

~ Into the Fire ~

by Trekgrrl

Content Warning:

This story depicts an armed conflict. There is an interrogation scene wherein torture is used for the purpose extracting information from a hostage. It is not gratuitous, but it exists.

Notes:

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. There are many bits and pieces of Treknology in this segment. I haven't cited my sources, but if anyone wants to know them, email me and I will happily provide them.

Translations of Klingon curses can be found at Voragh's website:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8853/curse.html>

The Vaadwaur aren't mine either, not that I would want them, but nonetheless, they aren't mine.

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.

Rayna Merris is an original character.

This story is fourth in an arc of stories centering on Janeway and an original character. If you're expecting an immediate hop into bed between two women, this is not the story for you. 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 "Equinox" and "Dragon's Teeth," and makes references to those episodes.

Constructive criticism and good wishes can be sent to:

trekgrrl@hush.ai

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. I don't think there is a way to exaggerate how indebted to her I am.

Thank you to RJNolan and Littlepit for their insights and constructive suggestions. They helped make this a better story.

Thank you also to the fans who have been waiting for another episode. A special nod to the one who has held her breath until she turned purple. You get my medal for sacrifice above and beyond.

"Kathryn." Rayna Merris gently tapped the slumbering woman on the shoulder.

Smoke grey eyes opened blearily, blinked, then focused on hers. "What time is it?" The sands of sleep lingered in her voice.

"0600 hours."

Janeway nodded, shifting to lie on her back. Red hair cascaded around her face like threads of fire. It stood out in sharp contrast against the pillow's white fabric. Long-fingered hands scrubbed over her face, but she made no effort to rise.

Considering she collapsed on the sofa just after three this morning, it is no wonder.

For two weeks, Voyager had been slogging its way through the blast ring of an exploded star. This entire sector was saturated with synchrotron radiation...whatever that was. Rayna neither knew nor cared. Particle physics had bored her to tears during her Academy days, but from snippets of conversation she'd overheard in the Mess Hall, supernovas apparently generated gamma rays the likes of which the Maker, Himself, could not envision. The next parsec was flooded with them. Radiation levels were appallingly high causing health concerns and sensor interference. As a result, everyone had been given inoculations, shields were on maximum, and the vessel was quite blind.

Janeway, Chakotay, and Tuvok and been all but living on the Bridge. She'd seen her old friend only twice, and the other two not at all...

...until last night, when the captain had shown up at her door. Rayna didn't even let Janeway finish a softly mumbled apology before tucking her on the couch. Waking the woman after so short a time went against the unnerving strain of protectiveness that had bloomed in Rayna's hearts where her guest was concerned, but trust was a fragile thing. If Janeway were to be comfortable, she must be assured that Rayna would guard her position as captain. That meant rousing her on time.

Why is it important that she trust you?

Rayna could not say, and refused to be troubled by it. Feelings were, by nature, irrational; looking for reason where logic held no sway was a fruitless enterprise.

"Coffee's on the table," Rayna said softly, placing the beverage down.

Janeway covered her eyes with an arm, but otherwise did not move.

She needs a few more hours.

Suggesting that would be equally useless, so Rayna did not waste her breath. Instead she moved toward the replicator and asked, "Breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry." Came the weary reply. A crooked smile filled with self-deprecation blew over Janeway's face, and quickly vanished. "Just give me a minute."

"A whole minute?" Rayna flashed her guest a wicked grin that went unnoticed. "I have a waiting list for the use of my sofa. Since you're the captain, allowances can be made, of course, but oh the inconvenience."

The statement earned her a sardonic glower. "I've got to get to the Bridge."

Rayna returned the glare with her best sugary smile. "Of course you do. Sensors gain an additional two million kilometers when the captain is glaring at the viewscreen."

A whispered giggle burst from Janeway's lips, and the grey eyes lightened imperceptibly. The joy quickly faded in the wake of so much reality, and the human's face became somber once more. "Why do I always end up here?" she asked idly. Confusion drifted by on the air currents.

"To be is to be somewhere." Rayna crossed the room to stand near her friend. Friend...the word still felt strange to her. She brushed aside the sentiment. "Unless you're an extra-dimensional entity, but I'm certain that it must get vexing after awhile, being everywhere and nowhere all at the same time."

The captain's gaze became warmer, and Rayna found it difficult to bear. So too was the wave of affection that bathed her in disquieting contentment. Clearly she was becoming too attached to this woman, and that promised nothing but trouble.

Kathryn's husky alto compelled her attention. "What time do you go on duty?"

"Not until 1100 hours. Neelix took the breakfast shift." Was it possible that this obsessively driven woman was contemplating an extension? Rayna caught the glimmers of doubt behind the gray curtain of fatigue.

"Would you mind..." Suddenly Kathryn seemed uncertain of herself. "Would it be all right if I imposed a little longer?"

Rayna grinned down at the woman indulgently. "For someone who is so obviously intelligent, you are such an idiot." She reached down and pulled the blanket up beneath the captain's chin. "I'll wake you at ten."

It was nearly 1045 hours when Janeway ascended the Bridge. Her first order of business was to dismiss Chakotay, despite his protestations. The poor man looked dead on his feet. Afterward she made her way to each station, taking the psychological pulse of her crew.

Tom Paris had a shadow of stubble marring the square plane of his jaw line. There were bags beneath his watery blue eyes. "Captain," he greeted, apparently reading her intention. "I go off duty at 1500. I'm good until then."

She held his gaze for a moment, but the light of concentration in his eyes seemed steady. "All right, Lieutenant," Janeway agreed, "but not one minute past that time."

"Aye, ma'am."

Ensign Kim, she learned, was ordered to his quarters an hour ago. The crewmember subbing for him was a fellow named Hickman. He was normally assigned to Astrophysics.

That left Tuvok as the only other regular from Alpha shift still on duty. Janeway made her way to his station.

"How are you?" she asked quietly, briefly touching his sleeve.

"Well. I took my rest 49.3 hours ago."

Of them all, he was the most unaffected by the grueling schedule. His face was a little drawn, but otherwise, he seemed impervious to fatigue. There were times when she envied the Vulcan constitution.

"And you, Captain?" Deep brown eyes studied hers before returning to his sensor readout. Like her, Tuvok had adopted a hushed tone, something reserved for personal conversations and designed to protect their privacy.

"I'm fine," she assured him, an instinctive response, and quickly followed up with, "Really. I racked out for a few hours." Discussing personal business on the Bridge was not her first choice of activities, but sometimes it was the only opportunity anyone had.

He gave her a friendly glance. "That was sensible." There was a knowing flicker behind the darkness of his eyes.

Right. So he knows where you were sleeping. Probably everyone else on board does as well.

Janeway studied the viewscreen. It displayed nothing but interstellar murk. A few stars managed to pierce the dismal fog, but that was all. "I see we're still as blind as a Covian bat," she pronounced, her mind preoccupied. She truly hated Voyager's grapevine. Paris and Kim routinely crashed in one another's cabins, and it wasn't even discussed. As captain, everything she did was put under a molecular scanner.

"Indeed." Tuvok's expression did not alter...and yet...did somehow. "Your presence on the Bridge has not extended sensor range."

His comment caused her give him a sharp glance. "Excuse me?"

"It is a common myth among captains, according to Rayna."

"I see she wasted no time in contacting you." Janeway's thoughts had turned stormy. It hadn't occurred to her that Merris would carry tales, even to Tuvok.

Black brows lowered slightly. "We spoke briefly three days ago, Captain. She inquired after you, and upon learning that you were still on the Bridge, indicated that you might be operating under that particular misconception."

Janeway blew a sigh. She was prickly as a porcupine when it came to that woman and could not for her life think why. "Merris said something like that to me, this morning."

