat. And the riveting moment when Chakotay of Dorvan V revealed his identity.

***************

Mortimer Harren, aka the Mouse, worked in the dim warren of cubicles in the basement of the building. He and his colleagues kept the computer networks operating and secure. Mortimer was intrigued by the idea of patterns. He spent a lot of his time creating very odd programs to do things like search for changes in coffee consumption based on the weather on various areas of Earth. He was considered interesting, but a bit odd. Most people didn't mind that though, since his theories were so entertaining.

Jake and Billy walked into his office to find Mortimer absorbed in a project. "Hey Mort," Billy said lazily as he pulled up a chair to straddle. "Whatcha workin' on?"

Mortimer barely spared the time to shoot an irritated glance at the disturbance. "I'm trying to reconstruct our files on Admiral Chakotay. It looks like someone slipped a very powerful virus into
our network. It got past all of our filters and safeguards."

His brow knit. "All of *my* protections too. I want to find out how that happened and what was so important about one military record that it warranted total eradication." He flashed a look at his friend. "And when I know how, I bet who will fall right into my lap."

Jake perched on the arm of another chair. "That's great, Mort. Could you let me know if you find anything? I'm supposed to send some facts up to the main desk for a batch of articles."

Mortimer grinned. "And you want to scope out a unique angle to snag a story of your own?"

Jake groaned as the other two laughed.

"Hey Mort," Billy asked, "why are you started on this already? Did somebody already tip you off?"

"I asked him to," came a soft voice behind them. Science writer Noah Lessing had just walked in, accompanied by one of Mortimer's coworkers, Celes Tal. He moved forward and handed Mortimer a mug. Then the tall man folded himself into another chair. Tal perched on her desk.

"You see," Noah said, "Admiral Chakotay saved my life a few years ago. I didn't like the idea of people forgetting about him, so I asked Mort to do some digging."

"He did? How?" Jake leaned forward, intrigued.

Noah settled back into his seat. "I was a Lieutenant on Voyager, usually worked at Ops or Stellar Cartography. Chakotay was still a Captain back then, but we all knew where he was heading."

A smile lit his face in memory. "You'd never know to look at him that the Cap was pretty much second in command of the Fleet. He could replace conduits and haul boxes with the best of them. And he was so...approachable, you know? Anyway, one time we were ambushed by some Cardassian ships. We were way outnumbered but the Cap managed to knock them out and get us away. Ship was pretty badly shot up, though."

He sighed and shifted. "I was helping Engineering make some repairs. All of a sudden there was an overload in the Jeffries tube where I was working. Place filled with fire and smoke. Something glitched in the computer and the hatches began sealing automatically. I was barely ahead of them, and I couldn't call for help since the comm was down."

Noah shook his head, light gleaming off his shaved pate. "I was crawling as fast as I could but I could see the hatch to the corridor starting to close. Between the exit and me was a sparking, burning broken conduit. I knew that I couldn't reach the controls and I'd be locked in there to either burn or smother to death. I shouted---to this day I don't know why---and suddenly the door stopped closing. After a moment a silhouette appeared. It was Chakotay. He had used something to brace the hatch open and he was coming to help me."

His dark eyes unfocused as he sank deeper into the memory. "The manual control to switch off the power was right under that burning conduit. I couldn't get to it at all. I figured the Cap couldn't either. I was all ready to tell him to get the hell out when he took a deep breath and dove through the fire, slapping the power off as he passed. We beat out the flames on his uniform, then crawled out and headed straight to Sickbay. He lost his entire sleeve, and he had a wicked burn down his arm. I had smoke inhalation. I figured I could live with that, considering I should have been dead."

"Is that when you resigned?" That question came from Tal.

"Yeah, pretty soon afterward. I just couldn't handle the idea of entering those tubes again." He
shrugged. "You can't serve on a ship with that kind of fear. So I cashed out as soon as I could. I told the Cap in person. He was cool about it. Said he hated to lose me but understood."

"Damn," Jake breathed, "that's quite a story. No wonder you set Mort on the trail."

"Yeah," Noah agreed, "Chakotay doesn't deserve to be erased." His face hardened. "Or turned into a slave."

"I wonder what happened to him," Billy mused.

"I don't know," Tal said as she returned to her seat. "But Admiral Chakotay saved Bajor from the Dominion, so count me in to help find out."

Suddenly a voice sounded over the comm. "Jake Sisko, report to the Managing Editor's office. Jake Sisko, report to the Managing Editor's office."

"Duty calls," Jake said as he rose. "Good luck, guys."

The quartet waved him off and soon became absorbed in their work.

*****************

While news of the events at the Colosseum swept across the Empire, things were pretty much business as usual at Sisko's compound. His gladiators had been healed, cleaned up and attired in fresh tunics. Now they sat with the others in the training areas, dining al fresco.

B'Elanna and Tuvok had already received their meals and were busily eating. The half-Klingon was pausing between bites to fire questions at her suddenly famous teammate. "So, you were an admiral?" she checked after swallowing a chunk of beef.

"I was *the* Admiral," Chakotay confirmed quietly.

The news was received with a dubious Hmph. B'Elanna followed up with, "And you fought in many battles?"

"Over the years, yes." Chakotay nodded.

Her snapping eyes narrowed. "Against Klingons?"

Chakotay shrugged. He refused to lie, even if it earned him B'Elanna's wrath. "When they gave me no choice."

B'Elanna looked at him for a long moment, then nodded and went back to her meal.

"Admiral, your food is ready." The cook, whose kitchen had a long serving window like an old-fashioned take-out stand, held out a plate. All eyes followed the former officer as he crossed and accepted the vegetable stew. He ignored the scrutiny as he always had and made his way back to his companions.

Chakotay forked up a bite, but paused before it reached his lips. His brow furrowed as he regarded the innocuous-looking mixture.

"The people of the Empire know who you are now, Chakotay. And they're beginning to remember what you meant to them. The Emperor cannot kill you secretly anymore. He must be careful in his arrangements so he is above suspicion."
Chakotay continued to stare at his plate, remembering what happened to Jean-Luc.

B’Elanna snorted and dug her utensil into the mass of vegetables and grains. She opened her mouth wide, shoved in the food and ostentatiously chewed and swallowed. A few seconds later she started making strange noises as her jaw worked. Her hand flew to her throat and her eyes bugged. Tuvok and Chakotay leaned forward, ready to rush for aid. Suddenly she grinned at them, enjoying their panic at her joke.

Chakotay snorted as the other gladiators nearby chuckled and shook his head, then began to eat.

***************

Tom nervously entered Julian's suite, uncertain of the Emperor's temper. He was surprised to see Julian calmly seated at the desk, reading reports. He cleared his throat. "Hello sire, I simply wanted to check on you after such an...unusual day."

Julian felt perfectly calm. He had made his plans and dispatched his minions to carry them out. Now all he had to do was wait. He stared at his brother-in-law a moment, then pointedly stated, "You know I did what I had to."

"Yes, sire." Tom kept his expression neutral.

"If Father's plan had succeeded the Empire would have been thrown into chaos and ruin." Julian's tone brooked no argument, not that Tom would dare offer one. "And *Chakotay* was nothing more than Jean-Luc's lapdog," Julian gritted. "He had to be put down."

Suddenly Julian stood and moved nose to nose with Tom, his eyes fierce. "You do understand, don't you? There was nothing else to be done."

"Yes, sire," Tom answered firmly.

Julian whirled again, pacing. "He shouldn't be alive. It angers me, that my orders were not carried out. The Guard must be taught to obey." He paused and looked over his shoulder at Tom, keen eyes watching for a reaction as he asked, "What did you feel, when you saw Chakotay again?"

Tom's face stayed frozen as he automatically replied, "I felt nothing."

Black brows rose. "That wouldn't have been true, once upon a time."

Tom shrugged. "That was ten years ago, when hormones were raging and my...place...not so clear."

He held his breath, willing Julian to believe the lie.

The Emperor nodded, satisfied by the response. He strode to the desk and picked up a padd. He began, "I've been meaning to ask you about this plan for..."

Tom breathed again, then quickly took his position at Julian's elbow.

***************

Benjamin Sisko sat in front of the comm panel deleting message after message from media services. He had no intention of letting those vultures swarm his compound, flapping and snapping at each other as they squawked their questions.

He paused as he read the name of the next supplicant. His expression grew thoughtful as he settled more deeply into his chair and pushed the button to play this missive.
"Hi, Dad." Jake Sisko looked ill-at-ease as he shifted, then lifted his eyes to face the screen. "I know we haven't spoken in a while, but---" the young man gave a sudden, explosive sigh. "Shit, forget this. The network's Managing Editor—the big boss—is making me ask for an exclusive. With you, and Admiral Chakotay, and any of your other fighters who have a story."

Sisko watched his son run a hand over his close-cropped hair. "But I don't care about this assignment, Dad. Not if you're going to think it's the only reason I called." His gaze grew accusing, "I found out you're here—with the Admiral—from one of INN's sources. Why didn't you tell me you had come to Earth?"

After a hard stare that Sisko was glad he hadn't been available to witness for real, Jake slumped. "I just want to see you, Dad, or talk to you. Please, contact me." The message abruptly cut off.

Sisko played the recording one more time, then sat in front of the blank screen for a while, lost in memories.

Eventually he straightened, decision made, and moved to the next message in the queue.

*****************************************************************************

Chakotay was still awake, listening to the faint murmur of the city that didn't sleep even in the dead of night. So he easily heard the tramp of boots echoing in the corridor. He leapt to his feet, wondering if he would soon be fighting for his life.

Instead, the door opened and low lights slapped on. Gladiators stirred, awakened by the disturbance.

"You, Admiral," a guard called, "Come here."

Sharing a glance with a newly conscious Tuvok, Chakotay relaxed and made his way to the man who summoned him. He stepped into the hallway and was quickly surrounded by a quartet of Sisko's men armed with phasers. He silently accompanied them down the corridor to a separate room near the exit to the building.

The door opened and he was gestured inside. The moment he was past the portal his arms were seized. He resisted the instinctive urge to struggle and allowed himself to be dragged toward a corner. Once there, he was spun and his wrists shackled to two chains set in the wall at waist level.

His jaw clenched as he spied a cloaked figure on the other side of the room. B'Elanna had told him Sisko never had sex with his gladiators; nor did he sell their favors as other owners did. Apparently she was wrong. His chin lifted. Whoever had bought his services would not be getting their money's worth.

When the guards left the swathed form stirred. A pale hand lifted to slide back the cowl as a familiar voice drawled, "I don't know what Sisko paid for you, but he certainly made his money back in what he charged me to be pleasured by the star gladiator of the Colosseum."

The second those blue eyes appeared Chakotay lunged, only to be brought up short, his arms held back by the chains. His lip curled as he sneered, "I knew Julian would send assassins. But I never expected he would send his best."

"He doesn't know I'm here, Chakotay." Tom's features crumpled. "You know I'd never hurt you."

Chakotay said nothing, merely raised a brow as his eyes swept contemptuously up and down Tom's form. He stalked back to his corner, then whirled. "Just like you didn't know my entire family was marked for death the night Julian murdered Jean-Luc?"
"I swear to you, I didn't know." Tom strode up to the silent, stiff figure, determined to convince him. "You have to believe me."

Suddenly a strong bronze hand whipped out and grabbed Tom, squeezing his throat. Tom trembled at the icy rage in the dark eyes.

"You forget, Tom, I was there. I saw you with him and Ayala." Chakotay resisted the urge to break Tom's neck as the anguished memories swept over him. "They killed everyone in the village. They were all innocent." His grip tightened. "My son was innocent."

"So is mine!" Tom wanted to shout but could only whisper.

Chakotay stared at him a moment and knew that he couldn't kill Lucien's father. He flung the tall figure away as if he couldn't bear to have Tom near him.

Rubbing his sore throat, Tom stumbled to his feet. "Julian never gave an order that I heard, Chakotay, I swear it. And I have been living with that black-hearted snake every day since Jean-Luc died. Unable to mourn him, or you."

Tom looked away a moment, struggling for control. He asked in despair, "Must my son die too before you'll trust me?"

Chakotay nearly snorted but didn't. He leaned back against the wall. "Why should it matter if I trust you or not?"

"Because you're the key to everything, Chakotay." Tom spread his hands. "Didn't you see what happened in the arena today? I did. I saw a gladiator become more powerful than the Emperor."

A sharp, disbelieving bark of laughter greeted Tom's claim. "I am a *slave*, or hadn't you noticed?" Chakotay's lips thinned. "The only power I have is to amuse a mob."

"That *is* power," Tom insisted. "The mob is the Empire. Whoever controls it holds the destiny of us all. Julian knows it, that's why he fears you. The Emperor only reigns so long as he controls the Fleet and the Guard. Both of *them* can be made to bow to the will of the people."

Tom stepped forward, determined to make his point. "Julian has many enemies, especially in the Council. But they aren't able to stand up to him—you already have."

"So they oppose Julian but do nothing?" Chakotay spat.

"Some of them have spoken out...one person in particular." Tom reached out, his face filled with hope. "If I arrange it, will you meet with her?"

Chakotay slid away from the pale outstretched fingers, his face set like stone. "You refuse to understand. I am a slave. Nothing more. I could die in this compound tonight or in the arena tomorrow. What possible difference can I make?"

"This woman wants what you want," Tom insisted.

"Then let *her* kill Julian." Chakotay knew he had no heart left to open to this man who had once held a significant piece of it, along with a portion of his soul. Both had been blasted away by the phasers that struck Dorvan V. "Yesterday your plans didn't include me. Today should be no different."

Tom dropped his arm, defeated. "I knew a man once," he said, eyes boring into Chakotay's. "A man
of honor and principle, who loved Jean-Luc Picard and was loved as a son in return. That man served the Empire, and we were all the better for it."

Chakotay’s harsh expression matched his tone. "That man is dead. Your Emperor did his work well."

Unable to resist, Tom stepped forward, laying a hand on one stiff shoulder. "Let me help you," he implored in a whisper.

"Yes, you can help me," Chakotay answered just as quietly. "Forget I ever existed. Never come here again."

He moved away from Tom, calling "Guard! The...gentleman...is finished with me."

One guard entered, unlocked the chains and led the slave back to the other three members of the escort to the sleeping area. Chakotay never looked back.

Tom stood a moment, calming his ragged breath and churning emotions. Then his shoulders straightened and he swept from the room.

***************

Sisko was lounging on a settee eating grapes when his wealthy visitor was ushered back into his presence. He took in the blond's clenched jaw and stiff shoulders and drawled, "No refund. I warned you he wouldn't be receptive to your charms."

Tom's eyes flashed for a moment as he considered taking out his anger on the man who dared own Chakotay, but kept his temper in check. "I'm not here to demand my money back. I'd like to make you another offer."

Sisko raised a brow and waited.

"You know who I am," Tom said matter-of-factly, "so you know what kind of resources I have access to. I'd like to send a team to increase the security here, and to install some anti-monitoring devices."

Dark eyes narrowed. "And how much would that cost me?"

"Nothing." Tom shrugged.

Sisko laughed and waved his arm as if shooing away concerns. "So you're just going to provide some very expert services out of the goodness of your heart?"

His face lost its jovial mask as he sat up. "That's a little too generous, my Imperial friend. You make me wonder if I should break my other rule and have our luscious gladiator delivered to my bed. Obviously the Admiral did *something* to inspire such largesse."

Tom bit back his instinctive response. He knew the wily entrepreneur was baiting him. "Chakotay has enemies, and right now he's not able to defend himself. Keeping him safe---" Tom couldn't resist the jibe "So he can risk his life in the arena for your profit is in *your* best interest. I'm giving you a way to do that at no cost to yourself."

The blue eyes were steady as they gazed upon Sisko. "What's your answer?"

Sisko considered the offer. He sensed the danger the Dorvan was in, as well as Paris's sincerity in wanting him safe. In the end the chance for free services decided him. "Very well. Bring them back
here in an hour with the proper credentials and identification."

"I---I can't have them directly associated with me," Tom admitted. "It would be too dangerous. But their identities can be confirmed via the Imperial database."

"Very well." Sisko stood and escorted the cloaked man to the small transporter alcove. He watched Paris pull out and tap on a small device, obviously some kind of computer. "What are their names?"

Tom looked up just as he was about to transport. "Reginald Barclay and Marla Gilmore."

Sisko made a mental note of the names, then returned to his settee to wait, very pleased with himself and the universe.

***************

Tom reappeared in his son's closet, which was actually a fair-sized dressing room. He quickly shed the cloak and buried it in Lucien's pile of "costumes"---cast-off clothing the boy used when pretending to be a pirate, or spaceship captain, or hero of old. Tom slipped out to see his son still sleeping, and Tem in a chair nearby nervously watching a small screen in his lap.

"Did anyone come looking for me?" Tom asked anxiously.

"No, sir, it's been quiet." Tem stood and switched the sensor net's monitor off with relief. "If there's nothing else?" he asked hopefully. The Bajoran was grateful that Thomas Paris had rescued him from slavery and actually hired him to attend Lucien. But all of this cloak-and-dagger skulking about and stealth technology unnerved him.

Tom smiled sadly...he knew his young servant preferred a less dangerous life. He appreciated that despite Tem's fears the Bajoran hadn't abandoned them to return to Bajor, even though Tem was free to do so. "I'm sorry, Tem, but there's one more thing I need you to do. You know where Reg Barclay lives?" He waited for a nod, then walked over to Lucien's desk and hastily wrote a letter on real paper. He folded it and handed it to the younger man. "Please take this message to him right away. It's extremely urgent."

Tem sighed and accepted the note. He knew Tom wouldn't ask if it weren't vitally important. "All right. Front exit, back door, or hidden passage?"

"Hidden passage," Tom confirmed. "No one can know. And thank you."

Tem just nodded and slipped away on his errand.

Tom crossed to Lucien's bed. He sat beside his son and just stared into the boy's face, releasing the iron hold on his emotions. The feelings swelled, jumbling together into a tangled, aching mass.

When he first saw Chakotay in the flesh he'd been stunned by the dual slam of love and lust through his own body. He'd felt driven to tenderly embrace his love and at the same time passionately kiss the lover he'd only had in dreams. It hadn't helped that Chakotay's tunic, which left exquisitely muscled arms and calves bare, sparked his imagination. His wicked thoughts included sinking to his knees and finding out what prize awaited him under the edge of the flowing blue cloth.

But then he'd looked into Chakotay's face and saw the changes in the man. Those dark brown eyes had always been open to him, warm and soft and honest in their passion or pain. Now they were closed and cold. But even Chakotay couldn't hide their sorrow.

Tom ached for Chakotay. He reached out a hand to adjust Lucien's blanket. He couldn't imagine
having his son ripped from his arms, brutally murdered. Add to that wife, family, tribe, village---
everything and everyone utterly destroyed. He didn't know how Chakotay had stayed sane under
such a burden of grief.

On top of that Chakotay was sold into slavery and forced to fight for his very life. It was a brutal,
bloody existence that left its mark upon the soul.

Tom's lips twisted. Of course the circumstances of their meeting were less than ideal as well. To be
dragged from your bed and chained to a wall---and then be set face to face with someone you believe
betrayed you in every possible way. Tom knew how damming his presence at Julian's side appeared.
No wonder Chakotay couldn't find it in his heart to trust Tom.

Lucien murmured and Tom automatically stroked his brow soothingly. He frowned, suddenly
remembering that the tattoo was gone from Chakotay's face. That did not bode well for the other
man's state of mind. He hadn't noticed before in the shock of Chakotay's disbelieving expression.

Tom lost himself in memories a moment, wondering if he'd ever see Chakotay's stunning dimpled
smile again. His own face filled with determination. His actions tonight would help keep Chakotay
safe, at least outside of the Colosseum. That bought both of them some time. For now it would have
to be enough.

***************

Will Riker frowned, snuggling closer to the body in bed beside him. The sound disturbing his sleep
became clear a moment later when the comm unit beeped again. He rose with a low growl,
wondering who had dared ignore his orders to be left alone. A quick glance told him his companion
hadn't wakened, so he stalked to the small desk, dragging on a robe as he went. He plopped down in
the chair, thinking the hotel manager would receive a scathing complaint in the morning. He
wouldn't use this establishment the next time he was on Risa, that was for sure.

One finger forcefully stabbed the appropriate button. "Riker," he barked.

"I---I'm sorry to bother you during leave, Captain, but it's very important and I knew you wouldn't be
watching the news feeds." Harry Kim's face filled the screen with excitement and anxiety. "Sir,
Admiral Chakotay's alive!"

"What?" Will's jaw dropped and his eyes widened, stunned. His face filled with hope as he leaned
forward. "Where? How? What the hell happened to him? When can he retake command?"

Harry's shoulders slumped with relief. He'd taken a big risk, not knowing if Capt. Riker was
involved in the original plot. The man's obvious joy at the news dispelled his fears. "He's on Earth,
sir. He's a slave, a gladiator fighting in the Colosseum. I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't
seen it with my own eyes." He met his CO's gaze. "We have to do something, sir."

Will's hand automatically rose to stroke his beard as his brows lowered in thought. "Tell the crew to
make their way to the Sol system but then sit tight. Don't do anything, don't say anything until I can
get there and figure out what's going on." At Harry's crisp nod Will smiled. He too felt more alive
than he had since the day Jean-Luc Picard died. "We'll get him back, Harry."

Harry felt his own lips curve, prompted by Will's excited grin. "I never doubted it, Captain. I'll pass
the word and wait for your orders." He pushed a button and the screen went black. He stood up,
feeling more himself than he had in months.

***************
Will stared at his faint reflection in the darkened comm. Then another figure appeared, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I take it your resignation has been put on hold?" Deanna Troi asked. Ironically, it wasn't the noise that woke her. It was the surge of joy and hope from her Imzadi. A few months ago when they'd rendezvoused for the first time since the Emperor's death she'd been shocked at how...diminished Will had seemed. As he told her about the loss of not only his revered leader but also his dear friend and respected CO, she'd soothed him through that first harsh bout of grief.

They met as they always had since then, but he never seemed to entirely shed that darkness in his soul. Until now.

Large hands clasped her own. "I'm sorry, Deanna. I know I'm the one who suggested I retire to Betazed so we could get married. There was nothing left for me in the Fleet so there was no reason to worry about the stigma of marrying a member of a 'lesser species'." His curled lip showed what he thought about that ridiculous notion.

Will stood and turned, encircling his love about the waist. His eyes begged for understanding. "But now the situation has changed. Chakotay is still alive. And I can't help him as a civilian."

Deanna smiled softly, pleased to see her beloved back to the man he should be. "But as a Captain with an Imperial flagship at his disposal...?" she trailed off, knowing that their connection made her understanding and approval clear.

Will closed his eyes and held Deanna, resting his head a moment on her shoulder. "Thank you."

As he pulled back, he turned and opened a drawer in the desk. He pulled out a small box and opened it, revealing an antique diamond ring. "I was going to give you this in a few days. This ring has been passed down through my family for generations. I know that we've kept our relationship hidden, but I don't want to do that anymore." He removed the glittering object from its velvet nest and slipped it on Deanna's hand. He kissed her fingers then lowered them, stroking her skin with his thumb.

Deanna swallowed and lifted a hand to Will's face. "I love you," she said quietly. "And I know this is what you have to do. I'll be waiting for you to send for me or come to Betazed."

"Deanna, I don't understand what's going on yet." He hesitated. "And I don't know exactly what will happen. But I promise I'll keep in touch."

"Promise me you'll keep yourself safe," Deanna replied, gripping his fingers, "And that you'll return to me."

"Yes," Will said, and they embraced once more.

***************

Reg Barclay's nervous fingers slipped on the instrument he was holding. The small tool clattered to the floor along with the sensor unit he'd been securing to the wall. "Oh, damn," he muttered, then pressed a hand to his forehead.

He'd been jittery since they arrived at Benjamin Sisko's compound. Tom Paris had sent a note promising payment for a bunch of sophisticated equipment to be installed immediately at the San Francisco address.

Despite the late hour, there'd been no question of refusing. In truth, Reg didn't care if the bill ever got paid. He already owed both Chakotay and Tom a debt of gratitude.
Reg was a technical genius, a wizard with machinery, but his social skills were sorely lacking. Despite that, he'd gotten through the Academy. Admiral Chakotay—who back when they met was only a Commander—had started out just trying to help him fit in among the crew at Reg's first posting. But after taking the time to get to know Reg he noticed the engineer's talents and asked him if he'd like a transfer to Research & Development on Earth. When Reg finally convinced himself to take the chance, Chakotay personally made sure Reg was awarded a place in the Empire's corps of cutting-edge technicians.

It had felt like coming home. He missed Chakotay, whose easygoing nature seemed to dispel his own jitters, but nothing could compare with this new life. Talking theories and building them into reality every day with like-minded people was a joy he never expected.

Even more amazing had been meeting his colleague, Marla Gilmore. The equally shy engineer had sparked a sense of protectiveness in Reg. Strangely, he was so focused on making her feel at ease that he forgot his own nervousness. They had eventually gone from working lunches to real dates to a surprisingly passionate affair to a happy marriage. Chakotay had kept in touch over the years but hadn't been able to attend the wedding. His simply beautiful handwritten letter of congratulation was framed on their wall at home.

Reg and Marla clicked as well at work as they did in their private lives. Their collaborations produced many innovative designs. The dampening drones used to defeat the Dominion were their crowning achievement.

Their charmed life had continued until the day Jean-Luc Picard died. The new Emperor, Julian, had soon after fired a number of Fleet personnel with no warning or explanation. Reg had sent a call for help to Chakotay, but never received a reply. Marla and many others had resigned in protest of the firings, so the two were now tossed out into the real world.

Enter Tom Paris. At the time, neither Reg nor Marla had recognized the stranger who had called with the proposal to set them up in a business of their own. The man had offered a loan at very good terms, and a flat-out, no-strings donation as well.

They thought the proposition was too good to be true. Their suspicions rose even higher when they saw footage of Tom standing beside the man who'd discharged Reg for no good reason. But they did agree to meet one last time.

That was when Tom had begged them to help him keep his son safe. He wanted them to design a warning system so he would know if anyone was monitoring his rooms or tracking him. He also needed a secure comm system and a way to transport in and out of the palace without being detected.

The information dropped their jaws and earned their sympathy, but it was Tom's next revelation that clinched the deal. He said he had chosen Reg and Marla because he knew Chakotay had trusted them. Then he told them that Chakotay was dead at the new Emperor's order.

Marla and he didn't even need to discuss it. They'd done exactly as Tom asked.

Their business was flourishing as they enhanced security systems for a number of Council members as well as various firms and ordinary citizens. They also kept up their tinkering, gaining several patents for new technology.

They'd been stunned to see news reports of Chakotay fighting in the Colosseum. So when Tom's note asked them to enhance the protections around the compound where their longtime friend was being held, they immediately assembled their kits and beamed over.
Reg suddenly felt hands kneading his shoulders.

"Easy, honey," Marla soothed as she tried to massage away the tension wracking her husband's body. "There's no rush."

Reg looked up and smiled, some of his nervousness bleeding away at the touch. "I just want to get it right, Marla. If Chakotay really is a target---"

"I know," Marla agreed. "I'm just as worried as you are. But twisting yourself into knots is going to distract you and we could miss something."

Reg shook his head. "Not with the way you organize our checklists."

Marla smiled. She always felt a glow when Reg complimented her. Then she frowned as she glanced down the hall of the dorm. "I wish we could get in to see Chakotay. I'd like to make sure he's OK."

"Yes," Reg nodded toward the guards blocking the door to the slaves. "We could have injected him with a transponder or something and beamed him right out from under the forcefields." He sighed. "Instead, we're strengthening the fields so nobody else can beam him out."

"Or beam an assassin in." Marla stooped to pick up the tumbled wall unit and held it in place as Reg secured it. She looked at her husband. "For now, it's the best we can do."

He nodded and they both stood, hefting their toolkits. "Where to next?" he asked, and they continued reluctantly reinforcing Chakotay's prison.

***************

Chakotay lay in his cot, staring up at the ceiling. He winced as his mind replayed the conversation between himself and Tom. He just hoped he'd been convincing enough at the end to keep the younger man away.

In the first moments of their meeting, Chakotay's rage had swamped all reason. He'd automatically struck out at Tom for being one of the trio he believed had destroyed his life.

A good look had soon convinced him of Tom's innocence. And with the cooling of his anger, all of his old protective instincts had risen. So he'd been cruel to be kind, to convince Tom it was useless to continue to see him. Tom's visit to the compound had been an unacceptable risk.

Julian Bashir Picard was possibly insane, but no fool. He would keep tabs on those in his service, including his brother-in-law. Eventually something would slip and Julian would crush Tom as he had Chakotay.

A sigh of regret forced its way past Chakotay's lips. He had to forget about Tom. He'd automatically struck out at Tom for being one of the trio he believed had destroyed his life.

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A sigh of regret forced its way past Chakotay's lips. He had to forget about Tom. He'd even given up any hopes of fulfilling Jean-Luc's dream of a restored Federation. And Chakotay had no illusions about the odds of his own survival.

He was a walking, talking dead man. That much was certain. The best he could hope for was to stay alive long enough to rid the Empire of Julian Bashir Picard. It was the last, the only thing he could do now to save his people...his friends...and the man he once loved.
Chapter 10

Kathryn Janeway's mouth was set in a grim line as she entered the Colosseum and proceeded to the box set aside for Council members. She did not want to be here. She had never traveled to other planets to attend gladiatorial games. She detested the waste of life. Nor had she been to Julian Bashir Picard's seemingly endless orgy of violence. Until today.

It was all Geordi's doing. He had commed yesterday to describe a most unusual event within these walls. And the man at the heart of it. He was convinced that the sudden reappearance of Admiral Chakotay was the opportunity they'd been waiting for. That he was the leader who could bring about the overthrow of the Emperor's corrupt regime.

Kathryn, of course, dismissed her co-Councilor as a wide-eyed dreamer. But then she'd seen the news footage. First the unprecedented combat, then the confrontation between Chakotay and the Emperor. And lastly, the reaction of the spectators, whose wild approval was matched by the viewing audience, according to the polls. All the evidence had combined to convince her she needed to see this gladiator for herself.

She settled into her seat, nodding at Geordi and a few other friends.

Shelby stood and addressed the newcomer from her seat in the front row of the box. "Councilor Janeway, I don't think I've ever seen you here before. I thought you didn't like to rub elbows with this vulgar crowd."

"I may not always be a woman of the people, Elizabeth," came the cool reply, "but rest assured I am always a woman *for* the people."

The other Councilors laughed as Shelby quickly sat back down.

***************

There had already been several bouts that day. The audience was primed, hyped by the many colors of blood already spilled on the Colosseum floor. But they wanted their champion. Soon the chant began. "Chakotay! Chakotay! Chakotay!"

No one was cheering the Emperor as he entered and made his way to the Imperial box. Inside he seethed, but Julian kept his face serene as he took his seat. Greg, Tom, and Lucien followed and also made their way to their places.

Data waited for the signal, then began his spiel. "For many decades, the Colosseum and indeed the whole planet Earth were denied the thrill of seeing gladiatorial games firsthand. And yet, that did not diminish the power of their spectacle or the proof of their enduring popularity. Heroes were born of these offworld games. One man in particular. His name became synonymous with gladiators, combat, and victory. He retired undefeated five years ago, universally praised and applauded. Now he returns to fight in this storied arena for the first time. Your Emperor, Julian Bashir Picard, gives you---the legendary Worf of Klingon!"

The crowd went wild. This was a warrior whose reputation was unmatched.

The tall, muscular fighter burst through a gate riding in an ornate horse-drawn chariot. He was dressed head to toe in silver armor fashioned into snarling animal faces. He accepted the roar of applause as his due as he circled the Colosseum. His helmet, which held the image of a tiger, glinted in the light. He carried a sword as well as a battle axe with a handle as thick as his wrist. The broad
side of the head held a razor-sharp edge, while the other side narrowed to a wickedly sharp point.

Data waited until Worf's conveyance had dropped him off in the center of the floor and departed. Then his voice rang forth again. "And from the frontier planet Dorvan V, the Emperor presents, the warrior Chakotay!"

Will couldn't believe his ears. He barely believed his eyes as he saw his old friend stride through another gate. Chakotay was dressed in his usual tunic, this time with a breast- and backplate added to offer some protection. He carried a sword and a small round shield.

Harry gripped Riker's arm. "I told you, sir," he hissed excitedly, then joined the thunderous applause shredding the air as the crowd lauded their champion.

That recognition and joy was echoed by every member of the Fleet secreted in the stands.

Tasha Yar dropped into the seat on Will's other side. She surreptitiously passed him a padd. "I've done recon on the security arrangements both here and at Sisko's compound. They're both locked down tight."

"Damn," Will muttered as he confirmed his tactical officer's assessment. "It looks like the only way we'll be able to make contact is in the three blocks from one place to the other."

"Yes, but there's also the risk of being recognized if Chakotay is under surveillance. A former Admiral having a chat with the Enterprise Captain isn't likely to be overlooked."

"I'll go," Harry piped up. "I can slip out as soon as the match ends and wait for him on the street."

"That could work," Tasha seconded. "He'll look just like any other starry-eyed fan." She grinned at Harry's blush.

Will also smiled as he nodded his approval. "All right. Let Chakotay know that we're here and what we're doing."

Arrangements made, they settled back in their seats and returned to watching the events on the arena floor.

Julian's cheek twitched as he worked to hide his true reaction to Chakotay's popularity. Even Lucien was ignoring him. "The rabble embrace him as one of their own," Julian said, trying not to snarl.

Tom gave him a careful look. "The people are fickle, sire. He will be forgotten in a month."

Julian's smile was pleased but not pleasant. "Oh, much sooner than that." His voice dripped oily anticipation.

Tom raised his brows, hoping his face hadn't paled too noticeably.

Julian met his brother-in-law's stare. "It's all been arranged."

Tom tried to swallow his fear and turned back to the fighters.

***************
Worf regarded his opponent as the bronze-skinned man approached. His eyes narrowed. This fighter was a good 8 or 9 centimeters shorter and, while well-built, clearly just a human.

The Klingon had been impressed by the reports of Chakotay's fighting skills. That respect increased when he recalled the man's military history and fairness toward his enemies. Clearly this admiral-turned-slave possessed both honor and integrity. He would regret killing such a fine warrior.

But kill him Worf would. He had no choice if he wished to return to his wife, K'Ehleyr, and their son. The Emperor's "invitation" to fight in the Colosseum was bluntly worded. This was a battle to the death. Worf gripped his weapons.

***************

The hair on the back of Chakotay's neck rose as he surveyed this legend of the arena. He knew there had to be more to the setup. As formidable as Worf appeared, Chakotay doubted Julian would trust his enemy's destruction to a single gladiator.

He watched as Worf turned to the Imperial box, raised his axe and shouted, "We who are about to die salute you!" Chakotay simply pressed a hand to the bag of Dorvan soil around his neck, then tucked it back out of sight. He turned to face Worf, his senses stretched to the limit to try and discover the hidden danger before it overtook him.

***************

Worf lowered the faceplate on his helmet, leaving only his eyes visible. He immediately lunged at Chakotay, battle axe sketching a wide arc toward the human's head.

Chakotay immediately lifted his shield, bracing for the shock as the Klingon's heavy weapon smashed against it. He thrust his sword, only to have it cross with Worf's own.

They began sparring in earnest, the complex combination of strikes and parries too fast to see as more than flashes of metal. Despite the size difference, it was clear these two fierce warriors were evenly matched.

Chakotay heard a strange sound just as he blocked another swing from Worf's battle axe. The power behind the blow forced him back a step. As he was recovering and readying his own counterstrike there was a burst of movement behind him.

A huge Bengal tiger leapt from a newly opened hole in the floor, its claws raking down Chakotay's backplate.

Chakotay immediately threw himself away from this new threat, rolling to his feet with shield and sword ready to fend off the animal. Instead, he saw it snarling and slashing a few meters away. A thick collar around its neck held a chain that disappeared into the shadows below the floor.

Worf took advantage of his foe's temporary loss of focus, slashing fiercely with his sword. He tried to drive Chakotay back toward the tiger, but instead the human shifted and renewed his own attack. The two fighters were now headed in a completely new direction.

The next series of blows put Chakotay at the corner opposite the tiger. Another hole opened, and a second beast came flying out. He spun and jumped to the left, avoiding the teeth and claws.

Two more holes opened quickly. Soon four chained tigers paced the Colosseum floor. It was obvious that someone was controlling the length of the chains, for the ferocious beasts were pulled back if Worf drew near. The chains were extended again if Chakotay showed signs of being driven
toward one of the corners.

Worf kept looking for a weakness in Chakotay's defenses. He disliked the unequal odds, now 5 against 1, but there was nothing he could do. He had no control over or even prior knowledge of this extra source of peril. But the tigers were now weapons in his arsenal and he intended to take full advantage of them.

***************

The crowd's sounds were a mix of protest and excitement. Here, indeed, was a David-and-Goliath battle done with style. They avidly watched the living legend Worf clash with newly minted champion Chakotay. Worf's size and weapon advantages, the tigers, the sheer improbability of Chakotay's survival, sparked their interest like nothing before.

***************

Tom's hands were clenched as his eyes stayed glued to Chakotay, who now had a much smaller space for maneuvering thanks to Julian's "arrangements". Fortunately Tom's fists were hidden since his arms were clapping Lucien. The boy had practically crawled into his lap as it became clear his hero wasn't likely to survive this combat.

Julian relaxed into his seat. Now he only had to wait to see if man or beast delivered the death blow to his enemy.

Greg swallowed down his horror as he realized that the Emperor had planned the bout in order to kill Chakotay without getting his Imperial hands dirty.

***************

Tasha, Will, and Harry unconsciously gripped each other's arms, willing luck and strength and skill to their imperiled friend.

***************

Geordi and Kathryn leaned forward in their seats, hoping all of their half-formed plans wouldn't be ended by a slash of sharp steel or claw.

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Both Worf and Chakotay were becoming winded as the combat continued. Chakotay was constantly in motion, avoiding the tigers and the warrior with adrenaline-enhanced skill. He whirled like a dervish, never in the same place for more than a breath or two.

Worf swung his battle-axe with a shout, once more seeking to cut Chakotay's throat. He was stunned when the smaller man suddenly charged him, shield slamming squarely into Worf's chest. He went down, winded, and stared at the sword blade resting against his throat.

Chakotay simply stood a moment, reluctant to end this opponent's life. In that instant the full extent of Julian's treachery was revealed.

The collar unlocked around the nearest tiger's neck. The enraged animal sprang at its prey with a roar.

Chakotay barely had time to turn and raise his shield. The tiger's full weight---at least twice his own--crashed into him, slamming his body to the arena floor. As he fell he desperately raised his sword.
The beast impaled itself on the length of steel, but it kept slashing at Chakotay's breastplate and shield even as its lifeblood spilled out.

Worf got to his feet and retrieved his weapons. He planned to behead the human while he was trapped under the heavy animal's carcass.

Even as he struggled to get out from under the dead tiger, Chakotay knew he'd never be free in time to stop Worf's assault. He wrenched his arms and his shield loose, then desperately hurled the shield toward his opponent like a frisbee.

The unexpected gambit paid off. The disc slammed into Worf's faceplate, denting it and nearly breaking his nose. The deformed metal's eyeholes no longer lined up, leaving him temporarily blind. Worf dropped his battle axe and started tugging at the mask and helmet, trying to tear it off.

Chakotay finally pushed the tiger off his pelvis and legs. He stretched and grabbed the battle axe. He swung the pick end down, piercing the Klingon's foot to pin him to the floor.

Worf's bellow of pain was cut short as he felt Chakotay's body slam into him once more, tumbling him to the floor. His sword was taken. He was trapped. Any tigers that were released now would go after him, the bleeding, immobile prey. Not that they were interested any longer. The first cat's death seemed to have subdued them. They lay submissively on the Colosseum floor.

Chakotay used his legs to pin Worf's arms and chest as he finished removing the bigger man's helmet. He stared into the warrior's eyes a moment, then stood and again placed his blade at Worf's neck. He looked to the Imperial box.

***************

Julian, like everyone else in the arena, sat stunned. He stared at victory snatched literally from the jaws of certain death. His mind refused to accept the fact that Chakotay still breathed.

Finally the Emperor composed himself and walked to the edge of the box. He looked out over the expectant spectators and decided someone would pay for his disappointment. He extended his arm. Thumb down.

***************

Chakotay raised his sword high, as if to bring it smashing down on his opponent's vulnerable throat. Instead, at the apex of the arc he suddenly stopped and dropped the weapon to the floor. He leaned over and freed Worf's foot, then reached out a hand to help the wounded man to stand.

***************

The crowd stared incredulously a moment at this act of defiance. The legendary warrior Worf had been spared not by the Emperor, but by the man he had sought to kill. The mercy of the gesture inspired a greater ovation than any the Colosseum had ever heard. And for the first time, hidden in the calls of acclaim for Chakotay were shouts of anger at Julian.

Kathryn kept her eyes and ears open as she watched the spectacle unfold in the arena stands. This was almost as exciting as the match itself, and much more encouraging.

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Lucien was shouting and clapping, squirming in his father's embrace. "He won! He won! Chakotay's all right!" The boy's eyes grew round. "He beat Worf," he said in awe.
Tom hid his relief, pressing his face into his son's hair. "Yes he did, Lucien. Yes he did," was all he could murmur. He barely noticed when Julian and Greg left the box.

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Will's voice was hoarse from shouting, but Tasha was still going strong beside him. He turned to Harry. "You'd better get going. You only have three blocks to work with and I guarantee the street will be packed."

Harry nodded. His relief at Chakotay's survival had been too great for words. He needed to save his voice for more important and personal communication. He got up and scurried out.

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Worf slowly lifted his fingers to clasp Chakotay's. As he was pulled upright his eyes questioned the mercy he had found at his foe's hands—which defied the Emperor's decree of death. "Why?" he asked. "You've killed enough men before today."

Chakotay shrugged and released the alien when he was upright. "You won your freedom years ago. Julian had no right to force you into this. You shouldn't be here, so you shouldn't die here."

"Neither should you," Worf replied. He offered his hand. "You are a man of honor, Chakotay. It has been an privilege to meet you."

"And you, Worf of Klingon." Chakotay shook the meaty palm. "May you return there soon."

Then the two exhausted fighters headed toward an open gate. Suddenly the door in the black marble wall parted and Guards came pouring out. Phasers drawn, they surrounded the two men. Two holstered their weapons and took charge of a limping Worf, leading him away. Chakotay could only hope he was being taken to a doctor, and then to board a ship back to his homeworld.

Then Chakotay straightened as he saw Julian approach. He cursed his lack of a weapon as the Emperor glided between his Guards and stopped before the champion gladiator.

"What am I going to do with you?" Julian asked as his gaze swept his nemesis. "You simply refuse to die."

Chakotay said nothing. They stared at each other in silence.

Then Julian held out his hand. "I offer you my hand once more, Chakotay." His eyes savored the muscular form, acknowledging its power and rugged appeal. "Join me. We could make a most formidable team."

Ignoring the offer, Chakotay simply continued to gaze at Julian in disgust and anger.

"Are we so different?" Julian challenged him. "You take life without hesitation when you have to. The same as I."

"I have only one more life to take, and then it will be done," was the quiet reply.

Julian's eyes gleamed. "Then take it now."

Chakotay snorted at the bluff. The second he moved toward the Emperor, the Guards would phaser him to his bones. He turned and walked away.

"They tell me," Julian said casually, examining his nails, "that your son squealed like a stuck pig as
they charred his body to ash."

Chakotay stopped and whirled, visibly struggling for control.

Julian continued, "And your wife, she offered her body like a whore to save her hide. Of course, my men refused. They burned her slowly, inch by inch while she screamed and cursed your name with her dying breath."

The Guards tightened their holds on their phasers, waiting for the gladiator to spring. Many of them were sickened by the Emperor's goading of the valiant slave. Greg's mouth was a thin slash in his pale face.

Chakotay's whole body trembled as he clenched his hands and reached for some remnant of calm. His voice was like gravel as he rasped, "Your vile reign will soon be at an end. Justice will be done." Then he turned his back on the Emperor once more. The Guards parted before him automatically as he walked away.

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The crowd began chanting Chakotay's name again. But this time they also openly booed and derided the Emperor.

Julian turned and quickly left the Colosseum, fury stamped clearly on his face.

Kathryn sank back in shock. Any of these people could be sold into slavery for such defiance. Yet they dared it, in support of one very special man. She looked at Geordi and nodded. Hope had arrived strong and determined in the somber form of Admiral Chakotay.

Tom watched the people cheering in the stands. He nodded to himself, satisfied.

***************

Stripped of his armor and again wearing a collar, Chakotay and Sisko's other gladiators stepped into the street to begin their three-block walk to the compound. He, as always, ignored the fans trying to get past the guards to touch their idols.

Harry watched the men and women emerge. When he caught sight of Chakotay, he yelled, "Admiral!" waving his arm up and down, rather than side to side. He was hoping the discrepancy would catch Chakotay's attention in the seething mass of bodies lining the way.

It was Tuvok who actually noticed the young man behaving oddly and yelling Chakotay's title rather than his name. He touched his fellow warrior's arm. "I believe that man is trying to contact you."

Chakotay focused and immediately recognized his former aide. "Thank you," he murmured to Tuvok, then drifted to the edge of the group of gladiators. He began shaking the hands thrust out to him, slowing the pace. "Harry," he called, "Are you all right? Why are you on Earth?"

Harry quickly approached and fell into step with the fighters. "The Enterprise is in the Sol system for upgrades. Captain Riker's gathered the whole crew."

He met his former CO's stunned gaze with a determined one of his own. "We're going to rescue you, sir."

Chakotay's tactical mind added this new factor and raced through a multitude of possibilities. "Harry, does Will know who the other ships will support if it comes to a fight?"
"I think he's been sounding out the other captains. So far we're solidly behind you." Harry's expression sobered. "We've all seen what the Empire's become."

"Harry, listen. You have to do some things for me. Tell Will not to take any action until he's contacted, either by me or by my messenger. I'll give them a password that only he'll know. You also have to get in touch with Tom Paris, the Emperor's brother-in-law." Chakotay's eyes held a new light. "Tell him I will meet his politician."

Harry felt hope swell in his chest. He nodded, "Aye, sir. You can count on me."

Chakotay laid a hand on his shoulder for a moment with a hint of a smile. "I know I can. Good luck, Ensign."

Harry quickly shoved a tiny bundle into Chakotay's free hand and dashed off to begin implementing his new orders.

Chakotay hid the bit of cloth in his fist as he returned to his spot beside Tuvok and B'Elanna.

"Good news?" the Vulcan asked, raising a brow.

"Maybe," Chakotay answered, his mind elsewhere. "Just maybe."

They soon reached the compound. The crowd scattered as the gladiators were once more secured behind Sisko's walls and forcefields. Chakotay stood a moment as his collar was removed, then strode swiftly across the expanse. He had been given free rein of the garden, so he walked to a small bench half-hidden behind a bower. He sat and opened the bundle Harry had given him. His breath caught as he carefully lifted out the object within.

It was the braid of hair from his medicine bundle. He stroked the intertwined strands of black, recalling how it came to be.

Chakotay and Laren had been married for seven weeks when it was time for him to return to the Fleet. He'd let his hair grow while on a six-month extended leave, and he needed it cut before going back to his post. On the night before he was to depart, Laren had done the job. She sat him in a kitchen chair in their newly finished house and paused a moment, considering the task. She had started slicing the strands with a knife in the ancient way, and she set the first lock aside. It had been a quiet time, soft murmurs and the snick of steel. Eventually Laren had finished up with clippers. She stood back to examine her handiwork, meeting her husband's eyes with a wry smile. "You look like you just stepped off the transport, Fleeter" she said, stroking her fingers through the now-short, silky strands.

"Not quite," Chakotay replied, encircling her waist and drawing her to stand between his knees. "No tattoo then, remember?"

"Hmmm," was all Laren said, the chains of her earring swinging as she bent to take her husband's lips. They kissed for long minutes, enjoying the warmth and flavor of their union.

Then Laren leaned over and picked up the knife again. She took a lock of her own midnight hair and cut it off, ignoring Chakotay's startled gaze. Then she handed him one end of each group of gathered strands. "Hold these."

Chakotay did as he was asked, gripping one lock in each hand. He watched as Laren quickly plaited them together, knotting first one end and then reclaiming the other to do the same.

When she was done, she placed the hair in his palm and curled his fingers around it. "There, now
you'll have something to remember us by."

Chakotay gave her a fond smile as he ran a fingertip down her nose ridges. "I have no intention of forgetting you."

"Good," Laren said, and pulled Chakotay up to lead him to bed for a proper good-bye.

In Sisko's garden the fountains played and the bees droned as Chakotay sighed and ran the locks through his fingers. Some years later, when his son's hair was to be cut for the first time, Laren again saved some strands to weave with theirs, creating the braid he now held in his hands. Harry must have rescued it from the medicine bundle in his quarters on Voyager.

Eyes blurred with tears and soul overwhelmed with emotion, Chakotay clutched the gift in his hand. He pressed the fist to his chest, feeling his heart beat once more.

Julian paced the length of his office, his mind conjuring and discarding plans. "I cannot take control if I am not loved," he said, not stopping his agitated movements. "They loved Chakotay for his bravery, and now for his mercy. So I cannot simply have him phasered out of existence or I will seem even more unmerciful. He crosses me at every turn!"

"He is defying you," Shelby agreed as she watched the Emperor. "His every act, his every victory strengthens his position. The mob sees it—and so does the Council. You can be sure they'll use this to their advantage. Then it will be more than just jeering in the Colosseum, sire. It will be outright rebellion."

She paused. "You must assassinate him."

"No!" Julian snapped. "I will not make a martyr of Chakotay. He must die as any slave, in the arena."

He flung himself into the chair across from Shelby. "But I will act to secure my rule. This is the perfect time to identify my opponents. "His gaze grew thoughtful. "There is a certain Denebian snake I have heard of. It will lie on the ocean floor as if it were wounded. An enemy comes and takes a bite of it, and it does nothing. Others approach for their share, and still it does not strike."

His face hardened. "Until all of its enemies are exposed."

Shelby eyes narrowed in understanding. "So you will lie still, and let your enemies come for a nibble."

Julian nodded, then dismissed the Councilor with a wave. When the blonde was out of sight, he beckoned. "Approach," he ordered.

Seska hurried over and knelt, "What is your command, sire?"

"Have every Councilor followed. Assign whomever you wish. I want daily reports."

"All of them, sire? Even Shelby and the rest of your allies?" Her agile mind organized resources and assignments, even as she allowed a puzzled expression to cross her face.

"Yes, my dear Seska. All of them." Julian stroked her sharp chin with a forefinger. "Why trust when you can have proof of loyalty?" His eyes glittered down at her. "Or treachery."
Chapter 11

Chakotay was sitting on his bunk in Sisko's dormitory, idly running the braid through his fingers. He felt...different. Alive again, as though somehow this gift had shot a ray of light through the muffling shroud of his grief. It was a beacon to the good memories of the past, and they helped to soften the edges of those last horrible images of his family and home.

Suddenly slim fingers plucked the object from his hands. He instinctively grabbed the thief's wrist and found himself looking up into B'Elanna's eyes.

"You really are a fast one, aren't you?" She sat beside him, still holding the braid. She ran her thumb over it. "You didn't have this before," she commented as she watched him from the corner of her eye.

"Harry---the young man in the street today---he gave it to me. I thought it was lost forever," Chakotay admitted as he released the half-Klingon's wrist.

"The way you were." B'Elanna's gaze was filled with understanding. "Klingons have something like this, a memento of the ones who've left us behind."

Her voice became brisk. "Here, let me fix it so you won't lose it again." She carefully wrapped the braid around his left wrist. Unknotting the ends, she wove them into a circlet. When she was finished the strands meshed so perfectly you couldn't find where the bracelet began or ended.

"There," she sat back and lifted Chakotay's hand so the band swung from his wrist. "Guaranteed to stay on through battle, earthquake, windstorm, fire, and flood." Her expression grew wistful. "At least, that's what my mother always told me."

Chakotay touched one finger to his new adornment. "Thank you." He shifted to face B'Elanna, clasping her hand. He noted her withdrawal to some place in the past. "Did you have one from your family?"

"No," B'Elanna shook her head. "My father left us when I was young, and my mother...there wasn't time. She...she was part of a new generation of warriors determined to protest Klingons' banishment from the Council."

She swallowed. Her voice roughened when she continued, "They didn't leave anything to gather or bury when they shot her down."

Chakotay squeezed the sword-callused fingers in his own. "I'm sorry."

B'Elanna blinked and tried to shrug it off. "It was a long time ago. I was pretty lucky. Because I was half-human, they only sold me into slavery."

She frowned as she remembered. "I fought them pretty hard. I think that's what kept me from becoming a bed slave. Sisko saw me across the Promenade and bought me as a gladiator. He thought having a skilled female fighter might pique people's interest."

A fierce grin lit her features. "And pretty soon he figured out that it was better to just put me in charge."

Chakotay tilted his head in speculation. "You kept killing the other armsmasters?"
"No, I just broke their noses." B'Elanna chuckled. "But it was pretty hard for Sisko to ignore the proof that his people's defensive training wasn't very good."

"So you've survived the arena for a while." Chakotay pondered what B'Elanna's life must have been like, surviving for so long in the arena.

"Yeah." B'Elanna sighed and was silent a moment, then stared once more at the braid. "I'm a gladiator, Chakotay, because I've had no other choice except death. I envy you and Tuvok. Even if you die tomorrow, at least you've had a chance to live. And to love."

Chakotay slung his arm around B'Elanna's shoulders. "You're young, smart, strong, and beautiful. Don't tell me you're thinking of giving up hope of winning your freedom."

B'Elanna stared into Chakotay's eyes. Her own asked for the truth. "Do I have anything to hope for?"

"I can't promise anything, B'Elanna, but I think so," Chakotay murmured. "I think we all do."

She nodded and they sat quietly together for a while.

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Harry finally returned to his parents' house, exhausted. It had been a long day. He opened the stasis unit and smiled at the covered plate with his name on it written in his mother's graceful script. He pulled out the dish and a bottle. A few minutes later he took the reheated meal from the small oven designed for that purpose. He sat on a stool at the counter, eating his mother's cooking, drinking his beer and simply enjoying the peace and quiet. He didn't think he'd have those qualities in his life for much longer.

He'd gotten to bed late the night before, waiting for hours until he finally got in contact with Captain Riker. Then he'd spent a tense morning waiting for him to arrive, then watching Admiral Chakotay fight the legendary Worf.

After the brief meeting with the officer-turned-gladiator, Harry had headed directly for where he knew the Imperial family exited the Colosseum. Julian made a point of returning to the palace by hovercraft rather than transporter. Harry could only hope that, as he'd heard happened occasionally, the Emperor left without bothering to wait for his brother-in-law and nephew.

Harry needed to stay at the front of the crowd until the Parises showed up, but he also needed to avoid being noticed by Greg Ayala. He purchased a standside vendor's entire bunch of balloons, then went to another cart to buy a sunhat. He quickly put it on, pulling the brim low over his eyes. He nearly collapsed with relief as he saw Julian and Greg alone in the hovercar, both men's faces fixed into bland smiles.

As soon as the vehicle was out of view, Harry removed the hat. His eyes stayed glued to the exit for several minutes, until Thomas Paris and his son appeared, followed by a Bajoran servant and several Guards. They conferred a moment before the elder Paris obviously acceded to his son's pleas to walk the short distance back to the palace.

Harry waited until they approached his position before calling out, "Good sir, a gift for the grandson of Jean-Luc Picard from one who served him."

He saw the boy's eyes light up at the huge assortment of colorful balloons. "Please spare a moment, Mr. Paris, for a devoted member of the Fleet." As he bent to hand the strings to the child he leaned into Tom and whispered urgently, "One who is still loyal to Admiral Chakotay."
The man's blue eyes widened but he quickly recovered and pulled Harry down to squat in front of his son. "Why do you tell me this?" Paris hissed.

"Chakotay asked me to deliver a message." Harry tried to convey his sincerity and urgency in his eyes and tone. "If you arrange it, he will see your politician."

Harry had thought Thomas Paris rather attractive, but the obvious hope and love that seemed to fill him at the words transformed the aristocratic face into something truly beautiful. Fortunately, the boy's excitedly jumping body blocked the Guards' view. A heartbeat later all evidence was gone save the new light in the man's eyes.

"I understand," Paris murmured, then they both stood. "Thank you," he said out loud, and shook Harry's hand. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness and continued service."

Harry returned the strong clasp, giving the man Chakotay trusted an understanding nod. He stayed in place as the group continued down the street. When they were out of sight, he quickly moved to the prearranged rendezvous point to meet up with Riker and Yar.

At the café, he delivered Chakotay's orders to Captain Riker and leaned back with a relieved sigh. He was surprised to get a grin from his CO. "Don't relax just yet, Harry."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because you're going on another mission." This time Yar answered in an excited whisper. "You've been seconded to Covert Ops for the duration."

"Huh?" Harry's brow crinkled.

Riker leaned forward on his elbows. "I need for you and Tasha to go to the shipyard. We need the Enterprise ready to go at a moment's notice, but I'm supposed to still be on Risa so I can't make the contact. I'm pretty sure the man in charge of Utopia Planitia, Hawkins, is on our side. But someone needs to go there in person and make sure he gets the Enterprise put back together ASAP."

"How do we do that?" Harry wanted to know.

"You and I are going on a little impromptu inspection. I'll be reviewing the targeting system upgrades, you'll be my aide." Tasha's restless fingers drew patterns on the tabletop. "I'll make sure Hawkins receives the message while you get a clear picture of how soon our baby will be shipshape again."

"So, are you up to the challenge, Ensign?" Riker's eyes were serious even if his tone still held a faint tease.

Harry's shoulders straighted. "When do we head out?"

"Right now," Tasha said, standing and clapping a hand on Harry's shoulder. "The shuttle leaves in 30 minutes. Just enough time to grab a uniform."

The trip to the shipyard near Jupiter was uneventful. Their mission had gone like clockwork. Hawkins and Tasha had chatted specs and designs until they were alone under the console examining relays. Then Tasha had casually brought up Chakotay's name. Hawkins' restrained but fierce indignation over the Admiral's treatment had been enough for her to make the suggestion that things were tense in the Empire and the Enterprise might need to be ready sooner rather than later.

The two had shared a look, then Hawkins had nodded and remarked that he'd been considering
putting off some repairs of Guard vessels to put more workers on the Enterprise job. After all, it was the flagship of the Imperial Fleet.

Tasha had related her success on the trip back to Earth, then Harry told his own strange tale.

He'd done reconnaissance on the big starship, assessing the state of pertinent systems. Then he'd wandered the shipyard itself, checking out the other vessels in various states of refurbishment. All of the other transports in dock were Guard ships.

Harry had been standing before one, peering up and remembering how poorly he'd seen members of the Guard behave during his shore leave. It saddened him to think of the once proud service turned into a disgrace by a bunch of thugs and thieves acting with the Emperor's approval. A sudden voice made him whirl.

"It's funny, I keep expecting it to look different. A pirate vessel shouldn't appear so...clean. And that's all it is anymore, all any member of the Guard is anymore. A pirate." The light-haired man fixed Harry with an intense stare.

Harry gulped and wracked his brain for a response. "Is that right, uh, Captain?" he asked as he nervously counted pips on the purple shirt.

"Yes it is, Ensign." The man looked at him carefully. "You're with the Enterprise, right? Are things any better in the Fleet?"

At least Harry knew the answer to that one. "Yes. Captain Riker is a good man."

"So I've heard. He's due back in a few weeks, when his ship is finished?"

"Yes, sir." Harry hoped his thudding heart couldn't be heard by this enigmatic stranger.

"Do me a favor, Ensign. Let your Captain know that Greg Ayala isn't the only one who's wanted to switch the track of their careers." The stranger sighed. "Some of us would like to trade their Guard purple for Fleet colors. To serve the Empire with honor again."

He looked around a moment, as if checking for eavesdroppers. "To regain our integrity. Admiral Chakotay left an example that wasn't only respected by his own people."

Harry covered his shock with a nod and a salute. "I'll let Captain Riker know to contact you, Captain---?"

"Ransom. Rudy Ransom." The Guard put out his hand. "Thank you."

Harry returned the firm grip, then left to find Tasha and exchange reports.

They'd met Will at his inn, tucked away in a San Francisco suburb. He'd congratulated them on their efforts and sent them home for a well-deserved rest.

Reflections over, Harry put his things in the sink and headed upstairs to bed.

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Chakotay was aware of the presence before it could touch him. He rose silently in the dark, slitting open his eyes so he wouldn't be blinded by the beam of the wristlight.

"Follow me, Admiral." Sisko's tone permitted neither discussion nor delay.
Chakotay followed the slave-owner down the hall and into the room where he had met Tom a mere 24 hours before. This time it contained a table with two benches, and two cloaked figures. Sisko exited and closed the door behind him. Chakotay moved to a bench and sat. He spared a quick glance at Tom, but the smaller figure he couldn't identify.

Tom stepped forward and held out a hand to indicate the cloaked woman. "Chakotay, this is Councilor Kathryn Janeway."

A confident, rather deep voice sounded from the slim woman as she lowered her hood. "I hope Tom's trust in you is well-founded, Admiral. And that my being here is proof enough that you can trust me."

Chakotay's expression remained cautious and unconvinced. "Is the rest of the Council with you?"

"Most of them, yes." Kathryn examined the former head of the Imperial Fleet. His strength she had already seen evidence of, but she was surprised. She sensed a thoughtfulness, a greater depth than she expected from a man of action. She was also not unaware of his handsomeness and the intelligence sharpening his brown eyes as he considered her response.

"Can you buy my freedom and get me out of San Francisco?" Chakotay asked.

Kathryn's brows rose. "To what end?"

"The Enterprise is in the Sol system." Chakotay settled his elbows on the table. "It has devices that will temporarily disable the Guard vessels until we can pull a few more Fleet ships from the border."

"But Captain Riker is in charge now." Tom protested.

"The Fleet is still loyal to me. They're just waiting for me to take command," Chakotay replied, meeting Tom's eyes a moment before his attention was drawn away.

Kathryn set her hands on her hips. "Are you mad? We can't disable the Guard. They're the protectors of the core worlds."

Tom looked at her in disbelief. "Kathryn, we---"

"No," she interrupted him firmly, her eyes like steel. "I will not trade one dictator for another." She knew what she had seen and heard of Chakotay, but that was not enough for such an enormous leap of trust.

