

~ Holohell ~

by Trekgrrl

Disclaimers:

Voyager and Star Trek don't belong to me. I've drawn my information from all the Star Treks, from the old series, to Voyager. I'm also a role-player and drew information from the Star Trek Roleplaying Game put out by FASA Corporation.

I have no money, only a mortgage, and I'm not making any money from this story. If anyone wishes to sue, they will be sorely disappointed.

The Star Trek planetary classification system can be found here: [Star Trek Star Charts](#), published in 2002, or online here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Trek_planet_classifications

The principle of "faster than light, no left or right," came from "Fury." The precedent for the Bridge having only a minimum complement of staff was set in "Night", when Harry Kim was all alone until Tuvok came on duty.

"The Quiet Man," isn't mine, either, in case anyone was wondering. I am attempting to give that wonderful classic a nod, not violate anyone's copyright.

Rayna Merris is an original character.

If you're expecting an immediate hop into bed between two women, this is not the story for you. I'm a hardcore Trekkie. The science fiction part of the plot is primary to any romance. On the other hand, they will eventually end up in bed, so if that offends you or you aren't over eighteen, please don't read the series.

This story takes place after "Fair Haven" and "The Equinox" and references those episodes. It also takes place **before** "Spirit Folk". Therefore, the holo-people are not aware of too many things. (Yes, that oblique reference to a song was on purpose.)

The deaths of Admiral Edward Janeway and Lieutenant Justin Tighe are referenced. I didn't like the way things played out in [Mosaic](#), and used poetic license in the retelling. Did I mention that I'm not making any money from this? Good.

Constructive criticism and good wishes can be sent to:

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If it weren't for my beta-reader/creative consultant, Pam, this story would never have seen the light of day. She is the best, and I will defend that assertion with every fiber of my being.

Thank you, also to RJNolan, for reaching out to a new author and making her feel welcome. It is nice to have a mentor.

The translation of Dor-sho-gha can be found here:
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8853/curse.html>

"Captain's Log: Stardate 53334.4

"After four days of precarious travel through the Dead Zone, we detected a Class C planet with rich deposits of deuterium."

Janeway paused dictation for a moment to sip at the lukewarm remnants of coffee in her cup. "Precarious travel" was right. So far they had encountered two neutron stars and a black hole, not to mention intermittent subspace debris. Each new obstacle necessitated a drop from warp speed to make course corrections. The experience was tedious at best, downright hazardous at worst.

...and horribly slow... We overestimated our ability to travel through this sector. I never realized how much I would come to hate the words, "faster than light, no left or right."

Her eyes slid toward the huge sphere of crimson fire that filled up the windows of her Ready Room. It was violent star. Flares and solar storms raged across its surface. Under different circumstances, it would have been an intriguing opportunity for study. The death throes of stars were still only partially understood. Now, however, it was an unsettling reminder of how very far they had to go.

If Voyager reaches the other space station inside a year, it will be miraculous. She set the mug aside and renewed her entry. Hence the reason for our stopover...

"It is one of several small worlds orbiting a red supergiant. Despite the fact that massive veins of kelbonite prohibit our simply transporting the deuterium to Voyager, I have decided that the opportunity to stockpile energy is too important to pass by. Long range scans can find no sources of food, and hydroponics can't produce enough to feed the entire ship. If we run low on fuel, there will be no way to conserve it by curbing replicator use. They are currently our primary means of sustenance."

Janeway closed down the log when her Ready Room door chimed. "Come in," she beckoned.

Neelix and Lt. Paris entered. Both of them looked strangely happy, considering the number of hours everyone had been logging. She waved them both to chairs and offered up a welcoming smile.

"Gentlemen," she greeted.

"Captain, I've finished revamping Fair Haven," Paris announced, blue eyes sparking with excitement.

"Good for you, Tom," Janeway's heart quickened slightly. "I'm surprised you found the time or energy."

"Well, it's actually kind of relaxing; plus I took a few shortcuts," he admitted with a sheepish shrug. "I found an old twentieth century film called, The Quiet Man in the archives. It was filmed in County Mayo, Ireland, and the scenery is gorgeous...saved me a lot of programming for the landscape." His boyish face glowed with creative pride. "And I did an ocean. It turned out even better than before. Mind you," he cast her a speaking look, "I kept the most important characters from the original."

Janeway picked up her cold cup of coffee to hide her embarrassment. The reaction was ludicrous - every hand on the ship already knew of her tryst with Michael Sullivan.

That isn't a particularly happy thought.

One would think that after six years she would have gotten used to *Voyager's* information network, but the utter lack of privacy still gave her pause.

Neelix spoke up for the first time and pulled her back into the conversation, "I was thinking, Captain, that we might reinstitute the open-door policy for holodecks one and two. The crew has been under incredible pressure lately, and there are no opportunities for shore leave in the immediate future. Since we're going to be stationary for at least a few days mining deuterium, I thought it might be a morale booster."

He has a point. Janeway nodded in agreement. If only all her decisions were this straightforward. "Permission granted. I'll make the announcement and institute liberal leave for the next three days."

Both crewmen grinned like children about to go for their first ride in a shuttle, and shot from her Ready Room at warp speed.

Seconds later, Chakotay requested entry. Janeway called him in, finding his expression a mirror image of Paris'. "I hear that Irish eyes are smiling." He sat down with a weary plop.

"I think the crew could use a little time off," she remarked on her way to the replicator. Fresh coffee was in order.

"I think we all could," he agreed. Janeway picked up on the slight emphasis he placed on the word "all."

Here we go.

Obviously it was time for their "talk." She swallowed a mouthful the hot, bitter liquid, finding it mediocre when compared to the stuff produced by replicators in the Mess Hall. ...*and definitely inferior to Merris'...*

"Don't even start," Janeway warned, partly to Chakotay and partly to her wayward thoughts. She returned to her desk. "I can assure you I have every intention of availing myself of Irish hospitality."

He nodded, but there was still a troubled look to his rich, brown eyes. "I'm glad. You're overdue for some fun."

His gaze turned to the Ready Room windows, and beyond, to the alien star field filling them. "B'Elanna took the first mining team to the surface. She says that the deuterium will require a little additional processing, but it should only add a few of hours to the operation."

"Good." Janeway made a note of it in her log.

"I can't get used to this space." His normally full features were a little leaner, a testament to the amount of time he'd been spending on the Bridge. With a sad smile, he turned back to her. "We've been traveling a long time, but this...is different."

Janeway regarded him over the rim of her cup. "I know what you mean. At least, the Delta Quadrant was filled with living systems. Even if they were hostile, there were other races to interact with. Here, it's just us."

Things seemed a little better between them these days. That was good. Tension between the captain and first officer invariably leaked out amongst the crew, sowing seeds of contention. She'd also missed his friendship.

Chakotay's bronze features grew serious. "Kathryn," he began, "are you all right?"

The question caught her completely off her guard. Janeway's gaze flitted up to his, then down. "I'm fine." She smiled at him reassuringly.

He grinned at her and shook his head. "As I've told you before, you'd say that with both legs torn off." His forehead crinkled, distorting his tribal tattoo. "Seriously, you've been through so much lately."

"We all have," she reminded him, picking up one of several PADDs. "The crew's performance is beginning to suffer. There are reports of shorter tempers and higher sick leave on every deck." Setting it aside, she continued, "Hopefully a little holographic shore leave will alleviate some of the tension."

"It should." He nodded, looking thoughtful. "Tuvok and I have been meeting with the crew chiefs every morning, and I hear you've been making a few late night tours of the lower decks. I take it you still aren't sleeping well." His expression was one of intense study.

Janeway spun her chair slightly to port and rolled her eyes. There had to be some way to head off this conversation. "I do have a touch of insomnia now and then, but that's beside the point. I think that the crew needs a little extra attention from the captain right now." She cut him a stern

glance.

"You're not going to put me off so easily."

Janeway held up her hand in warning. "Chakotay..."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but I'm worried about you." He leaned forward in his chair, elbows on knees. "I'm worried about us, our relationship as coworkers and as friends." Dark eyes were luminous with emotion as they met hers. "After the *Equinox*..."

She stood, cutting him off. Shame, so long suppressed, spurred her to retreat to the sitting area. Latent images of the cargo bay, of Lessing's frightened face slammed into her stomach with the force of an asteroid.

"It was a bad call. What's happened to you, Kathryn?" Chakotay's censure still wrenched at her heart.

"I know I disappointed you," she admitted. "I disappointed myself." Her eyes looked outward, but there was no solace in the barren planet below or the scarlet gas giant that loomed beyond it.

"Never." From the sound of his voice, Janeway knew he had followed her. "I didn't approve of your methods..."

She closed her eyes against his words, as if the thin bits of flesh could shut out the truth.

Chakotay stepped to within a hands breadth of her, but didn't touch. No one touched her anymore.

"...but I understood your motives. Among my tribe we know very well the ferocity with which a mother protects her young. Ransom took two of your children; you were going to get them back."

"I only wish my motivations had been so pure." Janeway turned away from the windows and sat on the edge of the mint green sofa that bordered them. She scrubbed over her face with her hands. "I was after revenge, Chakotay. I was ready to sacrifice everything, this ship, our crew...everything."

The cushion next to her sank beneath his weight. "Ransom betrayed all that the Federation holds dear, beginning with the Prime Directive." Chakotay's tone was passionate. "He was a mass murderer, plain and simple, who took the trust we extended and spit on it. Of course you wanted retribution."

He makes it sound so simple, so excusable. It wasn't, of course. Janeway knew that too. The reality was that in the end, she'd betrayed her own principles, almost becoming a monster, herself. "You didn't," she pointed out, finally meeting his worried brown eyes.

"I don't see things the way you do." Chakotay's face was gentle, a reflection of the spirit beneath the flesh. "I resigned from Starfleet because they abandoned my people to the Cardassians. Any illusions I had about the inherent nobility of the Federation were lost. You've built your life on those ideals, and expected that Ransom would uphold them." He stared down at the slate colored carpet. "I only wish I could believe in the goodness of others the way you do. I may be spared the sting of betrayal, but I never experience the joy of the dream."

...the joy of the dream... Don't you know I've lost that too?

She could not continue this discussion. The wounds he'd touched were too deep, and too tender. Years of emotional scar tissue sealed them shut. Janeway knew very well that some of them were festering, but even if she wanted to lay them open, it could never be with him. Chakotay's nature was simply too changeable. Though he'd been right about her actions where Ransom and Lessing were concerned, there had been too many other times when he'd countermanded her orders and been mistaken. Baring her soul to him was out of the question. The stark reality of her weaknesses would undermine his faith in her as a leader, and only cause more second-guessing in the future. He needed her to be larger than life just as much as the rest of her crew.

Janeway found her mask of camaraderie and glued it to her face, adding a half-grin for good measure. "We balance each other quite well, I think."

Relief practically seeped from Chakotay's pores. She could see it in the sudden relaxing of his shoulders. He returned her artificial smile with a genuine grin. "I think so, too," he said, rising. "I'll let you have first dibs on Fair Haven, if that's all right."

"It is," Janeway confirmed and stood to pat his shoulder. "I've got a few loose ends to tie up, and then I'll be off."

He left with a spring in his step, and she was alone once again. That was for the best. Janeway dug her fingers into the clenched muscles of her neck. They felt like slabs of molecular plating mixed with ground-up glass. She rocked her head from side to side. It did no good. Exhaling slowly, she returned to her polished metal desk. Unbidden, memories of her last night in Merris' quarters returned. They were far more agreeable than dwelling on the ragged emotions Chakotay had stirred.

She isn't afraid to touch you, Kathryn. Her hands were like feathers on your skin. They whispered to your pain...

Frozen knots of tension had melted away, and she'd followed the flood of relaxation down to the black ocean of sleep. Janeway lay her head on folded arms. The nights since had been much less restful. Ayala and Mallory haunted *Voyager's* corridors, staring at her in silent accusation. "Why didn't you save us?" they seemed to say as their flesh crystallized and crumbled. "We trusted you."

A throbbing pain blossomed in Janeway's chest at the thought of her lost crewmen. With it came something else: a yearning for closeness that went beyond physical need. She could satisfy her

sexual appetites; Michael was programmed to exacting specifications. No earthly lover could compare when it came to skill and endurance. He even assuaged the loneliness somewhat with his extensive knowledge of Irish literature and his stimulating conversation.

He isn't real.

All the better...

She would never have to give an order that caused his death.

Playing it safe? That's not like you.

Janeway cut short the internal dialog. The point was she'd reached a kind of equilibrium. With Michael she could escape into a world that was mercifully simple, and release a little pent up energy at the same time. It was safe to love him. Even the Doctor had agreed there was no other way.

What did you expect him to say? He's a hologram, himself.

Now came Merris, lost and alone, but also passionate, defiant, and not cowed by rank or adversity. The woman possessed a razor-keen wit and an implacable will. She challenged Janeway's mind and soothed her body.

Why don't you go find her?

Her neck and shoulders were so tight the muscles nearly screamed. Janeway shrugged them, but it didn't help. The specter of Merris' fingertips tormented her with promises of relief...and pleasure. She admitted the last with great reluctance.

You liked her hands.

Janeway tried to ignore that disquieting fact, and succeeded, for an instant.

Imagine how they would feel on your back, your legs...elsewhere...gliding over heated flesh...

She sat up with a start, wincing as her shoulders protested. What the hell was wrong with her? *Voyager* was further away from home than ever, and she was wasting time with daydreams.

Isn't it strange that you aren't fantasizing about Michael?

Janeway ignored the devil's advocate in her brain and picked up her PADD of efficiency reports. The dull statistics could not hold her interest. Inevitably her thoughts wandered once again.

Getting rid of Chakotay had been childishly simple. He heard what he wanted to hear, and believed because he wanted to believe.

I wonder, Katie darlin', if Merris finds you so easy to manipulate?

Probably...

The idea that someone could orchestrate her actions was disturbing. It was also a little humbling.

You've beaten the Borg at their own game, but can't control a simple conversation with this woman.

The challenge was intoxicating. She'd started researching Deltans and Orions three days ago. It wasn't going well, though. There were too many inconsistencies between the disparate cultures, particularly where *Shashuna* was concerned. Though translated as, "compassion," Janeway had the distinct impression there were many layers to its meaning. Marrying them to the Orion values of spite and revenge was proving impossible for her linear, scientific mind.

You know, old girl, perhaps it would behoove you to simply ask the woman. Subtlety and subterfuge are what she's used to. If you want to get to know her, the direct, uncomplicated approach is your most likely scenario for success.

Maybe...

"Computer, locate Crewman Rayna Merris," she asked.

"Commander Merris is in the Mess Hall," came the answer. Janeway noted that even the computer realized she had no authority to strip an intelligence officer of rank, not without a formal court martial, anyway. Before long, maybe she would come to accept that reality, herself.

She rose with purpose.

Rayna Merris sipped the last of her coffee and patiently awaited Tuvok's next move. It was almost 1400 hours, and the Mess Hall was quiet, a stark contrast to the chaos of the midday rush. They had been playing since the wee hours of morning, pausing when she had to help with chow. She studied the kal-toh pieces. Right now the t'an rods resembled a group of Terran salmon swimming upstream.

Tuvok selected his t'an and made an adjustment. His earthen eyes shot her a glance that was completely unreadable.

Rayna stared at the mishmash for several seconds then closed her eyes. Yes, she could see where he was going. In her mind the rods slid one-at-a-time into place until the game was finished - and he won. *No...we can't have that.* She plucked out one of the little bars and reinserted it at the bottom. The school of fish collapsed in a heap. Now it looked like a pile of excreta from an Yrissian worm. *Much better.* Rayna grinned at her friend.

One black brow was already flying. "Kal-toh is supposed to be about finding order amid chaos," he chastised her gently, "not about creating chaos from order."

"You play your way, old man, and I will play mine."

"I see that you remain predictably obstinate," he observed dourly.