He nodded. "I see. You were concerned that she spoke about the content of your conversation, a natural reaction." His fingers made precision adjustments to Voyager's scanners. "Please be assured that Rayna's discretion can be counted on."

That was high praise coming from Tuvok. Janeway absorbed the reassurance, and found herself suddenly curious. "She talks about me? What did she say?"

Suave, Katie. You sound like a high school student trying to pass a note in study hall.

Luckily Tuvok's telepathy was not sufficiently strong to penetrate her consciousness without physical contact. He made a notation in his log before answering. "Only that you and she were friends." His eyes skittered over to meet hers. "It is not a title she bestows lightly."

Their conversation was prematurely derailed when the sensor panel suddenly came alive. Off-key alarms announced that something unusual had been encountered.

Janeway headed for the command chair. "Report," she demanded as she strode.

"We are picking up an automated distress signal, Captain." Tuvok's voice was as unperturbed as ever. "It appears to be Talaxian in origin."

Talaxian?

Neelix's people had been defeated by the Haakonian Order, but many had fled to the stars in search of a new home. Janeway frowned as she thought. It was possible that one of them had become sucked into the Dead Zone, just as they had.

"Can you bring it on screen?" She already knew it was doubtful.

Tuvok confirmed her suspicions. "Negative. There is too much radiogenic interference."

"Distance?"

"Point zero, zero three nine light years."

About two hours at warp three. Her mind completed a rough set of calculations in an instant. "Set a course," she instructed.

Paris acknowledged her command, his graceful fingers already flying over Voyager's controls.

"Shall I contact Mr. Neelix or Commander Chakotay?" Tuvok asked.

"No." Janeway turned her head to look at him. "There's no way to tell how old it is or if anyone is still alive." She saw no point in raising Neelix's hopes, and Chakotay had just turned in. "We'll call them if this pans out."

Settling back into the cushions, she tried to force her mind to focus on business. It proved to be a difficult task. During the last few days, thoughts of Rayna had intruded on her often. She could dismiss them after a fashion, but they inevitably returned, sneaking up on her consciousness. Without warning, she would be overwhelmed by flashes of memory.

Like the warmth of her arms on the holodeck...

Though the embrace had begun as an act of comfort, before it ended, Janeway could not rightly say who was comforting whom. It hadn't impacted her then, but as days passed, the remembered sensations crept to the forefront of her awareness.

...the slender strength of her body...

Like now. Try as she might, Janeway could not stem the flow of distraction.

...her velvety cheek nestled against your neck...

She had forgotten how good it felt to be held, and now that the need had been awakened, yearned to feel it once more.

Maybe you've just been alone too long.

Maybe, and if that was the price for getting her crew home, so be it. Her decision had stranded them in the Delta Quadrant. Solitude was a paltry sacrifice in comparison.

"You always did pick the hardest path."

She frowned at that, because it had been said in her father's voice. Memories of him occurred with less frequency than those of Rayna, but it seemed that his ghost still haunted the mansions of her mind. At least this one wasn't a holographic illusion.

What makes you so sure the last one was?

No. This was not a road she wished to travel. For the ten thousandth time, Janeway thrust the topic of her father aside. It was something she needed to deal with, but not now.

Her inward gaze moved to the viewscreen once more. It hadn't changed a jot. All the micropulverized debris reminded her of the old stories of dust storms in the Plains.

So much for gaining another couple million kilometers...

Rayna got to the Mess Hall on time and within two hours was assigned to lunch delivery. As had been the case for the last several days, the on-duty crew could not break for chow. She and Neelix carried the meals to them. It turned out to be an excellent way to see all areas of the ship.

The 'lift doors closed and she requested her destination of Voyager's computer. Deck 15 was her last stop. It was a cramped area with industrial lighting, a dreary departure from the glistening world above, but one that evoked pleasant memories for Rayna. Her uncle had owned a small fleet of Orion "freighters," a label which was more generous than "pirate ships," but less accurate. They were small, swift of engine, and equipped with cloaking devices the Romulans would have envied. What interior space remained was given to cargo bays and hidden compartments. Hallways and cabins were crammed together leaving little room to breathe.

Voyager's lower decks were much the same, tight and twisting like a bowl of pasta. Plasma relays provided a constant hum of power. The bulkheads vibrated a little more strongly because of it. There, Voyager's heartbeat pounded to an anti-matter rhythm and sang of dilithium dreams. Something about it quieted the restlessness of her spirit, much like being with Kathryn.

The ride down ended, thankfully. Rayna was thoroughly sick of thinking about the captain.

Turbolift doors opened to chaotic activity and showers of golden sparks.

"Dalby!"

The unmistakable voice of B'Elanna Torres sounded from somewhere to the starboard. Rayna glanced outside to clear her path before rolling the cart of food trays out. She guided them to one side of the corridor and parked. A sharp popping from above her head preceded fresh fireworks, and Rayna ducked downward to avoid being caught in them.

Looks like First Contact Day.

Her mind briefly recalled the colorful displays over the San Francisco Bay. They'd even fabricated the Vulcan hand salute in a brilliant barrage of yellow and white.

"Get this pile of *forshak* out of my way," Lieutenant Torres growled. The half-Klingon gave the cart a shove, sending it careening back toward the turbolift doors. She had a repair kit hung over one shoulder and tools sticking out of her tunic pocket.

Rayna yielded ground. Obviously now was a bad time for meal delivery. In her effort to move aside, she almost collided with a tallish crewman. His brown hair was cropped short and the line of it foretold of baldness sure to follow. Similarly dark eyes raked over her face in an angry glance. "Do you mind?" he hissed. "I'm trying to assist the Lieutenant."

If you keep at it, you are bound to succeed sooner or later.

She'd once owned a broken chronometer. The time was perpetually frozen on 0239 hours, but it still managed to be right once a day. Up until her latest assignment, she'd kept it as a lesson in humility.

This human radiated hostility as he brushed past, and she heard him whisper, "buddy fucker," under his breath. It was an old naval term, a survivor from the days when vessels like this rode waves not stellar winds, and it referred to someone who betrayed a shipmate.

Ah.

Neelix had reluctantly admitted that some crewmen harbored a grudge where Ayala was concerned. They either thought she'd caused his aberrant behavior, or that she'd been over-quick to kill him...or both. Regardless, there was a powerful undercurrent of resentment, especially among the former Maquis.

Rayna pushed her cart to port, that seeming the less active direction. At the very least, no incandescent pops of electricity crackled along the conduits. Two crewmen were normally stationed at the plasma relay. One had his back to her. The other she recognized.

Noah Lessing was a gentle sort of man. His skin was medium complexioned, rather like Tuvok's. He had short, close-cropped hair and was clean-shaven. "Hi, Cooky," he greeted, and nodded toward the cart of food. "What is it this time?"

"Critter fritters and bug juice," Rayna returned, just as she had yesterday.

Lessing was one of the only crewmen who went out of his way to engage her in conversation. She'd learned over time that he and a few others on Voyager had come from a Federation starship called the *Equinox*. Encountering other 'fleet members should have been an occasion for joy. Instead, Neelix related a tale of genocide, betrayal, and destruction.

"Figures." The slender black man came over to get his meal.

Behind him was a Bajoran male. His young-looking eyes locked onto hers with the force of a tractor beam. There was no avoiding him this time.

Piss.

She'd quite forgotten about Crewman Gerron Jin. His bent was not only to talk to her, but corner

her for a lengthy interrogation. Rayna had been ducking him for days. Running away from problems was always the easiest solution...until they caught up with you, cornered you, or confronted you...the three "c's" were deadly.

"I know you," the boy said without preamble. Conviction, almost defiant in its intensity, seeped from him to wash over her empathic senses. His ebony eyes glittered icily like chunks of basalt beneath binary stars.