"The time for talk and half-measures is over," Chakotay insisted as he stood.

Kathryn strode right up to the powerful warrior to challenge him. "So I'm to believe that after your glorious coup you'll just take your Fleet ships and leave?"

"No," Chakotay stared down at her. "I will leave, but the Fleet ships will stay under the command of the Council to keep order during the transition from Empire to Federation."

His eyes narrowed as he made his own plans clear. "They will also ensure that all of the member worlds are once more fairly represented, and that slavery is abolished. And they'll...facilitate...the removal of the corrupt members of the Guard so those vessels can return to duty."

Kathryn rocked back on her heels. "So once all of the Empire is yours, you'll just give it back to the people?"
Chakotay simply stared at her, letting his eyes speak the truth.

Kathryn shook her head. She wanted to believe, but... "Tell me why."

"Because it was the last wish of a dying man," Chakotay replied, then took a cleansing breath. "I will rid the universe of Julian Bashir Picard. The fate of our people I leave to their representatives, you and the Council."

"As it should be," Tom murmured.

Kathryn looked at Tom a moment, then turned back to Chakotay with a nod. Her face softened. "Jean-Luc Picard believed in you, trusted you." Her eyes indicated Tom. "So does the son-in-law he loved. I will do the same."

Chakotay accepted her decision with a small bow. Tom sagged in relief.

All business now that her path had been chosen, Kathryn straightened her shoulders. "I'll draw up plans for a provisional government and a list of the Councilors who are willingly conspiring with Julian. It will take a day or two. We can't free you until then or they'll realize our plans."

She held out her hand. "In the meantime, please...stay alive. The people need you."

Kathryn was surprised at the gentleness of the grip of that powerful tawny hand. She and Chakotay shared a look of mutual respect. Then she moved away. "Come on, Tom. There's much to do."

Tom automatically moved to the exit. He desperately wanted a few moments alone with Chakotay to clear the air, but knew that now was not the time.

"Tom," Chakotay called after him softly. When Tom turned Chakotay said, "Harry Kim is the name of the Fleet officer who met you. If you need to coordinate anything, go to him." He paused and gave Tom a soft smile. "This was a big risk to take. Thank you...and I'm sorry for yesterday."

Tom felt something in his soul sigh with relief as he saw the dark eyes gazing so warmly at him. He nodded and smiled his forgiveness, then turned to follow Kathryn. The sooner they got started the faster they could free Chakotay.

Sisko entered as soon as Tom left. "So tonight I get double the rates. Perhaps I should retire you from the arena and put you out to stud."

Chakotay ignored the jibe. Sisko knew his visitors didn't come for sex. "They will be contacting you for the price of my freedom."

Sisko raised a brow. "My dear Admiral, you are a boundless source of revenue. Why would I want to give that up?"

"You can't prevent this." Chakotay looked at the slave-owner, trying to figure out if the man was serious. "My people are waiting for me. Julian Bashir Picard *will* be stopped."

"And why would I want that?" Sisko challenged. "He's making me rich."

"Does nothing else matter?" Chakotay blew an exasperated breath. "Jean-Luc Picard had a dream for the Federation to be reborn, Sisko. He entrusted me with making that a reality."

"Jean-Luc Picard is dead," Sisko replied flatly as he opened the door and signaled for some guards. He waved his gladiator into the hall to return to the sleeping room. They stepped into the corridor.
"You don't trust that I can accomplish this?" Chakotay asked, glancing at the other man.

"Trust is for starry-eyed dreamers like my son," Sisko said, his tone indecipherable. He continued, "To remake the entire Empire is beyond even your formidable talents, Admiral. You, like the rest of us, are a mere mortal, shadows and dust." He opened the door and stopped, looking into Chakotay's eyes. "Shadows and dust."

"Perhaps," Chakotay conceded, "But I have to try. Even if you won't free me, at least give me a padd to record my orders."

He paused in the doorway. "There is one more thing you should know." Chakotay looked into Sisko's eyes. "Julian Bashir Picard murdered the man who set you free." He walked into the darkened room without looking back.

Sisko let the door close, but his face was troubled as he made his way to his own house.

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Tom and Kathryn stood a moment on her back terrace, breathing in the night air. They'd finalized their own plans, and Tom gave his longtime friend a quick hug good-bye. "You'll contact me when it's time to go to Sisko?"

"Yes, Tom, I promise." Kathryn leaned back and looked at his face, lit by the light from the full-length windows. "He means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

Tom dropped his eyes. "More than you could begin to guess."

She smiled. "Then let's hope for a happy reunion soon." She gave him a push. "Now get out of here. Give Lucien a kiss from me."

Tom blew Kathryn a kiss as he walked down the steps into the garden.

Their conversation had been duly noted by a watcher in the bushes. Angry eyes followed the man's slim figure as he approached through the green. Here was the barrier to the Emperor's favor. This pampered, spoiled traitor. Sure fingers gripped an unusual weapon. Tom Paris would soon cease to be any sort of problem. Forever.

Tom usually beamed out from Kathryn's small transporter room, but tonight he wanted a few minutes in the cool, clean air before returning to the stifling tension of the palace. As he wandered, he suddenly felt the hair on the back of his neck bristle in warning.

He barely turned around in time to see a shadowy figure leaping out at him. He fell but managed to catch his attacker's wrists, pulling the stranger down with him. Long ago lessons in self-defense kicked in as he slammed a knee into the man's groin.

The lack of reaction, as well as the breasts pushing against him, told him he was actually dealing with a remarkably strong woman. One who seemed determined to get her right hand close to his neck.

They wrestled, slamming into each other, growling and rolling into bushes, which caught and kept Tom's cloak as he slid back onto the grass. Tom felt his assailant shift all her weight onto her right hand. His own arm wavered under the pressure and slowly folded in toward his shoulder. Desperate, Tom changed tactics, rearing up and butting his skull hard into her nose.

He felt the tension let up immediately. A howl of anger gave him a second's warning before a knee
slammed into *his* groin. His world went white with blinding pain, but he kept his hold on the woman's wrists. Instinctively he knew that if he lost control of this encounter he'd be dead.

He rolled them again, pressing his full weight on the thrashing form underneath him. He lifted his head to call for help and heard the snap of teeth millimeters from his throat. Angered, he smashed his forehead down again. Suddenly the body beneath him went still.

Tom kept his grip until he was bathed in light. "Tom, what's going on?" Kathryn asked as she rushed over, phaser held out before her. She'd heard the crash of underbrush and grabbed a weapon and a wristlight before running out.

"An assassination attempt, maybe even surveillance," Tom replied grimly as he carefully leaned up. He gestured for Kathryn to put her feet on the unknown woman's arms before sitting up. He was shaking with the rush of adrenaline and could feel bruises and scratches throbbing with his accelerated heartbeat.

He noticed a glinting near the woman's right hand. Taking off his shirt, he carefully lifted the object with the cloth. A hypospray lay in his palm.

He exchanged a puzzled look with Kathryn, then reached for the mask covering the woman's face. When he pulled it off, he gasped. Whoever she had been, her face was unrecognizable now. It was obvious her nose had been crushed, the nasal bones forced into her brain. Sightless eyes still held an expression of hate, as did her snarling mouth.

"Do you know her?" Kathryn asked, swallowing her nausea.

"No," Tom replied. "But we need to find out who she is and get rid of the body---discreetly." It suddenly hit him that he'd killed this person. He swayed a little.

"Easy, Tom, take it easy," Kathryn said, catching and gripping his shoulder. "You didn't have a choice here and you know it." She pulled him to his feet. "Now where's your transporter control?"

"Huh, it's um..." Tom looked around, "There." He walked over and picked it up.

"OK, we're going to pay a surprise visit on an old friend of mine." Kathryn took the device and typed in an address. She handed it back to Tom, glad to see the glazed look fading from his eyes. "Can it handle all three of us?"

Tom swallowed, but nodded. He stepped over to stand straddling the body and gestured for Kathryn to do the same. They disappeared in a shimmer.

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They rematerialized in what looked to be a den and were met by the barking of dogs. Tom froze as two huge German shepherds bounded around a corner and stopped a meter away, snarling and still barking.

"Holmes! Watson! That's enough!" Kathryn ordered.

Tom was surprised to see the dogs promptly shut up and sit. He relaxed but decided not to make any sudden moves.

"I thought I was the one who made house calls," came a sleep-thickened voice from the doorway. Tom saw a solidly-built woman of indeterminate age walk into the room. She blinked her eyes at them and the body, then put the phaser she was holding onto a shelf. "Well Kathryn, you certainly
"Hello, Kate," Kathryn said with a smile, stepping past the dogs to give her friend a hug. Then she turned to Tom and said, "Tom Paris, Katherine Pulaski."

"Hi ma'am," Tom said nervously as he shifted his shirt to hide more of his chest.

Kate's summer-blue eyes crinkled in amusement. "Don't worry, Mr. Paris. I've been a doctor for longer than you've been alive. I'm sure you're not sporting anything I haven't seen before."

Tom blushed but also held out the hand with the hypospray. "Maybe, maybe not. I'd appreciate it if you'd run a tricorder over this." He bit his lip. "And her." He gestured awkwardly at the body, then moved away from it to offer his empty fist for the dogs to sniff.

"Hmm...I take it you want to make sure there are no booby traps before we move her?" At her visitors' nods Kate disappeared a moment. She returned with a medical tricorder which she first pointed at Kathryn and Tom. "You obviously weren't involved in the scuffle, Kathryn, but you, young man, could use a little time with a regenerator."

She then moved to slowly survey the body. "I'm not reading any technology, on her or in her. I think it's okay to get her off my rug and into the office."

Kate moved the tricorder to the hypospray. Her forehead crinkled in puzzlement. "That doesn't make sense," she said.

"What?" Kathryn asked, abandoning her own petting of the dogs to peer around the taller woman's arm.

"You can see that the spray is full," Kate said with a gesture. "But the tricorder can't determine what's in it. It doesn't register as anything it's encountered before."

Tom looked over. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're very lucky you didn't get stuck with it, Mr. Paris." Kate's mouth thinned. "And that you'd better tell me exactly what happened here."

Tom reluctantly handed his shirt and the hypospray to Kathryn and squatted by the body. He closed its eyes before hefting the surprisingly heavy weight and shuffling behind Kate as she led the way to a well-equipped medical facility. He laid the corpse down on a biobed and pulled a sheet over it. Then he just stood there, staring. A moment later he walked to a stool and fell onto it.

Kate regarded him a moment and raised a brow at Kathryn, who'd closed the door on the curious dogs so they couldn't invade a sterile area. The Councilor shrugged and put the hypospray down on a counter. She wasn't sure how well Tom was taking the situation. She doubted he'd killed anyone before.

Kate's eyes reflected concern. She walked to closet and pulled out two lab coats. One she laid over a chair. The other she kept with her as she went to a small replicator and dialed up a mug of something. Then she brought both items over to Tom.

"Hot sweet tea with a dash of brandy, and a coat so you don't get cold." She handed him the former and dropped the latter into his lap. "Why don't you get Kathryn here to show you how well she can wield a regenerator. I'm going to get dressed."

At the doorway Kate paused and turned back. "I know you obviously need to keep this quiet, but
that hypospray concerns me. I'd like to bring someone else in to study it."

Tom's lips immediately opened in protest, but Kathryn's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Who do you have in mind?" she asked.

"Jadzia Dax and Keiko Ishikawa." Kate looked toward Tom. "Kathryn knows them, Mr. Paris. They're top-flight scientists, but I'm not going to lie to you. They've gotten a lot of crap jobs because one of them is a Trill and the other is a human who's in love with that same member of a 'lesser species'. Or so the propaganda calls people like her."

Tom relaxed and gave the brusque woman a smile. "It's just Tom, and I'm only related to the Emperor by marriage. So it's impossible for me to have inherited Imperial bigotry."

Kate's eyes regarded him more warmly. "It's good to know you're also immune to its effects. It can be contagious, sometimes." She started out the door again. "I'll put some food out and coffee on before I come back. You two can hang out in the kitchen while we get to work."

"Kate," Kathryn called out after her. "Thank you."

"No problem." The doctor shrugged. "What are old friends for?"

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"She's awfully casual about this," Tom said as he watched Kathryn run the regenerator over his ribs. He'd healed other, more personal injuries himself.

"We go back a long way," Kathryn said, then looked up at Tom. "This isn't the first assassination attempt we've dealt with."

Tom absorbed that information with surprise. Before he could comment the door opened.

Kate Pulaski returned, followed by two strikingly beautiful women. One was obviously a Trill, dark brown spots forming a symmetrical pattern along her face and neck. The other was a tall Asian beauty. They nodded a greeting to Tom and Kathryn but immediately headed for the hypospray.

"This it?" the Trill asked over her shoulder.

"Yes, Jadzia," Kate answered. "Do you want to use the lab here or take it home?"

The other woman answered. "Here's fine. Your lab is almost as good as ours, plus," Keiko said as she shrugged, "if I know you there's already coffee and a pile of sandwiches waiting."

Jadzia nudged her lover. "Is that a complaint about my cooking?"

"How can I complain? I've never tasted your cooking." Keiko suddenly noticed the draped body, sobered, and lightly touched Jadzia's shoulder. "Maybe we'd better grab something and eat in the lab."

"Oh, we're sorry," Jadzia said as she turned to Tom. "Kate knows what we're like. We didn't realize--"

"No, it's no problem," Tom said with a hint of a smile. "It's actually made me feel almost normal again, listening to you two." He stood. "If we can go to the kitchen, I'll give you a quick rundown on the situation before you get started."
Tom and Kathryn were finishing up their second cups of coffee. It had been a few hours since he had told his brief story. He stood and reached for his computer, unable to delay any longer. "Kathryn, I need to get home. I don't want Lucien to wake up without me there."

Kathryn rose as well, stretching. "I think you'd better zip me back, too. If she was a spy we have to be very careful in our movements from now on." She looked at him. "You have the most secure setup, so you'll have to contact Sisko."

Tom nodded and was about to reply when the three scientists walked in. "I can't believe it," Keiko said, shaking her head in wonder.

"I'll admit Curzon had heard rumors, but never actually saw the stuff," Jadzia said as she opened up the stasis unit and got some juice.

"Well, it certainly explained a lot about Tom's assailant." Kate settled into a chair and rubbed her eyes wearily.

"What's going on?" Kathryn asked as she sat back down. Tom leaned against a counter.

"That hypospray contained an extract from an extinct plant species." Keiko pulled her chair closer to the table. "At least, everyone thought it was extinct. I'm not even positive about my identification since there's no record of the substance itself, just descriptions."

"So it was a vial of plant juice?" Tom asked, confused.

"No, poison." Jadzia put her empty glass in the sink and walked over to stand behind Keiko, rubbing the seated woman's shoulders. "And if it metabolizes the way I think it does, it would be virtually undetectable less than an hour after injection or being ingested."

"Really," Tom said, his mind making connections. "Would long-term exposure cause weakness?"

"Yes, and eventually complete debilitation and death." Jadzia nodded, her face grim. "And it wouldn't show up on standard Imperial scanners."

"But the key is that it's Cardassian." Kate looked at the two stunned faces. "When Keiko discovered its probable origin I went and took another look at your would-be assassin."

She shook her head. "At first glance, and even first scan, she appeared to be a Bajoran female. But that didn't make sense considering the cause of death."

"What do you mean?" Kathryn asked.

"Well, Bajorans have rather denser bone structure in their nasal cavities. No matter how hard Tom's head is, he shouldn't have been able to break her nose. So after the gals told me the poison was likely Cardassian, I went and took some deep tissue samples. They showed Cardassian DNA altered to look Bajoran."

"But I thought Cardassians also had nasal reinforcements," Jadzia said, forehead wrinkling in confusion.

"They do, but apparently whoever did the cosmetic changes to our friend removed her brow ridge completely. That left only the underlying bone structure, which by itself was insufficient to protect her."

"Damn, and it was just blind luck that's how I hit her," Tom said, shivering. He looked at the
women. "Is there any chance you can make an antidote to that poison?"

Keiko tilted her head back to meet Jadzia's eyes, then looked back at Tom. "I don't know, but we could try."

"Please, do your best. I'm afraid there are a few people—including my son—who are going to need it." Tom shivered again, this time in forboding.

"You got it," Jadzia promised.

"I'll take care of the body," Kate said, rising to her feet. "There was no ID or anything else on her. Do you have any idea who she was?"

"No," Kathryn shook her head. "But we think we know who sent her," she said grimly as she stood and moved next to Tom for transport.

"Then be careful, both of you," Kate said, rising to lay a hand on each of them. "I'm sure her absence won't go unnoticed."

Tom nodded and sighed. "Back to the gilded cage."

Kathryn gave him a small, encouraging smile. "Hold on just a little longer, Tom. Soon we'll all be free."
Chapter 12

Tom gave a huge sigh of relief as he appeared in Lucien's closet. It had been a long, strange, dangerous night. He cautiously opened the door to see both Lucien and Gerron Tem fast asleep. He walked over to Tem's chair and took a quick look at the monitor on the young man's lap. It didn't show any disturbances. He sighed in relief—they'd had a quiet night.

He reached out and shook the Bajoran's shoulder gently. "Hey, it's time to get up."

Tem stirred, blinking his eyes as awareness returned. He jumped up and said, "I'm so sorry! I never meant to fall asleep."

"It's OK, really," Tom reassured him. "I was out a lot longer than I expected." He indicated the sensor monitor. "It looks like none of Julian's minions did a bed check, so we should be fine."

Tem's shoulders relaxed. "Shall I wake up Lucien?"

"No, let me do it." Tom looked at Tem meaningfully. "Lucien is going to be sick today. When I tell you to get a doctor, contact Kate Pulaski. She's in the directory."

"You don't want to use the usual Imperial physicians?" Tem's brow furrowed in confusion.

"No." Tom said firmly. "I have it on good authority she makes house calls."

Tem nodded and left to shower the chair-induced soreness out of his back and neck.

Tom drifted to his son's side and brushed a hand over his forehead. "Hey," he called softly. "Lucien, mon cher, this is your wake-up call."

Lucien grumbled and turned over. Tom grinned and pulled the bedcovers down and off the bed. "Rise and shine, little warrior," he teased. "I bet the gladiators have been up for an hour already."

"Don't want to," was mumbled grumpily into Lucien's pillow.

"Come on, Lucien, it's important." Tom's voice lowered. "I need to talk to you."

The seriousness of Tom's tone brought the boy up to a sitting position, his freckled face solemn. "What is it, Dad?"

Tom smiled fondly and ruffled Lucien's hair. Then he sobered. "Lucien, you have to promise me that what we talk about stays a secret. You can never tell anyone else. Understand?"

"Yes, Dad. Cross my heart," Lucien promised as he quickly marked his chest with an X.

Tom took a deep breath, then began. "You know that Jean-Luc—your Grand-père—was a good man, right? That he was a good Emperor?"

"Of course." Lucien rolled his eyes as only an eight-year-old can.

"Well, since he died...things are not going so well, Lucien. The Guards are doing a lot of mean things to people." Tom hurriedly continued, not wanting to go into details. "Chakotay wants to stop the Guards from doing those bad things."

"But he's a gladiator," Lucien said, confusion washing over his face. "He has to fight in the arena."
"Well, he's not going to be one for much longer. I'm going to free him so he can be an Admiral again." Tom peered at Lucien, ready to gauge his son's reaction. "But I need your help."

"You do?" The boy's eyes rounded a moment in surprise before he straightened his back and shoulders and puffed out his chest. "Waiting for orders, sir."

Tom acknowledged Lucien's acceptance with his own nod. "I'm going to need you to pretend to be sick later on today. So I can say I'm busy and can't be disturbed—and so nobody but Tem and I and my friend, Doctor Kate, will be allowed to see you."

Lucien's eyes narrowed as he concentrated. "And then you're going to go into the closet, right?"

"Exactly. But I can't disappear if people are looking for me. So if you're sick, people will know I'm with you and they'll leave us alone." Tom stroked his son's cheek. "Can you pretend for me, Lucien?"

"Yeah." Lucien grinned at his father. "I've done it before."

Tom raised a brow, trying to hide his own smile. "You have? We'll need to have a little talk about that some other time."

He took his son's hands to deliver the next, more important bit of news. "Lucien, I may have to send you away soon, with Tem. Is there anything that you need to take with you? I mean, that you'd really miss if you could never come back."

Lucien's face screwed up in thought a moment, then he nodded. "Well, pictures of you and me and Mama and everyone else. And the shuttle model you gave me for my last birthday. And the bear Mama made for me herself."

His brows furrowed as he concentrated. "And the letter from Chakotay about when Mama was young, and the stone he gave her." He sat back and folded his arms, suddenly looking very adult. "I can live without the rest."

Tom pulled Lucien's arms apart so he could hug him. He rested his cheek on the light-brown hair. "You are a brave warrior, Lucien. I'm very proud of you." He sat back. "I want you to put those things in your satchel, so if we have to go in a hurry you'll know where they are."

"OK, Dad." Lucien looked up at his father. "Is there anything you want me to put in there for you?"

Tom smiled. "Yeah, you can put some photos in for me...and my stone from Chakotay too."

"I'll keep them together so they won't get lost." Lucien promised.

"OK, mon cher." Tom briskly dusted his hands. "Now we'd better decide how sick you'll be and when to get started."

Father and son began to plot, their heads close together.

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Father and son faced each other for the first time in years. Benjamin and Jake Sisko continued to lock eyes as the younger man stepped down from the transporter pad. "Hi, Dad," he said softly.

"Hello, Jake." Sisko's gaze roamed Jake's face, noting the new maturity in his features. His son had become a man here on Earth. "It's good to see you." He beckoned Jake into his study.
Jake absorbed the opulent surroundings. "Nice digs."

"Thanks." Sisko indicated a seat. "Do you want anything?" At Jake's refusal Sisko sank onto his settee. He looked around the room. "I needed someplace quick."

"And close to the Colosseum, no doubt." Jake couldn't quite hide his disapproval, which thinned his mouth and narrowed the space between his eyebrows.

"Of course." Sisko chose not to rise to the bait. Instead he asked, "Are you still at your grandfather's?"

"About half the time." Jake shrugged. "With the transporter, New Orleans to San Francisco isn't much of a hop. I have a room in a friend's apartment when we're on deadline or something and I want to stay in town."

"That's good to hear." Sisko nodded. "But you know if you need a place to stay---"

"I can't make a home here, Pop, and you know it." Jake got up and ran his hand over his close-cropped hair as he paced. "You want me to try and invite my friends over, knowing that you're keeping men and women in that next building like it's some kind of kennel?"

"Not kennel, stable," Sisko growled. "A stable of gladiators that has made me a tidy profit over the years. I notice you never complained where the money came from when it paid to renovate your grandfather's house and set up his restaurant or provided your education and all that fancy equipment you just *had* to have."

Jake stopped and whirled. "I was a child. I didn't understand what it was all about."

His shoulders slumped. "I never realized they were your property, Dad. That you were a damn slaver. I just figured, well, you were training them---like boot camp---and that they wanted to fight." He gave a sharp laugh. "How naive can you get, huh?"

"Your mother and I wanted you to be...innocent, Jake." Sisko's face and tone softened as he regarded his son. "We didn't want you to grow up tainted by the violence of the arena. Or the...harsher realities of life in the Empire."

Jake's angry strides carried him to the space in front of his father's seat. "So you let me be blindsided. When I found out *exactly* what business you were involved in and how you got into it, I threw up, Dad. I was so upset I puked my guts out. I couldn't believe that you'd been a fighter---a slave---yourself, and yet you were still willing to do the same exact thing to other people."

Sisko stood to meet his son's challenge. "There were very few options open to an ex-slave, ex-gladiator, Jake. It's true Jean-Luc Picard freed me, but that didn't guarantee me a home or a job. I never had your opportunities. I was enslaved when I was seventeen for protesting slavery. How ironic is that?"

He leaned in, making his point. "No chance for a good education or any real skills. Fighting was all I knew so that was what I went with."

With a deep breath, Sisko calmed somewhat. "You can be ashamed of your old man all you want, but I am not going to justify my choices to you or anyone else."

His chin tilted. "Your mother had no problems accepting who and what I was."

"I know," Jake sighed. He looked at his father. "I know you loved her, and me, and were just doing
what you thought best." He moved to perch on a chair. "But she's gone now. And grandpa's restaurant is making money. And I've got a good job as a researcher for INN. I'm hoping to move to the writing desk soon."

He opened his arms. "Let's face it, Pop. You're rich. Do you really need to keep doing this?"

"If you had asked me that question a few months ago," Sisko mused, "I would have said yes."

He shrugged. "I figured I'd be a gladiator-owner until I died. But now..." He sighed. "Now I'm wondering if it's time to quit. I've made a name for myself as more than just a slave. And I'm starting to see their faces, to know them as individuals. Maybe I should exit while I'm on top."

Jake perked up immediately. "You'd really do that?"

"Yeah, I might." Sisko grinned at his son. "Although the only other thing I might be good for is shucking clams or peeling shrimp for your grandpa's étouffée."

"Nah," Jake teased, "He'd let you clean the okra for the gumbo too."

Sisko rolled his eyes and grinned, but the mirth quickly faded. "I can't do anything until the 150 days of the Emperor's celebrations are over, Jake. If I fail to meet my contract----"

"You could end up back in the arena yourself," Jake finished grimly. He searched his father's face. "What are you going to do about Admiral Chakotay?"

"What do you mean?" Sisko moved restlessly to his desk, refusing to meet Jake's gaze.

"Dad, my friends have managed to reconstruct his records. And we're pretty close to figuring out how they were destroyed. We might even get some leads on what happened to him." Jake walked up to his father and searched the dark eyes so like his own. "The man's a leader, Pop, chosen by Jean-Luc Picard himself. He saved us all from the Dominion. How can you keep him as a slave? I've seen the reports on his match with Worf. Somebody wanted to make sure he didn't leave that arena alive."

"That's the point of gladiatorial combat, Jake. It's a fight to the death. You know that." Sisko's tone was dismissive.

"Bullshit," Jake spat, earning him a startled look from his parent. "The Colosseum exhibitions aren't always fair fights, but even you have to admit that someone is deliberately trying to kill Chakotay."

His gaze grew fierce. "Why is that? Does he know something? Is he planning something?"

Sisko recognized the determined light in his son's eyes. His heart filled with fear for his only child. "Whatever is happening here, Jake, is between my slave and me. I want you to go to your grandpa's and stay there until I contact you."

"No way!" Jake's fists clenched. "I know something big's about to break. It could make my career as a journalist. Besides, you're a part of this---I'm not just walking away. And I'm sure as hell not going to go hide under a table somewhere in Louisiana."

He frowned. "You have to let me interview the Admiral."

"No." Sisko's face closed.

"What?" Jake looked at him in disbelief. "You have exclusive access to the most famous man in the Empire and you're not going to let me see him?"
"That's right. So you may as well be on your way," Sisko said flatly.

Jake shook his head. "If you think this is going to stop me, Pop, you don't know me very well."

He sighed. "But I did say I wasn't here about the story. And I meant it. So, I'll promise not to approach Chakotay without your permission---but I'm staying in San Francisco."

Sisko desperately wanted to knock out his son and ship him off to a safe, obscure corner of the Empire. But he knew it wouldn't do any good. Jake had always been dogged in his pursuit of the truth. He said, "All right. If I can't get you as far away as possible, will you stay today and catch up with the old man?"

"Of course." Jake hesitantly approached his father, then impulsively hugged him. "I've missed you," he whispered.

Sisko kissed his son's cheek and held him close. "I've missed you too," he replied, then continued the embrace while he considered his options.

No matter what, his son would be safe.

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Tom stood in Lucien's closet and activated his portable comm screen, once more sending silent thanks to Reg and Marla for their ingenuity.

Benjamin Sisko's face soon appeared. "Ah, the Admiral mentioned I'd be hearing from you. So what is it you wish to discuss?"

Tom grimaced at the gladiator-owner's flippant attitude. "Name your price," he said tersely.

One dark eyebrow raised. "My price for what?"

Teeth gritting, Tom replied, "You know what---for Chakotay's freedom."

Sisko's expression hardened. "It's not that simple, my Imperial customer. I have obligations to the Emperor to put gladiators in the Colosseum. Chakotay is the star of these games. If he suddenly fails to appear, the Emperor will seek to punish me and my family."

His expression hardened. "Not you and your seditious friends."

Tom reflected on that truth a moment. Sisko was right, Julian showed no mercy to those who stood in his way. "What if I could arrange safe passage off Earth for you, would you agree then?"

"I might," Sisko said with a nod. "But you'll have to get all of us out---everyone at this compound, as well as my son and father."

Tom blinked. "You want me to transport all of your slaves?"

Sisko's answer was firm. "I'm not going to leave anyone behind to suffer the Emperor's less-than-gracious hospitality."

With a nod, Tom conceded. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

"Act quickly, Mr. Paris. You realize, I can't keep Chakotay out of the arena." Sisko gave a grim smile. "But despite the odds I think our warrior will continue to triumph."
The screen faded to black.

His face thoughtful, Sisko turned away from the monitor to look at Jake, who'd hovered out of view. "You heard?"

"Yeah, Pop. Now I know why you swore me to secrecy before answering the comm. Are you really going to let Admiral Chakotay go?"

"*If* Paris and his conspirators can guarantee our safety, I'll consider it. But until then the Admiral's just another gladiator." Sisko stood and rested his hands on Jake's shoulders. "You have to be safe before I'll let him be anything else."

Jake gave a frustrated grunt, then tugged on his father's arm. "Come on."

Sisko let himself be led to the transporter. "Where are we going?"

"New Orleans," Jake shot back. "I figure you deserve a last meal before telling Grandpa he has to abandon his restaurant."

Sisko shook his head. "You're all heart, Jake."

The men smiled at each other as they stepped up onto the platform.

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"So, Doctor, have you given any thought to my requirements?" Julian walked around the lab, peering at Lewis Zimmerman from under his lashes.

"I must repeat, sire, my belief that you are, to put it bluntly, barking up the wrong tree." The bald man's voice expressed an equal blend of irritation and sarcasm.

The doctor's peeved expression was unique in Julian's existence. This ill-tempered scientist apparently refused to be intimidated by the Emperor's rank or power. Normally that would earn the man a sound beating at the hands of Julian's Guards, then a one-way trip to the slave pens.

But Julian was feeling generous. He was expecting to hear from his pet operative soon, and her report would signal the beginning of the end for his enemies. He slinked over to the other occupant of the room, a pretty blonde human. He ran a finger along her arm, snickering when she gave a startled jump and darted away. "I'm afraid you're lying to me, Doctor. While I'll allow it this once because it amuses me..."

His expression turned to stone. "Don't think I'll indulge you beyond this one small rebellion."

Julian reached out an arm and grabbed the woman, sinking a hand into her hair to yank her next to him. "You, Doctor Zimmerman, do not have obstetrician or geneticist on your résumé. Yet that did not stop you from helping your longtime assistant, Samantha Wildman here, conceive a half-K'tarian child with her husband."

He sneered and flung the woman away. "Although I don't know why she'd want to mate with a lesser species." His eyes again examined the stunned doctor's face. "Or why you'd agree to aid the creation of yet another half-breed runt." His smile took on an unpleasant edge. "And they didn't even name little Naomi after you. Very ungrateful of them, I must say."

The doctor and Samantha shared a look; both sets of shoulders slumped in defeat. Samantha spoke first, her voice an uncertain quaver. "You won't hurt her, will you, sire?"
"Of course not, my dear," Julian purred. He turned back to the doctor. "As long as your colleague gives me what I want."

The doctor's mouth pressed into a grim line as he surrendered. "Very well. It will take me a few days to prepare. When everything is ready I'll create some synthetic egg cells and use your DNA to make your clones. But Emperor, I must point out that this will violate the Eugenics Laws that have been in place for centuries."

"*I* am the embodiment of Imperial law, Doctor. Mere words on old scraps of paper or in a computer system cannot hold sway against my desire for a worthy successor." Julian's eyes gleamed. "I will have a child who is my exact replica, to raise in my own image."

Samantha cleared her throat. "Do you have a carrier ready, sire?"

Julian smiled at the naked fear on her face, then turned back to the doctor. "Yes, I have several candidates in mind to carry my firstborn son. I simply need to decide who is most worthy. At least one of them will require an artificial womb, however, to accomplish the task."

The doctor protested, "I'm not qualified to---"

"Perhaps you're not, but your little holographic experiment is." Julian's tone was chilling. "You keep forgetting, Doctor, that I know *everything*. Including that you have an interactive holographic matrix that embodies the entire history of Imperial medical data."

He smiled. "It even looks like you. So you may continue your own quest for immortality. But not until you've helped me fulfill mine."

Zimmerman exchanged a glance with Samantha. He knew he had no choice if he wanted to protect an innocent child, as well as the research he'd spent years developing. He bowed, defeated. "I will await your summons, sire."

Julian nodded, satisfied that he had eliminated the need for an Empress. All he required now was a warm body to birth the first clone. His dreams of a restored Bashir dynasty would soon be a reality.

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Joe Carey sat at his desk in the palace and wondered when things all went so wrong. He was second-in-command of the Imperial Guard in name only. In truth, no one was in charge anymore.

There were a lot of good, honorable men and women still wearing the once-noble purple and black. But they were all too afraid to do anything about the multitude of abuses against the citizenry that occurred every single day. The thugs among the Guard---bullies and extortionists---had been given free rein by the Emperor himself. There was nothing anyone could do about it.

Joe looked up as the door opened. He stood to attention and peered at Greg Ayala in silence. He didn't know much about this man who'd left the Fleet to become head of the Guard. He sometimes thought Ayala was as sickened by the violence and greed as much as he was. But Joe never said anything about it. He knew too well that silence equaled safety under the new regime. But in the last few days, since the news of Admiral Chakotay's return had circulated, he'd watched his leader become quieter and grimmer each time he saw the man.

Greg waved his second back into his seat and agitatedly approached the replicator. When his ordered cup of coffee appeared he sipped, trying to maintain some semblance of calm. To contain the emotions that seemed to swirl within him more chaotically each day.
He hated the Emperor. With every fiber of his being, Greg regretted aiding Julian Bashir Picard to the throne. It no longer mattered that the man was Jean-Luc's son and heir. Greg now understood that he'd paid too high a price to keep order in the Empire. This tainted peace was not worth his soul. He bowed his head as he remembered what he may not have ordered, but did allow to happen. The destruction of Chakotay's home and family. And he'd stood by silently as he watched the Emperor plot Chakotay's own death with unabashed glee.

Joe felt a rush of sympathy for the clearly suffering man. "Can I help you with anything, sir?"

Greg looked into his subordinate's kind eyes. "Tell me, Carey, what do you think of the return of a Bashir to reign over the Empire?"

Joe flushed uncomfortably. "To be honest, sir, I have a wife and two sons. I think whatever you tell me to."

Greg gave a weary nod. "That's the only safe answer, isn't it? Because I have a wife and sons as well." He wandered over to Carey's desk, idly running a hand across its surface. "Chakotay only had one child," he whispered.

"Yes, sir...um, I was meaning to talk to you about that." Joe fiddled with a padd in his hands. "I'm not sure it really has anything to do with us, though---directly," he quickly covered his ass in case his own suspicions were true.

"What is it, then?" Greg welcomed the distraction.

"Well, we've had a request for information about Dorvan V." Joe's face creased with sorrow as he turned on the desk monitor. Pictures of destruction, black scorched earth, leveled buildings, burned bodies soon appeared. His voice was a little strangled as he continued, "The Imperial News Network obtained this footage. According to their sensor readings, the residual energy signatures match Guard shuttle phasers. And personal sidearms."

Greg felt like he couldn't close his eyes on the carnage. He didn't deserve to. "What do they want from us?"

Joe bit his lip. "Confirmation. And if they're right, an explanation for why the Imperial Guard would murder innocent Imperial citizens."

Greg reached over, switched off the cycle of images and ran a hand down his face. He turned and looked at Carey. "I want you to tell me the truth, Joe. How bad is it out there?"

Joe felt those anguished eyes boring into him and found he couldn't lie. "It's pretty bad, sir."

He picked up the padd, looked at it a moment, then handed it over. "This is a list of all the names of the Guards who participated in the...incident...on Dorvan V. Under that are the names of all of those who've been attacking or extorting people with the Emperor's approval."

Joe shrugged. "The lists are almost identical. We've just been...keeping track. In case someone wanted to know."

Greg turned on the padd and read it, the instrument's low light reflecting on his features. He looked up and asked, "Is there a way to leak this without it being traced back to our office?"

"Sir, I'm not sure I understand," Joe said cautiously.

Greg gave him a knowing smile. "I'm not asking you to *do* anything, Joe. I'll do it, but I need to
make sure *my* family is safe." He tried to convey his sincerity, his need. "Please, trust me. Help me do the right thing here."

Joe stared for a long moment in silence, then slowly nodded. "All right. We'll have to hide the signal, then bounce it all over the Empire. It could take a while."

"OK." Greg pushed up his sleeves and pulled a chair next to Joe's. "The second thing we need to do is make sure there are honest men and women in charge of the squads again."

His jaw firmed. "The people of the Empire are supposed to trust the Guard, not hate or fear them. It's time we remembered who we are."

"What happens to the names on the list?" Joe asked.

"For now, split them up. Give them patrols in low-security places. Away from people." Greg ran a hand through his hair. "Then we'll have to figure out who to trust, and give our operatives the authority to discipline their subordinates according to the regs. That way when the story breaks we'll have already acted to restore order."

"And integrity," Joe said quietly. "I know a few people...they were actually thinking of transferring to the Fleet."

"Don't you mean 'we'?" Greg asked pointedly.

"Yes," Joe confirmed, chin raised. "But if you mean what you say, then maybe we'll stay."

"I mean it," Greg said, more serious than he'd ever been in his life. "I have a lot to make up for."

Joe nodded once more and they got to work.

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"Are you sure about this, Mort?" Jake could hardly believe his ears. "And are you sure this is a secure channel?"

"Yeah, to both questions." Mort rubbed one knuckle across his eyes. "I've been up all night checking the image feeds. They've sent a request to, what's his name, Ayala? To his office, anyway. Trying to get confirmation. They haven't heard back yet."

"I bet they won't," Jake muttered.

Mort shrugged. He doubted they'd hear anything either. "Hey, how's it going with your dad? I've been trying to contact you all day, but you were unavailable."

This time Jake shrugged. "Not bad. I went with him to New Orleans to see my grandpa."

"That's great!" Mort said, but then his eyes narrowed at Jake's frustrated face. "He won't let you see the Admiral, will he?"

"No!" Jake practically flung out the word. "Not unless I promise to leave San Francisco the second I'm done interviewing him."

"Tough call," Mort sympathized. "You could get the scoop of the year, then miss out on the story of the century."

"Yeah." Jake growled. "And I know he means it. One thing my Pop is, it's stubborn."
He gestured with one hand. "I'm hoping to get him to change his mind."

"Where is he now?" Mort asked.

A grimace preceded Jake's answer. "At the Colosseum. His gladiators are fighting again today."

Mort sat forward. "Including the Admiral?"

"Well, he went with the rest of them. I'm not sure if the Emperor has another one of those special exhibitions planned." Jake's frown deepened. "I hope they all come back alive."

"Yeah," Mort said. "It must make it worse living next door to them."

"You don't know the half of it." Jake looked at his friend. "Thanks for the update, Mort, and say Hi to the gang for me."

"Take care of yourself, Jake," Mort said before he signed off. "You're right in the middle of the action, which means you're also in the danger zone."

Jake just grunted as he flicked off the screen.

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In a fit of temper, Julian struck the man kneeling in front of him. He stalked to the end of his office and whirled. "What do you mean, she's disappeared?" he growled.

Michael Jonas cowered on the floor, shivering. He had seen what the Emperor did to slaves who displeased him. "I don't know what happened to Seska, sire. She ordered me to tail Councilor LaForge. She decided to handle Janeway herself, said she had a hunch about something. But she never reported in this morning."

"Have you searched? Was there any sign of her?" Julian barely resisted the urge to kick the man.

"No---I mean, yes, we searched, but no, we didn't find anything." Jonas dared a quick glance up. "We found traces of DNA in Janeway's garden, but nothing to indicate where Seska went after that. All the transporter logs are clear."

Julian's eyes narrowed. "And she didn't give you any clue to what she was working on?"

"No, sire." Jonas tened. "Only that she thought you would be very interested in her findings."

Julian swooped down on Jonas, jerking the man's head back by his hair. "I am *not* happy, slave. And my unhappiness has consequences, do you understand?"

A shudder shook Jonas's frame. "Y---yes, sire. Please, I didn't know what to do when she---"

"Silence!" Julian flung the man onto his back and stepped on his throat. "It appears that Janeway has neutralized my spy. I know Seska used you as a backup."

His lip curled. "Though why she'd consider such a sniveling worm useful is beyond me. So I'm giving you one chance, creature. Find me Seska's killer."

He removed his foot, but the threat was clear in his eyes. "Or I promise that I'll be yours."
Chapter 13

Tom hurried into Julian's chambers. He paused in the center of the room, finally glimpsing a figure in the shadows. "You sent for me, sire?"

The Emperor stepped into the light. Tom shivered slightly but held still under the other man's scrutiny.

Julian walked around his brother-in-law, assessing him, measuring, judging. He stopped directly in front of the younger man and asked, "Where have you been all day?"

"With Lucien. He hasn't been feeling well and I didn't want him to be alone." Tom lifted his shoulders. "He gets ill so rarely that when it happens he gets cranky, then clingy."

Julian simply nodded slowly, still watching him.

Tom swallowed nervously, then stepped a little closer to the silent man. "Was something troubling you, sire?"

"Yes." Julian moved away to perch on the edge of his desk. His eyes trapped wary blue counterparts. "Do you think Janeway has a new lover?"

"Councilor Janeway?" Tom asked, trying to control his breathing as every hair on his body lifted in warning. "I don't know."

"She's been disappearing from her house at night, but no one can figure out how or why." Julian leaned back a little more, tilting his head. "She thinks I don't know about it."

"Let her have her secrets." Tom shrugged.

"Oh no, my sweet," Julian cooed. "If there is one thing I will not have in my Empire it is secrets that are not my own." He beckoned Tom forward.

Tom forced himself to move to Julian's side. He held still as he felt delicate fingers brushing along his cheek.

Julian mused, "Janeway will soon discover the danger of crossing me. And all her plotting will be for naught. As will all of the cheers for the new champion of the Colosseum---so much noise, forgotten. Nothing can stop me. Soon they will see my greatness and tremble before it."

Tom shifted to look into eyes glittering with malice. "But not tonight," he said, hoping he spoke the truth.

"But not tonight," Julian confirmed. His hand moved to cradle Tom's jaw. "Before long all of my plans for the future will be set into motion, and all of the pieces will fall into place. And anyone who resists me will rue the day they were born."

His face twisted with sudden hate. "Chakotay, especially," he spat, "will wish he'd died in the Badlands. This I swear."

Tom stood frozen as Julian continued to pet him.

Julian's gaze turned reflective as he began stroking his thumb along Tom's lower lip. "Do you remember what my father said once, that sometimes he feared life was nothing but a frightful
"dream?"

Tom nodded.

"I think he was right. And I only have you to share it with." Julian pressed against the firmly closed lips. "Open your mouth," he ordered.

Tom obeyed and felt the pad of Julian's thumb running across his teeth.

"You know I love you." Julian held Tom's gaze as he removed his thumb from Tom's mouth and licked it slowly.

"And I love you," came the automatic response. Tom felt naked and exposed under that piercing gaze. He wrenched his eyes away. "I'd better get back to Lucien."

Julian nodded again with a small smile. "You must tell him to be strong. He is still the heir to the Empire." He leisurely examined the slim body before him. "At least for now."

Tom escaped, wishing he could truly flee the dark future he'd glimpsed in Julian's eyes.

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Tom's hands were still trembling when he turned on his comm screen. He nearly collapsed with relief when Harry Kim's face immediately appeared. "You'd damn well better have everything set," he said grimly.

Harry automatically bristled at the peremptory tone, then noticed the worry in the pale face of the Emperor's brother-in-law. He felt a flash of sympathy for the delicate position Thomas Paris found himself in. "The arrangements are made. Voyager will be here soon---the ship was already on its way to the Sol system for a complete overhaul."

The Ensign leaned forward. "There's an ancient access tunnel that runs under Sisko's compound to a park a few blocks away. I'm going to have a hovercar hidden nearby. Sisko can send Chakotay to me around midnight. As soon as the Admiral's aboard, I'll head for a shuttle stashed nearby and signal Voyager. When Sisko lowers the forcefields around his compound they'll sweep in and beam up everyone there, then swing over to New Orleans to get Sisko's father."

"Sisko is not going to like that. He may demand that all of his people are transported first," Tom pointed out.

"I know, but this is the only way it's going to work. When Voyager moves in all hell's going to break loose. Chakotay needs to be on his way to the Enterprise to take command before that happens." Harry's face reflected his determination.

Tom sighed. "All right. I'll see Sisko in person, since he'll probably also want some latinum for all the profits he's going to lose in this deal."

"At least he's willing to consider letting the Admiral go," Harry pointed out. "He could just as easily have slit Chakotay's throat to try and gain the Emperor's favor."

Tom just nodded. Then his eyes shifted uncomfortably. "I have one more request."

"I think I know what you want. If you can get yourself and your son out of the palace, Voyager will take you with them." Harry's gaze was solemn. "We don't know how people will react to Julian's overthrow, or how the Emperor will take his downfall."
He shrugged. "But we figured it would be better to get the kid out of harm's way."

Tom almost sank to the floor in relief. Instead he smiled at the earnest young man on the screen. "Thank you. Hopefully we'll all be safely away from Earth soon."

"Yeah. And it'll be good to see Admiral Chakotay on a starship again, back where he belongs." Harry smiled back. "Good luck."

Tom nodded. "To you too."

Chakotay clicked off the padd in his hand. Sisko had tossed it to him as the gladiators returned to the dormitory after the day's surprisingly fair matches. The former Admiral had immediately gotten to work. He had recorded his plans for the immediate neutralizing of the Imperial Guard vessels. He hoped it would be a temporary action. Chakotay believed that honest Guard commanders could be found and persuaded to join the Fleet officers in deposing the Emperor and his corrupt officers and officials.

Together the two armed forces of the Empire would unite to secure armories, vessels, the sensor nets, and computer systems. Then the Council would call a special session to elect a temporary President. They should also formalize the transfer of power back to the Council, and arrange elections on all of the member worlds so that every citizen, regardless of species or birth planet, would once again be represented fairly.

Chakotay hoped the media outlets would be invited to broadcast and record these first steps in the return to the government of old. He knew it was absolutely necessary that the people of the Empire agree and support the changes that were coming, or the Federation would die before it could even begin to be reborn.

When he'd finished outlining his strategies and suggestions for blocking possible Imperial countermoves, Chakotay had used the remaining space on the padd to convey as much as he could of Jean-Luc Picard's principles and philosophy. Therein lay the heart of the murdered Emperor's dream for the restored Federation.

Chakotay recounted conversations they'd shared over the years about honor, duty, integrity, honesty. Little did Chakotay know at the time that Jean-Luc was trying to instill in his protégé a belief in the importance of seeing the truth and doing the right thing despite the personal cost. Yet Chakotay had learned the lesson well, and now he knew it needed to be passed on to others.

So he had spent hours this day conveying his thoughts, trying to prepare his people---all the people---as best he could to face the future. The Empire was about to be changed forever. Definitely for the fairer, hopefully for the better.

Chakotay sighed, laid the padd on his bunk and rubbed his sore throat. He was surprised to see a glass of water appear before his eyes. He accepted it and nodded gratefully to Tuvok before swallowing the soothing liquid.

"It was simple to anticipate the physiological effect of such a lengthy speech," Tuvok explained as he moved to his own bunk. He considered the man sitting across from him. "Your words were eloquent."

Chakotay's brows rose; this was high praise from a Vulcan. "Thank you. I was just trying to explain my purpose, my point of view. At first, a lot of people won't understand or agree with what I hope to
achieve. They at least deserve to know *why* their universe will be so radically reshaped.”

Tuvok pondered a moment. “You sound so very certain that you will succeed. Such overconfidence is illogical, especially considering our situation.” His open hand indicated the dormitory of gladiators. Fellow slaves.

"But situations can change." Chakotay gave a small shrug. "There are always two battles to be fought, the one against your enemy and the other against your own weaknesses and fears. To lose the latter is to lose both. Sometimes the only power we have is the strength we find in ourselves.”

He sighed. "I hope for victory---I'm not certain of it. But I do know that to bring about the return of the Federation, each and every citizen on *this* planet needs to defeat their fear of the unknown, to conquer their feelings of smugness and superiority, and open their minds and hearts to their fellow beings."

"A formidable undertaking," Tuvok said with a raised brow.

"I don't know if my words will do any good, but I figure it can't hurt." Dimples flashed and faded as Chakotay gave a small, self-deprecating grin. "We need all the help we can get, because there's nothing more stubborn than a Terran."

He leaned forward. "But if we can get Earth to accept our plans, then the rest of the Empire will follow."

"Indeed," Tuvok acknowledged. He stared at Chakotay a long moment, then said, "I think the people of all planets would do well to follow your example."

Chakotay was startled by the unexpected compliment, but his own reply was stilled as the door opened to reveal Sisko. The newcomer gestured impatiently. "Admiral, come quickly."

Tuvok and Chakotay shared a quick look, then Chakotay rose and approached, taking care to bring the padd with him.

Sisko's hooded eyes tracked his approach. "Congratulations, Admiral. You have very persuasive friends."

Chakotay noted the absence of guards as they walked down the hall. "Thank you for the padd," he said, but only got a grunt in response. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he took in the older man's tension. "You look worried, Sisko. Is this about your son?"

Sisko stopped and turned back. "Who told you about Jake?" he snapped.

The broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. "This is a small place, and people don't have much to talk about." He peered at the other man. "You're scared for him." It wasn't a question.

Frustration burst from Sisko in a sweep of his arms. "He refuses to leave Earth with me. He doesn't see that it's for his own good." He paced the width of the hallway as he gritted, "He's just so stubborn. He doesn't want to 'hide under tables', or 'miss the story of the century'."

Sisko snorted. "He doesn't use the brains he was born with, and he's going to get himself killed."

"No," Chakotay said softly. He looked at the padd in his hand; his gaze reflected speculation. "Jake is a journalist, yes?"

Sisko paused and turned back. "He'd like to be, that's for certain. What do you have in mind?"
Chakotay allowed a small smile. "Just a way for all of us to get what we want, Sisko." He started walking again, approaching the room at the end of the hall. "Send him to me after we're done here. He won't be completely out of danger, but I'll get him off Earth. I promise."

Sisko stopped his slave with a hand on one bronze arm. "And what will it cost me?" he asked pointedly.

"Nothing," Chakotay replied. When surprised dark eyes met his he continued, "The Emperor has already murdered my son. I'm not going to let him have yours."

At that moment Sisko understood what Jake had been trying to tell him about this man. That the integrity and bravery weren't just for show. He was the real thing, a true leader. Sisko suddenly regretted the haggling he'd just done over the price of Chakotay's freedom.

With a shrug he got over it. What's done is done. He motioned Chakotay into the room. "Jake will be waiting for you," he said as he shut the door between them. He walked slowly toward the building's exit, still thinking.

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Julian waited behind his desk as Councilor Shelby entered his domain. The blonde fairly radiated anticipation, as did the older Bajoran woman following her like a shadow.

The Emperor grandly gestured to the two chairs in front of his desk, permitting the ladies to be seated in his presence. Only Shelby accepted the offer, though. Her attendant stood behind the Councilor's chair, a clear indication the stranger was a slave. His lips thinned as he realized this woman was no one of consequence.

"What was so important you had to see me tonight, my dear Elizabeth, and who is your...hard-used companion?" He grinned to himself as the rather plain-faced alien stiffened at the insult.

Shelby ignored the jibe to her slave and leaned forward, eager to share her news. "This is Wynn, sire, my personal...investigator."

Julian's brows rose. "And what, exactly, has she been investigating?"

"The disappearance of your spy, sire." Shelby knew to tread lightly. "I hoped to further serve you by putting my people to work in finding out what happened to Seska."

She paused, then said carefully, "I was aware of how much you...valued her."

"It's true," Julian mused, leaning back in his chair, "Seska's...enthusiasm for discovering the truth nearly rivals my own. I do enjoy her 'interrogations', despite their inevitable fatality to the unfortunate being questioned. She certainly does her share to keep the prison populations down."

His gaze flicked to the older woman, then back to his ally. "But why did you take this upon yourself, without my authority?"

Shelby snorted, secure at least in this opinion. "Because while Seska was a top covert operative, Jonas is a joke. He couldn't find his own lunch, much less Seska's killer."

"You're sure she's dead, then?"

Wynn spoke up, "We don't have a corpse, sire, but all indications point to it. There were a few bloodstains found in Janeway's garden. Not enough circumstantial evidence for an accusation, but—"
"But enough to know the Councilor has struck a blow against me." Julian's anger toward his enemy distracted him from reprimANDING the upstart slave.

"Not exactly, sire," Shelby interrupted. "Or at least, not alone."

"What do you mean?" Julian asked, his voice a low and dangerous growl.

"There was another person's DNA found in Janeway's garden."

The Emperor shrugged dismissively. "Of course there was. Janeway's garden parties are famous and very well attended. I wouldn't be surprised if you found *my* DNA in her garden."

"But that would be impossible." Shelby settled back, savoring the moment. "While it's true many of us were there a week or so ago, it rained between the Councilor's last party and the night Seska disappeared."

Julian's eyes narrowed. "Then the sample had to be recent. Who is it?"


The sallow face froze in shock, then settled into lines of denial. "That's impossible. Tom is mine, and his son my heir. He would not be so foolish as to try and betray me."

Wynn protested, "But his blood--""

Shelby quickly raised her hand, silencing her slave. The Councilor hid her own satisfaction, recognizing that Julian at this moment was very capable of killing the messenger. "Nothing is certain, sire. But his DNA was there, despite clear efforts to conceal the evidence."

She carefully suggested, "Perhaps you could ask him what he was doing at Janeway's home?"

"Not now, he's with Lucien." Julian's gaze sharpened with a sudden suspicion. He rose with determination.

Shelby also jumped to her feet, hoping she hadn't just gambled away her life.

Julian caught the flash of fear and smiled grimly. "Don't worry, my dear Councilor. I won't do anything---yet. Not until I hear the truth from Tom's own lips."

He gazed at the two women. "We will discover whether you will earn my gratitude, or my wrath."

He left them contemplating their fates.

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Lucien was lying on his bed, bored out of his gourd. He rolled onto his stomach and reached over the side of the mattress to his satchel. After a few moments of fumbling he extracted his prizes: two polished stones, each with a different symbol etched deep into their surfaces.

Satisfied, he flopped back onto his pillow and examined the stones. One was a milky blue-green and the other opalescent white. He turned them this way and that, watching the light bounce off them. He rubbed his thumbs carefully over the carvings, feeling the smooth lines tingling against his skin.

"I see you have them both," came a voice from the doorway.
Lucien dropped the rocks, startled. He bolted up, only to relax when he saw his uncle glide into the room. "Hello, Uncle Julian."

"Hmm...you're feeling better, I take it?" Julian asked as he seated himself on his nephew's bed.

The boy bit his lip a moment, uncertain how to answer. Finally he shrugged and replied, "Yeah, I guess."

"That's good." Julian laid a hand against the boy's forehead. "At least there's no sign of fever."

"Uh, nah." Lucien fiddled with the stones, uncomfortable lying to his relative.

"I noticed you playing with those when I came in," Julian said smoothly. "I haven't seen them since before you were born."

"Yeah, Dad gave them to me." Lucien displayed his treasures proudly. Then he confided to his uncle, "I'm hoping Chakotay will make one for me. But I doubt he'll have time when he's an Admiral again."

Julian went very still a moment. Then without missing a beat he ruffled the boy's hair. "I'm sure he will. No matter how busy he is, he always was willing to do things like that."

"I want mine to be red---or black---something really neat." Lucien smiled and comfortably slumped at his uncle's side.

"You know," Julian was suddenly struck by a thought, "you really should come and see *my* stone from Chakotay."

"You have one too?" Lucien's head came up as his eyes brightened with interest. "Cool."

"Yes, I'm sure your father told you, Chakotay gave one to each of us, your mom and dad and me." He stood and held out his hand. "Why don't we go look for it?"

Lucien suddenly recalled his situation. "Uh, maybe I should let Tem know where I'm going...?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll see him in the hallway, or we can comm him from my room." Julian tilted his head, musing aloud. "Maybe I should give you my stone, too, then you can keep them all together." He smiled. "Of course, you'll have to find it first---like a treasure hunt."

"OK," Lucien agreed as he hopped off the bed and bounced his way out of the room.

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Tom approached Chakotay the second Chakotay stepped into the room. Catching Chakotay's wrists, Tom pulled Chakotay closer, urgency in every line. "Julian is on to Janeway. We've run out of time. At midnight, Sisko will lead you to a tunnel. Follow it to a park. Harry Kim will find you there and get you on a shuttle to rendezvous with the Enterprise."

Chakotay quickly took in Tom's anxious demeanor. Setting the padd on the table, he gripped Tom's shoulders. "Are you and Lucien all right?"

"For now." Tom absorbed the warmth of Chakotay's hands seeping through his tunic, and the caring and concern clear in the dark eyes. "Voyager will be coming to pick us up as soon as we get out of the palace."

Some of the tension ebbed from Chakotay's body at hearing the plan. He surrendered to an
overwhelming urge, so long denied by time and distance and circumstances. He carefully lifted one hand to cradle Tom's cheek. "You've done so much to help me. I'm sorry you've had to put yourself so much at risk."

Tom leaned into the caress, closing his eyes a moment. He felt again that sense of rightness, that he was where the universe wanted him to be. He sighed and looked at Chakotay. "I only did what I had to."

"No, Tom. You had no obligation to me, or anyone else. All you had to do was keep safe. To be strong for Lucien," Chakotay said tenderly. Oddly enough in this moment when they were on the brink of revolution, when his fate was still uncertain, all he felt was a strange sense of peace. He finally had Tom in his arms, even if it was only for a moment.

Tom's hands had dropped to span Chakotay's waist. He leaned forward a moment, absorbing the feel and scent of the man he loved. "I'm so tired," he confessed. "Julian hates all the universe---and you most of all."

"Because Jean-Luc chose me," Chakotay nodded, sliding his own arms around Tom, pressing into the strong, slender frame.

"No," Tom said, leaning back to look at Chakotay. He raised a hand and ran his fingers over the place that once held Chakotay's tattoo. "Because he loved you."

Tom paused. "Because I loved you."

"That was a long time ago," Chakotay whispered. He caught the slender fingers and drew them to his mouth for a kiss.

"No. That was yesterday. And this moment. And the rest of my life." Tom held his breath, searching Chakotay's face for his reaction.

Chakotay smiled softly and placed one palm over Tom's heart, remembering a day long ago. "That's a promise I can't refuse...and the knowledge is a joy I will never regret."

He took a deep breath. "I love you too. Still. Always."

"I've felt alone all my life," Tom admitted. "Except with you."

Chakotay slid his hand up Tom's chest to run along Tom's neck and circle to the nape. He drew Tom's head down and kissed him. For the very first time.

Tom opened his mouth to moan at the contact, and heard an echoing sound deep in Chakotay's throat. He pressed closer to Chakotay, entwining arms and legs and tongues and breaths. They strained to absorb each other, each recognizing the missing half of his soul. Consummating a union almost two decades in the making.

Chakotay opened his lower hand against the small of Tom's back, clamping their hips together. While their kiss continued to range from rawly passionate grinding to sweetly tender brushing. His other fingers stroked the skin of Tom's neck, comforting yet also comforted by the simple touch.

Neither man knew how long they stayed locked together. But eventually they drew away, both of their bodies immediately craving the return of its mate.

"I should go," Tom breathed.
"Yes," Chakotay whispered. His eyes mapped Tom's face one last time, then drew him down to brush his lips across the wide forehead. "Good luck." His voice trembled slightly.

Tom just nodded, overwhelmed by the emotions of love and loss.

He turned away, picked up his own computer from the table and walked to the door. At the threshold he stared for a moment, then disappeared into the corridor. The door clicked shut behind him.

Chakotay took some time to catch his breath and rein in his feelings. To tuck this bittersweet memory into a special place in his heart. And to look forward to their reunion.

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Jake burst into the room, tired of waiting in the hall. Also, he was a little unnerved by the brief blast of intensity in the face of the man he recognized as Thomas Paris. He'd never figured that decorative addition to Imperial functions would have such deep emotions.

He stopped short when he recognized a similar struggle for control in Chakotay's expression. When the man looked over at him, though, he was pure Admiral.

"So, you're Sisko's son, the journalist." Chakotay's eyes seemed to pierce Jake's façade of bravado.

"Yes---well, not exactly. I've done a few stories, but right now I'm mostly a researcher." Jake was vaguely surprised to hear the unvarnished truth tumbling from his lips.

Chakotay's mouth twitched a moment into a ghost of a grin, but he quickly recalled the seriousness of the situation. "And you'd like to interview me?"

"Yes, Admiral Chakotay, I would." Jake's hands clenched unconsciously with tension. "We've figured out most of what happened to you, the how, but not the why."

He tried to read the dark eyes. "Are our suspicions true, that Julian Bashir Picard is responsible for what happened to you? Why did the Emperor destroy your village? Why is he trying to have you killed in the arena?"

Chakotay quirked a brow. "You don't waste time asking the easy ones, do you?" He walked over to the table and picked up the padd.

Jake automatically reached for the slim instrument as Chakotay approached, only to have it tilt out of his reach.

"There's no time for an interview, but I'll make a deal with you, Jake." Chakotay gazed at Sisko's son, wondering if the young man would take the bait. "You help me and I'll guarantee you a front-row seat for the biggest event since James T. Kirk declared himself Emperor."

"What are you talking about?" Jake frowned suspiciously.

"A good tactician always has a backup plan. I want you to be mine." Chakotay indicated the padd. "I've put orders on here for Captain Will Riker of the Enterprise. I want you to contact a Betazoid named Deanna Troi. Say to her, 'It's not much of a wedding present, but Chakotay sends you and your Imzadi all the best wishes for a future free of shadows.' Then ask her to contact Will and tell him you are the messenger I promised."