"If I'm so fucking predictable, you should have seen that coming." Rayna tempered the harshness of her words by giving him a friendly look. Frankly, she didn't care one iota whether or not she managed to win the game, so long as he didn't win either. If that meant destroying his carefully crafted strategy and sending them both back to square one, so be it, and of all people, Tuvok should have anticipated that tactic. Then again, it had over twelve years since they'd had the opportunity to play.

"You are correct," he admitted easily, collecting her empty mug and retrieving two fresh cups of something from the replicator. "I had forgotten some of your less-than-logical traits." He handed one of them to her, then retook his seat.

The smell told her that it was Vulcan green tea, a deceptive beverage that smelled like apples and tasted like mud. Rayna took a sip and grimaced. "Pah! And I had forgotten this tasted so foul."

He merely shrugged, "You have consumed six cups of coffee since 0600 hours. I thought it prudent to vary your diet."

"Knowing full well that given a choice between this swill and a bucket of Hortan piss, I would have picked the piss." Sarcasm tinged her observation.

"It is an acquired taste for non-Vulcans." His somber tone only served to make her snicker.

"Remind me to requisition it." Rayna carried the horrible substance back to the replicator and disposed of it. "I don't see you foisting this shit on the captain," she observed, then addressed the computer. "Ratkajino with extra sugar, please." The foaming beverage materialized immediately. "...or aren't you concerned with her caffeine level." She shot him a cutting glance before returning. It was the first time she'd entertained thoughts of Janeway all day.

Right. That flame-haired woman you pictured flat on her back and screaming your name...that was someone else.

Fantasies don't count, especially when the object is unattainable. Even if Janeway fancied the fairer sex, her sort never do more than dally with the likes of you.

Rayna gingerly sampled her drink. The Klingon version of coffee had a more robust flavor than the human equivalent, and contained three times the kick. It slid down her throat in a deluge of sweetness. "Now that's more like it."

Tuvok was unimpressed. "Her attachment to coffee, much like yours, defies logic." He paused as

if thinking. "I take it she has not frequented your quarters of late."

"I'm quite sure you keep track of her communicator." Rayna leaned back in her chair and contemplated him with hooded eyes. It was not his way to engage in pointless gossip. She waited for him to continue.

"As Security Chief, it is imperative that I know the captain's location at all times." He confirmed her suspicions regarding his level of nosiness. "However, I have observed that after her overnight visits she appears to be better rested."

That gave rise to Rayna's best, rakish grin. "I do have that effect on women," she winked, "eventually."

"I wanted to thank you."

His simple statement of gratitude touched Rayna deeply. It gripped her to no end, as well, because it reminded her how much Tuvok's opinion mattered.

Further conversation was truncated by the arrival of the subject herself. Janeway moved with determination toward their table, "Merris, Tuvok," she nodded to each in greeting, "May I join you?"

Tuvok inclined his head to one of the chairs.

What does she do in her spare time, drive nails in her shoulders? Rayna felt the human's discomfort acutely, taking note also of the dark circles surrounding Janeway's eyes. Chemicals leeching through her skin told a tale of low blood sugar and emotional upheaval. *So, she hasn't eaten and someone upset her.* There was also an undercurrent of sexual arousal. Faint traces of it clung to the captain.

"Who's winning?" Janeway inquired, frowning at the random pile of t'ans before stepping aside to request coffee from a replicator. Rayna suppressed a smirk, noting that Tuvok did not offer the woman tea.

Coward. She'd razz him about that later.

"No one, at the moment." Her old friend waited until the captain was seated before continuing. "The rods have been reduced to an entropic state."

Hearing the teensy bit of exasperation in his voice filled Rayna with a pleasing sense of satisfaction.

It was short-lived.

"Spite?" asked Janeway looking at her. When Rayna declined to answer, she continued, "I've spent some time reading about the morays of Rigel V. I thought you and I might communicate a

little better if I knew more about your background."

Not bad for regular military...smoothly spoken, with just enough "aww shucks" to be almost convincing.

Rayna wasn't fooled. Janeway had warned that their conversation regarding the *Saladin* wasn't over. She considered the captain a moment, then smiled. "Know your enemy, always a good strategy." Turning her attention back to Tuvok, she asked, "Are you going to move, or stare at the t'ans hoping they will spontaneously transform?"

"I would hope we aren't enemies, Crewman." The captain's voice contained a note of warning. Displeasure transmitted itself through the air between them.

"You want me to reveal information about my last mission when I don't wish to, Captain." Rayna turned narrowed eyes back to the human. "That doesn't make us friends."

Her comment caused Janeway to blink in genuine confusion. "That's not what this is about," she protested firmly, then hesitated a moment. "I just...I would like to get to know you better."

"To what end?" Rayna parried. There was always a hidden agenda. It was the first of many survival skills imparted by her father. Tuvok was the only notable exception to that rule.

Much to her surprise, Janeway laughed. The throaty sound enthralled her, as it had days ago. Grey eyes twinkled playfully at Tuvok. "Does she have to make everything difficult?" the human asked, a crooked grin lingering on her face.

"Absolutely." His flat, utterly serious tone sent Rayna into her own fit of merriment.

"He should know," she admitted between chuckles. "I've no idea why he still tolerates me."

Tuvok glanced at them both, and Rayna saw the tiny glimmers of affection beneath the placid surface of his eyes. "It seems the only logical solution," he offered.

Rayna was very glad she was not in mid-swallow, because his comment would have caused her to spew ratkajino all over her tablemates. As it was she could only hold her stomach until the tide of laughter subsided. Finally, she opened her eyes. The captain was studying them both. She was grinning widely, but behind it was powerful curiosity, that and...attraction? It vanished before Rayna could get a good fix on it.

Great Maker, is she attracted to Tuvok?

That would figure, given Janeway's slavish devotion to protocol. Vulcans only came into heat once every seven years.

The moment of peaceable levity was interrupted when the Mess Hall admitted Naomi Wildman and Neelix.

It was all Rayna could do not to roll her eyes. She'd managed to limit interaction with the child for the last several days. They had exchanged pleasantries, wiped a few tables, and entertained the notion of a game of kadis kot...something she'd successfully avoided thus far. There was no way this side of Jupiter Station that she wanted to spend hours withstanding the meteor shower of Ms. Wildman's emotions. Yesterday, she'd broken down and said as much to Tuvok. She'd seen him speaking with Naomi during lunch today.

Perhaps he suggested she keep her distance. That would be nice.

"I thought you'd be at the Ox and Lamb by now." Janeway smiled welcome at Neelix, and turned beaming eyes on the waif at his side. "Hello Naomi."

"Good afternoon, Captain." The little one smiled as if the very heavens had rained blessings upon her head. Her admiration of Janeway set the Mess Hall alight with its radiance.

Rayna sucked in a long breath. The shear force of feeling overwhelmed her senses making her almost giddy from her body's sympathetic response. She was aware of their continued conversation, but only half-attended.

"We were actually planning a picnic on the beach that Mr. Paris has so kindly created," explained Neelix. "You're all invited, of course. You could bring Michael, Captain." His final statement was punctuated by a welcoming smile.

Anymore emotional plasma charges going off around here, and I will need a headache injection.

Rayna blinked several times, a fact that did not escape Tuvok. His loam colored eyes pinioned her with unrelenting scrutiny. "Michael?" she mouthed partly to cover her temporary weakness and partly because she was curious about Janeway's picnicking companion.

Unfortunately, there was no possible way for him to surreptitiously reply. Instead he addressed Neelix, "I have volunteered for Beta Shift, and must decline."

"Sounds good," Janeway agreed to go readily enough, though Rayna sensed that she was slightly embarrassed. The scarlet flush staining the alabaster of her cheeks was a physical confirmation.

"What about you, Crewman Merris?" Naomi politely included her by name. Softer waves of genuine welcome washed over Rayna's empathic seashore.

"I would..." *...rather do ten rounds with a Gorn.* She cut off her caustic reply. It was poor coin with which to repay such kind intentions.

Unfortunately the child took her shortened response to be acceptance. The next thing Rayna knew, Naomi Wildman had taken her by the hand and was leading both her and Neelix into the galley to prepare lunch. "Mr. Tuvok said you weren't accustomed to being around children and that I should help you practice."

Practice?

Rayna swallowed down a few choice curses and sent the guilty culprit a piercing glance just before being impelled into the kitchen.

Bright sunshine kissed Janeway's face with warmth. Fresh country air filled her nostrils with the sweet aromas of wildflowers and newly cut hay. It was heavenly. There were rolling hills of emerald green surrounding Fair Haven, and songbirds heralded their passing with calls of welcome. She and Neelix exchanged contented looks before starting down the packed-clay street.

The buildings were different than she remembered, but Paris had said he'd made changes. Instead of molded brick, most were constructed of cut stone, gray and old, steeped in history. Whitewashed fronts glinted silver beneath the golden glow of summer. A horse-drawn cart meandered past them, carrying a load of manure...cow from the smell of it. Sullivan's Pub had transformed into a rambling two-story of white with glossy, green trim. There was a sign on the brass door handle that read, "Out to Tea."

Reading at the train station...you just might learn about another new author.

She should have put on a costume, but Naomi was so excited there hadn't been time. Michael wouldn't notice anyway. The perceptual filters constrained all the holographic characters from picking up on inconsistencies in hair, dress or speech. They could all walk down the center of town bald and naked, and none of Fair Haven's citizens would pay the least attention.

A pretty redhead curtsied to them from the door of Emily O'Conner's Tea Shop. The large window announced that Lyon's Tea was on sale.

"I've missed the Ox and Lamb," Neelix muttered as he shifted the large wicker picnic basket to his other arm. "I can't wait to swap recipes with the innkeeper again."

"Is it the same one?" Janeway waved to Maggie O'Halloran, who operated a flower wagon.

"I think so." Neelix accompanied her to the cart.

The blooms were exquisitely lovely, layered in groups of pink, white and red. Yellow roses poked prickly stems from the top of a water-filled pail.

Maggie smiled widely at her. "You'll find him at the usual spot, Katie," she verified Janeway's suspicions. "Just look out for Michilin. He's been harassing Michael to open up early, claiming he's about to drop dead from thirst."

Michilin? That must be one of the new characters. "Thank you," she politely replied and paused

to sniff at the roses. Their fragrance brought back memories of her dorm at the Academy. Mornings there always began with fresh bouquets from Boothby.

That's the second time you've thought of him this week. Maybe she was a little more homesick than she thought.

You must be, since you're equating the Academy with home.

She selected a single rose colored in butterscotch and smelling of honey. Neelix and the others waited patiently. A quick downward glance confirmed that Naomi still firmly gripped Merris' hand. The child met Janeway's eyes with an excited giggle, then pointed to one of the large draft horses tethered across the street.

A Shire? It was big-boned enough, with shaggy white stockings, but she couldn't be sure of the breed. The huge gelding was munching on some poor fellow's woolen hat.

"Good thing it's never winter in Fair Haven," Neelix observed with a cheerful smirk.

"You're right," Janeway shielded her eyes from the glare and tried to get her bearings. The train station used to be next to Cohan's Feed and Grain. With all the changes Paris made, there was no telling where it was now.

"Crewman Merris," Naomi's voice held a note of concern, "are you feeling all right?"

She spun around just quickly enough to catch Merris rubbing at her forehead. The Deltan woman recovered in an instant, giving Naomi a perfectly proportioned smile. "Brightly polished," she replied.

Though spoken in Federation Standard, the two words were a form of Rigellian slang, meaning "fine." Janeway ran across them yesterday, while perusing Everyone's a Sucker: Surviving Orion Trade. A Ferengi Merchant penned it after he came out on the wrong end of a transaction.

"Katie!" Michael's baritone shout drew her attention. He strode up the earthen road, a worn book in one hand and the other raised high above his head, waving furiously.

Janeway moved to intercept him, roving her eyes over his chiseled features, covered with a fine patina of whiskers, down the front of his crisp, white shirt. The muscles beneath the thin layer of cloth were hardened from years of physical labor, lifting kegs of ale and whiskey.

"Good morning." She gave him a peck on the cheek. Stubble rubbed her lips. She felt him smile and stepped back to enjoy it.

"I've missed you, lass." He offered an arm. "I was beginning to think you'd never return."

Linking arms, she led him over to the waiting group. "You've already met Neelix and Naomi, I believe. This is Rayna Merris." Janeway found herself suddenly discomposed once again. The

steady scrutiny of those black orbs made her feel vulnerable down to her soul.

"Rayna, is it?" Michael asked and extended his calloused hand.

Whatever reaction Janeway expected, it was certainly not the one she got. Merris did not return the gesture, and replied stiffly, "Kindly do not use my name without permission."

Michael seemed as taken aback as she did. "I'm sorry, Miss. It's just that we're all friends here."

"No," Merris gently, but firmly admonished, "we aren't. May I have my hand back now, Ms. Wildman?" Her question was directed to Naomi. The child nodded, mouth open and immediately let go. Without another word, the bald woman left them, striding out toward the open Irish countryside.

"I didn't mean to give offense." Michael turned apologetic eyes in her direction.

Janeway patted his hand. "I'd best go after her." She bent down to kiss Naomi's blonde hair. "I don't believe she's upset with you."

"She doesn't feel well." The little girl's clear blue gaze flickered upward. "I can tell."

Concern crowded out any other emotions competing for Janeway's attention. She straightened and said to Neelix, "Why don't the three of you go ahead? We'll meet you on the beach."

She trotted away to catch up with her wayward crewman.

Chakotay attempted to relieve the slight pain in his lower back by adjusting his position in the command chair. The Bridge was mostly deserted. Even if they were not interested in visiting Fair Haven, most of Beta Shift had taken advantage of the opportunity for some down time. Crewman Hamilton sat at the helm. Tuvok rotated between the Ops and Security consoles, evaluating sensor readings and monitoring communications.

So far, the mining teams were making good progress. A new rotation had just landed by shuttle. Ensign Kim and Seven of Nine were supervising the operations. Usually Harry jumped at the chance to accompany Paris on a holo-adventure. Not this time.

"I want to feel like I'm doing something that will help us get home." Harry's round face was tight with suppressed passion. His almond-shaped eyes stared into Chakotay's in an almost angry manner. "We're sitting in the middle of some twisted kind of Wonderland; the last thing I want to do is play around in another."

Chakotay acceded to Kim's request and put him on the second Away Team. They were all feeling the strain, and if mining deuterium on an uncharted rock made things bearable for Harry, so be it.

Seems like you decided to follow his example.

After his meeting with Janeway, Chakotay found that he was feeling none too keen on a field trip to Ireland. The captain was entitled to a little joy in her life, but he didn't have to watch the happy couple dance and play rings...

...or whatever else it is they're doing.

Which was how he'd ended up sitting the evening watch with Commander Tuvok and Crewman Race Hamilton. It gave others the opportunity to take in a little R & R, and took his mind off being envious of a hologram.

He turned his attention to the viewscreen. *Voyager* had just slipped to the planet's dark side, and Chakotay did not miss the baleful star which glared down on it or its sanguine glow.

It's just a ball of hydrogen. Attributing any sort of consciousness to it is foolish.

"Sir?" Hamilton turned to him. The helmsman sported a high and tight haircut and was known for his prowess at poker. "I need to hit the head."

He nodded permission, and the young man hurriedly departed.

They were deep in the planet's shadow now. Everything was velvety black outside. It was peaceful, like sleep given form.

Tuvok moved to the helm and checked a reading. "Our orbit continues to be stable, Commander."

"Thank you," Chakotay replied, stifling a yawn. It had been a long day, and when there was only a skeleton crew on duty, it made for a quiet time. Pushing himself up, he crossed to the Ops console and checked status. Everything was within normal parameters. He rubbed at dry eyes. "Did Captain Janeway start her leave yet?" he asked. Maybe a little conversation would help him remain alert.

His companion spared him a stoic glance. "Yes," he replied flatly. Silence on the Bridge once more reigned supreme.

That's what you get for trying to make small talk with a Vulcan.

He took a different tack: naked honesty. "I've been up since 0330, Tuvok. How about some assistance?"