"You think you do." Rayna pulled out a tray and held it out for him.

He made no effort to take it. From the smoothness of his facial skin and the lack of depth to his nostril ridges, Rayna figured Geron's age to be about twenty-two or twenty-three. Counting her time in hibernation, it had been more than twelve years since she'd worked the Cardassian theater. He would have been a child.

Footsteps behind her preceded the scent of Torres' frustration. Rayna blinked as the turbulent emotion whipped past her with gale force.

"Is there a problem here?" The Chief's terse demand echoed off the metal bulkheads.

"No ma'am," Rayna answered and thrust Geron's tray at him.

He took it, eyes still boring into hers.

"What about it Geron?" It seemed that Torres was not satisfied. The Klingon bulled her way over and confronted him.

Geron dropped his eyes and clammed up. In that instant, Rayna saw a vulnerable shyness about him; it was both innocent and familiar. The memory of a small boy, bleeding from his nose and mouth flickered across her mind's eye.

"Leave him be." The words escaped Rayna's lips before she could check the impulse.

Nothing for it now.

For good measure she added, "I can see which side of your parentage you favor." Most hybrids were sensitive when it came to their breeding. That kind of vulnerability could be easily exploited.

It worked all too well. Torres' furious countenance turned toward her. "What did you say?" she growled. Small hands bunched into fists and fury rendered the Chief's features into a savage mask.

Bull's eye. You are Brig bound, Ray-Ray.

However, she didn't have to go there by herself. "Why should I repeat myself for a worthless

taHqeq?" It was the worst of all Klingon insults, and to properly bring it home, Rayna accompanied it with a disdainful sneer.

Torres froze for the barest instant. The next, she was lunging forward, and Rayna was forced to twist out of the way. Air displaced by Torres' fist brushed past Rayna's jaw.

Oh, she's fast....The Brig may well be the least of your worries.

There was a dull thud as Geron heaved his tray aside. Both he and Lessing converged on the raging Klingon before she could strike again. They struggled to restrain her.

Torres responded with a battle cry worthy of Kahless, himself. Rayna soon gained a healthy respect for the engineer's knowledge of curses. She was highly skilled, taking in both Deltans and Orions in equal measure and including both sets of grandparents, all the aunts and uncles, plus several non-existent siblings.

It all came to a sudden stop as the klaxon sounded.

"Red Alert," Janeway ordered. Voyager's lighting dimmed and pulsing lines of red illuminated the surrounding walls. Instrument panels stood out more sharply amid the gloom, making them easier to read.

They'd dropped out of warp only moments before and opened a hailing frequency to the Talaxian vessel. There had been no answer. Without warning, a swarm of small ships emerged from the radiogenic fog, weapons charged and locked.

Paris was already initiating evasive maneuvers. She felt the pitch and yaw of Voyager sharply change. Inertial dampers kicked in to compensate.

"Who the hell are they?" she demanded.

"I am reading Vaadwaur signatures, Captain," reported Commander Tuvok. "Seventeen total ships." There was a brief pause, then, "They are breaking into three distinct attack groups, firing particle cannons."

Vaadwaur?

"Phasers," she ordered. Her hands gripped the command chair's arms more tightly. It had been no more than three months since they'd encountered that species, or what was left of it. Once proud conquerors, the Vaadwaur used a series of intricate subspace corridors to ambush unsuspecting planets. They'd been defeated by a coalition of alien governments. Only about six hundred of that war-like race remained, preserved in bio-pods beneath their homeworld's surface.

Until we woke them up.

Tremors shook the Bridge.

"This is Chakotay." Her communicator crackled to life. "I'm on my way."

"Shields at ninety-one percent," Tuvok reported coolly. "We have destroyed two of the fighters and disabled three more."

"Tom." Her urgent prompting was unnecessary. She could see how fast his fingers glided over the controls.

Once more Voyager trembled.

"They are targeting our engines and weapons systems," Ensign Hickman called out from Ops.

Another strike caused one of the plasma relays to overload and white-hot electricity rained down.

Lt. Paris shouted over the hissing, "Direct hit. We're losing impulse engines."

The turbolift doors schnicked open and her first officer staggered toward his chair.

Janeway spared him a glance and aimed her next directive at Engineering. "Reroute emergency power."

"Aye, Captain," a cool voice responded.

It wasn't Torres, but Janeway had no time to investigate the Chief's whereabouts.

Information continued to pour in from Tactical. "Two more Vaadwar vessels have been destroyed."

"Vaadwaur?" Chakotay sounded as mystified as she felt. He called up the command console.

The staccato impacts of particle cannons tap danced over Voyager's shields with alarming regularity. Janeway digested the sounds; a glance at the readout near her chair confirmed her fears. "They're firing in successive bursts. Each strike progressively drains the shields."

"Confirmed," Tuvok answered. "All attacks are focused on shield grids 3, 12 and 13."

Bridge, weapons control, and Engineering...

Another violent impact rattled the bulkheads. Janeway heard a metallic hiss followed by a harsh crackle of energy. Tuvok's cry of pain set her into motion toward his station. Chakotay followed. Plasma fire wicked up from the array of instruments. Her friend was down. She could see that his face and right arm were badly burned. Blood dripped from his forehead.

"Medical team report to the Bridge." Janeway checked Tuvok's pulse, relieved to find it strong

and steady.

"We're losing aft shields." Tom's warning was an instant too late. An explosion from the stern sent Voyager careening to port. Both she and Chakotay went flying. Janeway was tossed against Tuvok's station. She bit off a scream as tendrils of fire scorched through the back of her uniform, crisping the flesh beneath. Hickman pulled her free.

"Boarding clamps are being deployed," Tom's voice was distant, distorted by the malevolent hiss of flame.

Of all races, the Vaadwar must not get hold of Voyager's technology.

She heard a magnetic hum from overhead; the ship shuddered as contact was made.

"Janeway to Computer. Initiate self-destruct sequence. Authorization: Janeway pi-one-one-zero."

"Acknowledged."

Thank God it was still working.

"Self-destruct sequence requires secondary authorization from one of the following personnel: First Officer, Security Chief, or Chief Engineer." The computer continued the standard protocol.

Only Chakotay did not answer.

Janeway twisted about, pushing away from Hickman, and finally found her first officer. He was unconscious, trapped beneath a collapsed section of decking.

The ablative armor of Voyager's hull started to whine. She slapped her communicator. "This is the Captain. We are being boarded by the Vaadwaur. You are authorized to use any necessary force to repel them."

Ensign Hickman deserted her long enough to access the small weapon's locker located near the turbolift.

"They're coming directly to the Bridge," Tom announced. "I show additional intruders on Decks 12 and 13."

"Here," Hickman shouted, and tossed the helmsman a hand phaser. Another was given to Janeway.

She checked it out of habit.

Full charge...good.

A circular pattern opened in the ceiling just above the command chairs. Hulking shadows in

brown battle armor descended. Targeting scopes illuminated the eye pieces of their helmets with a baleful red glow. They carried ion pulse blasters, huge cylindrical rifles that combined particles with light. Green jets of energy shot past Janeway, striking Hickman full in the chest. He collapsed without making a sound.

Janeway returned fire, but her beam merely crackled along the armor's surface. The soldier she'd targeted took aim at her and fired. Something hot and sharp struck her in the shoulder. She bit back a scream.

"There are too many!" Tom was hunkered down near the conn, trying to lay down suppressive fire.

They were losing the Bridge.

Lock out non-Starfleet personnel.

It was the only option left.

"Computer." Janeway fell to one knee as her vision swam. Why was she so weak? The wounds on her back didn't feel that bad. "Initiate security lock out. Authorization..." They marched on her position, rifles ready, but did not shoot. She couldn't raise her arm. The phaser just hung there, limp and useless. "Janeway phi-zero-zero-six. Ignore all commands fr-"

One of the men brought the butt of his weapon crashing down on her temple, sending her into darkness before she could finish.