"And then I'll be on the bridge when they make their move," Jake surmised as he eyed the padd a moment, then shook his head decisively. "No, wait a minute. My dad put you up to this, didn't he?
I'm not going to play it safe just because he thinks I can't handle myself."

Frustrated, Chakotay grabbed Jake's shoulders. "This has nothing to do with you, your father, or even me. Jake, these plans could change the course of history. If I don't make it to my rendezvous with the Enterprise, then it's possible everything that a lot of people have risked---or lost---their lives for will not come to pass. I can't take that chance. So I am begging you, forget your own petty ambitions and arguments with your father. Take the padd to Will."

Chakotay snorted at the younger man's stunned expression. "I'm sorry, but I don't have time for subtle persuasion. If you're going, you need to leave now."

Jake moved away and crossed his arms. "And if I'm not?" he asked defiantly. Jake had already committed himself mentally, but some small part of him still resented being manipulated.

Chakotay sensed agreement. Dimples flashed briefly as Chakotay grinned. "Then you won't get access to what else is on this padd. The musings of Admiral Chakotay of the Imperial Fleet. His memories of times spent with Emperor Jean-Luc Picard, recalled on the eve of his escape from slavery."

"Shit." Jake found a smile of his own. "You set me up, didn't you?"

All mirth gone, Chakotay shook his head gravely. "No, Jake. There are things I want the people of the Empire to know and understand. So I'm entrusting them to you."

Jake nodded and walked up to the living legend. He held out his hand, and felt it enclosed in a strong, sure grasp. Then the padd was pressed into it.

The men walked to the doorway and into the corridor. There they parted company. Chakotay returned to his bed to await the stroke of midnight. Jake walked to the house to hug his dad goodbye.

***************

Tom transported into his usual spot and spent a long moment regaining his emotional equilibrium. Calm once more, he stepped into Lucien's bedroom.

And felt a rush of cold dread when his eyes fell on the empty bed.

"Lucien! Tem!" he shouted, fear echoing in his voice.

Tem skidded to a stop in the doorway. "I'm sorry, sir. He was already gone when I walked in with---"

"Never mind that!" Tom snapped. He grabbed the young Bajoran's shoulders and practically shook him as he growled, "Where is he?"

"With the Emperor," Tem gasped. He landed in a chair as Tom shoved him aside.

Tom's heart beat frantically as he dashed down the hall, desperately hoping he wasn't too late.

***************

Julian and Lucien looked up as Tom flung himself into the room.

"Hey Dad," Lucien called from his seat beside his uncle. They were behind the desk in Julian's suite.
"Yes, hello Tom. We were starting to worry about you," Julian purred. His cold stare pinned Tom into place. "I was just telling Lucien here the story of an Emperor from long, long ago. His name was Claudius, and he was betrayed by those closest to him."

Tom closed his eyes and felt despair wash over him. It was clear Julian knew. He opened them again and unsteadily made his way to a chair set in front of the desk. He watched anxiously as Julian slung his arm around Lucien's shoulders. On the desk's shiny wooden surface sat three carved stones: one aqua, one white, and one a dark purple with reddish streaks.

His only consolation was that Lucien was obviously unaware of the tension thickening the air.

Julian stroked the boy's hair, his eyes never leaving Tom's face. "But Claudius knew they were up to something. They were busy little bees. So he sat down across from the one he had trusted, who had wounded him most deeply. And he said, 'Tell me what you've been up to, my busy little bee. Or I shall strike those closest to you. I will bathe in their blood and make them beg and sob for the sweet release of death'."

He leaned down to press his cheek against Lucien's. "And what do you think happened then, Lucien?"

"I don't know, Uncle," the boy said with wide eyes.

Julian smiled. "The little bee told him everything."

And swallowing his rage and his despair, throat aching with unshed tears, Tom began to speak.
Chapter 14

San Francisco as a whole was never really quiet, but a few minutes before midnight the streets around Sisko's compound were deserted. There was a glimmer in the darkness, and three dozen Guards appeared. They were wearing body armor and carried phase rifles in addition to their personal sidearms.

Sisko saw them from where he'd been standing on his balcony enjoying the balmy night. He swiftly went inside and crossed to a terminal. A few moments of punching codes into the computer and the forcefields were locked into place so none of his own security personnel could lower them.

His face grim, he descended to ground level and made his way outside. He paused and yelled up to his guards, "I've fused the controls for the forcefields. You won't be able to get out or let them in. It's up to you what you do when they break through." Then Sisko crossed the garden and training grounds, heading for the dormitory.

***************

Joe Carey stood before the gate. He saw Sisko moving and called, "Open in the name of the Emperor!" When he was ignored, he turned to his troops and ordered, "Break through the forcefields, I don't care how. But remember---" his fierce gaze encompassed them all "Take them alive. No exceptions." He stepped back and let his people get to work. They concentrated their fire, trying to overload the system.

***************

Sisko entered the dorm building and made his way to a door. He unlocked it and entered to see the gladiators already awake, peering out of the windows and talking over the sounds of phaser fire. "People." His voice immediately brought silence and attention. "We're about to be invaded. There are weapons in the armory. If you want to fight for your freedom, then come with me."

His eyes roamed over them all. "The choice is yours. From this moment you are no longer my slaves."

As the gladiators began streaming into the hall Sisko pulled Chakotay aside. Tuvok and B'Elanna hovered nearby.

"It looks like we've run out of time, Admiral," Sisko said. "Stay in the shadows. Make your way into the garden. In the southwest corner is an old manhole cover. Under it is a ladder that will carry you down into the access tunnel. The park is three openings farther down the line." He handed his erstwhile property a wristlight and phaser.

Chakotay searched the older man's face. "What will happen to all of you?"

Sisko's mouth twisted into a wry smile. "It looks like we'll start the revolution without you." He sobered. "We'll hold them off as long as we can."

Chakotay nodded. "Thank you, and good luck," he said quietly.

"To you too," Sisko replied with a nod, then hurried down the hall to make sure his people were properly equipped.

B'Elanna and Tuvok approached. The three gladiators clasped hands a moment, bidding silent good-
"Strength and honor," Chakotay said, and their murmurs echoed his. Then he let go and made his way out the door and into the night.

Tuvok and B'Elanna turned and raced after Sisko, determined to make their last battle count.

***************

Chakotay darted from one clump of shadows to another, making his way across the training yard, heading for the relative safety of the gardens. As he was finally shrouded in greenery he turned a moment for a last glimpse of his comrades. They were upending tables and benches, finding cover. Beyond them the forcefield whined under the assault of the Imperial Guards' weapons.

He whirled and plunged into the bushes to search for the tunnel access. As he wrenched open the rusted iron disc Chakotay noted the eerie silence that fell over the compound. It told him the barriers had been breached.

With a final thought for his fellow gladiators, Chakotay disappeared underground.

***************

It was not going to be a fair fight. That much was certain. They didn't have armor or heavy weapons. Sisko's eyes roamed the moonlit figures of his gladiators, crouched and waiting for the Imperial troops to fire the first shot.

He was pleased that all of his guards and servants had also joined in this last stand. Most of them didn't know they were guarding Admiral Chakotay's escape. They were here because Sisko had been good to them for many years.

Sisko gave a shark's smile and tightened his finger on his phaser. It was time to become a warrior once more.

***************

Without warning the night was shattered by the bright bolts and high shrieks of phaser fire. The Guards' volley was answered by Sisko's people. The gladiators proved as adept with energy weapons as they were metal. Guards grunted as the energy dissipated along their armor.

More troops transported in, appearing in the middle of the yard. The new Guards immediately fanned out to secure the gardens and mansion.

With a yell B'Elanna leapt over her protective cover and lay down a barrage of fire, striking half-a-dozen foes, drawing the new squad's attention. She landed into a roll to avoid being hit by return bolts. She sprinted into the cover of the garden and crouched a moment, catching her breath. The half-Klingon grinned. She was about to go hunting.

***************

Sisko saw his people picked off by Imperial sharpshooters. Their own strikes were useless if they impacted on the enemy's armor. They had to hit exposed skin to be effective. His guards and gladiators were good, but there was precious little flesh showing to target.

He heard B'Elanna's shout and saw the new Guards—and where they were headed. He shared a look with Tuvok, both pairs of dark eyes flecked with moonlight.
The two men stared at each other, then moved as one to attack the newcomers, their phasers spitting fire.

Chakotay held the wristlight as far away from his body as possible, just in case someone was waiting further down the tunnel to take aim at him. He moved as swiftly as he could through the subterranean passage, knowing that it was only a matter of time before someone figured out where he'd gone.

He finally reached the third ladder after his own. He turned off the light and climbed upward in complete darkness. At the top he waited under the closed cover, catching his breath and straining to hear anything above him. There was only silence.

Hooking one arm tightly around an iron rung, he pressed his other hand against the lid to the portal. Chakotay slowly pushed upward, wincing at the sound of grating metal. He peered out from the small slit he'd created, but again there was nothing suspicious. Just a quiet street, the faint wind stirring the tree branches into leafy whispers.

Taking a deep breath, he lifted the cover completely off and stepped into the moonlight once more. He swiftly replaced the lid and dashed into the nearest patch of bushes.

About two blocks away he noticed a figure in the moonlight standing beside a hovercar. He approached cautiously, trying to make as little sound as possible. He soon recognized Harry Kim.

Still, something didn't feel right. Chakotay stopped and stepped deeper into some foliage. He pursed his lips and gave a low whistle.

Harry's heart leapt and his gut twisted as he heard the quiet sound. "Chakotay, run! It's a trap!" A figure suddenly rose up from where they had crouched in the hovercar. Harry grunted in pain as a beefy hand yanked him back by the neck and pressed a phaser to his temple.

The Guard, a man named Braxton, shouted into the darkness. "Give yourself up quietly, Admiral, or I'll kill him where he stands." He smiled in satisfaction as he heard soft scuffles. The rest of the Guards hidden in the area were readying their weapons.

Braxton tightened his grip on Harry and opened his mouth to shout again, but left the words unspoken at the sound of something small skittering along the pavement. When it stopped, it turned out to be a deactivated phaser. Both men were surprised to then see a flash of movement. A powerful silhouette appeared, limned in moonlight, fingers spread and hands slightly raised. It was Chakotay.

Chakotay continued his walk to where his would-be captors waited. He didn't resist as more men flowed out of the shadows to roughly grab him and drag him to the hovercar. He couldn't let Harry be killed for no reason.

It was clear they'd been betrayed. Chakotay had sensed the bodies in the darkness. Human hunters waiting to pounce on their prey. Too many to take out quickly with a single phaser. He was surrounded. There was no way Chakotay would have been able to get out of the area, much less the city, on his own. And since Jake had already delivered his orders, there was no need for Chakotay to escape to give them in person. Especially with the young Ensign's life as the price of his freedom.

He'd taken a moment to bid farewell to all the half-formed dreams he'd nurtured for the future, his own and the people's. He hoped Sisko and the other gladiators survived, that Tom and Lucien at least were safe, far from the palace. And that somewhere, Will Riker and the others still roamed free.
It was clear his own road, his own life, would end in Imperial hands. He'd briefly touched the braid on his wrist, thinking that soon he would join his family in death. Then he stood up and delivered himself back into captivity.

Braxton stared at the famed admiral as he approached, surrounded by Guards who took advantage of the strong man's passivity to deliver a few cowardly kicks and blows. Braxton gave a sharp bark of laughter. "Such nobility and sacrifice. You can always tell the idealists. They'll do anything to save their friends."

He pressed his phaser to Harry's temple once more. "They're so stupid. Not everyone keeps their word, Admiral."

Ayala stepped out from where he'd been observing in the shadows. "You have your orders, Braxton." His voice was a low growl. "I said no casualties. You harm the Ensign and you can be sure I'll be shooting you right after."

He kept his eyes firmly turned away from Chakotay. He couldn't bear to look at his former friend. Instead he gestured impatiently for Braxton to back off and other Guards to secure the prisoners.

As his hands were bound and a collar locked around his neck, Chakotay noted with relief that Harry was being similarly restrained. At least the young man would live.

He gave a dejected Harry a small shrug. They'd done their best. Sometimes that just wasn't enough.

************************************************************

Elsewhere in the Empire, Julian's minions were collecting his other enemies. The houses of Janeway, LaForge, and other Councilors were invaded without warning. Like Sisko's compound, the residences' forcefields were overloaded and the troops moved in. Those who had stood against Julian were summarily arrested, dragged out into the night, and transported away.

Joe Carey wiped the sweat from his brow. It had been a surprisingly hard, long battle to secure Sisko's domain. He regarded the unmoving figures lying on the ground before him. He knew Sisko and some of the gladiators by sight. He issued his commands: the gladiator owner and his warriors were to be transported to the Colosseum. The rest of the rabble were going to be held in the compound until the Emperor decided their fates.

He shook his head sadly as he wondered if sparing their lives was merely condemning these brave people to an inevitable, but far more painful death. In the end he shrugged. He had his orders. He would follow them. For now.

"Damn it Will, we have to do something!" Tasha Yar's fist pounded the surface of the Enterprise Captain's desk. "The Emperor's running rampant down there!"

Will looked into his second's blazing eyes. His own drifted to gauge the other occupants of his Ready Room. Josh Cavit and Ken Dalby, beamed over from Voyager, looked equally upset at the turn of events. Rudy Ransom, representing the Guard Captains and crews who had also joined the rebellion, was sitting quietly waiting for Riker to speak. Reg Barclay and Marla Gilmore, found and recruited from Earth for their technical expertise per Chakotay's orders, were fidgeting, uncomfortable with the tension in the room. And Jake Sisko, INN researcher/reporter and the bearer of Chakotay's last message, was frowning in a mix of anxiety and frustration.
Will felt a hand rest on his shoulder a moment and reached up to clasp it. He sensed Deanna's silent offering of strength and calm through their bond. He nodded to himself, sure of his decision.

"I *am* doing something, Tasha," he said. "I'm following Chakotay's orders. You heard him. He's outlined a solid plan for a takeover that is as bloodless as possible."

He let some of his own frustration leak through. "We don't know exactly what's happening down there. Chakotay and Janeway have obviously been betrayed, but *we* haven't been exposed. Otherwise the Emperor would have moved to destroy us by now. Yes, our friends are in danger. But I can't jeopardize this entire mission for one or two people. No matter how important they are to me personally."

He spread his hands. "Please, Tasha, don't fight me on this. We need to be united or we might as well give up before we fire the first shot."

The angry blonde stared into Will's determined face for a few moments, then sighed and backed down. "I'm sorry for my outburst, Captain. I just don't like the thought of Chakotay, Harry, and the others in that bastard's hands. There's no telling what he has planned for them."

"Nothing good, that's for certain." Jake wasn't protesting, just stating a fact. He'd been numbed by shock at the news that his father was among the prisoners. "Considering what happened to Dorvan V, it's a pretty safe bet Julian Bashir Picard will be even more vindictive at close range."

Rudy Ransom spoke up. "But it *is* the distraction the Admiral spoke of. We won't have to manufacture one, since the Emperor will be so focused on seeking revenge that he's not likely to notice the changing of the Guard, as it were."

Will nodded. "So it's settled. We'll move forward as scheduled. Rudy, you've explained things to your people?"

"Yes. We'll be releasing our political prisoners and filling up the jails with the Guards and Councilors who've willingly conspired with the Emperor. Unfortunately, we can't be sure who we can trust in the Emperor's personal entourage, so we'll have to leave them for last."

"Understood. Reg and Marla, are you ready to play secret agent?" Will hid a hint of a smile at the way the two instantly sat to attention.

"Yes," Marla replied. "We're going to sneak into the main computer complex and let loose a few of our new drones."

"It should take about an hour to secure all of the automated defenses and Imperial systems," Reg added as he nodded, twisting his hands together nervously.

"Voyager is ready to help secure the shipyards and guarantee that the vessels we're not sure of stay locked down." Cavit's face was grim. "I just wish we could have fulfilled the retrieval part of our mission as well."

"As do we all," Deanna said softly. "But now we need to concentrate on making the return of the Federation a reality."

Jake clutched his padd in a tense grip. It had been copied and returned to him for safekeeping. "I'd like to link up with my group at INN to start downloading the Admiral's messages for the people. He makes the case for a restored Federation pretty convincingly."

"That's good to hear." Will offered a grim smile. "Because like it or not, the Empire is going to fall."
Chakotay was marched along a familiar passage into the bowels of the Colosseum. He was chained hand and foot, bruised and sore from the less-than-tender care at the hands of his captors.

He passed cells of silent prisoners, and recognized the faces of his friends and allies. Janeway stood in front of a group of frightened men and women. Councilors, he guessed, by their stunned visages and soft bodies. He noted Harry's disheveled form in their midst.

The next cages held the gladiators. Some were sporting obvious injuries, but nothing serious. He caught the somber eyes of his friends, B'Elanna, Tuvok, even Sisko. They nodded in solemn tribute as he walked by.

At the end of the corridor the solid beams of the massive structure were exposed. From the thick joists hung chains. The Guards marched Chakotay underneath the center set and spun him around. Carefully they transferred his bonds so that when they were finished he stood with his arms outstretched by the new chains.

Finally they removed the collar from around his neck and left him standing, alone.

Julian stood on a balcony of the Imperial Palace, watching the sun rise on the first day of his new—and absolute—reign over the Empire. Power and satisfaction flowed like the headiest of wines through his veins. Julian Bashir Picard had achieved the destiny he'd anticipated for a decade. And soon all the universe would prostrate themselves before his greatness.

Shelby appeared at his elbow, bowing deeply. "It is done, sire."

"Chakotay? Janeway?" he inquired.

"Yes." She nodded. "And all of the others."

"Good." Julian waved her away. She departed, looking forward to her reward.

The Emperor turned away from the wakening city, strolling to a table inside the room. He mused as he walked around its inlaid surface, "But there is yet the small matter of my treacherous family. What of my nephew? And what of his father?"

He passed a chair that was pulled out from the table. Tom Paris sat stiffly upon it, his hands clenched in his lap and his face pale and strained. Julian gripped the top of the high chair back and stretched forward to whisper in Tom's ear, "Should both of you share your lover's fate? Or should I be merciful?" He chuckled. "Julian the Merciful."

With a yank Julian pulled out the chair and spun it to face him. He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the carved arms and thrusting his face close to Tom's. "Lucien will stay with me now. And if you give even a single *look* that displeases me he will be dead before you blink."

His eyes narrowed, boring into Tom's. "As for you, in three days I will have you outfitted with an artificial womb. Containing *my* son. You will agree to everything, follow the doctor's orders to the letter."

Julian smiled. "It is an honor, you know. To bear the first of my progeny. A pure-blood heir, the beginning of my dynasty. *That* is your destiny."
He stood and folded his arms. "Am I not merciful?"

Tom stared at him in silence.

The Colosseum was filled to overflowing. People had heard that a match was scheduled, more amazing than any they had ever seen. No one knew the details, but the promise of a spectacle was enough to bring them forth.

Hushed whispers echoed in the vast space. There had been rumors of disappearances and disturbances during the night, but no one knew what, if anything, had really happened.

The tinge of anxiety only increased their anticipation.

Kate, Jadzia, and Keiko sat in the middle tiers of the stands, close to an exit. They held hands for mutual comfort. *They* knew that Kathryn Janeway had been snatched from her bed in the early morning hours. When Kate had been unable to reach her old friend they'd done a little asking around. The answers they'd gotten chilled the marrow of their bones.

They decided to hide in plain sight, figuring if the net widened to include them at least there would be witnesses.

Dressed in white-and-gilt body armor, Julian strutted through the corridor underneath the Colosseum stands. His personal Guards marched with him in quick formation, phasers drawn. Ayala reluctantly brought up the rear.

Chakotay watched Julian approach. He forced himself to stay relaxed in these final moments of his life, refusing to show any emotion to feed this man's gloating triumph.

The Emperor moved to stand in front of Chakotay. His eyes caressed the powerful figure.

Faintly, the sounds of the crowd's chant began to filter down to them. "Chakotay! Chakotay! Chakotay!" the people shouted for their champion.

Julian's tilted his head upward, listening. He returned his gaze to his nemesis. "They call for you," he said. "The Admiral who became a slave. The slave who became a gladiator. The gladiator who defied an Emperor."

He began to circle his bound prey, running his fingers along the bronze flesh exposed by the tunic. When Julian was behind Chakotay he pressed himself against the gladiator's back, resting his chin in the crook of Chakotay's neck. His hands continued their liberties, roaming the strong body. "It's an impressive tale," he purred. "And now people want to know how the story ends."

Chakotay endured the speech and touch in silence.

Julian ended the forced embrace and returned to his original position. He peered into Chakotay's indifferent face. "Only a famous death will do."

He smiled unconvincingly. "And what could possibly be more dramatic than to challenge the Emperor himself in the Colosseum?"
Surprise and suspicion washed through Chakotay's expression. "You would fight me?"

"Why not?" Julian snapped. He drew himself up stiffly. "Do you think I'm afraid?"

For a moment, Chakotay was seeing a young boy from a long time ago. His gaze was steady, his voice sad but certain as he replied, "I think you have been afraid all your life."

Julian flinched at that. His hand jerked as if seeking to deliver a blow. But he stopped himself and sneered, "Unlike Chakotay the Invincible, who knows no fear?"

Chakotay gave a small shrug. "I knew a man once who told me, 'Death smiles at us all. The best that we can do is smile back'."

"I wonder," Julian said with a smirk, "Did your friend smile at his own death?"

"You must know." Chakotay stared into Julian's eyes. "He was your father."

The bolt struck home. Julian stiffened, failing to hide his reaction. Then his expression shifted to insincere concern. "You loved my father, I know."

He drew close to Chakotay again, wrapping his arms around him, hands stroking the strong back. "That's why this is so fitting." He slipped a hypospray from his sleeve and jammed it against the nape of Chakotay's neck. "You'll share the same death."

Chakotay gasped at the burning touch of the instrument pressed to his skin. As Julian stepped back Chakotay swayed slightly, pain like an acid beginning to burn along his nerves. In contrast, his muscles felt somehow leaden and clumsy. He stared at Julian in horror.

Julian casually tossed the used hypospray on the ground. "Of course, my father had been exposed to low doses of this poison over a period of months. His final moments were much more...merciful...than yours will be."

His eyes glittered. "You're already feeling the effects, my dear Chakotay. The pain and the debilitation will increase gradually until all you can do is writhe in agony, unable to even beg for death."

The Guards' faces betrayed their shock at this display of treachery and cowardice, but they remained silent.

Julian reached out and sank his hand into Chakotay's hair, holding his head in place. Then he ground his lips against the full mouth that had for so long haunted his dreams. When Julian was done he stepped back and raised a brow. "You should never have refused me, all those years ago."

With that he gestured to Ayala. "Put a breastplate on him and unchain him, but keep your phasers set to kill. It's show time."

Greg's hands trembled slightly as he secured the pieces of metal over Chakotay's torso. Then he unlocked the chains, releasing Chakotay's arms. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

The two men shared a look. Then with a gentle hand on his old friend's shoulder, Greg guided Chakotay to stand with the other Guards and Julian. The platform under their feet began to rise, the ceiling parting before them so they could travel up to the arena floor.

***************
Tom sat in his usual chair in the Imperial box, Lucien right beside him. His eyes roamed the nearly empty Councilors’ section. He snorted. It was now called the Ministers’ box, since Julian planned to cement his power by dissolving the Council.

He blinked and swallowed, refusing to give in to any of the emotions coursing through him. *He* had given Julian the key to destroying Janeway's budding transition government. She and many other officials were residing underneath the Colosseum at this moment, awaiting their turn in the arena.

Worse still, Tom had handed over Chakotay. He unconsciously pulled Lucien more tightly to his side. He'd had no choice if he'd wanted to protect Kate and her friends, as well as the military coup Chakotay had worked to arrange. Julian would never have stopped digging, hunting, searching. Not until his most hated enemy was again in his clutches.

Tom knew he'd only done what he had to do after Lucien's life was threatened. *Knew* it, in his heart and soul and mind. But that didn't stop the endless ache of knowing he'd betrayed the man he loved.

Both Paris men tensed as a pit in the floor of the Colosseum opened to reveal several dozen men.

Most of them wore the purple and black of the Imperial Guard. They were Julian's personal retainers, hand-picked by the Emperor for their viciousness. He also saw Greg Ayala, the man's face set like stone.

Julian was impossible to miss. His armor reflected the sun, making him shine like an ancient idol. Satisfaction shimmered off him in waves.

In contrast, Chakotay seemed a little worse for wear. Tom bit his lip, cataloging the visible cuts and bruises. His eyes narrowed---Chakotay looked ill. There was a gray cast to his normally warm complexion, and he looked like he was struggling just to stay on his feet.

In a flash Tom knew what Julian had done. The coward had already murdered Chakotay, ensuring his own victory. Tom's fists clenched, but he was trapped, by the threat hanging over his son's life, as well as the Guards creating a cordon around the box.

Suddenly a hand landed solidly on his shoulder. Startled, Tom turned to look into sympathetic eyes under curly auburn hair. "I'm Joe Carey, sir, assigned to lead your escort."

Tom nodded, uncertain why the man would bother introducing himself.

Carey's eyes darted about, weighing the risk, then leaned forward as if to shake hands. Instead he whispered, "All is not lost, though the Admiral may be."

Tom's eyes were wide as he watched the Guard return to his place.

**************

The gladiators and Councilors had been moved into arena-level cells on Julian's orders. They pressed against the bars, trying to see what was happening. Former slave mingled with ex-official, indistinguishable. Each of them drew comfort from the presence of the others as they watched a great man face the last fight of his life.

**************

Kate had never met the Admiral, but she had been following his bouts over the last few days. She
stared down at the figure standing by the Emperor. "Something's not right," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"With what, Kate? Are the Guards showing some interest in us?" Keiko leaned over to ask the questions, since Kate was on the other side of Jadzia.

"No, it's the Admiral. He looks ill---" Kate's brow furrowed with a new suspicion. "Or poisoned."

"Poisoned? You mean with the Cardassian toxin?" Jadzia focused her attention on the arena, trying to confirm Kate's supposition.

"More than likely." Kate's face creased with sorrow as she sighed. "Poor man," she murmured.

The other two women's thoughts silently echoed her words.

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Jake had a visitor seat on the Enterprise bridge. He was monitoring the news channels. "Oh shit!" he shouted.

"What is it?" Will demanded from his place with Tasha at Tactical.

"It's Chakotay. He's in the Colosseum and it looks like he's going to fight the Emperor!"

"On screen," Will ordered as he moved to his seat.

All eyes were glued to the sight of the Emperor standing beside their former leader, surrounded by Guards.

"This is it." Will looked to Tasha. "Give the signal."

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Data stood in his usual box, profoundly grateful he didn't have to make any grand speeches for this fight. He had a very bad feeling about it. But he was going to carefully monitor the audio and visual feeds.

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The thousands of citizens in the Colosseum audience roared as they realized that the battle would be between their beloved Chakotay and the Emperor himself.

Julian smiled at the acclaim. He held out his hand and a Guard put his sword into it. He stretched out his arms and slowly turned, facing every part of the Colosseum. The sun glistened against his armored body and along the edge of his weapon.

Chakotay, still unarmed, was trying to control the pain and leaden feeling creeping along his limbs. He kept his breathing deep and slow, his eyes drifting along the stands until he reached the Imperial box. His heart sank when he saw Tom and Lucien there, heavily guarded.

He straightened further, swallowing as he raised a shaky hand to touch the Dorvan talisman around his neck. He had only one chance. One choice. Kill the Emperor. It was the only way to save all those he cared for.

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Julian snapped his fingers and a sword was put into his other hand. He flung it contumeliously at the feet of his weakened foe.

Chakotay stooped and picked up the sword. As he stood he saw the flash of Julian's approach. He barely managed to raise his blade in time to block the Emperor's first blow.

Julian grunted in annoyance as the gladiator managed to counter his next few strikes. He was rather surprised that the man was still upright, much less managing a defense. His features darkened as he increased the fury of his attack.

Chakotay was barely able to turn away that flickering sword. He wanted to curl up and hide away from the agony wracking him, tightening his flesh, throbbing in his bones. He knew he didn't have much time.

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Confused comments were exchanged among the spectators as they speculated on the gladiator's apparent trouble. They suspected that the cause was more than the Emperor's skill with a sword. Their shouts were an incoherent rumble, their voices filled with a mix of pleading for Chakotay and anger at Julian.

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Suddenly Julian saw his opening. He brought his sword down in a vicious blow, aiming for the back of Chakotay's leg. He intended to sever the wavering man's hamstring and tendons, crippling Chakotay.

But he failed. At the last moment Chakotay lurched, moving out of the way. The sword still cut into the bronze flesh, but it was not the devastating injury Julian had hoped for.

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The cries of dismay that filled the Colosseum echoed throughout the Empire, where citizens of every planet sat glued to their monitors.

Reg and Marla were in the Empire's San Francisco computer complex, keeping track of their drones' secret invasion via a padd. But neither of them could turn away from the vidscreen filled with the sight of their friend bleeding onto the arena floor.

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Kate, Jadzia, and Keiko stood up as one. Their voices raised in a fierce cry of Chakotay's name, hoping in some small way to let him know he wasn't alone.

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Tom joined Lucien in the shouting, standing proud and defiant at the edge of the box, willing his strength to the man still fighting below.

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Chakotay was consumed by the fire of pain that singed his lungs with every breath, that burst over him in waves with every beat of his heart. Each moment that passed it became harder to brace his body to absorb the shock of Julian's sword against his own. The more difficult it was to move his arms to meet the flash of the Emperor's blade, each strike planned to bring about his death.
"Chakotay! Chakotay! Chakotay!" The sound surged through Chakotay's ears and into his soul, reminding him of his duty, those he fought for. Those he was dying for with each sobbing breath. He couldn't fail them.

From some unknown reserve, a surge of energy ran through his frame. With a roar he went on the attack.

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Outside the Colosseum a revolution was taking place. And nobody noticed. The Enterprise and Voyager were joined by a handful of Guard ships as they conquered the skies above Earth. The rebel force disabled vessels loyal to Julian, one after another, until all of them were under Riker's command.

Reg and Marla secured the information networks, sensor nets, planetary weapons, and Imperial databases.

Throughout the core worlds, Guards loyal to the Emperor were deposed and incarcerated, while crewmembers accepting orders from Riker and Ransom took command.

Their work done, the foundation for the new Federation laid, all eyes turned to watch the architect of this new universe as he struggled on a much more personal level to end the Emperor's reign.

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Julian retreated before the rain of blows. His stunned mind couldn't deal with the fact that Chakotay was somehow overcoming the effects of the poison. His movements lost their smooth surety as panic set in.

The gladiator and the Emperor continued to clash, the only sounds above the chant of the crowd the strike of their swords and their heaving breaths. First Chakotay would seem to have the upper hand, but then he would stumble and the Emperor would swoop down, raining blow upon blow but never able to break the other man's defense.

Julian sent his sword in a wide arc, striving to cleave Chakotay's head from his shoulders. Chakotay ducked under the blow and started to spin away from Julian. The Emperor readied a counterattack---cut short when Chakotay reversed course. The gladiator lunged forward, slashing at Julian.

Suddenly Julian felt a fire along his arm as Chakotay's sword cut through armor and flesh. He dropped his sword and scrambled back as the gladiator continued to advance, bearing down upon him.

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Chakotay was gasping, almost unable to breathe through the pain. He continued to track Julian, but his steps were beginning to falter. His arms trembled with the strain of continuing to heft the sword in his hands.

Julian shrieked at the Guards, still standing as silent sentinels on the arena floor. "Shoot him! I command you to obliterate him to atoms where he stands!"

"Power down your weapons!" Greg Ayala's command was fierce and loud. He backed up the order with his own phaser, trained on his subordinates. Several Guards, who'd tired of the violence and greed the Emperor had espoused, took up position beside him. The rest stood down, understanding their time was done.
The Emperor's eyes were wide as he watched his own retainers turn on him. "For pity's sake, Greg, toss me your phaser! I'll do it myself!"

"No, sire," was the quiet response.

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The crowd continued their chant, but their hero was failing, dying. Chakotay dropped his own sword, suddenly too weak to hold it. But he continued his advance, step by excruciating step.

***************

The second Julian realized his opponent was also unarmed, a fierce and ugly smile crossed his face. He stopped retreating and used his uninjured hand to pull out a hidden dagger. Its wickedly serrated edge gleamed in the sunlight.

He sprang at Chakotay, intending to end his hated enemy's life once and for all.

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Chakotay found some last measure of strength, of will, to fulfill this final duty. He caught Julian's arm and turned it, forcing the blade back toward the Emperor. When it rested against Julian's neck, Chakotay gave a harsh cry and with a brief burst of energy, forced the blade deep into Julian's throat. Then he pushed the bleeding man away from him.

For one instant Julian seemed to hang in the air, blood pouring from the fatal wound. Then he finished his arc toward the arena floor and crashed upon it. His unseeing eyes stared up at the blue sky.

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Data frowned as he watched the victor, Admiral Chakotay, stagger and wrap his arms around his middle as if in pain. He knew that for whatever unknown reason, the great man was not long for this world. He turned up the audio feeds, hoping to catch Chakotay's last words. It was all he could do to honor him.

***************

The second Julian was dead Tom was turning toward the stairway leading to the arena floor. Lucien was right behind him. He paused a moment in shock when he realized Carey had phasered some of his own Guards, and was now ordering the "Ministers" to be taken into custody. Shelby's loud and long protests were completely ignored.

Tom barely registered the change in authority as he flew downward. He had no other thought, no other purpose but to reach Chakotay.

He and Lucien burst out of the doorway and ran toward where Chakotay was straightening.

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Chakotay raised a hand, swaying, preventing Greg from rushing to his side. "It is done," he said, his voice strained with exhaustion and pain. "Greg," he rasped, "Free my people."

Ayala nodded, blinking back tears. He gestured and one of his Guards hastened to obey.
Kathryn, Sisko, B'Elanna, Tuvok, and LaForge were in the front of the surging tide of people spilling from the arena cages. But they, too, stopped in silence a few meters away.

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A hush fell over the Colosseum, over the entire Empire. Each person pausing to hear Chakotay speak.

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Chakotay raised his face a moment to the sun, his hand unconsciously encircling the braid around his wrist. Then he opened his eyes and looked at the men and women standing before him. "The Federation was a dream that once came true. Jean-Luc Picard died believing that the seeds of that dream still resided in the heart of every member of the Empire. That together you could create a universe anew, in justice, equality, freedom, truth, love, duty, and peace."

He gasped as another stabbing pain shot through him. "It is up to you to make the Federation dream a reality once more. Let it live again, in strength and honor."

The last of his vitality gone, Chakotay crumpled to the floor of the Colosseum.

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Tom got there first. He threw himself over Chakotay's unmoving body, his hands frantic. "Oh no, Chakotay. Please, don't leave me. Not now." He pressed his face into the crook of Chakotay's neck.

He sensed the body underneath him stir and he drew back, clutching at the broad shoulders. Dark eyes filled with love and pain opened and Tom felt his own burn with tears.

"You...Lucien...safe?" Chakotay asked, his voice the merest whisper of sound.

"Yes," Tom forced from his tight throat.

A smile ghosted across Chakotay's face and was gone. He tried to convey with this last glance all he felt for the man who'd dwelled in his heart for decades. "Love you. Time...home."

"Yes, Chakotay. It's time for you to rest." Tom's voice was strong as he stroked the beloved face, even as silent tears streamed down his own. "Just think of home."

Chakotay's eyes closed.

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Tom stood, his face stern as he regarded the people on the arena floor and sitting silently in the stands. He shouted, his voice ringing throughout the space, "He has paid the price for your freedom. What you do with it is up to you. All of you."

His expression turned fierce. "Is your freedom worth one good man's life? We believed it once. Make us believe it again."

Tom turned back and looked at Chakotay. "He was a man of strength and honor. Never forget him."

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Silence reigned throughout the Colosseum as Tom, Sisko, Lucien, B'Elanna, Tuvok, Janeway, LaForge, and Greg surrounded Chakotay's body. They hefted him up onto their shoulders and
carried him from the place of blood and death.

Julian Bashir Picard's corpse they left behind.

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This is pretty much where the movie concluded. When I began this story, I decided to take full advantage of 24th-century technology to craft a different destiny for Chakotay. So if you prefer angst and the darker realities, stop reading here. If, like me, you want to see brighter days for these characters, the story isn't over yet.
Harry was following the flood of prisoners onto the Colosseum floor when he was jerked to a halt by a strong grip on his arm. "Hey!" he shouted as he whirled to face an older woman.

"Young man," Kate said sternly as she retained her grasp, "I'm sure your Admiral won't miss yet another impotent bystander wringing his hands. You'd do better spending your time helping us save Chakotay's life."

Harry's bewildered eyes wandered over the three very different women clustering around him. "How? The Emperor poisoned him---"

"We know," Keiko interrupted. "Or at least, we guessed. But if Tom was able to shoot Chakotay with the hypospray we gave him yesterday, there may still be a chance to help the Admiral."

"You're a member of the Imperial Fleet, right?" Jadzia recognized the disheveled uniform. She didn't even pause for Harry's answer. "Do you have a ship in orbit we could contact? One that can beam the Admiral to a stasis chamber?"

Harry's back straightened. He'd been unable to help Chakotay twice now---he refused to fail the man a third time. "Yes. Give me a communicator and I'll summon every damn ship in the Fleet."

Kate gave a wry smile and resisted the urge to ruffle the earnest young man's hair. "Just one will do. But we have to hurry." Her concerned blue eyes shifted for a moment to the solemn procession approaching them.

Harry nodded and followed the women out of the arena.

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Tom carefully cradled Chakotay's head as the slow journey toward the exit continued. He also kept an eye on Lucien, who was helping a dark-skinned Vulcan gladiator at Chakotay's left shoulder.

Hope and fear warred in Tom's heart. When he'd thrown his own body over Chakotay's he'd surreptitiously injected the limp form with the compound that Kate had dropped off during her "house call" yesterday to attend Lucien. He had no idea if it was an antidote or not, much less its effect.

At least Tom knew that his beloved wasn't dead; he could feel the faintest of pulses in Chakotay's neck. But there was a frightening stillness to the strong bronze form in their hands. Tom could barely wait until they were out of sight of the crowd, away from all the staring eyes. He needed to get Chakotay to Kate's office---fast. Every heartbeat they delayed put the fallen warrior's survival at greater risk.

The shadowed coolness of the corridor caught Tom's attention. He startled when Harry Kim rushed forward to slap a commbadge on Chakotay's chest. The young officer then stopped their progress with a crisp announcement. "OK, anyone who wants to go with the Admiral to the starship Voyager's Sickbay, keep hold of him. If you want to stay here, there'll be hovercars arriving shortly to take you wherever you want to go."

Sisko murmured dryly, "Got to love military efficiency." Then he looked sharply at Harry and asked, "If I accompany you now, can you put me in contact with my son?"
"I'm sure that won't be a problem, sir." Harry watched Greg Ayala and the two Councilors carefully redistribute their part of the burden to the others and move aside.

"We'd better stay here and ensure the peaceful transition." Kathryn briefly cupped Lucien's face, then laid one hand on Tom's shoulder and one on Chakotay's. She gave Tom an encouraging smile. "Take care of him."

Tom just nodded and watched her step away once more.

Harry gave a quiet command and the scientists, gladiators, Lucien, Tom, Chakotay, and himself disappeared in a shimmer of light.

Kathryn turned to Greg Ayala. The seriousness of her expression was echoed by Geordi's as they confronted the leader of the Guards. "Well, Mr. Ayala, are you still in command of the Guard or are you headed for a Federation prison?"

Greg's gaze was somber and filled with guilt as he met her stare without flinching. "I don't know, ma'am, but you'll have my full cooperation, whatever my fate."

Geordi's face softened slightly as he laid a comforting hand on the obviously distraught man's shoulder. "You did the right thing, eventually. That's what counts."

"I know," Greg replied, "but Chakotay's already lost so much because of my inaction in the face of the Emperor's cruelty. I just hope he doesn't lose his life as well."

"As do we all," Kathryn echoed, her own eyes anxious.

The trio headed back to the arena to round up the other trusted Councilors and Guards for the trip to the Imperial Complex. There was much work to be done.

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The second the group materialized on Voyager, Kate sprinted for the stasis tube Harry had requested via commlink. Her fingers danced over the console as she adjusted settings. "Get the Admiral's leg wound cleaned and healed---quickly!" she ordered.

The others shifted Chakotay's body so he was face down on a biobed. Keiko snatched a small sonic cleanser/sterilizer from a startled Fleet nurse and set to work, while Jadzia appropriated a tricorder and regenerator. Between them the deep cut soon disappeared.

Chakotay was turned over, then they took care of all the other bruises and lacerations.

Tom had one arm around Lucien, hugging the boy tightly to his side. The other hand was running almost compulsively through Chakotay's hair. His voice was tight with anxiety as he asked, "Is the antidote working? It *was* an antidote, right?"

Jadzia frowned as she read the results of her scan. She looked up with an apologetic shrug. "Not exactly, Tom. The stuff we gave you was more of a preventative. It looks like we were able to temporarily arrest the damage the poison was causing, but we'll definitely need something else to clear his system."

She gestured and the silent spectators picked up Chakotay again, moving him to lie on his back inside the uncomfortably coffin-like stasis chamber.

Kate checked her settings one last time and switched on the machine.
Tom felt his gut clench at the soft click of the transparent canopy shutting Chakotay away from his touch. He stared down at the wan face.

"He's strong," B'Elanna said as she moved closer, responding to the blond man's obvious worry. She wondered what his relationship was to Chakotay.

Tom gave her a grateful smile. "I know," he whispered.

"And for now, he's holding his own," Kate said with a sigh of satisfaction, then looked around the room. "By the way, where's the ship's doctor?"

Captain Cavit, who entered in time to hear the question, answered grimly, "He decided to strike a blow for the Empire by trying to flood the ventilation system with knock-out gas. He's currently warming a bunk in the brig, and I'd prefer he stayed there."

Kate nodded, then briskly approached the officer, patting Tom's and Lucien's shoulders as she passed them. "If you don't mind then, Captain, we'll take over for the moment. There's still a lot of research to be done if we're going to save the Admiral's life."

She held out her hand. "Dr. Kate Pulaski."

Kate then gestured Jadzia and Keiko over. "My colleagues, Jadzia Dax and Keiko Ishikawa."

Cavit shook hands with all three. "You have free run of the labs and Sickbay. My people will assist you any way they can."

Keiko spoke up as she pulled out a data padd. "If we can get this information into your medical database, we can begin using your systems to further analyze the toxin and come up with a way of safely removing it from Chakotay's body."

"I can do that," Harry volunteered as he claimed the device and moved to one of the terminals. B'Elanna followed, feeling the awakening of an interest in technology from her pre-slavery days.

"As for everyone else," Cavit said, looking over the motley group, "I'll have cabins set aside for your use. I've already contacted Captain Riker to let him know Chakotay is aboard. After you've changed and eaten, we should have an update on what's happening across the Empire, and we can discuss where you'd all like to go and arrange transportation for you."

Tom merely nodded. He and Lucien wouldn't be leaving Chakotay's side.

Reg and Marla shared satisfied smiles and a quick victory kiss as they confirmed their Empire-wide--no, Federation-wide--security measures were intact. They detected another takeover attempt on Mars, and quickly informed their Guard liaison of the location.

After they had secured the computer systems and media linkups, the couple had retreated to a safe house to await further instructions from Captain Riker. And to wonder if it had been Chakotay's body or his corpse that had been carried from the Colosseum.

The news of Chakotay's fragile but continued life had come from an unusual source: a private call from Jake Sisko. He also relayed a request from Riker for the two technicians to arrange a multi-location briefing with the Councilors and Guard leaders on Earth.

While Reg and Marla had moved to the main government complex to coordinate the briefing time...
and locations, the INN researcher-turned-reporter had also been busy. Jake had begun broadcasting from the Enterprise almost as soon as Chakotay had been beamed off-planet, reporting the changes in government taking place all across the Empire.

The young man had also aired Chakotay's recorded hopes for the people, as well as his recollections of the wishes of Jean-Luc Picard.

The eloquence and genuine sincerity of the former Admiral's and Emperor's words did much to keep people calm during a time when things could easily have descended into chaos and anarchy. There was even a sense of renewal blossoming across the systems.

But everyone hoped that Chakotay would be able to speak for himself soon.

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Mortimer quietly relayed the news about Chakotay's condition in person to Billy, Tal, and Noah. He didn't want one of the newshounds jumping on the information just to get a scoop on the other networks or reporters.

INN, re-dubbed FNN, had already been first with the story of the massacre at Dorvan V, as well as the list of names of Guards who'd participated in those and other atrocities against Imperial citizens.

There were also rumors that Chakotay had been poisoned before facing Julian Bashir Picard in combat. Mort had believed that one even before hearing from Jake. It was the only explanation for the gladiator's obvious struggles and eventual collapse. In a way he was glad Chakotay had killed the Emperor. He had a feeling the crowd would have torn their former leader apart, and there had already been more than enough violence in the scant months of Julian's reign.

But at least now most of the perpetrators of the Emperor's cruelty were in prison, awaiting trial. Hopefully, the reports of the transfer of power would continue to be peaceful and optimistic. The changes being instituted by the Council were a fine start, as well as the arrangements for elections across the former Empire.

To make the day perfect they just needed some good news on the personal front. Mort tried to convey to his companions Jake's hope for the Admiral's return to health. Of course, the team didn't brood for long. They immediately launched into action, doing what they did best: research. They were making discreet inquiries via official and not-so-official channels, seeking any scrap of information to aid Chakotay.

Mort settled back into his seat with a nod at a busily typing Tal, then turned on his computer to continue his own efforts.

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Jake practically flew from Voyager's transporter platform into his father's embrace. "I was so worried about you," he admitted as he tightened his arms.

Sisko leaned back with a grin and rubbed a gentle hand over Jake's close-cropped hair. "Never underestimate the old man," he said, then sobered. "I watched your broadcasts. You're a hell of a reporter, Jake."

Jake blushed and ducked his head at the praise. "It wasn't bad for a first try, I guess. The network's picking up all the exclusives I send."

Will Riker, who'd also beamed aboard from the Enterprise, clapped a hand on the young man's
shoulder. "We're glad to have you, Jake. You've been a big part of this, so you should continue so." He quickly assessed the older man as he asked, "So this is your father?"

"Yes. Captain Riker, this is Benjamin Sisko. Dad, Captain Will Riker." Jake nervously regarded the two powerful men as he made the introductions.

Will refused to ignore the awkwardness of the situation. "I can't say I approve of your enslaving Chakotay, Mr. Sisko, but a lot of us *are* grateful that you did what you could to protect him from the Emperor."

Sisko's answer was as direct as his gaze. "Frankly, I don't care what your opinion is of how I ran my business, Captain." He shrugged. "But since I'm *out* of that business now, I trust we can deal tolerably well together for as long as I'm here."

Riker continued to lock eyes a moment, then gave his own shrug and grin. "Well, sir, I'd say your timing is impeccable, considering the new constitution will abolish slavery and gladiatorial combat before the end of the day."

Jake relaxed as the two men amicably continued to talk on the way out the door.

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Cleaned, fed, and leaving a sleeping Lucien tucked in bed in their newly assigned quarters, Tom had resumed his vigil in Sickbay. He rested his hand a moment on the canopy of the stasis chamber, sending love and encouragement to the man sleeping within.

Tom noticed that in the interim someone had bathed Chakotay and dressed him in Fleet Sickbay pajamas. Although he would have liked to have done the job himself, giving him a precious minute or two with Chakotay without the glass between them, he was grateful. The change of outfit was a visual reminder that his beloved was no longer a slave, a gladiator constantly in danger.

He looked at the biomonitor. Chakotay's metabolism was slowed to almost negligible levels. The damage caused by the toxin was still present. It was a blessing for Chakotay to be unconscious. If he weren't, he'd be in excruciating pain right now.

With a heartfelt sigh Tom drifted into the office, where Jadzia and Keiko were peering at their terminals. He jumped when the Trill's fist suddenly slammed onto the desk with a "Damn!"

Keiko echoed her lover's exclamation and pushed herself away from the computer. "No doubt this thing's Cardassian. It's just so damn pernicious." She ran her fingers through her hair in an irritated gesture.

Tom chewed his lip. "I take it things aren't going well?"

The women exchanged a guilty look before Jadzia answered. "I'm going to be straight with you, Tom. We're not getting anywhere with this. Even with the Fleet database we're stumped on how to do more than hold this poison at bay."

Tom stiffened his shoulders against the wave of despair. "So what's our next step?"

"Kate's already taking it," Keiko reassured him. "After she gives her report at the meeting, she's going to ask for help." Her eyes softened. "You'd better get to the briefing room yourself or they'll start without you."

Tom nodded and with one last look toward the stasis chamber, departed for the conference room.
Josh Cavit watched as Riker settled into the seat at the head of the table. He'd been surprised at first when his friend suggested Voyager as the venue for this meeting. The Enterprise certainly had bigger conference rooms.

Voyager's captain sighed, his brows drawing together as his eyes lighted on Dr. Pulaski. He knew why Will had come here. To be closer to Sickbay. The same place everyone's thoughts no doubt wandered from time to time, the stasis chamber where Chakotay lay unconscious. He couldn't be released from the protection of that death-like sleep until they found a way to free him from the prison of pain and weakness the Emperor had confined him to.

Still, Chakotay was alive. That in itself was something of a medical miracle. The ladies' research and Harry's quick actions had managed to foil Julian's plan to condemn a good man to death.

Cavit smiled as he watched Harry, more confident and animated than he had ever seen the day-old Lieutenant. Mr. Kim was sharing a padd with the half-Klingon woman---B'Elanna?---apparently discussing an article from the latest technical journals. The ex-gladiator looked to be holding her own, her features flushing attractively as she spiritedly defended her opinion.

Also watching the pair was the other newly freed slave, a Vulcan named Tuvok. Cavit had read with interest the man's background, intrigued by his former career in security.

He was like most of the victims who had ended up in chains or dead on some arena floor. Tuvok had simply done his duty, and the twisted policies created by the Empire's hunger for new slaves had turned the rescue of some accident victims into a crime.

A crime that, if the man had not proven himself such an able fighter, would have punished him with death. Cavit rejoiced that the whole institution would be abolished, crushed under the weight of the founding principles of the new Federation.

Cavit could be proud that he had been part of this great change, that he'd had the courage to follow Admiral Chakotay into defiance of the status quo. His gaze shifted to Captain Ransom, whose pensive expression as he too watched the ex-slaves seemed to reflect similar thoughts.

Yes, they could all hold their heads up high for what they had done these last few days. Even those whose behavior before yesterday was less than exemplary.

Cavit looked to where Ben Sisko was listening to his son, the older man's eyes twinkling with amusement as Jake's arms swooped through the air. He wondered what Ben Sisko would be doing now. The businessman had officially freed all of the people in his possession, both on Earth and elsewhere. He'd also been surprisingly generous, arranging an account to provide a stake for each of his former slaves.

It was obvious that news had pleased his son, Jake. The earnest young man had been up front in his news reports about his father's former occupation, but he'd also been quick to suggest other ex-slavers take the same sort of actions for their own people. The most likely alternative, he'd innocently pointed out in a Federation-wide broadcast, was a tax or property seizure to fund a government program.

*That* subtle threat got things in gear. Accounts were opening all over the place. A government agency would probably be created anyway---to make sure all those in captivity were either freed or put back in legitimate prisons for non-political crimes, and that compensation was equitable.
The door opened, and Tom Paris hurried in to fill the last empty seat.

Cavit could admire the younger man’s resilience, the way he’d kept his cool in the life-threatening situation he’d been thrown into from the moment Julian ascended the throne. He was sure Paris hadn’t had an easy time of it, working against the Emperor while staying so close to him. Not to mention the risks to Paris's son.

Or Paris's apparently deep feelings for Chakotay. Cavit knew there couldn't have been anything between the men. The Admiral wasn't one to cast aside his marriage vows, and Paris didn't seem the adulterous type either. So whatever relationship had existed must have been crafted of what might have been.

Still, it warmed Cavit's heart to know that Chakotay had someone waiting for him. After losing his family, village, tribe, and freedom, it was going to take someone very special to help Chakotay heal. Fortunately, it looked like Paris was ready, willing, and able to take up the challenge. Cavit dearly hoped Paris would get the chance. Soon.

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Will nodded to Tom, then activated a console set in the tabletop. The wall panels lit up. One held the new Federation symbol, the other Reg and Marla. "Hi," Will said with a smile, "Everything set?"

"Yes, sir," both Reg and Marla answered at once. They blushed, shared a small smile, then turned back. Reg nodded and continued, "We have the Councilors ready in a room nearby. Gregor Ayala and Joseph Carey will represent the Guard along with---" He consulted Marla's padd. "Your Captain Ransom."

The view pulled back, revealing the two men dressed in purple-and-black sitting at a small table with the couple.

The strain in Ayala's dark eyes was apparent to Will. He almost wished Deanna had accompanied him to the meeting. But his fiancée was busy arranging counseling for those former gladiators and slaves who would have difficulty processing their experiences and sudden freedom. Will simply nodded to the man he had once thought of as a dear friend.

"We're ready here, so let's get the Councilors on line." Will's quiet order produced a flurry of tapping from Marla.

She lifted her head with a nod and smile as the other wall panel lit up. "Done," she said with quiet satisfaction, observing their own set of panels showing the Voyager group, and Kathryn and Geordi in front of a small crowd of humans.

"Captains, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending this update and strategy session." Kathryn's genuine smile gave truth to the diplomatic phrases as she continued. "It has been a long day, but I wanted us to come together briefly to reflect on what we've accomplished, and what is yet to be done."

Will stifled a grin, suddenly glad Tasha was back on Enterprise holding down the fort. Her reaction to this pomp and circumstance would probably have been more...overt...than B'Elanna's grimace and eye-roll.

Apparently Kathryn had caught the look, because she grinned and pushed up her sleeves. "Let's get to work, people."

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"OK," Geordi said as he referred to the padd in his hand, "we have most of the Fleet back guarding the borders. The special task force of Guard and Fleet ships will also be deployed to ensure the abolition of slavery and establish free and honest elections. We've got to fill all the new Council seats for the non-core worlds."

Kathryn hid a yawn and wished for coffee. Her fellow Councilor was definitely the perkiest member of this group. It had been a long four hours, hashing out the redistribution of Imperial resources, the duties of the Fleet and Guard, parliamentary and election procedures, as well as the re-establishment of a Federation President and judiciary.

Not to mention officially approving and funding Deanna Troi's network of counselors for the freed slaves—as well as anyone else who would have difficulties adjusting to the change from Empire to Federation. A man named Mark Johnson had been named Deanna's second-in-command and the program's liaison to the Council. Kathryn hoped she would be awake enough to pay proper attention during their first meeting tomorrow.

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Kate Pulaski kept herself from fidgeting by sheer force of will. She hadn't realized she'd have to wait through all the official business, *and* everyone voicing their opinions of the new constitution that had been drafted. The liberal-minded doctor had been pleased to note, however, that the Council had solicited feedback on the document from representatives of every non-human species, since their full rights were to be reinstated after too many years of being second-class citizens.

But finally, it was time for Kate to speak. "I know you've all read my report on Admiral Chakotay's condition. What you also need to realize is that as of right now, we have no way of clearing the Cardassian toxin from his system." Her frustrated gaze swept the other faces in the room. "Jadzia and Keiko are two of the best in the field, but we've run simulations of every scenario and antidote we can think of and come up empty."

She looked toward Will's grim face. "I'd like to request some more consultants on this. Otherwise there's no hope of ever getting Chakotay out of that stasis chamber."

"I have a suggestion, or rather, my research colleagues do." As Jake leaned forward, his words drew the attention of everyone in the room and on the screens. "They came across the work of a Dr. Lewis Zimmerman. He's both a doctor and a holoprogrammer, and he's designed a prototype hologram to serve as an emergency doctor on board starships."

Jake's voice rose with excitement. "It's an active diagnostic and research tool. Don't you see? It's like having a doctor with the entire medical history of the Federation and Empire memorized. Maybe he can figure out an antidote for the Admiral."

Kate leaned back in her chair, her expression lit with speculation. "If nothing else, it might give us a new direction to go in, some new angle of research." She shrugged. "And we could ask Dr. Zimmerman to pitch in as well."

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Tom felt a wave of gratitude when all eyes turned to him for the final say. It was a clear acknowledgement that he was, in essence, Chakotay's next of kin. He swallowed the lump in his throat and said, "That sounds like a place to start, but I'd rather get as many people as possible working on curing Chakotay."

B'Elanna frowned in puzzlement. "What are you going to do? Put his medical file on the news
networks and wait for some elementary-school chemistry student to call in with a cure?"

He looked at her steadily. "Yes."

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. "Is that the wisest course of action? To spread word throughout the quadrant of a powerful Cardassian poison would raise speculation over Emperor Jean-Luc Picard's death. It is illogical to focus on the past when our greatest concerns during the transition are with the future."

Kathryn's somber gaze reflected her concern. "Tom, I can understand your desperation here. Everyone wants to see Chakotay on the road to recovery. But are you sure you're ready for the publicity? The people---*all* the people---want to know the Admiral's condition. You open the floodgates like that and there will be a media frenzy."

Jake sighed and nodded. "As a journalist I hate to admit it, but the Councilor is right. If the nets get wind of the Admiral's location they'll descend like locusts. The sensors will read so many ships packed around Voyager you'll be able to travel from here to the Colosseum hopping from hull to hull."

Tom sighed as he reconsidered his plan, his brows knitting as he pondered the best course of action. He wondered what Chakotay would suggest. Suddenly his face cleared and his soul calmed as he came to a decision. He looked at each person staring at him, waiting for his answer. "Here's what I'd like to do. Get a hold of Dr. Zimmerman and his medical marvel, let them take a crack at the case. If they blow it, then we send the files to every trustworthy doctor and researcher we can think of. We don't specifically mention Chakotay, or Cardassia. He'll be just another anonymous patient needing a consultation."

He turned to Jake. "I'd also like you, Jake, to write up something for broadcast that basically says Chakotay is alive but facing a long and difficult recovery." He shrugged. "It's no more than the truth. And people are worrying so I think we at least need to tell them that he's not dead."

"But that will bring the newshounds right to your door," Jake protested.

Tom gave him a small smile. "No they won't, because we won't be here." His voice was clear and sure as he said, "I've decided to fulfill Chakotay's final request. I'm going to take him home. To Dorvan."
Tom stretched, his fingers reaching toward the ceiling of the Sickbay on board the nondescript freighter. They were currently traveling incognito, making moderate speed to DS9. He had just lived through an extremely hectic week, but for the moment he was content.

He moved from the doorway to where Chakotay's stasis tube hummed into the silence. A quick glance confirmed that the comm system was channeling sound to the man within. Tom sank into the chair next to the apparatus with a sigh. "I'm glad to have you all to myself for a while, Chakotay."

He scrubbed his hands down his face and leaned back. "And to have some peace and quiet. I think the last moment of silence I had was right after I announced I was taking you back to Dorvan." He chuckled. "You could have fit tennis balls in all those slack jaws."

His grin softened into a fond smile. "Then, of course, the protests started. It was really sweet, how fiercely they complained. I was lucky to get away with my hide intact. Nobody wanted to see you go."

Tom leaned forward. His eyes tenderly caressed his beloved's features. "But they all gave in at the end. They want what's best for you, Chakotay. Same as me. So we started making plans."

Slender fingers counted off each step in the process. "Kathryn and Geordi offered to take care of the Paris estate, and work out Lucien's inheritance. He's already given up most of the Imperial holdings, and his claim to the throne." Tom's grin was a mix of amusement and pride. "He said he never wanted the stuffy old job of Emperor anyway. Gladiators were much cooler."

His voice held a touch of wistfulness as he continued. "Will Riker's been appointed Admiral of the Fleet, Chakotay. I think you'd be pleased about that. He's already coordinating things with Joe Carey, the new head of the Guard. They're still deciding whether or not to merge the two groups. I think it might even be added to the referendum that's going to precede the elections. They've sent decoy ships to different places in case the newshounds start sniffing for your whereabouts."

Now Tom hesitated. He thought it was a little silly that he was afraid of sharing this next bit of news with an unconscious man, but still he paused. "Greg Ayala resigned. He and his family are on board. When he was cleared of the aiding and abetting charges he said he wanted to help rebuild your village...to try and make amends. He seems very sorry for the role he played in everything. I think he won't be satisfied until you either punish him, or forgive him."

He brightened then. "Your friend B'Elanna came along, too. Said she didn't have any family left on Earth or Klingon, so making a fresh start with us was as good a plan as any." Tom shifted closer as he whispered, "And Harry finagled a liaison position so he could tag along. I think he's got a thing for your fellow ex-gladiator."

Tom straightened with a shrug. "Of course, *he* claims he's just spending so much time with her to bring her engineering skills up to speed. She's also taking lessons from Reg and Marla via comm link."

Tom's left index finger returned to his right thumb as he resumed his count. "Sisko, surprisingly, is still with us too. He arranged for this freighter, and he's having some of his people meet us with supplies from his home base so we'll at least have power, shelter, and basic foodstuffs and building materials. He said he was just hitching a ride since he wanted to get the rest of his people set up in their new lives, but I think he has a soft spot for you. Jake Sisko stayed behind to continue reporting..."
on the transitional government."

Getting up, Tom wandered the room, raising his voice so it would still be transmitted. "Tuvok went home to reunite with his family. He's been guaranteed his pick of positions in the Fleet or Guard, or Vulcan's own forces, if he wants to return to security work. He was greeted as a returning hero, in a very restrained, logical sort of way, of course. We picked up Gerron Tem. He's a Bajoran who's been taking care of Lucien while I've been making arrangements for us all. Tem hasn't yet decided if he's sticking with us or going back to Bajor, so I'm not sure how long he'll be around."

Tom returned to his seat, resting his elbows on the clear canopy and setting his chin on his crossed arms, staring down. "Your lady docs had to stay on Earth. They have patients and projects that they couldn't just abandon, no matter how much they wanted to. But they're going to keep searching for a cure for you, Chakotay, and they'll be coordinating the responses to the case file we've circulated about your condition."

He grinned and shook his head bemusedly. "I'm not sure how well you're going to like your new physician. He takes some getting used to---and he's got a heck of a snippy attitude for a hologram."