The dark face turned toward him, one brow up, eyes gently apologetic. "Forgive me, Commander." Tuvok moved back to his usual position at Security. "The Captain left for Fair Haven at approximately 1515 hours. She gave no indication of her anticipated return."

"Good." Chakotay walked back to the First Officer's seat, but remained standing. "She needs the time off. I've been worried about her lately, as I told you."

"I remember," Tuvok tilted his head forward in a gesture of acknowledgement. "Did you have the opportunity to speak with her?"

Chakotay nodded, smiling, "This morning. She tried to put me off-track, but I was determined. I think we resolved some of the lingering *Equinox* doubts. I hope so. Kathryn has enough on her without carrying more guilt." He glanced at Tuvok and found the dour man regarding him steadily. "Any feedback?" he asked. It had taken years for the Vulcan and him to reach an understanding. Now, Chakotay sought his advice regularly, especially where the captain was concerned.

"Not at present."

Hamilton returned then. "Thank you, Commander," he said before resuming his post at the helm.

So much for in-depth conversation.

Two off-key beeps alerted him to sensor contact. Chakotay swiftly strode to Operations and checked the displays. The blood red star's energy output had quadrupled, but the scans were strange, not like stellar energy at all. More information scrolled upward. "It's got both radiogenic and neurogenic properties." He turned troubled eyes toward Security. "How can a star produce neurogenic energy? That doesn't make any sense."

Just before she fled from *Voyager*, Kes had begun releasing neurogenic pulses, but these were much stronger. His brain struggled to digest the scads of information pouring in through sensors. From this side of the planet, the computer's mock-up had the energy spreading across the planet's surface like huge bank of fog.

"Go to yellow alert," Chakotay instructed. "Shields to maximum. He tried to get a transporter lock on the mining team, but it was a no go. "...too much kelbonite... *Voyager* to Away Team Beta."

"Go ahead," Kim answered with reassuring speed.

"We're picking up some unusual readings from the star, a neurogenic wave is enveloping the planet." At the rate it was moving, they wouldn't even have time to finish the conversation.

Helplessly, he watched the cloud overrun the team's position. "Kim!" he called. "Seven?"

"Radiation is constant at non-harmful levels," Tuvok added additional data. "However, the neurogenic component is strong enough to affect communications."

Their lifesigns were still strong and steady. Chakotay could see little blips which represented the

miners moving back to their shuttle. *Thank the Spirits...*

"It looks like they're packing up to come home." He glanced at Hamilton and Tuvok, then refocused on the console's display. "Neurogenic output is over eight thousand isograms and rising. The leading edge will reach our position in about five seconds."

"I still do not detect any harmful properties." Vulcan logic could make even the most unlikely scenario seem commonplace. "Shall I contact the captain?"

Chakotay shook his head. "Not if there's no threat to the ship." He pressed several keys. "The wavefront is closing."

Much as he would like to interrupt Janeway's dalliance with Michael Sullivan, Chakotay also knew how badly his captain needed a vacation. "Two seconds." Calling out the numbers was standard procedure. "One." His dry eyes stung because he'd forgotten to blink. "Contact."

Nothing happened. After confirming all systems were operating normally, Chakotay expelled a lungful of air. "I think we're okay." He turned back to the Bridge...

...and found his father.

It was dark, the kind of inky blackness you could only find in the absence of civilization. Kolopak's lined face was illuminated by the orangey light of a campfire.

What, again?

All around them came an orchestra of night noises. Frogs beat out a deep percussive rhythm. A myriad of bugs clicked and chirped their melody. From far away he heard the war cry of a great cat.

It isn't the same...

His brain spat out images of his last encounter with what had seemed to be his father. The illusion there had been complete, but frayed within minutes like a tapestry unraveling. Not this time. Everything was stable. Above his head, the night sky was filled with brilliant pinpoints of light. He recognized them all, Lyra, Cygnus, Aquila...they winked at him, lining the dark with diamonds.

Chakotay twisted his head around, but there was no trace of *Voyager*. His feet sank into the moist earth. Smells of rain water, of rich, black dirt, and the renewing decay of vegetation filled his nostrils.

You're in Central America, or at least a very good recreation of it.

"Sudea." The use of his Spirit Name called him out of reverie. Kolopak lifted a long barreled pipe and puffed it. "Sit with me." A wizened finger pointed at a bare patch of ground.

"Who are you?" He ambled over, carefully treading across the uneven surface.

"An excellent question," his father answered as a zephyr stirred his hair, "especially in light of recent events." The gray mane nodded. "Your mistrust is wise." He tossed a bundle of sage into the fire, causing scented smoke to billow forth. Calm brown eyes met Chakotay's and in them were reflected a million, million stars. "I gather you mistook the name of this place to be symbolic rather than literal?"

The Land of the Dead... Glacial realization stole over his consciousness and Chakotay slowly lowered himself to kneel at his father's feet.

Rayna was sick to death of the holodeck. The surrounding environment was so very real, from the sultry breezes to the softly flowing river stocked with fish. Geese honked. Sheep grazed. None of it cast a shadow on her empathic senses. She was still on *Voyager*, still breathing the same, sanitized air, surrounded by bulkheads and ablative armor.

The forcefields limited her range, but there were one or two stray bits of chemistry drifting about. Lt. Paris was somewhere close. She'd encountered his bio-signature a few minutes ago. Some other human was fucking about three meters to her fore. The bending of light prevented her eyes from seeing him, but he was there, nonetheless.

Where in Sul's Name is the exit?

Her skull was threatening implosion. Naomi Wildman's broadband transmission of happiness had just about split her head in twain. That combined with the bifurcation of her senses had left her nerves frazzled. She hadn't experienced this level of holo-distortion since her first year at the Academy.

You should have been more cordial to Janeway's toy.

"Merris!"

The captain's voice called to her from somewhere behind a forcefield that bore the shape of an oak tree. Her erect figure came into view soon after. Rayna paused, stubbing her toe into an illusion of stone.

Why are you waiting for the irritating woman?

She refused to answer. There came a time in everyone's life when they needed to spite themselves.

"Captain." Rayna put both hands behind her back and clasped them tight. Her fingernails dug sharply into her skin, but the tendril of pain felt better than the nullness which surrounded.

Janeway stopped less than a meter away, hands on hips. "You move fast," she observed, apparently having decided to make polite chit-chat. "I take it you've changed your mind about a quiet picnic by the ocean."

She gave the human a grimace that hopefully bore some passing resemblance to a half-smile. "I beg pardon for my earlier rudeness. Holodecks make me cranky." It sounded lame, even to her ears, but truth was often lackluster in comparison to fiction.

The captain's aristocratic features reformed into that delightful crooked grin. "This won't put you in better humor, but Naomi already told me you weren't a hundred percent."

I despise children.

Rayna watched patches of holographic mist form between two graceful hills. The sun shone less brightly as clouds gathered.

Looks like rain, so much for the haven remaining fair.

"That was Michael?" Ignoring Janeway's oblique reference to her state of being, she pieced together her best penetrating stare.

Color once more rushed to fill austere cheeks with scarlet. Pale complexioned humans were like little canvases. Between embarrassment and bruises, they could produce an entire spectrum. Janeway squinted at her from under auburn brows. "We were discussing you, actually. Holodeck sickness?"

Oh well recovered.

This game was much more fun when Janeway wasn't exhausted.

"Your research is showing." Rayna tried to focus on the lovely byproducts the captain's body was shedding, delighted pleasure being chief among them. *She enjoys these exchanges as much as you, Wind Child.* "I was looking for an exit, but can't tell port from starboard in here."

Grey eyes became somber as Janeway's emotional palette shifted to sympathy. "It's a well-documented condition in Deltans. I should have thought of that when Naomi invited you." Guilt...a feeling to which the captain seemed overly prone...added its pallid blue hue. "I'll guide you to the hatchway, if you like." Her hand wrapped around Rayna's elbow.

For once, Rayna was content to be led. A glimpse up found the sky turning stormy, and she had no desire to be wet, not with rain water, anyway. Still, she couldn't resist some more teasing. "Don't you have anything better to do: humping your hologram, for example?"

Janeway's anger was announced through her chemistry and suddenly regal bearing. "I don't care for people prying into my private life," she ground out through clenched teeth.

"I'm just amazed you have one." Rayna adopted an attitude of disinterest. "Captains are usually in love with their vessels, a horridly one-sided affair, but far be it from me to make you self-conscious." In her opinion, most humans were completely nonsensical. They had no problem with actually having sex, but couldn't seem to talk about it.

Fog rolled more thickly across the grassland, slipping over piled stone fences and sluicing around huge boulders of granite. The temperature had dropped. That confused her.

Why would Lieutenant Paris have programmed in bad weather?

"I'm not self-conscious," the captain protested hotly, but her emotional landscape had become more heterogeneous, interspersed with worry, doubt and...fear?

Rayna attended her more closely. Long fingers now had a vice grip on her upper arm, fueled by Janeway's inner conflict. It didn't take an empath to see the tension that suffused her compact frame.

"You know," Rayna began, deliberately keeping her voice light, "neither side of my ancestry is known for its inhibitions, Captain. If it fueled your warp core to have an orgy with three Tellarites and a sehlat, it wouldn't bother me."

Her comments caused Janeway to roll her eyes and look aside. They also brought back the captain's wry smirk. "Was that supposed to make me feel better?" When Rayna nodded, grinning, the other woman sighed. "I do like him, maybe more that I should." Fear returned with a vengeance.

They stopped walking. Janeway kept her gaze down, but did not release her hold on Rayna's arm. "I made modifications to his subroutines." Her voice trailed off.

"I certainly hope so." Rayna's comment caused Janeway to look at her in astonishment. "One can find a plethora of poor to mediocre lovers in the real world." Then she became dead serious. "Be easy on yourself. You've been at sea a long time. Every captain needs a harbor." Her breath came out in jets of white; the ambient temperature had dropped so low.

Janeway noticed as well. "This isn't right." Ice was forming over the stream's surface. In the distance, a huge plateau of frozen snow pushed upward from the ground, becoming a mammoth glacier. It glinted blue-white, like the vast skeleton of some long dead giant. "Computer," the captain barked, "freeze program and exit."

Rayna found that the wall of mist was hard upon their stern, roiling over the land as though it had a soul and a purpose. She was shivering now. Her bare head burned with cold. "Oh good, a malfunction...add that to the lengthy list of things I dislike about holodecks," she chaffed to Janeway, and waited to see what was to come.

I know this place.

Janeway stared in disbelief at the world around her. Desolate ice fields stretched from horizon to horizon. They were deceptive. Beneath them lay an ocean darker than deep space. Snow fell from a sky of dirty cotton to lie in thick heaps on the shimmering ice. It was confectioner-sugar fine, but there was no sweetness. Here and there fangs of mottled brown rock thrust skyward. Verglas made them glint in the jaundiced light of an anemic sun the way a murderer's knife reflected moonbeams just before piercing flesh. A bitter wind slapped her exposed skin with tiny bits of ice. Her thin leather boots were powerless to keep the chill at bay, and already her toes were numb. She took a step forward, and heard the snow groan beneath her weight, the squeaky sound only made by virgin powder.

This is Tau Ceti Prime.

"Impossible," Janeway muttered, reaching for her comm badge. "Janeway to Bridge."

For several seconds there was nothing.

"*Daedalus*, this is prototype starship *Terra Nova*." The voice did not belong to anyone on *Voyager*. She recognized the resonant tenor instantly. "We've completed suborbital maneuvers, and are returning for dock, ETA to your position is fourteen minutes."

Justin?

Her mouth was suddenly parched. Janeway worked her tongue to force moisture back into it.

It can't be him, Kathryn.

A roar of heavy engines split the polar silence, and her disbelieving eyes beheld the silver gleam of a vessel. It was sleek and nimble, capable of short bursts of warp speed while in space and incredible aerobatics while under atmosphere. They'd worked for months on the design. Experimental thrusters allowed it to jump in and out of subspace and attack without warning from any angle. The hull stress was incredible, though. It had taken countless corrections to come up with a working simulation.

"*Voyager*?" she tried her communicator again, with as little success as before.

A powerful sonic boom sent ripples through the snow, and caused drifts of it to tumble pell-mell across the ice cap. In the distance came a howling wind that whistled as if in answer to the din.

"*Terra Nova*, this is *Daedalus*," the mother ship called. "Lieutenant Tighe, we're picking up an increase in solar activity. Come 'round to .035."

She remembered it all so clearly.

"Acknowledged." Justin's electric blue eyes danced merrily in her direction. "We don't want the Admiral to have a bumpy first ride," he added with a wink.

Her father snorted in derisive humor. "I imagine you would succumb to space sickness long before me." He touched a button and brought up sensor readings from Tau Ceti's sun. Energy output had increased exponentially. "Looks like we've got a Clipper forming." Cool, grey eyes met hers. "Go aft, Lieutenant, and check the instrument arrays."

The squawk of her communicator pulled her out of memory back into the twisted pantomime taking place. *"Terra Nova, this is Daedalus."* Janeway recognized Captain Roberto Irizarry's voice, and registered the stress which flavored it. "We're showing a solar wave, and it's big, definitely a Tau Ceti Clipper. You've got less than five seconds before it reaches your position."

She'd obeyed her father's orders, but never made it out of the main corridor. The stellar wind shear hit them so fast there hadn't been time. Its impact rolled them to port, sending the *Terra Nova* careening into the planet's atmosphere. They struck sideways, hard. At that trajectory, hitting the air was more like falling 300 meters onto tarmac. No ship could withstand reentry under those conditions.

Staring upward, Janeway saw the fireball form and divide into pieces as the vessel broke in half. Her heart tautened into a fist, and the searing pain in her lungs had nothing to do with the arctic freeze.

Her memories of the crash, itself, ended when her head smashed into the bulkhead. After that, there was only a long darkness.

Months later, 'fleet investigators theorized that the ship's structural integrity field saved them all from decompression and cushioned them during impact.

I would rather have died there.

"I've felt that way, too, sometimes." When Merris answered, Janeway realized that she must have voiced her thought. The Deltan hybrid was standing perpendicular to her, one hand gently resting on the small of her back. Though shivering violently, her demeanor was one of calm observation. "What is a Tau Ceti Clipper?"

"The star in this system is unstable," she answered absently. "It generates pulses of radiogenic energy. They form without warning, and sweep planetside at incredible speed."

All around them, the surreal scene played on. Janeway watched the *Terra Nova's* nose section slam into the polar cap only a few dozen meters from their location. Massive shards of ice and rock exploded up and out in a mushroom cloud of destruction, but none of it rained down on them. A moment later, the second section plummeted to earth.

It was all coming back to her.

Perception had returned with maddening slowness. Cold enrobed her, hugging more tightly than inertial dampers. How long had she been unconscious? Janeway staggered to her feet and cast about. There was too much light. Instead of the hatchway leading forward, she found only a gaping hole. It sparked blue as driving winds showered it with particles of ice and snow. The structural integrity field was intact. That was a good sign.

Blood trickled into her eyes, down her face. It cooled quickly. She tried to raise her father via commlink, but received only white noise. Adrenaline gave her impetus to continue aft, to the cargo bay, and manually open the airlock. Frigid winds sliced her hands and face as if the very air were filled with splinters. She tumbled out of the opening onto an unyielding arctic floe.

Overhead, the dreary sky was brightened by flashes of lightning.

High level static discharge...

Where were they? Her stunned gaze took in the broken remains of their vessel. Pain in her shoulder, head and right leg announced injuries, possibly fractures, but she had no time to take heed. Janeway ordered herself to walk, to move around the tail section. The cold whipped over her eyes, making them tear. She wiped them, impatiently.

There it was.

The cockpit lay several meters away. It seemed to be shifting, as if the polar cap were unstable. She tried to run there, but could only snail her way through the snow and debris. Her leg gave way and Janeway sprawled into an icy drift. Frost chapped her fingers raw as she clawed her way out.