"Engineering, report!" B'Elanna Torres heaved aside a torn piece of plating.

Half the corridor on Deck 15 had collapsed. There was no getting to the turbolift.

"Sensor readings show at least four hull breaches." Ensign Dalby called from in front of one of the consoles. We've got intruders on the Bridge, Decks 5, 12, and 13." His features were taut with tension. "There's no answer from the Bridge."

"Lt. Vorik, here." Her badge squawked to life. She heard stress underlying the Vulcan's normally placid tones. That was bad. "We were forced to disengage the warp drive." The hiss of ruptured plasma relays made for ominous background noise. "Impulse engines are down, and the ship is adrift. We have port thrusters only." She heard him tapping a touch screen. "Life support is marginal, but still functioning on all decks. Transporters are inoperative."

A light touch on her elbow made Torres twist her head around. Crewman Merris inclined her head gracefully; its pristine flesh was marred by burns and scrapes. "Truce?" she asked without rancor.

Torres nodded. Voyager needed all hands and grudges would have to wait.

Black eyes bore into hers like neutridium drill bits. They were preternaturally serene. "Have everyone switch over to emergency channel zero-two-theta. It is encrypted and will be more difficult to monitor." The intelligence officer's even, calm voice provided a soothing counterpoint to the chaos.

You should have remembered that, BLT.

In all her life, Torres had never gone from absolute fury to gratitude in such a short span of minutes. She activated her communicator. "This is Lieutenant Torres. Per incursion protocols, route all communications to the designated secure channel. Rotate the frequency every hour in accordance with emergency procedures."

Section by section, the crew acknowledged her command.

Merris was still regarding her in that cool, steady manner. "Who are the Vaadwaur?" she asked, as if there were no more important question in the universe.

Torres made her way to the nearest control panel and brought Voyager's internal sensors online. "They're what's left of a race that was wiped out nine hundred years ago. We encountered them when we set down on their old homeworld to make repairs." The power grid on Deck Twelve was malfunctioning. She dispatched a repair team to it before continuing her answer. "We found a few hundred of them in bio pods beneath the planet's surface. How they ended up in the Dead Zone is anybody's guess."

"Torres to Vorik." She switched communications targets. "Transfer helm control to Engineering." They needed to stop drifting.

Vorik's next message caused her blood to ice over. "I cannot. Captain Janeway initiated a command lock out of all essential systems. Navigation, weapons, and transporters are all inaccessible."

"Son of a cave sloth!" she ranted. "I'll try to override it from here."

Torres entered a series of commands. The computer informed her in unflustered letters that it was unable to comply with her request. To add insult to injury, it also let her know that the Secondary Command Processors were down. She smashed her fist against the bulkhead.

Peripherally she saw Merris move slightly to one side and heard her activate her commbadge. "Neelix are you all right?"

"I'm a little shaken up, to be honest." The Talaxian spoke in a hoarse whisper. "Naomi and I are hiding in the Jefferies tubes."

It might have been her imagination, but Torres thought she saw relief pass over Merris' shuttered features.

"Seven of Nine to Lieutenant Torres."

B'Elanna was never so pleased as to hear the dispassionate Borg's voice. "Go ahead."

"I have configured the sensor arrays in Astrometrics to conduct an interior scan. There are fifty-eight Vaadwaur life signs on four decks. Communications with the Bridge are severed and there has been no response from individual commbadges. You are the highest ranking officer I have been able to contact."

The words sunk past Torres' ears and lodged somewhere in her windpipe. Suddenly there wasn't enough air.

She had no time to react.

Gerron's voice called from down the smoke-filled corridor. "Sixteen plasma relays have malfunctioned. Level Ten forcefields have been erected around all damaged sections."

"They're wearing powered armor!" her comm link emitted a new voice. Small arms fire pulsed once, twice. "We can't penetrate it with hand phasers." There was a loud crashing sound and the thrumming sound of larger weapons. "Fall back! Fall back!"

The communicator crackled a final time and became silent.

Ghuy'cha.

Torres had never aspired for captaincy, and found the prospect of command utterly terrifying.

"Designate your first officer." Crewman Merris spoke again in that cool, almost unconcerned tone. When the Deltan woman had walked back over, Torres could not say. "I believe Ensign Dalby is the next highest rank."

"Right," Torres stammered out. "Dalby, you're it."

The former Maquis looked just as happy about his promotion as she did about hers, but he nodded grimly. "Gerron, Lessing," he commanded. "Check the tubes and make sure they're clear. We'll need to climb topside since we can't get to the turbolift."

The two crewmen set to work immediately. While they did so, Dalby accessed one of the storage lockers and pulled out a few hand phasers. They were the only weapons available at this level.

Torres reached for her comm badge once more, but hesitated. In all her life she had never once thought she would give this instruction. "All hands, this is Lieutenant Torres. We've lost contact with Captain Janeway and the Bridge crew. As of this moment, I am assuming operational command of Voyager. Ensign Dalby is Acting First Officer."

A barrage of communication ensued. Information poured in from several decks. It deluged her senses and quickly became overwhelming.

"This is Kim. Give me a rendezvous point, and I'll meet you there." His voice was pitched just a hair too high, but was otherwise reasonably calm.

There was scarcely time to breathe, much less answer him.

"Lieutenant Torres. This is Crewman Bonneville. I've got 10 security team members on Deck 14. The armory is intact and uncompromised, but we can't open it."

"No one can," Merris assured, "not even you. With the Secondary Command Processors down, the computer cannot recognize you as Acting Captain."

Which meant that Janeway's lock out was impregnable.

Torres turned to stare at the woman. The security mechanism designed to protect Federation Starships from falling into hostile hands now kept them from accessing the very things they needed to repel the invaders: helm control, weapons arrays, and heavy ordnance.

We've either got to rescue the command staff or restore the processors.

"Bonneville, stand fast. Torres to Sickbay."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant." Hearing the Doctor's voice was also a relief.

"Status of the Bridge Crew?" Every comm badge transmitted the life-signs of its wearer to the ship's computer. If no one up there was answering it meant they were incapacitated or... She refused to complete the thought.

Though she'd never believed in a god, Torres sent out a silent prayer. Janeway was the closest thing to a mother she had left. Chakotay had been her mentor and a dear friend, and Tom...Tom had woven himself into the tapestry of her soul. They had to be all right. There was no other option.

She closed her eyes.

And received an answer. "Captain Janeway, Commander Chakotay, Commander Tuvok, and Lieutenant Paris are alive, but injured. They all need medical treatment." The EMH paused a moment, and when he continued, his voice had gained greater urgency. "According to the readouts embedded in the captain's communicator, her vital signs are fluctuating. I'm detecting foreign chemicals being introduced into her physiology. They appear to be a combination of sedatives and hallucinogens."

What the fuck?

Merris supplied the answer, even as she accepted a phaser from Ensign Dalby. "They have discovered that they cannot access Voyager's systems without the captain's authorization codes. Drugs are normally the first step in conducting an interrogation." The Deltan's eyes had become chunks of black rock, more than simply unfeeling. They were inanimate.

In contrast, Torres was livid. Nobody hurt the captain, not on her watch.

"We have to get her," she announced, half expecting Merris to argue. Most likely they should repair the secondary processors, override the access codes and take functional control of the ship...or some such bilge.

Instead the slender Deltan merely activated her communicator. "This is Merris. How many Vaadwaur are on the Bridge, Seven?"

The former Borg answered immediately, "I count 11, 8 of which are in full armor."

Merris digested the information then asked, "Can you get an accurate scan of it?"