Tom's brows rose. "And yes I did say hologram. Dr. Zimmerman on Jupiter station couldn't give us much help, but he did download a copy of his program into a portable unit Reg and Marla whipped up. So now you'll have the best care in the Federation. I just hope you can put up with him."

Tom's face softened as he shifted a hand to idly trace patterns on the canopy. "I hope for so many things, Chakotay. That we'll find a cure for you soon. That the people of Dorvan will let strangers settle on their planet and make a home there. That we can build anew in peace. That you'll be able to accept Lucien in your life. That we can be together, finally."

His voice trembled a little. "That you'll want me. That you still love me, Chakotay. And that I can feel your arms around me, warm and strong and just...so you." He swiped the side of his hand against his misty eyes. "Here I go getting all mushy again. That's my cue to get some sleep."

His body unfolded from the chair and stretched once more. "Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram Zimmerman One."

There was a shimmer in the air and suddenly a tall, slim, balding man was regarding Tom with a slightly peeved expression. "Please state the nature of the medical emergency," he said by rote, then blinked and shifted as he saw who summoned him. "Ah, Mr. Paris. Has there been any change in the Admiral's condition?"

"That's what I need you to tell me, Doc." Tom shrugged, a little embarrassed. "I just want to make sure Chakotay's set for the night."

The hologram had only spent a few days overseeing the care of the unconscious man, but his algorithms had already absorbed the deep concern his patient generated in the people around him. He simply nodded and strode to the monitors, checking the readings. "Vital signs are all good. The stasis unit is functioning at optimal efficiency." The EMH looked up, his brows rising in an approximation of curiosity. "Have there been any communiqués from Earth?"

"No, Doc," Tom said, his shoulders slumping slightly. "They haven't had any luck finding a way to clear the toxin from Chakotay's system."

"Unfortunately, my research is also at an impasse," the hologram admitted. "Perhaps you should consider expanding your circle of consultants."
Tom bristled instinctively. "These are the best scientists in the Emp---Federation."

"I have no doubt of that. But you will soon be coming into contact with people on the frontier. Surely they would have more experience with Cardassian poisons than someone who's been living safe in the core worlds." The doctor's matter-of-fact voice trailed off as he awaited a response.

The blond head tipped to the side as Tom settled back onto his heels, pondering. "You might be on to something there, Doc. The Bajorans are considering entry into the Federation. Maybe they'd share information---or they could even give us a line on where to find the Cardassian who developed the poison."

He hugged the startled hologram. "You're brilliant! I'll send a message as soon as we dock at DS9." He bounded out of the room to ruminate on this new avenue of exploration.

"Well," the doctor said, staring around as he straightened his jacket, "the least he could have done is turn off my program."

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Kassidy Yates, captain of the freighter currently ferrying this motley collection of individuals to Deep Space 9, regarded the man across from her through narrowed eyes. She freely admitted to herself that she found Benjamin Sisko attractive, but she also wasn't sure she should trust him one millimeter. Despite his hearty laugh and genial grin, Ben Sisko was a very dangerous man.

Still, she *was* attracted. And she could indulge herself a little while safely on her own turf. "So, Ben," she drawled between sips of the wine he had brought for their meal, "what are you going to do with yourself now that your gladiators have scattered?"

Sisko's smile widened slightly as he surveyed his lovely companion. He wondered if he should respond that *she* was his top priority at the moment. Probably not, since Captain Yates seemed the type to only enter...negotiations...on her own terms.

But not since his wife had died so many years before had his blood been stirred so. Kassidy was intelligent, fiery, opinionated, and determined to make a life for herself among the stars. Sisko was very much hoping she could see her way to making a life with him, as well.

"I've actually been debating what to do with the base I established on a planetoid near DS9," he said idly, running his finger along the rim of his glass. "I was wondering if the new Federation may not be amenable to me turning it into a boot camp."

"Boot camp?" Kassidy's brow furrowed.

"Yes, a kind of pre-prison detention center for juvenile offenders. They would learn physical and mental discipline, skills toward a craft or career, and pay their debt to society without incurring a permanent mark against them." His face reflected painful recollections. "People can be very unforgiving of the past sometimes."

Kassidy's expression softened as she leaned forward to rest a hand on Sisko's wrist. "That sounds like a wonderful way to keep kids from turning into criminals."

Ben shifted so they were holding hands. His spirits lightened when she didn't draw away. "Perhaps when we get the Admiral where he's going, you'd give me your opinion of the place."

Kassidy's lips curved. "I'd like that."
Kathryn glanced at the padd in her hand before addressing the group around the table in her garden. "So there's been no progress?"

Kate shrugged and sipped iced tea. "No, our research is stalled, but we haven't heard back yet about the case study we sent to the labs and universities."

Jadzia fiddled with her napkin, then leaned forward. "We're lucky that assassin's supply of poison was found and secured. This is pretty vicious stuff, and there's a chance we won't be able to find a counteragent."

All the faces at the table turned solemn. Keiko shook herself out of her funk to insist, "Hey, nobody's giving up here. And even though Zimmerman hasn't been much help, his hologram *did* give us a solid lead."

Geordi perked up at that. "Yes, he did. Reg," he turned to the engineer, "How is the EMH program handling the transfer to the new equipment, anyway?"

"Well," Reg fidgeted a little, "From Mr. Kim's reports, so far there have been no glitches or any problems with the new technology. And I must say that the Klingon woman—B'Elanna Torres—shows a remarkable aptitude for the field."

Marla chimed in, "Yes, we've even hired her as a consultant to assist Harry in getting Dorvan set up to accommodate the EMH. She's eating up the books and articles we've sent her."

"With a little help from our Fleet liaison," Rudy Ransom said. He was representing both branches of the service today. "His reports are all ruthlessly objective, but he's dropped a few hints that suggest he's not as detached as he'd like us to think."

His eyes twinkled. "I have a feeling he wouldn't take too kindly to reassignment right now."

"I'm just glad that nobody's figured out Chakotay's location yet." Jake Sisko's long body was sprawled in his chair. "Although I've heard there are reporters tailing a few of the Fleet and Guard ships, and going undercover at various medical facilities. They're convinced that Chakotay is still in this sector."

"We appreciate your keeping the secret, Jake," Kathryn said with a nod. "Tom and the rest are going to have a hard enough time without being surrounded by holocameras and nosy questions."

Jake just gave an embarrassed shrug of acknowledgment. He'd told his friends but was confident that the story would go no further. They didn't even discuss it among themselves.

"Well..." Kathryn stood and gestured with one arm, "I think that's about everything. I hate to shoo you away so soon after lunch, but this is my first day off in a while and I intend to make the most of it."

The others quickly followed suit, and departed with hugs and farewells. Only one person remained, and he hadn't spoken a word all afternoon.

"You were pretty quiet, Dr. Johnson. I hope you weren't intimidated by the company." Kathryn's gaze roamed the ruggedly handsome man, who was standing in for Deanna this afternoon.

"Not at all, Councilor. I appreciated the invitation...and the fact that you trusted me with the
knowledge of Admiral Chakotay's situation." Mark let his voice and smile warm, hoping he was making a good impression on the formidable woman. He'd admired Kathryn Janeway even before he met her, and was hoping to get to know her better now that he was the liaison between Deanna Troi's counseling program for ex-slaves and the Federation Council. "So what are you going to do on your day off?"

Kathryn felt a little thrill at his interest. "Actually, I'd prefer if you called me Kathryn. We're off-duty, as it were. And nothing much. I was just going to take my dog for a romp on the beach."

Mark carefully tested the waters. "Then please, call me Mark. I, uh, don't suppose you'd like some company? I throw a mean stick."

Kathryn smiled and linked arms with him, turning them toward the house. "Well, I'll introduce you to Bear. If she likes you, then it's a date."

Two dark heads were close together, peering into the innards of a disassembled replicator. "So you see," Harry said as he pointed with a slender tool, "This thing is simply out of omicron particles. It just needs to be recharged and it will be as good as new."

"But while it's open, shouldn't you tighten up the connectors in this section? It would make the unit more efficient and you wouldn't have to recharge it as often." When B'Elanna moved to take the pointer, their hands brushed together. The jolt that rushed through her had nothing to do with the equipment they were working on.

"Um, yeah, that's a good idea. This unit's a little outdated so it could use some tweaking." Harry tried to steady his breathing as he eased his arm out of the cramped space. He'd had crushes on a few people in his life, men and women, and a handful of pretty good relationships. But he'd never felt anything like this. The way they clicked was unique. And he was beginning to need B'Elanna, fierce warrior, brilliant thinker, and reluctantly tender soul, in his life.

B'Elanna could scent Harry's desire. It matched her own. She had spent the last two weeks in close company with the Fleet officer, supplementing her studies of engineering theory with some hands-on experience.

Of course, now she wanted to get her hands on something else. Someone else. Her mother used to tell her when the right person came along she would just know. Back then B'Elanna had laughed off Miral's opinions. But meeting Harry had changed her mind, along with her heart.

But she was still scared. This was going to be a big step for her. She had to be sure it was the right one to take. As she too retreated, her pulse pounded through her shaking hands. She clenched them to hide her nervousness. "So Harry, I guess you'll be blasting off to a new assignment once we get to Dorvan, right?"

Harry fidgeted with his cuffs. "Well, no. I mean, I asked Admiral Riker if I could stay until Chakotay was out of stasis and back on his feet. If Trebus is as demolished as the reports suggest, it's going to be a lot of work getting the infrastructure back in place. I'm supposed to requisition some Fleet engineers and materials once I get a handle on the situation."

"Oh." B'Elanna's delight didn't quite make up for her uncertainty. There was no reason now for her to hesitate, except that she was scared stiff. "I'm going to be staying on too, you know. To help Chakotay and Tom."
"Yeah, I was hoping you would." Harry swallowed, took a deep breath and took the plunge. "Would you like to go out or something, when we reach DS9? I've heard there are a few good restaurants---even rumors of a Klingon one."

B'Elanna's nose crinkled. "I could do without having to kill my dinner before eating it, thanks. A cup of raktijino is about as Klingon as my palate gets." She felt herself blush. "But I'd like to have dinner with you."

Harry's response was delivered in a sigh of relief. "That's great." Then his forehead wrinkled as he saw B'Elanna bite her lip, her eyes sliding away from his. "That is great, isn't it?"

"Look Harry, I just need you to know that...well, I've never done this before." Embarrassment dipped B'Elanna's head. "I wasn't interested in dating anyone in my mother's protest group, and then I was captured, and sold, and---"

"Oh," he breathed and gathered an unresisting B'Elanna in his arms. "It doesn't matter. Really, it doesn't." Somehow he could sense both the strength and the vulnerability of the woman in his embrace. He smiled a little as he stroked B'Elanna's hair, thinking of his parents' reaction to him bringing home a gladiator. They'd probably see right through her tough exterior and try to smother her with affection.

B'Elanna melted into Harry, winding her arms around his waist. "It wasn't so bad. I managed to convince those p'tahks that I wasn't suited to be a bed slave. And Sisko made sure no one ever messed with his people."

Her face lit with a fierce grin. "And by that time, I had the skills to protect myself in any situation."

She drew back and tentatively rested a hand on Harry's face. "I just wanted you to know I might not be the kind of date you're used to."

Harry smiled. "That, my B'El, is exactly what I'm hoping."

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Sisko glanced over at his companion, then shook his head in disgust. "Keep your head down and your mouth shut. That 'disguise' of yours is laughable at best."

Tom gritted his teeth and did as he was told. He really couldn't complain. Sisko was right, darkening his hair, faking a beard, and wearing nondescript clothing wasn't much of a cover. But he *couldn't* just sit and wait on the freighter while Sisko sent out clandestine inquiries about Cardassian poisons.

They were seeking help through official channels, as well. Tom had already had a meeting with the manager of the station, a man named Odo. Surprisingly, he was a member of one of the Dominion species, the Founders. But his loyalty had never been questioned by any of the Fleet officers who periodically docked here, even during the height of the conflict. The alien had agreed to forward Tom's request to the Bajoran government.

Tom had also sent a discreet message to Chakotay's Bajoran relatives, asking them for help in aiding their widowed in-law.

No one had turned up anything thus far, so now they were going to make some underworld contacts.

Tom bumped into Sisko's solid shoulder when the older man abruptly stopped. He slipped around to see what his guide was chuckling about, and had to smile himself.
B'Elanna and Harry were on the promenade, sharing a frothy drink, gazing into each other's eyes.

Blue eyes slid warily to confirm the ex-gladiator-owner's reaction. "I take it you approve?"

"Oh, I'm sure B'Elanna can handle herself, and the Lieutenant. I'm simply wondering if young Mr. Kim knows what he's let himself in for. Klingons, even half-Klingons, can be quite a handful." But Sisko's indulgent tone set Tom's mind at ease.

"I don't know, Harry seems to have proven he can hold his own in a crunch." Tom nudged Sisko. "Shouldn't we get going?"

"Yeah." A few more minutes found them in the bowels of the station, gliding through darkened corridors. They reached a nondescript door and used a passkey to enter.

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The Ferengi Quark blinked at the sudden intrusion and hastily moved to hide his possessions, desperately sweeping them into his lap. When he saw who had invaded his space he sagged with relief and frowned in annoyance. "Sisko, you know better than to come here," he grumbled.

Sisko motioned Tom to stand behind Quark to keep an eye on the wily alien. He himself moved to lounge in the chair on the opposite side of the table. "I didn't have time to wait for an engraved invitation," he drawled. "I'd like to buy some information from you."

Quark at once became more genial. "Well, of course, you should have said so. I'm always happy to oblige such a good customer."

"Especially when you can no longer count on him for income as a buyer of your slaves," Tom murmured, his anger at Chakotay's captivity momentarily overwhelming his determination to let Sisko handle things.

The Ferengi glanced over his shoulder at the menacing stranger, then turned back to his longtime associate. "What exactly are you in the market for?"

Sisko leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. His dark eyes pinned Quark's with a steely gaze. "I know someone who ran afoul of an Obsidian Order operative. Got himself a snootful of poison for his trouble. I'd like to find out how I can bring my friend back to health."

"You can't," Quark said dismissively. But the gleam of currency soon caught his interest.

Sisko coolly slid five bars of latinum across the surface. "I'm willing to pay top dollar for reliable intel, even more for a meeting with someone in the know." His eyes turned cold. "But don't even think about taking advantage of my generosity. If I find you've played me for a fool there won't be enough left of you to run a DNA analysis."

Quark gulped and took the bars, fingering them as he pondered the request. "And just who is your friend?" he asked silkily, thinking that certain parties might be very interested in the answer.

He squawked as he was roughly pulled to his feet and shoved against the wall by Sisko's suddenly not-so-calm companion. "Don't you even let your greedy little mind consider leaking this to *anyone*," the stranger hissed, his blue eyes as hot and angry as the heart of a flame. "If I get wind of even *one* person sniffing around our trail I'll personally rip your entrails out and feed them to you one centimeter at a time."

Quark pushed himself away and sank into his chair, rubbing his bruised shoulder and mentally
counting the items that had scattered to the floor. "Fine, fine, you don't have to be impolite about it."
His hands waved their irritation. "You only had to ask and my lips would be sealed."

"Then we're asking," Sisko said, rising from the chair. "I'll contact you in two days." He gave a
shark's smile. "Always a pleasure doing business with you, Quark."

He and the other man swept from the room. Quark began to gather his wares, muttering. "Oh yeah,
always an absolute treat, Sisko."

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Tom, blond once more, was sitting in Odo's office a few days later. He was tapping his fingers
agitately on his thighs, unnerved by the smooth-faced alien's rather stern gaze.

They both stood, Odo calmly, Tom anxiously, when the office doors opened to admit a rather
distinguished older Bajoran. The tall man immediately broke into a politician's smile as he strode
forward, hand outstretched. "Ah, Mr. Paris, I had no idea *you* were the one seeking Bajor's help."

Tom suppressed his automatic recoil. He didn't like the slimy vibe the newcomer was giving off, but
he knew how to play the game. "I'm trying to keep a low profile, and besides, I have no real
influence now that power's been given back to the people of the Federation."

"But you still have the ear of the Council, no doubt. Regardless, it is an honor to make your
acquaintance. Perhaps if you have time in the future you can share with me your impressions of your
Federation's new government. Especially since my people will soon be deciding whether to join your
mighty ranks." He held Tom's hand a long moment, piercing him with shrewd brown eyes.

"Thomas Eugene Paris, Minister Jaro Essa of Bajor." Odo's gravelly voice managed to convey his
disdain without ever sounding discourteous.

Tom nodded in acknowledgement of and agreement with Odo's subtle assessment. He gestured to
the chair across from his. "If you would have a seat, sir."

Jaro Essa made himself comfortable, scrutinizing the young patrician, mentally cataloguing the
rumors about him. He let his face fall into lines of regret. "I'm sorry that so far we have had no
success in finding information about any toxic substances used by Cardassian agents, much less
those of the Obsidian Order.

The man's expression turned a touch sly, "Of course, I might be able to devote more time to your
request if I were not so busy campaigning."

"Bajor is also having elections. The Minister is seeking the title of First Minister," Odo shrugged and
leaned back in his chair. "His fellow candidates, Kai Opaka and Minister Shakaar, don't seem to
have the same problems fulfilling their regular responsibilities. Of course, they also don't seem to be
quite as...fond of speech-making."

"Mr. Odo has no idea of the exhausting nature of politics, having been appointed to his post by the
Empire." The Bajoran seemed to savor his next comment. "Of course, the change in regime may put
that in jeopardy. One can only hope...that you continue to serve the Federation in the same capacity."

Tom was getting tired of the pissing contest as the two men shared glares. He rose, all well-bred,
well-trained graciousness. "In any case, I thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to
meet with me personally." He held out his hand. "I trust you'll let me know if there's any news from
your sources."
"Yes, of course," Jaro purred as he once more shook Tom's hand. Then with a last dismissive look at Odo he departed.

Tom snorted and dropped into his chair. "What an ass," he muttered.

Odo just grunted in assent, then returned to his own seat. "But a dangerous one. I sincerely hope the Bajorans figure that out before that man becomes their leader." He regarded the human. "You are aware he's lying?"

Tom slumped and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, but what else can I do? I need the information."

"Why, Mr. Paris?" Odo spun his chair to center himself and rested his elbows on the desk. "For what purpose? Surely you're not planning on poisoning someone." He carefully awaited the response.

Blue eyes dropped as pale fingers twisted around each other. Tom's brows drew together as he debated internally, then he looked up, trying to gauge the other man's sincerity. Finally he said, "Someone very close to me is lying in a stasis chamber, his body full of a toxin our scientists have identified, but can't eliminate."

He let his feelings leak through, just a little. "I'm afraid we're never going to find a cure without help."

Odo nodded to himself, then stood. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Tom asked as he rose to follow.

Odo's lips lifted a fraction. "To get you some help."

The alleyway was shadowed and the stench unpleasant, but Jaro Essa continued to make his way to a small hovel set apart at the end of the noisome lane. He knocked once, and pushed past a silhouetted figure when the doorway opened.

Jaro stopped by the small stove and whirled. "What is it, Wynn?" he snapped. "I don't appreciate your sending messages to my office."

"I'm sorry, *Minister*, but I thought you might like to know just who's been asking about Cardassian poisons." Wynn had barely managed to escape the security net that had descended on Earth with Shelby's fall from grace. Now the older woman was back on her home planet, scratching her way to some semblance of power.


Wynn recovered from her surprise after a moment. She purred, "But do you know why he wants the information? How to get it? Or even where there is still a sample of that very lethal toxin?"

"No," Jaro approached and gripped the woman's chin. "But if you want to keep your head attached to your neck I'm sure you'll tell me."

"All in good time," Wynn smiled, not intimidated one bit. "All in good time."
Tom stared around the courtyard of the Bajoran temple. The low, hollow notes of the garden's wooden wind chimes blended with the sounds of running water to create an oasis of peace and quiet in the middle of a crowded city. He resisted the urge to pace, instead settling himself on a flat stone to watch water lilies drift in a large oval pool.

He couldn't figure out why Odo had dumped him here, but he had little choice but to sit and wait. The slim chance that this contact would provide a solid lead to help Chakotay was certainly worth the inconvenience of cooling his heels for an hour.

"You seem troubled, young one."

The voice made Tom whirl, startled. A short, middle-aged Bajoran woman was looking at him with concern in her dark eyes. He cleared his throat and replied, "Yes, I suppose I am."

The lady sat beside him, tilting her head as she observed him. After a moment she said, "The golden prince of the Empire is a hero of the Federation." She gave a slight nod at his startled glance, then asked, "What brings you to Bajor, Thomas Eugene Paris?"

Tom shifted uncomfortably, but his gut was telling him to trust this stranger. Her robes and aura of serenity proclaimed she was a member of the temple. "Desperation," he replied honestly. "I need information to help...someone very important to me."

The Bajoran's eyes warmed as she smiled. "How discreet of you. But you need to be a little more specific---you might try asking for 'information on Cardassian poisons and the Obsidian Order'."

The sense of space in his mouth told Tom his jaw was gaping. He hastily closed it. "Are you Odo's contact?"

"Yes. I'm Kai Opaka." She shrugged. "Mr. Odo is an old friend. He was so good to help us with...logistics and supply...during the Dominion occupation. But not as helpful, of course, as Admiral Chakotay."

"What?!" Tom leapt to his feet. "Odo wasn't supposed to mention---"

"He didn't." Opaka also stood. She leaned her head back to meet Tom's eyes. "The Prophets remember how the Admiral kept his promise to them, and his kindness to Bajor."

"I'm not sure I understand." Tom sat down again, putting him on a level with the short, plump woman.

"Chakotay freed Bajor from the Dominion, but he didn't put the planet under Imperial protection---or control." She gestured to the skies above. "Instead, he provided us with our own sensor net and ships, as well as an orbital defense station. To guarantee Bajoran independence." Her eyes dimmed with sadness. "Unfortunately, he didn't know it was his own home planet that would come under attack."

"No. If he had...." Tom trailed off; it was useless to speculate now on what might have been.

"But he didn't." Opaka too seemed ready to set aside the topic. "In any case, Bajor's debt to Chakotay is great indeed. Rest assured, young Paris, whether or not my people join the Federation, we will do all we can to help him. And to keep his return a secret."
She grimaced. "That is, *some* of us will. I suggest you choose your confidants carefully. There are those who would use this situation to their advantage."

"Yeah, I've already met a guy who fits that bill." Tom's features twisted in distaste a moment as he remembered Minister Jaro. Then hope smoothed out his expression as he stood. "Do you really think you can help us?" He grasped her hands in an unconscious gesture of entreaty.

"Perhaps." Opaka squeezed the fingers wrapped around hers, then drew away. "The choice will be made by others, and they may demand a high price for their aid. But I shall ask. My associate, Vedek Bariel, will contact you when there is news."

"Thank you." Tom's head lifted with his spirits. He felt a renewed, if unjustifiable, sense of hope.

The Bajoran gave a small bow and drifted to the garden door. Just at the threshold she turned back. "I wish you luck, young Paris." A glint of amusement sparkled in her eyes. "And I can tell you this much: You *will* need it, along with the patience of a Vedek."

"Why do you say that?" Tom's forehead crinkled in confusion.

"Let's just say if I know the inhabitants of Dorvan, you'll be facing quite a welcoming committee." Then the humor faded into something else. "Thomas, you have taken your first steps in what could be an arduous journey. Never lose touch with your own heart. Let love sustain you in the hard times ahead. And remember that the emotion can take many forms."

A whisper of cloth, the creak of the gate and she was gone.

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Kai Opaka was right. There *was* a committee, and they were *not* welcoming.

Tom's group had hung around DS9 for another day or two, picking up medical supplies for the EMH and waiting for news. What they ended up with was a boatload of frustration.

Jaro Essa kept sending messages not-so-subtly suggesting that Tom reveal *why* he wanted the information he'd requested. Or to at least meet with Jaro once more. Coincidentally, the optimal places and times for a conference in the Minister's busy schedule were perfect opportunities for the politician to be seen with Tom.

It hurt to give up this source of a possible cure, but Tom knew he couldn't become a pawn in Bajor's power games. He refused all of Jaro's requests. Eventually they stopped coming. Tom knew he'd made an enemy.

He hadn't heard from Vedek Bariel, or even Kai Opaka saying she'd failed. Odo had talked with Tom twice, offering a gruff encouragement but no new leads. Oddly enough, he'd also warned Tom to watch his step when he reached Dorvan.

Now Tom knew why.

The first hint of trouble had been with Sisko's people. They'd arrived at the Dorvan spaceport ready to assess the damage to the Trebus region and begin setting up a temporary infrastructure. But before they could even debark from their vessel, they were contacted by some kind of planetary council. And brusquely informed that they were free to trade, tour, meditate, visit, and so on, on Dorvan---but they were *not* to approach Trebus under any circumstances.
Under Sisko's orders the team stayed put, killing time until their boss could arrive to straighten things out.

Kassidy's freighter had only been docked a minute or two before they received their own "off limits" orders. Shock had quickly dissolved into anger as their protests were ignored. At one point B'Elanna had treated everyone to a lesson in Klingon curses before Harry had stepped up and swept her into a hug.

For one tense moment everyone held their breath, waiting for the explosion that usually occurred when B'Elanna was thwarted. Instead, the ex-gladiator had given a long, sad sigh and clasped him in return. "How can they do this to Chakotay? Isn't this his home?" The question held the forlorn echo of the long-ago girl who'd never felt welcomed on her own planet.

It was Sisko who'd answered, his deep voice surprisingly soft. "Maybe they don't fully understand yet that he's here and needs their help." He turned to Tom. "It looks like it's time to come clean. Perhaps you should explain in more detail exactly what cargo we're carrying. And what plans we have for it."

Fifteen minutes later they'd been ordered to release Chakotay and get off the planet.

Tom finally lost his patience and sent a blistering reply explaining that *he* was Chakotay's guardian and that the only way anyone was getting near the man was over Tom's dead body.

People had started showing up soon after, silently surrounding Kassidy's freighter.

All the newcomers had done was watch and wait, until a small group of men and women opened a channel to the freighter and demanded to speak with the "upstart Imperial pup laying claim to their kinsman".

Kassidy lowered the ramp. Tom had limited his party to Sisko, Kassidy, Harry, B'Elanna, and Greg. Sensing his allies at his back gave him the strength to lift his head high as he stepped on Dorvan soil for the first time.

"I'm Tom Paris, caretaker of Chakotay," he announced, his voice clear and carrying. Then he tensed, waiting.

"I am Anthwara, leader of the Dorvan Council of Elders." A white-haired man stepped forth, dignity in every line of his weathered face and the way he carried himself. "And I ask you by whose authority you come here---and by what right you kidnapped our cousin Chakotay."

"I didn't kidnap anyone," Tom snapped in instinctive defense. Then he took a deep breath and calmed. "He's very ill---surely you saw what happened in the Colosseum."

"We've been informed of recent events," was the enigmatic reply.

Urgency drove Tom forward. "Well what you don't know is that Chakotay is currently in a stasis chamber, his body full of a rare poison. One with no antidote." His fists clenched. "All he wanted was to come home."

"And so you have brought him to Dorvan. We are grateful, and bid you depart," Anthwara replied with a gesture toward the ship. "We'll take care of Chakotay from now on."

Tom could sense a protest gathering behind him, like the shiver in the air before lightning strikes. B'Elanna's low growl was echoed in several throats. He gestured for them to hold their positions---and tempers. Then he stepped up to stand toe to toe with Anthwara. His voice reflected the steel in
his eyes, in his spine. "I don't think you understand the situation here. Chakotay is *mine*: my love, my soulmate, my responsibility."

He lifted his eyes to encompass the small crowd. "And I am not going to abandon him just because you say so."

"Liar!" The angry shout came from the left, where another cluster of strangers had been listening. A blur of motion brought a tall, black-haired Bajoran into the fray. "This man---" He spat the word with a mouthful of venom "Contacted my family on Chakotay's behalf."

The newcomer paced in front of the silent audience as his companions drifted to mix with the Dorvans. "He claimed he was asking Chakotay's in-laws for help and information. And that he was Chakotay's next of kin."

The stranger stopped and slapped a hand to his chest. "I am Tabor Kel. My cousin---Ro Laren, Chakotay's *wife*---has not even had a decent burial, yet this one claims to speak and act for her spouse."

Tabor shoved his face into Tom's. "I saw Chakotay fighting in the arena, Paris, while you played lapdog to the Emperor who put him in chains. You stink of Imperial corruption---the same foul stench that arrived with the troops that murdered my cousin."

Tom clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth together. Held himself stiff to keep from attacking the alien. For a moment he wished he had B'Elanna's ability to throw caution to the winds. He desperately wanted to shut the Bajoran up---with his fist.

Tabor took a step back, crossed his arms and sneered. "You think you can buy your way onto this planet, but I'm here to stop you. Whatever *relationship* you think you had with Chakotay only existed in your own twisted mind."

He snorted. "The poor bastard was only on Earth a week or so before he disappeared. Hardly enough time for you to 'get to know each other', much less develop the bond you describe. Unless, of course, he was ordered to your bed."

Tom could sense the crowd's turmoil. He protested as much to them as to Tabor, "No! It's not like that! For years I've---"

"What are you saying?" This time Anthwara interrupted, shock and anger stiffening his frame. "Are you suggesting that Chakotay was unfaithful to his wife?" His face darkened as he ordered, "Get out of my sight!"

"Enough!" The yell was loud and forceful enough to keep both Tabor's and Tom's angry denials at bay. A small Bajoran woman with short reddish hair strode up to the trio. A palpable sense of power gave her greater presence than her height would suggest. "Tabor, we've been through this already. I can't believe you're being this stupid."

Her sharp gesture clamped Tabor's mouth shut on another complaint, but his mulish expression shouted his protest.

The newcomer stopped and addressed not only Anthwara, but also the small delegation behind him. "Ladies, gentlemen, you know me from my visits to Trebus over the years."

She turned to Tom and his group. "My name is Kira Nerys. Best friend of Ro Laren." The woman's face softened in memory as she explained, "Tabor Kel knows as well as I do that Chakotay was never unfaithful to his wife."
"So Paris is lying," Anthwara said flatly.

Surprisingly, another voice broke in before Tom could renew his protests. A Dorvan woman whose black hair rippled down her back stepped up and laid a hand on Anthwara's shoulder. "Peace." Her dark eyes considered the participants in this strange tableau. "Let Nerys speak. There is obviously more to the situation here than we know."

"Thanks, Rosera," Kira said with a brief smile, then squared her shoulders and continued with the story. "As I said, it's true that Chakotay never broke his marriage vows, but it's also true that Tom Paris was---and maybe still is---Chakotay's beloved."

"Explain yourself," Anthwara snapped.

"Don't listen to her," Tabor insisted, "Laren never said anything about this."

"Of course she didn't." Kira was getting annoyed. "It's not really a suitable topic for a family dinner, is it?" She turned back to the Dorvans. "Ro Laren and I have known each other since childhood. We had no secrets. Neither did Laren and Chakotay."

Her quick, curious glance assessed Tom. Then she continued, "Chakotay and Laren met when he was on extended leave from the Imperial Fleet. They clicked, partly because they were in the same situation."

She sighed. "Both of them were in love with people they could never claim for their own."

Rosera urged Kira on when she paused again. "So they decided to make a life together?"

"Yes," Kira replied. "As they spent time getting to know each other, they realized that the best they could do was put aside their dreams of the impossible for...the possible, you could say. They offered what was left of their hearts to each other. And built something good, and strong, and real."

Kira drifted over and laid a hand on Tom's arm. "Laren never begrudged Chakotay his dreams of you, because he never asked her to give up her feelings for her first love, either." She offered him a bit of a smile. "I'm glad Chakotay will have you to help him remake his life."

Tom tried not to wince as the grip on his arm tightened painfully. Kira's expression acquired a dangerous edge as she warned, "But I consider Chakotay my brother-in-law, so if you hurt him I'll kill you. Slowly."

"Understood," was all Tom said. When the pressure was gone he surreptitiously rubbed the sting out of his forearm, wondering how bad the bruise would be. For a second he was distracted speculating who would win in a fight between Kira and B'Elanna, then Rosera's voice drew his attention.

"You see, Anthwara, Paris's claim is genuine." Rosera leveled a stare at Tabor, who nodded and slumped in defeat. "And apparently uncontested."

"Not quite. I concede that Chakotay may have had feelings for the whelp once upon a time, but that is all." The old man flicked a glance over Tom. "But the evidence of past attachment is not enough to grant him the right to decide Chakotay's future."

"Then what *will* convince you?" Tom's frustration drove him forward again. "I am *not* leaving him."

"A test, of your place on Dorvan, and in Chakotay's life." Anthwara's eyes searched Tom's. "I challenge you to enter the Habak, to go on a vision quest and let the spirits themselves decide your
"What do you mean?" Tom asked warily.

"If the quest reveals that you are, indeed, Chakotay's chosen, then you will be accepted as such by the tribes of Dorvan. But if you are...deluded...then you and all of your associates will leave Chakotay here, and never venture near this world again."

"That's a lot to decide based on some mystical mumbo jumbo," Sisko interjected mildly.

A young Dorvan man, Lakanta, stiffened and growled, "If you don't like our ways, offworlder, you can always leave---*without* Chakotay." The Dorvan looked like he'd prefer that option.

"No, we're staying." Tom met the eyes of each of his group as they nodded their support. Even Sisko gave his silent agreement. Then Tom turned and tilted his chin as he looked over the crowd. "I accept the challenge."

Tom chose Sisko and Harry to accompany him on the journey to the closest Habak, in the nearby village of Solon. The small conical structure sat apart from the more mundane buildings. The earth around it was packed from the dance of countless feet over the years, and a fire burned in a large pit a few meters away.

"Are you sure you're ready for this, Paris?" Sisko asked the question as Tom emerged from another nearby structure, his only covering a large towel around his waist.

"Ready or not, I don't have much choice, do I?" Tom muttered, his eyes on the rising smoke. "They have to accept me, and this is the only way to guarantee it."

"What are you going to do if the quest doesn't turn out the way you want?" Harry asked as he handed Tom a large cup of water.

Tom drank it down, then met the young man's eyes. "Let me put it this way: The 'over my dead body' thing wasn't a bluff."

Harry nodded, then quietly confided as he took the empty container, "B'Elanna and Greg are standing by. Just give the word and we can be out of here in a heartbeat."

Tom clasped each man's shoulder, seasoned warrior and young officer. "Thanks. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that." He stepped forward as a towel-clad Anthwara appeared from another small hut.

"Ready?" the old man asked.

"Yes." Tom's reply was as clipped as the question. He straightened and moved toward the Habak.

"Just a moment." Both men paused, and their eyes widened as Rosera appeared, loosely tucking the edge of a towel between her breasts. "I'm going in with you."

"Why?" Anthwara demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"You know why---to preserve a sense of balance in the vision quest. Your judgement is biased." She shrugged. "So is mine, but in the opposite direction. Hopefully what we see between us will be the truth."
Tom gave the woman a grateful smile. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Ah, I'm just a sucker for star-crossed romance." She opened the flap and ducted inside. "Let's begin."

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Tom's eyes quickly adjusted to the dimness of the interior. He made his way around a sizable fire pit and settled cross-legged next to Rosera. "Is there anything you need me to do for this ceremony?"

"No, the steam and the herbs will do most of the work. This will be a shared quest, so you simply link arms with Anthwara and myself, close your eyes, and let the chant take you."

"Take me where?"

"That is what the Spirits will decide," Anthwara replied as he took his place at Tom's other side. "Remove your towel; it's time."

Tom blushed as he fumbled to untie the knot at his waist. The heat in his cheeks increased as he was reflexively compelled to look at the bared bodies on either side of him. Anthwara gave a long-suffering sigh, while Rosera winked.

A cool breeze shocked him as the flap opened and Lakanta brought in hot stones. He carefully arranged them over the fire. Anthwara sprinkled bunches of herbs over them while Rosera poured water, their voices winding together in a chant.

After a moment they laid aside their implements and linked Tom's arms with theirs, pressing palm to palm and entwining their fingers.

And still the chant continued, weaving around them like the smoke and the steam and the heat. Tom swayed with the rhythm of their words, his eyes drifting shut.

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The smell of scorched wood struck him first. Tom's eyes flew open to find himself standing in the midst of devastation.

All around him was ash and soot, smoke still rising to drift in the breeze. From the charred, fallen trunks and absence of buildings he guessed that he was standing in the aftermath of a forest fire.

He felt a keen sense of loss at the destruction of what had probably been lush woodland. He wondered where exactly he was, and what happened here. At least his dream-self---or was it spirit-self?---was clothed, in a simple tunic, trousers and sandals.

Tom was startled by the screech of a bird---and noticed then how complete the silence was, before and after. He lifted his eyes to scan for the creature. A small shape circled high above, almost lazily beginning a slow spiral down.

As it came closer the silhouette resolved itself into a hawk, its sharp beak and talons glinting above the wisps of smoke.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

The voice caused him to jump. Tom turned to see a dark-eyed Bajoran woman scrutinizing him, her gaze as sharp as the angles of her cheekbones and chin. "Ro Laren?" he asked.
She nodded, the chains of her earring catching the light. "Got it in one, Paris." She circled him. "I never thought I'd actually get to meet you."

Ro snorted. "I guess I still haven't, technically."

"I'm sorry," Tom said. "What happened to you was...I didn't know what Julian was planning, I swear."

"What would you have done if you had?" The question was delivered as the slim figure completed her circuit to stand before him once more. Ro waited, arms crossed, chin and eyebrows lifted.

"Stopped him." He held her eyes, his voice low and fierce.

"Because of Chakotay?" The question pushed at him the way Ro pushed at his chest. He hadn't even seen her close the gap between them.

He stood firm under the assault. "No, because no one deserved what happened to you." His voice softened. "Or your son."

Ro stared at this stranger, trying to pierce his blue eyes to see the soul, the truth behind. After a moment she relaxed, content with what she read there. She settled her weight on one leg, bending the other knee, getting comfortable. "I believe you."

Tom sagged with relief. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Oh, you're not out of the woods yet, Paris." The wry humor in her voice brought Tom's head up. Ro was regarding him again, not as hostilley but no less intently. "Tell me about yourself...and Chakotay."

"Um..." Tom chewed his lip. "I don't know that there's all that much to tell. We met when I was 11, met again when I was 17 and recently crossed paths once more."

"I hope you can do better than that, or frankly I'm going to knock you on your ass where you stand." Ro Laren moved in again, this time shoving her face under Tom's. She was pretty sure he didn't understand the precariousness of his situation. "I love my husband, and based on that statement I wouldn't trust you to take Chakotay to lunch, much less take care of him."

"Not you too," Tom groaned, then loomed over her as he gritted, "Maybe you're a ghost or a spirit, maybe you're just some hallucinogen-induced figment of my imagination. But let's get one thing clear, lady: I love Chakotay. I have loved him for over a decade, and I have longed for the chance to tell him. To make a life with him. So I am *damn* well going to be with him for his recovery every step of the way, whether you, or the Dorvans, or the Spirits like it or not."

"You sound very sure of finding an antidote," she goaded.

"I have to," Tom retorted. "Losing him is not an option."

Her sudden warm, friendly smile startled Tom back a step.

"Good." Ro nodded with satisfaction, then sobered. "Chakotay's going to need all the help he can get."

"He'll have it." Tom reached out, lifting one of her hands and pressing a kiss on the back. "I promise."
Ro reached up her other hand to ruffle his hair with her fingers. He couldn't read the emotions swirling in her dark eyes. "Just love him, Paris, that's all I ask."

Then she lifted her face to the sky and called to the hawk, "He'll do."

The bird swooped down. Tom almost jumped again when it landed on his shoulder, talons pricking him through the cloth.

/I'm glad he meets with your approval./ Tom heard the wry voice in his head. He stared at the hawk, who *winked* at him. "Huh?" was all Tom could say.

Ro laughed. "It's weird the first time, isn't it? Tom Paris, say hello to your spirit guide."

"Spirit guide? I have a spirit guide?" He paused. "What's a spirit guide?"

/Swift on the uptake, I see. Your answers are Yes, yes, and an advisor who can help you on your path in life---*if* you wish to walk the ways of Chakotay's people./

"Do you have a name?" Tom tried to bring some calm to his confusion with the simple question, figuring he'd take things step by step.

/You can address me as 'Brother', but 'Hey You' will do in a pinch./ Tom stifled a chuckle and reached a tentative hand to stroke the feathers of the hawk's folded wing. The soft edges flowed along his fingertips. "You feel so...real," he said in wonder.

/I am real. At least here, in your mind. And I will come when you call. Good luck, young one./ With that the bird launched itself once more into the sky.

Tom grimaced, and again heard Ro's laugh. He glanced at her.

"I wouldn't take it personally. Chakotay told me once his guide still calls *him* youngster sometimes, and he's 34 now." At the mention of her husband Ro's face clouded. "I guess I'd better let you get back to him."

"Will I ever see you again?" Tom asked. His renewed grief for Chakotay's loss was mingled with regret of his own. He was sorry he'd never get a chance to know Ro Laren, and wished he'd been able to meet her and Chakotay's son.

"I don't know...but if I can you can bet I'll be keeping my eye on you," Ro threatened. Then she added with another smile, "And keeping an eye out for you and Lucien, too."

The smoke seemed to swirl around them, growing stronger. "Good-bye," Tom called.

"Farewell," was the faintest of echoes.

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Tom jolted awake to the smells of smoke and sweat, the feel of heat from the steam and the fire and the bodies close to his. He swallowed and shakily freed himself from his companions' grip.

"So now we have our answer." Rosera laid a hand on Tom's shoulder. "Welcome to Dorvan, Tom Paris, chosen of Chakotay."

Anthwara huffed and rose without comment, gathering his towel around him once more. At the doorway to the Habak he paused and turned back. "You have a decision to make, Paris. The Spirits have confirmed your right to speak for Chakotay. Now you must decide if you wish to accept all of
his responsibilities. Rosera will explain. You will have one hour to make your choice." The cool
air that arrived with his exit was a balm to Tom's flushed skin.

"Come on." Rosera replaced her own towel and led a similarly re-covered Tom out into the daylight
once more. He blinked at the brightness, then turned to Rosera with a questioning lift of brows.

Rosera almost chuckled at the befuddled look on the young man's face. "What Anthwara meant was
that Chakotay now bears the legacy of his tribe. The stewardship of Trebus, the lands around it, and
all of its people. If you want to be Chakotay's next of kin, then those burdens come with the
designation."

"But if I do agree, *I* will get to decide Chakotay's treatment?" Tom asked, wanting to be clear on
that point.

"Oh, definitely." Rosera shrugged. "You will be the sole arbiter of his fate, until he can speak for
himself."

"Then I don't need an hour." Tom straightened his shoulders. "I'll take it---everything, whatever."

Rosera shook her head at some private thought. "Why don't you get cleaned up and dressed. I'll pass
the word and gather the council."

Tom nodded and quickly returned to the hut where his clothes were. Harry and Sisko jumped up
from their chosen lounging spots on the ground in front of it.

"What was it like?" Harry asked eagerly, handing Tom a full container of water as he passed.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Sisko chimed in with a raised brow.

Tom gulped the cool liquid, waving away their questions. "For now, I'll just say really strange, but
apparently effective. I'm going to be officially accepted in a minute or two, so I need to get dressed."

"And bathed, if you would be so kind," Sisko added smoothly. Harry just wrinkled his nose and
nodded.

Tom grimaced and muttered, "Thanks for the reminder," as he ducked into the hut. But he did make
good use of the soap, water and towels provided.

In a few minutes he reappeared, dressed and smelling a lot fresher, his hair still wet.

The group that had surrounded Kassidy's ship earlier in the day approached the trio. Kira, Tabor,
B'Elanna, and Greg were with them.

They stopped and Anthwara's voice filled the air. "The Spirits have decreed that this offworlder,
Thomas Eugene Paris, may speak with Chakotay's voice. He has accepted the responsibilities that
come with that right. Is that not so?" He looked at Tom.

Tom could sense an air of expectancy in the crowd. He had the sudden feeling that he really didn't
know what he was getting himself into. Regardless, he wasn't going to give himself any other choice.
"Yes."

"Very well. You and all you assign are granted access to Trebus. We ask that you consult with the
council and regional government before you begin making decisions about what to do with the land,
and who should dwell upon it." Anthwara gestured to someone behind Tom.
Rosera stepped forward. There were two children with her, one on each side, clutching her hands. "You may immediately take custody of Chakotay's nieces, Jelene and Koral, the only other survivors of the massacre of Trebus."

She watched Tom pale and reassured him, "You realize, if you aren't up to the task, we will make other arrangements."

Lakanta sneered. "Or, of course, you can change your mind and go back to the Imperial Palace."

Tom swallowed, and stared down at the two young girls, their black hair, deep brown eyes, bone structure, and tawny skin proclaiming their connection to Chakotay.

Two sets of long-lashed, innocent, curious, and slightly frightened eyes stared back.
"Can I see him? I want to see him!" Koral's tone went from pleading to imperious in a heartbeat as she tugged on Tom's shirttail, then rose up on the balls of her feet. The seven-year-old pressed her hands to the side of the stasis chamber, trying to see into it.

Jelene glanced down at her fraternal twin. "Shh...you'll wake him up." She was kneeling on a chair placed facing away from the unit, and leaned over the back to rest her elbows on the clear cover. "Uncle Chakotay's sleeping."

Tom grunted as he lifted Koral so she could also see Chakotay. "Well, that's not exactly right, Jelene." Fortunately the sisters weren't identical twins—he would have felt horrible if he mixed up their names. "Stasis is a special kind of sleep. Even though our voices are transmitted inside there, talking won't wake your uncle up."

"What happened to his tattoo?" Koral's face scrunched in confusion. "I remember he used to let me sit on his knee and trace the lines when he would tell stories around the fire."

"Uncle Chakotay tells *the best* stories," Jelene confided as her finger drew a pattern on the stasis tube. Hopeful eyes rose to meet Tom's. "Will he wake up in time to tell us a bedtime story?"

"No," Lucien drew the word out, embellishing it with the know-it-all superiority of his eight years. "The Admiral can't get out of there until my dad finds a cure for him. He's been poisoned."

Lucien's mouth formed something between a grimace and a pout as he stared down at Chakotay from the other side of the unit. "It seems like he's been in there forever."

"I read a story like that---'Sleeping Beauty'. She was poisoned by pricking her finger on a spinning wheel and slept for a hundred years." Koral tilted her head far back to look upside-down at Tom. "She woke up when a prince kissed her. Can you find a prince to kiss Uncle Chakotay so he'll wake up?"

"Are *you* a prince?" Jelene asked, her eyes wide. "You look just like the one in the book." This tall, handsome man with hair touched by the sun and eyes like the sky was the first blond she had ever met in person.

Lucien snorted and rolled his eyes. Tom sent him a warning frown, but was ignored. "My dad's not a prince," the boy said, then shrugged. "It wouldn't work anyway. We'd need a princess, not a prince."

"Actually, Lucien, I think the story calls for a true love's kiss." Tom's face softened as his gaze caressed Chakotay's quiet features. "And that I *can* provide."

He watched his son's reaction out of the corner of his eye, hoping Lucien wouldn't react badly to the idea. Before now, he hadn't broached the subject of his hopes for a future with Chakotay. He was almost certain Lucien was free of any prejudices regarding relationships.

Koral wriggled to be put down and Jelene turned and slid until she was sitting, her feet dangling a few centimeters from the carpet. Lucien walked around the stasis chamber to stand in front of his father. All three children stared at Tom. He went to one knee to put himself on a level with his audience.

"I don't understand, Dad," Lucien said slowly, "I thought you...you loved Mama."
Tom gently grasped his son's shoulders, and drew the boy in for a reassuring hug. "I did, mon cher. And I do. But, people can love more than one person in their lifetimes."

He leaned back and held Lucien's gaze. "I've known Chakotay for over sixteen years. And your mom...well, she's been gone for a while. It doesn't mean I'll forget her, but I love Chakotay too."

"Are you sure?" The narrow-eyed stare that accompanied the question suddenly reminded Tom of Jean-Luc. He resisted the urge to ruffle his son's hair. He just nodded, face serious.

Lucien chewed his lip, thinking. Tom and the girls were quiet, waiting for his decision. After a while the boy's shoulders straightened and a smile brightened his eyes. "I think---I think that would be OK. To have Chakotay be...family." He scuffed the rug with his shoe, then pushed Koral with his shoulder. "You two, too."

Matching dimpled smiles broke across the girls' faces. Jelene jumped to her feet and the twins nudged Lucien back, crushing the boy between them. The trio started giggling and pushing each other, still grinning. Tom missed Chakotay with a sudden fierceness that robbed him of breath. He gathered all three children into his arms, hugging them as he choked out, "Yes, a family. All of us. I promise."

"So the girls are settling in all right?" Rosera curled up on a couch in the freighter's small observation lounge. Wisps of steam rose from the mug cradled in her hands. She dipped her head to enjoy the aroma of the fragrant tea, but watched Tom from under her lashes.

Tom shrugged and sipped his own drink. "I believe so. They seemed to understand the situation with Chakotay easily enough." He smiled reminiscently at Koral and Jelene's prince suggestion. "And B'Elanna helped them get ready for bed. Thanks for bringing their clothes, as well as their books and toys."

Rosera waved it off as she swallowed, then asked, "Do you have the computer monitoring them? They still have nightmares, every once in a while."

"Yes, it'll alert me or Gerron Tem if any of the kids shows signs of distress." His brows drew together. "What are the dreams about?"

She sighed. "They're pretty vague---the classic bogeyman coming to take them away." Rosera's expression turned grim. "They weren't in Trebus when the Imperial Guards came, so they don't really know what happened."

"Where were they, then? How did they escape?" Tom set his cup down, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees and his chin in a hand.

"Koral considers herself quite the explorer, as I'm sure you'll find out soon enough," Rosera said with a fond smile. "And you can usually find Jelene blithely skipping right alongside her. Their parents were constantly chasing them down at sunset, especially when there was no school."

Rosera sipped her tea, looking into the past. "On that particular day, the twins had wandered farther away than usual, to a set of caves west of the village. They happened to run into a family from another community who were spending the day there. They were relatives of Anthwara, in fact."

Tom was quiet, watching the scene unfold before his mind's eye.

She continued, "Of course, the girls' explanation for why they were alone so far from Trebus wasn't
very convincing, so their parents were quickly contacted. Jelene and Koral were told that because
they'd disobeyed the rules and left the village, they would be punished: They couldn't go to the
bonfire planned for that evening. The family who found the twins offered to take them overnight."

Rosera frowned, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "They were very lucky. The minerals in the
caves shielded them all from the Guards' sensors. Jelene and Koral went to Solon, so no one had a
clue what had happened until the next night, when nobody came to pick up the girls."

Tom swallowed. "And there was no one left?"

"Not alive." Rosera's mouth thinned. "Plenty of corpses, though. Strangely enough, we did find two
graves outside of Trebus: Ro Laren and her son."

"So Tabor was wrong. Ro Laren *did* receive a proper burial, most likely at her husband's hands.
Chakotay must have somehow gotten there before you, and then left—or was taken away." Tom
mused reflectively, "I wonder what happened to him after he stormed out of Jean-Luc's cabin. How
he got to Dorvan. And how he came to be in Sisko's group."

Tom shook his head and leaned back with a sad sigh. "So much death and destruction—no wonder
he was so wounded, so angry when I met him again."

"I'm sure he must have been. Chakotay had always taken his role as protector very seriously. It's why
he stayed in the Fleet so long." Rosera drained her cup and set it down. Then she rose, stretching.
"It's time for me to be getting home."

"Will you stop by again soon? I don't want the twins to think they've been abandoned." Tom noted
the grace that seemed an intrinsic part of Chakotay's people as he escorted Rosera to the transporter
chamber.

"Oh, they won't. They know that Chakotay is their closest family. It will make sense to be with him."
She gave a knowing smile. "And as his chosen, to be with you."

Tom blushed under that too-aware stare. "Yes, well, getting Chakotay out of the stasis chamber
would be a nice first step." He ran his hand behind his neck, trying to dispel his embarrassment.

"Yes, I suppose it would be." Rosera stepped onto the platform, then turned to look at the man—so
different from the inhabitants of Dorvan—who had apparently won her kinsman's heart. "I'll visit you
at Trebus in a day or two, to check up on things," she reassured Tom. "Call me if you need help
before then, or if there's any news about Chakotay's condition."

"I will." Tom smiled, feeling he had found a friend and ally in the remarkable woman. "Good night."

"Good night, Tom Paris." Rosera lifted a hand. "And good luck."

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"Are you sure you're not spinning me a pretty yarn to get more latinum, Quark?" Sisko regarded the
Ferengi on the comm screen. Dark fingers idly toyed with an ornate but sharp dagger as he awaited a
response.

Quark shivered as he saw the light glint along the blade's edge, but quickly recovered and replied, "I
can assure you, the rumors are true. Someone else has been making discreet inquiries about
Cardassian poisons—but in this case they're trying to locate a source, not a cure."
"And you think an infusion of cash would get you the name of the person with this...parallel request?" At Quark's nod, Sisko asked coolly, "Why should this interest me?"

"Well for one thing, I'd think you or your...associate would want to know who else has even heard of this apparently extremely rare substance." Quark leaned forward, warming to his theme. "Secondly, they might have some information that you don't. Thirdly---"

"Thirdly, I could put a tail on them and dispense with your services altogether," Sisko interjected. He sat back and tossed the knife aside. "Very well, Quark. I'll play along. The funds you've asked for will be in your account by noon tomorrow."

His eyes hardened. "But tread carefully. This person may also be hunting you. And if you sell me out, the consequences will be most unpleasant."

"You've already made that abundantly clear, Sisko," the Ferengi grumbled. "Your threats don't make this any easier."

"Perhaps not," the older man conceded. "But I don't want there to be any ambiguity regarding my intentions---or the price of betraying me."

"Hmpf," was the disgruntled response. Quark picked up a padd in front of him on the desk. "And you want these items delivered to your compound? Pretty strange requisition."

"I want the inventory, not questions or commentary," Sisko said shortly. "And at your prices, I expect to be satisfied."

"Of course," Quark said smoothly, "I live to serve."

Sisko just snorted. "Contact me when the shipment is ready." He stabbed the button ending the communication. Another presence in the room made him leap from his chair to confront the newcomer.

"Are you that charming to all your subcontractors?" Kassidy noted the lightning reflexes, and the immediate relaxation of Sisko's body, as she sauntered further into the room.

A smile crossed Sisko's features as he approached. "No, only when they aren't as charming as you."

"Ah," Kassidy drawled the syllable, reaching out a finger to brush the edge of Sisko's collar. "So I should screen all your contacts to make sure they *aren't* as charming as me?" She sobered. "Or should I just assume you flirt with, say, twenty percent of them?"

He noticed the concern in her face and raised one hand to capture hers, raising her slender fingers to his lips. "Oh, far lower than that. You, my dear Captain, are unique."

"In your experience thus far." She tilted her head, trying to read his eyes. "What about the future?"

"In the future, I hope you'll be more than just a...business contact." Sisko moved slowly, giving the beautiful woman plenty of time to slip away. He gathered her into an embrace, his lips hovering over hers. "Much more," he whispered.

They kissed.
"So Doc, how do you like the new digs?" Tom stretched out on the window seat with a sigh and took a long swallow of his iced mint tea.

"Considering the holographic—and thus infinitely variable—nature of the room, Mr. Paris, one could assume that since I haven't changed the 'digs' as you call them, they are adequate for my purposes." The EMH's eyes flicked around the rather eclectic setting. "Although I may need to start prescribing prophylactic analgesics to prevent the headaches that will be brought on by the clashing styles of decor."

Tom settled back and considered his surroundings. The holographic doctor and he were currently the only occupants of the room—besides Chakotay, of course. The stasis chamber hummed under a newly added medicine wheel a few meters away. The unit's generator was tucked out of sight behind holographically-generated walls, but a replicator, computer and comm screen were easily seen.

Tom's seat extended pretty far down the north side of the room. The enormous window was real, crafted into the building itself and screened with a forcefield to admit both air and light. The curtains, cushions, couches, chairs, and rug reflected the antique furnishings of Tom's childhood home.

The walls were taken up with tapestry-sized weavings and shelves full of tribal carvings that had been brought by the many visitors over the last few days. The doctor's mix of virtual and real lab equipment was carefully arranged on the far side of the space.

Tom guessed that his critic referred to the clash between Dorvan simplicity and ostentatious Terran luxury. He frowned. "I don't think it's that bad, Doc. Besides, this is just temporary housing until I can figure out the lay of the land. I don't want to make too many decisions about Trebus—or our personal living arrangements—without Chakotay's input."

The hologram noted the sudden tension in his host's body. "Mr. Paris—"

"Just Tom, please. We've certainly spent enough time together," Tom said, then sighed. "And we'll likely have a lot more ahead."

"Very well, Tom," the Doc said as he walked over to perch awkwardly on the other end of the window seat. "In my medical opinion, Mr. Chakotay's prognosis is quite...uncertain. It may be best to make your long-term plans, regardless of whether the Vedek---"

"No!" Tom interrupted fiercely as he leapt up, the liquid sloshing in his glass. "Things are looking up—they are." His arm swung wide. "Look how much we've accomplished in just a few days. I mean, I couldn't believe how the Dorvans pitched in with Sisko's team. Together they put up this building, and installed all of the holo-emitters, freshers, replicators, and recyclers so we don't have to do any digging for pipes and all. The generators can easily handle the load of feeding and housing everyone—not to mention all the communications equipment and your lab."

The Doctor noted an edge of hysteria in the declaration, and tried to lighten the atmosphere. "And myself, though I'm also immensely grateful for the freedom of this portable emitter." The hologram's hand rested with a kind of reverence on the device at his waist. The unit looked like a Kirk-era medical kit, a small black case complete with a virtual strap crossing his chest to the opposite shoulder. "Your engineers are...unusual, but most impressive."

Tom allowed the doctor's statements to divert him from his emotional outburst. He gripped his glass in both hands, calming himself as he wandered over to Chakotay's...chamber. He frowned as he realized how close he'd come to thinking coffin. He stretched out a hand and pressed it to the clear canopy, wishing he could wake the man within. It had been so long, too long since he'd seen Chakotay's deep brown eyes gazing into his. He looked up at the hologram, jaw firming. "Yes, they
are. So is the medical team—including you, Doc. And I have a very good feeling about this evening’s meeting."

The EMH felt out of his depth. Zimmerman had programmed him only to deal with patients, not their families and the emotional roller coaster of hope and constant disappointment. He rose and crossed to the unit as well, fussing with the settings and reviewing the sensor readings that hadn't changed since the stasis chamber had been transferred from Kassidy Yates' freighter.

After a moment he looked at Chakotay, then Tom. "I understand your...sentiments and I would never discount the benefits of optimism, but I believe you should remember that this could be another dead end. The formula for an antitoxin has eluded the best minds of the Federation, not to mention my own program containing the essence of the Empire's knowledge." He looked once more at his patient, wondering if he would ever see him conscious. He was surprised how much he wanted to meet Chakotay. How much he wanted to see him alive and well.

Tom's fingers curled into a fist. "But Vedek Bariel—"

"Could be bringing a cure. Or at least more information than the hints and rumors Mr. Sisko has unearthed," the Doc conceded. "But as a scientist I have to warn you not to leap to conclusions."

"I suppose you're right," Tom said dejectedly.

Watching Tom's shoulders slump caused a strange, sympathetic lurch in the hologram's algorithms. As the Doc looked once more at Chakotay, his face creased into a new expression: regret. "It seems a real possibility I will fail my very first patient."

Tom offered a wan smile, the best he could do at the moment. The high generated by Bariel's message had yielded to depression caused by the hologram's reminder of how hopeless the situation really was at present. "You're doing your best, Doc. That's all we can ask. I don't think Chakotay will hold it against you."

The EMH looked up, surprised. He offered a tentative smile, his first. "Thank you." He straightened his shoulders and his jacket, his determination renewed. "I believe I would prefer to confirm that with Admiral Chakotay himself, however. I'd best review my notes for the meeting." He briskly crossed to the lab area.

The EMH's lift in attitude caused Tom's own optimism to rally. He stood tall and once more patted the chamber. "Soon, Chakotay. Soon."

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The building—warehouse, really—that had been set up a good distance from the remains of Trebus had a large conference room with walls made up of comm screens. Everyone was in on this meeting, and anxiously awaiting Vedek Bariel's arrival. Desperate for some good news after so many dashed hopes. Conversations speculated on why the Bajoran needed to come to Trebus instead of simply comming from his temple. Conversations speculated on why the Bajoran needed to come to Trebus instead of simply comming from his temple.

On one screen Geordi, Kathryn, and Mark Johnson sat with Jadzia, Keiko, and Kate. On another, Tasha, Will, and Deanna waited in the Enterprise's conference room. A third showed Jake Sisko, who looked delighted to be introduced to Kassidy by his father. Unfamiliar figures in the background of Jake's screen were his FNN friends, invited to sit in for the first time—but still under the veil of secrecy. Reg and Marla were conferring with B'Elanna and Harry via another comm panel.

Tom watched the Doc chatting with his scientific counterparts on Earth. He smiled as his gaze
shifted to Kathryn—he'd already teased her about the new man in her life. But Mark Johnson looked like a keeper, so Tom had wished the couple well.

After a moment he let his eyes drift over the others, noting the closeness between Sisko and the feisty transport captain, seeing Harry's arm move of its own accord to encircle B'Elanna's waist. Then Anthwara, Rosera, and Lakanta caught his eye as they entered. Tom was glad Tem and Greg Ayala's wife had taken all the children to Solon for a visit. He didn't know how long this conference would last. But he fervently prayed the bubble of hope that had once more formed in his chest was a good omen.

The door opened again and Greg Ayala appeared. Tom quickly called for everyone's attention and they hurried to their seats.

Following the ex-officer was a tall Bajoran man with a gentle smile. Tom approached, holding out his hand. "Vedek Bariel?"

"Yes, and you must be Tom Paris." Bariel returned the handshake warmly. "Kai Opaka sends her respects."

"And some guests," Kira Nerys smoothly inserted with a grin and nod as she slid into the room. "Just for the record, I'm also here in an official capacity, as head of the Bajoran security forces."

Sisko raised a brow. "Then shouldn't you be back on Bajor, coordinating with Odo and trying to ferret out our would-be poisoner?"

"Perhaps, but if we can find a cure to go along with the preventive concoction the brainy ladies whipped up---" Kira offered the trio of scientists on the screen a jaunty salute. "I'd sleep a lot easier."