"Daedalus?" she attempted to make contact even as she called on leaden limbs to move. No answer...probably too much solar interference. Until the Clipper dissipated, not even sensors would penetrate. Her brain seemed capable of serving up scientific trivia, but couldn't come up with a reason for the nose section to be moving. Up and down it wobbled, listing a little to port, now to starboard...

Her boots lost traction without warning. The ice here was shinier, slicker. It struck her then, like a supernova inside her skull: the polar cap was broken.

"Dad," she called out, but only managed a hoarse croak. "Justin!"

Janeway felt herself trembling, partly from cold, partly from shock. It was all so real, down to the smoke and steam. She stared at the wreckage and felt like a macabre spectator. Where was her younger self? Why hadn't she come out? Her mind struggled to process events, to make sense of what was happening. Had *Voyager* had been sucked into a temporal distortion? If so, maybe she could save them. She took a step forward, only to feel something take hold of her wrist. Ripping her eyes away from the tableau she found Merris was still with her. The woman's grip was firmer than a tractor beam.

"Are we still in the holodeck?" Janeway asked, managing to piece together fragments of rational thought.

"Yes, Captain," Merris replied, and slid her hand downward to intertwine their fingers. "So flinging yourself into the water would be rather useless."

She could scarcely whisper through the emotion filling her throat. "It didn't work any better the first time."

The black ocean chilled her to the marrow, so bitterly cold that she doubted she would ever again be warm. Her only thought had been to reach them. There was a breech just aft of the cockpit. Through it she could see her father and Justin, bruised and bloody, but still alive. The rhythmic movement of their chests told her that much. But the same forcefield that kept them all from dying on impact now kept her outside. Her fingers slipped over it, finding no purchase. All the while, water seeped through microfractures in the hull, and the capsule began to sink.

Janeway was vaguely aware that she spoke out loud, recounting the tragic chain of events in a dispassionate murmur. None of it was reflected on the holodeck. The *Terra Nova* lay there, abandoned and dead, as if the story ended with the opening sequence.

Using the pointed end of her useless comm badge as a make-shift pick, she managed to climb back on the ice, and staggered her way to the tail section. There was a transporter adjacent to engineering. If she could reach it, make it function...

Every step was an effort of will. Her clothing had frozen stiff. She couldn't feel her feet or hands anymore. There was an incessant ringing in her ears that caused her head to throb in pain. Just a bit further...

It took three tries before she could clamber up the cargo ramp. Frost had turned it into an ice-slide. In the end, she had to crawl, millimeter by millimeter.

Inside were the flickering lights of a console. When she began to enter commands, Janeway noticed how hard it was to control her fingers. They shook worse than a ship escaping a gravity well. Yet, for whatever reason, she didn't feel quite as cold. Partial life support?

"Hypothermia," Merris interjected softly, her lips only centimeters from Janeway's ear. The sensation of warm breath seemed alien amid the frozen wasteland.

Precious seconds passed as she rerouted the damaged circuits. Power levels increased, but not enough. Only one of the two microfusion generators was online. She spliced new relays working against both time and her own disobedient hands. They couldn't seem to hold on to the plasma torch. Several times it fell to the deck. Finally the other generator sputtered to life.

Triumph gave her a quick spurt of energy. She moved to the transporter control, only to find the scanners sporadically failing. The annular confinement beam was too unstable; it couldn't hold both of the patterns. There was only enough power for one transport. Only one, then the beam

would collapse.

Vertigo attacked her senses as if she'd leaned over a great chasm.

Edward Janeway was her first hero, a figure clad in light, looming in her consciousness with almost god-like status. But even if he had been the most ordinary of men, what kind of child would leave their father to drown?

Yet...life without Justin was equally unthinkable. He made her feel safe, always had, ever since the day he'd appeared in the doorway of that filthy Cardassian cell.

In the end, love had nothing to do with it. Star Fleet protocol required that she save the person of higher rank, and command conditioning proved impossible to override.

Janeway locked onto her father's life signs. Around her, the ship seemed to list. The console's display blurred in and out of focus.

Damn it. This was no time to be dizzy. She shook her head, trying to clear it, but that only made things worse. Now the world was occluded by growing spots of darkness. Trembling fingers reached for the controls as the shadows overtook her, filling her vision until everything else was gone.

"I waited too long." Janeway didn't know when she'd closed her eyes, but she did not choose to open them. "I waited too long, and lost them both."

By the time rescue teams reached them, the *Terra Nova's* cockpit was several fathoms down. She'd awakened in Sickbay to the stark reality of her failure.

"Planka shit," the coarse exclamation tickled over the skin of her ear.

Janeway's eyes snapped open in surprise. Despite the frigid circumstances, or perhaps because of them, she was unable to place the reference. "Planka shit?"

Crewman Merris still held her hand fast, anchoring her to reality. "The excreta of a Deltan sea slug," she explained. "You were injured, in shock, concussed, freezing to death, and faced with a choice that would have made a Vulcan pee his pants. Forgive me if I don't find your actions worthy of condemnation." The statement, for all its light-heartedness, held a tone of thinly veiled passion.

"You certainly have a way with words," Janeway observed wryly and felt Merris' grip tighten.

"To paraphrase the Doctor, 'I'm a spy, not a diplomat.'"

Movement around her drew Janeway's attention back to the holodeck. It was slowly transforming. Sunshine cut through the cloud cover, creating glowing pockets of warm air. Blades of grass burst through thinning ice as spring overtook the artificial winter. The landscape

flattened into a vast plain. Here and there, trees sprouted into majestic giants, and she recognized them...pin oaks and silver maples interspersed with flowering plums. Beneath their graceful sweep of branches grew White Columbine and lavender colored Asters. Beyond were endless fields of corn. She remembered the honeyed taste, so sweet you could eat it right from the stalk. A gleaming silo in the distance kept vigil over acres of farmland. Smells of hay and silage wafted past her nostrils.

"So," Merris' placid alto sounded almost sleepy and was accompanied by an exaggerated yawn, "where are we supposed to be now?" One look into the Deltan's cunningly alert eyes, confirmed that her boredom was feigned.

Janeway drew in a long breath, savoring the illusion of homecoming before answering, "Indiana, about four miles from where I grew up."

Her mind entered a slipstream of deduction. Hijacking the holodeck was not without precedent, but damn difficult to hide. Security codes had to be overridden. Immense amounts of power and countless gigaquads of memory were needed to launch planetary simulations. Such a drain on resources could not go unnoticed in Engineering. Her communicator should have been pinging a rendition of "Jingle Bells" two seconds after the emergence of Tau Ceti Prime. There had been nothing. All attempts on her part to make contact with *Voyager* had been fruitless. Whatever was occurring, it involved the entire ship.

It was also glaringly obvious that someone had either studied her background extensively, or read her mind. Two depictions from her past were no mere coincidences; a performance this exacting required a director.

Anger spurred her to release Merris' hand and she stepped forward, hands on hips. "All right, you wanted my attention." Her strident challenge rang out in stark contrast to the indolent ease of an Indiana summer. "You have it. Now what the hell are you doing to my ship, and what do you want from me?"

"Your ship is unharmed." It was her father's voice.

Janeway spun around and found him standing next to an ancient-looking pin oak. He looked exactly as she remembered, broad-shouldered, stately, and supremely confident. Even out of uniform, dressed in trousers and tunic of ivory linen, there was something commanding about him. His hair remained the pastel gray of gathering storm clouds, and his eyes still pierced into her soul.

Of course this wasn't her father. Edward Janeway was long dead. Nor was it the first time she'd encountered a being with his likeness. The alien impersonator had attempted to lure her into an alternate dimension...to feed on her energy. Swallowing down the vestigial fear that clawed at her gut, she shot the imposter an imperious glare. "Back for another try? You'll find me just as unwilling to accompany you as before."

The hologram chuckled, a sonorous rumble that was familiar to her, in the distant way old

friends and seldom-worn shoes could be when they were encountered after a lengthy absence. When he spoke, his silvery head tilted minutely to the right, a habit of his that she'd quite forgotten. "Stubborn as a Klingon...it's good to see that some things remain unchanged." Long strides brought him nearer, though not within arms length.

"What do you want?" She was in no humor to bandy platitudes.

"To talk to you, Kathryn." His countenance became somber as if years of care were suddenly remembered in an instant. "One more time..."

Just at the edge of her peripheral vision, Janeway was aware that Merris was slowly moving to his flank. The pointed end of a comm badge protruded from between fine-boned fingers.

...like a make-shift dagger...

Janeway kept her eyes still, not wishing to betray the movements of her crewman. "I'm listening," she folded her arms across her chest, "but my patience is wearing thin."

His right hand rose up and fiddled with the material of his shirt...where his comm badge would have been, had he been wearing one. A deluge of mental images drenched her consciousness...it was her fifth birthday, and he was called back from liberty...she was eighteen and watching him order a friend arrested for misconduct...he and her mother had argued and he was lingering outside the front door holding a box of chocolates... Each time, his thick fingers had absently toyed with the communicator on his chest.

Just like hers did before making an unpopular announcement to the crew.

All this time, and I never realized the similarity.

When the admiral spoke, it was with deliberate slowness. "I always held you to the highest standards." His eyes glowed with pride. "And you always exceeded them. That's the first thing I wanted to tell you: no father was ever prouder of his daughter than I am of you."

Crewman Merris had ceased her stalking. Instead, Janeway noticed that the Deltan had actually backed away a little.

That's strange.

"What happened on Tau Ceti Prime was an accident, Kathryn," her father's image continued to speak. "You didn't fail me. You didn't fail Justin."

Her emotions responded to the words, whirling inside her like dervishes. Janeway had thought this wound was healed, that she had dealt with the guilt and sorrow enough to move on. Somehow this thing, this mockery of her father, had ripped away the scab, and exposed an infection she wasn't aware existed. Molten fury rescued her from the mire of misguided sentiment. "My father is dead." Crimson colored her vision as she advanced on the imposter.

"Justin is dead. How dare you impugn their memories! How dare you pretend to know their wishes, or my feelings?" A thought occurred to her then, and she shot her supposed father a shrewd look. "Where's Justin? He died with you. If you are truly my father, why isn't he here as well?"

"Lt. Tighe was impatient to begin the next great adventure, as he always was." The answer caught her a little of guard. Janeway had expected him to offer some sort of trite argument about the afterlife. Instead she was presented with a different sort of logic which was absolutely consistent with Justin's impetuous nature.

Seeking a momentary distraction, her eyes sought out those of her wayward crewman. Merris remained standing at a discrete distance from them, and was conducting an in depth examination of her fingernails. The Deltan woman apparently felt Janeway's attention, however, and glanced up at her. Glints of ironic humor sparkled like tiny stars in the black of Merris' eyes.

"I have one more thing to say." The admiral's voice pulled her focus back on him. "I never tried to protect you, Kathryn, not from the world, not from your own decisions. Even when I could see that you were choosing the wrong path, I always let you learn for yourself. I thought it would make you strong." His eyes darkened, and it was so much like the real Edward Janeway, that her heart wrenched within her chest. When he spoke, there was enough bitterness and regret in his voice to make angels weep. "And it did. You've grown up believing that you require no one's protection."

Overhead, a large bird circled, crying out in a hoarse croak before fluttering down to land on her father's shoulder. It was a raven. Glossy blue-black feathers ruffled and one, beady orb studied her. Then it blinked lightly at the hologram's ear.

A tear formed at the edge of the admiral's eye. "I'm sorry, my girl." His image began to waver. "There are some things I should have shielded you from." Color faded, and he became translucent. The raven flew down to sit on the ground at Merris' feet.

Utter calm overtook her. "Now, I know you're not real," she hissed at him, an edge of mocking humor turning her words into vitriol. "My father never apologized."

Whether he heard her or not, she couldn't say. There was nothing left of him but a memory.

Kolopak drew in a long breath of his pipe's tobacco and exhaled. Smoke rings rippled outward in lazy spirals to cavort upon the breeze. They intermingled with the thick, white smoke that rose in an opaque column from the camp fire. As he stared at the silvery wisps, Chakotay saw them animate, this one a scuttling scorpion, that a lithe deer, still another, the stealthy jaguar. The shimmering images circled him. Closer and closer they danced, their heady scent drifting into his nostrils. His lungs inhaled the jaguar. He could feel the power of his totem fill him, from blood to bone, bone to muscle, muscle to skin, until it permeated his being.

Chakotay rose as, not as a man, but as the cat. The moist ground cushioned his paws and the night air sifted soft and warm through his coat. He saw the world filled with light...more light than he had ever seen. Even the tiniest bug seemed to glow with silver radiance. Roaring to the sky, he sprang forward, over the fire, out of the campsite, running for the sheer joy of movement. Leaf and vine caressed his body as he glided past.

Then he was back by the fire, seated next to his father. But everything was different. It was as if the universe suddenly came into focus. Chakotay laughed with the happy, babbling brook, cried with the morning dove over her lost chicks, and sang with the Earth's primordial rhythm.

His father began to chant, "Chamozie," in a deep, monotonous rumble. The word repeated, gaining substance with each utterance, becoming more than mere sound. It echoed in Chakotay's soul like pebbles falling down to the bottom of a depthless ocean.

Above them, the stars began to shift, whirling ever faster until they traced the Sacred Spiral in silver upon the black, celestial canvas. It rotated clockwise, and Chakotay was drawn into its endless whirling, pulled down, down and down until he was once more seated upon the solid earth.

"The strength we possess comes from our ancestors," Kolopak spoke as if from atop a distant mountain, each word reverberating among the trees. "Beginning with the Ancient Ones: Tate Wari: our grandfather of fire..." As he spoke the fire flared in answer. "...Takutsi Nakawey, his wife, whose womb holds all creation..."

Chakotay remembered a painting that adorned his family home. Vibrant colors of green, blue and pink formed a circle within a circle. In the center was ...

"...Kauyumari, the Deer Spirit." His father raised his arms to the starry heavens. "His children provided us with meat. It was he who cultivated the first plants which our ancestors would collect before they learned the art of cultivation: mushrooms, wild onions, wild tomatoes, chili peppers, and the prickly-pear cactus..."

Rustling vegetation pulled his gaze away from Kolopek. All around them, facing inward were deer, does, bucks, and fawns. Their liquid brown eyes bored into him. How he had laughed at the old legends as a child! Shame clogged his throat with bile and Chakotay's eyes filled with moisture. "Father I have been such a fool." His voice trembled.

The chant continued, "...Tatei Yurianaka, our Mother, the Sacred Earth..."

Vines sprang up from the dirt and whispered around his arms, caressed his shoulders. He lay backward. They pulled at him, not painfully, and he felt his eyelids close. The Earth drew him inward, to the center until he could feel the singing pulse of creation. Tears of joy cascaded from his eyes.

From far away, he could hear his father's voice, once more invoking the Chamozie. They were suddenly flying, faster than the nightingale, higher than the eagle. Over land and sea he soared as

the wind carried him, until they reached the stars. The Alpha Quadrant passed below them in a blur. Warp speed was too slow to describe their pace. Chakotay glimpsed the Cardassians, the Romulans, the Klingons, felt the presence of every Federation ship. Then they were beyond. The ruined Caretaker array floated dismal in the night. It looked more like twisted body parts than wreckage, as if Jack's giant had burst asunder when he fell down the beanstalk.

Chakotay saw the Kazon tribes still warring, and caught a brief gleam from Borg cubes before plunging into the endless black of the Void. They descended into the dark...or did they rise? He could not say. There was no up or down to speak of in the nothingness.

And suddenly white light bathed him and Chakotay saw the first tentacled station, then another, then another...there were thousands, drifting on the stellar currents. Slowly they floated past, and scattered.

He saw the sector where they originated, the same place where *Voyager* currently resided. Dim and dying suns cast pale light upon the system. Lumps of dirt that held no life circled them in a spiral waltz.

"The field lies fallow," said his father reverently. "It waits for the Great Mother to breathe upon the embers. Can you see, Contrary?"