"Yes." Several seconds passed. Then, "We also have information on their technology in our databases. I am sending the schematics to the nearest computer station. Lieutenant?" she addressed Torres. "It is unacceptable for Captain Janeway to remain a captive."

"Don't worry Seven," B'Elanna tried to be reassuring. "We're hatching a plan even as we speak." She cut communications. "Right?" The latter comment was directed to the others.

They looked grim, but determined. All of them gathered around the console's display.

The Vaadwaur wore exo-skeletons that were reinforced with tritonium, just like their underground chamber had been.

Fuck. We'll need plasma charges to make a dent in that shit.

Neural connections in the helmet and electrodes distributed throughout the limbs made it probable that the machines also enhanced the physical strength of the soldiers wearing them.

This just gets better and better.

"Are those magnetic field generators?" Merris pointed to small, powered modules embedded in the boots.

"Looks like it," answered Lessing. He leaned forward to tap the screen and zoom in on the tiny images. A tense smile played at the corner of his mouth. "I take it you didn't ask that as a rhetorical question, Cooky."

"Battle armor is normally equipped with a magnetic component in case of Zero-G conditions. However," Merris squinted her eyes at the technical readouts that scrolled past, "they normally

have to be reconfigured to compensate for variations in metallic composition. Can we tell if they have done so?"

Torres checked the read outs being gathered from Astrometrics, though she could not understand why Merris was so interested. "It doesn't look like it. Why?"

A frigid smile decorated the Deltan's face, but did nothing to awaken the deadness of her eyes. "The first things we will need are several pairs of gravity boots."

It took a moment, but Torres eventually caught on. Turning off the artificial gravity would transform the heavy exo-skeletons into floating hunks of metal. "You're nasty." She gave the other woman a look of frank appreciation. "I like that."

Merris acknowledged the compliment with a minute twitch of her brows. "It will only work once. After that, the Vaadwaur will no doubt make the necessary adjustments. However, it will provide the bonus of easily moving the wounded." The intelligence officer conducted a weapon's check, then moved to the open maintenance shaft door.

"Give a push and they'll float along." Torres followed, giving her badge a smack. "Bonneville, we're going to make our way up to you via Jefferies tubes." At Torres' nod, Lessing jogged to one of emergency storage chests. He pulled out several med kits and an emergency repair kit. She made her voice calmer. "In the mean time, try the compression phaser rifles from the ancillary weapons lockers. They may have better luck against the Vaadwaur's armor. Seven, Kim," she addressed the other two. "Meet us on Deck 6."

Both of them acknowledged her transmission. Seven added, "I am attempting to modify our phasers with Borg nanoprobes to make them more effective." There was an edge of anger coloring the normally flat voice.

One thing I can't deny: Seven loves the captain.

They gathered at the Jefferies Tube. With the exception of Merris, everyone looked at her as if she were going to say something brilliant, or at least were hopeful that she would.

I only wish I felt like a genius, right now.

Torres blew out a shaky breath. *You can do this*, she thought. *You fought the Cardassians with less. This is nothing more than another resistance movement.*

She met each person's eyes, one pair at a time. "We're going to rescue the senior staff. It's a long climb to Deck 1, and there are hostiles in between. With Voyager's systems locked up, they won't be able to track our communicators." She brought up a layout of the Bridge. "There's a tube that opens here." Her finger pointed out the entry point. "We can get to it from Deck 6. Before that, we have to access the industrial replicators on Deck 11, and order up some gravity boots."

She hoped that her tone was confident, and did not betray the quivering of her insides. Things

must have worked out okay, because Dalby gave her a thumb's up.

"All right then." Torres drew in one final breath. "Let's go."

Chakotay's mind swam a long, winding river back to consciousness. He was first aware only of pain, a dull, monotonous hammering in his skull that radiated down the left side of his face. He blinked, but only one of his eyes obeyed. The other felt hot and swollen. Grey carpet cushioned his head. It was scratchy against his cheek.

Memory returned in a swirling rush of images: flashes of light and bone-jarring rumblings that only a storm born of battle could spawn.

The Vaadwaur...

His arms were restrained behind his back. He tried to sit, and could not. The flexing of muscle caused a grinding agony in his ribs. An instant later, something heavy forced him down. The deck struck him with the force of a photon torpedo, and Chakotay was momentarily paralyzed. Through the white-hot haze of torment, he heard disembodied voices. They spoke gibberish at first, but the universal translator immediately morphed the sounds into words.

"Have you reached Engineering?" Someone uttered in a menacing hiss.

"No sir." Static crackled at the edges of the words, and Chakotay could hear the sounds of live fire. "There are forcefields erected every ten meters in all directions. We cannot deactivate them."

"Nothing works!" This voice was closer. A dull thud of flesh against metal was accompanied by a string of frustrated curses. "This derelict vessel is worthless to us."

"The first officer is awake, sir."

Steel-hard hands grasped Chakotay's shoulders and bodily lifted him up. The Bridge whisked past. He saw Tuvok, still unconscious on the deck. Half of his face was marred by angry-looking burns. Lieutenant Paris was propped against the Ops console, bound hand and foot with some kind of shackles. Drying blood caked about an ugly cut on his cheek and dribbled from one ear. His eyes were closed as well.

Where is Kathryn?

Without warning Chakotay was slammed down into the port command chair. The pressure on his arms was horrible, as if red-hot needles were being driven up his elbows. Pain throbbed in his right shoulder and was echoed in the pounding of his skull.

Above him was a moving mass of metal and lights. Brown armor flickered red in time with Voyager's alert status. It whirled and hummed as its wearer moved backward from him.

Overlapping plates shifted. Heavy metal feet clanked, and the unblinking eye of an ion blaster stared at him from inhumanly large hands.

Chakotay turned his head, wincing as the world around him listed. The dizziness subsided after a moment. Janeway was seated next to him. She was bound, hands behind her back. Blood was congealed beneath her nose and flowed freely from a split in her lower lip. The wound looked fresh. A scorch mark on her shoulder told him she'd been shot at least once. His nostrils detected the sickly sweet odor of burned flesh. He could see curled bits of uniform flaking off from the back of Janeway's neck.

"Captain," he croaked. His windpipe was desiccated, as dry and barren as the deserts of Vulcan. He couldn't see how badly she was burned.

She didn't answer immediately, and before he would call again, someone wrapped cold fingers around his throat.

"Greetings, Commander Chakotay."

Gaul...

The pinched, cruel face of the Vaadwaur commander swam into focus. Dark eyes stared into his with all the warmth of a cobra contemplating a mouse.

"Janeway, Kathryn." The captain's voice was slurred. "USS Voyager, Starfleet Identification Number: 1789236-01."

"Enough!" Another Vaadwaur stepped past Gaul and struck Janeway's face with a vicious slap. Her head snapped left and new blood ran.

Chakotay threw himself against the hand that restrained him, only to be grabbed from behind and pulled back. Armor encased claws dug into his shoulders and he choked back a groan. Every breath seemed to move razor blades through his chest.

The Vaadwaur seized Janeway's hair and jerked her upward. His mouth was close enough to spray her with spittle as he hissed. "We know who you are and who you work for. We want the authorization codes."

"Merin," Gaul's chill tenor carried an edge of impatience. "Calm yourself." His beady eyes once more faced Chakotay. "As you can see, some of my subordinates prefer more heavy-handed methods of interrogation." Subtle changes in his face created a parody of reluctance. "Your captain has proven remarkably resistant to our drugs. Torture may be our only recourse."

The alien leader straightened, but his eyes never left Chakotay's. "Can we give her more, Doctor?" he purred out his question.

The answering Vaadwaur was one Chakotay had never encountered. He looked older than the

others. "In her present condition, it would be dangerous. Her burns..."