"Then we should get this meeting started and see if that can be accomplished," Tom said, waving the newcomers to the open seats. He was surprised when Bariel remained standing.

"As Kai Opaka warned Mr. Paris, the Admiral's fate does not rest in Bajoran hands," Bariel said. "But she did ask someone who she believed could help, and they have come to...discuss the situation." He nodded to Kira, who tapped her commbadge in a specific sequence.

There were gasps around the room and around the Quadrant as two figures shimmered into existence. One was clearly a strongly built Cardassian male, the other a petite woman whose delicate features blended Cardassian and Bajoran heritages.

The man bowed to the company. "Good evening. I am Elim Garak, Legate of Cardassia."

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Tom's frozen shock began to thaw as he witnessed the warmth of the smile the alien directed to his companion as he took her hand and drew her forth.

Garak returned the encouraging squeeze of the fingers in his. "And this is Ziyal, the Chief Minister and my wife." He kissed her hand before tucking it in the crook of his arm as they faced the array of shocked strangers.

Deanna responded first. She could see the expressions on all the other faces even if she was too far away to read their emotions. "Legate, Minister, thank you for traveling to Dorvan. May I ask how you know Kai Opaka?"

Tom's manners kicked in and he waved the strangers to seats as Ziyal answered. "As I'm sure you've
already guessed, I'm the connection between Cardassia and Bajor."

She settled into her chair, grateful to feel Garak's hand grip hers encouragingly under the table. "My father is—was Gul Dukat," she said bluntly as she watched her audience absorb another shock. "My mother a Bajoran diplomat's daughter who visited Cardassia many years ago and fell in love with a dashing alien officer."

Ziyal reached for the glass of water in front of her and took a fortifying sip. Then she continued, "I was raised on Bajor, as my mother wanted to keep me with her. But when the war with the Dominion began, my father begged me to come to Cardassia to stay with him. He believed I would be safer there. Kai Opaka, an old friend of the family, arranged my transport."

She shrugged gracefully. "I'm not sure how much danger I was actually in, but I was glad for the chance to learn more about my father's people. And of course, to meet the man who would become my husband." She smiled at Garak.

"Please rest assured that we won't hold your father's military actions against you," Kathryn said diplomatically as she leaned forward a little.

"I'm glad to hear that," Garak replied. "I would also like to say that we, in turn, recognize and appreciate how much restraint the Imperial forces showed in the aftermath of the Dominion's defeat. Our cities and infrastructures are for the most part intact, our people unmolested. I'm well aware that did not have to be the case. Victors are not always so considerate of conquered peoples."

"You can thank Admiral Chakotay for that," Will said. "He issued very strict orders about the Fleet's behavior before that last battle." He shrugged. "His influence was still strong enough even after he was gone to counter the new Emperor's...less civilized plans."

Garak nodded. "I suspected as much." He refrained from besmirching Julian Bashir Picard's character. That cretin's brief reign was best forgotten. He released Ziyal's hand with a last squeeze and folded his own on the table. "Now, I must ask what information impoverished Cardassia could possibly have to interest people who have access to the vast resources of the Federation."

"First," Jake piped up, "You both have to promise not to reveal anything you learn in this meeting to anyone else."

The others nodded and murmured approval of Jake's reminder. Bariel motioned for attention and announced, "Kai Opaka stressed the importance of the secrecy of these discussions in her initial contact, and both your guests have already agreed."

"That's good to hear," Tom said. "Please convey our thanks to the Kai." He turned to Garak and Ziyal. "We're all aware of the group of Cardassian spies and assassins known as the Obsidian Order. We'd like information about—more specifically antidotes to—their poisons."

Tom acknowledged the intelligence and shrewdness in Garak's eyes and suspected that the Legate was already starting to connect the dots. He wondered at Garak's history and how much he knew about the covert cabal on his home planet.

Garak tilted his head, hiding the chill that shivered through him at the mention of the Order. He himself had once been part of their ranks, trained in their dastardly arts by his own father, Gul Evek.

Ironically, it was Ziyal who'd freed him from the Order's dark grip. When she arrived on Cardassia Prime he'd been assigned as her bodyguard, but in reality he was supposed to keep an eye on her activities and be ready to assassinate her if the Obsidian Order deemed her death politically
expedient.

For the first time in his long career he'd felt reluctance, even doubt. Ziyal was refreshingly honest in her ideals, and in her desire to stop the Dominion's exploitation of Cardassians and the twisting of their culture.

When Garak had received the orders from the Founders to murder Ziyal, he defected. Instead of killing her he'd taken her into hiding and used all of his hard-earned skills and experience to keep them both safe.

It was a measure of Ziyal's strength of character that she adapted so well during their time on the run, keeping up with Garak without complaint. She also managed to get him to share with her the truth of his own past.

Garak had expected her to turn from him in disgust when she knew the whole sordid story. Instead, she'd offered him her love and challenged him to use his many talents to benefit their people.

Inspired by his own burgeoning feelings for Ziyal, Garak had done just that. When the Dominion fell he stepped into the breach, becoming a leader for a new and honorable Cardassia. He'd been offered the position of Legate, Ziyal at his side every step of the way as Chief Minister.

Now he had a chance to forge a more prosperous future for his planet by aiding the newly minted Federation. But he had to strike a delicate balance between what he gave, what he asked for, and what he revealed about himself.

"It is an unavoidable and unfortunate truth that Cardassian poisons have a reputation for...efficiency. I have gleaned some small knowledge of such substances in my travels." Garak's eyes ranged around the table and across the screens. "Do you have a particular toxin in mind?"

The EMH answered him. "The poison is derived from a plant species native to your planet and previously believed extinct. It acts to cause intense pain and overstimulation of the neural system, then attacks the muscles and organs to cause debilitation and eventually death."

Garak's face creased in sympathy as he listened. "I take it from your description that you've observed the effects firsthand."

Kate leaned forward to confirm his statement. "Unfortunately, yes. A human male, approximately 34 years old, has fallen victim to this particular substance. He is currently in stasis, awaiting an antidote."

Garak took a breath, then looked around once more. "And what is that cure worth to you?"

"Are you saying there *is* one?" Sisko regarded the Cardassian through slitted eyes.

"Oh yes, there is, but it is not an easy or particularly reliable course of treatment." Garak's face was solemn as he said, "And I mean this as no insult, but I can assure you the doctors of the Federation are not equipped with a mindset that will ever allow them to discover it."

"So you're going to blackmail us? For what, latinum to line your pockets you slimy---" Tasha's furious outburst was cut off by the darkening of the comm screen and the sudden grip of her CO's hand around her wrist. She turned to Will to protest, "Sir, he's---"

"Doing what everyone does, making a deal. One that you're going to ruin if you insult those two. For stars' sake, Tasha, he's the Legate of Cardassia!"
Tasha sat back and freed her arm to run both hands through her short hair. A sigh exploded from her. "I'm sorry, Will, it's just so damn frustrating to be so close. He knows the antidote---I can taste it."

"Me too," Will said with a commiserating look. "But just cool it, OK?"

"Yes, sir." Tasha gave him a rueful glance. "You want to reconsider that promotion?"

"No, *Commander*. At least, not yet," Will said with a chuckle and turned the screen back on.

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"These terms seem reasonable," Geordi said, looking up from the padd in his hand. "I believe, Legate, that the Council can seriously consider your request."

"I'm glad you think so, but I need more than 'consideration'," Garak said firmly. "This antidote you seek is the only leverage I have to gain the needed materials to ensure my planet's self-sufficiency. I'm sorry, my dear Councilor, but I cannot give that up for a mere promise that your colleagues will discuss Cardassia's situation."

"We are in the midst of rebuilding our entire government, we can't simply snap our fingers and meet your demands." Kathryn held on to the edges of her temper as her patience began to fray.

Garak rose. "You've expressed your interest and I've named my price. Do contact me when it's met."

Tom stood so quickly his chair fell behind him with a thunk. "You can't do this! Just walk away and leave us hanging. Please, give us the information."

"Mr. Paris," Garak began, then sighed. "I recognize your wish to see your---colleague?---well again, but---"

"Elim, wait." Ziyal had risen as well, her eyes on the human's distraught face. She approached Tom and laid one hand on his arm in a gesture of comfort. "May I ask, who is he and how was he poisoned?"

"Admiral Chakotay," Tom replied, his voice rough. "He was poisoned by the Emperor before their bout."

Ziyal nodded. "We saw the footage on Cardassia." She tipped her head to one side. "He means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

Tom just nodded, his eyes silently pleading.

Ziyal smiled and nodded in return, then shifted to face Garak. "I think we should give him the information he seeks."

Garak stood to protest, "But my love, we need---"

"He'll make sure that our people get what they need, I'm certain of it." She smiled and raised a hand to her husband's face. "Please, trust him."

Garak sighed and closed his eyes a moment, admitting defeat. "Very well."

"I'll guarantee it also." The soft voice from the comm screen caused everyone to turn. Noah Lessing sat up straighter as he declared, "I owe the Admiral a lot, and I want him to be well. So I'll pitch in to meet your price if the Federation government doesn't."
"Me too," piped up Celes Tal. "And I'm sure all of Bajor will back me up."

"I believe you're right," murmured Bariel with a smile at his fellow Bajoran.

"Dorvan will also pledge resources to meet Cardassia's needs." Anthwara said stiffly as his kin nodded.

"Then it's settled," Tom said firmly. "Please, tell me."

Tom picked up his chair as Garak and Ziyal returned to their seats.

Garak folded his hands once more. "You must understand, the Obsidian Order was not interested in the welfare of their experiment's victims when they discovered a protocol to reverse the effects of that particular poison."

He grimaced. "In point of fact, it was an accident. They were trying to make the toxin even more potent, but the substance the scientists used instead counteracted it."

"So what do we need to do to clear Chakotay's system?" B'Elanna's hand unconsciously reached for Harry's as she spoke.

Garak glanced at the young woman. "Poison him again."

The EMH crossed to the side of Chakotay's stasis chamber, hyposprays in hand. "I must repeat my protest of this decision."

"I heard you the first time, Doc. Hell, I heard everyone the other five times as well." Tom sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "But you saw what happened in the simulations."

"The second, insect-derived poison bound the plant toxin so it could be removed with a specially modified tricorder and transporter unit." Harry snapped out the answer like a status report from his position by the console they'd rolled across the room for the procedure.

"No wonder our people never came up with it," Greg mused from the floor, where he was adjusting connectors. "Their first priority is to do no harm."

"Cardassian doctors do have their own version of the Hippocratic Oath," Ziyal said from the window seat.

"But the Obsidian Order never made its scientists adhere to it," Garak finished grimly. He moved to Tom's side. "I must ask again, young Paris, that you consider this action carefully. In order to extract all of the first poison, you must supersaturate with the second. And only after the first toxin is completely removed can you administer the antidote to the second poison."

"But at least that second one isn't fatal," B'Elanna pointed out. "It was mainly used for torture."

"And you will administer the antidote as soon as possible." Rosera's voice rose at the end, a request for confirmation.

"Of course," the hologram huffed. "I'm a doctor, not a sadist."

"Even so, the Admiral will have to deal with the cumulative effects of both poisonings: weakness, pain, possibly paralysis. And there's no telling how bad the symptoms will be, or how long until a full recovery---or even *if* he can make a full recovery. This treatment protocol was tested on
Cardassians, not fragile humans." Garak looked down at the unconscious figure. "It may be kinder to let him die in his sleep."

"It's your decision Tom Paris, chosen of Chakotay." Anthwara's expression was neutral, offering neither encouragement nor censure. "Do we try this method, or wait to see if your Federation friends can bring Chakotay back to life?"

For one wild moment Tom wanted to run from the room. He keenly felt the weight of this responsibility for the life, health, and future of the man he loved. He stared at Chakotay's face, wondering what Chakotay would bid him do.

As he struggled to control his emotions and confirm his decision, Tom suddenly felt a breeze from the window caress his cheek. In the back of his mind there was the echo of a hawk's cry. Tom closed his eyes a moment, reaching. When he opened them once more his expression was at peace. "Do it, Doc."

The EMH looked to his assistants, who nodded their readiness. He stepped up and turned off the stasis chamber. The canopy slid back with a click.

A soft hiss marked the moment the second Cardassian poison entered Chakotay's bloodstream. The EMH moved to the new console. "The binding process has begun."

Tom swallowed. "So now we wait."
Chapter 19

Chakotay opened his eyes.

The world was gray.

A wasteland of ash stretched to the horizon in every direction. What had once been a forest glen, shadowed and overgrown, now lay naked and exposed to the overcast sky. The carcasses of burned trees hunched under their coatings of soot, shriveled, blackened and broken. He could smell the lingering taint of smoke in the air.

The silent desolation struck him to the soul. He sank down into a crouch, his arms wrapping around himself in a vain attempt at self-comfort.

As Chakotay silently struggled to comprehend the changes to his surroundings, he noticed the sleek form of his spirit guide detach from the ravaged landscape.

The she-wolf approached to sit in front of him. They stared at each other, neither breaking the silence.

Chakotay's emotions rose up to strangle his breathing. He choked out, "What have I done?"

/What was necessary./

"No!" The denial was ripped from him as he surged to his feet. "No, this didn't have to happen." His vision blurred with tears as he stared, unseeing, at what he had wrought. "This is all my fault. My pride, my arrogance destroyed everything." His voice sank to a whisper. "Everyone."

/Why do you say this?/ The she-wolf tilted her head, concern in her eyes as she regarded Chakotay.

"All I had to do was take his hand." Chakotay stared down at his opened palm, speaking more to himself than to her. "Jean-Luc Picard was dead. Julian Bashir Picard his murderer, making himself the heir to the Imperial throne. And the son wanted me to serve him as I had the father."

His voice roughened with self-loathing. "But no, I knew better. I was too good to take Julian's offer. I was determined to bring him to justice. I was going to fulfill Jean-Luc's final request, to restore the Federation." His hands clenched into fists. "Instead I brought death to the ones I loved."

/No, Chakotay, you cannot blame yourself./

"How can I not, sister? How can I not." Chakotay sighed, a world of loss in the sound. "Look around us: They aren't even here to greet me on the Other Side."

His shoulders slumped, his expression crumpled, reflecting his despair. "I thought we would finally be together again," he whispered.

/Peace, youngster. There are things you do not know./ She caught his anguished eyes, held them. /You look at the path not traveled and conclude you made the wrong decision. But believe me, if you had not acted as you did, this world would now be overwhelmed by darkness./

"Instead it's dead. How is that any better?" Chakotay demanded.

/It isn't dead. And neither are you./
He blinked. "What?"

/You still live, Chakotay. That is why your people aren't here to meet you./ Her gaze filled with compassion. /They knew if you held them in your arms again you would never leave this place. And you must return to the land of the living./

"To what purpose? I've died twice already, or close enough." Chakotay sank to his knees before the she-wolf. "I'm so tired."

She moved closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her, laying his cheek against her fur. "So tired," he whispered.

/I know. It's time to let others carry the burdens for a while./ After a moment she drew back, turned and started to walk away. She paused, sending a meaningful glance at her charge.

Chakotay shrugged and stood to fall into step behind her, his feet dragging in the ash.

Eventually the sound of water reached them as they descended a gentle slope to a stream. It ran clear and swift along the rocks, a bright ribbon winding through the fields of gray.

Man and wolf reached the bank. She stopped and scraped at the ground with her paw. /Look, Chakotay./

In the patch she had cleared tiny green shoots could be seen. They were slowly but surely making their way to the surface. A sudden break in the clouds bathed them in golden warmth.

The wolf raised her head. /It will take time, but the healing has begun. This place will never be the same, Chakotay. The universe has changed. But nature is beautiful whatever form it takes./

A hawk's cry startled them both. They looked up to see it, wings spread to embrace the sky as it glided above them. Their eyes followed the bird's path along the stream.

Further down the water two squirrels chased each other, dashing up the burned trunks and scampering through the ash.

On the opposite bank a vixen sat, staring at Chakotay with wise dark eyes. Surprisingly, a butterfly rested without fear on the sleek red fur between the fox's black-tipped ears. The brightly-hued wings opened and closed, then the butterfly flitted up, dancing around the fox's head. The vixen stood to follow her companion away from them, across another field. They disappeared, but the other animals stayed.

The clouds parted further, showing a widening streak of blue and finally the sun itself.

/Those who have departed give their blessing to you, brother./ The spirit guide pressed herself into Chakotay's body in a gesture of comfort and support. /As do I. Your path is not clear to me, but know that you will never walk it alone./

She looked at him gravely. /Remember, you are never alone./

*****************************************************************************

"Ouch!"

"Hey, Fleeter, if you can't take the beat---" B'Elanna crowed.

"Get out of the arena," Harry finished with a grimace as he rubbed his shoulder. "I can take it, but I
B'Elanna lifted her staff to point out the large cushions on each end. It was like fighting with a giant cotton swab. "It *is* a practice match. If I'd hit you with a plain staff you'd be asking the Doc for a bone-knitter right about now." The concern in her eyes belied her teasing tone. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Harry picked up on his sparring partner's anxiety and smiled. "Yep, just startled. You really know how to get under my guard." And under my skin was thought but not spoken. He shrugged. "I guess I should be grateful I never ended up a gladiator, huh?"

"You're not so bad," B'Elanna said consolingly. "I trained Sisko's people and you'd have definitely passed the test."

"That's good to hear." Harry's puff of breath ruffled his bangs. "You know, if you ever get tired of engineering you could probably get a job at the Academy whipping cadets into shape."

"Actually, Sisko's offered me a position at *his* academy for juvenile offenders." B'Elanna shrugged. "I'd be whipping at-risk kids into shape, as well as teaching them engineering skills."

"Really." Harry settled back on his heels. This was news. "Don't you enjoy working for Reg and Marla?"

"That's the best part. I could still do research projects for them." She glanced at Harry from the corner of her eye. Her voice was carefully neutral. "Sisko's going to do some more terraforming on the planetoid to diversify the flora and fauna. He's hoping to attract some businesses and farmers, have a real community instead of just the compound."

"It sounds...very nice," Harry said.

"Does it?" B'Elanna faced him fully, her heart beating with a mixture of hope and fear. "I was thinking it might be a good place to make a fresh start, or even to commute from Dorvan." She took a deep breath and waited.

Harry ran his fingers along his staff, considering his words. "I'm assigned here until Chakotay is well. After that...I was hoping to get a posting on DS9."

B'Elanna's heart leapt as hope gained a stronger hold, but she was still uncertain. "Are you sure that's what you want, Harry? You joined the Fleet to serve on starships, not a space station stuck in one place. And it's awfully far from your folks."

Harry smiled and lifted one hand to cup B'Elanna's cheek. "Haven't you figured it out yet? The only stars I'd miss are the ones in your eyes. Wherever you are is where I want to be."

He grinned. "I'm actually hoping to persuade Admiral Riker and the Federation Council that we should take advantage of Sisko's plan and try evaluating his kids for entrance into the Academy. By providing some Fleet personnel to teach protocols and procedures."

He glanced down shyly. "I was hoping you might like to get a Fleet certification yourself, then maybe we could sail among the stars together for a while."

B'Elanna's grin was fierce as she yanked Harry into her arms, both of their staffs flying. But her expression softened as she tilted her face up to his. "I...I really do like you, Harry Kim."
Harry smiled. "And I really like you, my B'El."

Neither of them said anything else for a while.

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Gerron Tem frowned and wondered if he should have gone back to Bajor. Five kids were hard enough to handle on a good day, but this quintet was wound up waiting for news about the Admiral.

"No, there's been no word. I'm sure someone will let us know the moment Chakotay's condition changes." He kept his voice even as he answered Koral. It seemed every few minutes one of them was asking the same questions over and over.

The Bajoran dearly wished Greg Ayala's wife was here to help him. He'd met Sue Nicoletti days before, and gotten to know her yesterday during their impromptu tour of Solon. Between them they'd managed to keep the children occupied and out of trouble for most of the visit.

But Sue was spending some time with her husband, and had left their sons, Andrei and Leo, in Tem's care. Fortunately all of the kids were around the same age and got along. If they hadn't Tem would have been pulling his hair out. Instead he just asked the prophets for patience and suggested, "Why don't we go for a walk? Maybe toss a ball or something."

Koral looked uncertain. "What if Uncle Chakotay wakes up when we're gone?"

Tem patted the girl's shoulder. "Tom will comm us, so you don't have to worry about missing anything."

"Do you think he'll recognize us? When we saw him last time we weren't as big as we are now." The whisper was Jelene's as she shyly regarded him through her long lashes.

He smiled at the hesitant question. "I'm sure he'll remember you. Even if he hadn't been to Dorvan in years, Harry Kim told me that the Admiral talked with his wife as often as possible. And he had a lot of holopics in his office; I'm sure at least one of them was yours."

Andrei, who was nine and looked like a miniature Greg, shrugged. "Besides, even if he doesn't recognize you, he'll know who you are as soon as you tell him your names."

Leo nodded sagely. The seven-year-old had his mother's large eyes and sweet smile. "Andrei's right. I've never heard of anyone else with names like yours. My dad used to say the Admiral never forgot anyone who worked for him, so it figures he'd remember his family even better."

Lucien jumped up and moved to the door. "My dad said we'd be a family, so there's nothing to worry about. He'll make sure everything turns out OK." He triggered the panel. "Race you to the big tree!" He dashed out the door.

The other kids yelled a protest and took off, hot on his heels.

Tem brought up the rear, smiling at the resilience of the young. Maybe he would stick around for a while.

***************

"So Quark's inquisitive stranger hasn't shown himself---or herself or itself?" Irritation drew Kira's brows together as she drummed her fingers on the desk.
"Not so far. If it's any consolation, I think they've had a lot of experience avoiding detection." Odo leaned forward, appearing larger in the comm screen. "Has your staff come up with anything?"

"No." Kira frowned. "The most likely targets are the candidates for Chief Minister, of course. Their opinions on joining the Federation could sway public opinion across the planet, so whoever wins this election all but decides Bajor's fate."

She sighed. "We've increased our security around them, but there's no guarantee our would-be assassin won't slip through."

"I'm pretty sure the Kai will dismiss her guards." Bariel's eyes reflected his worry for his mentor, though his voice was as serene as ever.

"Don't tell me that," Kira groaned, bending her head and sinking her hands into her short hair. "It's hard enough keeping track of them *with* their cooperation. I don't need a rogue priestess deciding to go it alone."

The vedek and the constable shared a small commiserating smile. Bariel said, "I'll talk to the Kai. Perhaps if I frame it as in Bajor's best interest..."

"And I can scan the station for the toxin, thanks to the modified sensor frequencies from Mr. Paris, and pass the information on to your staff to begin their own search on the planet," Odo offered.

"Anything you can do, I'd appreciate it." With a muffled groan Kira lifted her head. "I need to get back to my post."

"How long are you staying on Dorvan?" Odo asked.

"Garak and Ziyal wanted to wait until Chakotay wakened, but *their* people are also starting to make noises about their absence." Kira replied with a shrug. "If there's no change by this evening, we're going to head out."

"Then I hope you hear something soon," Odo said as he signed off.

"As do we all," Bariel echoed.

***************

Tom paced the waiting room, cursing its existence. As soon as the procedure had been completed last night, the Doc had transferred Chakotay from the stasis chamber to a holographic biobed. Then shooed them all away, saying he would contact them when Chakotay was conscious.

After a restless night Tom had risen to find that Chakotay's "room" had been cut in half. He was barred from the inner sanctum, no matter how much he protested. The hologram was refusing to admit anyone to see Chakotay. The Doc wanted to get an idea of the condition his patient was in before subjecting him to his "ravening horde" of well-wishers.

So Tom had spent a pretty rough morning pacing the waiting room, which still had half of the long window seat. He constantly returned to the opening, needing to smell the air and look out on the grass and flowers. It brought him some small measure of peace, and patience.

His friends, both familiar and new, were taking turns sitting with him. Right now Ziyal and Garak were curled up on a sofa together, reading padds and discussing Cardassian business. Greg and Sue were spending a quiet morning by themselves, B'Elanna and Harry a more active one in a holographic gym. Tom was kind of glad the half-Klingon was gone---her impatience had sparked his
own.

Sisko and Kassidy were in charge of answering the comms from Earth and elsewhere, and Tem had taken the kids in hand. Tom wondered what the Dorvans were up to...they were conspicuous in their absence.

Suddenly the air was shattered by a hoarse scream.

Chakotay was awake.

************************************************************

Tom stared into the cup clenched between his hands and waited for the briefing to begin. He was desperate for some explanation of Chakotay's condition. After hearing his beloved's voice he'd started pounding on the door, but the Doc had only opened it briefly with a terse command for quiet before disappearing once more. Tom didn't even know whether he no longer heard Chakotay screaming because he'd stopped, or because the Doc had soundproofed the room. Tom had tried to adjust the holographic settings, but found he'd been locked out---in fact, everyone had been.

He only learned that Kate had been called for a consultation when the Doc had finally stepped out of Chakotay's room and sealed the door behind him. The hologram immediately headed for this small office, clutching a padd, his face set into grim lines.

Garak was also been invited for the conference call with Dr. Pulaski. The surprisingly kind Cardassian had pulled Tom along, then pushed him into a seat and shoved a mug into his hands.

Tom sipped. Hot, strong, sweet tea with a dash of brandy. The traditional home remedy for shock. His whole body tensed in dread.

Kate's face appeared on the comm screen, her blue eyes hard to read. "Have you verified your findings, Doctor?"

"Yes, there's no question about the Admiral's current condition. Nothing *but* questions about his treatment and prognosis." The EMH glanced down at his report.

After a moment he turned his chair to include Garak and Tom in the discussion. "As you are aware, Mr. Chakotay's system has been cleared of the original plant toxin using Mr. Garak's suggested method. The insect-derived poison has also been neutralized and removed."

The hologram's gaze was bleak as he looked down at his padd. Although he'd been programmed with clinical detachment, he'd found it eroding the longer he remained among these people. He certainly wished for it back now. "There was no sure way to predict the effect of the original poisoning---or the treatment---on the patient. We simply had to wait for him to wake. He did."

Kate took over the recitation, her eyes sad, her mouth thinned in sympathy. "Chakotay's neurological system has been hyperstimulated, to the point where even the brush of cloth or the whisper of a breeze against his skin is painful."

She heard Tom's gasp but didn't look at him as she forced herself to continue. "In addition, he has either suffered total paralysis or a lack of voluntary command over most of his body." Her frown deepened. "At waking, he had control of neither his bladder nor his bowels."

The Doctor took over again at that. He looked straight at Tom. "However, the Admiral did manage to communicate his awareness of the situation, and the possible course of treatments. He also made his wishes in this matter known."
Tom shook himself out of his fog of despair. "What are you saying?"

The Doc's voice was surprisingly gentle. "We can't risk compromising the free flow of signals across the nerve pathways. Therefore, we cannot offer the Admiral any pain blockers or other types of stimulus suppressants."

"You mean he's got no choice but to be wracked with pain?" Tom's voice grew louder with each word as the horror of it washed over him in waves.

Garak's cool hand lightly gripped Tom's arm. "If human response is anything like Cardassian, you risk deadening the nerves entirely. Your physician is correct in his assessment. The only thing he could do is sedate the Admiral, which is also not recommended."

The hologram waited for Tom to come to grips with the situation before he continued. "In addition, because everything is so very painful to experience, Chakotay's chances of regaining mobility and his fine motor skills at this point are minimal at best. That is assuming, of course, that he is simply experiencing a correctable lack of ability rather than genuine paralysis."

Tom barely managed to ask, "Then what are you going to do?"

The Doc glanced at Kate, who nodded, and at Garak, whose light eyes were soft with sympathy and regret. "I'm sorry, Tom, but you are no longer privy to that information."

"What?!" Tom practically launched himself over the desk. He braced his arms against the solid surface, leaning forward to shout in the doctor's face, "What the hell are you talking about? The Dorvans said *all* decisions were mine."

"Yes, until Chakotay could speak for himself." The Doc's eyes relayed his own dismay at the situation. "Chakotay has invoked doctor-patient confidentiality and asked that I convey his appreciation for your efforts on his behalf. He also asked that you leave Dorvan at the earliest opportunity. In fact, everyone is to depart, 'return to their own lives and leave him in peace'."

"Chakotay can't mean that," Tom protested, but the ache in his heart told him the words were true. His chin tilted. "I'm not going anywhere, and neither is anyone else."

"The Admiral has already submitted a request with the planetary council. If they agree to revoke your welcome, you will be forced to vacate," the EMH admitted.

"I don't understand," Tom said, his voice rough with emotion. "How can Chakotay get any better if we're not here to help him?" He caught the flash of a secret in the Doc's black eyes. The hair on the back of his neck rose. "What exactly are Chakotay's plans?"

"Please believe me, I will do everything in my power to aid my patient, but at this time there's nothing more I can say." The Doc stood and nodded to Kate.

"I'll do as the Admiral has asked, and let you know the response," Dr. Pulaski said, then the comm screen went black.

As the hologram moved to exit, Garak hurried after him.

Tom sank back into his seat, his head buried in his hands. He couldn't believe after all their efforts, all their worry and wait, Chakotay wouldn't even see them. See *him*.

On some level he did understand. Chakotay was a strong man accustomed to being at the peak of his physical and mental capabilities. To be so helpless must be a torture to him.
Perhaps Chakotay didn't realize that Tom loved him, needed to see and touch, to reassure himself of Chakotay's very existence after so much time apart.

Tom lifted his head, the light of battle in his eyes.

Chakotay was going to have a visit from Tom whether he liked it or not.

***************

Blinking hurt.

So did breathing.

Chakotay stared at the ceiling, desperately trying to ignore the messages of pain his body was sending. The ache was constant, with sharper spikes of agony when he tried to move. Mostly unsuccessful attempts.

His limbs felt heavy, unnatural, as if he were mired in quicksand.

He closed his eyes, feeling his pulse thundering through his veins. Sweat poured from his trembling body as he struggled through another panic attack.

He was trapped, helpless, slowly sinking...or drowning....

Chakotay wrenched his mind away from the disturbing images with a gasp. He shuddered, and groaned at the resultant wave of pain.

It was hard not to curse his spirit guide for sending him back, but he felt he didn't have the right to complain. Perhaps, despite the she-wolf's words, he *was* being punished for failing his people. He knew he deserved it, but wasn't sure he could endure it.

The tear that slipped from one eye blazed a trail of fire against his skin as it slid along his temple to wet his hair.

The door sliding open drew his attention. The Doctor entered and immediately headed for the monitors. "Any change, Admiral?"

"It's just Chakotay, Doctor." Each word was torture on the nerves of his face, but he formed each one. It was the only part of his body he seemed to have some modicum of control over.

"Of course." The EMH moved to stand at the supine man's bedside. It bothered him more than he could say to see this powerful body so stiff and still. Even worse was the pain and despair shadowing the dark brown eyes. Another twinge of guilt made itself known. The Doc again wondered if he had done the right thing in using the Cardassian treatment. "I've contacted Dorvan's council, and Dr. Pulaski is relaying your other request as we speak."

"Thank you. For that...and for taking care of me." Chakotay paused. "I know you're not a nurse or orderly, but---"

"But you don't wish to distress anyone by letting them see you in this state. Frankly, I disagree with your position, but it is your choice." The EMH shrugged. "A good doctor should know his way around a bedpan; I just didn't think I would have the opportunity so early in my career."

Chakotay's lips quirked slightly at the tone. "You have an interesting bedside manner."

"You'll have to thank my programmer for that," the Doc said as he began briskly cleaning up his
patient. He used the softest materials and the lightest, quickest touch possible, not wanting to cause any more pain than necessary. He could sense the tightening of the muscles under his hands as Chakotay involuntarily tensed in his efforts to remain silent.

When the doctor was finally finished and recycling his materials, Chakotay picked up the thread of conversation again. "You're really a hologram?"

"Yes, a Mark One Emergency Medical hologram, designed by Dr. Lewis Zimmerman." The EMH returned to stand at the foot of Chakotay's bed. "You're my first patient. Perhaps you should consider sending a report to Jupiter Station."

"At the moment, the only thing I can say is that you wield a mean washcloth." Chakotay considered his physician. "Have you settled in OK?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," the Doc replied as he began straightening covers.

"Has the council given you any problems? Do you like your room---do you have a room? Is there any form of entertainment for you, or anything you need?" Chakotay saw the hologram still, then face him fully.

"I---You---It's very kind of you to ask." Chakotay's concern touched the Doctor. It made him feel...real. "I guess I could make use of a small space of my own. I've been reviewing the Emp---Federation's cultural database." He glanced shyly at his companion. "I've discovered an interest in the musical genre known as opera."

"Then you should definitely take some time for yourself...to explore it." Personally, Chakotay hoped he would be out of earshot if the Doc meant Klingon opera. He had more than enough pain to deal with without deliberately torturing his eardrums.

The comm sounded in the small room. The EMH moved over to a console and switched on the screen. "Does 'do not disturb' not translate to Cardassian?" he asked dryly as he saw Garak's face.

"Of course it does, Doctor," Garak smoothly answered. "I simply wished to let you know I'm ready."

The EMH's brows rose. He muted the sound and looked up at his patient. "Elim Garak is the man who provided your cure, such as it is. He wishes to speak with you."

"About?" Chakotay wasn't sure he had anything to say to the Cardassian. He'd listened to the report of his treatment. There wasn't any way for them to know he'd experience such severe side effects. He didn't blame Garak, but he also couldn't bring himself to thank the man.

"He wouldn't tell me, but he did request a private discussion." The Doc waited for Chakotay's decision.

Chakotay considered for a moment and decided to allow it. He had no ties to this stranger, so there would be no emotional distress at seeing him—or being seen by him. If nothing else, he'd be distracted from his physical discomforts for a while. "All right. But *only* him."

The Doc nodded and re-engaged the sound. After a brief chat he signed off and went to the door. When it opened, he exited and Garak entered.

***************

Tom made an inarticulate sound of frustration as he watched the panel slide shut behind Garak's
He glared at the Doc, whirled away and threw his body onto a couch and his head into his hands. So far all his determination had gotten him was a major case of frustration.

B’Elanna and Harry had obligingly tried to crack the codes locking Tom out of the computer system and the holographic controls, but their best efforts were for naught. The encryptions would take hours, maybe even days to break through.

When he'd contacted Kate Pulaski on his own she had been sympathetic, but as tight-lipped as her holographic counterpart.

Tom was simply grateful the kids were still outside. He didn't think he could hold it together if he had to face the twins beseeching him to let them see Chakotay.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Ziyal's concerned face. "Do you need anything?" she asked.

"Information," he snapped, then sighed and laid a hand over hers to squeeze gently. "Do you know what Garak wanted to see Chakotay about?"

The young woman's face creased in concern as she looked to the closed door. "No, all he said was he should have known, and that he had to accept responsibility for the consequences of his actions. He wouldn't reveal anything else...he just hugged me very tightly and commed the Doctor."

Tom's gut tightened. He didn't think things could get any worse.

He was wrong. Anthwara walked in the door and headed straight for him.

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The disgruntled Dorvan elder stood in front of the pale-skinned man who was Chakotay's chosen. Anthwara still couldn't believe it.

Admittedly, his kinsman had wed an off-worlder before, but Ro Laren had shared some common ground with her in-laws. A strong sense of family, of responsibility to the community and to the land. She was also deeply spiritual, honoring the Spirits of the tribes as well as her Bajoran Prophets.

She'd made a place for herself over the years of her marriage.

This blue-eyed, blond scion of Imperial power seemed alien to Anthwara, even if he was human. Thomas Eugene Paris had grown up surrounded by wealth, servants, technology. He seemed to contribute little to the Terran community beyond his good looks and glib tongue. How could he possibly become part of Dorvan? What did Chakotay see in the brash young man?

Anthwara sighed. In the end, it didn't matter if he understood. Only that he accept.

Yet he did find some clue to the bond between the two disparate men when Tom's face lifted to his. The shadows beneath the blue eyes spoke of sleepless hours spent worrying over Chakotay. The fire in their red-veined depths shouted his intent to do whatever it took to reach and keep his soulmate.

Tom Paris, strange as the notion was to Anthwara, truly loved Chakotay.

It was a place to start.

"The council has received a request from our kinsman Chakotay to have all of this..." He gestured at
their surroundings with one age-spotted hand. "And all of you removed from the planet. He wishes us to revoke your stewardship of Trebus, and of Trebus's survivors."

Tom stood slowly, a rage beginning to build inside him. He would *not* be kicked out of Chakotay's life. He opened his mouth to deliver a louder protest than anyone had heard since this all began.

He didn't get a chance to say a word.

Anthwara ignored the signs of the blond's temper and continued, "We have denied him. His desire to drive away all those who care for him is natural, given what he suffers. But there can be no healing without help, and hope."

The older man's voice dropped as he finished, "And love."

Tom's mouth---as well as the Doc's and Ziyal's---hung open in shock. They had been gearing up for a fight, not a confirmation of Tom's place at Chakotay's side.

Tom searched the wise dark eyes in astonishment, then hastily recovered. "Please, do you know if there's a way to get through to him? He won't see me, or any of his friends."

"Chakotay has always been contrary, and stubborn." Anthwara's wrinkles deepened as he frowned. "I'm sorry, young Paris, but there is no advice I can give you save that the answers lie in your own heart, not mine."

"I don't have any answers," Tom muttered, frustration evident. "Just confusion."

"Then perhaps you should seek another set of eyes to aid you in finding your path." Anthwara reached into the satchel he wore at his side and pulled out a padd and a small device. "Rosera asked me to give these to you. She thought you might be genuine in your wish to understand our culture."

He nodded in approval as long fingers reverently handled the items. "The device is called an akoonah, and it can take the place of the herbs from the Habak."

"You mean I can contact my spirit guide with it?" Tom asked, clutching the gifts. He could almost hear the hawk's cry.

"Yes. The instructions are on the padd." Anthwara wrapped his hand around a pale wrist, feeling the strength of the bones and tendons underneath their delicate covering. He held Tom's eyes. "You are part of us now."
Chapter 20

Kassidy and Sisko stopped abruptly just inside the entrance to the waiting room. A strange sight met their eyes: Tom sitting cross-legged on a cushion, eyes closed, hand resting on a small gold-and-black device resting on the floor. Surrounding him in rapt attention were the other adults.

Sisko sidled up to B'Elanna. "What's going on?" he whispered.

B'Elanna leaned back and quietly told him, "Chakotay woke up, and tried to get rid of us all. He won't see anyone—except Legate Garak and the Doc. The Cardie's still locked in there—Kahless knows what they're finding to chat about."

She paused a moment as if pondering the mystery, then continued, "Anthwara stopped by and told Tom that Chakotay was going to have to get used to having us around, because nobody's leaving unless they want to. He also gave Tom that little piece of Dorvan technology. I think he's trying to have a séance or something using it."

Sisko just grunted. Kassidy asked, "How long's he been like that?"

"I don't know." B'Elanna shrugged. "He was already zoned out when we got here, I'm not sure how long ago. I've kind of lost track of time today."

Kassidy noticed how the ex-gladiator had her fingers entwined with Harry's. She gave a mischievous smile and said, "The Lieutenant *is* rather distracting, isn't he?"

B'Elanna blushed, but held her head up proudly. "Yes, he is."

The three turned to watch Tom, wondering how long he'd be in his own world.

*************************************************************************************************

"Yo! Hawk, Brother, Hey You! I'm calling here!" Tom stood in the middle of the burned forest, arms akimbo as he shouted to the uncaring storm clouds.

/Rather rudely and loudly, I must say./

Tom whirled and spied the bird perched on the blackened branch of a nearby tree. He strode up to it and demanded, "I need your help—-I need some answers. Chakotay's awake but won't let us in to see him. Not his friends, or his family...or me."

He flushed at the mix of sulk and whine in his voice. He'd been pathetically eager for any little crumb of insight when he got here, but the tension of his real-life situation had combined with the wait he'd endured on the spirit plane to make him noticeably less reverent.

/Chakotay is not as he was./

"You think I care about that? I just want to talk to him, to see for myself his eyes are open and he's breathing on his own. Is that really too much to ask?" Tom complained, a rather unattractive put-upon expression twisting his features.

/Perhaps./

"What?!" Tom's eyes narrowed as he advanced upon the hawk. The spirit seemed unimpressed as Tom stood nose-to-beak and snapped, "Where do you get off saying something like that? I've been
busting my butt trying to keep Chakotay alive. Now he's finally safe---and he refuses to have anything to do with me. What kind of attitude is that?"

/One that you would do well to understand./

Something in his spirit guide's tone made Tom pause. As his anger faded, the soul-deep loneliness made itself known. "I just want to be with him."

Tom's whisper was a plea. His hands opened in a gesture of helplessness.

The absence of belligerence was acknowledged with a quick nod as the hawk hopped from the branch onto Tom's shoulder. He rubbed his head against Tom's temple, his mental voice soothing. /I know. You love him. But you do not see that love can take many forms./

"I don't understand," Tom admitted as he lifted a hand to stroke the bird's breast feathers.

/That's a good place to start, young one. There's hope for you yet./

Before Tom could reply, a low howl seemed to drift over the landscape, trailing sorrow in its wake. "What was that?"

/Chakotay's guide./ The hawk used its beak to point to a lone wolf silhouetted against the clouds at the top of a hill. /She mourns for all that is lost./

"Still? I mean, Trebus was destroyed months ago." Tom hoped his question didn't come across as disrespectful, but he was puzzled. Perhaps time worked differently here.

/Look about you, Tom Paris./

As Tom did he noticed the awful grayness of it all. The still silence, the ash coating everything, the sky full of clouds heavy with moisture. "Everything's suffocated."

/Yes. There has been little chance to grieve, or heal. The land still waits for the rain to mix the remains of what has gone before into the soil and the water and the air. When that happens, then life can truly begin anew./

"But what does that have to do with Chakotay and me?" Tom had never been good with allegories or metaphors. Give him a nice straightforward instruction manual any day.

If a bird could snort, the hawk did, a muffled blend of amusement and exasperation. /It means that there are things still unresolved, for both of you. If you refuse to acknowledge the past and the present, you risk your future./

"Oh, that was helpful." Tom struggled to keep his sarcasm on the mild side. "Any other nuggets of wisdom?"

/Only this, rude one: Sometimes you just have to punch your way through./

Tom was back in the waiting room. He got the feeling he'd been summarily booted off the spirit plane. He opened his eyes, his gaze automatically going to the door to Chakotay's room. The conversation with his guide whirled around his mind, confusing him further.

Suddenly the door opened and Garak appeared. Without thought Tom leapt up and barreled through his audience. "Computer, initiate lockout Paris Alpha Omega." When he reached the portal he pushed the Cardassian out of the way and dashed through.
He rested his back against the closed panel, panting, heart pounding. He murmured, "Sometimes you just have to punch your way through."

***************

Garak turned to the others, bemusement clear on his face. "I take it Mr. Paris has decided visiting hours are still open?"

"So it seems." The Doctor's irritation was plain. "I'd better get him out of---"

"No," Garak interrupted gently, shifting to block the hologram's progress. He tilted his head, speculation in his eyes. "Perhaps this is the perfect opportunity for them."

"Opportunity for what?" the EMH snapped. "My patient was very explicit in his preferences---"

"Which you yourself, Doctor, have admitted may be detrimental to his recovery," Bariel pointed out. "It's true you are taking excellent care of his body, but surely Chakotay's spirit also needs nurturing."

"And who better to provide that than Tom?" Ziyal asked.

"It's too late now, anyway." Harry was reading a nearby console. "The lockouts are back in place---and this time you're on the 'keep out' list, Doc."

"Paris must know a thing or two about computers himself," Sisko said with a raised brow. Then he grinned. "Sneaky little bastard, isn't he?"

The Doc stalked over to the panel and tried his override codes. The negative beeps confirmed Harry's assessment. He sighed. "At least Chakotay's condition is not a fragile one. He should be in no danger, despite the absence of monitoring."

He frowned. "But I still don't like it."

"Of course not." Kira shrugged. "But there's not much you can do about it, except wait."

"Pull up a chair and join the club, Doc," Greg offered. "I bet we're going to be here awhile."

"Actually, Ziyal and I are due back on Cardassia Prime," Garak said. During the conversation he'd drifted over to stand in her embrace.

"Are we truly finished here, Elim? I thought you believed you still had responsibilities to Chakotay." Ziyal's expression reflected her concern as she gazed at her husband.

"Chakotay has released me from them." The Cardassian's eyes held an echo of surprise. "He is a most remarkable man."

"Yes he is," Sisko murmured in agreement, then briskly walked to the center of the room and announced, "Kassidy and I are heading out as well."

"But you can't. We still don't know what will happen with the Admiral." Sue's protest was more disbelieving than angry.

"I'm sure that Chakotay doesn't want us to stand around, wringing our hands." Sisko smiled at the wide-eyed woman. "In fact, he so much as told us so. I have cargo that needs to be transported to my compound so renovations can begin."

Kassidy added, "Don't worry, We'll be back."
"We all will," Kira said firmly. She jumped up, eagerness in every line. She looked around. "If everyone's ready, we'll head out in five."

Bariel smiled at her energy. "I suppose I have no choice in the matter?"

"Of course not. The Kai would have my head if I left you here." Kira shook her own. "Besides, I need you to keep reminding her that the guards are just doing their jobs."

"We'll let you know what happens," B'Elanna promised as farewells were exchanged.

In a few minutes, only Greg, Sue, Harry, B'Elanna, and the Doc remained to keep vigil.

*************************************************************

Jadzia breezed into the apartment she shared with Keiko, her arms full of daffodils. "Hi honey I'm home," she called out as she sped through the rooms toward the kitchen. Once there she laid the blossoms on the counter and started opening cabinets, seeking a particular vase.

"Hi Jadzia," Keiko said, walking into the room to offer a welcoming hug and kiss.

Jadzia pulled back, framing her lover's face with her hands as she searched solemn dark eyes. "Hey, what's wrong?" she asked, her brows drawing together in concern.

"It's nothing, really." Keiko pulled back, then crouched to open the door to the corner storage space and pulled out just the one Jadzia wanted. "I guess I'm just feeling a little let down about Chakotay."

"I figured you'd gotten Kate's message when you skipped lunch." Jadzia took the water-filled vase from Keiko and began arranging the flowers. "You were reading his file again, weren't you?"

"Yes," Keiko admitted as she watched her lover and idly picked up a daffodil. She paused, her lips twisting in regret. "I just wish there was something more we could do. I keep thinking about him lying there, paralyzed and in pain."

The Trill nodded to herself; she'd suspected as much. "Keiko, that isn't anybody's fault except the Emperor's. We did the best we could for Chakotay. He's awake—he's *alive*. Now he's got to find his own way of dealing with the restrictions on that life."

She saw Keiko nod out of the corner of her eye. The movement was unconvincing to say the least. She laid down the rest of the blossoms and turned to gather the woman into her arms. Light eyes bore into dark. "Keiko, it's out of our hands. We've tried everything we could think of to improve his condition. Nothing's worked. It's time to let go and give someone else a chance to help."

"I know, I know, really," Keiko said, wrapping her hands around Jadzia's waist. "It's just that Kate's plan is such a long-shot."

"Not Kate's plan, Chakotay's," Jadzia reminded. "If he thinks this is the way to go then we just have to support him as best we can. It's out of our hands. We have to wish him well and move on."

Keiko smiled and expressed her thanks in a kiss. "I'll try to remember that. But I don't think I'll be completely successful until I find out if it works or not."

"You and me both," Jadzia conceded with a sigh. She released her companion and picked up a flower, gesturing for emphasis. "But we're not going to drive ourselves crazy with waiting." She bopped Keiko's nose with the daffodil. "Even if I have to distract you with sex."
Keiko laughed and swatted Jadzia with her own flower. "The sacrifices you make on my behalf."

"It is amazing, isn't it?" Jadzia winked, relieved. She knew from her symbiont's long life experience that whatever would happen, would happen.

There was nothing they could do now. Except hope.

***************

Megan and Jenny Delaney got their lunches from the replicators and turned to find a seat in Voyager's dining room. Seeing Dalby and Henley sitting with their heads together, the twins made a beeline for their table.

"OK, guys," Megan said as she slid into a chair, "What's the scoop?"

"Yeah," Jenny chimed in, "Cough it up."

Both bridge officers leaned back and focused on their meals. Mariah raised her brows. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh please, Mariah, don't even try playing innocent with us." Jenny shook her head. "Your wet-behind-the-ears crewmen may fall for that routine, but we know you, remember?"

Ken chuckled. "They've got you there."

"And we also know *you*, Ken. I bet you not only know who our mysterious passengers will be, but also why we're breaking Warp 9 on our way to pick them up." Megan nudged him with an elbow. "So give."

"All right, all right." Ken shifted to avoid the sharp jab. "But you've got to keep this quiet, understand?" His eyes were serious as he regarded his companions. "I know you love gossip, but don't spread this around. It's important."

"You have our word," Jenny promised, picking up on her friends' gravity. Megan nodded her agreement.

Ken looked to Mariah, who shrugged and leaned forward on her elbows. "Captain Cavit got a Priority message straight from Admiral Riker this morning. Apparently Admiral Chakotay's resurfaced, but in really bad shape."

Twin pairs of eyes opened wide. "Where is he?" Megan asked.

"What's wrong with him?" Jenny chimed in.

"We don't know." Ken took up the story. "But apparently one of his doctors on Earth put in a request for someone to come ASAP to Dorvan V. *Two people* agreed. Five seconds later, Joe Carey was ordering Captain Ransom to make all speed to a rendezvous with us."

Mariah shrugged. "And as soon as the passengers are transferred, we're zipping straight to Chakotay's home planet."

She frowned. "The Admiral must be pretty bad if we're burning dilithium like this."

"Any word on who these miracle workers are?" Megan propped her chin in her hand.

"Nope. But I'm sure we'll know soon enough." Ken glanced at his chronometer. "C'mon Henley,
we'd better get to the bridge. We should be in sensor range soon."

"Thanks for satisfying our curiosity," Jenny smiled at them, but her eyes were somber. "And don't worry, mum's the word."

****************

Wynn gritted her teeth and leaned against the rough stone wall of a nondescript alley, catching her breath. Her feet were sore, along with the rest of her aging bones.

She was being hunted.

Or, more accurately, the secret stash of Cardassian poison in her pocket was.

The call from Jaro Essa had come through a few hours ago. She'd known the situation had to be desperate if he was willing to risk comm traffic.

It was. Somehow Bajoran Security forces had managed to figure out a way to scan for the rare toxin. They were sweeping the main cities on the planet, trying to find the illegal substance---and its owner.

Wynn had been lucky: The searchers were limited to hand-held sensors. They had to be practically on top of the stuff for it to register.

So all she had to do was keep out of range, and find a way to circle back to her hiding place after she was sure it had been thoroughly swept by the investigative teams.

Wynn frowned in annoyance as she loosened her collar. She'd have unloaded the stuff by now if Jaro had been less intractable a negotiator. He refused to give her access to the corridors of power. She was demanding a post in his cabinet in exchange for the guarantee that Jaro would become First Minister.

He just wanted to pay her off and have her slink back into the shadows.

Her eyes narrowed as she drew herself up, her mind busy with plots and plans.

Perhaps it was time to show the stiff-necked Minister just how unwise it was to cross her---and how vulnerable he really was.

****************

For what seemed a moment set out of time, Tom just stared. Silently drinking in the sight of Chakotay, a need so long denied. The bed Chakotay was lying on had been adjusted so he was sitting, the covers rumpled at his waist. His eyes were closed.

Tom puzzled over how Chakotay wasn't wearing pajamas or a typical hospital gown. Then again, it was a relief to reassure himself that the bronze skin was whole, free of the bruises and cuts delivered before that last bout in the arena. He focused on Chakotay's hands, lying open on the blanket. As if just waiting for Tom's own to wrap around them.

His first step whispered against the rug, startling brown eyes open. Shock widened them a moment as Chakotay's gaze locked with his. Then Tom winced to see his beloved's body tighten in rejection. The firm jaw clenched, the powerful shoulders stiffened, and those strong, gentle fingers curled into unwelcoming fists.

"You shouldn't be here," Chakotay said flatly, holding back the pain his response to Tom's presence
"You're wrong, Chakotay. This is exactly where I need to be." Tom hurried forward, fingers already reaching out. He froze when he saw Chakotay try to flinch away. The former gladiator, once all predatory grace, was only able to lurch a centimeter or two. Chakotay's clumsy attempt at escape had been accompanied by an unmistakable expression of fear, quickly hidden.

"No, Tom." Chakotay formed each word precisely, struggling for control. He desperately wished he could make some gesture of warding against the ache---more than just physical---building within him. He devoured the sight of his love, noting the weariness dulling the normally bright blue eyes and bruising the skin beneath them. "I have my reasons. Please, do as I ask. Leave now. Leave Dorvan."

Tom started forward again, this time his palms raised in a placating gesture. "Easy, I won't touch you," he reassured softly as he remembered the Doc describing Chakotay's condition. The full-blown bear hug Tom had instinctively wanted to bestow would have had Chakotay howling in agony.

He eased onto the very edge of the bed, careful not to brush the blanket-covered legs. "But I need to know why you're shutting me out."

Chakotay forced his attention elsewhere, unable to bear the pleading gaze. He could feel his chest starting to tighten, his breath coming faster. He squeezed his eyes shut as the horrible trapped sensation washed over him. He had to get Tom out of here---now. He forced a coldness into his voice. The harshness was a result of his drying throat. "I prefer to deal with this...situation on my own. I don't need---I don't *want* you here."

"You're lying." Tom leaned forward, trying to see beyond the mask of indifference. "You told me you loved me, Chakotay. You're not a man to say that lightly, even when you think you're dying." He flinched at the sudden anguish in Chakotay's eyes.

"I'm *still* dying, but slowly now." Chakotay's chest started heaving, pain underlying his words. "So very slowly. Right now I'm nothing more than a talking corpse."

He took refuge in anger. "And I don't need you to hold my hand or blow my nose or wipe my ass for me. So just get out and let me be." He couldn't suppress a small gasp as the nerves in his neck and back punished him for the tension tightening them. He was sinking, drowning...his hands started trembling.

"You're *not* dying!" Tom surged to his feet in protest. His fingers clenched to keep from shaking sense into Chakotay.

"Maybe I wish I was!" That truth struck home. Chakotay could see Tom's face blank and pale in shock even as his own body began to shudder and sweat through a full-blown panic attack. He strangled his cries of agony in his throat, unable to do more than sit and suffer and wait for it to end.

Tom reared back, disbelief striking him speechless. How could Chakotay say that---*think* that? Tom had hoped for years, waited a third of his life to be with Chakotay. And now the man he'd risked everything for wanted to...

Something in him just snapped, stretched too tightly by all that he'd gone through. "You bastard!" Tom shouted. Pain ripped through Tom's soul, sparking a rage born of fear and betrayal.

His lips curled into a snarl as he launched himself onto the bed. His arms snapped out to land on either side of Chakotay's head. He leaned in close, biting out every word. "You aren't going
 anywhere---certainly not to the happy hunting grounds, or wherever the hell else you think your spirit winds up."

He was spitting into Chakotay's face, uncaring of Chakotay's obvious distress. How *dare* he? was the only thought that blazed through Tom's brain. "Suicide is *not* an option, mister, so you can get that thought right out of your head. I have not moved heaven and earth to keep you alive just so you could say Sayonara the second things got tough."

He shoved his face close enough to see his own reflection in Chakotay's eyes. "I saved you---your life is *mine*."

Chakotay's voice thrummed with intensity, each word knife-sharp. "Then the universe hasn't changed one bit, has it *master*? All I've done is gone from being Sisko's property to yours."

Tom stopped breathing for a moment. He stared, silent, then slowly lifted himself off the bed. He felt as though the wind, the heart had been knocked out of him. Is that what he was doing? Forcing an unbearable existence on Chakotay because he couldn't bear to live without his love? He stumbled back one step, another, his mouth working but no sounds coming out.

Chakotay could barely breathe---the pressure in his chest increased. The silence in the room was eerily like the aftermath of battle, heavy with exhaustion and regret. He watched the man he loved struggle to recover from his cutting words, and fail. Chakotay's apology congealed into a lump in his throat, choking him.

Horror continued to wash through Tom. In that moment he felt as though he'd never be himself again. He'd spend the rest of his days in this shell-shocked fog, hopelessly searching for the reason things went so wrong, so suddenly. He turned to go.

Chakotay was jolted from his own fugue by the sight of Tom leaving his room. He knew in that instant that the wounded younger man would be exiting his life as well. Forever.

He should feel relief, that his plan to free Tom from any sense of obligation had succeeded. At the time he believed it was for the best. Chakotay didn't want to be Tom's burden any longer.

But in that instant Chakotay knew that he had underestimated Tom's commitment. Maybe even the depth of his feelings. Tom was in this with his whole heart, for the long haul. And Tom couldn't pull away without losing some essential piece of himself in the process. If Chakotay forced Tom to leave, he would be destroying something---someone---precious and rare.

And if he let their bond break now, it would never be mended. Chakotay truly believed something inside both men would die at the parting. In the end, he couldn't do it. He finally understood what his guide had been trying to tell him. Tom was the other half of his soul. Chakotay wasn't alone. He never had been.

Chakotay struggled to form a word, a sound, but his agitation was sending waves of pain coursing through his body. He watched, hopelessness and horror overwhelming him, as Tom took another step. And he couldn't lift a finger to stop him.

***************

Tom was shuffling toward the door, head down. He was almost to his destination when there was a horrible crash and thud behind him. He whirled, startled.

Chakotay was face down on the floor, his legs twisted in sheets and blankets, one arm flung out as if reaching for something. From the rhythmic jerks of the bowed shoulders, Tom knew Chakotay was
crying. Oh so quietly, soft, broken sounds of utter despair.

His own eyes blurring and stinging, Tom flung himself to his knees beside the shaking body. His fingers hovered, uncertain where to land. He lowered himself until he was on his stomach, mirroring Chakotay's position. "Chakotay?" he whispered, their fingers almost brushing.

***************

Chakotay was too late. He'd tried so hard, to call out to Tom, to bring him back, to explain. But returning panic had robbed him of his voice. In desperation he'd used all the strength he'd had to raise his arm.

Perhaps it was a side effect of all the emotional upheaval, or some unexpected burst of adrenaline. Chakotay managed to lean forward, only to over-balance and land hard on the floor.

As he felt the pain wash through him he knew he'd failed. Tom was gone. Again, he'd lost all he loved because of his own arrogance. He should have tried to make Tom understand instead of arguing with him. Verbally attacking him.

Now he had lost Tom forever, and he had only himself to blame. The tears burned, but he let them fall.

It was the only thing he could do.

Then the sound of his name penetrated his grief. He lifted his head, barely, to see Tom lying in front of him. Not gone from the room. Not out of his life. Still with him. He stared, his breath hitching.

Tom suddenly remembered something his guide had said. He swallowed and gathered his courage to offer love in a form he never before conceived, or understood. "Cha, I love you...if you can't...live like this, then..." He stopped, choked, but finished, "Then it's your choice. I'll let you go."

Chakotay blinked. His brow furrowed, and with a last effort he shoved his hand to close the distance to Tom's. He felt the long fingers curl around his, cradling. He could see what that gift had cost Tom. It was clear in his devastated face.

He struggled to speak. He had to make Tom realize how much those words meant to him. His own voice was barely audible. "Tom...Tom. I love you. I *can* live, like this. I have...hope things will get better. But I need you to understand. This body...it can't be my cage. I---I need that open door...a final exit. Or I won't be able to last another day, much less a lifetime."

Chakotay focused, ignoring the pain, and squeezed his fingers ever so slightly. "I choose to stay, Tom. To fight for a life...with you."

They lay there a moment, joined only by their eyes and that simple touch, silently exchanging apologies, and forgiveness, and promises.

Tom let his lids close, his body sag. He breathed out all the dark feelings that had filled his soul during this terrible time, reveling in the warmth of Chakotay's hand. But he knew even this simple contact was causing his love pain. With a last brush of fingers he opened his eyes and let Chakotay go. "I'll get the Doc." He hesitated, bit his lip. "Cha?"

"Yes?"

"Garak talked to his wife about responsibilities, and consequences." He focused on Chakotay's face. "He offered to kill you, didn't he?"
Chakotay sighed. "Yes. He had hoped that I wouldn't be...as bad off as the Cardassians were. When the Doc gave his prognosis, Garak felt that it was his fault...and he thought that helping me to the Other Side was the only way to...make amends."

"Why didn’t you take him up on his offer?" Tom felt his whole being go still as he waited for the answer.

"Because I wouldn't force that duty on anyone, and because it's not my time. Not yet. There could be help...a chance for a normal life...on the way." Chakotay fell silent, exhausted but content. He had shared the important information. The details should arrive in person soon enough.

It was comforting to know that Tom would be by Chakotay's side for the next step of this strange odyssey his life had become. It was where Tom belonged. Always. He understood that now. Chakotay closed his eyes and tried to relax, entrusting himself to Tom's care.

Tom smiled. "Computer, release lockout Paris Alpha Omega and summon the EMH." He straightened his shoulders, lifted his head. He loved Chakotay. Chakotay loved him. Tom was himself again.

He could sense a renewal of sorts in Chakotay as well, despite the pain and fatigue etched on his beloved's face. "The Doc will be here soon," he whispered, then just waited quietly beside Chakotay, at peace.

There was hope for the future. And they would face whatever came---together.
Reg and Marla were out on their balcony, watching the sun set over the city. Reg had his arms wrapped around his wife, savoring the press of her back against his chest. The fact that they had found each other, that she loved him, still filled him with awe. He believed it always would. He rubbed a cheek against her blonde hair. "So what do you think?" he asked, his voice hushed in deference to the approaching night.

"Honestly, I don't know." Marla sighed and ran her hands down her husband's long arms. She smiled fondly as she thought of them wind-milling through the air whenever Reg got overly excited over a new discovery in engineering. "It's an intriguing offer. But I'm not sure I want to go back to the Fleet."

"Will did say he would give us our old ranks back, and our pick of assignments," Reg pointed out. "We'd be able to go back to pure military research instead of installing alarm systems and inventing new and better ore processors."

"But there's a real need for that kind of work, Reg," Marla said as she turned to face her husband. She searched his eyes. "I know that we did a lot of good for the Fleet when we were with them. But to be honest, I *like* the 'more mundane' applications of engineering theory or whatever you want to call it."