Chakotay smiled at the nickname. He'd been a breech birth, and Kolopak had said it made him naturally rebellious to the expectations of others. "I see, now, Father," he whispered in awe. "I see everything."

"Here were born the Sky Spirits, and here they return to rest and to die." The older man pointed a wizened finger toward a hulking ball of red.

The supergiant... He saw *Voyager* orbiting the iron rock of planet that now seemed painted in blood. Beyond, as if his eyes were long-range sensors, across the countless light years hence, he could see the second space station. Something was wrong. The great creature hung limp and unmoving. There was no light thrumming the length of its tentacles, no impetus of life to animate it.

"Is it dead?" he asked, turning worried eyes toward his father.

"Not yet," Kolopak replied, "but soon. If you and your tribe are to return home, you must reach it in time."

"But how can we heal it?" The Jaguar within him roared in frustration. "We've come so far..."

His father merely smiled a sad, little smile. "You will find a way, but first, another lesson." Their perspective shifted a final time, bringing them back to *Voyager* and funneling Chakotay's vision. Kolopak tried to touch his shoulder, but there was no substance to his hand. "Sometimes when we strive to see everything, we miss what is in front of our noses." He pointed, and Chakotay followed his sign.

There was something, a tiny piece of color that fluttered as if caught in a summer breeze. He frowned at it. A flag perhaps... They drew nearer. ...No... It was maroon. Metal winked at him in the crimson light.

"My time with you is almost up." Kolopak became as smoke, silvery and translucent. "Farewell, my son. Dance the spiral in your dreams."

"No!" Chakotay reached for him, but touched only fabric. Where his father had been, was only a shirt. Fighting the urge to weep or scream, he turned the cloth over. It was a Federation tunic. Above the right shoulder, pinned to the stark, white epaulet was the silver rank insignia of a commander.

"Goodbye, Sudea," his father's spoke once more.

Chakotay's consciousness slipped away in a great rush of gravity.

"Commander?"

Tuvok's unflappable voice told him that he was once again on *Voyager*.

He blinked several times, his eyes tired and dry.

"Commander," the Vulcan repeated, stepping closer. "Are you all right?" Dark eyes looked down and a line of concentration formed between black brows.

After a moment, he followed Tuvok's stare.

The uniform shirt was still clutched in his hands.

Rayna Merris refused to look at either the large, black bird, or the clearly distressed captain. The avian creature was merely another illusory game piece. It was, frankly, beneath her notice.

As for Janeway...the human's rage and anguish were plain enough that visual confirmation was unnecessary. Prideful people did not relish their weaknesses being seen, and it was always the best course of action to be purposefully obtuse. She took several steps away, and began an inspection a forcefield shaped like a tree.

That was the Admiral, wasn't it?

Doubtless. Body language and facial expressions were largely unconscious and invariably had unique properties. No person smiled or frowned exactly the same way as another. Intelligence officers learned the idioms of Flag Officers by rote, a necessary security measure in case communications were intercepted.

When old-man Janeway had twiddled with his shirt, his daughter had absently mirrored the gesture by touching her comm badge. That simple exchange was a better guarantee of identity than any security code in existence.

What surprised her were the captain's vehement denials.

Really? Denial is a default setting for human defense mechanisms. For someone with a mind so rigidly scientific, ghosts are not factored into the equation.

In contrast, Deltans and Orions, both revered the dead. Whether or not life continued after death was not even questioned; it considered self-evident.

True, but Orions don't saddle the dead with perfection. Their ghost stories are full of capriciousness and cruelty.

It isn't your job to open Janeway's eyes. The captain is an intelligent woman; she'll either accept what happened as true or not.

Something tapped her shoe. Glancing down, Rayna saw that it was the crow, or raven. She wasn't an ornithologist and really didn't care a Circassian fig which. One of its ebony marble eyes stared back up at her, unblinking.

Around her, the recalcitrant holodeck began morphing yet again. Lush meadowlands disappeared. The trees shrank downward, and the sky above became coolly uniform. Stark metal bulkheads melded with little contrast to the close knit carpet of the deck. It could be any Federation ship, anywhere. Flashing lines of scarlet indicated Red Alert, but there were no running crewmen or roving patrols. At least it now looked like what it was: a starship. Her empathy was finally in harmony with her other senses. As she watched, careful to maintain her expression of complete boredom, the polished walls began to bleed.

Rivulets of garnet streamed downward. They pooled together and stained the flooring. The air grew chill and dank.

She heard footsteps approaching and turned to face Captain Shin Fong. His burgundy command tunic was sleek with ruby liquid that streamed from the gaping wounds in his neck; wounds she'd caused with a communicator very much like the one in her hand.

Rayna stepped in front of him. "Back for round two?" she inquired, twirling her comm badge casually.

He smiled at her, a lurid expression made worse by the pink tinge of blood coating his teeth. "I know what you did." Arterial moisture gave his normally crisp command voice a lisping sound.

"So I would imagine..." Her pulse thrummed in her temples. All her willpower funneled into maintaining the pitch and modulation of her voice. "...considering I did it to you." From behind,

she heard Janeway's approach. The captain was still furious, but concern now threaded its way through the human's emotional tapestry.

Shin howled, doubling over as if in horrible pain. When he straightened at long last, the bleeding had stopped. In fact, there was no trace of any injury. His murky brown eyes were tired beyond measure, but sane. "You have to tell them the truth."

Rayna gave out a mirthless bark of laughter. "I don't have to do anything, but stay a half-breed and die."

"Tell us what?" Captain Janeway spoke up. The human had moved to Rayna's side. Distress still orbited about her, but it was fading in the wake of curiosity and a ferocious protectiveness.

"Did I interrupt your little family reunion?" Rayna rebuffed the uninvited interference with a sharp hiss.

Stormy eyes slid in her direction accompanying a renewed burst of temper. "That wasn't my father," Janeway growled in warning.

"Then it would follow that this isn't Captain Shin. So why the fuck are you so interested in what he has to say?" She watched the impact of her words strike the human, setting off depth charges of doubt and remorse within the ocean of her eyes.

That was unkind.

It was.

You should have found a gentler way to tell her.

I haven't really told her anything.

A keening wail erupted from Shin. Rayna clapped her hands over her ears, but could not block the sound. There was something so pained in it, as if all the grief in the universe were venting outward. Her soul wept to hear it. The slender Asian held his head as if it would burst. His image dimmed, losing resolution. It pixilated into a fragmented collage of colored dots before re-congealing...

...into Gul Refak.

Rayna felt the blood drain from her face.

The Cardassian commander stretched his bony neck, cracking it audibly. He fixed her with eyes so wholly devoid of emotion that they might as well have been empty sockets. "Lt. Rahl." His torso bent forward in a sarcastic bow. "Oh, I am aware that is not your name, but..." He bared his teeth in a menacing grimace. "...I fear you never did properly introduce yourself."

Pressure on her chest threatened to squeeze the breath from her. She was glad for every lesson in control her father had imparted, every slap across her face when she betrayed even a hint of emotion. They allowed her to brave this demon's presence without flinching. "I was wondering if you would join the party," she greeted genially.

Not bad. Your larynx is a little taut. Relax it. There...

"How could I pass up on the opportunity to bask in your biting wit and charming personality?" Refak licked his lips and grunted. "Raping you was the highlight of my otherwise tedious existence." He rippled forward. "Let's walk down memory lane, shall we?"

The corridor transformed into a dank Cardassian holding cell. Strobe lights embedded in the ceiling tapped out a painful display of optical irritation. Random noise blared through speakers. Sleep was unthinkable in the din. There on the far wall was the word, "bitch." Refak had drawn it there with Rayna's blood and feces when the pain amplifier finally caused her to lose control of her bodily functions. He'd forced that finger into her mouth.

Stop shaking.

Rayna could feel the tremors as they coursed up her spine and transmitted to her limbs. Her mental command went unheeded.

Rage, midnight black and cold, emanated from Janeway. "Leave her alone," the human ordered, her voice softly menacing.

His laughter reverberated in the close quarters sounding like rattling bones and skittering leaves. "Is she your pet, Captain? I hope you didn't pay too much for her; she's damaged merchandise. Let me show you."

Rayna watched in mute horror as a holographic representation of herself was added. Metal chains bound her to the titanium bunk. She remembered their chill grasp on her wrists and ankles as she was forced to lie on her side. Three Cardassian guards crowded around her, each hammering his organ into an orifice. The pain of tearing flesh haunted her.

Do not react. He wants to see you cringe and look away.

Her bowels churned, and both her hearts flailed against her ribcage, but Rayna continued to watch. She was so used to disconnecting herself from pain that this was barely an exertion.

Without warning, Janeway attacked. Her expertly placed kicks and punches would have rendered the Cardassian unconscious, had he been corporeal. Instead they passed harmlessly through his image.

"So fierce..." Refak's gaze tracked down over Janeway, virtually undressing her. His claw-like hands twitched. "If only I'd been there when you were captured. The fun we would have had."

It was Rayna's turn to find the floodgates of wrath. The unfamiliar feeling swept over her consciousness the way a firestorm consumed dry timber. "This is the point where I would tell you to go fuck yourself," she almost whispered, her tone deceptively quiet, "except you'd engender a clone." In her hand, the comm badge dangled loosely. She idly wondered whether it would sever his member, if she could stab it clean through enough times.

His body is insubstantial. Your blows would be as useless as Janeway's.

Let's find out.

Before she could cross the scant meter or so separating them, Refak folded in on himself with an agonized cry. Light refracted through his twisted countenance rending his limbs asunder. Out of the bloodless heap stepped Captain Shin. The new apparition was pallid and sweaty, as if after some mighty effort. He closed his muddy eyes and drew in a simulated breath, before squarely facing Rayna. "They put a Cardassian in my head," he murmured to her. "Even in death, I couldn't break free."

Straightening, Shin turned toward Janeway. "I needed you to see me, to see what they did to me."

Voyager's captain looked similarly pale, but she replied steadily, "I understand." Her aristocratic features were alive with compassion.

Shin nodded. He turned back to Rayna once again. "They made me a murderer." A chasm of sorrow echoed with his grief. His hands, outstretched, were covered in blood. "You don't need to protect me anymore."

Her unexpected tide of anger had ebbed, leaving Rayna slightly nonplussed. It had been decades since she'd lost her temper over anything. Plotting revenge was a much more efficient use of energy. Her gaze shifted to Janeway. And yet she'd been affronted when Refak toyed with this woman...who was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. It took long moments before her brain registered Shin's comments. "I'm not protecting you," she replied. "I never was."

Slanted eyes widened, and Rayna managed to find some semblance of satisfaction at his surprise. He wanted to say more. His mouth opened as if to speak, but his image began to unravel as if an unseen hand were tugging at the threads. In a matter of seconds, he was simply no longer there.

Sul's teeth.

Emotions that she'd forgotten existed attempted to dominate her awareness. Rayna fought the urge to run, and instead turned to face the metal bulkhead. Once again, it had the appearance of a Federation vessel, silver and gray, clean and tidy. Not like her insides. All the filth that had been lying inert below the surface had been set to boiling. Her eyes burned. Rayna didn't understand why. There were no pollutants in the air. They were still on *Voyager*, where the atmosphere was hermetically filtered. Moisture gathered, obscuring her vision.

Are you crying?

Something touched her hand. Soft and dry, it stroked feather-light down to her finger tips.

Janeway.

There was no shocked reproach in the human's aura, no smothering pity or worse, the saccharine desire to be reassuring. Janeway's intention was as much to receive comfort as to offer it. The captain desperately needed to touch someone living. Rayna could feel it snug about her, even as long fingers wrapped securely around her own. Their bodies drew nearer, and she brought a palm to Janeway's waist. Not since she was a little girl had Rayna consciously sought shelter from another. Such weakness was anathema. But the undertow of need...her own...and that of Janeway's... was too powerful to resist. Strong arms encircled her shoulders as tears scalded her eyes. She couldn't make them stop. Rayna tried to pull away, but the captain's embrace was obdurate as granite.

"Let it go," whispered words urged her. "Let it go. I've got you."

As the onslaught of emotion overwhelmed the last of her defenses, Rayna could only cling tightly and pray that the promise was true.

Janeway held the trembling woman close and whispered reassurances. The warm solidity of Merris' body was soothing, in a visceral way. It grounded her, gave her something to focus on other than the emotional tempest that raged inside her mind.

What they did to her...

The sheer brutality of the assault on Merris was beyond her ken. For Janeway, force was a tool employed only as a last resort, and for a specific purpose. Violence, simply to inflict pain and humiliation, was almost incomprehensible. So too, was cruelty for its own sake.

This whole experience has been cruel.

That thought fanned her rage into a conflagration. Was everyone on *Voyager* being toyed with in this casual manner, confronted with false images of dead loved ones, or compelled to relive humiliation publicly?

I need to know what is happening to my crew.

Merris' arms retreated as if on cue, and the Deltan dried her face on a sleeve. Dark eyes met Janeway's with cool aplomb. "That was certainly unique," she remarked, and cast her gaze about the holodeck.

"'Unique' is hardly the word I would choose." Janeway stepped slightly in front of the other

woman. The corridor still pulsed with scarlet light. Only it seemed to be infinitely long with hatchways at regular intervals. "Now what?" Frustration edged her voice.

Nothing happened. No new apparitions appeared. The only sound that Janeway could hear was the relentless pounding of her heart.

She ground out a staccato curse and keyed one of the hatches. It opened into the interior of a Borg cube. Drones manned their posts with mechanical precision.

What the...?

Merris touched a button and secured the hatch. "Wrong door," she observed dryly. Without so much as a second glance, the graceful Deltan stepped to the next portal and opened it.

Raucous laughter billowed forth, followed by several Klingon curse words. This time, Janeway keyed it shut. "What kind of sick game is this?" She was in no mood for a scavenger hunt, but it seemed there was no other option of she were going to find Neelix and Naomi. Striding past Merris, she opened a third door...

...and found an oddly familiar hallway. It curved gracefully away from their position, sleek and smooth as skin. Dull gray light flickered from the seamless walls and floors.

The space station?

There was something sickly about the pallid glow. She made ready to shut the hatchway when Merris' warm hand covered hers, stilling it. "This is no hologram," she murmured.

"What?" Janeway stammered. "How is that possible?"

Merris brushed past her, ebony eyes squinting in concentration. "Not a clue, but forcefields don't emit chemicals." Delicate fingers brushed along the wall.

Janeway followed, unwilling to lose another crewman amid the ever-changing holo-environment. The hatchway sealed behind them with an ominous hiss of air. She glanced back and it had disappeared entirely. The corridor she and Merris walked now extended backward, meandering in graceful curves. A stale smell lingered in the air.

This floor did not fluoresce with every step. The dim light did not brighten. For some reason these facts seemed significant.

"We are not on the same station." Merris knelt to touch the deck. Her eyes were unreadable as they met Janeway's.

The Deltan ability to sense chemical changes was as well documented as their aversion to holodecks. Even without a tricorder to confirm it, there was no reason to doubt her conclusion.

If it is another construct, what are we doing here?

No hypothesis presented itself. Heaving a sigh of exasperation, Janeway leaned a hand against the bulkhead. It was cool and moist, as stark contrast to the vibrant pulse of the first station. "Something's wrong here." She frowned, stepping back. Her scientific reasoning jarred itself into motion. Considering the organic properties evident in the previous structure, it could simply be a different variety, with a lower body temperature. The possibility didn't feel right. "Is it ill?" Janeway gave voice to her first inclination, glancing in Merris' direction.

Her companion did not immediately answer, instead staring down the length of the corridor. Tiny movements of her eyes told Janeway that the woman was watching something specific. She followed the steady gaze, but saw nothing.

I wonder if that's what you look like when your madcap lizard is scampering about?

The question reverberated through her consciousness and caused Janeway to take a second look at Merris. The elfin face was shuttered and expressionless, completely impossible to read. Yet, there was a heightened aura of alertness to her. "What do you see?" Janeway asked quietly.