Merin suddenly pushed a hand against Janeway's chest driving her back against the command chair. Her face twisted, and she cried out in pain. "...are useful. What are the access codes, Captain?"

"Leave her alone damn you!" Chakotay ignored his chest, his shoulder, the brutal, unfeeling hands that held him in place. Worry for her blistered his heart.

"Chakotay?" Janeway's eyes clenched shut. Color drained from her face. "The crew? Are they safe?" Her head lolled back into the cushion. "J-janeway, Kathryn..."

"Let her go," Chakotay demanded. He struggled in vain to free his arms, tried to rise, to kick...anything. The restraints would not yield.

This time Gaul cackled out a vicious laugh. "You can end it any time, Commander. I'm certain that you know the proper codes. Give them to us and we will provide your comrades with medical treatment."

To his left, Merin continued to toy with Janeway. "The codes, woman!" He dug his thumb into the wound in her shoulder.

The captain gave a hoarse cry before repeating her name and rank.

Chakotay ground his teeth together. The only way to help the captain was to get her out of here.

Come on, Sudea. You were an Advanced Tactical Instructor at the Academy.

How many were there? His eyes darted about, taking in the towering soldiers encased in metal. *Six, at least.* They wore bulky exo-skeletons. Armor like that lacked maneuverability in close quarters, but was highly effective in withstanding light fire.

We'll need rifles, at least. Type-IV Phaser Cannons would be better. He tested the restraints on his wrists.

Tighter than a tachyon beam.

The fact was, he wouldn't be getting out of here without help.

Chakotay turned his head in Janeway's direction. She was pale, sweaty.

I'm sorry, Kathryn.

Something sharp pierced his neck and the world around him blurred. The Bridge lights became haloed and indistinct. He saw Gaul backing away. In his hand was a sliver of metal that glinted.

A needle...

Unnatural lethargy settled over Chakotay's limbs. His thought processes became chaotic and maddeningly slow.

Gaul's face filled his perception. "We need those codes, Commander." His breath was fetid, oiling its way into Chakotay's nose. "Give them to me, or I will have Merin begin removing pieces of your captain."

No.

Chakotay's mind abruptly fractured. Part of him became a distant, unemotional observer of the tableau occurring on the Bridge. It calmly reminded him that there were risks in serving the Federation, and repeated lessons learned decades ago during senior command training.

"Sooner or later, you will be captured by hostile forces."

In those days, they'd all thought Admiral Sanjit Singh was one of those over-zealous martinets who foretold doom at every turn.

"There are races who have forgotten more about inflicting pain than you will learn in a lifetime."

Twinkling brown eyes had smiled at them all and yet had been deeply saddened at the same time.

"You believe you are invincible, that no one can break you. You are, all of you, mistaken."

Even as Chakotay stared at his captain, the woman who had become his teacher and best friend, his mind engaged a series of mental barriers.

The instructor's sing-song voice played on within his mind.

"Disorientation is the first of many steps in the process. Drugs, sleep deprivation, locking you in total darkness..." The old man paced sedately, forwards, back, speaking to the room in a disassociated manner. "Torture is the least of your worries. It is what they will do to your comrades that will truly torment you."

"Chakotay." He gathered moisture and spat into Gaul's face. "USS Voyager. Starfleet Identification Number..."

Gaul's fist smashed into his cheek, loosening teeth and drawing blood. The salty taste of it filled his mouth and gave him new ammunition. He used it to decorate the Vaadwaur's angular face with glistening drops of scarlet.

Janeway's voice drifted through the drug-induced haze. "Daddy," she called.

She never talks about her father. For her to summon his spirit, means that the drugs are

extremely potent.

"Not real..." The captain shook her head, staring past her interrogators at the viewscreen. "You aren't real."

Merin spun away in disgust. "Perhaps we should begin executing her precious crew one by one."

Fiery blades of panic and fury sliced through Chakotay's gut; he gritted his teeth, and was silent.

"First comes blackmail. Tell us or we will torture, kill, maim..." Admiral Singh waved an arm through the air. "The list is endless. Tell us or else." He paused, and his eyes became haunted by unseen phantoms. "Only they mean those words. And you will have a sad choice to make."

"So we have become barbarians now?" The physician moved to Janeway's side and checked her condition with a strange sort of scanner.

"We need those codes," Gaul replied, and turned his attention back to Chakotay. His face and tunic had been wiped clean. "I will kill your captain. Make no mistake."

"Or...my personal favorite..." Singh had laughed without humor, a dry, rattling sound that reminded Chakotay of rustling leaves. "Bribery. If you tell us what we want, we'll give you, your crew, your friend, whoever, medical treatment, a shower, a tachyon particle beam... All lies. All of it."

There was a roaring in his ears. The world around him spun in a perverse carousel of motion. Lights flickered in multicolored bursts that danced in a carnival of fantasy. Chakotay heard music, like an organ or calliope, only twisted into discord.

It is only another type of vision quest, he told himself. You have learned from childhood how to ride the altered states of your mind.

He began the ritual...

A coo chee moya. I am far from the sacred places of my grandfathers. I am far from the bones of my people, but I ask on this day of uncertainty for the spirits of my ancestors to guard me and mine from harm.

His totem-cat returned. Stealthily it moved, past the unseeing Vaadwaur guards, through the winking scarlet glow. The Jaguar sat on its haunches near his chair and growled a song of malice.

The captain's head turned toward him and their eyes met. Grey layers of drug induced fog parted for but an instant. "Hold on," she told him. Then the moment was past and he felt his thoughts unhinge and fly to pieces.

The auric beams from phasers lit up the corridor like flashes of artificial lightning. They were answered by green jets of blaster fire. Rayna ignored it all. They'd been bogged down on Deck 6, Section 12 for several minutes. The Vaadwaur boarding party from Deck 5 had apparently moved downward. Whether their vessels had detected the rescue team's movement or this was all just an accidental meeting, she could not say. But it was wasting time.

Bonneville and his security team were gamely laying down suppressive fire with their compression rifles. So far it was all they could effectively do. It took too many shots to truly damage the heavy armor.

"Fuck." Torres dropped her filament probe.

Rayna picked it up, and handed it to her. They were both hunkered behind the firing line, dismantling two hand phasers. The underpowered units had proven to be less than useless...so they were being repurposed into grenades. She and Torres had begun the process a few seconds ago. It was painstaking work. Phasers were an unforgiving lot when it came to messing with their innards. Precision and patience were the best tools. Unfortunately, Rayna's runaway thoughts interfered. She wanted to be on the Bridge. Now.

Concentrate.

The instructions were buried in her unconscious, but her hands remembered. They had performed this task several thousand times in training.

First, deactivate the prefire control assembly by severing the neutrillium monofilament between its two central nodes.

That was far easier said than done. 'fleet scientists had designed these weapons to discourage tampering.

Seven of Nine had apparently been quite productive. She'd managed to fabricate an interface between her sensors in Astrometrics and Sickbay. Detailed information on the Bridge crew's condition had been gathered, none of it good.

The Doctor said that Tuvok's condition was deteriorating; plasma burns had damaged his lungs, and he was experiencing respiratory distress.

Set the beam control assembly to manual override.

Janeway was in shock from the combination of her injuries and the large amounts of drugs flooding her system. Her brain activity had become erratic. The situation was already dire; it bordered on lethal.

She replaced the outer casing. Torres had done the same. Their eyes met and Rayna saw grim determination reflected in the other woman's gaze. She nodded. Both of them set the beam intensity to maximum and held down the control button.

The whine began. According to the textbook, it was a "conductive acoustic effect," which exponentially increased in volume and pitch. There were exactly thirty seconds from the moment it started to the moment of detonation.

Twenty-five seconds...

Twenty...

Ten...

"Fire in the hole," Rayna announced, the usual warning for such things. Who knew why anymore?