She gripped his shoulders. "Like the exoskeleton we developed for that Elaysian woman—-Melora. We enabled her to walk for the first time since she left the light gravity of her home planet. Nobody else was able to do that."

Her gaze saddened. "And not many people would. It wasn't very profitable for us."

Reg smiled in understanding and trailed his fingertips along the frown lines on Marla's brow until they eased. "But it *was* important," he conceded. "And we've earned enough from other patents to afford some pro bono work."

"Exactly." Marla nodded. "If we're Fleet, *they* decide what we work on, even if we're in charge of the lab."

Her lips pursed uncertainly. "But I don't want to keep you from your dreams, Reg. Do you want to go back? Because if you do, I'll go with you."

Reg kissed the pointy tip of his wife's nose and shook his head. "Not really. Once, I needed the structure, the discipline of Fleet life for support. But now we've built something together, I can stand on my own two feet, beside you."

He lifted his brows. "Besides, we can always sub-contract as consultants if Will, Joe, or Kathryn really needs us."

Marla hugged Reg tight. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear. She leaned back, a secretive smile on her face. "It's just as well. Kate may not have been able to deliver our baby if we were Fleet."

Reg nodded in absent-minded agreement, then the words registered. His eyes flew open in shock as he started babbling. "B---B---baby? Us? Baby? Really? We're going to have a baby? When? How?"

Reg blushed, then chuckled, then hugged Marla. Suddenly he sprang back with a concerned look. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Of course not," Marla soothed. Then she turned around again, feeling Reg's body against her back. His hands immediately cupped her belly---so carefully. She sighed in contentment, resting her arms over his as they watched the stars come out.

Geordi LaForge nervously ran his hand over his hair, straightened his tunic, shifted the padds on the desk in front of him. He wanted to make a good impression.

He hadn't been all that surprised when Kathryn was nominated for President of the Federation Council. But he'd been floored by his own invitation to run for VP. His only ambition had been to help people. Years ago, a position on the Council had seemed the best way to accomplish his goal. But now he could find himself with more power than he'd ever imagined.

He wasn't so sure he wanted it.

But he would do his duty, just as he had since he'd first sworn to serve the citizens under his jurisdiction. There would simply be a great deal more of them now.

Or rather, there might be. Elections were in a week. He'd outlined his qualifications and plans before everyone on Earth---and via commlink the entire Federation---a few days ago.

Now it was business as usual. Hence his nervousness. He was in charge of recruiting experts from a variety of fields for a Federation-wide task force. They were going to be surveying the non-Terran worlds to determine what monies and other resources were needed to bring all Federation planets into parity. Or at least to guarantee a respectable standard of living and quality of life for all inhabitants.

Reg and Marla were his first choices for the technology reps, but he knew that Will Riker was trying to entice them back into the Fleet. So he had sent out some feelers for other likely candidates. He was waiting to interview the first person on his list.

Geordi's musings were interrupted by the opening of the door. He stood and moved around to greet his visitor. "Dr. Brahms?"

"Leah, please." The dark-haired woman approached the Councilor and stretched out a hand. "If things work out, we'll be colleagues." She offered a smile.

Geordi met the hand and smile with his own, his face brightening. He preferred things to be informal himself, and they could be spending a lot of time together.

They both gasped at the electricity that flowed at the clasp of their fingers. They stared at each other, stunned.

Leah looked more closely at the Councilor. She'd known he was handsome, and the mix of earnestness and enthusiasm she'd observed in his public personality was very appealing. She'd read up on his background before accepting the invitation to discuss a position on the task force, and he'd earned her respect.

There had been a vague sense of anticipation, but Leah never expected such an intense reaction---attraction. Her lips parted in surprise, but she couldn't think of anything to say. A blush crept up her
Geordi tightened his grip on the delicate hand in his. This woman drew his attention like a magnet, irresistible. While Leah's serene beauty was clear from her picture, the sudden fierce need to hold her, to learn everything about her, was something he'd never dreamed of. "Leah," he said softly, savoring the name. "I'm Geordi. It's very good to meet you."

The interview was one to remember.

"Rosera, is Uncle Chakotay mad at us?" Jelene gave her elder a sidelong glance from where she was perched on a bale of hay, legs swinging.

Lakanta looked up from where he was pointing out to the other children and Gerron Tem the various animals on his farm. His expression was concerned as he met first Tem's, then Rosera's eyes.

Rosera walked over and slid her arm around the girl's shoulders. "Why would you think that, little one?" She noticed Koral and the boys had also fallen silent.

"Well, he woke up days ago, but he won't talk to us or tell us stories. He won't even let us see him."

Jelene's lower lip trembled as she voiced her fear. "Maybe he's not happy that he has to take care of us."

"Oh no, Jelene, it's not like that at all." Rosera cupped the child's chin in one hand and tilted it until uncertain dark eyes met her own. "Your uncle is very sick. You know how you want to hide in your bed under the covers when your tummy hurts? Well, your uncle is feeling a lot worse than that. He's afraid he might snap at you when he doesn't mean to, so he wants you to stay away until he's better."

"Tom gets to see him," Koral pointed out, her expression mulish. She crossed her arms. "And *he's* not related or anything."

"Mr. Paris---Tom---knows how to take care of people when they're sick." Tem's gaze traveled from one twin to the other. "When Emperor Jean-Luc Picard was ill, he liked to have Tom sit with him sometimes to make him feel better."

He shrugged. "Maybe Tom's helping Chakotay the same way."

Lucien piped up, "And your uncle *is* sending you messages every day. And arranging trips and stuff, like coming here."

"Trust me, Chakotay is doing what's best for you."

He squatted so he was at their level and grinned at them. "He can be worse than a bear with a sore paw when he's not feeling well. I can remember him breaking his leg when he was a kid---I never heard so much whining in all my life. My ears hurt for days."

All the kids giggled at the image and the atmosphere lifted. "Come on," Rosera said, glancing at her watch. "We're supposed to go to Anthwara's for lunch. He wants the off-worlders---" She gave the boys a wink. "To taste some real Dorvan home cooking."

A chorus of OKs accompanied them away from the barn. Lakanta lagged behind, holding a silent argument with himself. As he lifted his eyes he happened to see Gerron Tem walking directly in front of him. He gave a quiet sigh of frustration.
He was attracted to the slender Bajoran. Lakanta sensed in the alien a toughness of mind and character that belied the delicate face and form. The combination of vulnerability and guts he sensed in the younger man enticed him, stirred him more than anyone he had ever met on Dorvan.

But Lakanta was also one of those tribesmen who was fiercely devoted to the old ways. He'd been pretty open in his resentment of Tom Paris when the newcomers first arrived. He thought the Terran was arrogant, sweeping in with his technology and his aliens and his claim on Chakotay's life and heart.

Still, Lakanta had acquiesced to the Spirits' decree of Paris's place on Dorvan. He'd helped build the warehouse and place the holo-emitters that were right now providing Chakotay with some small bit of comfort in his suffering.

And eventually he'd shaken the blinders from his eyes and the chip off his shoulder and gotten to know the exotic strangers who had taken up residence on his planet.

A few annoyed him, but he liked most of them. One he more than liked.

Which brought him back to thoughts of Tem. Should he risk offering friendship to the Bajoran? More than just friendship? If so, how much more?

Bumping into the object of his musings startled Lakanta out of them. "I'm sorry," he said, quickly backing away. "I should pay attention to where I'm going."

Tem turned and regarded the Dorvan. He was a few years older than Tem, strong and graceful like many of Chakotay's people. Tem blushed a little as he recalled the rather steamy daydreams he'd been having recently. All starring this strapping warrior. His mind groped for something to say. "That's all right. You were worrying about the girls, weren't you?"

"Um, yes. The girls. Exactly." Lakanta eagerly accepted the excuse. "I hope this friend of Chakotay's arrives soon. I don't like the idea of the girls doubting their place in his home."

"Yes." Tem nodded gravely. "Especially after all they've been through." He cleared his throat nervously. "But they appear to have bounced back really well. You Dorvans must be pretty tough."

"Yes, well, I'm sure Bajorans are too." Lakanta sidled over. "Living under the Dominion and all."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Tem shrugged. "But a lot of us fled the invasion. Unfortunately, a lot of us also got caught by slavers and ended up in chains anyway."

He looked away a moment, into the coincidences and quirks of fate that shaped his past. "I was really lucky Tom bought me, and was willing to free me."

"Would you tell me about your experiences sometime?" Lakanta made his decision. He stepped even closer and laid one hand on Tem's arm. "Maybe---maybe over dinner?" He tensed as he awaited an answer.

Tem was relieved to see the stiffness in Lakanta's body. It let him know he wasn't the only one anxious and aware of the spark between them. He smiled and rested his hand on his companion's. "I'd like that a lot."

Lakanta nodded, feeling the anticipation begin to bubble in his veins. "Good," he said, then turned to follow the rest of the group.

Tem's smile widened when he felt fingers fumble a moment, then tangle with his own to tug him
along. He was so very glad he'd decided to stay on Dorvan.

"So, are you going to make Mark call you 'Madame President' when you're alone?" Kate's eyes twinkled as she caught the blush on Kathryn's cheeks. Her teasing smile turned more sly with confirmation of her suspicions.

"Aren't you a little premature in your diagnosis, Doctor?" Kathryn retorted. She leaned back in her chair in the garden, one arm sweeping into a vague gesture. "The elections haven't even started, much less all the votes been tallied."

Kate snorted. "Oh please. Who else will folks trust to lead the Federation Council? You've been ensconced in that cushy seat for more than a decade."

Kathryn's expression grew troubled as she looked down, as if seeking a vision of the past or future in her coffee. "I keep wondering why people don't ask me about that."

The older woman's brows drew together as she sensed the change in mood. "Ask what, Kathryn?"

The Councilor sighed, her fingers tightening around her cup. "About why I let slavery continue so long. Why I didn't stop the barbarity of the gladiator games. Why I didn't lift a finger to prevent Julian from murdering his political rivals and critics. Why---"

"The people aren't stupid, that's why. What makes you think they've suddenly forgotten the Empire?" Kate leaned on her elbows, her gaze piercing. "You can just end the guilt trip here and now, lady. You did what you could to help, to be a voice for truth and equality on the Council. Hell, only Jean-Luc's influence kept you from slavery or assassination. And when Julian Bashir *Bastard* Picard took the throne, you worked to depose him and re-establish the Federation."

Kate threw up her hands in exasperation. "What more do you think people want? Blood?"

"Maybe, considering I never had to shed any in the cause." Kathryn looked at her longtime friend. "I can't help thinking I got off really easy in this, Kate. I lived very well in Imperial favor. It's true I risked my career, maybe my freedom in the plan to restore the Federation. But the cold hard fact is I spent maybe four hours in the Colosseum prison. There were a lot of people who died---*died*, Kate---because they didn't have the protections I did."

Her voice dropped. "And in the end, I couldn't even take the stand by myself. I hid behind Admiral Chakotay. And he paid the price."

Kate's sigh was a concession. "We're all guilty of that, Kathryn. Beating yourself up over the fact that a good man is suffering won't help him. And I don't think he'd like what you're saying. In a way, it's an insult to him to involve *him* in *your* proclivity to self-flagellate."

Kathryn's eyes slid over to regard her companion. Her lips quirked into a rueful half-smile. "I didn't think you knew big words like that."

Kate grinned. "Hey, I'm not just a pretty face." She tilted her head. "So, no more self-pity parties?"

"I'm done. You're right, I did the best I could, and I should just continue to do the best I can. For everyone in the Federation." Kathryn shrugged. "Assuming, of course, I win."

"Well, you've got my vote." Kate slouched comfortably into her chair and took a sip of her drink. "So answer my question: Will you be 'Madame President' in the budoir with the dashing Dr.
Tom wiped his sweaty palms on his slacks. He was standing alone outside the building housing Chakotay and the others. Only the discipline born of a thousand diplomatic functions kept him from fidgeting as he waited for the new arrivals to beam down from Voyager.

He was alone by request. Even the Dorvans had stayed home today, recognizing the importance of this meeting in Tom's anxious eyes as he asked for their absence.

There was so much riding on the shoulders of the people about to arrive. Tom had come to realize how truly bad Chakotay's situation was in the last few days.

Tom was amazed at his beloved's fortitude. Since they'd had their moment of reckoning, Chakotay had allowed Tom to be a constant visitor. Tom had seen firsthand Chakotay's efforts to keep up his spirits in the face of his condition. The constant pain Chakotay felt kept him from sleeping well, or long. The stress and deprivation were starting to take their toll. Chakotay was a strong man, but eventually he would succumb to their effects and weaken.

Unless this plan worked. Tom desperately hoped it would.

He straightened as two figures shimmered into existence before him. "Tuvok," he said, his face brightening in welcome. He stepped forward, turning to the lovely woman at his side. "And you must be T'Pel. Welcome to Dorvan."

Tuvok entered Chakotay's room, noting the lines of strain marking the former gladiator's face. Also obvious was the warmth in the dark eyes that lit at his appearance.

"It's good to see you, Tuvok," Chakotay said as he gave a small smile. "I very much appreciate you abandoning your family so soon after your return."

"I did not leave all of them behind." Tuvok turned to indicate his companion. "This is T'Pel, she who is my wife."

The Vulcan woman glided forward and gave a small bow. "I am honored to meet you." Her dark eyes expressed her compassion for the man sitting up in bed. "It is thanks to you my children still have a father."

"I wasn't alone in that. Tuvok proved himself most able in combat." Chakotay nodded toward Tom and the silent EMH. "You've met Tom, and this is the Doctor." He glanced at his beloved a moment, noting the tension in the slim body.

Then he took a breath and looked at Tuvok. "Have you considered my request?" he asked, trying to steel himself for the reply.

"Of course, Chakotay." Tuvok walked over and stood next to the bed. "It is a most intriguing idea."

"I think it is a ludicrous one." The Doc's expression reflected his disbelief. "Chakotay's nervous system is being overstimulated, the neurons and pain receptors constantly firing. The damage is organic, a result of the poisoning. I don't understand how some mental exercise is going to make a
Chakotay’s lips quirked. "I'll explain it again, Doc. I remembered Tuvok mentioning one night that he had undergone the ritual of Kohlinar." Chakotay tried to lean forward, winced and gasped, and settled back. "From what I understand of Vulcan practices, it's an intense discipline of the mind and body, the suppression of all emotion."

He sighed. "I'm not looking to deaden or deny my emotions, though. All I'm hoping is that if he leads me through the ritual, I can learn to suppress some of my body's awareness. At least of the pain caused by the toxin. To relegate those neural messages to the background, like white noise. Maybe then I can regain my ability to feel genuine sensations of pain."

"And pleasure," T'Pel murmured.

"If it works, Tuvok, will Chakotay be able to live a normal life?" Tom sought the truth in the serene dark eyes.

The Doc piped up, "If nothing else, it will give us a chance to find out whether Chakotay suffers from any genuine paralysis, or his body is simply not moving because of the pain it causes."

Tuvok nodded gravely. "That question still remains."

Chakotay asked with equal seriousness, "Will you do it? I'm sorry to force you to experience this agony in the mind-meld, but it's the only thing I could think of."

Tuvok regarded his former colleague. "If I had been unwilling to make the attempt, I would not have come." He lifted a hand and T'Pel raised her own so their fingers touched in an ancient gesture. "But I will ask that T'Pel also enter the meld. She is an accomplished healer, and I believe her participation will increase our chances of success."

"Of course, whatever you wish." Chakotay swallowed the lump in his throat. "T'Pel, it's not going to be easy. Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"To help my husband is my duty." She again allowed her gaze to meet the human's. "To aid you, as I have said, is an honor."

Chakotay bowed his head slightly in acceptance and acknowledgement. "Then I'm the one who is honored—and grateful. What do we have to do to get ready?"

Tuvok stepped up and laid his hand against specific points on Chakotay's face. The discipline and calm that he recalled from their brief contacts as gladiators still remained, but the edges were fraying. He frowned as he took stock of Chakotay's situation. "It must be soon."

He lowered his hand and looked toward his wife a moment, then to Tom and the EMH. "If you will show us to our room, we will rest and prepare. I suggest that Chakotay does the same. The Kohlinar is not an easy or comfortable experience."

"Well in that case I suggest that Mr. Paris plays escort." The EMH briskly shooed the trio out the door. "I'm going to take some baseline readings for comparison during and after whatever strange activities you have planned."

He lowered his brows in warning. "Be aware that I will be monitoring my patient's vitals every moment."

Tom dredged up a grin, trying to ignore the butterflies wrestling in his stomach. "That doesn't sound
very restful, Doc." He conceded, "But I know you have Chakotay's best interests at heart."

"Not just his." The EMH cleared his throat and ordered gruffly. "So you'll have no problem obeying my orders to get some sleep yourself, Tom." He shrugged. "I know how draining it is to sit and wait."

"You've certainly seen me do it often enough the last few days." Tom hurried over and traced his fingertips ever so lightly across Chakotay's brow. "See you soon."

"Soon," Chakotay answered, hope and a promise in his eyes.

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T'Pel stepped into her meditation robe, covertly eyeing her husband as his strong form was encased in his own garment of flowing blue satin. She was not given to wild expressions of emotion, but she did feel a certain...completeness in seeing her mate hale and whole beside her.

Tuvok's captivity had nearly broken her vaunted Vulcan calm. The shock of his arrest, the frustration of Imperial indifference to his innocence, the horror of seeing him fighting for his life in the arena all pushed her to her limits. Only the love still felt through their marriage bond and the need to be strong for her children kept T'Pel's stoic façade in place.

She had cried when he returned to her. Just once, in the privacy of their bedroom, in the aftermath of lovemaking so profound they shared both thoughts and skin. They were so close in that moment that she sensed Tuvok's gratitude for her moment of weakness. They both needed the release of those tears.

They had continued to get to know each other again. Tuvok had not yet chosen his path: Vulcan Security, the Fleet, or a new direction unrelated to his previous career. Instead, he spent his time appreciating his family and renewing his mental energies after his ordeal.

Chakotay's message had startled them into remembering the universe outside their little world. T'Pel had been appalled when she learned of the Emperor's vile final act, and understood the need for some remedy for Chakotay's agony.

At first she dismissed the idea though, citing humanity's proclivity for unrestrained emotion. But her husband's description of the order and control of Chakotay's thoughts convinced her that it was at least worth a try. She had become intrigued by the idea of a human attempting a Vulcan healing technique.

So she suggested to Tuvok that they both enter the meld. Her greater knowledge of the workings of the body---she'd made sure she familiarized herself with the differences in a human one---might be a way to direct their efforts and measure the effects.

She sealed the last fastening. They would soon find out.

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Tuvok privately admitted to a sense of satisfaction at feeling his mate's eyes upon him. He held out his arm to escort her to Chakotay's room, and inwardly smiled when she took it without hesitation.

He knew the public contact was unusual, but not unheard of, among Vulcans. He simply wanted to know she was near physically, not just as a light in the back of his mind. It calmed and reassured him in a visceral way no mental discipline could match.
The life of a gladiator—the constant edgy need to look over his shoulder, the reflexive tensing at the approach of another being—were finally beginning to fade. He'd never been exposed to so much violence during his years as a security officer, and he wondered now if it would be wise to even contemplate a return to that life.

He suspected he'd be bored after all the excitement.

It was intriguing to have so many possibilities before him. He could start a completely new career, perhaps even return to the university. After facing down bat'leth-wielding Klingons, the raised eyebrows of his fellow students would be nothing.

One thing he was sure of: He wouldn't be taking a position in the Fleet. He'd been away from his family long enough. And he'd never be separated from T'Pel again. Not by choice.

He rested his other hand on his wife's arm a moment, giving it a small squeeze before the door to Chakotay's room opened.

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Tom paced, avoiding B'Elanna's and Harry's legs as he circled the sofa. He deftly wound around Sisko and Kassidy as his steps marked the corners of the waiting room.

He was glad the couple had returned from their errands so quickly. He also appreciated that their presence, and support, was silent.

Platitudes and pep talks would have driven him crazy. He'd already been kicked out of Chakotay's room. Tom had finally lost his cool now that the attempt to help was finally occurring. His fidgeting and "disruptive mental and emotional distress" had bothered the Vulcans enough to ask him to go elsewhere.

He'd tried spending time with the kids, but then Sue, Greg, and Tem had quietly taken him aside and said his ill-concealed agitation was upsetting the twins and Lucien.

Tom tried seeking the solace of his spirit guide, but couldn't seem to calm down enough to achieve a meditative state.

He had considered crashing the Dorvans' ritual to direct healing energy to aid Chakotay, but knew he wouldn't be able to go out of earshot. He needed to know the results immediately, be they good or bad.

"Tom, why don't you sit down," Harry suggested from his spot next to B'Elanna, prompted by intense sympathy for Tom. Harry admired, respected, and very much missed Chakotay, but he knew that the feelings were nothing compared to the devastation that would engulf him if it were his B'El in such pain.

Blue eyes flashed with annoyance a moment, then filled with rueful embarrassment. "I can't," Tom admitted, "I'm afraid I'll explode."

B'Elanna nodded in silent understanding. She was amazed at her own sense of well-being, of energized calm. She was ready to act to help her ailing friend, but she was also content to wait until he requested her aid or presence. She snuggled closer to Harry, feeling at peace in his embrace.

Sisko and Kassidy exchanged knowing glances. They could feel the air vibrating around Tom, he was so tense. They'd attempted to feed him earlier but Tom took only a few bites before he pushed the plate away. They'd managed to get him to drink some fluids every few hours, but that was the
best they could do. They knew that Tom would eat, and rest, when he knew Chakotay's fate. The same as everyone else.

Suddenly the door opened.

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The Doc automatically stumbled back as a gold-topped blur dashed into the room. He smiled as Tom skidded to a stop, eyes full of questions.

Tom immediately relaxed at the understanding expression on the curmudgeonly hologram's face. His gaze took in two very weary-looking Vulcans. They were calmly standing up from where they'd been perched on either side of Chakotay's bed.

Chakotay himself had his eyes closed. His body was completely still, barely breathing.

Tom swiftly took his place at his beloved's side and reached out, but stopped himself just before his fingers could brush one bronze cheek. "Chakotay?" he whispered.

When the brown eyes opened Tom almost shouted for joy. They were still shadowed with exhaustion, but most of the pain that had dulled their dark depths was gone. Pale fingers twitched, slid that fraction of a centimeter closer and made contact.

Chakotay smiled and without warning reached up to pull Tom into his embrace. He sank his fingers into the red-gold waves of Tom's hair, holding him in place to receive a kiss that answered all of Tom's questions, soothed all of his fears.

And kindled all of his desires. Tom felt his toes and hair curling as his mouth was claimed by full lips that explored his with both tenderness and passion. By the time he was released he was moaning for more, sprawled over Chakotay like a long-limbed blanket. "Chakotay," he breathed in wonder and relief, feeling strong arms close around him.

"Tom." Chakotay answered the call of the heart that sounded clear in Tom's voice. He closed his eyes a moment, savoring the lightness and peace and freedom from pain he had managed to achieve in the meld.

Then he opened his eyes and looked to the Vulcan couple who had made his life bearable again, all futures possible. "Thank you," he said simply, knowing that they understood more than the words.

Tuvok and T'Pel bowed. "You are welcome," Tuvok said, knowing that Chakotay had done most of the work. They had been his guides, helping him unleash the potential within himself. He was a most remarkable man.

"Well, as much as I hate to break up this little lovefest, it's time for you to all let my patient sleep." The Doc laid a gentle hand on Tom's shoulder blade. "Please, Tom. It's been a difficult day, and Chakotay still has a long recovery ahead of him."

Tom reluctantly shifted off the bed, his fingers trailing down Chakotay's arm to clasp his hand a moment. Anxious blue eyes sought beloved brown. "Are you really going to be OK now?"

The Doc answered before Chakotay could tire himself further with explanations. "The damage still exists within the neural system, but it no longer seems to be having a deleterious impact. The paralysis, fortunately, was not actual but merely a side effect of the overstimulation."

The Doc indicated Tuvok and T'Pel. "I don't understand how they managed it, but their treatment---
however unorthodox—seems to have achieved what medical science could not. Chakotay will need some remedial training in walking and other activities to relearn his motor skills, but I can now foresee a full recovery."

Tom gave the hand in his a little squeeze. He smiled when Chakotay's expression didn't change to one of pain. He pressed a quick kiss to Chakotay's lips, then turned to the exit, eager to spread the good news.

Chakotay was going to be all right.
L'waxanna Troi was in the middle of a high-drama hissy fit. "Why don't you get married on a garbage scow circling Rigel VII. It can't be any more obscure---or insulting!"

"Mother, that's enough!" Deanna Troi rarely lost her temper with her flamboyant parent, but this time L'waxanna had simply gone too far.

Deanna stalked over to where the older woman was lounging on a sofa in a VIP suite. It suddenly occurred to the counselor that her shoulders had been tense since the moment her mother stepped aboard Enterprise.

She was going to need more than a simple tap on her relaxation point to ease the stress she felt. "I don't see what you have to complain about," Deanna said bluntly, "Will has already agreed to a full Betazoid ceremony."

"On Earth," L'waxanna reminded with a wave of her blue-green cocktail. "And he insisted that the guests' nudity be optional."

Deanna bit off a sigh of annoyance and decided not to argue the point. "In any case, the trip to Dorvan has nothing to do with you."

"Of course it does." L'waxanna stood, an expression of aggrieved insult on her features. "My baby, the heir to the Holy Rings of Betazed, is planning to fly out to the farthest reaches of civilization to subject herself to some barbaric *human* tribal ritual. You'll probably be painted purple and forced to dance around a fire or something. And you think that's no big deal? What will my friends say?"

Deanna's voice naturally slipped into that overly patient tone her elder always inspired. "Mother, there isn't going to be a ritual, just a blessing. And Will hasn't asked Chakotay yet whether something like that can be arranged."

She perched on the arm of a chair. "We haven't even had time to schedule a date for the trip. But we *are* going."

Deanna looked at her mother, unconsciously pleading for understanding. "Chakotay is one of Will's oldest and dearest friends. The poor man *finally* began to regain his health only ten days ago. He won't be able to travel any time soon. So it makes sense for us to go to him."

Her eyes warmed as she smiled in fond remembrance. "Both Will and I planned this, to say thank you after all this time. Chakotay helped us find the courage to be together when interspecies relationships were frowned on, and he always supported us."

The half-Betazoid's lovely face settled into determined lines. "So it's only right Chakotay gets to celebrate our marriage with us."

Touched by her daughter's distress, L'waxanna relented. "Oh very well," she huffed, conceding with her typical martyred air. "I suppose I can always tell them you're spending your honeymoon going back to nature or something."

Deanna just shook her head and changed the subject.

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Joe Carey dubiously regarded the prisoner in front of him. "So Jonas, I hear you want to cut a deal."

Michael Jonas twisted his hands into the shirrtails of his prison outfit. His incarceration had actually been OK so far. Nobody hassled him. He got food, exercise, and counseling on a regular basis.

Unexpectedly, he started to feel guilty about his work for Julian, despite the fact he'd been a slave at the time. And found the nerve to do something about it—but for a price. He nervously cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah. I want you to commute my sentence, give me early parole or something."

Carey's brows drew together. It wasn't an impossible request---Jonas's term was lighter than some because he hadn't really done much harm. Carey shuddered. And if *he'd* been a slave of Julian Bashir Picard, he'd probably have done anything and everything the evil bastard ordered too.

"What'll you give me in return?" he asked, his voice and expression carefully neutral as he perched on a corner of the interrogation room table.

"There's---there's somebody you didn't catch." Jonas fidgeted, running his hand through his thinning hair as he avoided the Guard leader's eyes. "She wasn't working for the Emperor."

He grimaced. "But she could have been." Jonas shivered in memory. "She was ruthless enough for him."

Carey felt a prickle on the back of his neck. He leaned forward slightly, trying to maintain his casual air. "Who is she, who did she work for, and why should this interest me?"

"Her name's Wynn." The words tumbled out of Jonas's mouth in a rush. "She was Councilor Shelby's slave---Bajoran. They kept tabs on Julian's enemies for him."

He looked up into Carey's kind eyes. "She and I were working on the same project when the Empire fell: Finding the person who killed Julian's pet spy and assassin, Seska."

Carey's eyes narrowed. "And what did you learn?"

"Nothing." Jonas's mouth twisted in bitterness. "By the time I found out anything Wynn had already gotten the goods on Tom Paris."

Long-honed instincts kicked in. Carey was sure they were going off course. He straightened with a shrug. "Then it's case closed. We've indicted Shelby for giving the orders for the crimes committed by her slaves. If we can track Wynn down we'll prosecute, but right now it's low priority. She gave us the slip." Still, something was tingling in his memory, a connection he just couldn't make.

"You don't get it." Jonas's voice rose with his agitation. "That Bajoran bitch was on to Seska. And Seska was a top hit woman. She never left a trace. She had this stash of poison---I think it was Cardassian."

He stared at Carey. "#I# went to recover the stuff, but your people got there first. Problem is, you only found a few grams. I'm pretty sure most of it was gone."

Carey pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose a moment, trying to maintain his calm. He knew that a cache of poison was hidden somewhere on Bajor. Unknown innocents on that beleaguered world were in jeopardy.

But at least now they knew the would-be assassin's identity. It was a relief and a new anxiety all at once. Wynn by herself was a danger. Wynn with the poison---that was chaos in the making.
"All right, Jonas," Carey rose and waved for the prisoner's escort. "I'll talk to the prosecutor and judge and see what we can do."

He hurried to his comm panel to contact DS9 and Bajor. At least now he could put a name and face to Kira's and Odo's quarry. Carey only hoped they could stop Wynn before she carried out her fiendish plan—whatever it may be.

***************

"You're stepping on my head!"

"Shhh! Someone'll hear you," Koral hissed in annoyance as she scrambled over the sill and onto the window seat. She leaned over to help Jelene up, momentarily taking hold of a scraggly bunch of wildflowers, then handing them back. The twins hopped down to the floor to make room for the three boys.

"I told you I could do it," Lucien crowed, his chest puffing proudly. "Tem taught me how to switch off forcefields."

"Are you sure we weren't followed?" Leo asked, cautiously peering out the window to make sure no one was on their trail.

"Nah, we gave them the slip, all right." Andrei spoke with the cocksure certainty his position as oldest in the group gave him. "There's no way they would think we doubled back."

"I still don't know about this," Jelene said, biting her lip uncertainly.

"*You* wanted to put the flowers in here as a surprise," her sister reminded. "Don't be such a fraidy-cat."

"I'm not!" Jelene stamped her foot. "Am not! Am not! Am not!"

"Are too!" Koral taunted, her eyes flashing.

"No she's not." The soft voice made all the kids jump. They spun to see Chakotay sitting up in bed in pajamas, staring at them. They all flushed and looked down, knowing they'd been caught.

Jelene suddenly broke ranks, dashing across the room and climbing on the mattress to throw her arms around Chakotay's neck. Then she waved the bunch of blossoms under his nose. "I thought you'd like to have these," she said shyly. "Since you can't go down by the stream yet."

Chakotay closed his arms around his thoughtful niece, giving her a grateful smile. "So you decided to bring the outside in for me this afternoon? What a wonderful present."

He tilted her chin. "But shouldn't an adult be with you?" he asked, brows rising. By the tone the kids knew the jig was up.

But his twinkling eyes told them he was glad to see them. Koral climbed on for her own hug and kiss. Then she shrugged. "Well, Gerron Tem took us for a picnic. We saw all the flowers on the banks and Jelene thought you might like some."

She faltered, then said, "I knew the way, so I said we could just...come back...and put them in your room while you were in physio—physico—"

"Physiotherapy." Chakotay looked at the three boys. "And you decided to tag along?"
Leo just cowered and flushed guiltily. Lucien scuffed his sandal against the rug. Andrei rolled his eyes at the other two and answered. "Yes, sir. Lucien had to close down the forcefield for them, and I knew the girls weren't tall enough to climb in by themselves."

He ducked his head sheepishly under his elder's steady regard. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," he muttered.

"How about now?" Chakotay's expression became more stern as he set the girls on the floor and stared at them. "Koral, Jelene, I *know* you know better than to just go running off."

Jelene's head lifted. "But we wanted---"

"I know you wanted to bring me the flowers, Jelene." Chakotay's face softened as he gathered up the spilled blossoms from the blanket. "But that doesn't change the fact that Tem and the others are probably frantic with worry for you. Do you think scaring them like that is fun?"

A chorus of "No, sir" accompanied downcast eyes and shuffling feet.

"All right. For now, let's tell them you're all right." Chakotay raised his voice. "Computer, open a comm channel to Gerron Tem."

"Gerron here." The young man's voice held an edge of anxiety.

"Hi, Tem. This is Chakotay. I just wanted to let you know that your intrepid band of explorers is safe with me."

"Thank the Prophets," Tem said fervently. "I thought I'd have to mobilize the whole planet. No one knew where they'd gotten to."

"I can imagine," Chakotay said with a smile. "Please let the others know. I'll keep an eye on them until you all get back. Use the stroll to unwind."

"I'll pass on the good news," Tem agreed. "Thanks again. Gerron out."

Chakotay looked at the quintet. "First things first. Computer, replicate one standard glass vase, 15 centimeters in height. Also, five juvenile wristbands with Federation-style communicators embedded in the weave." He focused on Leo. "Would you get them for me, please?"

Delighted with the responsibility, Leo forgot his anxiety and skipped over to the unit. Then he carefully carried the items back to dump them on the bed. Chakotay filled the vase from the pitcher of water on his bedside table, then arranged the flowers. He paused a moment to admire them. "Thank you," he said softly. "They're beautiful."

Then he turned back and lifted the wristbands. "OK, people, I don't think you want to worry your folks any more than you have."

He tossed one to each child. "So be sure to wear these from now on so we can contact or locate you."

Lucien grinned as he slipped his on. "Like belling the cat?" he asked with a knowing look.

"Exactly," Chakotay returned his grin. "You're certainly too fast for me these days."

Koral looked up at the comment. "Why are you still in bed? I thought you were better."

Chakotay leaned over and picked her up again, sending silent thanks to Tuvok and T'Pel for the lack
of pain in the movement. "I am. But I still get tired easily."

He leaned in to share a secret. "The Doc sent me in here to take a nap."

"A nap!" Jelene clambered back up to her earlier perch on the big bed. "Does that mean we can have a story?" Big dark eyes begged.

The boys perked up. "An adventure, with lots of fighting?" Lucien asked hopefully.

Chakotay chuckled to himself and decided not to mention that traditionally the person going to sleep got the story. Instead he shifted more toward the center of the bed and patted the mattress, inviting the guys to find their own seats.

A few scrambling moments later, everyone was settled. Chakotay's voice took on the traditional cadence. "This story is part of a dream I've had many times. It's the tale of a brave, clever, colorful alien named Neelix. He dwells in a place very far away, across the galaxy, in a mysterious realm called the Delta Quadrant...."

*************************************************************

Data cradled his pet tabby cat, Spot, as he stared out the windows of his tiny apartment. He regarded his reflection set against the night sky.

The uniform looked good on him.

He smiled to himself at the gleam of the comm badge on his chest and the pip on his collar. He was now a full-fledged Ensign in the Federation Fleet.

He was still dizzy from the whirl of the last few days. So much had changed for him, so quickly.

Tomorrow he'd begin his term of service on the Federation flagship, Enterprise.

He never expected such a placement when he'd cautiously returned to the Academy to inquire about re-enrolling. He'd been just a few credits shy of graduation when Emperor Bashir Picard had "cleansed" the cadet ranks all those months ago.

Data had lain low for a while after the Emperor's death, hoping folks would forget the android's role in the gladiator games. He was fortunate that the holocam operators hadn't considered him photogenic---they didn't show him very often so not many people had recognized him.

Eventually, his dream of exploring space had reawakened, and he'd finally decided to submit an application for a return to the Academy. Along with an engineering report he'd never gotten to finish.

Apparently it had impressed his professors enough for him to skip the remaining classes and immediately report for duty under Admiral Riker himself.

Data was looking forward to meeting his new colleagues. He'd received a message from the ship's Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander Kurt Bendera, welcoming him aboard and mentioning some projects Data would be working on.

It certainly sounded interesting. And the Enterprise even allowed pets. Spot, with the uncanny telepathy cats sometimes had, purred her approval.

Data's mouth twitched into an unfamiliar smile as he contemplated the dark of the night, and the brightness of his future.
Tom stepped over the threshold and stopped. Warmth blossomed in his chest as a smile stretched his lips at the sight before him.

Six bodies lay sprawled, fast asleep on Chakotay's bed. The man himself was lying on his back in the center. Koral and Jelene had snuggled down on a broad shoulder apiece. Leo and Andrei had each claimed a leg, their heads pillowed on Chakotay's thighs over the blanket.

Lucien was to one side, facing the others, his hands tucked beneath his cheek. Strong bronze fingers rested on his hair, unconsciously making a connection.

Tom's thoughts were drawn back over the last ten days. He and Chakotay had spent hours together, talking about their plans and dreams, aspirations and expectations.

It was surprisingly easy to mesh their lives together. As if they'd been awaiting the chance for years and didn't know it.

Tom had no desire to return to Earth, except to visit their friends. He was happy to build a life amid Dorvan forests and fields.

Chakotay had finished his tenure among the stars, content to be the caretaker of Trebus, rather than the universe.

Both men wished to leave the Imperial limelight behind, to fade into the background of the Federation.


The next step was to let the twins and Lucien know their decision. Tom had mentioned his hopes when he first arrived on Dorvan, but then dropped the subject. So the men were going to face their charges together. *That* had been a memorable evening. Tom's smile widened at the memory.

The Doc was letting Chakotay get out and about, using a walker to tour the facility and venture onto the lawn just outside the warehouse. Chakotay started renewing his relationships with his old friends and making new ones. He was also getting to know his nieces again, and Lucien as more than just Tom's son. Tom had programmed a private dining room and the five of them ate together for the first time a few nights ago.

Tom had been trading looks with his beloved all evening, considering and rejecting a dozen openings. Chakotay finally broached the subject by asking the twins if he could officially adopt them.

"Would that make you our father?" Jelene asked, tilting her head.

"Well, honey, you and Koral called your dad that." Chakotay leaned forward, his expression serious. "And I don't want to take his place, or your mother's. I want you to always remember them and how much they---and everyone else---loved you."

"Then what would we call you?" Koral's forehead crinkled in confusion.

"I don't know," Chakotay replied quietly. "Who do you want me to be?"

The two exchanged speaking looks in the way of twins, silently communicating. Then they whispered together.
Tom laid his hand over Chakotay's, feeling his tension. He knew that the girls had expressed some doubts about whether Chakotay even wanted them. If they decided they would be happier living with Rosera or Lakanta, or some other family, Chakotay would accede to their wishes.

But Tom was afraid it would break Chakotay's battered heart. Tom squeezed the hand under his, offering his support.

He was also proud of Lucien's respectful silence. His son was waiting as anxiously as they were for the girls' decision.

After what seemed like an eternity, Koral and Jelene looked up with identical beaming smiles. "We've decided," Koral blurted as both girls jumped up to run around the table to give Chakotay a hug.

Tom caught the glimmer of moisture in three sets of dark brown eyes as Chakotay returned the embrace. Chakotay's voice was huskier than usual as he murmured, "Does this mean it's OK if you stay with me?"

"Oh yes...Papa Chakotay," Jelene said with an emphatic nod of her head.

"Papa C for short," Koral noted with a quick kiss. Then she leaned back and looked slyly at Tom. "And we'll call you Daddy T."

"Me?" Tom felt his insides melt as he received his own set of embraces. He looked at the two faces, their dimpled smiles so much like their uncle's. "How did you---?"

"Oh, please, Dad. You told us yourself weeks ago. And we're not babies. You two have been kissing every chance you get." Lucien grinned. "I think you'd get arrested if you weren't getting married at some point."

Tom could feel the heat of a blush creep up his face even as he shook his head. "We're not getting hitched for a while, mon cher, so keep that under your hat."

He shook a half-serious finger. "And you're getting pretty close to the line, mister. Careful you don't cross it." He sobered. "Are *you* all right with this? With us?"

"Yeah, Dad." This time Lucien hopped up and squirmed his way into the family embrace. He grinned. "I might even start calling you Daddy T. It's cool."

Tom rolled his eyes, but hugged his son in gratitude as the knot in his gut dissolved completely.

Then long strong fingers set on a broad palm came into his vision as Chakotay ruffled Lucien's hair. Chakotay winked at the boy. "I think you should call him that too."

"No way," Tom protested with a laugh. "You are *not* ganging up on me already."

"What are families for?" Chakotay chuckled in return. Their gazes locked.

They stared at each other, feeling their bond expand into a circle as their new family ties took hold.

Tom shook his head as he came back to himself with a happy sigh and stepped forward. He put his hand on Lucien's shoulder and gently shook the small form. "Mon cher, time to get up for dinner."

A sleepy rumbling protest was all he got in response. That and a pair of twinkling brown eyes observing his efforts.
"Hey," Chakotay greeted Tom softly.

"Hey yourself." Tom replied. He leaned far over for a brief kiss, then drew back with his own grin. "So, need some help here?"

"Just a bit," Chakotay chuckled. He eased himself up carefully, cradling the girls. "Hey sweethearts," he called softly. "I need my arms back."

Tom shifted to the bottom of the bed and nudged the other two boys. "All right, guys, up and at 'em."

"OK, OK," Andrei said as he blinked and sat up, stretching. Then he seemed to snap awake as he bounced a little on the mattress. He turned to Chakotay. "That was the *best* story!"

Lucien perked up. He leaned up on his elbow, nodding vigorously as he looked at his father. "You missed it, Dad. There was this trader named Neelix, and he took on a whole planet full of bad guys to rescue his girlfriend."

"Not by himself," Koral said as her chin jutted out. "Kes *did* help him."

"Kes was an Ocampa---she looked like an elf," Lucien supplied helpfully.

"And she was very wise," Jelene said as she wriggled and smiled dreamily. "And they really loved each other. I was so happy she decided to leave with him to see the galaxy together."

Leo's nose wrinkled. "At least there wasn't *too* much mushy stuff."

"Yeah, well, you'd better go see your mom before she makes you *eat* mushy stuff for being late to dinner." Tom shooed all the kids off the bed. "Lucien, Koral, Jelene, Tem's waiting for you to make sure you wash your hands. Don't dawdle."

The kids straggled out, chattering about Neelix and Kes's fate.

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Tom sat on the bed and picked up one of Chakotay's hands. He absentmindedly threaded their fingers together as he teased, "So when will you spin me a tale?"

Chakotay looked at their joined hands and softly smiled. They'd been sharing a couch or a chair for some pretty heavy make-out sessions or curling up together for long conversations, but Chakotay thought it was time for the next step. "How about I tell you a bedtime story?" he asked, glancing at Tom through his lashes.

Tom swallowed, overwhelmed for a moment by his feelings of insecurity. He definitely didn't want to be a disappointment as a lover, and he knew he was pretty inexperienced.

He hesitated too long. Tom saw uncertainty washing through Chakotay's expression and hastily spoke up, raising the golden-brown fingers to his lips for a quick kiss. "I'd like that. A lot."

After a moment he admitted, "but I'm not sure exactly what sleeping with a man is like."

"Well, with *this* man, it's just sleeping. At least for now." Chakotay raised his free hand to caress Tom's face, tracing a thumb over his lips. "Maybe a good-night kiss to go with that story."

"How could I turn down such a tempting offer?" Tom planted a quick kiss of his own and rose. "Need any help getting dressed for dinner?"
"No, but could you get the kids ready for bed afterward? I think it's time to talk to Greg, and Ben."
Tom tilted his head to the side, his face pensive. "So you're going ahead with what we discussed?"

"Yes. It feels right to me." Chakotay searched his love's face, anxious for approval. "You understand?"

Tom just nodded, and leaned in for another quick kiss. "Yes, I do, Cha," he whispered, then leaned up to leave. "See you in a few."

Alone, Chakotay sighed and bit his lip, struck by uncharacteristic doubts. He was grateful Tom understood. He hoped his friends would as well.

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Kassidy chuckled as she closed her bag. "Well, at least we were here long enough to make it worth my while to unpack, and then pack up again."

"You knew this was going to happen?" Sisko turned to give his lover a speculative glance.

"I thought it might, yes. Dorvans are very traditional." Kassidy wandered over to give Sisko a comforting pat on the shoulder. "Don't feel too bad. Chakotay did tell you how grateful he was for all you'd done."

Sisko ran his fingers along Kassidy's nape, feeling her shiver in pleasure as he gathered her close. "I know. And in a way I'm glad he wants to choose his own crews for the rebuilding. There's a lot to be done at the compound, and all of my artisans are here."

"And we have an open invitation to come back, not to mention B'Elanna and Harry joining us when Chakotay's a little more mobile."

Sisko gave a wicked grin. "That'll give us time to make sure the staff suites are properly soundproofed."

Kassidy returned the leer with one of her own and pulled his head down to claim his lips.

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Greg followed Chakotay's halting steps into his bedroom. He was glad to see his former comrade back on his feet, but anxious to get this conversation over with.

He had a feeling that the sword hanging over his head since that fateful day in Jean-Luc's cabin was about to fall.

A few steps past the doorway he paused, fidgeting, until Chakotay settled himself onto the edge of the bed and waved Greg over to a chair placed nearby.

Greg blinked, sat, stared, swallowed, and panted anxiously as he waited.

Chakotay watched Greg a long moment. "I'd like you to leave."

"What?" Greg had expected a blistering rehash of his betrayal, not this quiet mix of determination and regret. "Why?" He leapt to his feet to pace. "I can't. I need to help you, to make amends. I need--"

"And I need you to go." The hint of desperation in Chakotay's tone stopped Greg in his tracks.
Chakotay took a deep breath, holding on to his calm and control. "I can't have you here anymore, Greg. It---it hurts too much."

Greg slowly crossed back to his chair and sat, sensing Chakotay's struggle to explain.

"Greg, I know you want to help rebuild Trebus. And I'm sorry if you feel like I'm setting you adrift." Bronze hands lifted, opened, an unconscious plea for understanding. Chakotay explained, "I look at Leo and Andrei, I see Sue laughing with you, and all I can think about is that because of you my own wife and son are buried in a field, lying forever silent in graves I dug with my own hands."

Chakotay hands returned to clench his knees, marring the smooth lines of material with his tense grip. "I know it's not all your fault. It's Julian's, and the men who pulled the triggers."

He looked up, a hint of anguish twisting his lips. "And mine, for not being here." He paused. "But you are also partly to blame."

Greg felt the echo of that truth in his own soul. He winced in sympathy as he saw Chakotay shift and grunt with frustration. He knew the other man was wishing he could spring to his feet and walk out his agitation, but of course he couldn't. Not yet, at least.

Chakotay shook his head at his own impatience, then calmed down and looked at his friend once more. "You keep reminding me of the past, and a future that will never be. I feel like I can't focus on what's here and now. The blessings that brighten my life. I can't let go of the anger, and I have to. I have to."

He sighed. "I don't want to hate you, Greg. Or Sue, or Leo, or Andrei. But I'm afraid that's what will happen, if you stay."

He offered a rueful smile. "I don't remember who said it, but someone told me once that you wouldn't leave until I punished you, or forgave you. I do forgive you, but I have to rebuild my world a little more before I can invite you to be a part of it again."

Greg's brow furrowed as he considered Chakotay's words. Then he stood. "We'll pack up and hitch a ride with Kassidy and Sisko. I think the boys will enjoy a trip to DS9."

He held out a hand. "Thank you for your forgiveness, Chakotay, and your honesty." He looked down, his voice dropping. "I wish you all the best."

"I know." Chakotay took the offered hand and held it. "Take care of yourself, and your family. You're a good man, Greg. Please, promise me you won't feel guilty for being happy."

"I'll try." Greg almost sagged with relief as he was tugged down into a quick embrace. Then he stood and laid a hand on Chakotay's shoulder. "Promise me the same, old friend."

Chakotay smiled. "I promise."

Greg's head was high and his back straight as he left the room. Chakotay watched him go, then sighed as he felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. He tenderly stroked the braid that never left his wrist. "I still miss you both, so much," he said softly, "but I also know that life goes on. And that you want me to be happy. So I'll do my best."

He was still smiling as he slowly made his way to the bathroom to get ready for bed.
Chapter 23

Tom took inventory as he stood in Chakotay's bathroom. He was clean, inside and out. His robe was neatly and securely fastened. Beard suppressed, teeth brushed, face washed, hair combed.

With a sigh he glanced at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He looked terrified.

He shook his head in an attempt to dispel his unease. It wasn't as though he was about to face some horrible ordeal. He was simply going to lie beside the man he loved. The same man he'd been swapping spit with for days.

But this was different. This was *bed*. And *sleeping together*. Even if it was just going to be sleeping.

This was a kind of milestone, a marker in their long strange journey to each other. There were no more hurdles to vault, obstacles to overcome, barriers to breach. Nothing stood between them anymore. Not even clothes, unless Tom wore them.

At night, Chakotay usually slept in the nude.

That tidbit had aroused and alarmed Tom in the same instant. He was a little shocked as well to hear that many people on Dorvan did the same. And it was no big deal. Kids simply knew not to lift the sheet or blanket if they were stealing into their parents' room.

Tom glanced at the sprigs of hair visible between the lapels of his robe. He was in pretty good shape; he certainly had nothing to be ashamed of. It was just...it had been such a long time since he'd been so intimate with anyone. Since Annika's death.

And Tom had yearned hopelessly for Chakotay's love, to be enfolded in that strong embrace, since he was a teenager.

Chakotay had left his mark upon Tom's heart that night he'd pressed a hand to Tom's chest and refused his advances. In their decade apart his once-frantic desire had faded to a bittersweet ache.

But their too-brief time together after meeting again had sharpened Tom's feelings. The need for Chakotay had become like thirst, like hunger, like breath and blood. An elemental requirement for Tom's very being.

That need had driven Tom to take risks, dare things he'd never considered before. To prove himself worthy of the love of such a remarkable man.

And somehow Tom had succeeded. It was a little disconcerting to know Chakotay was finally his.

But it was absolutely terrifying to realize that *he* was Chakotay's: body, heart, mind, soul.

And yet...scared as he was, he wanted this more than anything in his life.

Tom glanced up again, and the man in the mirror looked back with anticipation tempering the fear.

It would have to do. Chakotay was waiting.

***************

Chakotay looked up from his contemplation of his robe-covered knees, watching from his seat on the
side of the bed as Tom entered. He was struck again by how different Tom was from the youth who had propositioned him all those years ago. Guileless desire and winsome charm had limned the vision of the teenage Tom, lying tucked in a corner of Chakotay's mind. Yet the memory paled in comparison to reality.

This Tom was an adult, a man who had lived, and loved, and lost. Who had survived a decade enmeshed in Imperial splendor and deceit with his integrity intact.

The face and form had become even more attractive, but it was Tom's soul that held Chakotay enthralled. His spirit, strong and shining. Chakotay would for the rest of his life be grateful to see the light of love in those clear blue eyes. To know that his feelings found their match in so wonderful a man.

He smiled in welcome, but his expression sobered as his lover approached. Concern furrowed his brow. "Your hands are shaking." He met Tom's gaze. "Are you afraid?"

"No." Tom folded his arms, ducked his head, looked at Chakotay through his lashes. "Yes, a little," he admitted, his voice low and embarrassed.

Chakotay reached up and tugged on Tom's elbow. He turned to face Tom as the younger man sat beside him. He leaned in and confided, "I am too." He pulled back to see amazement on Tom's features.

"What? Why? You've done this before, right?" Some of Tom's trepidation faded into curiosity.

Chakotay's head tilted as he considered the questions. "Done this? Shared a bed?---Yes, but not since the last time I was on Dorvan." Grief briefly twisted his face before the lines smoothed out again. "Slept with a man?---Also yes, but it's been more than ten years. Loved you?"

A tender smile lit his face. "Yes again, before and still." He picked up one of Tom's hands, feeling the faint tremor. "Which is why I'm so scared of screwing this up."

He leaned forward again and offered, "We don't have to take this step tonight, Tom. Or tomorrow, or even next month. Not until you're ready, and sure."

Now Tom's expression twisted in confusion. "I thought you wanted to sleep together."

"I did, and I do." One of Chakotay's hands drifted to cup Tom's shoulder, trying to convey earnestness, support, understanding, love, and all of the other emotions that tangled together made up the bond the men shared. "But Tom, I love you. I think you claimed your place in my heart the day you fell out of that air vent."

His eyes twinkled a moment with warm reminiscence. "And you're not going to forfeit it because you want to wait a while longer to share a bed, or even a life with me."

Chakotay's fingers tightened, ever so slightly. "You won't lose me until the day I die. And you can be sure that even on the spirit plane I'll feel the same for you. So please don't force yourself to do *anything* just because you think it's what I expect. All I want is for you to have no regrets."

The caring and love seemed to shimmer in the air around Chakotay, so strongly did Tom sense them. "There will be no refusals," Tom's smile shared his own recollection, his of a night forever etched on his mind. "And no regrets."

He kissed Chakotay very softly on the lips. "I love you. Let's go to bed."
Tom stood and helped Chakotay to his feet, steadying him as they shrugged off their robes. He was struck by the sight of sleek tawny skin sliding over muscles hardened by toil and battle.

Chakotay was beautiful, like the paragons of male power who inspired the sculptors of Earth through the centuries. A living bronze, but one whose eyes were all too human in their vulnerability, in the willingness to admit love, to show trust. Tom enclosed his beloved in the gentlest of embraces, his head resting on a broad shoulder, feeling the soft skin warm beneath his cheek.

The shivering of the body in his arms told Chakotay that Tom was yet uncertain. That the younger man was plowing forward anyway was pure Tom Paris. A sudden surge of emotion closed Chakotay's lids as he returned the hug. But his mind's eye arrayed his lover before him once more.

Tom's muscles and sinews were lean and long, their wiry strength evident even in stillness. His skin was pale, and dusted with hairs that had darkened from the blond fuzziness of youth to a rich red-gold. The sprinkling along Tom's gilded limbs, the line of glinting hair decorating his torso, all seemed appropriate. A clear sign to all fortunate enough to see Tom of how precious he was.

The couple's hands drifted slowly over each other, stroking, learning texture and shape. Their touches weren't intended to arouse, but to comfort, to connect, to offer a visceral reassurance that this moment was real.

Neither man knew how long they stood in their silent communion, but eventually Tom's nervous shaking stopped and Chakotay's fatigued trembling started. With a last clasp, Tom turned them and supported his lover as Chakotay settled under the covers.

Tom's face flushed at Chakotay's scrutiny as he circled the bed to reach his own side of the mattress. "See something interesting?" he asked, taking refuge in flippancy.

Chakotay grinned and opened his arms as his partner slithered in beside him. "Just enjoying the view. I have a sneaking suspicion that it's one I will never tire of."

A wry smile quirked Tom's lips as he felt a boneless relaxation steal over Chakotay. Despite the earlier nap, his man was worn out and ready to head to dreamland. "Then we'd better get you back in full health soon so you're the one strutting your stuff. Turnabout is fair play, you know."

Chakotay's chuckle was husky. "Does that mean you'll be prancing around in a skimpy tunic and sandals for months for my visual delectation?"

All of Tom's residual fears receded as the bubble of happiness in his chest expanded to warm his belly and fill his throat and prickle his eyes. "Not just visual," he murmured, his arms squeezing their promise.

"I'll hold you to it," Chakotay whispered, and held his love close to his heart as he shared the tale of Neelix and Kes until sleep claimed them.

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Harry gave a last gasp as he rolled off B'Elanna and onto his back beside her. He fumbled to entwine their fingers. His head turned to admire the sleek lines of her body shining with sweat. He was still amazed that this brilliant engineer, this fierce gladiator, this beautiful woman, had joined her life to his.

B'Elanna's nostrils flared, inhaling the scent of their musk. She glanced at her lover with a fierce grin. She hadn't expected to enjoy sex so much. Harry had proven himself well able to keep up with her needs, and her moods.
She was even more surprised at the way her fighting spirit embraced their union. They clicked in work and play, striking sparks and chords on many levels. Even in the quiet moments. The talk and soft touches, the closeness they shared, soothed and nurtured some aspect of herself she didn't quite recognize. Yet it felt good. *She* felt...complete.

B'Elanna gripped the hand around hers. "How are you doing there, Fleeter?" she teased.

"Not too bad, warrior woman." Harry smiled and reached over to brush the backs of his fingers across her brow ridges. "I'm sure I'll live, but if I don't, let me just say, 'what a way to go'.”

B'Elanna laughed in delight and rolled to rest on top of his strong, compact body. They were well matched, in all ways. "I'm glad to hear you'll recover. It's nice to know you've decided to stick around for a while."

Harry sobered, his dark eyes searching hers in the dimness. "For always, my B'El." He stared at her. "You don't believe me?"

B'Elanna's face clouded. She wanted to trust Harry. He seemed a man of honor. But he also came from a background and inhabited a world of privilege that she had no understanding of. She dropped her eyes to her fingertips as she traced patterns in the moisture beaded on his chest. "I think you believe it," she whispered.

Harry laid one hand on B'Elanna's hip as the other captured her chin. "B'Elanna, I need *you* to believe it. To know that I love you, that I'm going to be with you for the rest of our lives."

He shifted to cradle a sharply-drawn cheek. "Love needs trust. Without it..." His expression saddened as his voice dropped. "Without it we won't survive."

"Oh Harry," B'Elanna sighed, her distress clear in the sound. "I'm sure in my heart that you wouldn't tell me something if you didn't mean it. I just...I'm afraid."

She swallowed and confessed, "I've been alone for most of my life. Depended only on myself. But...I like the way you make me feel. The way we fit."

Her dark eyes swept over Harry's understanding face. "I don't want to *need* you, Harry. But I do, so much. Too much." Her breath came out in a rush. "I love you."

Harry felt a warmth bloom in his chest at B'Elanna's declaration. He firmly set her aside as he rose and knelt beside her. He grabbed her left hand in his right, resting his palm against the back of her hand and curling their fingers together. Squeezing as hard as he could, breaking the skin as her nails cut her palm, he muttered the words of an ancient Klingon ritual.

"What?!?" B'Elanna recognized the vow of marriage in her native tongue. Shock widened her eyes even as joy filled her. For Harry to speak those phrases meant he understood the promise he was making, bound in blood for all time. She was overcome with a fierce sense of rightness that came from a part of her soul she'd only vaguely glimpsed in Harry's company.

Not Klingon or human, but woman. Herself. B'Elanna Torres. Who in this moment chose to be the lifemate of Harry Kim.

She smiled as she shifted their hands to mark his palm with her nails in an acceptance of his suit. She then answered him, in Standard, using the words of human tradition. A vow to love, and honor, and cherish. Until death parted them.

Then they kissed as they pressed their bleeding palms together, sharing blood, sharing breath.
Knowing that they were joined. For the rest of their days.

***************

Tem leaned into Lakanta's body, relishing the warmth and strength of the arms surrounding him. Their kiss seemed to go on forever, yet ended much too quickly as the Dorvan leaned away to drop a last peck on Tem's nose ridges.

Lakanta smiled at the younger man's moonlit beauty. "You'd better get inside before they send out search parties."

Tem straightened as his lips formed a small moue of annoyance. "I was perfectly content to spend the night curled up in front of your fire. You didn't have to send me packing."

Long hair silvered by the moon flopped across Lakanta's shoulders as he shook his head. "Yes, I did. It wouldn't have been proper for us to spend the night together so soon. We've been dating for less than a month." He looked at Tem, hoping that the younger man wouldn't laugh at his old-fashioned ways. "I want to do this right."

Tem was touched by Lakanta's stubborn courtesy. It spoke of respect, and caring. He smiled and lifted a hand to toy with a lock of the other man's hair. "And that's important to you?"

"Yes." Lakanta took a deep breath and opened up a little more. "Because *you're* important to me."

Tem embraced his warrior once more, lifting on tiptoe to whisper, "And because you mean just as much to me, I'm going to go alone to my room right now and dream of you. Walking across moonlit fields, traveling the path to your house, getting ready for bed. Wishing I could be with you."

Lakanta brushed his lips across Tem's brow as the Bajoran drew away. He lifted a hand to answer his companion's wave. When he could no longer see Tem he murmured, "I'll be dreaming of you too."

***************

Sue watched her husband pace the confines of their room. "Greg, it's all right. I knew we weren't going to stay here forever. So did the boys."

A large hand ran agitatedly through rumpled black hair. "I know, I know," Greg threw over his shoulder as he walked back and forth in front of where Sue sat on the bed. "It's just...he's not letting me do anything to help."

"That isn't true and you know it, Greg." Sue stood and blocked his path. She clutched his shoulders. "You've done a lot in the time we've been here--and before." Her features softened as the depth of his anguish registered. "He's not punishing you, Greg. He forgave you."

"He told me he was sorry for having to ask me to go away." Greg's voice faltered as his expression crumpled. "Chakotay said--he said I was a good man."

"He was right. You are." Sue hugged her husband close to her body, stroking his hair. She felt him tuck his face into the crook of her neck, and the hot dampness when the tears began to fall. She closed her own eyes in relief. This was a necessary release, the draining of a wound that had been festering in Greg's spirit for far too long.

She would let him cry, then sleep. And in the morning he would be ready to find a new path. To begin life anew, unburdened by the guilt and the grief.
Sue also blessed Chakotay's generous heart, for truly setting Greg's soul free.

***************

Celes Tal led the way to the booth they'd reserved. The restaurant was a familiar hangout for San Francisco-based media types. It was warm and friendly and the food was plentiful, cheap, and delicious.

She flopped onto the bench and regarded her "herem", as the guys were known at the office. She considered them as they settled into their seats. Actually, they were all good catches: handsome, intelligent, sweet, funny. She doubted she could ever choose just one. It would hurt their friendships too much.

That was probably why Jake, Billy, Noah, and Mort never asked to date her. She had become too much like a kid sister to them all.

Tal grinned to herself. Prophets help any man who didn't do right by her, with so many would-be big brothers to deal with.

"What are you smiling at?" Billy asked, his eyes narrowing in mock suspicion.

"I'm just glad to be out of the office," she replied, leaning back into her seat with a sigh. "It's been a hell of a day."

"I think it's been a heavenly day," Jake retorted, eyes twinkling at the play on words.

"Well, you would," Noah conceded in his soft voice as he fiddled with his water glass. "You've got friends in *really* high places now."

"That's right. We're going to have to keep an eye on you." Mort's smile indicated this was *not* one of his famous conspiracy theories. "Make sure your ego doesn't swell too much at having the ear of the new Federation President."