"A bronard," came the unexpected answer. Merris did not so much as flick a brow. The lithe woman rose and began to move down the corridor. "It is a sea predator native to Delta, not unlike your sharks, only with less brain and more teeth."

Part of Janeway registered equal measures of concern and relief that her animal hallucination was not an isolated incident. She cataloged the information for later attention, and focused on trailing the other woman.

They reached a haphazard intersection. Just to the starboard side of it lay a small bundle of cloth. Sitting atop it, brown eyes bright with twinkles was Janeway's illusory reptile. It darted away, weaving in and out of Merris' feet, not that the Deltan hybrid seemed to notice.

They crouched beside the pile. The material was white with a layer of minute particles, and it was difficult to discern its true color. Merris gingerly picked up a corner and exposed a section that was still black. She stood. The cloth tumbled downward in a rush of whispered sound, sending out clouds of dust in its wake.

It was a set of uniform pants. An old-style type two phaser was still clipped to the waistband. Stranger still, was that on the floor where they had lain, being slowly covered by the snow-like layer of falling dust, was a Romulan disrupter. Janeway bent down and retrieved it, feeling a little like she was surrounded by fog. Her emotions, even the rage that still burned within, seemed distant.

A new hatchway opened in the wall. Through it she could see the holodeck. No imagery bedecked it. Silver walls with gold crosshatching winked at her through the aperture. There were voices resounding through it. She heard Neelix calling to Naomi, and Tom Paris shouting to Neelix. Relief flooded her being, and she moved toward the sounds, pausing only to ensure that

Merris followed. She did.

"Captain!" Neelix rushed to her side. His face was lined with the tracks of tears, but his eyes glittered with joy. "I have had the most amazing experience," he proclaimed. "I saw the Great Forest, and my parents."

Janeway scarcely had time to digest his words when Naomi took her free hand. She found the child smiling at her. "I saw my grandmother," she whispered. "I never met her before."

She looked behind to where the station had been, and found only the inactive holodeck.

Is this even real?

Her eyes sought out Crewman Merris. The slender woman had positioned herself several meters away, the trousers casually slung over one shoulder. When their eyes met, Merris nodded, a silent reply to an unasked question. Janeway tightened her grip on the disruptor, finding that it was still there, still solid.

Her thoughts struggled to process the new data, even as her senses registered the approach of Tom Paris. Unlike the others, he was subdued, and wore an unusually pensive expressive. "Tom?" she inquired softly.

He offered a slight smile, and replied, "I'm okay, Captain." Clear blue eyes drifted down to her hand. "Where'd you get that old thing?"

Whooshing air cut off any response she might have given. The holodeck hatchway had opened. Chakotay, Tuvok and a security team charged in. "Captain, are you all right?" her first officer asked.

"Fine." The answer was automatic. Janeway strode to meet him. "What the hell happened?" Her fury had returned full force.

"*Voyager* was enveloped by some sort of neurogenic wave front." Chakotay was slightly out of breath. Murky brown eyes sought out the other crew members before returning to her. "The ship is undamaged, no casualties, all hands accounted for." He hesitated. "Captain, Tuvok and I both experienced visions." His bronzed face was taut with a mixture of elation and fear. "I saw my father..."

The words sank in slowly, but they set off a series of emotional explosions stronger than plasma charges. What had happened on the holodeck was clearly not an isolated incident. "Visions or hallucinations?" She shook her head, still trying to put all the pieces together. "Was it some sort of attack?" Manipulation of the ship's computers removed all possibility that the neurogenic cloud which simultaneously enveloped *Voyager* was a naturally occurring phenomenon.

"Unknown." Tuvok held up a maroon shirt. "However, Commander Chakotay returned with this tunic." In his hands was a Federation top with the rank of Commander festooned on the white

epaulet. "Physical evidence eliminates the possibility that the experience was entirely illusory."

Janeway stifled a frustrated curse. Turning narrowed eyes to Chakotay she order, "Have the Doctor examine the crew for signs of telepathic invasion." She briefly glanced at Paris. "Tom, help him. I want brief summary of what, if any, hallucinations were experienced. Commander Tuvok..." Janeway offered up the Romulan weapon she carried. "...take this, the tunic and trousers, and the phaser to Engineering. I want them authenticated." The smoldering fury inside her chest became an inferno. "Assemble senior staff in the Briefing Room in four hours." The last was directed to Chakotay.

He was looking at her oddly, almost worriedly. "Aye, Captain."

"I'll be in my Ready Room," Janeway shot the last over her shoulder as she marched away.

Four hours later, Chakotay was seated at the Briefing Room's irregularly shaped table. He'd never noticed before that it bore a passing resemblance to a shield. The Doctor had begun his report on the crew's status. Over 90 percent had logged an encounter with the dead. Even Seven of Nine had been visited by her parents. Thus far only he and Janeway had actually returned with artifacts.

The Doctor finally brought his briefing to a close. "There is no evidence of increased serotonin levels which are consistent with telepathic contact." His expressive features became frankly dumbfounded. "I can find no medical reason for these 'visions.'"

Chakotay leaned forward. "There's always the possibility that these were genuine."

"Impossible." Janeway's reply was expected. Ever the skeptic, she lived in a world of scientific rationality. It was the incredible depth of passion lacing her tone that truly surprised him.

He took in the armored set of her jaw, and the scarlet flush of her cheeks. The captain was livid. The last time he's seen her so inflamed was during their pursuit of the *Equinox*.

Spirits...could she have encountered Ransom's ghost?

Of them all, only Janeway had submitted no account involving the dead.

Maybe that's why she is so adamant: she didn't experience anything.

No. The captain had reported visiting some kind of hallway which closely resembled those on the first space station, so clearly something had happened. More to the point, too much vehemence accompanied her objections. She was withholding something...something that troubled her heart-deep. Nor had Merris been at all enlightening. The newest crew member simply reported seeing her grandmother, and did not elaborate.

Lt. Torres gave him a troubled look before launching into her findings. Clearly she had picked up on Janeway's demeanor. "The recovered items are approximately fifty years old. No identifying markings were found on them. However, we were able to extract epithelials from the tunic. They're Vulcan. From the insignia on the shoulder, we believe the shirt belonged to Commander Sorek, the first officer assigned to the Magellan." She glanced up at the captain. "Our database does not contain a reference sample, so we can't be 100 percent certain. There were only five Vulcans on the crew manifest, and only Sorek held the rank of commander."

The captain nodded. "Seems a safe bet," she confirmed.

"The phaser worked once the power cell was recharged," B'Elanna continued. "Beyond that, there's not much I can tell. Unlike communicators, phasers were never equipped with a ship's identifier." She gave an exasperated shrug.

"And the disruptor?" Chakotay prompted.

Her attention shifted to the PADD in her hand. "That's a different story altogether."

The Briefing Room's display lit up in a colorful display of the weapon's schematics. B'Elanna caused the power output to flash. "Someone deactivated the power modulator and disconnected beam control."

Lt. Paris leaned forward, clear blue eyes flashing. "They set it to detonate?"

Torres nodded. "Yes, but it failed to explode, obviously. Like the phaser, its power cells were also drained completely." Her brown eyes crinkled as she frowned. "There's no real way to tell how the power drain occurred, or when."

"One mystery after another." Janeway's caustic tone was testament to how little she cared for the endless series of riddles. She rose and paced around the table. "From the time we entered the Labyrinth, we've been playing a game according to rules we didn't make. It's time to stop." Diamond-hard eyes drilled into each of them. "Our immediate priority is to complete the mining operations. Lieutenant Torres," her piercing gaze shifted, "double the number of teams on the surface. I want to leave this system in thirty-six hours."

"Captain-" her objection was cut off.

"I realize it will put a strain on our manpower, but *Voyager* has already been subjected to some sort of mind-altering phenomena. Next time it may go beyond hallucinations." The steely set of Janeway's jaw brooked no contradiction. "Lieutenant Paris," she shot the helmsman a look, "work with Seven and double check the course you've plotted to the second space station. Make sure it's the fastest way possible."

His blonde head nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Chakotay seized the moment to speak. "Captain, when you and Crewman Merris were somehow

transported to the unidentified corridor, you said it reminded you of the first space station. You also said that seemed to be sick."

"Your point, Commander?" Her entire demeanor was suffused with impatience.

This isn't like her.

The more he observed the captain, the more obvious it became that something was profoundly wrong. He chose his words carefully. "In my...hallucination...I also saw a second construct. It appeared to be ill." *Walk lightly here, boy.* Chakotay seemed to hear his father caution. Using a long inhalation to buy time, he once more ordered his thoughts. "Since you returned with physical proof that the experience was real, and so did I, wouldn't it be prudent to have the Doctor study the data your Away Team gathered from its foray into the station?"

Her steely eyes bored into him relentlessly, but finally Janeway nodded. "Agreed. We may have to find some means to repair or heal it if we're going to get back to the Delta Quadrant."

He watched as she continued to pace. Her shoulders and back were ramrod straight. Tension, unease, and wrath tainted the very air around her with their darkled energy. Chakotay caught Tuvok's quiescent eyes. They silently agreed to meet later.

Finally the captain stopped moving. "Ensign Kim, I want you to analyze the sensor record of the neurogenic wave." There was a forced gentleness to her voice as she regarded the baby-faced Asian. Then she inclined her head toward the room's exit. "Everyone, dismissed."

Chakotay remained seated as the others shuffled out. It was his intent to speak to Janeway.

Before he could open his mouth, however, the captain fixed him with an implacable glare. "Dismissed, Commander," she ordered tersely.

He reluctantly obeyed.

It took almost an entire day before Chakotay was able to speak privately with the Vulcan Security Chief. Deuterium mining consumed hundreds of man-hours. Both he and Tuvok were effectively tied up coordinating the process. There had been equipment malfunctions, one near collision of shuttles, and over a dozen arguments between crewmen. He'd spoken to Janeway twice, and both times she'd dismissed his safety concerns. The simple truth was that she was pushing the crew mercilessly. This endeavor of hers to finish three days of mining in half the time was foolhardy.

He keyed the entry request at Tuvok's quarters and was invited inside.

"Has she lost her flaming mind?" The passionate declaration of B'Elanna Torres let him know that his was not the only concern being aired.

The engineer was glaring up at Tuvok's impassive face, both hands on her hips. She couldn't

have done a better imitation of Janeway if she'd tried. Pointing that out to her would probably earn him a fat lip, however. Chakotay approached the duo. It was a little unexpected that Torres would be here. The half-Klingon normally used either Tom Paris or himself as her sounding board. Furious brown eyes shifted to meet his. "I've learned to trust the captain's judgment, but this time, she's gone too far." One smallish fist smashed into her palm. "My people are being pushed to the limit. I've got infighting on every shift, even among people who have never been problems. We're all on the ragged edge here, and her irrational deadline is only making things worse."

The dark-skinned Vulcan was inscrutable, as always. "Captain Janeway has explained the need for urgency," he replied evenly. "Without knowing the origin or intention, if any, behind the neurogenic wave that enveloped *Voyager*, there is no predicting the effects of any future encounters."

"Targ shit." Torres growled. "I saw my mother in Sto-vo-kor. She was peachy. Everyone I've spoken to had a lovely reunion with someone who'd passed. Nobody was hurt. The only person on this ship who seems to be distressed by the experience is Janeway."

"B'Elanna," Chakotay tried to slide into the conversation. He met with no success.

Torres threw her hands into the air and unleashed a series of Klingon curse words. Suddenly she froze, jaw working. When she next spoke, it was with quiet purpose. "I know she's a friend of yours, Tuvok, but ever since the spy came on board, things have gone sideways. Ayala served with the Maquis and on *Voyager* for years. It doesn't seem possible that all this time he's been a Cardassian mole." Her face was closed, but her voice was thick with repressed emotion. "What if Merris did something to him? Tampered with his mind, slipped him some kind of drug? What if she's done that to Captain Janeway too?" Seething almost-black eyes twisted to glare at Chakotay. "According to Neelix, the captain was last seen chasing after Merris. She had the opportunity."

Chakotay shook his head sadly. "I've thought about Ayala at least a thousand times. I hate what happened to him as much as you do, but there's no way Merris could have caused it. Hell, B'Elanna, you've read her jacket. She's a negative psi; she can't even read minds much less tamper with them." He put a calming hand on her shoulder. The muscles beneath it were tense to the point of snapping. "The replicators prohibit the production of poisons or drugs. Even if Merris could override the safeties, there's no chemical in existence that can cause what happened to Ayala." That at least gave Torres something to consider. His worried eyes turned to Tuvok. "Have you tried talking to the captain?"

"I have," the security chief confirmed, "and been rebuffed."

Not good.

As the captain's oldest friend, Tuvok could normally reach past Janeway's considerable defenses. Chakotay moved to stare out the transparent aluminum windows that lined Tuvok's quarters. Outside, there was only the brooding red star, looking dire against a backdrop of endless night.

"Has she left her Ready Room?"

"No." Tuvok joined him in his observation. "Nor can I find evidence that she has slept."

"So what else is new?" B'Elanna called out from behind them. "She never sleeps," the next words were dripping with sarcasm, "unless she's spending the night with the Rayna Merris. Afterwards, she appears to be remarkably well rested."

Chakotay spun around. "That's enough," his barking order pulled Torres up short. "Who the captain chooses to spend her off duty time with is none of your business."

A bark of derisive laughter was his initial response, followed by, "It is when she's a Section 31 spook." Lieutenant Torres folded her arms across her chest. "Come on, Chakotay, you know how these intelligence types are. They can't be trusted any further than I can toss them." She paused here, considering, "No, not even that far."

It was a truth that he couldn't easily dismiss. Chakotay had placed little stock in the charges of murder and treason levied against Merris. All of the Maquis stood accused of similar offenses. Upon learning of that her kin group had perished on Uvidia Tyr, he'd set aside the possibility that she would collude with the Cardassians.

However, as Merris was assigned to a covert mission aboard a Federation starship, it was indisputable that she was at least a member of Internal Affairs, and possibly part of Section 31.

The officially nonexistent and uncondoned rogue agency within Starfleet Intelligence claimed to protect the security interests of the United Federation of Planets. Its name was derived from Article 14, Section 31 of the Earth Starfleet Charter, which allowed certain rules of conduct to be "bent" during times of extraordinary threat. Merris' mission to uncover so-called sleeper agents certainly qualified.

He blew out a long sigh. "That may be, B'Elanna, but she has no reason to harm the captain, or *Voyager*, and her actions, to date, have been nothing but helpful."

"Dor-sho-gha," Torres snapped. "Including the part where she omitted any reference to sleeper agents in the first place? Or how about the cavalier way she murdered Ayala? For fuck's sake, Chakotay, there was a security team right there!" Her cranial ridges deepened into crevasses, an indication of the depth of her rage.

There it is.

They had finally reached the heart of what was tormenting B'Elanna. Chakotay understood all too well how poorly Torres handled grief. "Look." He took hold of both her shoulders and stared into her furious black eyes. "You know that we couldn't have helped Ayala." She tried to twist out of his grasp, but he tightened his grip. "Deep inside, you know that. Even if he had survived, we don't have the technology or resources to reverse his condition."

At long last her shoulders sagged. Torres took a few steps away from him before saying, "In my head, I know you're right. It's just hard." She turned to face him and Tuvok. "But even if we set all that aside, the fact is, in all the years we've been in space Captain Janeway has never spent the night with any of us. Now she does so with this stranger. Even if Merris doesn't have some kind of psychic ability, she has the Deltan sex appeal. Her pheromones could probably induce a Vulcan to sleep with her."

The image of Kathryn in bed with Merris filled him with disgruntled envy. In all their years together, the captain had never once considered him as a partner, even when they were stranded planetside. Chakotay thrust away the images that were engendered; they aroused him in ways he was not prepared to confront.

Torres' warrior instincts exploited his momentary hesitation. "Hell, Janeway even threw over her hologram for the woman. She left Michael with Neelix and Naomi. Obviously there is something between them, and whatever it is, it puts Merris in a position to influence her."