Bonneville and his team pulled back and retreated down the hallway at a run. She and Torres darted forward, staying low and tossed their presents down the corridor to the waiting Vaadwaur. They scrambled backward immediately and threw themselves to the deck.

The world erupted in an argent flare which was blinding even through Rayna's closed lids. Thunder rolled in a deafening echo.

Like a storm at sea...

Though Rayna had not often been in all-out combat, the metaphor seemed appropriate. Everything, battle included, had a rhythm all its own.

She opened her eyes in time to see Bonneville roll to his knees, his feet, then jog back to the intersection. He stuck his head around the corner cautiously. "All clear," he confirmed, then whistled in sardonic appreciation. "Fire suppression subroutines are still working, but boy is Engineering going to have a mess to clean up."

"We always do," quipped Lessing. The dark-skinned man rose, glancing at Rayna with not a little humor. "You security types are only good for blowing things up."

Rayna clambered upright. She flashed her teammate a brief grin, but did not feel the least bit happy. Worry was not an emotion to which she was accustomed. On Romulus, in another life, she had felt it before. Tuvok had been sick with the fever of Pon Far. He was irrational, out of control. Being with him had been a desperate act, and one which had touched her deeply. It was the first, and last time she had been intimate with someone. The remainder of her liaisons had merely been sex.

Now her friend was in danger, and fear for him was devouring her calm. Worse, was the creeping sense of dread which leached into her hearts at the thought of Kathryn's torment. There was this...desire...this overwhelming desire to warp time and space so that she could be there to make the horror stop.

Madness, Ray-Ray.

Too true, and it was a dangerous madness, clouding her mental acuity with emotional distractions.

It was the last thing she needed, especially given the riotous passions being transmitted by her current companions. Tension, fear, and anger made the atmosphere thick enough to chew. Everyone had a hair trigger, herself included.

After casting a last glance toward Bonneville and seeing his thumb's up, Rayna turned to collect the wounded, and found Geron standing there.

Speaking of dangerous madness... The boy had been behind her every step of the way. If she stopped too quickly, his head would no doubt slip into her nethers.

Which might be quite pleasurable if he can hold his breath long enough.

Unlikely. Bajorans had no more stamina in that department than did humans.

You do know him.

Another line of thought she had neither the leave, nor the inclination, to follow...

She reached Ensign Dalby. The former Maquis' face was bathed in sweat and his breathing was shallow. He'd taken a blaster shot in the gut two decks ago. They'd given him something for pain and tried to stabilize him, but there was little they could do. Without medical treatment, he would die.

Fortunately, Torres and the Doctor had proven remarkably resourceful. Holodeck 2 was running a mass casualty response simulation, courtesy of the lieutenant's quick thinking, and the EMH had transferred himself there. From comm traffic, several injured crewmembers had already arrived. Thoron generators were being used to hide from scanners, and the Jefferies tubes had become a veritable underworld of illicit travel.

Dalby glared up at her through bleary brown eyes. "Why does it have to be you who helps me?" he grouched.

Rayna found herself remarkably tolerant of the cantankerous ensign. It took courage and character to insult someone to their face...or at least showed lack of taste and/or common sense. No matter. His agenda was not hidden.

"Come along, sweetness." Rayna needled him as she and Geron lifted the man up. Each threw one of Dalby's arms over their shoulders. "One so charming as you must be saved."

"Fuck you, Spook." His voice was thick with pain and painkillers.

"I don't take advantage of the less sexually mature," she purred.

Reconnaissance intel from other decks was being fed, spoonful by spoonful, to Torres. Voyager's crew were improvising resistance efforts. They were outgunned, and so took the fight to a less direct level. Hatchways were being sealed and forcefields erected wherever possible, anything to cause delays or inconvenience to the Vaadwaur. Some truly spiteful soul on Deck 5 had inverted the disposal sequences on the latrines, causing a slippery, aromatic mess that played havoc with traction. Armored soldiers were sliding about in a small river of filth.

I would love to meet the one who thought up that gem.

Past the intersection, the corridor became a ruined tunnel of charred metal and Vaadwaur body parts. Their blood ran black as midnight upon the carpet, and mixed with soot to soil the pristine silver walls with ebony droplets. All were dead. Rayna forbore the urge to smile, but felt more than satisfied with the level of carnage. Her only regret was that it had been over so quickly. Death was more mercy than they deserved.

A gesture from Torres caused them all to flatten back against the bulkhead. Their reluctant leader proceeded forward at a crouch. Bonneville followed, rifle at the ready. Tension stretched nerves to a snapping point for interminable seconds, then...

"Harry?" Torres' hushed call was echoed though a nearby commbadge.

"Yeah." The Asian's voice was both joyful and relieved. "We've set up check points the intersections nearest to the holodeck entrance. "I take it the explosion was your doing."

Torres waved them all forward. Lessing and Gerron breathed out long sighs of air. Rayna and company followed. Two more security officers secured the rear as they moved.

Scant minutes later, they were surrounded by illusory medical staff. A moving ocean of green, black, and white swept past lines of biobeds in an unending tide. Two nurses were conducting triage at the hatchway. They scanned Dalby and immediately had him moved to a biobed. Rayna's last sight was of the ensign being carted away on a gurney.

The familiar nausea overtook her senses, but she ignored it. Holo-sickness was the least of her worries.

"Miss Rayna!"

She turned toward the sound to find Naomi Wildman running toward her, Neelix close behind. The waif slammed into her like a pillow tossed from a catapult and wrapped two wiry arms around her waist. Rayna's empathic senses were submerged beneath a pool of welcoming relief. For a handful of heartbeats, she could only stare mutely at the top of Naomi's blonde head.

What in Sul's name do you do with this?

Finally, Rayna managed to pat the child's shoulder.

Neelix grinned at her widely. He, too, was a geyser of happiness. "It is good to see you. I've grown accustomed to having an assistant in the Mess Hall."

"Merris!" Torres called for her attention.

Rayna extricated herself from Naomi's grasp, giving her one last pat, and moved over to a small knot of uniforms gathered around the holodeck's control console.

Bundles of wire, spliced in multiple places ran across the floor. Three or four computer terminals had been pieced together in a makeshift command display. On it was a miniscule schematic of the Bridge. Seven of Nine indicated eight scarlet blobs of light. Her normally perfect bun of hair was loose and strands of it fanned outward in random directions. "Ensign Kim and I have managed to divert a portion of the Astrometrics sensors to this display. These," she indicated the red dots, "are armored guards. They are posted as follows: one on either side of the turbolift doors, three are flanking the port side of the main Bridge, and three are flanking starboard." One metal tipped finger indicated three smaller dots, also in red. "The remaining Vaadwaur are not wearing battle armor. The Captain's Ready Room is sealed from the inside." Though her expression and tone remained as mechanical as ever, Rayna detected a look in those arctic blue eyes which reminded her of a photon torpedo the moment it locked on target.

"That follows," Torres agreed. "The Ready Room holds Captain Janeway's computer; it would be protected under the security lock out. They'll have to either blow the door or cut their way inside."

Seven nodded. "The Briefing Room is currently vacant, but the Vaadwaur have access to it."

Ensign Kim moved forward. "The captain and Chakotay are positioned in their command chairs. Tom is here," he indicated a point near the Ops console, "and Commander Tuvok is here, by Tactical." Deft movements of his fingers on the touch screen caused the view to shift. "These are the Jefferies tubes accessing Deck 1." He highlighted the shafts in yellow, then returned the display to the Bridge. "They all intersect in a small cargo hold, here," a rectangular section of the ship flickered green, "next to the turbolift and abaft the Bridge module." The display zoomed in. "From there, three secondary shafts run: one to the Briefing Room, one to the Captain's Ready Room, and the last to a hatch by the Engineering Console."