"Not to mention a passing acquaintance with the VP," Tal pointed out. "And let's not forget the Admiral of the Fleet."

"Yep, pretty soon he's going to be *way* too hoity-toity to drink that awful FNN coffee." Billy nudged Jake's shoulder. "What with no silver spoon to stir it with."

"Enough already!" Jake laughed as he raised his hands to fend them off. "I'm just going to point out that if I'm too big for my britches, so are you. We've *all* been invited to the Inaugural Gala. And to the wedding."

"That was very kind of Will and Deanna," Noah said with a nod, abandoning the Jake-bashing. "But I was really surprised to get the invitation to travel with them to Dorvan."

"Yeah, not many people would open up their honeymoon cruise to other passengers," Mort chimed in. "Of course, it's not like Voyager doesn't have a few extra cabins."

"True," Billy said as he leaned on his elbows. "And I guess it's logical to have a Federation ship somewhat close to Bajor for *their* elections." He turned to Tal. "Do you know who you're voting for yet?"

Tal's forehead crinkled like her nose as she considered. "Not really. There are too many rumors floating around. I think I have to get there and listen to the candidates in person, or find out what
people really think of them outside of sound bytes and news vids."

She glanced at Jake. "By the way, thanks for arranging so we could get paid to go on this jaunt as part of your group."

Jake turned back from accepting their usual pitcher of beer and quintet of frosted mugs from the waitress. He shrugged and began pouring. "No problem. It made sense to put an FNN team out there for the vote, since the referendum for Bajor's entry into the Federation is so soon after."

He grinned. "I just hope Will doesn't mind the exclusive on his wedding."

"I think he'll be OK with it, as long as there's no visual feed." Billy shifted a sly look around the table. "So, folks, who's going to wear traditional Betazoid garb?"

"I don't know, what is it?" Tal was surprised to see color mounting in Mort's cheeks.

"Uh, um, your birthday suit." Mort took a hasty sip of his beer.

Noah chuckled at Tal's confused look. "The one you were wearing the second you were born."

The Bajoran's mouth formed a perfect little o of surprise. Then she shook her head vigorously. "Not even on a bet. No way."

Jake waved his hand, dispelling her fears. "Don't worry. The guests don't have to be naked. I already checked."

"That's a relief." Mort's tone turned casual. "So, Jake, is FNN going to break the news of Admiral Chakotay's whereabouts?"

"What? No, of course not." Jake glanced at his friend. "What makes you think they would even know where he is?"

"Well, you're a researcher only recently bumped up to reporter. Yet you're the correspondent they send to cover the wedding of the Admiral of the Fleet, *and* you get your pick of crew to head out with you to the frontier." Mort lifted his eyebrows. "It's not hard to connect the dots and come up with a picture of what you maybe gave the brass to close the deal."

Jake snorted. "I didn't give them anything other than what I told you: coverage of the wedding and Bajor's elections." At the others' disbelieving stares, his eyes dropped. "And maybe a piece on the people behind the hunt for that assassin they still haven't found---what's her name, Wynn."

Noah's brows drew together. "Is she that great a threat?"

"She may be." Billy frowned. "There are rumors she's been spotted near each of the candidates."

Tal chewed her lip in worry. "That poison she has could do a lot of damage. Jake, you're not going to get involved in the investigation, are you?"

Another shrug from him. "Nah, I'll probably just do the regular one-on-ones with the cops and tap my dad for the names of some of his shadier contacts to get the inside scoop. But FNN *does* want something big for all the expense they're going to."

Jake's eyes betrayed his own concern. "I just hope I can deliver."

Mort gave Jake's back a reassuring thump. "Don't worry about it. With this team, I'm sure we'll be able to wrap up the case on our own in no time. And then you can interview Wynn herself."
"It's in the bag," Noah seconded.

They all raised their mugs, clinked them for good luck, and got down to the serious business of deciding what to eat.

***************

Garak carefully carried the glasses brimming with canard over to the sofa.

Ziyal reached up to accept one, smiling at her husband. He was practically crackling with energy and excitement. "You seem...pleased," she said slyly.

The Legate of Cardassia shot his mate a look of fond exasperation. "Pleased? Are you sure you're not overstating things a bit?" He sat down beside her and wrapped his arm around her slender shoulders.

Ziyal swung her feet up and to the side to lie along the couch, snuggling down against Garak's chest. "No, I don't think so. Kathryn and Geordi kept their promise to aid Cardassia. And they were much more generous than expected."

She sipped her drink, savoring its unique flavor a moment. "Now if we can just put the materials and monies to good use, our people will be well on their way to recovery."

"Not only us," Garak noted as his fingers slid into his wife's thick hair. "All of the rebel worlds will receive some sort of assistance. I think there is a Terran precedent, something called a 'Marshall Plan'. I'll admit I really don't care what the name is, as long as we can continue to rebuild."

"Still, it took a lot of courage for our friends to be so blunt about their intentions before the Federation elections." Ziyal leaned up to look into Garak's face. "When you heard their speeches outlining the plan to revamp all the formerly second-class worlds of the Federation *and* to aid their beaten enemies, did you think they had any chance at all of winning?"

Garak smiled and brushed noses with Ziyal. "Not even an infinitesimal one, my dear, as you are well aware. I was already drawing up the bill for Dorvan and Bajor, since their people had sworn unconditionally to help us."

Ziyal chuckled. "I figured as much. Still, it's better for everyone if burdens are spread among many. Whether you're talking about people or planets."

"I wouldn't have agreed with you, once upon a time." Garak's eyes unfocused as he looked into the past. "So many of us were raised with the belief that there is always someone beneath you whom you can force to fill your needs. And, as an elite member of the state, you have every right to abuse them."

"I know, but things are different now. You're a different person." A gentle squeeze of her husband's thigh reinforced Ziyal's words. "And we have a chance to make Cardassia a better place. To show our people they don't have to live that way."

"Maybe," Garak conceded. "But it will be a hard journey, and a long one."

"But we've already taken the first steps, Elim, and every small advance brings us closer to our goal. We *can* do this. We will. I'm sure of it." Ziyal sat up and raised her canard in a toast. "To new beginnings."

"To new beginnings," Garak echoed, and replenished his store of faith and hope once again by
gazing into the shining eyes of his beloved wife.

They clinked glasses and shared a kiss.
Chapter 24

Chakotay woke in the pre-dawn stillness to an almost-forgotten sensation.

He wasn't alone.

He lay on his side, the warmth of another person radiating against his back. Soft breaths stirred his hair. A slim arm was firmly wrapped around his torso, and someone else's legs had tucked themselves into the bend of his own.

Chakotay's eyes misted as he remembered the last time he'd experienced such things. It was years ago, the last time he'd been on Dorvan. The last time he and Ro Laren had awakened together. Right before he kissed his wife and son good-bye and headed off to continue fighting Emperor Jean-Luc Picard's last war.

Chakotay was startled from his musings when his companion muttered incoherently and tightened his arm around Chakotay's chest.

Tom. Another love. Another time. The present rather than the past.

Chakotay pondered the differences in having a man share his bed. The body behind him was taller, extending slightly above and below the reach of Chakotay's own.

Tom was definitely hairier. The fine strands decorating his limbs tickled as they brushed Chakotay's skin, while the crisp fleece that painted red-gold along the younger man's chest and belly created a wonderful tingly friction against Chakotay's back with each breath.

Of course, it was also impossible to ignore Tom's morning erection poking his butt.

Chakotay absently ran his palm the length of Tom's forearm, stroking, while he took a moment to tuck the past away into a corner of his mind and heart. He would visit that place often, keeping those he had cherished alive in his thoughts for the rest of his life.

But he also had new memories to make, a new life to embark upon.

And a new love to explore. Starting now.

With a smile that held just a hint of mischief, Chakotay opened the drawer on the bedside table and fished around until he found a bottle of moisturizer. He used the creamy, unscented lotion to slick the skin of his inner thighs, then returned the container.

With a lift of one leg and a shift of his hips, Chakotay captured Tom's cock in the crease of his body. He felt the shaft slide against the crack of his ass and underneath his scrotum, the tip of Tom's cock teasing the sensitive skin. And he waited for Tom to wake.

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Damn, he felt good. No, better than good. Fantastic.

Tom stirred and felt his dick slip a little farther into its unknown haven. There was warmth, and smoothness, a gentle pressure and a silky texture. All along the front of his body pleasant sensations sparked along his nerves. Then awareness clicked into acknowledgement.

Chakotay. His love, and by all indications, soon to be his lover.
His eyes flew open to see Chakotay's black hair and a bronze body pressed close to his.

Wonderfully, deliciously close. So close that Tom's cock was encased in Chakotay's warmth.

Tom's brows drew together as his higher brain functions more fully engaged. "Uh, Cha, is the Doc okay with this?" He gestured with the arm wrapped around Chakotay's frame and was distracted when his fingertips brushed against Chakotay's groin. He tentatively explored the new territory, learning texture and shape, becoming more confident when Chakotay moaned softly and arched into the touch.

Chakotay gathered his rapidly scattering wits as Tom continued his ministrations. "He said that I should resume my regular activities as soon as I could, as long as I didn't overexert myself."

He wondered if Tom could hear his smile. "I figure sex with you will be occurring fairly regularly, and in this position you'll be the one responsible for most of the exertion."

Tom flexed his hips experimentally in reply, grunting at the pleasure the move evoked. "Have I ever mentioned just how much I admire that mind of yours?" Tom leaned forward to plant kisses along Chakotay's temple. "So beautifully efficient."

"Why, thank you," Chakotay said teasingly as he turned his head to meet Tom's mouth. "It's always nice to be appreciated."

Tom's rejoinder was stopped by the brush of Chakotay's lips against his own. He would never refuse this offer. He had sampled them before, but too briefly, too rarely to be satisfied.

He would never be satisfied, or more than temporarily sated. Tom hoped that for the rest of his days the first and final taste of the day would be this sweet mouth, this combination of hardness and softness the touch that greeted him in the morning and at night offered a tender benediction before he drifted to sleep.

Now he submerged himself in the mingling of their breaths, the press of their flesh as he slid back and forth in the cradle of Chakotay's thighs, a slow sweet friction burning along his nerves. He raised his hand to drift along Chakotay's throat and chest, across the smooth flat belly and down.

Touching another man was familiar and strange at once. Tom rolled Chakotay's balls in their sac, sharing what had always felt good to him. His knuckles brushed the tip of his own pumping cock, sending an extra thrill shooting through his veins. The heat, the slickness, the scent of sex drove him on.

His fingers returned to clasp Chakotay's shaft, feeling the pulse of the thick vein against his palm, the slickness of the leaking tip. Tom sensed the build toward climax in his core, the heat and tension in his balls that signaled the approach of ecstasy. He moved his hand faster, wanting Chakotay to join him in completion.

And still their mouths mated, sliding and shifting, never parting even as breaths escaped in grunts and pants as excitement rose to unbearable levels.

Chakotay's hips danced in time with his partner, forward so his cock was stroked by Tom's fist, back to feel the slide of the long engorged shaft between his thighs. He snaked one arm back, crooking his elbow and turning his forearm and wrist to reach up. His fingers sank into Tom's hair, enhancing the feeling of connection.

The lightning raced under his skin, sending sparks along his nerves to his brain to his balls to his cock. Deep inside his body the shockwave gathered, and in an instant flashed through him in a rush
of joy. Chakotay gave himself over to it, let the pleasure take him. He groaned into Tom's mouth, his pelvis jerking as he spilled his seed into Tom's waiting fingers.

Tom's muffled shout mingled release and relief as he felt Chakotay shudder in his grip. He pressed himself even closer, arching his spine to drive his dick as far as he could between his lover's thighs. He felt like he would never stop coming, that his back would break and his heart give out before his cock did. His head filled with light and noise and scent and taste forever and ever—until his body released all its tension at once. He sank onto the mattress, a boneless pile of bliss.

The men finally broke their kiss and lay unmoving beyond their heaving breaths.

Chakotay rolled to his other side to gaze at his lover. Tom's eyes were dilated, unfocused, staring. Dark brows drew together in worry as Chakotay reached out a hand to Tom's cheek, his thumb ghosting over the kiss-swollen lips. "Hey there, Tom, you OK?"

Tom dragged his brain back into some semblance of order as he noted Chakotay's concern. "Yeah," he wheezed, then tried again. "Yeah, Cha, I'm just...Wow. I mean, I know it's been a while, but...Wow."

Chakotay chuckled. "And that's just the beginner's level."

"I'm not sure I'll survive to become an expert." The twinkle in Tom's eyes faded as he stared at Chakotay intensely, the emotions flooding him overwhelming. After the longest moment, he whispered, "I've never been so afraid of anything as I was of losing you."

Chakotay grimaced in sympathy. His fingers slid down to twine with Tom's, ignoring the stickiness. "But you didn't, Tom. You did everything just right."

He hesitated, his teeth worrying his lower lip a moment. Wondering if he should give voice to his own nebulous fears. Then he looked into the blue eyes so close and admitted quietly, "Actually, I'm more afraid of keeping you."

Tom's forehead creased in puzzlement. He propped his head on his free hand. "Why? I don't understand."

"Because you grew up roaming the corridors of power, Tom," Chakotay replied. "In the middle of the hustle and bustle of the most cosmopolitan city on the most sophisticated planet in the known universe."

He sighed. "Maybe you'll make a commitment to me and then someday feel I'm holding you back, tying you down. I'm afraid that despite your enthusiasm for blue skies and green fields, you're going to get bored with this little backwater world."

He looked down at their twined hands. "Or maybe you'll get bored with me. After all, you're younger than me, and I'm only the second lover you've ever had."

Chakotay lifted his eyes once more. "I don't want to be 'the old ball and chain', Tom. Maybe you should give yourself some time to be sure this really is the life you want."

Tom shook his head at the absurdity of the notion and slid over until he had Chakotay flat on the bed and completely trapped beneath him. He captured his lover's hands, pressing them into the pillows. When they were nose to nose he spoke. "I am only going to say this once, so you'd better pay attention, Cha. San Francisco was nothing more than a gilded cage for me, so I'm glad to leave it behind. Dorvan is full of interesting people and ideas, and it's one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. I can set down roots here, build a home."
Tom pressed a sudden kiss to Chakotay's mouth, sinking again into the pool of sensation he hated to leave. After an indulgent moment he pulled back to insist, "As for other lovers, who the hell else is there for me? I've dreamed of having you in my bed for a decade. So now that I've finally got you here, don't think you have even the slightest chance of escaping." He could still see the worry tingeing the dark brown eyes, even as Chakotay responded with a small smile.

"Technically, you're in *my* bed," Chakotay pointed out as he arched into Tom's frame.

"Ah, but we share and share alike, so what's yours is mine." Tom's expression turned fierce as his grasp tightened. "The way that *you* are mine."

Then his face softened as his eyes glittered with moisture. "And the way I'm yours. Believe me, Cha, there's no place in the universe I'd rather be than in your arms."

"I'm sorry for questioning you, Tom. Especially after you've already told me you're ready for this, and all that we've shared. It's just..." Chakotay struggled to put his emotions into words, to explain the doubts that whispered in his mind at odd moments.

Reminding him of all those he had failed, telling him he didn't deserve to be loved. "To be honest, every once in a while I find myself feeling like everything is going to collapse around me again. That I'm going to end up alone. Because I really haven't earned the right to be happy."

Chakotay felt his face flush. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "I know it sounds silly, but I can't help it. Survivor's guilt, I guess."

He lifted his head to deliver a tender kiss of apology. "But never doubt that I do love you, Tom Paris." His conviction shone in his eyes. "And I want to keep you."

In some strange way Chakotay's confession reassured Tom. Chakotay clearly trusted Tom—and their bond—enough to confess the doubts plaguing him. It also touched Tom in a way he couldn't define, to see this vulnerability in such a strong man.

At first he was amazed Chakotay could ever doubt himself, question his worthiness. Then Tom remembered wrestling with his own bouts of self-blame after Annika died. Chakotay had lost so much more; it would take time to lay all the ghosts permanently to rest. Considering that, it was no wonder the man still felt guilty sometimes. And uncertain of the future.

Tom gave a soft smile of understanding and released his grip, sliding to the side to remove most of his weight. With a sigh he nestled into Chakotay's welcoming embrace, resting his head on a strong shoulder. "Then keep me close, Cha, because I love you too."

"I will, I promise." His momentary uncertainties soothed away, Chakotay closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of contentment as they waited for the alarm to ring.

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Rosera lifted a wooden cane from the rack attached to the wall, tucking the slim object under her arm.

"Not that one," Anthwara said irritably from his seat on the couch. "That was a birthday present."

Rosera breathed in patience and exhaled her frustration. "That's the only one left, old man, and you know it. None of the others were 'suitable' either."

She turned and shot an exasperated look at the white-haired Dorvan. "Why don't I just borrow a cane
"Why doesn't he just replicate one?" Anthwara sneered as he sipped his tea. He'd been surprised by his early visitor, and even more so by her request. He had a sneaking suspicion that Chakotay didn't even know about this loan.

"Because it wouldn't be the same." Rosera strolled over to reclaim her seat and her own cup of tea from the low table. She propped the cane next to her. "It was different when he had to use the walker to get around. But pretty soon he'll just need some help with balance. And it would be nice for him to hold something from Dorvan, from his homeworld, as he works to find it."

Anthwara's eyes narrowed. "There's more to it than that, isn't there? You know he'll be addressing the council today. You want him to make a good impression." The last was an accusation.

"Maybe." Rosera shrugged. "Or maybe I just want him to know not everyone will be as hostile to him as they were to his mate."

A grunt was Anthwara's only reply. Rosera tossed her hair over her shoulder and sipped her tea, then casually asked, "Are you going to let Chakotay do as he wishes with Trebus? After all, he *is* the caretaker of the land."

Anthwara scowled into his empty cup. "It's not up to me. The council makes the decision. After the Spirits have their say."

"But your opinion carries enough weight to tip the balance in either direction." Rosera set down her drink and stood, pointedly picking up the cane to take with her. "Just remember that even if his vision of Trebus clashes with yours, you still share the best of intentions. Chakotay loves Dorvan as much as you do."

Anthwara simply grunted again as he watched Rosera leave. Then he continued to sit, staring into space, thinking of the past.

And the future.

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"I've examined my internal logs, Chakotay, and there is no record of me authorizing sexual gymnastics." The EMH ran a regenerator over his patient's neck, easing the strained muscles. "I would have thought *you* at least would have shown some restraint."

His eyes narrowed as he took on a suspicious air. "Or perhaps that's the problem---were there restraints involved?"

Chakotay choked, then peered at the readings as the Doc switched back to a tricorder. "How in the world can you tell Tom and I had sex?"

The hologram slapped the instrument closed and set it aside. At the sight of Chakotay's horrified expression he relented. "I happened to see Mr. Paris on his way out this morning. He was glowing, yet had not taken the time for exercise. His lips showed definite signs of swelling, and his smile was 2.5 centimeters wider than typical."

He paused. "The evidence was easily apparent. He obviously---what is the phrase?---got some."

"Oh," Chakotay slumped in relief that medical advances hadn't made the technology quite *that* invasive. "Well, you're right, Tom and I did...indulge a little. But it wasn't anything wild. I just
twisted my head a bit too far, and didn't notice until afterward."

The Doc picked up a padd and briskly made a notation. "Actually, you seem to have unconsciously conducted a very useful test. Adrenaline and endorphins often prevent awareness of pain or stress. Then later, when the body calms, the muscles make their complaints known."

He glanced over. "The fact that you experienced pleasure..." He paused to acknowledge Chakotay's nod. "And then were able to experience the minor pain of this neck ache without problem is a sign of normal response to stimuli."

Chakotay shifted on the diagnostic bed. "And the rest of the therapy seems to be going well. So...do you think it's safe for me to upgrade to a cane? I have to address the Dorvan council this afternoon, and honestly I'd rather be walking under mostly my own power."

The Doc tilted his head and considered. In his time since activation he had come to understand that a physician must take into account the patient's psychological, not just physical, well-being. He nodded slowly. "Yes, if you are careful to stay on even terrain and take your time. Oh, and that you have someone beside you at every step—just in case."

"Thanks, Doc." Chakotay smiled his gratitude. He knew the level of aid he used to approach the council wouldn't significantly alter anyone's perception, but he thought he'd need every advantage when facing the planetary leaders with his plan for Trebus. "And Tom will be with me, so I'll be fine."

"That's good to hear." The EMH made a last notation. "As for your overall condition, Chakotay, I believe that if your physical rehabilitation continues to progress at this rate, you'll soon be dispensing with my services."

Chakotay saw his opening and took it. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Doc." He kept his voice casual. "Have you thought about what you'll be doing once my treatment is finished?"

The EMH blinked in surprise. "I didn't think I had any say in that. I am, after all, simply a program originally designed to be a temporary addition to a ship's medical staff."

He frowned as he pondered his fate. "I expect I'll be shipped back to Dr. Zimmerman to be incorporated into his current research matrix."

"So you'll cease to exist?" Shock swept through Chakotay at the hologram's equanimity at the idea. "In this incarnation, yes." The Doc fingered the small case at his side that housed his portable emitter. "But I suppose my experiences will aid my creator in enhancing his next model." He wondered if he was trying to convince Chakotay, or himself, that this was acceptable.

"But is that what you want?" Chakotay closely watched the expressions flitting across the hologram's face. It was amazing that the EMH had changed so much in such a short time, adding nuances of personality, making friends, discovering his own likes and dislikes.

Although his lack of a future was horrible to contemplate, the Doc shrugged it off as inevitable. "What I want hardly matters. I'm Dr. Zimmerman's property."

He raised a skeptical brow. "Unless you're planning on committing grand theft hologram."

"No, no, nothing like that." Chakotay caught the flash of disappointment in the dark eyes and realized the EMH wasn't quite as dispassionate as he sought to appear. "No, I was thinking more along the lines of asking Dr. Zimmerman to let you continue as a separate entity, to grant you
citizenship in your own right."

He warmed to the topic. "You were a copy of his research matrix, so if we transmit a report on the developments within your program, that should be enough for him to continue his work. You could stay out on the frontier."

Chakotay shrugged. "Assuming, of course, that you'd want to. The choice would be yours. I'm sure that there are many facilities in the core worlds that would welcome someone with your credentials."

"Where would I stay on Dorvan? What would I do?" The Doc wondered if this sudden giddy lightness was hope.

"In Trebus, if you like. There are plans to rebuild---*if* we can get the council's approval. This warehouse will probably become a research facility. You're a natural fit. And since the war there are many worlds on the borders needing medical help. You'd get the chance to meet a variety of different people---and to do a lot of good."

"I---I must admit I don't know what I want." The Doc cleared his throat. "It never occurred to me I had a choice."

He wanted to be certain of his data. "You'd really ask Zimmerman to let me go?"

"Of course. You're not just a diagnostic tool. You're our friend." Chakotay slid off the bed and snagged his walker. "We don't want to see you decompiled."

He laid a hand briefly on the Doc's forearm, squeezed, then began to maneuver himself out the door. "I'll send the request to keep you active this morning. You think about what you might like to do."

The Doc waved Chakotay out, then stood in the center of the room. His worldview shifted as he realized he might actually have a future. Maybe even a home. He gave a small smile.

One thing he was sure of, no matter what happened: He had friends.

After a few moments, the Doc started working again, humming a selection from a comic opera. One with a happy ending.

Yes, this feeling was definitely hope.

******************************************************************************

"Do we have room for a horse, Daddy T?" Koral asked as she stood at Tom's elbow. She peered at the study's computer screen, trying to decipher the blueprint displayed. She briskly amended her request. "Actually, just one would get lonely. And we can't have that. Five would be much better---six, if Tem is going to stay."

"I, uh, I'm not so sure about that, Koral." Tom turned to see three hopeful, slightly calculating faces staring back at him. "Your uncle and I haven't really discussed farm animals."

"But *you're* designing things," Jelene insisted, drawing out the second word to convey its importance. She added brightly, "Why don't you just add a stable?"

"It wouldn't have to be all *that* big." Koral hoped she sounded convincing. "Horses don't need much room---really."

"Yeah, Dad, we need a stable for some horses. I want to learn how to ride. All the other kids on
"Dorvan know how." Lucien's voice hadn't quite reached a whine, but Tom sensed it coming and moved to head it off.

"Look, kids, I'm starting the design of the house---and *it* is definitely going to be equine-free," Tom said firmly. "Honestly, I'm not sure if there would be enough space for such big animals. And they're an awful lot of work. Plus, Lucien and I have no idea how to take care of them. So it sounds like a long-shot to me."

He stifled his grin, anticipating their reaction to his next words. "But it's not really my decision. The grounds and outbuildings are going to be Chakotay's department. If you want horses, you'll have to take it up with him."

As Tom predicted, the trio turned inward for a huddle, whispered comments rising around their closely gathered heads. He leaned back into his chair, confident that he'd successfully avoided being the bad guy in this situation. He'd leave the refusal of hoofed residents to Chakotay.

Suddenly the children broke their circle and lined up in front of him expectantly.

Lucien was the spokesperson this time. His tone was eminently reasonable. "If you won't let us have horses, what about dogs?"

Tom knew he'd been set up when he saw the eager, pleading faces. He groaned as he imagined following a pack of scrambling pooches, scooper in hand. Before he could answer, he heard the faint clump of his rescuer's approach.

The trio broke ranks and hurried to greet Chakotay, who was carefully making his way to the desk using a carved wooden cane. Tom rose to meet his lover, assisting Chakotay into his own vacated chair. He took the cane and examined the workmanship, running appreciative fingers along its polished surface. "This is really nice."

Chakotay hummed an agreement. "Rosera brought it over for me. It's one of Anthwara's spares, for when his ankle bothers him."

He settled more comfortably into his seat and addressed his entourage. "So what trouble will you be getting into today?" he inquired, eyes twinkling.

Jelene giggled, shuffling her feet, playing with her wristband. "None. Not even one little bit."

Koral nodded sagely. "Yes, we're very responsible for our age, Papa C."

Lucien also chimed in, despite seeing Tom roll his eyes at their statements. "Yeah. We're going to Lakanta's with Tem to house-sit while Lakanta's at the council meeting this afternoon."

"Oh..." Chakotay glanced at Tom and in raised golden eyebrows received confirmation of his suspicions. "Well, you do know not to go near the mother while she's getting ready to give birth, right? And to leave the puppies alone until Lakanta says it's safe to pet them?"

He waited for nods from each child, then leaned forward to deliver a quick kiss to each forehead. "All right, then have a good time, and mind what Tem tells you."

"But we wanted to know if---" Koral started."

"Yeah, you guys had better get ready. I'm sure Tem is anxious to get over there." Tom seized the opportunity to end the discussion and shooed the kids out of the study. He chuckled as he returned to
perch on the arm of Chakotay's chair, curling around his companion. "Whew, that was a close one."

Chakotay grinned. "You're right. Let's just hope there aren't too many of those puppies, or we're lost. If I remember correctly, the twins can be ruthless when they really want something."

Tom gave a mock groan. "And Lucien definitely knows persuasion is an art. Expect to receive essays on the benefits of pet ownership."

Chakotay carefully spun them both to face the computer screen. "Well, at least it was a momentary distraction. I forgot all about facing the council later."

He glanced over. "You're still coming with me, right?"

"Of course." Tom squeezed a shoulder in reassurance. "I'll be there to catch you if you faint from nervousness."

He grinned at Chakotay's snort. "Hey, I've had to stand up to them myself. They're a pretty formidable bunch."

"Agreed," Chakotay sighed. His eyes drifted absently over Tom's blueprints, then he blinked and focused on the computer screen. "Tom, is this the design for the house?"

"The first draft, yeah." He peered over Chakotay's head.

Chakotay worded his next question carefully. "And you decided that what Dorvan really needed was its very own castle?"

"Castle, what do you mean?" Tom started pointing out features of the design. "It only has twelve bedrooms---we *will* be having guests quite often, you know."

"Probably, but that many at one time? And Tom, you've set aside an entire floor for a library."

Chakotay looked over. "I was thinking of some bookcases in a corner of the living room, some wing chairs and maybe a fireplace."

"But Chakotay, Lucien's inherited a *ton* of books. I don't want to see them all end up in storage."

"Maybe he could donate most of them---the ones with no sentimental value---to a town library," Chakotay suggested. "Then everyone on the planet could have the chance to enjoy them."

"Well, I suppose," Tom said, unconvinced.

"And you have so many storerooms." Chakotay shook his head in bewilderment as he switched to different views on the computer screen. "Tom, I don't think an entire town on Dorvan has enough stuff to fill that much space."

"If you don't like the design---" Tom started.

"No, it's not that, really." Chakotay gently urged Tom from his perch so they were facing each other. "I just think our house needs to blend in a little more. I know you're used to grand halls and chandeliered ceilings, but I don't think that will work here."

He shrugged. "Besides, who's going to clean it all?"

That caught Tom's attention. "Didn't you say you had servants before?"

"A few, but Tom, they weren't house servants." Chakotay gestured vaguely. "Just some field
workers for the farm and a few handymen and accountants. And that was really Laren's show. She kept a vast operation running smoothly all year round."

He gently gathered Tom's hands in his own, seeking Tom's uncertain gaze. "If this is what you want, that's fine."

He smiled. "I honestly don't care what style the place is, as long as the windows can open to the sun and the breeze—-but keep out the bugs." He lifted their joined hands, sketching an arc in the air. "I just think we're going to spend a heck of a lot of time taking care of the buildings, instead of each other."

Tom rubbed his thumbs across Chakotay's knuckles, absorbing the other man's concerns. He thought about the structures he'd seen so far on Dorvan: not overly large, but open and airy. Filled with comforting, homey touches rather than luxurious appointments. He set aside what he was familiar with and seriously pondered the kind of place he wanted to come home to. What he would choose to build, now that he had the freedom to do so.

With a last squeeze, Tom freed himself, turned and closed the file. "I'm going to start fresh tomorrow morning." He answered the questions he could already see forming on those eminently kissable lips. "And yes, Cha, it's because I want to. I think I constructed these on automatic, just re-creating what I was used to."

He chuckled self-deprecatingly. "And you're right. The Imperial Palace would *not* look good stuck in the middle of Trebus."

"Not even on the outskirts," Chakotay confirmed. He tugged Tom down for a brief kiss. "But if that's what you really wanted, Tom, I'd build it for you."

"Yeah, but would you do windows?" Tom asked with a smile.

"Maybe—-if you gave me the right incentive," Chakotay replied with a wicked grin.

"Don't start something you can't finish, mister," Tom warned. "You don't want to be late for the meeting."

"You're right," Chakotay sighed regretfully and let Tom help him to his feet. "And I think I'm going to need all my strength."

Tom handed Chakotay his cane and wrapped an arm around his lover's waist. "And just a bit of luck."

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Rosera paused outside the Doctor's office. She could hear him singing, his voice soaring through Italian phrases with a true exhilaration. She recognized the lyrics and patiently waited for him to conclude. When he did she stepped forward, offering a sincere round of applause. "That was wonderful."

The Doc hastily put down his equipment. He felt unaccountably flustered, despite the serenity that seemed to surround the Dorvan woman like a cloak. "Oh, hello, Rosera. I didn't hear you come in."

"I didn't want to interrupt you." She gave a small smile.

"Well, yes, that was quite considerate of you." The Doc cleared his throat—-a useful human affectation—-and asked, "Now, just what is it I can do for you? You're not ill, I trust."
"No, Doctor, my request is not of a medical nature." Rosera wandered the room, running her fingertips over consoles and padds, noting the smooth coolness of all of the surfaces. Finally she turned. "From your performance just now, may I assume that you are continuing your study of opera?"

"Yes, I would say that was rather obvious," the EMH replied with a hint of sarcasm, one brow rising.

"And you are also aware that Chakotay will be hosting some of his friends from Earth in a few weeks? They'll be going to Bajor for the elections, then coming here for a blessing ceremony."

"While I'm often the last to know," the Doc noted, "Chakotay has been very kind about 'keeping me in the loop'. So yes, I am aware of their arrival date."

"I was wondering, Doctor, if you would consider..." Rosera took a deep breath, then finished in a rush, "Accompanying me in a small recital some evening when they're here."

"Don't you mean accompany you *to* a recital?" The Doc's forehead creased in a simulation of confusion.


"I am unfamiliar with Dorvan music, madame, but I'm aware it involves a substantial amount of chanting." The Doc continued emphatically, "I'm a medical man, not a medicine man. I don't chant."

Rosera chuckled. She liked the acerbic hologram; he certainly preferred plain speaking. "I shudder to imagine you trying. No, Doctor, I thought perhaps some duets from the more romantic operatic composers---a kind of 'Music for Lovers' evening."

The EMH was completely nonplussed. He asked the obvious question. "Do you sing?"

He was even more stunned when Rosera echoed back to him a few phrases from the piece he had just finished. As a mezzo-soprano, of course. His mouth hung open in shock.

Rosera chuckled again at how human this collection of light beams could appear at times. She reached over and closed the gaping maw. "Well?"

The Doc collected himself. His perspective shifted with the sudden realization that there were people who shared his interests on this world---and probably many others on the frontier. He grasped Rosera's hand and bowed over it. "I would be honored, madame."

Rosera smiled her delight. Although she enjoyed the chants and songs of her people, she always felt a special thrill when she let loose her breath and soul in the lyrics of the great works of long-ago Europe.

It was sometimes difficult to find a man who was willing to join her. Especially when it came to performing outside the healing or spiritual circle.

But the Doctor seemed to have no qualms whatsoever about singing his head off. And he certainly was a perfectionist.

She gave the fingers around hers a little squeeze. This could work out very well indeed.

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"Please, Kai, reconsider." The ragged edges of Kira's patience roughened her voice. She pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose, ignoring the serene courtyard visible through the large window of the temple office. It was a struggle to keep her tone respectful. "We only have your best interests and safety in mind."

From her seat behind a low table, Opaka could practically see the frustration rippling the air around the security officer. She gave a gentle smile and glanced toward her aide. "And you agree with our esteemed guest, Bariel?"

"Yes, Opaka." Bariel moved forward, the worry clear in his eyes. "If Wynn got to Jaro Essa, there's no doubt that she can find a way to reach you."

He turned to acknowledge Kira's nod of confirmation before continuing. "Besides, your fellow candidate Shakaar is *increasing* his complement of guards, not dismissing them." He pointedly concluded, "Again."

Ignoring the rest of his statement, Opaka asked Kira, "How is Minister Jaro?"

"He'll be all right. It looks like whatever was in that preventive cocktail from Earth really works. At least for small exposures." Kira's lips twitched. "He wasn't up to his usual politicking for a day or so, but his oily smile is now firmly back in place."

Bariel resisted the urge to grin at Kira's obvious dislike of the shady power-broker. He walked over to sit next to his friend and fellow cleric. "Please, Kai Opaka. I know you want to let the people see you, know you—even touch you—when you speak to them. But that is exactly the kind of opportunity Wynn knows how to take advantage of."

Unable to maintain her silence, Kira whirled and crossed to join the conversation. "She's an *assassin*, Kai. Not some disgruntled citizen waving a placard or throwing rotten fruit."

"I've never thought my performances at the podium were *that* bad." Opaka sighed and looked at her two would-be protectors. "It sets a bad precedent. If I'm afraid of Wynn as a candidate, how much more fearful will I be if I become First Minister?"

She stood, ending the discussion. "No, I will continue as I have, without bodyguards or taste-testers or whatever other measures will keep me from the people." She rested one hand on each set of stiff shoulders. "It will be all right. The vote is in two weeks. I'm sure I can survive on my own until then."

Opaka drifted out of the room. Bariel and Kira looked at each other, taking measure.

"What can we do?" Bariel asked. His face was grim.

"She's turned down all the conventional protections." Kira returned his stare. "It's time to get creative."

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Odo regarded the trio of downcast Ferengi with a baleful eye. "She's a wanted criminal. How could you sell her a personal cloaking device?"

"It didn't work," Rom said, his tone placating. "She should never have been able to disappear from the sensors like that."

Quark quickly chimed in, "We gave you the frequency of the signal that was leaking through. Those
Nog just stayed hunched in his seat and hoped that this brush with the law wouldn't prevent him from attending the Fleet Academy on Earth next semester. He was determined to get away from his uncle's shady schemes and put to good use the engineering skills he'd picked up from his father.

On some level he couldn't believe that Uncle Quark had been foolish enough to smuggle a personal cloak onto Bajor, even if it was a malfunctioning one. And to have the audacity to sell it to the planet's Public Enemy Number One...he sighed and wished he were anywhere else.

Odo grunted and perched on the corner of his desk. "They would have, if Wynn hadn't figured out a way to fix or replace the flawed equipment." He crossed his arms. "You're lucky Jaro survived, or you'd all be facing charges as accessories to murder."

"No!" Rom said as he jumped to his feet. "Nog wasn't involved in this at all. He shouldn't even be here."

His usually hesitant voice was emphatic, his expression fierce with a parent's need to protect. "I insist that you make sure none of this goes on his record."

He approached the shape-shifter. "Quark and I will help you, and face the penalties for selling that broken device---but Nog's going to be a Fleet Cadet, and I won't let you jeopardize his future."

Quark squawked and leapt up, spinning Rom to face him. "Just where do you get off selling me like a cheap Lobi crystal." His face darkened with anger. "Just who do you think is making the decisions here?"

"I* am," Odo said, his gravelly voice ending the incipient argument between the brothers. "And you should be thanking Rom for giving you a chance to stay out of jail, Quark."

"What?" Quark sensed a shift in the dynamics of the room. Maybe they really were in trouble. He knew how to go with the flow, and gave a quick, conciliatory smile. "Of course, Constable. Anything we can do to bring the fiend to justice."

"Yes, your sense of civic responsibility is legendary," Odo replied with a straight face. He glanced at Rom. "What have you got for me?"

"Well," Rom began nervously, "if---if Wynn managed to get the cloak to work, then she's got to be using it every time she's in the city. The Bajoran security forces are randomly sweeping all the neighborhoods."

"Yes..." Odo prompted.

Rom gulped. "Then she must be using a lot of energy. She'll have to replace the power cells pretty often." He shrugged. "Not many people carry replacements that size."

Odo turned to Quark. "And would you, by any chance, be one of those people?"

"Uh, why yes, we do happen to have a small number of them in stock." Quark smoothed his vest into place. "Perhaps I should return to Bajor to see if Wynn wants to do a little more business."

"Perhaps you should," Odo agreed. He stood and looked at the silent young man in the back of the room. "Nog, you're free to go. Rom, go get the power cells."

He looked at Quark. "You and I need to have a little discussion."
As the two Ferengi hurried out they glanced back at their kinsman, hoping the next time they saw him it wouldn't be on the other side of a brig forcefield.

Wynn smiled to herself as she adjusted her vedek's robes. The flowing garments concealed her stash of poison, and the device keeping it---and her---from registering on security sensors.

She tapped a button on the public comm panel, sending a coded transmission to Jaro's private terminal. She figured he'd be more receptive to her calls now.

It had been easy enough to slip a small dose of Cardassian toxin into his wine at the fund-raiser a few nights ago. She'd been well-trained in stealth operations. No one had noticed her enter or leave.

The taunting note she'd left on the desk in his mansion let him know he'd been volunteered to test the poison's effect on Bajorans. She had only given him a small taste of the agony that awaited those who crossed her. The effect was diminished further by Jaro receiving a dose of Federation anti-toxin.

No matter. It had been enough to give Jaro the illusion of martyrdom, giving him a boost at the polls. And to warn the politico that she was not someone to be trifled with.

The lines on Wynn's face deepened as she considered her lost dreams of a place among Bajor's elite. She was a wanted woman now, so any kind of career in the public eye was forever gone.

But still possible was a well-hidden life of luxury on some other world. As long as Jaro came through with the latinum for ending the lives of his rivals for the title of First Minister. She was going to throw in a few Federation---her teeth gritted at the thought of their smug human faces---victims for free. That would effectively put an end to any hope of Bajor joining the Federation.

She straightened her shoulders and began to make her way out of the city, contemplating her plans.

For if Jaro didn't pay, he would be the first one she sent to the grave.
Chapter 25

B'Elanna and Tuvok sat by the stream's edge, listening to the fast-flowing water. They'd met at the
door to the warehouse in the early afternoon, and by silent agreement made their way to this spot.

"It's strange, isn't it?" B'Elanna suddenly spoke into the quiet.

Tuvok raised an inquiring brow. "What phenomena has led you to make this observation?"

"Six months ago I was fighting for my life in the arena. No real future beyond the next bout---since
each one could very well be my last. No home, no one who cared about me..." her voice trailed off
as her fingers wandered among the blades of grass. "If you had told me then that things would be so
different now, I'd have laughed in your face."

"Given your predilection for...more physical responses, I highly doubt that laughing is all you would
have done." Tuvok inhaled, his nostrils flaring slightly at the scents of earth and water and flowers in
the air. He mused reflectively, "But I must agree the likelihood of events progressing as they have
were marginal at best."

"Yeah." B'Elanna grinned. "Who'd have guessed that when I took a whack at some big silent lug in
Sisko's practice ring that he'd turn out to be the Admiral of the Imperial Fleet?"

"Or a guiding force behind the reinstatement of the Federation," Tuvok noted.

B'Elanna regarded her companion out of the corner of her eye. She said casually, "Harry and I are
going to start spending time at Sisko's base. Now that Chakotay is almost recovered, Harry's
beginning the transition to his placement at the compound. There's even talk of using it for refresher
courses for Fleet personnel---help keep them in fighting trim."

Tuvok lifted one brow. "Has anyone been made aware that when you 'whip people into shape' you
sometimes forget the expression is intended to be metaphorical?"

B'Elanna laughed at the subtle reminder of Tuvok's sessions under her tutelage. "Hey, you thanked
me at the time---despite learning that Vulcans *do* bruise easily---at least when fighting with
Klingons."

"Or, more precisely, skilled half-Klingons," Tuvok conceded with a slight bow. "And I believe that
your students will be fortunate indeed to have such a fine teacher, both on the practice field and in
their engineering classrooms."

Embarrassment flushed B'Elanna's cheeks as she ducked her head shyly. "Thank you, Tuvok. "It
means a lot to me. I want...I want to be...worthy."

"Of that, you should have no doubts," Tuvok gently assured her.

They sat in silence a moment, until B'Elanna gathered the courage to broach the subject that had
been burning in her mind since they reached this secluded haven.

"So you're going back to Vulcan?" It wasn't really a question.

"Yes. We will depart immediately after the ceremony for Admiral Riker and Counselor Troi. It is
illogical for T'Pel and myself to be parted longer from our children."
"Have you decided what you'll be doing once you get home?" B'Elanna asked in genuine curiosity. She couldn't really picture Tuvok without a sense of purpose, or even something as mundane as a job. She knew spending all this time with no real occupation would have driven her mad.

"No, nor even if we will stay there. Chakotay mentioned several possible scenarios for us both in Trebus, if his plans are brought to fruition." Tuvok paused. "They were...intriguing. But we are uncertain if we could settle our family here. Vulcan is very different." If he were human, he would have shrugged.

"And so are Vulcans," B'Elanna noted. The sharp sense of impending loss made her close her eyes. "You'll be missed."

"A family created by choice can be as real as one crafted by nature's caprice of birth." The statement was not necessarily logical, but true nonetheless. Tuvok glanced at B'Elanna. Such a complex mix of brash warrior and brilliant woman, fierce adult and fearful child.

He reached out and lightly rested one hand on her sleeve. "Distance stretches the bond, but sometimes not even death is powerful enough to break it."

B'Elanna opened her eyes, and stared a moment into the wise gaze of a man more than a century her senior. From another world, an alien culture, possessing a perspective she could never attempt to understand.

Yet he was kin. Like Chakotay, and Tom, Harry and his parents, even Sisko. Family.

She smiled at Tuvok, and he released her with a nod. It was indeed a strange and wonderful turn of events that had brought them here.

They sat beside the water for a while longer, the silence comfortable between them.

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Chakotay stood and swayed a moment, finding his footing after sitting in one place so long. He gripped the cane in his hand more tightly and felt Tom's fingers close lightly around his elbow. Ready to offer support, but not forcing it upon him.

He found his balance and reassured his lover with a small smile. A small squeeze sent a silent message of encouragement, then Tom's hand dropped away to let Chakotay stand on his own.

Step by careful step, he crossed the wooden floor of the council chamber at Solon. The structure mirrored a Habak: conical roof, a fire pit in the center. But this building had dozens of small windows marking the top of the circular wall, and banks of wooden benches for observers. The room was packed, representatives from every tribe and village on Dorvan waiting to hear Chakotay's plans for Trebus.

He made his way to the spot traditionally taken by a supplicant to the council. A long semi-circular table spread from the point directly across from Chakotay. Anthwara held the center chair as head of the ruling body of the planet. There was a governmental structure in place for day-to-day operations, but *this* was the place major decisions were made.

The old man's eyes told him nothing. Chakotay swallowed and glanced at the rest of the tribal leaders, seeing some friendly faces, like Rosera's and Lakanta's. Most were neutral, one or two openly hostile.

Chakotay took a deep breath, rested both hands upon the head of his cane, and began to speak. "I
stand here today as a symbol of many things. A child of Dorvan, raised in the ways of our people. A man of space, content to dwell among the stars. A one-time leader of the Fleet. A former servant of the Empire. A citizen of the New Federation."

His gaze touched each councilor in turn. "A warrior of the tribes, sworn to defend and protect."

He swallowed, voice roughening. "A flawed man who failed in that most solemn duty."

His throat closed a moment as he struggled for breath. Eventually Chakotay regained his calm and lifted his head once more. "I am also a survivor. Of tyranny. Of bloodshed. Of grief and loss. And it is as a survivor that I ask you to consider my plans for Trebus."

Some councilors leaned forward, betraying their curiosity. Others narrowed their eyes, wary of what Chakotay had in store.

Tom kept his focus on his beloved, willing him support and strength.

Chakotay again looked at each man and woman behind the table, almost uniform in the shades of their skin and hair and eyes. "The Trebus we knew is dust and ash and blackened bones. Nothing I do, nothing you decide here will change that."

He lifted one hand, palm up. "We could rebuild Trebus as just another Dorvan village, or divide its land among the tribes, or let the wilderness reclaim it. But I don't think that's what our loved ones, our lost ones, would have wanted."

The murmurs that stirred to life behind Chakotay abruptly ceased at Anthwara's glare. When those dark eyes shifted to make Chakotay their target, he knew at least one vote might already be cast against him. Still, he soldiered on. "Trebus was unique on Dorvan in its population. Not only did members of the tribes dwell there, but also small numbers of Bajorans, Betazoids, and humans from throughout the colony worlds."

"A *very* small number," one old woman noted dryly as she adjusted her sleeves.

"Granted, but they were there just the same." Chakotay returned both hands to his cane, the wood solid and comforting beneath his palm. His braid rested lightly against his wrist. "I request that you allow Trebus to continue in that tradition---even to expand upon it. To let that ruined village become not a painful reminder of Imperial treachery, but a beacon of hope for the people of the Federation, especially the frontier. I ask that you allow a university town to be built there."

The room erupted. Even several Council members leapt to their feet in surprise.

The voices were so loud and jumbled Tom couldn't tell whether they were for the idea or against it. But he was shocked to see Anthwara stand and slam the table, the sharp crack of sound cutting through the din and shocking silence over the room.

"Enough!" Anthwara yelled, his eyes again flashing with ire. "We will hear from the duly elected representatives *when it is time*. Until then, we are interested only in the words of the caretaker of Trebus." He sat, his grudging gesture returning the floor to Chakotay.

Chakotay spoke not just to the Council now, though he didn't turn to face the rest of the room. "I know that Dorvan has maintained its isolation for decades. But I also know that more and more of our young people leave each year because they yearn to know more than the village they were born into."

His obvious earnestness calmed the spectators even more, as they were persuaded to actually *listen*
rather than automatically conjure impediments to the plan.

Tom remembered some ancient proverb about prophets and their hometowns and hoped it was wrong. He thought it might be in this case, as he let the melodic rise and fall of Chakotay's voice soothe his own anxiety. He didn't need to pay attention to the details. He already knew them, as Chakotay had asked for Tom's help and opinion in crafting this plan.

A university that blended the ancient and modern, built to last by a unique group of artisans---former slaves apprenticed to the craftsmen and craftswomen of Dorvan in the hope the apprentices would gain skills to help other war-ravaged worlds. A university espousing the ideas and materials of the past, but also incorporating the cutting-edge of thought and technology that was the future. Tom just hoped that the people of Dorvan would come to share Chakotay's vision.

But Tom knew that even if they didn't, he and Chakotay would find a way to honor the memories of the people of Trebus, whatever form that tribute took.

They deserved no less.

Tom tuned in again as he sensed Chakotay nearing the end of his presentation.

"The Empire destroyed a vast number of lives, broke many families, stole the homes and hopes and dreams of countless people. Slavery and strife and death have touched every planet on the frontier. I ask that here, on Dorvan, in Trebus, we offer a place for new dreams, new lives to begin." Chakotay sighed to himself as he regarded the once-again neutral countenances of the council.

He'd done his best. Now it was out of his hands.

Chakotay turned and made his way back to Tom, his steps echoing in the silence. Tom stood and together they walked outside to let the people have their say and leave the council to their deliberations.

Tom slid an arm around his lover's waist as they stepped into the orange light of late afternoon. They leisurely walked to a borrowed hover car. It was a convertible-style that currently had the top down. "We're really going to have to get one of these," Tom remarked as he ushered Chakotay into the passenger seat with a flourish.

Chakotay grinned and shot Tom a sidelong glance as the younger man circled the vehicle and settled behind the controls with unabashed glee. "You're just disappointed you can't put this loaner through its paces."

"Damn straight," Tom agreed with a chuckle as he started the engine. "Just listen to that purr. This baby is raring to go."

"Hmph. Just remember: You start hot-rod-ding and *Tem* will be driving once the kids are aboard. And since he was planning to stay put and wait for Lakanta, he'll be one annoyed Bajoran."

"Prophets forbid," Tom set the vehicle's nose toward Lakanta's farm. He kept the pace reasonable, reminding himself that unlike a shuttle, a ground car was more vulnerable to the unexpected. But oh, what a joy to be able to pilot himself. He was definitely volunteering for the role of family chauffeur.

He put a shuttle at the top of the list of purchases for their new home. And definitely a hover car too, as he glanced over to see Chakotay's eyes closed, his face tilted into the breeze stirred up by their travel.

Chakotay looked...at peace, the tension of the last few days falling away.
He also looked gorgeous, smiling ever so slightly, eminently kissable. On impulse, Tom put the
vehicle in neutral, leaning across the seats to plant his lips on the full ones that beckoned him
irresistibly. One hand slid into soft black hair while the other fumbled to find purchase on Chakotay's
shoulder. Tom sighed his approval as his lover's mouth opened beneath his, granting him access to
the sweet secrets it contained.

Chakotay smiled into the kiss at the sound of contentment. He shifted, turning more fully into the
embrace. He began to stroke the long, lean back under his hands, relearning the angle of shoulder
blades, the curve of ribs.

The two men simply sat, necking, enjoying their closeness. Eventually they drew apart, panting
slightly. Chakotay reached up a thumb to wipe the shine off Tom's lips. "What was that for?"

"Just because." Tom shrugged, then grasped Chakotay's wrist and snuggled his cheek into
Chakotay's palm.

He searched softly glowing dark eyes. "What do you think they're going to do?"

"I don't know." Chakotay sighed and lightly pressed his fingertips into the corner of Tom's jaw. "I
don't know how the other villages reacted to the massacre. If they use the incident to paint
offworlders as evil, then there's no chance at all. If they acknowledge that Julian's power play could
have happened to any planet, then at least they'll give the university serious consideration."

Tom lowered Chakotay's hand to his lap, entwining their fingers. "I know you mentioned it when we
started planning, but have so many people really left Dorvan?"

"Yes." Chakotay grimaced. "Mostly teenagers, like I was. They want to know about the cultures
they've only heard vague stories about. Some come back to find spouses and raise children, but a lot
of them feel like they can't live on such an isolated planet after being part of the wider universe. I
think if they can have that access through the university, they'll *choose* to stay and make their
homes here."

He shrugged. "As you said, it's a beautiful place."

"Full of beautiful people," Tom concurred, using his grip on Chakotay's hand to pull him forward
again. He was surprised when Chakotay pressed his other hand to Tom's chest, stopping their lips a
few centimeters from each other.

"You said 'full of *interesting* people and ideas', as I recall it. Not beautiful," Chakotay teased.

Tom darted his face forward, nipping Chakotay's lower lip. "Then let me amend my statement to 'full
of interesting ideas and at least one *very* interesting, *extremely* handsome, *unbelievably*
beautiful, *incredibly* sexy person.' The tip of his tongue laved the spot he'd abused.

Chakotay chuckled and rubbed noses with his impudent companion. "We've imported one of those
from Earth too, and he's a saucy thing to boot." With a regretful sigh he shifted back to his own side
of the car. "We'd better pick up the kids. If we leave them at Lakanta's too long they'll figure out a
way to smuggle that dog *and* all of her puppies to the warehouse."

Tom groaned in agreement and started them moving again. "That's just too likely a possibility to
ignore. We'll have to pick up this meeting of our private mutual admiration society again later."

"Count on it," Chakotay agreed, letting one hand drift over to squeeze Tom's thigh. He left it rest
there and once more closed his eyes, enjoying the breeze and the company, the sense of movement
and thoughts of the coming night.
Rosera ran her hand behind her neck as she exited a changing hut near the Habak, lifting the sweaty strands clinging to her nape. "I'm going to go right from here into a cool bath and not get out for *hours*." 

Lakanta grinned at her. "Is that a simple statement of intent or a veiled request for company?"

The woman's eyes narrowed playfully. "Considering how tightly you're wrapped around a certain Bajoran's slender finger, I don't think it's fair for you to tease me."

His jaw dropped a moment as he stopped in shock. When he snapped out of it he hurried to catch up to Rosera. "What exactly did you mean by that?"

Rosera glanced over her shoulder, saw Lakanta's half-angry expression and paused. She turned back to face him. "Simply that there is no deception in the vision quest. It was easy to sense your heart's yearning for its mate, even though the fate of Trebus was this session's purpose."

When the tension didn't leave the warrior's frame, Rosera tilted her head in confusion. "Aren't you pleased the spirits approve of your choice?"

"It's just...I'm just---" Lakanta's frustration puffed out in a sharp breath. "I'm starting to think the whole thing is a bad idea. When I'm with him I don't feel like myself."

Rosera was grateful for her self-control as she barely suppressed a smile. "Oh? And who do you feel like?"

"I don't know---someone less...certain of things. I mean, here I am, one of the people who should be dead set against this plan of Chakotay's. But do I do my usual spouting about tradition and culture and Dorvan custom? No, I'm too busy panting after the first offworlder who comes along."

"Not quite the first, Lakanta." Rosera cupped the younger man's chin, tugging his head down so she could meet his confused gaze. "You and I both know that this squawking is nothing more than a simple case of cold feet. I don't think you've ever been in love quite like this before."

She stopped his instinctive withdrawal. "Yes---*love*. It makes you vulnerable---so it's natural to be scared."

A knowing smile curved her lips. "And it's not that you've lost your conviction, my friend, just your anger. That can happen when your perspective broadens, changes. Love does *that*, too. But I don't doubt that you are still looking out for Dorvan's best interests."

Lakanta succeeding in pulling away this time. "Of course, but---"

"No," Rosera interrupted him firmly. "I'm not going to stand here and listen while you talk yourself out of the best thing that's ever happened to you. Go home, kiss Tem, look into his eyes and understand that it's true: You're *not* quite yourself anymore. Part of you---your heart---belongs to him. And rejoice in that."

She turned back toward home, ignoring Lakanta as he stood in the path, still staring.

After a moment Lakanta shook himself free of his reverie. Reflecting on Rosera's words made him shake his head in bemusement. "Some warrior you are, scared of love." He chuckled at the absurd turns the mind could take, and set off with a quick stride toward home.
To find Tem and fulfill Rosera's orders.

After all, she was a very wise woman.

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Anthwara sighed as he sank back into his favorite chair, a glass of iced herbal tea transferring its coolness to his palms. He sipped the spicy brew, letting its strong flavor cleanse his palate.


Any one of those emotions, he supposed, perhaps all of them and more.

The Spirits had sided with Chakotay.

Preposterous! The very idea of allowing aliens to swarm over this world, spreading their beliefs and ideas, bringing foreign flavors and scents and sights to what Dorvan had always been.

But the spirits had been clear. And their approval had been echoed by the representatives of the people, and most of the Council members.

Change was coming to Dorvan. Whether Anthwara liked it or not.

Yet the elder was not as upset as he had expected to be. Perhaps because the aliens who fought so hard for Chakotay had shown themselves willing to live by Dorvan law and traditions.

And also because Anthwara trusted that Chakotay would always do what was right. For his family, his people, for Dorvan.

Of course, Anthwara would never actually admit that. In fact, tomorrow was soon enough to let Chakotay know that Trebus was in hands. And he would also tell Chakotay that he would be keeping a close eye on Chakotay's every decision, every move, every step of the way.

With that final thought he rose to clean up and make his way to bed.

Satisfied, if not content.

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"So that's the foreword, Harry---at least the first draft. I'd like for us to come up with outlines independently, and see how closely they match." Chakotay laid down the old-fashioned journal he'd been reading aloud from and looked across the desk at the young officer.

"It's going to be strange not having you on Dorvan all the time." Chakotay said with a wistful smile. "But it's for the best. I don't suppose there could be much call for a Fleet liaison here. 'Spotty' is probably the best word to describe our space traffic."

"That's true, sir." Harry sighed. "Plus I understand the importance of the Fleet not unduly influencing the development of Trebus. You're not trying to create a frontier version of the Academy."

"No, I'll leave that to you and Sisko," Chakotay conceded, eyes twinkling. "I suspect that's our wily friend's long-term goal, but I think he has his work cut out for him. He'll have to reshape the entire planetoid."

"I think he's already working on it. It should be an interesting process, but one Sisko will manage to bring off." Harry continued with a shrug, "I'm just not sure I should know all the details."
"Harry, your wisdom increases every day," Chakotay complimented. He leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on the desk. "Are you sure it won't be a problem to help me with this research? Your plate sounds pretty full---and you *are* a newlywed."

"Definitely." Harry's agreement came in the form of an emphatic nod. "I'm looking forward to reading this."

Chakotay gave him a small grin. "Well, don't get your hopes up. I'm an ex-soldier, not a writer."

"But you *are* a storyteller, sir," Harry countered. "And this is definitely a story that needs to be told."

"Yes." Chakotay might have said more, but they were interrupted when Tom poked his head around the half-open door.

"Hey Cha, the kids are finally asleep. We had a meeting scheduled, remember? Bedroom. Now." Tom indicated Harry with a tilt of head. "And I think our friend here should report to his lady's chambers ASAP as well." With a flash of red-gold hair he was gone.

The two men still in the room shared amused looks, complete with matching sets of raised eyebrows.

"Well, it sounds like we've been given our marching orders, Harry." Chakotay closed the book on his desk, grabbed his cane and stood, making his way with the younger man to the door.

He paused just before the exit, laying a hand on Harry's shoulder. He smiled, thinking of how a green ensign became such a fine officer. "I know you won't be leaving immediately or going very far, but I wanted to thank you, Harry, for sticking around all this time. And for everything you did to help, before and now. It's been a privilege to know you."

Harry straightened, feeling a flush of pride and embarrassment heat his cheeks. He knew he'd never forget the lessons he'd learned from Chakotay, and never be able to express how grateful he was simply to have met the man, to have been fortunate enough to be mentored by him. He wondered if this was the way Chakotay had felt about Jean-Luc Picard. "Thank you, sir. It's been an honor to serve with you as well."

"And when you're officially transferred, you'll have to get into the habit of calling me Chakotay," Chakotay said as they walked into the hall to rendezvous with their beloveds. "That's an order---even if I'm no longer an Admiral."

Neither man noticed two omnipotent beings winking into existence in the abandoned study.

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"Did you see him, actually using pen and paper? Veritable antiques in this day and age." The female Q flopped herself into the chair Harry had vacated, tossing her long red hair over her shoulder and propping her stilettoed feet on the desk. "I didn't even think these creatures knew how to make paper anymore."

"This planet isn't all that modern, my dear. You have to take into account their penchant for rustic living." Q glanced at his mate as he settled into Chakotay's seat and fiddled with the cloth-bound journal. "Besides, I believe Chuckles thinks of it as a kind of tribute to Jean-Luc."

Ms. Q waved her hand in a queenly manner. "Well, let's hear what words of wisdom he has to offer the masses."
Q opened the book, cleared his throat and began, "I have heard that people see me as the instrument of change, akin to the knife that ended Julian Bashir Picard’s reign by spilling his life's blood on the Colosseum floor. That I am the 'liberator of the quadrant', the 'creator of the new Federation'. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I am no more than the tip of the blade, the merest point on its edge. I would have achieved nothing without a greater force of will behind me. The impetus, the momentum, the weight provided by all who supported my efforts. People who worked behind the scenes for years, who defied the status quo to invoke our better natures and the memories of nobler days. Others who suffered and died in the battle to end the corruption of the Empire and restore justice, equality, and freedom for all citizens of our commonwealth of worlds. *They* are the ones you should thank, and esteem, and mourn. Many of them will remain nameless, faceless, their sacrifices lost in time. But in these pages I share with you the names I know, of individuals and groups whose actions redeemed our past and preserved our future. These are the stories of those who strived---whether to victory or death---with strength and honor."

As Q lowered the book he raised his brows and asked, "Do you think we should pop over and tell Chuckles that he's completely wrong?"

"I don't think he'd appreciate your interrupting him right now," Ms. Q remarked dryly was she regarded Q over the tips of her thigh-high boots. "But he would probably appreciate the irony if he knew that he really *was* the lynchpin of the entire new Federation. That none of this would have happened if he wasn't at the right place at the right time. And hadn't taken just the right actions."

"True, things did turn out rather badly in all of the Imperial universes without him," Q said reflectively. "And even here, the price for the creation of this new Federation was a costly one."

Ms. Q caught his change of mood. "Yes, a lot has happened to Chakotay in the course of fulfilling his destiny."

She looked at Q, her expression bordering on concern. "Chakotay will be allowed his happiness, won't he?" she asked wistfully. It was strange to worry over one particular mortal bipedal male, but this universe's Chakotay had grown on her as she watched him struggle under the burdens of duty and grief.