"Rayna will do nothing to harm Captain Janeway." Tuvok's emphatic, matter-of-fact pronouncement caused them both to look at him. He was still facing the blood-red sun.

Chakotay exchanged a dubious glance with Torres. "I'd like to agree with you," he took a step toward the Vulcan, "but B'Elanna's made a valid point. How can we be certain what her motives are?"

Tuvok turned toward them both then. His eyes were infinitely patient. "Rayna Merris is my friend. I know her character well. In this instance, you can only trust my judgment, as Captain Janeway trusted yours, Commander," he inclined his head toward Chakotay, "when she appointed Lieutenant Torres as Chief Engineer."

His words struck home. After discarding a hundred responses, Chakotay finally nodded. He didn't like it, but Tuvok had earned the benefit of the doubt. A sharp look at Torres silenced her objections, though he could tell that the half-Klingon was far from sanguine. "All right, then," he turned the topic back to its original subject. "Captain Janeway is pushing herself too hard. Obviously something is wrong."

"Agreed." Tuvok's resonant baritone betrayed a hint of his concern. "However, until she chooses to do otherwise, it is her prerogative to remain silent." A light gleamed from the murky depths of his eyes.

I hate it when he's right. Chakotay wanted to ride the turbolift up, burst into Janeway's Ready Room, and refuse to leave until she opened up to him.

It didn't work when we crossed The Void, Sudea. It won't work any better now.

He and Torres left Tuvok's quarters to continue their work. For Chakotay, the future seemed to promise stormy skies and rough waters. He hoped it was wrong.

Alien music pulsed out a discordant mélange of fury. Rayna moved within the driving beat, letting the metallic noise hammer her emotions into torpor. Klingon dance was as raw and unpolished as their language. Some called it a form of ballet...

She twisted left, striking the air with the blade of her hand.

...but to Rayna, it had always been a poor comparison. No ballet in her experience incorporated killing blows.

The *Hegh'bat*, was ancient. Literally translated as "time to die," it told a tale of doomed Klingon warriors who withstood Romulan invaders to the last man, and the small child who chose suicide over capture. This particular rendition had been modernized. Drums, like beating hearts, pounded wrath. Screeching guitar rifts echoed the death throes of the fallen. Its movements were extremely physical, incorporating kicks, leaps and lunges. Her body shed sweat as if she trod upon the surface of a star, soaking through her replicated sweat pants and t-shirt.

She'd been dancing for almost three hours. With every step, Rayna held her Cardassian captivity in her mind's eye. The beatings, the rapes, the repeated, endless torture...the moment she freed her wrists long enough to lay them open with her teeth... No sooner did the memories end, than she began them anew.

"Confront your pain."

Torim of Vulcan was a slightly built man with thinning black hair and coffee colored skin. It was his job to prepare upper level operatives for possible capture and interrogation. Over a period of weeks, he methodically broke the minds of his pupils, turning confident agents into drooling wrecks. Then he rebuilt them, pointing out the weaknesses he had exploited.

"If it hurts you to remember, then it can be used against you."

Tears streamed down her cheeks, but she felt no shame. Orions considered emotional displays acceptable when associated with artistic expression. Under Torim's guidance, her love of dance became an outlet, a means of expressing emotion and releasing energy. Both of these were essential to the maintenance of sanity.

Just being on the holodeck again was difficult. It was the only such open space available, however. Rayna watched the yellow and black walls blur as she spun 'round. Luckily, everyone on *Voyager* was erstwhile occupied mining and refining deuterium.

It's also quite late.

Time had no meaning. Neither did pain, not from her screaming calves, nor from her burning chest. Only the motion mattered. So long as she was moving, the past was bearable.

Make the music louder.

That would be likely result in permanent hearing loss.

But I can still hear him.

Reliving her imprisonment was the only way. Internal hurts were useful to an enemy; they had to be systematically excised. She would stare at them until they stopped hurting...no matter how long it took.

"Rayna," her implanted communicator hummed with Tuvok's rich baritone.

"Pause the music, please," she addressed *Voyager's* computer. Her breath tore from her lungs in heated pants. "Go ahead."

"Turn around."

The voice came from behind her. To her surprise, Tuvok was already in the holodeck. She'd not seen him enter nor heard him speak, a testament to how high she'd turned the volume.

"I did not mean to ignore you." Breathing hard, Rayna crossed to the corner where she'd dropped a towel and bottle of water. Now that she'd stopped the dance, her legs quivered in protest. She could hear how loudly her hearts pounded, sounding like pulse blasters set to automatic fire. The rough terry cloth felt lovely to her head. In short order she was at least somewhat presentable, the sweat and tears were wiped away.

Her friend waited serenely, arms dangling at his sides in a relaxed manner that his tight jaw-line belied. "The Doctor indicated that your vital signs were," he paused here, obviously seeking the right word, "elevated."

Rayna pulled a face. "So the photonic bastard is almost as nosey as you." The notion made her smile. No one in her experience had ever rivaled Tuvok in that arena.

There was no corresponding lightening in his brown eyes. "Considering the subject matter of your performance, perhaps his concern was warranted. The *Hegh'bat* is an unusual choice."

Uh oh, Wind Child, you've successfully managed to worry a Vulcan. It was the crying, no doubt.

He's seen me cry before.

She studied his obdurate features for several seconds. They were closed, not impassive. It was an important distinction for Tuvok, and meant that he was actually feeling something that disturbed his peace. "What's wrong?" Rayna queried, and then took a long drink. A precise balance of salt and other minerals had created a fair imitation of sea water. On Delta, it was used for cleansing - spirit or bowel, it made no difference.

Would that everything were so easy to purify.

He moved closer. Earthen eyes regarded her frankly. As always, they trapped her. "It would be more logical to direct that question toward you..." One eyebrow flinched downward, just a hair. "...and the captain."

Ah.

Rayna drew breath, deep and long. Outsiders would be confounded by the lack of words exchanged between them. Tuvok's mention of the captain, told her that Janeway was having an adverse reaction to her ghostly holodeck encounter. It was also an unspoken request for advice. The distraction of dealing with someone else's problems was quite pleasing, at the moment. Her own would patiently wait for her to return. "I take it she's still pissed off?" She cut him a look.

The dark head nodded once. "...and concerned there will be another...incident."

Rayna's thoughts quickened. It made sense. The captain had been forced to relive something traumatic and painful. She would certainly look upon it as some sort of attack. *And I'll wager both feet she hasn't told anyone what happened.*

Which meant Tuvok was fighting blind, trying to reach his friend when he didn't have access codes to the hatchways of her psyche. Knowing him as she did, there was little chance he hadn't attempted to speak with Janeway. Commander Chakotay had probably tried as well, if he were any sort of First Officer.

You can't disclose anything without violating Janeway's privacy, and he respects that, which is why he hasn't asked a single question.

The likeliest scenario for success was to pick a fight with the captain. Soldier-types were always at their most frustrated when there was no clear enemy. Janeway needed someone to hit. Without a doubt, the easiest way to deal with a bomb was to explode it in a controlled environment.

You could always tell her you fucked her father. That should send her over the edge quite handily. One good slap across your cheek and Janeway's temper will burn itself out.

As she pondered that course of action, Rayna had two surprising realizations. The first was that she really didn't want to lie to the human, even for good purpose, and while she'd encountered old man Janeway, she'd certainly not had congress with him.

The second was far more problematic. During their brief embrace, Rayna had been glaringly aware of Janeway's feelings. Reliving Tau Ceti Prime had flayed the captain's emotional skin. Grief and bitter regret poured from the opened wounds like arterial blood. Anger was a bandage, a means of binding those injuries. Ripping it away would be the worst kind of cruelty, something *Shashuna* would not abide.

So detonation is not an option. You have to disarm the warhead.

Tuvok waited in silence. He was always so patient with her.

Just as well. You're not coming up with any brilliant solutions to this quandary.

Janeway was too fucking smart for her own good, was the crux of the matter. She had to be aware that people were worried for her, and captains hated that shit. They took care of others, not vice versa. Anyone who approached, Rayna included, would only trigger the human's defenses.

There is one exception, you know.

Children were immune from a paragon's ire. They could come and go in all innocence, disarming adults as they passed with a coy wave and a shy smile. And *Voyager* was in possession of just such a guileless imp.

"I have an idea." Rayna scowled up at her friend. A check of the ship's chronometer showed 0520 hours. "What time is Naomi Wildman normally up and about?"

His appraising stare let her know that Tuvok had figured out her plan and approved. Warm twinkles deep within the murk of his eyes offered thanks. They also gave every assurance that he would be questioning her holodeck experience as soon as duty gave him leave.

Rayna extended two fingers toward him. He returned the gesture, saying, "Ki'nam-tor nash-veh heh kwon-sum dungau nam-tor t'hai'la t'du."

I have been and ever shall be, your friend.

"And I yours," she replied, turning her mind to the prospect of spending time with Ms. Wildman. "But you fucking owe me."

Janeway paced the length of her Ready Room with all the pent up energy of a caged lion. The mining operation was behind schedule. Two of the shuttles were down for repairs. Torres had the Engineering section working double shifts to get them back in service. To make matters worse, the deuterium's impurities were chemically more complicated than initial sensor scans indicated. Processing it for use by *Voyager* was consuming double the projected time.

Too slow...just like everything else in the God-forsaken sector of space.

The chime for 0715 sounded. She ordered a fresh cup of coffee. Its nutty smell was invigorating in itself, though the slight tremor in her hands let Janeway know that she was consuming too much.

I wanted to be back underway by now.

Every second's delay left them vulnerable to another psychic incident. Not even Tuvok seemed to recognize the danger. Thus far, only she and Merris had been negatively impacted. Next time it could be different.

There won't be a next time.

At least she hoped there wouldn't. Janeway dragged her fingers over bleary eyes. Sleep had become something foreign, a distant memory that tormented her with promises of black, featureless slumber. It haunted her the way ghosts of Merris' fingertips yet lingered on her neck, wrapped around her hand, resting feather-light upon her waist.

A ruthless shrug of will sent those thoughts fleeing into her mind's shadowed corners. They were weaknesses she could not suffer. Her frustration gave her shelter, like an insurmountable wall.

Not so insurmountable, Katie. The citadel is under siege.

She could feel how close her emotions lay to the surface. Seeing her father...

It was not my father. My father is dead. Death is final.

But these scientific objections paled in the wake of her feelings. Even if her conscious, rational mind could not accept the encounter as real, the pain, guilt and grief that harried the edges of her reason were proof that her heart accepted it without question.

What you said to him...horrible, cruel things. What if it was your father? What if that was the last time you will ever speak to him again?

No. Experience had taught her too well that things were seldom what they seemed.

Why, then, is everyone else so accepting?

Of all the reports filed, none, including Seven's and Naomi's, revealed the least bit of distress. Quite the opposite. The Doctor's initial assessment indicated that the psychological health of the crew had actually improved. They found solace in their meetings with the dead.

Maybe you would too, if you hadn't caused their deaths.

Dad and Justin were the first of many failures. Ten more seconds, and one of them would still be alive, at least. A child could have remained conscious for ten more seconds.

"Forgive me if I don't find your actions worthy of condemnation."

Merris' words came back to her, the one comforting thought amid an endless stream of accusation.

Her door chime sounded.

"Come in," she called. It was either Chakotay or Tuvok. Between the two of them, Janeway was uncertain who was more concerned for her. Each one had suggested she was pushing herself too hard, should rest more, should eat more. She returned to her Ready Room's desk and braced herself for another round.

"Good morning, Captain," the bright voice of Naomi Wildman greeted. She entered with a wide smile, brandishing a covered tray of food. "I brought you breakfast."

Janeway gave what she hoped was a cheerful look in return. "Good morning to you." She had no idea what could have possessed the child to bring her food, but the notion of eating made her stomach cringe into a knot. "I appreciate the thought, but I'm afraid I'm not hungry."

Disappointment made blue eyes darken, and Naomi's features fell. "But Captain," her small voice quavered, "I made it for you."

After opening and closing her mouth twice without speaking, Janeway finally nodded her surrender, and followed her guest to the sitting area. Naomi set the tray down on the coffee table and removed its cover with a flourish. The white plate contained two thin pancakes rolled into bundles and covered with a savory cheese sauce. Spinach leaves garnished the top. "Crepes Florentine?" Janeway inquired, giving Naomi a skeptical look. "Are you sure you made these yourself?"

The child nodded vigorously while twisting one of her fingers. "Yes Captain. Ms. Rayna taught me how."

"She's a member of the crew, Naomi, you should use her rank." Janeway picked up her fork. The food's aroma was wonderful and had unlocked her appetite.

"I know, ma'am, but she says that every time someone calls her 'Crewman Merris' she looks to see who they are talking to."

I can certainly believe that.

"How is she doing?" Janeway's mouth came alive with the flavors of feta cheese and grilled chicken. Mushrooms added their meaty texture, creating a beautifully balanced taste sensation. When was the last time she'd eaten? The recollection did not immediately present itself.

Naomi moved to sit beside her. "She's upset about something," the child imparted, leaning toward Janeway. "Her hands shake when she thinks no one's looking and her face is sad."

Small wonder, all things considered...

The image of Merris' rape rewound and played anew. She didn't want to see it anymore, but her mind would not comply. Only the touch of a small hand on her knee dispelled it.

"Captain?" Naomi's voice was innocently tender. "Did something bad happen?"

Janeway made herself continue to eat, though the meal had lost its flavor. "Something happened," she repeated, preparing to lie, "but it wasn't bad." The smile nearly broke her face, but she smeared it on, all the same. "I think Ms. Rayna is just a little worn out from all the excitement."

The clear blue eyes pierced her in their frank appraisal. Naomi suddenly seemed much older than her years. "You're not fooling me." Small arms snaked around Janeway's shoulders and squeezed.

Tears burned her throat like sulfuric acid. She bore the child's hug for as long as she could, but was forced to gently pull away. It was either that, or start to weep. The grimace masquerading as a grin still bedecked her features, feeling more like a gaping rictus. "I'm fine," she protested. "Really."

Naomi's regard did not waver, not a jot. Nor did she retreat entirely. One hand began to rub Janeway's back.

Her control wavered and Janeway almost lost the battle with her tears. That jarred her into a new level of awareness. She dropped her eyes to the slate colored carpet, but did not really see it.

Truth glared up at her from a blinding epiphany as if someone had taken the world from grayscale to 32bit color. In six years, through all the loss and loneliness, she'd never been this close to crying in front of a crewmember. It was eloquent proof of how near to the edge she was.

You're the one who isn't seeing things clearly.

Whether it was her father or not, reliving the crash had rent the fabric of her emotions, and instead of dealing with the fallout, she'd hidden behind anger and sheltered within work. The way she'd been driving the crew, it was a wonder there hadn't been more breakdowns and accidents.

Chakotay and Tuvok are right. You've been pushing too hard, and Voyager has been paying the price.

With the leeching of her temper, Janeway found herself totally drained. She covered her reaction as best she could by patting Naomi's shoulder, then turned her attention to finishing breakfast. "These were delicious. Thank you for making them, and for looking out for me and Crewman Merris."

"Well, I am the Captain's Assistant." The child glowed with pride. "I'm going to learn how to make Welsh Rarebit later this week." Eager hands gathered up the dishes, and Naomi practically skipped her way out.

Looks like Merris is accessing the replicator records again.

Janeway lacked the wherewithal to even become upset over that. There were more important items to attend. She tapped her comm badge, and summoned Chakotay to her Ready Room.

An hour later, she was leaning against the turbolift's back wall as it carried her to her quarters. The meeting had gone well. In light of the lengthy refinement process, it made sense to slow down mining operations. It would give the crew a chance to breathe.

The doors opened. Ahead, spilling into the corridor, was a rectangle of light. Janeway almost turned around and retreated. Her conscience would not allow her to pass the open doorway without inquiring after Merris, and she knew, without a shadow of doubt that once she was inside, it would prove impossible to leave. She stopped in mid stride.

Stand in the hatchway and ask how she's doing. It's simple enough.