Q's forehead furrowed as he considered. "I *think* so. But there will always be a touch of bitterness with the sweet. What might have been."

"There always is," the female Q noted. Then she swept her legs off the desk, propping her elbows on it and putting her chin in her hands. "But Chakotay seems to have made his peace---at least in this universe."

"And without one bit of omnipotent help," Q concurred, half-grumbling. It had surprised him that he never saw a need to step in and nudge things in the right direction. Chakotay had managed to save these worlds all by himself, whether the man thought so or not.

After a moment Q seemed to flick away his momentary melancholy mood, mirroring his mate's position on the desk and wrinkling his nose teasingly at her. "But it *was* fun to watch, wasn't it?"

"Mmm...yes. Chakotay certainly knows how to handle his sword," Ms. Q purred, her eyes closing to sultry slits. "*And* he was so sexy in his little tunic outfit."

"No argument here. He certainly had the legs for it." Q agreed, leering at the memory. The two Qs shared a lascivious grin.

"Wanna go see what he and Blondie are up to?" Q asked, waggling his brows.
"No..." Ms Q drawled, then suddenly lunged across the desk, pushing Q back into the chair and straddling him. "I want to see what *you* look like, all sweaty and chained. Let's go back to Sisko's compound on Earth and find out."

The two beings vanished in a wisp of steam.

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"I hereby declare this meeting of the Chakotay/Paris Mutual Appreciation Society in session," Tom said as he slid naked between the sheets, settling next to his equally unclothed partner. The two men solemnly kissed.

When they parted, Chakotay asked, "Is there an agenda for this session?" He settled on his side, stroking one hand along Tom's torso, contrasting the warmth of skin against his palm with the coolness of the topsheet his knuckles brushed against.

"The first order of business is deciding if all our meetings should take place in the nude as a matter of protocol." Tom felt the day's tension ebbing from his body under Chakotay's soothing touch. "Shall we open the subject for discussion?" he asked, sinking deeper into the mattress.

"Hmm...I'll have to cast my vote against that suggestion," Chakotay said gravely. "Such a bylaw would preclude impromptu gatherings of the society such as this afternoon's. But I'll offer a countermeasure. How about we make the meetings clothing-optional?"

"I can definitely be persuaded to get behind such a wise compromise," Tom said as he slid an arm around Chakotay's hip, palming one rounded cheek. "Especially if it leaves open the opportunity to get behind this behind."

Chakotay's brows drew together as he also abandoned his playful tone. "Just last night you seemed a little unsure about the pace of our relationship, Tom. Isn't this going from 'baby steps' to 'leaping tall buildings in a single bound'?"

"Not really." Tom shrugged. "I'll admit I'm a little fuzzy on the details, but I meant what I said this morning. I'm yours, Chakotay. And I want to *be* yours. That's something I have no doubts about whatsoever."

He met Chakotay's wary gaze steadily. "I want you. I want to know what it's like to be part of you, to have you be a part of me."

Chakotay smiled and cupped Tom's cheek. "The feeling's mutual, Tom. I want to share that experience---and so many more---with you as well." He looked away, then shyly glanced at his lover. "Actually, there's something I wanted to ask you first---the top item on *my* personal agenda."

A deep breath was drawn for courage, then Chakotay said in a rush, "I was wondering if you would do me the honor of participating in a private bonding ceremony in a few weeks, after I'm finally discharged from the Doc's care."

His fingers slid lower, catching the pulse suddenly beating wildly in Tom's throat, noting the startled
look in the blue eyes so close to his. Chakotay explained, "It's way too soon for me to marry again, Tom, but I've been thinking about what you said this morning. About us, and accepting that this is real."

Chakotay shifted closer, trying to read Tom's expression. "It won't be the big fancy celebration you deserve, but it would be a true commitment between us. For life. To our life together." He anxiously waited for response, hoping that Tom wouldn't see this proposal as a knee-jerk reaction to this morning, or Tom's offering of himself just now.

It wasn't. Chakotay had come to understand that he would always have doubts, always second-guess himself. He realized that was acceptable when it came to Trebus, but not when it came to Tom. Chakotay had loved the man for too long to let nebulous fears keep him from declaring that love. He just hoped Tom was aware that if Chakotay gave his word---whether before one person or a million---he would keep it.

Tom was stunned silent. He knew Chakotay, and had learned enough about Dorvan tribal customs to know the private bonding as good as a marriage ceremony, even if the Spirits would be the only witnesses.

Ironically, in that instant he felt a flood of sheer panic. The kind that comes when you realize all your dreams really *were* coming true, and you had to live with the consequences.

It was one thing to *think* that they were together for the rest of their lives. It was quite another to actually say it out loud---to make the vows. Tom wondered wildly if Chakotay had been right this morning and last night when he suggested Tom might not be ready for such a permanent arrangement. His mind began jabbering all the reasons they should hold off on a commitment.

Commitment.

That single word was enough to expel Tom's unexpected doubts in a sigh. His life flashed before his eyes, and with the images came the feelings that had grown between them over the years. He suddenly remembered that he was an adult choosing to make a life with the man he loved.

He wasn't going anywhere, so formalizing---finalizing---his place at Chakotay's side was a cause for rejoicing.

Tom felt a rush of exhilaration start at his toes and slide up his body to stretch his lips in the widest smile he could imagine. "Yes," was all he said.

Tenderness tempered his joy at the mix of love and relief on Chakotay's face. Tom's own emotions were a jumble of pride, and satisfaction, and wonder, knowing that Chakotay really, truly was his. For life.

They stared at each other, foolish grins on their faces, neither moving. Afraid to break the spell.

Tom knew he wanted to mark this moment, this decision. He had just the thing. "And in honor of this occasion," he announced, "Let the deflowering commence."

Chakotay laughed, as he suspected Tom meant him to. "Far be it from me to delay such a delightful--and momentous---society function." He studied Tom's face, his expression softening at the blend of anticipation and uncertainty in the blue eyes.

He promised himself that Tom's expression would soon change to one of sheer bliss. "Did you replicate some lube?"
Tom reached one hand under his pillow and pulled out a small container. He handed it over without a word.

Chakotay wrapped his arms around Tom and pulled Tom with him as he rolled. When Chakotay was on his back, he urged Tom to rest on hands and knees, so the lean body was tented above him, long legs spread on either side of Chakotay's hips. "We'll do most of the prep like this, if it's OK with you."

"OK," Tom answered, pleased that he hadn't been reduced to monosyllables. Not quite, at least. He actually was pretty comfortable this way, though he became acutely aware of the way his ass was jutting up when Chakotay pushed the sheet down to their knees.

Chakotay started with a kiss, letting Tom take the lead in the fencing match their tongues began. Sighed in pleasure as Tom shifted down to rest on his elbows and dextrous fingers found their way into Chakotay's hair.

His own eager hands set aside the lube to explore Tom's body, running along shoulders and back, arms and legs. Scratching through the hair on Tom's chest to tease and tweak nipples to hard peaks, smiling into the kiss as he swallowed Tom's moans. He moved lower, to hips and belly and groin, careful not to tickle Tom.

Eventually, Chakotay wrapped one hand around Tom's cock, fisting the aroused length. He used his other hand to fondle the globes of Tom's ass, pinching and kneading, moving into the crack to tease the tiny hairs there.

Tom almost bucked when he felt a finger rimming his opening. His skin felt sensitized, every millimeter alive and aware and desperate for the next touch. He shifted his hands to the broad shoulders beneath him, afraid he'd start pulling Chakotay's hair in his pleasurable torment. He broke the kiss to groan. "Come on, Cha, do it already."

Chakotay's hands left him a moment to fumble for the lube and open it. Tom kept his eyes locked with Chakotay's as those fingers returned, this time with a purpose. One hand spread his buttocks as the other, slick and warm, paused against his opening.

Tom tried to relax for this strange yet welcome invasion. One finger slipped into him. He was a little surprised at how easily it breached him.

"How do you feel?" Chakotay asked as Tom's focus turned inward.

"Weird, like I should do something, get rid of you." He wriggled back, seating Chakotay's finger more deeply. "But also---I don't know---connected."

When Chakotay smiled up at him with a murmured "Good," Tom leaned forward again, claiming his lover's lips. The brush of Chakotay's tongue inside his mouth mimicked the slide of fingers in his passage. The sense of fullness was satisfying in a way Tom hadn't expected.

He really was a virgin in this. Annika and he had never been very adventurous in bed. Tom's thoughts were yanked back to the present when Chakotay hit some switch inside him that jolted old-fashioned electricity along his nerves. Tom would swear his hair was standing on end. "Shit!" he gasped as he shot up.

Chakotay pressed the same spot again, watching Tom's eyes practically roll into the back of his head. This was very promising. He surreptitiously added a fourth finger, finishing the stretching. Tom looked like a thoroughbred before a race, panting, sweating, wiry muscles quivering.
Distracted. Chakotay took advantage. He pulled out his fingers and rolled them again, capturing Tom's startled "Oof" with his mouth. After a moment he freed Tom to let him speak, deciding his own lips and tongue would be better employed mapping Tom's throat and chest.

Tom almost forgot his question when his nerves started jumping at the wet and soft---and occasionally teeth-stingingly sharp---sensations began flooding his brain. He threw back his head with a breathy groan, his nostrils flaring at the scents of sweat and musk rising from their bodies.

When Chakotay kept sliding down, Tom grabbed desperately at his shoulders. "What are you doing?"

"Relaxing you," Chakotay replied before swiping his tongue along Tom's belly, then nipping him. "So lay back and enjoy." Then in a sudden move he shifted back and swallowed Tom's cock.

"Oh *Fuck*!" Tom gasped as his cock was plunged into wet heat. He felt the return of Chakotay's fingers into Tom's body.

The combination of Chakotay swallowing around his cock and those devilish fingers deliberately hitting his hot spot sent Tom shouting over the edge, shuddering as his lover continued to swallow until Tom was sucked dry.

Chakotay released Tom's cock and ass, moving his hands to bend the long pale legs and press them up and back. His own body, too long neglected, seemed to throb with each beat of the blood in his engorged sex. He barely retained enough control to search Tom's dazed face, asking hoarsely, "Ready?"

"Uhmh," Tom replied, shaking off the haze of orgasm. He looked up to see a bronze warrior looming above him, broad shoulders blocking the light, implacable hands holding Tom spread. He could feel the tip of Chakotay's cock like a brand against him.

A sudden memory of Chakotay in the arena blazed in Tom's mind. Chakotay looked as fierce and primal now, ready to strike---to claim, to take.

And Tom wanted to be taken. "Yes," he said, lifting his hips to meet the downward stroke. If he had felt connected before, it was nothing compared to this rod of flesh parting him, filling him, sliding on and on until he felt Chakotay's groin meet his ass.

Chakotay held motionless, breaths short, body trembling, as he waited for Tom to adjust. He released one of Tom's legs, letting it slip to his waist as he used his free hand to tease behind Tom's balls, his fingertips brushing the place they were joined. Tom made a sound in his throat and shifted, pushing upward again.

The clench of muscles around Chakotay's cock eased ever so slightly. He began to thrust, long smooth strokes, adjusting his angle, throwing his head back with a groan of pleasure. It had been so long. Too long. His balls tightened almost painfully, ready for the climax of this mating. He reached one hand to wrap around Tom's reawakening cock.

Tom reached out, running his fingers along Chakotay's sweat-slick skin, feeling the hard muscles underneath bunch and flex with every stroke into his ass. He sensed the pressure build again behind his eyes and in his balls. His body moved on automatic, caught up in the rhythm. Suddenly his back bent as he shouted again, hot semen spattering his belly as his world blurred into ecstasy.

The liquid pulse against Chakotay's hand was matched by his own release. Cum shot from him as he growled low in his throat, spending himself in a flurry of sharp thrusts into the heated flesh sheathing
him, the roar of blood in his ears drowning out the slap of flesh and heaving breaths.

The men held poised a moment at the apex of their movement, then sank back onto the mattress. Chakotay shifted his body to land beside Tom instead of on top of him.

Tom made a low sound of disappointment as he felt Chakotay's cock slide free. He lay sprawled, idly noting the wet spot under his ass and the fact that the sheet was *way down there* at the end of the bed. Much too far to reach. Much, much too far, as he had not one erg of energy left. It had all been spent in pleasure.

Chakotay roused himself after what felt like an eternity. He rolled to his side and flung one hand out, managing to clutch Tom's hip. He gave a slight squeeze. "You OK?"

"Oh yeah, sure, or I will be as soon as I remember how to make my limbs move." Tom turned his head to regard his companion. "I think we'll have to adjourn our meeting due to exhaustion, but I must say you certainly did the society proud today."

Chakotay grinned fondly and replied, "It was a joint effort, and all members should share in any accolades."

Tom's own grin turned into a speculative leer. "So when do I get to do the honors?"

Chakotay shifted his arm, running his hand up Tom's torso. "I was thinking, if you don't mind waiting a little, the night of our bonding." Chakotay let his fingers trace random paths through the hairs on Tom's chest.

Tom was struck by the appropriateness of the gesture. That joining too could mark the next step in their life together. He realized he could move after all, as he let a hand rest atop the strong bronze one over his heart. "That sounds perfect."
Kassidy ran her hands up Sisko's naked chest, her movements causing beaded sweat to gather into rivulets that meandered down his sides. She reached his shoulders and pressed her palms there, fingers curling around the muscles. Reveling in the slide of skin on skin, the press of naked bodies.

She thought he looked right at home against the scarlet sheets. Aboard her freighter, in the captain's bed. As comfortable as she had felt among the unbelievably luxurious appointments of his palatial suite at the compound. Over the last two weeks they learned they could easily fit themselves into each other's lives. Somehow, Kassidy wasn't surprised at the realization.

With a smile Kassidey braced herself to rise and hover a moment, her thighs quivering with the strain as she paused, her slick folds grazing the tip of Sisko's cock. One hand shifted back to grasp the engorged shaft and guide him into her depths. She sank slowly, feeling every centimeter as she joined them together. A physical expression of the connection she had found with the handsome man who'd beguiled her with his sly wit and unexpected honesty.

Sisko sighed, enjoying the sight of Kassidy's dreamy expression as she descended. His hands slid from her hips to her breasts, fondling the ripe curves as his thumbs teased dusky nipples already peaked with arousal. His low chuckle answered her purr of approval.

In moments like this he felt renewed, a sense of wonder filling him at having Kassidy in his life. He had trusted no one during his time in the arena, and precious few people since the day Jean-Luc Picard had set him free so many years ago.

Chakotay, with his stubborn integrity and impossible dream, had forced open the door to Sisko's guarded soul. Inspired Sisko to become once more the man of honor he'd been in his youth. Former slaves turned friends B'Elanna and Tuvok had widened the breach, made the changes more lasting.

But while they and Tom Paris acknowledged all Sisko had done for them, that motley group couldn’t truly appreciate what an effort, what a risk he had taken in joining his fate to theirs. Kassidy was different. She knew what it cost to be vulnerable in the real universe. And she accepted Sisko's love, his trust, cherishing them for the rare gifts they were.

She was a paradox: cultured woman and street-tough dame, altruistic optimist and worldly pragmatist. She was his match in so many ways, and Sisko would forever be grateful for this treasure he had discovered long after he'd abandoned hope of finding love ever again.

He lifted his head, and the offer of his lips was instantly met. Mouths opened, tongues tangled as the couple continued the movements of a dance as ancient and primal as humanity itself.

Quark muttered Ferengi curses under his breath as he shifted in the pre-dawn chill, trying to find a comfortable position leaning against the alley wall. He wished he were back behind the bar on DS9, scheming and scamming.

Instead, he'd spent the last 14 days wandering the seedier sections of Bajor's capital city. Subtly making it known he had an eclectic selection of goods to sell. Goods that a certain clientele may have an interest in.

But there hadn't been even a nibble, from legitimate customers or those less savory. Quark shuddered every time he thought of the time wasted, the days that passed without a single credit acquired.
If word of this ever got to the Grand Nagus, Quark would be the laughingstock of Ferengar. That was assuming, of course, that he wasn't already for letting his nephew join the Federation Fleet.

Quark snorted in self-disgust. Some mercenary he was, allowing a young relative perfectly suitable for exploitation to escape his grasp. And to make matters worse, Quark was actually protecting young Nog's chances of attending the Academy (not to mention keeping himself out of jail). He was allowing himself to be used as a pawn in Odo's scheme to lure Wynn out of hiding with a promise of replacement power cells for her cloaking device.

But he'd seen neither hide nor hair of the wily Bajoran. Quark had moved from neighborhood to neighborhood, following the schedule Odo had laid out.

Of course, there'd been no sign of the constable, either. The only thing keeping Quark from cutting short his interminable stay on the planet was the knowledge that Odo would make his life on DS9 absolutely miserable if Quark didn't hold up his end of the deal.

Quark sighed and straightened, preparing to make his way back to his current lodging to grab a few hours' sleep. Soon enough he'd be traveling to the next point in this futile, but unavoidable, journey.

He comforted himself on his walk with a pleasant fantasy of billing Bajor *and* DS9 for his oh-so-irreplaceable assistance.

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Kira could feel her sweat-dampened uniform sticking to her back as she squatted and carefully scanned the podium at the forefront of the open-air platform. It wasn't that warm a day, but her instincts were screaming at her that this was the time Wynn would strike.

The three candidates for First Minister were going to greet a small group of Federation delegates---including the current Admiral of the Fleet. Then each would-be Bajoran leader would give a final speech before tomorrow's elections.

Emotions were running high, people were milling about, and Kira's security teams were having a hard time with crowd control. It would be far too easy for Wynn to slip into the throng, striking at one of the candidates and plunging the whole city, maybe even the planet, into chaos.

The fact that Wynn had evaded all of the security sweeps---not to mention her face being on alert bulletins plastered on every street corner---galled Kira no end.

Fueling her anger was anxiety. Everything was riding on Kira---her choices, her arrangements, her people---and she *couldn't* fail in this duty. She wished she could be everywhere at once, guarding every candidate and each alien who beamed down from Voyager.

But that was impossible.

Kira sighed and stood, ruefully shrugging at the squad leader who'd finished the same scan moments before.

The older man simply nodded in return. He trusted Kira, and understood that sometimes you just had to check things yourself.

Security was serious business.

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Kira would not have been pleased to learn that four of those aliens from Voyager had already beamed down, along with their Bajoran colleague. Jake, Billy, Noah, and Mort hunched in a booth in a capital city bistro. They gave sighs of relief when Tal set down her drink and slid in.

Jake shifted in his seat, eager to compare notes. "OK, first off, I think this Quark guy is a dead end. He's shut up as tight as a clam—I couldn't get anything out of him. My dad said he thought it was odd for the Ferengi to be spending so much time away from his bar. He thought it might be part of some sting operation to get Wynn. I couldn't get a hold of DS9's Constable Odo or Kira of Bajoran Security to confirm his suppositions, but even if he's right I figure Wynn isn't going for it."

"I heard that Wynn's got some sort of cloaking device that's keeping her off the Bajoran security scans," Billy contributed as he put his elbows on the table. "Apparently it's good enough to fool the Federation detectors as well."

"That doesn't bode well for the candidates," Tal's teeth worried at her lower lip. "Especially Kai Opaka. She won't accept even a single bodyguard."

"What about the other two---Shakaar and Jaro Essa?" Jake asked.

"Shakaar has agreed to a five-person squad." Tal snorted. "Between government forces and personal ones, Jaro's surrounded by a platoon."

"That's not too surprising," Noah pointed out. "Considering he was the one actually poisoned." His brow furrowed. "From what I've heard, he's lucky he got that preventive shot. Otherwise, he'd be dead meat by now."

"Are you so sure? I mean, you have to wonder what Wynn's true intent was." Mort inched a little deeper into their huddle. "Why did she give him such a low dose? She had the perfect chance to kill the guy, but she didn't take it."

"Maybe it was a kind of warning to the government not to underestimate her," Tal suggested.

Mort shook his head. "'I don't think so. She hasn't communicated any demands, or made any threats. If she was issuing a warning she never followed through."

"Or it could have been a test run." Jake sat up, struck by a sudden thought. "What if stalking the candidates wasn't Wynn's idea? Mort's right, she hasn't named her price for their safety. And our research doesn't suggest any political agenda. So maybe someone else put her up to it---she *is* an assassin, after all."

Tal lifted her hands. "But who would do something like that?"

"One of the candidates, most likely," Billy said with a shrug.

"What are you suggesting? That Kai Opaka, Shakaar, or Minister Jaro is somehow tangled up with Wynn?" Tal shook her head in vigorous denial. "I can't picture Opaka or Shakaar doing something so underhanded. And Jaro doesn't make any sense---he* was* her first victim."

"But he wasn't in any real danger," Billy pointed out. "He'd already received the counteragent, and it *was* a low dose of toxin."

"If your theory's true---how do we prove it?" Noah asked. "You'll have a hard time convincing anyone except Mort of a conspiracy." His grin took away the sting of his words.

Mort smiled back, shrugging off the tease. "At this point, you also can't eliminate any of the
"If that was the lure and Wynn didn't try to acquire them, then she didn't need to get the stuff from Quark. Maybe she got the power cells from her contact."

Everyone's shoulders straightened at the idea. It was a place to start.

"OK, sounds like we have a game plan." Jake paused a moment, then started issuing assignments. "Tal, mingle and try to get a sense of who's the likely winner of the election. Mort, see if you can hack into the candidates' databases and find evidence of power cells or anything else disappearing recently. Noah, Billy, we're each going to take a candidate and stick to them like glue. We'll all meet in a few hours at the greeting ceremony."

He looked at his friends, his confidence suddenly faltering. "Uh, if that's all right with everyone."

The others grinned. "Sure, Jake, that sounds fine," Noah assured him.

"Yeah, *boss*." Billy nudged Jake's arm as the others chuckled.

Jake snorted. "Then let's get to work."

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"Great catch, Jelene!" Chakotay called as the girl deftly plucked the frisbee from the air. He smiled at her giggle of shy pleasure, then swiftly shifted to the right a few paces to catch the disc on its return journey. He expertly tossed the frisbee to Lucien, aiming it just a little high so the youngster had to jump for it. He knew the boy, like Koral, preferred a challenge.

His supposition was confirmed when Lucien grinned and, flushed with triumph, zinged the disc toward Koral. The frisbee was barely skimming the grass when it reached the girl, who fielded it with ease.

Suddenly Chakotay caught a mischievous gleam in Koral's eyes. He lifted his hands in automatic warning. "Koral, whatever you're planning---Heads up, Tom!" Chakotay shouted as the toy went spinning toward where Tom was seated on a blanket under a tree.

Tom, startled out his musings, automatically leaned out of the toy's path. He turned his head to watch the disc sail deeper into the woods beyond the edge of the meadow. "Well, Koral, looks like you've got some hunting to do." He grinned at her pout.

"I thought you would catch it, Daddy T---you're supposed to be good at frisbee." Koral complained,
then shrugged and started off toward the patch of trees that hid her quarry.

"I'll help you look," Jelene offered, skipping to her twin's side. "And he *would* have caught it if you told him it was coming." She nodded with a child's certainty in adult abilities.

"Last one across the field is a rotten egg!" Lucien shouted as he took off toward the trees. The girls accepted his challenge and put on a burst of speed. The three kids dashed across the grass and flowers and disappeared into the shadows of the trees.

"Be careful!" Chakotay called after them. Shaking his head, he made his way to where Tom was still sitting cross-legged by the picnic basket.

Tom couldn't contain his smile as he watched Chakotay walking toward him, no longer needing a cane. His throat tightened suddenly as he remembered how Chakotay had struggled in the early days of his physical therapy.

Now Tom's bronze warrior was back in fine form, strong and graceful and secure in his movements. To watch Chakotay simply cross a field, moving without pain, filled Tom with such love and joy---and anticipation.

The Doc had given Chakotay a clean bill of health, and the lovers had planned their private bonding ceremony for the night after Deanna and Will's public one.

Tom's expression turned speculative as Chakotay reached the blanket and laid down on his side, reclining on his left elbow. "So, Cha, what should we do to pass the time until our terrible trio returns?"

Chakotay flicked a glance toward the woods. "Depends." He reached his free hand to squeeze Tom's knee, letting his fingers drift up a jean-clad thigh. "What do you have in mind?"

Tom's heated gaze lingered over Chakotay's body, which even in its relaxed state oozed a kind of lazy sensuality. "Plenty, but what can I get away with?"

Dark eyes widened slightly, darkened. "May I suggest a meeting of the CPMAS?" He stretched, grasping Tom's nape to pull Tom forward and down to meet his lips.

"Mmmm..." was Tom's only reply as he uncoiled and arranged his body to mirror Chakotay's. They came together as naturally as breathing, arms wrapping around each other, lips and tongues and breath mingling, fingers caressing.

Concentrating on each other, but also aware of their charges.

Even passion had to take a back seat to parenthood.

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Deanna chuckled at her husband's discomfort. "I really can't understand why you don't just unbutton your collar, Will---or better yet redesign the whole dress uniform. Everyone who wears it looks as if they're being punished."

"We are," Will grumbled morosely, tugging at the constricting fasteners at his throat, "we're being punished for being foolish enough to accept promotions to ranks where we have to put on dress uniforms."

Despite his discomfort, he was fighting to keep a grin off his face. He couldn't believe how happy he
was, now that he had finally married his Imzadi. The woman who had offered him her heart a long
time ago, even though they could only be together in secret. Will loved Deanna, and more than that,
he was humbled by her devotion. He'd vowed to himself to always be worthy of it.

So far, so good. Their emotional bond had only strengthened in the weeks since the Betazoid
wedding.

*That* had certainly been an event. Will wasn't sure he'd ever be able to look at his mother-in-law in
quite the same way after seeing her in her birthday suit. Not to mention his own father.

He'd also never have guessed how many of his friends and colleagues harbored secret nudist
aspirations. He'd never seen so much skin in all his life.

Will snorted, wondering which was more uncomfortable: Grinning and bearing---and baring it all---
at his wedding or strangling in the constricting Fleet dress uniform for the official greeting by their
Bajoran hosts.

It was too close to call.

Deanna's smile widened as she caught the drift of Will's thoughts. She smoothed the amber silk of
her own free-flowing garment, sending back her impressions of the softness of the material, the airy
freedom of the long skirt.

Her thoughts shifted focus as she considered the dashing figure Will cut, the red-and-black Fleet
uniform emphasizing the breadth of his shoulders. She would be the envy of the proceedings with
him at her side, his ready grin and twinkling eyes charming the Bajorans, no doubt.

But when they were alone, later, Deanna knew that was when he'd let the façade of careless
amiability drop. It was the passionate, tender soul beneath that had held Deanna in thrall for so many
years. And always would.

She drifted over and kissed Will's cheek, sliding her own fingers underneath his collar to try and
loosen it a bit. "Are you going to be all right?" she asked, her dark eyes clouding with concern.
"Remember, they still haven't caught that assassin."

Slender fingers clenched in the material. "Will you be able to move fast if you're this
uncomfortable?"

Will smiled tenderly at the fear and worry he could sense emanating from Deanna. "Of course, I'll be
fine."

He tilted her chin to press a light kiss to her mouth. "Besides, there's been no indication this Wynn
character will care about us at all. There's been no sign of her in the last ten days. She's probably left
the planet."

"Be careful anyway. I waited long enough to get you," Deanna attempted to lighten the atmosphere.
"I want some time to enjoy having you."

Will drew her into an embrace. "And how long do you think you'll need to accomplish that?"

She smiled. "Oh, just a lifetime or two."

***************

Minister Jaro waved at the bee approaching too close to his ear, then returned his gaze to the crowd
of Bajorans gathered to get a glimpse of the Federation Admiral, and to hear the candidates’ final speeches. He wondered where Wynn was hiding.

Despite the phalanx of guards around and the tiny phaser in his pocket, he was on edge. Wynn was out of control—he was beginning to think she might even be insane. The messages she’d left for him had been brilliantly concealed from the security forces, but their content was a mix of practical requisition orders and wild ravings.

Jaro had acceded to the demands and cautiously ignored the rest. He had covered his tracks as best he could, maneuvering carefully to avoid detection. He didn't want to actually win the election and then lose the position due to scandal.

Still, the tone of Wynn's communiqués disturbed him. He wasn't entirely confident that she'd only strike at the delegates and other candidates.

But all he could do was wait for Wynn to make her move—and stay out of her way.

Shakaar, seated next to Jaro, glanced at his competitor out of the corner of his eye. The older man was pale and sweating. It increased Shakaar's own unease. He had a feeling that somewhere in the throng of supporters and detractors Wynn was hiding. He surreptitiously fingered the knife tucked up his sleeve, wishing instead he had a phaser on his hip.

He'd faced death countless times while fighting against the Dominion forces, but he'd never felt so helpless as he had the last few weeks. Knowing someone was out there, targeting him in particular, was unnerving. Especially because his first instinct was to get under cover, find some barrier or protection to shield himself from the danger.

But that avenue had been closed to him by his fellow candidates. If they were willing to risk death to continue to be available to the people of Bajor, then he had to do the same.

He sighed and shifted in his chair, his eyes roaming over the crowd.

He may have to do it, but he didn't have to like it.

Kai Opaka fussed with her outfit, adjusting her hat and smoothing her robe. In a way, the small movements calmed her. Focusing on these tiny details distracted her from the major events out of her control. Things such as the outcome of the election, and the assassin no doubt lurking in a convenient shadow.

She stilled her hands in her lap. Closed her eyes and simply felt the sun on her face, the air moving in and out of her lungs, the sounds of the audience.

What would be, would be.

***************

Bariel and Kira hovered at the edge of the platform, their eyes never still as they constantly scanned the crowd for Wynn. "You really think she's going to try something here, in front of all these guards and witnesses?" he asked.

Kira huffed a frustrated breath. "Under normal circumstances I'd say no. A smart woman would get out while she still could, while we're busy with all the security surrounding the delegates and the elections. But then a smart woman wouldn't have attacked Jaro and stepped up the hunt."

Bariel's brow furrowed. "So why is she still on the planet?"
"I wish I knew." Kira's hand automatically moved to her phaser as sparkling columns preceded the arrival of the Federation representatives. A handful of security guards appeared first. Will Riker and Deanna Troi arrived next, along with Captain Cavit and two other officers from Voyager, Dalby and Henley.

Everyone seemed to pause a moment. Bariel could taste the metallic tang of tension in the air. His own body stiffened, and he had to remind himself to breathe.

***************

Jake was standing in front of the holorecorder at the front of the crowd, filing his dispatch for FNN. Billy was handling the video equipment, while Noah was taking care of sound. Tal stood out of view, watching the crowd.

Mort pushed people out of his way until he reached his friends. "I've got it."

"Mort, I'm trying to---wait, what?" Jake whirled and automatically accepted the padd Mort thrust into his hands. "What have you got?"

"The power cells. It took me a while to trace all the dummy corporations and middlemen, but Jaro Essa arranged for some of them to be moved from one warehouse to another. Somewhere along the way the units conveniently disappeared."

"That's pretty flimsy, Mort." Tal quirked an eyebrow as she looked at the padd. "Especially if you're planning to accuse a Minister of collusion to commit murder."

"Well, technically, he'd only be guilty of aiding and abetting a fugitive," Billy pointed out. "Nobody's been killed, and only Jaro's been assaulted."

"That could change at any moment," Noah pointed out. All of them returned their attention to the people on the platform, and the crowd.

***************

Wynn mingled with the other clerics on the dais, her vedek's hood and robes concealing most of her features. The rest were altered in coloring and shape by the careful application of prosthetics and make-up, making her appear masculine. The disguise was good enough to get her past the checkpoints and onto the platform with the other religious representatives of Bajor.

Her hand gripped the hypospray tighter. It was loaded with 10 doses of the Cardassian toxin, plenty to fulfill her plans. The uninoculated aliens would be dead within an hour---the smug Bajoran candidates would take much longer.

Still, they would die eventually, and their impending agony was a pleasure to contemplate. Wynn smirked. All of her plans were laid. The funds Jaro had forwarded to her were transferred to offworld accounts. She had necessities and comforts laid in for a few days' stay at a secure location. Her passage on a freighter was booked under an assumed name.

She had debated simply leaving, taking advantage of Jaro's stupidity in giving her half of the latinum and credits up front. She might not have lived quite so well in exile, but the odds may have been better that she'd actually make it off-planet.

But her destroyed dreams and thwarted ambitions had proved bitter company in the isolation of her wait for an opportunity to leave. The more time she spent reliving the disappointments she'd experienced since Julian Bashir Picard's death, the greater the hate and contempt she felt for those
Bajorans who were going to take their place in the spotlight as leaders of this world.

With such a potent form of revenge at her disposal, it was easy for Wynn to persuade herself that she could have both freedom and satisfaction.

So she'd laid her plans, and made ready to carry them out.

Now all she had to do was deliver the poison and slip away during the ensuing chaos. She moved forward with the other Vedeks as they approached the Federation delegates for the formal introductions.

Wynn's eyes narrowed as she realized that she could take care of the first candidate during her wait to shake the Admiral's hand. She would pass right behind Kai Opaka. She could stick the self-righteous cleric, and Opaka would probably think it was one of the bees that were drawn by all the flowers and perfumes filling the air with their enticing scents.

She pulled her sleeve down, concealing the glint of the instrument. She approached the unsuspecting Kai, aiming for the small strip of skin visible between the woman's collar and her ridiculous hat.

Five steps, three, and then she was bringing up the weapon as her body blocked her movements from view---

Suddenly a hand reached out and encompassed her own, jerking the hypospray down. Wynn gasped as she realized the source of the interference. The Kai's hat wasn't real---it was alive!

Odo flowed off the unsuspecting Bajoran's head and into his usual form, still immobilizing Wynn's arm as he used his other hand to whip off her disguise. "You're under arrest," he said, satisfaction clear in his tone.

Jaro realized they had an alive---and likely very talkative---Wynn in custody and surged forward, pulling out his phaser, desperate to silence his partner in crime.

"You won't be needing that, Minister," Kira's smooth voice matched her movements as she plucked the object from Jaro's hand. "We wouldn't want anything to happen to the prisoner before her interrogation."

Their eyes met.

"Of course," Jaro conceded, stepping back. He moved toward the edge of the platform, his agile brain already plotting how quickly he could liquidate his assets and get off planet or into hiding.

A quartet of unfamiliar human males accompanied by a slim Bajoran woman blocked his escape. "Minister Jaro," one of them said as a holorecorder was shoved in his face, "Can you explain how power cells of the same type used by Wynn's cloaking device disappeared from your possession---"

When people's attention shifted to this new drama and began crowding around them, Jaro knew he was doomed.

As a thoroughly secured Wynn was hustled off by a group of guards, Kai Opaka turned to face her rescuers. Her gimlet gaze froze Bariel, Kira, and Odo. "Explain."

Bariel lifted his hands in a gesture of appeal. "You wouldn't allow any guards around you. We couldn't just let you blithely traipse around the planet without any sort of protection whatsoever."

Kira winced at the word "traipse" but added, "Constable Odo agreed to watch over you. Besides, it
gave him a great vantage point to observe things."

"Indeed, Kai Opaka, I would hope that the happy end justified the rather underhanded means," Odo concluded, crossing his arms.

"I'd have to agree with the gentleman," Will Riker broke in. He had sidled over to hear the conversation. "I know that the Federation Council will be appreciative of all the actions taken by Mr. Odo, as well as the Bajoran contingent, in order to protect the Federation delegates."

He grinned at the Kai. "You wouldn't want to spoil this lovely opportunity to have the Federation in your debt by complaining, now would you?"

Opaka considered a moment, then shook her head and laughed. "I must commend you on your grasp of tactics *and* politics, Admiral." She turned back to the trio. "Very well, I'll simply thank you all for my life today, and quote the Terrans' proverb 'All's well that ends well'."

Her expression turned stern. "Now get me a hat."

******************************************************************************

"That's quite a story. If nothing else, I must say this Kai Opaka has her priorities in order. The proper headgear is *always* important." Humor glimmered in Guinan's dark eyes under the brim of her own chapeau as she sipped her drink and regarded her companion. "So how did you learn all of this? It wasn't in the official reports."

Kate Pulaski grinned over her own glass. "Jake Sisko knows how important discretion can be to a good reporter---but I wormed all the juicy details out of him on a secure channel."

"My dear Kate, your powers of persuasion are unparalleled," Guinan complimented with a small bow. She was being sincere as well as slightly ironic. The almost-immortal alien had planned to spend the rest of her time away from Enterprise at a luxury spa, being pampered and catered to. Those vacations helped balance her onboard life as a bartender and unofficial counselor to the large crew.

Instead, she was attending Kathryn Janeway's party to mark the successful capture of the assassin and the completion of the Bajoran elections. Kate had called out of the blue with an invitation. The promise of all the dirt on the events of the last few months had proved an irresistible enticement.

Even sage aliens weren't immune to the lure of gossip.

"I'm glad you think so," Kate chuckled as she linked arms with her friend. "Because now that Kathryn's taken I need a new gal pal to double-date with. So I'm about to persuade you to go out with one of two very interesting ambassadors..."

They disappeared into the garden.

******************************************************************************

Geordi brought Leah's hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to the back. When he lowered them back to their sides, he was thrilled that she didn't let go.

He was head-over-heels in love with the serene and beautiful woman. He had found himself drawn by the softness of her voice, the gentleness of her demeanor. The hidden facets of her personality---a sly sense of humor, a fierce intelligence, flashes of passion---had been even more compelling. He had
so many hopes for this unexpected relationship.

Their's had been a cautious courting, two shy people getting to know each other. But though their progress had been slow, they had been growing closer in the passing weeks. Business conferences had turned into dinner meetings, and they'd been in constant communication when Leah had started visiting some of the less-fortunate Federation worlds to evaluate their technological needs.

Leah gave a gentle smile as she felt Geordi entwine their fingers. She'd never considered dating a politician before---if nothing else, she always imagined hating a life in the spotlight. But Geordi was so low-key, so genuine and sincere and simply wonderful, that her life had become entangled with his just as easily as their hands were.

Her gaze warmed as she considered the strong but sweet man before her. Her lips curled ever so slightly, a secret smile.

Geordi didn't know it yet, but tonight he was going to get very lucky.

Leah knew that in meeting Geordi, she already was.

***************

"So ma'am, will the Admiral be returning on Voyager, or will Enterprise be going out to meet him?" Data considered the topic safe for a social situation. He'd been surprised when Tasha Yar had asked him to escort her to this function, but he'd readily agreed. He found he liked the tall blonde, who was fascinating in her mix of coolness and heat.

"We're off-duty, Data, you can call me Tasha," Tasha reminded gently. She was surprised at the calming influence the strange android exerted over her. Perhaps it was his guileless curiosity, or the childlike innocence of his golden eyes, but she never snapped at him. And she found his open wonder at being in space a striking contrast to the jaded veterans she usually served with.

She smiled to herself at her uncharacteristic reaction to this unique person. "But to answer your question, Will is planning to stick with Voyager to the Spilenta system. Enterprise will be picking him up there in a few weeks. We'll be heading out as soon as the refits are complete."

"Thank you for the information." Data hesitated, then offered, "You look very nice this evening, Tasha." And she did, a slim column of ivory in a pantsuit that was decorated with embroidered threads of ivy green. His eyes widened as his tough-as-nails colleague blushed, the delicate pink adding its own lovely accent to her cheeks.

"I, uh, thank you, Data, um---let's dance." Tasha quickly grabbed one pale wrist and led her escort to where couples were moving to the orchestra's dreamy music.

Neither one minded that it was a slow song.

***************

Rudy Ransom, Joe Carey, Reg Barclay, and Marla Gilmore were idly discussing technological innovations with Lewis Zimmerman. All of them had been impressed with the independent development of the EMH's matrix.

"It was a personal request from Ad---former Admiral Chakotay," Zimmerman said with his usual pomposity. "I had no choice, really, but to let my creation continue on its own."

"Perhaps, but surely the spectacular success of your prototype makes up for the loss of the creation
"itself," Marla said as she leaned further into her husband. She glanced up into Reg's smiling eyes as she felt his arms wrap around her from behind.

"And now that the portable emitter technology is available, I'm sure your next version will be even more spectacular," Reg offered. He and Marla were actually consultants on the upgrades, so they had learned to take the researcher's whining with a hefty pinch of patience.

"I know the Guard will be very interested in having your EMHs installed in their Sick Bays as soon as the revisions and testing are completed," Joe said as he clapped a hand on Zimmerman's shoulder.

"Yes, and I have no doubt the Fleet will also find the idea of a holographic doctor for emergencies simply brilliant," Rudy concurred, following Joe's lead in keeping the mood light. "And it must be satisfying to know your creation has impressed the people of Dorvan enough to ask him to stay and help folks on the frontier."

He shrugged. "And after all, aiding others is why you created the EMH. I'm sure he'll do a lot of good."

Reg nodded in agreement. "He's fulfilling his purpose. What more would any of us ask for?"

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Keiko put her empty plate aside and groaned. "I don't think I'll eat again for a week."

Jadzia chuckled, her light eyes twinkling as she glanced at her lover. "Oh, don't do that. You'd look just as good with a little more meat on those lovely bones."

"Flirt," Keiko accused, but grinned and reached a hand across the table to enclose one of Jadzia's. "You know flattery will get you everywhere."

"Not until Kathryn presents all of those commendations for valor and service to the Federation," Jadzia pointed out. She lifted a finger to rub against Keiko's palm. "I'm glad there aren't too many people here for the ceremony---and very little publicity. I became a scientist because I like the quiet life."

Keiko leaned in, admitting, "I was wondering if you wanted to be more...noticed, now that interplanetary relationships aren't frowned upon anymore."

Jadzia looked up. "Is that what you want?"

"No, not in this lifetime," Keiko said with a chuckle. "I'm perfectly content to labor in obscurity---outside the accolades from the scientific community, of course. The pay increase was a nice surprise, though."

A grin lit Jadzia's face. "True, but I bet it was a lot less expensive than a lawsuit in the long run. *And* a lot less damaging to the company's reputation."

Keiko's eyes twinkled mischievously. "I think we should put in for a nice long vacation somewhere. Put a little of that extra money to good use."

"Only if it's somewhere with a nude beach," Jadzia reminded. "You know how much I hate tan lines."

Keiko laughed. "Why should you care? You never even go out into the sun without full protection---you don't get tan lines, you burn, remember?"
Jadzia's smile was wicked. "I didn't mean on me."

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Mark discovered Kathryn hiding behind a pillar, looking out over her garden at the mix of people gathered there. He slid an arm around her waist. "It was nice of you to have the party here, rather than at the central palace," he said as he rested his chin atop her head. "Much more appropriate."

Kathryn's lips curled into her trademark crooked grin. "Because this is where the quiet revolution took place?" She sighed and nestled into Mark's embrace. She was glad that he had stayed by her side through the heady days of the transitional government, and even her taking up the mantle of Federation leadership.

She had been afraid it would be very lonely at the top. But now she knew Mark was in for the long haul. It brought her a peace and contentment beyond that of seeing her long-held hope of the new Federation fulfilled.

Still, the fact that she had finally accomplished that impossible dream—with more help than she could even come close to fully acknowledging—brought a quiet satisfaction. And a new determination to ensure that the abuses and excesses of power that the Empire represented would never again come to pass.

Kathryn knew she would succeed because she had so many good people with her. This team of such disparate individuals was unbeatable. She knew it in her heart.

And if her heart was a tad overly optimistic because she happened to be in love with Mark, so be it. Her attention shifted back to him as he replied.

"Not so quiet." Mark chuckled. "I seem to recall being told about a bit of phaser fire here and there." His arms tightened fractionally as he remembered how close he had come to never meeting this remarkable woman. It was almost too horrible to contemplate.

But even greater than his dismay at the realization of how events could have gone so wrong was the awe at how things had turned out so right. For the people here, and for all of the citizens of the Federation worlds. That a few dozen individuals had brought about such a sweeping change was remarkable.

That all of them were so humble about their contributions was astounding. Mark knew that the future was in good hands. Particularly the dainty ones of the woman he loved more than he believed possible.

***************

At the same time Kathryn's party was being held, the Dorvan celebration was in full swing. Rosera and the Doctor had received a long round of shocked applause at their unexpectedly moving performance. There were a few cases of napkins being hurriedly pressed into service as handkerchiefs when a particularly poignant selection was sung.

Now the open-air celebration had reached the last phase, after-dinner dancing and conversation. The lawn in front of the warehouse had been transformed into a pavilion, complete with lush foliage, tables, chairs, and a temporary floor. Small white lights were strung everywhere, mimicking the stars above.

Chakotay sat down next to Will and Deanna. "I'm so happy for the two of you." He smiled at their glow of contentment. "And I have to thank you again for opening up your ceremony to so many
other couples."

"It was such a lovely idea, Chakotay, how could we possibly resist?" Deanna smiled at the memory. "And it was a beautiful ceremony. I just hope I get to know all of the others better---after all, we'll be sharing an anniversary of sorts."

Chakotay nodded. "You were in very good company: Tuvok and T'Pel renewing their vows, Kassidy and Ben Sisko becoming engaged along with Lakanta and Gerron Tem." He grinned. "And of course, you and Will, and B'Elanna and Harry, tying the knot."

Will smirked. "Who would've thought our strait-laced young officer would end up with a half-Klingon ex-gladiator." He shook his head. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard about it."

"But seeing them in person makes it easy to believe," Deanna glanced over at their host, gazing at him knowingly. "So when will be hearing some news like that from you, Chakotay?"

"Yeah, when is Tom Paris going to make an honest man of you?" Will seconded.

"Not for a while," Chakotay said, his mood becoming wistful. "I don't want to rush this. The losses are still too fresh---it's going to take a little more time for the past to really be past."

He gave a rueful smile. "At least formally. In our hearts, Tom and I are already committed."

"I bet Jean-Luc would have approved," Will said reflectively. "He knew the bond you two shared."

"I like to think so." Chakotay sighed. "I sometimes wonder what he would have thought about everything that's happened."

Will reached over to lay a hand on Chakotay's arm. "I know Jean-Luc trusted you above everyone else in the universe, my friend. And you didn't let him down. So I believe he would be at peace."

Deanna nodded. "And happy that you found your way home."

Chakotay blinked back a sudden mistiness. "Thank you," was all he said.

***************

Harry and B'Elanna swayed to the music, lost in each other.

"It's nice to have an official stamp on things," Harry said. "You know how bureaucrats love certificates."

B'Elanna chuckled and leaned in to nip her lifemate's ear. "Does that mean you are now formally obligated to fulfill your conjugal duties? How about this one?" She whispered a suggestion.

Harry blushed in embarrassment even as he flushed with arousal. "I can certainly put it on the list---I think I'm up to it."

B'Elanna's hand drifted down to confirm that statement for herself. She growled approvingly. "Then let's leave and turn this into a private celebration---after all, it is our honeymoon."

A moment later, there was no sign of them except for the breeze of their passing.

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"So Tem, does this mean you're going to stay with Lakanta all the time now?" Jelene asked as the young Bajoran ushered them into the warehouse to get ready for bed.

"Not yet, Jelene," Tem assured her. "We're only engaged, and Lakanta wants to do things properly. So we won't be living together until after the wedding."

Lucien looked back at his friend and caregiver. "It's cool that you two got together. I'm glad you're not going to be leaving to live on Bajor."

Tem smiled. "That's good to hear, Lucien. I would have missed all of you, too."

Koral tipped her head to the side with a wistful air. "Are you going to still take care of us sometimes even after you're married?"

"Of course," Tem said, crouching to get on the kids' level as he gathered them close. "We'll always be friends. But I will be spending a lot more time with Lakanta. I want him to come on some long visits to Bajor with me as well."

Never one to let an opportunity slip by, Lucien asked, "Do you think Lakanta will let us keep an eye on the puppies when you visit Bajor?"

Tem chuckled and ruffled his hair. "We'll see."

***************

Tuvok and T'Pel sat on a swinging bench in a quiet corner of the party. Their hands were touching in the ritual gesture of Vulcan communication between spouses.

No words were spoken, but the love flowed between them, a circuit of silent joy. It had been a milestone of sorts, to renew their vows to each other so far from Vulcan, before a mix of aliens unlikely to be found on their homeworld.

It might also be a turning point. A sign that perhaps they were ready to move their family to the frontier and make a life there. Tuvok as the head of Trebus's security force, T'Pel as a university teacher or administrator.

The decision was not yet made, but the speculation was...interesting.

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"I'll admit I was surprised that Anthwara agreed to speak blessings over so many aliens," the Doc said as he retook his seat beside Rosera. "My impression was that he didn't approve of non-Dorvans."

"I think it's more that he's concerned that Dorvan's tribes keep faith with their traditions," Lakanta commented. "I know that's the way I look at it."

"And he was probably pleased that so many people were interested in a Dorvan ceremony," Rosera added as she stirred her coffee. "It was pretty impressive---only one native in the lot."

"I found it more surprising that he stayed as long as he did at the party," Lakanta stretched and wondered if he should go inside and see how Tem was getting along with the kids. "Actually, it was a shock to see all of the council members here."

"It's an endorsement of Chakotay's plans for Trebus." Rosera shrugged. "They want him to know
that on a personal level they support him."

"Interesting. I must admit that these nuances of behavior elude me." The EMH's brow furrowed. "I'm not quite sure how to expand my program to understand it."

Rosera smiled. "Well, if you're interested in a tutor, I'll be willing to volunteer."

Lakanta's eyebrows rose as he wondered what was behind Rosera's oh-so-innocent expression.

He hoped the Doc realized what he was getting into.

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"I'm glad you guys were able to leave FNN indoors tonight," Tom said as he leaned against the bar, regarding the group of intrepid young people.

Jake beat a quick tattoo on the wood. "The network was so happy about the coverage of Wynn's capture, Jaro's downfall, and the Bajoran elections that we're pretty much off the hook for the rest of the trip."

He shrugged. "And if we need to pitch a story on the fly, my dad said we could do something on the reform school he's starting."

"That figures—-it would be great free publicity," Tom commented before his expression softened. "And it would help out his son."

"Yeah." Jake ducked his head as his voice roughened. "The old man has really come through these last few months."

"And Kassidy seems nice as well," Tal said, rescuing Jake from his momentary embarrassment. "She and Mr. Sisko make a striking couple."

"If nothing else, they're definitely together," Billy said with a grin. "I think they disappeared right after dinner."

"#I* think we need to change the subject," Mort pointed out with surprising tact.

Tom nodded. "What's going down on Bajor? I know the folks from there and DS9 felt like they couldn't get away for tonight."

Noah grunted an agreement. "Wynn has been spilling her guts on quite a few topics. Shelby and a few other ex-Councilors are looking at more charges, not to mention some Bajoran politicos who were in bed with Jaro."

He shook his head. "The new First Minister's going to have her work cut out for her rebuilding the government."

"It was great Kai Opaka asked Shakaar to be her deputy, though," Tal said as she swirled her drink. "I think they'll be able to handle it."

Tom set his glass aside. "So, will you folks be heading out with Will and Deanna when Voyager swings back?"

"It's time to go home to Earth." Mort nodded. "If nothing else, I shudder to imagine what FNN's computer system's going to look like when I get back to my desk."
"I'm sure it won't be beyond your ability to fix in a flash," Tal teased. "I'm more worried what your 'conspiracy search' programs have come up with while we've been away."

"Probably nothing as bizarre as what's really happened," Jake pointed out.

"Truer words were never spoken," Tom said with a knowing smile.

The next night, Tom and Chakotay stood on a blanket in a secluded glen. A nearby fire painted them in flickers of gold while the stars provided accents to the light of the full moon.

The men clasped hands, their matching loose trousers, tunics and bare feet making them mirror images, bright and dark.

Chakotay cleared his throat and smiled at Tom. The younger man was practically vibrating with emotion. He hoped the feelings were good ones—anticipation, joy, love—the same as his own. Along with a sense of rightness, of destiny fulfilled. One that had been in the making since he'd first seen a scamp swinging from an air vent.

"Thomas Eugene Paris." Chakotay almost chuckled when Tom's nose wrinkled in dislike of the formal name. "Tom. Before the stars and Spirits, this night I pledge myself to you, body, mind, and soul. I offer you my love in all its forms, my support in all your endeavors, my intent to walk the path of life together."

Tom's heart was too full, his throat too tight to speak for a moment. His universe compressed until all he knew was the gentle grip of Chakotay's hands, the glowing warmth of those dark eyes, that wonderful loving smile.

And he felt complete. Tightening his fingers, Tom inhaled and made his own vow. "Chakotay. Before the stars and Spirits, this night I pledge myself to you, body, mind, and soul. I offer you my love in all its forms, my support in all your endeavors, my intent to walk the path of life together."

They stared at each other, letting the moment wash over them. Then both men moved as one, drawing together, their hands still joined. "I love you" was whispered by two sets of lips just before they touched.

The first kiss was solemn, reflecting the seriousness of the promises made. A brief but thorough tasting, in itself a pledge of devotion.

But when they drew apart, Tom grinned in relief and love and lust. He drawled, "Get naked, Cha, and let this CPMAS meeting begin."

"Giving orders already? You should have told me ahead of time you were hiding a bossy streak." Chakotay tilted his chin, eyes twinkling. "Nope. You want it, you come and get it."

Tom recognized the message behind Chakotay's teasing challenge. Tom was in charge tonight---Chakotay was going to let him set the pace. It showed a trust and commitment that warmed Tom's heart.

Anticipation heated his blood, though, as he deliberately stepped forward to gather the edge of Chakotay's shirt to remove it. He tossed the garment to the edge of the blanket and took a moment to smooth rumpled black hair, enjoying the slide of the silky strands through his fingers.
Then draping his arms around Chakotay's waist, Tom drew his lover into another leisurely kiss. He tilted his head and shifted his arms, his fingers splayed over the smooth skin of Chakotay's back as his tongue mapped the contours of Chakotay's mouth. He felt the rough brush of Chakotay's nipples through the material of his own shirt.

Tom drew back and ran his lips along Chakotay's jaw and down, feeling the pulse beating in the strong throat. His tongue snaked out to lap at the notch at the center of the graceful collarbone.

He smiled at Chakotay's moan as he moved hands and mouth to trace the angles and arcs defining his mate's torso, tawny skin stretched over muscle and bone. He sighed his own approval as he felt Chakotay's fingers skim lightly along his own shoulders and neck, caressing.

Chakotay moaned again as he felt Tom's fingers work their way into his waistband, drawing his trousers down. He opened his eyes to look down his own naked body to see a fully-dressed Tom kneeling at his feet. "I think we're going to have to look at the CPMAS dress code again if you don't hurry up and get rid of those clothes."

His voice dropped as his hands cupped Tom's face. "I want to see you, Tom, touched by moonlight."

"Soon," Tom promised as his own hands glided up, teasing the backs of Chakotay's knees. He felt the shudder pass through the Chakotay's frame and smiled. He nipped his way along one thigh as his hands lifted to grasp Chakotay's ass. He kneaded the rounded muscles, his fingers dipping into the crevice separating them.

Chakotay's hands shifted to Tom's shoulders as he gasped. He spread his feet wider for balance and to give Tom free rein. His erection brushed fabric and he made a low sound at the sensation.

"Yes," Tom murmured approvingly. He reached to the edge of the blanket and snagged the container of lube there. He coated his fingers, then let them drift back between his lover's buttocks. He looked up at Chakotay. "Tell me if it's too much, too soon."

Chakotay smiled at the concern, and leaned down to kiss his gratitude. He felt the first long finger slide in as Tom's other hand splayed over the small of his back, offering support and keeping him in place.

Tom drank the offered sweetness of Chakotay's mouth as his finger continued to work its way past the natural resistance. The channel felt so hot and tight he couldn't wait to be buried within it. His cock was hard and heavy, pressing against his trousers. Both men shuddered and moaned as Tom pushed in a second digit. Chakotay clutched at Tom's shirt, fingers twisting into the cloth. He pulled away to tilt his head back as he straightened, gasping as Tom stroked his prostate. "Oh, you definitely have a talent for this."

"Thanks." Tom hurriedly worked a third finger into Chakotay's body, anxious to replace his hand with his cock. He was definitely ready for this joining. He twisted his fingers, spreading the lubricant.

Chakotay's cock, gleaming with precum, drew his attention. He dipped his head to lick at his lover's balls, then tasted Chakotay's essence as he ran his tongue up the shaft to swipe the fluid from the tip.

Chakotay moaned and pulled away, too close to risk more contact with that teasing mouth. "I'm ready Tom. More than ready."

"Then let's do it." Tom assisted his lover down to the blanket, then rose to bare his own skin to the night air.
"I was right---moonlight suits you," Chakotay murmured as he spread his arms and legs to welcome Tom back into his embrace.

"You look like the heart of the flame," Tom said in return as he kissed Chakotay. When they had to come up for air he grabbed the tube and coated his cock, gasping at the coolness of the gel.

Again Tom supported Chakotay's back with one hand, while with the other he positioned himself at the glistening opening. He pushed the head in, gasping at the instinctive grip of Chakotay's passage.

Chakotay braced his forearms against the blanket and arched, taking all of Tom into himself. He gasped at the blunt pressure, then relaxed into Tom's possession. He sighed and lifted a hand to lightly grip Tom's wrist in reassurance.

At that signal Tom began to draw out, feeling the channel sheathing him cling and massage his cock. He groaned and slid back in, his movements a little awkward but gaining confidence with each succeeding stroke.

Tom's gaze was fixed on Chakotay's face, at the expression of love and welcome dissolving into bliss. He quickened the tempo, pressing closer, wishing he could get close enough to share his lover's skin.

His free hand stroked Chakotay's quivering belly and meandered through the sparse thatch of pubic hair, feeling the buildup of tension in his own body as well as the one beneath him. He palmed Chakotay's cock, desperately pulling at the engorged length.

Chakotay's head tossed as Tom began moving faster. He groaned his lover's name with each plunge into his flesh. Chakotay pressed his elbows harder into the blanket, using the leverage to lift himself higher into the strokes. Love became passion became need as he felt the pressure in his core, an inexorable rise that broke over him in ecstasy. He shouted Tom's name to the night.

Tom moaned in pleasure as he felt Chakotay buck beneath him. He kept thrusting into the tightness and the slick heat until his own body succumbed to the rush of lightning, the shock of electricity in his veins. He felt the quick jets of warm fluid as his cock loosed his seed. He fell forward, bracing his hands against the blanket, struggling to catch his breath.

Chakotay straightened his legs and wrapped his arms around Tom's waist. He pulled Tom down, stroking the slim back covered with sweat. "Definitely an expert," he said dreamily.

Tom managed a weak chuckle against the strong chest beneath him. He lazily swiped his tongue against one flat nipple, watching it immediately peak in response as Chakotay groaned. "Certified by the CPMAS?"

"Certainly," Chakotay said as he gripped Tom's chin to lift his face. "But of course you may only hone your talents with members of the society. I'm sure that's part of the by-laws."

"As long as the guarantee is mutual, sounds good to me, Cha. You're the only one I want to use my skills on." Tom silently requested and received a kiss, then shifted most of his weight off Chakotay while keeping his head over his lover's heart.

"Same here, my love," Chakotay whispered as he felt Tom's body relax against him, heading toward sleep. He was content to stay awake awhile, enjoying the feel of Tom in his arms, listening to the fire, looking up at the stars.
A week later Chakotay, Tuvok, B'Elanna, and Sisko were standing in the sunlight outside the warehouse, saying their farewells. Harry, Tom, Kassidy, and T'Pel had already departed for the spaceport.

The four stood together, hands laid on top of one another's in the ancient sign of camaraderie and teamwork.

Chakotay looked at each of these special people. He knew they had saved him as much as he had protected them. If they hadn't reached out to help, and stood by him in his most dangerous hours, he'd be long dead. They were more than friends---they were kin, siblings of the warrior spirit.

They did not need to speak. They knew that near or far, they would always be in each other's thoughts.

B'Elanna embraced Chakotay, holding him for a moment in a fierce clasp. Then she stroked the braid on his wrist, gave him a quick smile and headed for the hover car. She knew she and Harry would be back soon, and often.

Sisko offered his forearm in a warrior's clasp that turned into a quick embrace. Then he drew back and mock-punched Chakotay's jaw before departing with a grin and jaunty wave.

Tuvok gazed a moment at Chakotay's serene face, so different from the cold and broken man he'd met on a slave ship what seemed a lifetime ago. He pressed one hand to Chakotay's shoulder, and felt a light grip on his wrist in return. A quick brush of minds, an exchange of thanks and reaffirmation of friendship.

Then the men parted and with a nod to each other, went their separate ways.

Tuvok settled into his seat. Sisko started the engine and as he swung the car into motion the three warriors looked back a moment, taking with them the image of Chakotay's parting smile.

On the spirit plane, the glen was no longer shadowed. Downed trees had brought the sunlight back to the forest floor. Blades of grass and bright flowers waved in the breeze, and the animals and insects busily hunted for their next meal. The scars of fire and turmoil were beginning to soften, the harsh edges blurring under the growth of new life.

Chakotay leaned against one ancient trunk, comforted that some of the old sentinels still survived all that had passed.

"Your world is much changed, my son." Kolopak's white hair was almost blinding in the sunlight as he crossed to his son's side.

"Yes, Papa. Some of it is my doing, and some not." He looked around at all of the differences.

"You are no longer troubled." Kolopak turned to face the same direction as Chakotay and laid a hand on his son's back. "Have you found your quiet life?"

"No, just a familiar duty." Chakotay turned to gaze into his parent's wise eyes. "One as husband, and father."

He smiled ruefully, "Farmer and builder and teacher. On Dorvan, where you always wanted me to be."
Kolopak's expression sovered as he turned his son to face him and placed both hands on Chakotay's shoulders. "I was wrong to try to hold you here, Chakotay. You had a long journey to this point. A painful one. But necessary."

He smiled sadly. "Sometimes we have to leave home, or lose it, to find it again." His voice roughened as he drew his son into a quick embrace. "Know that I'm proud of you, Chakotay."

"Thank you, Papa," Chakotay whispered as he came out of his meditation, his breath still shaky from emotion. He picked up the akoonah, touched the braid on his wrist and decided that soon he would need to make a new medicine bundle.

But first he would go see if Tom was back from the spaceport.

It was a beautiful day, and Chakotay was determined not to waste one single precious moment of it.

He had a lot of living, and loving, left to do.

THE END

End Notes

Comments are welcomed with great joy and constructive criticism is treasured as a rare gift.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!