The problem was that part of her wanted to enter. Even worse, part of her wanted to stay. Her body had learned that it could rest here, and she could feel it starting to shut down.

"Captain," Merris' voice startled her.

Janeway looked up to find the bald woman leaning her head out into the hall. *How did she know I was here?* "Hello," she returned. "I was just going check on you."

A pale brow drifted upward. "From the corridor?" Humor played at Merris' shapely mouth. "I take it you planned on using your communicator. Efficient, though..." She disappeared back inside calling over one shoulder, "...it lacks that 'personal touch' don't you think?"

After a handful of seconds, Janeway followed. Merris was waiting for her by the arm chair wearing a freshly pressed, white t-shirt adorned with the Academy logo, and a matching pair of blue sweat pants. There was something unsettled about the willowy Deltan, despite her casual demeanor. "Are you okay?" Janeway studied the woman's face.

A mask of smooth sophistication slipped over Merris' features, but dissolved almost immediately. "Not really," she replied. Ebony eyes turned to meet hers. There were lines of fatigue surrounding them. "You?"

Honesty carried its own peculiar kind of obligation. The lie that had reached the tip of Janeway's tongue lay stillborn. Faced with Merris' admission, she could not bring herself to speak it. She could not even manage to find the words that described her condition. "I don't know."

You sound so pathetic.

She would have withdrawn, then, but Merris crossed the room too quickly. "Why is it you think you must have all the answers?"

"I'm the captain." Janeway tried to muster her command persona. "It comes with the territory."

Her hostess moved behind her and keyed shut the hatchway. "Let's pretend for a little while, that you aren't the captain."

"Easier said than done," Janeway commented dryly. No one seemed to understand how unique *Voyager's* situation was.

For her part, Merris sounded singularly unimpressed. "Do you make what's-his-name use your rank? Michael is it?"

Janeway's eyes narrowed. She spun on heel to face the other woman. "I believe I've made it clear that my private life is not a topic for discussion." Her face burned with a combination of outrage and embarrassment.

"Come now. It's just sex. Why are you so touchy about it?" The black eyes were gently serious, a stark contrast to the humor just displayed. "Tell me. Please," she added, laying a hand on Janeway's elbow.

After being lost among the phantoms of her past, the nightmares of her present, and the dismal promise of a barren future, Janeway found herself defenseless. A wave of dizziness assailed her. She brought a hand to her forehead, and felt herself sway. Merris lost no time in guiding her to the room's plush sofa.

Pull yourself together.

"I don't do this." Janeway sank onto its cushions wearily. Every muscle in her body ached. "I don't display weakness in front of others."

"Neither do I." Her companion departed long enough to replicate a glass of something that glowed a vibrant pink, then returned, offering it to Janeway. "That person who soaked your uniform on the holodeck, that was someone else." Merris leaned down and made a show of examining Janeway's shoulder. "Did you develop any mold or fungus from the excessive moisture?"

"No." Janeway had to smile. "You have the uncanny ability to put me at my ease," she observed cagily, taking a sip of the odd looking beverage. The taste was a fruity, kind of a cross between bananas and pomegranates. It tickled her throat in a non-alcoholic way. "This is good."

"Andorian Komila juice." Merris held up one of her own. "It's supposed to be soothing." The graceful woman settled in the room's arm chair and curled her legs beneath her.

For a long time, they sat in silence. Janeway studied her glass. In ancient days, humans read tea leaves and augered the future in pools of black water. Pink liquid, she discovered, provided no window into tomorrow. "Do you remember what you said about captains needing a harbor?"

Now the dark eyes twinkled ironic mischief. "Of course, I was there when I said it."

"I think I'm looking for one of those," she confessed softly. "God knows I need one." The urge to leave slammed into her once more, full force.

"Are you crack-brained?" Merris' dulcet tone was supremely neutral, as if inquiring after the status of Deck Seven's plasma conduits. "Of course you need one." Her words disarmed the impulse to flee as neatly as wire snips on bits of copper. "Everyone does."

Finally Janeway was able to give voice to the fears she carried where Michael was concerned, "I think I could fall in love with him." She sat the empty glass aside, no longer able to look at Merris.

"I'm sure you will love him, for a while, but it won't last."

Janeway considered the words, but could not accept them. "He's everything I want in a partner, witty, kind, competitive..."

Her empty glass was collected. Merris padded her way, barefoot, Janeway noticed, to the replicator. She turned to face the sofa and smiled, in a sad sort of way. "We are not hardwired for perfection, Captain. It is in our nature to seek our dreams, but to never be satisfied if they come to fruition. Strange as it may seem, what we want is seldom what we need, and sooner or later, we grow tired of the fantasy."

I want to believe that. Janeway felt an instant of desperate hope. "How can you be so sure?" she asked.

"Because I've been the fantasy."

The answer surprised her, in its content, and the matter-of-fact manner in which it was delivered. Merris said it so flatly, without fanfare, or emotion.

Thinking about their past encounters, the easy way Merris could make her laugh, her subtle methods of persuasion, the lightning sweep of her thoughts, Janeway gave the only reply she could, "I can't imagine anyone getting tired of you."

It was the simple truth, a precedent set at the beginning of this conversation.

"You *are* exhausted." Her hostess left the room and emerged moments later with a blanket and pillow. "Would you like to rest on my couch?"

Weariness had long since settled on her shoulders, and Janeway was unable to refuse the shelter being offered. "It seems to be the only place I can sleep," she admitted reluctantly.

Merris flopped the white pillow down on the far end of the sofa's cushions. Her dark gaze intersected Janeway's. "And yet you stay away."

"I don't want to become dependent." Janeway began to unzip her tunic. When it fell from her shoulders, it felt as though a thousand kilos had been shed.

The grin on Merris' face was positively wicked. "Mmm. No doubt being sleep deprived is a much more rational option."

She's got a point.

There were reasons for her absence, but none of them came to mind. Something to do with propriety...they seemed paltry, right now. Janeway bent to remove her boots, only to find Merris already doing so. Before she knew what was happening, her fingertips were brushing over the Deltan's scalp.

So smooth...

Merris froze. Her black eyes flitted up to meet Janeway's. Heartbeats multiplied.

What are you doing?

"I'm sorry." Janeway hastily removed her hand. "I don't know why I did that."

"Oh pish-tosh," the other woman chided. Her expression was slightly confused, but not displeased. She reached up and pushed against Janeway's shoulders. "Lie down."

You should go.

The captain inside her was irate. Regulations were quoted ad nauseum, and Janeway knew she should take heed. Instead, her eyes closed, and she reclined into the pillow's downy softness. For a little while, she could pretend to be human. She was so weary of being "Captain." The blanket snuggled around her and the last sensation to reach her consciousness was of someone stroking through her hair.

Rayna curled up in the arm chair and dozed, on and off, for the next few hours. Her dreams were still swirling cesspools of brutality that sucked her down. Three times she awoke gasping for air. On the last it was to find the steely gaze of Captain Janeway upon her. Pinpoints of concern illuminated the layers of starship gray, and the atmosphere of her quarters was colored by that emotion.

With a low growl of exasperation, Rayna unfolded herself from the chair. "What time is it?" She didn't much care who answered, the computer or the captain.

It was Janeway. "About 1445 hours. I just checked a second ago." The human's voice was still husky from slumber.

Rayna's head and back were cool with perspiration as she exited the chair. "No, I am still not speaking to my dreams. In fact, I'm going to sue for divorce." There was little point in attempting to play it off. She crossed unsteadily to the replicator and requested two cups of coffee. One was handed to her guest. The other she kept and carried over to the window.

The huge crimson star still pulsed malignantly. Rayna found she rather liked it. Having something on the outside resemble how she felt on the inside lent the universe a perverse sort of symmetry.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No need." Rayna transferred her attention to the drab little rock of a planet below *Voyager's* orbit. "You got to see it in living color on the holodeck, and they say a picture is worth a thousand words."

There was a moment's pause. Just before Janeway spoke, the fragrance of her sympathy drifted sweetly by. "I'm so sorry," the captain's tone was somber, almost tender, even.

She shrugged, still focused on the view. "Whatever for?" With one finger she traced random shapes across the transparent aluminum. "You didn't do it."

That particular answer obviously perplexed Janeway. A vague sort of displeasure emanated her, and Rayna heard movement foretelling the captain's approach.

Cooler hands grasped her wrist and turned it over, exposing the angry-looking scar. "No one should be driven to this point, where death becomes more attractive than life," she observed softly. "I'm sorry that you were." The elegant woman's face was drawn with sadness.

That poignant emotion seeped like rain water through the cracks in Rayna's armor moving her in ways she could not name. A part of her soul she thought dead and long buried shuddered into wakefulness. With it came the unwelcome feeling of being laid bare to another's perception. She'd been naked many times, but never like this.

It seemed that Janeway was not immune to the moment, either. The cast of her emotions shifted infinitesimally toward ruddy hues of attraction. One thumb rubbed lightly atop Rayna's scar, but she was confident that the captain was totally unaware of the gesture. Indeed, Janeway's eyes had become slightly unfocused, looking inward.

Unconsciously meant or not, sweet sensation skimmed across her nerve endings, and Rayna reacted quickly to gain the upper hand on it. The human woman was emotionally vulnerable, right now. Taking advantage of that would be wrong.

True, and if you look up the definition of "less sexually mature," you will find a picture of this woman next to it. She can't even talk about sex without embarrassment.

"What are you thinking about?" Rayna asked, covering the captain's hand to still it.

"My father." It was Janeway's turn to move away. Slender arms folded over her chest, and the captain bowed her head. "Did you know him?"

That made Rayna chuckle softly. Questioning grey eyes shot up to meet hers. "He demoted me," she explained. "Irony, is it not?"

The humor of it was not lost on her companion, and one corner of Janeway's lips curved upward. It faded quickly. Once more her emotions edged toward blue.

...like the music played on Andor so sad your heart swells to bursting with unshed tears...

Rayna blinked to clear her mind. "You are remembering the accident." She felt, rather than saw the human's sharp glance. Her steps were already carrying her toward the replicator. Without looking back, she said, "What else could make you so melancholy?"

A flash of frustration told her that Janeway was likely cursing the existence of empaths, at least internally. Rayna recycled her coffee and mug. "Why is it you wish you had died there?" Though spoken in an off-hand manner, she listened closely enough to hear the captain's sharp inhalation of breath. Apparently Janeway had forgotten that she'd uttered that wish on the holodeck. "Because you didn't save them?"

Do not see her. This will be hard enough without the pressure of your regard.

She began to program changes into the "Tellarite Greens and Vinaigrette" subroutine.

"Yes," came the whispered reply.

"Orions and Deltans have precious few beliefs in common." Her fingers drifted lazily over the console entering commands she'd memorized while working for Thaddeus Yule. "One is that the date of your death is preset. It is an appointment to which you cannot be late, and for which no substitution can be made."

Janeway moved nearer. "I remember you saying something like that to Mallory." She could practically feel the frown in her voice. "I don't believe in destiny."

"I tried not believing in gravity once, on Jupiter," Rayna shot her rejoinder in between program lines. "It didn't work out well for me, but I do wish you good fortune in your efforts."

Her reward was an involuntary breath of laughter.

Rayna pressed the momentary advantage. "Setting aside the possibility that it was simply their time to die, what more could you have done?" She'd forgotten how many steps there were to adding the subtle flavor of beetle exoskeletons to this particular food item. But since you couldn't harvest a single leaf without some remnants, it was essential if the flavor was to be authentic.

It took countless seconds for Janeway to reply, and when she did, her voice held a tremor. "I could have finished the transport. If I had just held on a little longer..."

"With your injuries?" It was important that Janeway confront them, not discount them.

As the human crept nearer, Rayna had to force herself to keep her eyes averted.

"What difference - I - They weren't that bad." Self-loathing crept over the captain, like a putrescent disease that gnawed away at her confidence.

"Really?" Feigned disinterest filled Rayna's demeanor, from her toes to fingertips. "When I looked up the official reports last night, they said something about emergency surgery. Seems like overkill if your injuries were minor. I wonder. Would you court-martial one of your crew for passing out under those circumstances?"

She heard Janeway's teeth grind together. "Of course not, but-"

"So you have one set of standards for ordinary people and another, higher set for yourself." Rayna was not about to give quarter here. Though she still faced the replicator, her hands had long since ceased to program. All her senses were attuned to the woman behind her. "Or is it that you think the rules don't apply to you? The universe has an exemption clause written in with your name on it where shock, blood loss, and exposure are concerned? Are you truly so arrogant?"

Janeway's emotions seemed to decompress. The sudden release was almost physical, and Rayna heard the woman gasp. Footsteps retreated and the cushions of her arm chair sighed beneath the captain's weight. "Touché," she muttered.

Now, you may face her.

She saved the incomplete subroutine and ordered up two mugs of soup, tomato, if she recalled the Terran term correctly. It was a perfect cross between something to eat and something to drink. Right now, Rayna doubted either of their digestive tracts was ready for anything too substantive. Hers was certainly in an uproar given their delicate verbal joust-session. Things like this used to be more fun.

That was when you didn't care about the outcome. In her case, you want to make things better.

An inconvenient truth...

Rayna found herself an object of intense study as she carried over lunch. The captain's blue-grey eyes were filled with curiosity, and perhaps a hint of grudging admiration. "How do you turn things around on me so adroitly?" she asked, and accepted the soup with a nod of thanks.

"This is my game, Captain." Rayna took a seat at the sofa's edge. "I've been controlling conversations for decades. If you want to have a chance, you need to be at your top of your game

which, currently, you are not."

"Neither are you," Janeway observed. "Tell me something," she said between sips her manner deeply serious. "Do you wish you'd succeeded?"

There was no question what she meant. Rayna pondered her answer carefully, and elected to be forthright. "Most of me is dead already. So, it really doesn't matter."

The captain abruptly stood and moved to sit next to Rayna. "I refuse to accept that answer." Her emotions had become an effulgent sun, radiating compassion and determination so bright they blinded.

Rayna fled the couch, returning to the window post haste. Distance was the only remedy when someone's feelings reached critical mass unexpectedly. "You really are stupidly noble," she groused. "I was hoping it was just a front." Cutting her eyes back toward her troublesome guest, she fired off a disgruntled question, "Are you trying to be my Counselor, now?"

Janeway's pale eyes bored into her with disconcerting intensity. "I don't think you need a Counselor." There was a depth of kindness to her words that eased around Rayna in a cozy blanket. "I think you need a friend."

Friend? Rayna wished she had not ventured so far from the sitting area. *Why in Sul's name would this woman make such an offer?* Astonishment left her completely discombobulated. "Are you applying for the job?" she stammered out.

"If you think I'm qualified." The lopsided grin on Janeway's face betrayed how well she could read Rayna's reaction, and how satisfied she was at having caused it.

Rayna eyed her opponent with new-found respect. It wasn't often that anyone one-upped her in the course of an encounter. "You'll find I'm a difficult friend to have."

"That's usually my line." Twinkles of affection and amusement set the gray eyes alight. "After the Borg, the Hirogen, and the Kazon, I think I'm up to it."

It's your move, now, Ray-Ray.

She was worldly enough to know when someone was using psychology against her. Janeway had dropped a challenge right in her lap, hoping that it would be too tempting to resist. And it was. "Then you may call me Rayna when we are in private." She approached the other woman carefully, and extended her hand.

The captain stood. Long, cool fingers wrapped around hers and squeezed firmly. Janeway was exceedingly pleased about something, whether it was with Rayna's reply or with herself, she could not tell. Still, the smile that brightened her austere countenance seemed genuine enough. "It's Kathryn," she offered. "Same conditions."

Not to be out done, Rayna held onto the shapely hand for several seconds longer than necessary and needled, "Since we're friends, you'll have no compunction about spending the night here on occasion, so you get adequate sleep. Right?"

Some of Janeway's self-satisfied pleasure evaporated, and her face registered that the stakes had just been raised.

Rayna merely arched both eyebrows and fired off a smug little grin of her own.

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