Rayna digested the information carefully, only half listening when Torres showed where they could cut power to the gravity generator. Her impatience was growing. The Vaadwaur might begin executing the Bridge crew as a means of blackmailing Kathryn. When it did no good, they would escalate the torture.

You might lose them both e'er this is over.

Of all things she despised, having personal feelings interfere with business was the worst. Nothing good ever came from caring. Pain was the inevitable consequence.

The Doctor joined them briefly. "We need to counteract the drugs that have been used on the captain and Commander Chakotay, then stabilize their injuries. Unfortunately, I can't accompany you. There are too many wounded." His artificial voice was laced with genuine regret. "When we encountered the Vaadwaur previously, we were able to download a considerable amount of data on their civilization, including detailed medical files. I've uploaded everything onto this tricorder and preloaded this hypospray with different neutralizing compounds." He extended both devices. "Run a bioscan, then use the tricorder to program the proper combination of chemicals in the antidote."

Ingenious. Rayna's admiration for the Doctor's skills increased.

"Good work, Doctor." Torres accepted the two devices.

His lips compressed into a thin line. "Be careful," he glanced about the group, "all of you." Then the holoman departed.

Torres delegated Lessing and Geron to replenish the medkits before continuing, "We'll field two groups of five. Bonneville, take half your squad to the Captain's Ready Room. You should be able to override the seal from the inside. Seven, Merris, myself, and two others will enter the Bridge proper via the J-tube. Each team grabs the prisoners closest to their position and bugs out. Nothing fancy. Merris?" Dark, serious eyes slid to meet Rayna's. "Suggestions? You're the closest thing we have to Special Ops."

Now that is truly frightening.

Rayna kept the comment to herself. It would hardly inspire confidence. Far be it from her to point out the galactic difference between being a spy and being a commando. "A distraction would be beneficial," she offered, brow furrowed in concentration. "If we modified a few hand phasers so that they emitted a brief pulse of high-intensity light, it might overload the targeting scopes of our opponents, and it would certainly blind those not shielded by plate mail." She used the antiquated human term deliberately. It sounded far less intimidating to be going up against obsolete technology, than to be taking light weapons into a heavy infantry engagement.

"That's doable," Torres confirmed. "If we bypass the energy sequencers but overload beam control, it should put out about 2.2 million candlepower for half a second or so."

"They should be deployed before full breach is made," Rayna added. "That would mean opening the maintenance hatch on the Bridge first, and dispersing one or two, then killing the gravity and making entry. And you can't go." She nodded in Torres' direction. "You're the Officer in Charge, now."

Fury once more darkened the half-Klingon's eyes and seeped over her features. The string of curses which followed would have made the sagest Klingon proud.

Before anyone else could interject, Rayna continued. "Now that Dalby is down, Kim is your

second-in-command. He can't go either."

Seven of Nine shouldered her way forward. "I will lead the rescue party," she volunteered.

Torres looked none too happy, but reluctantly agreed.

"I'll take the ensign's place." Crewman Gerron Jin raised his hand.

Rayna almost groaned in frustration. It was a near thing. Just when she was looking forward to a few minutes without her corporeal shadow, the Bajoran whelp found a way to stick around.

Despite the unwanted company, her mood was brighter. A little payback did wonders for morale. Perhaps she would find a way to off the three armorless Vaadwaur in the thick of things. There would be no time to pay any of them special attention. She hoped that would change before their race was driven to extinction.

There is no room for emotion in business.

It stopped being business when they hurt my friends. Now it is vengeance.

Janeway heard screaming. She was aware of pain, the searing agony that crisscrossed her back setting nerve endings ablaze, the stiletto of torment that pierced her shoulder, and a throbbing ache that radiated down the right side of her head.

"The codes." Voices yelled at her, demanding answers she could not, would not give. Each refusal had a price, and the cost was counted in pain.

Metallic claws clamped onto her wounded shoulder. They squeezed and she realized that the person shrieking in agony was she. The pressure eased. She collapsed into the chair, her head lolling forward. Try as she might, she could not lift it.

"The codes."

Someone grabbed her hair from behind and jerked her head up.

Where was she?

The world around her swirled in and out of focus. Colored lights dappled across her awareness like will o' the wisps.

There were faces amid the shifting backdrop. She knew them. Gaul and his cohort, Merin...enemies....

Tell them nothing.

Where was her crew? Janeway tried to look about, but could not. The grip on her hair was too firm. She had seen Chakotay before. Was he all right? Though she wanted to call for him, her jaw would not obey. It felt heated and swollen.

"Where..." Her voice came out in a hoarse croak. "The crew..." Movement was impossible, though she tried, in vain, to rise. Metal bands around her wrists cut into the skin and veins. Her fingers were numb and useless.

"Give me the access codes, Captain. We will release your crew unharmed if you cooperate."

Her eyes tried to identify the speaker, but he was only a blur.

Lies.

"Janeway," she wheezed through the cotton of her throat. "Kathryn..." and bit back a wail when sharp metal tore at the wound in her shoulder. Blood flowed in a trickle down her arm, a wet, warm sensation that was almost pleasant.

The shadows occluding her vision shifted.

There was Chakotay. Her first officer was tied to the helmsman's seat. He was bleeding from the nose. Scarlet fluid streamed over his chin to drip on the carpeted deck. Each liquid sphere fell in slow motion as if time, itself, stood still.

They gave you something.

Part of her mind still functioned. It was sequestered to one side, commenting lucidly as if this whole affair were some sort of macabre sideshow.

Likely it was a hallucinogen combined with a mild sedative. It will affect perception and judgment.

Fragments of bygone lessons in interrogation techniques replayed with uncanny clarity.

Her eyesight temporarily cleared.

Chakotay's tunic was torn away. It hung in strips from his waist, exposing huge, purplish bruises. One of the Vaadwaur punched him in the side, hard. She could see her friend's face blanch bone-white and heard him moan.

"No." Janeway railed against the hand clutching her hair and tried, unsuccessfully, to free her wrists. She had to protect him, had to save him. "Stop." The words were empty and worthless.

"Tell us what we want to know, and we'll give him medical attention."

Never.

Her mind regurgitated the litany of name, rank and ID number, and was rewarded with more pain, blinding in its intensity.

"Not much longer, my bird." Her father's voice.... She'd heard it earlier, an ethereal whisper amid the harsh demands of her captors. Edward Janeway stood before her clad in full dress-uniform, chest crowded with medals. Warm, grey eyes locked onto hers and were filled with love.

Not real.

The part of her conditioned to command reported its observations in a sing-song monotone of dispassion. Hallucinations were normal when under the influence of drugs. Nothing could be trusted. No one was what they appeared. Then she smelled it...the spicy-sweet aroma of her father's cologne.

A short hiss at her neck heralded more fractures in her awareness. Voyager's lights began to swirl about as if fevered. They gained shimmering halos, which expanded and contracted in tandem with the trip hammer beating of her heart.

Daddy?

"I'm still here."

He was kneeling beside her. Janeway saw him clear as if she were once more on Earth.

"The codes." Hard flesh impacted her face and teeth loosened. Coppery blood filled her mouth.

Cruel hands pushed her violently back, sending her back into spasms of torment. Was that her crying out or Chakotay? Janeway didn't know anymore. Only her name and rank were real, but she did not recite them. The pain would come whether she spoke or not.

More demands. More threats. The Vaadwaur grew horns and flame spouted from their nostrils.

Another illusion. Pay it no heed.

Her pulse was erratic. She could feel it, could feel the pressure of her heart as it battered her chest. It was hard to breathe; the air in her lungs moved more like sludge.

I'm so tired...

All she wanted to do was sleep...

It would be so easy to slip away...

But her ship...her crew...

"You do not let go, Captain." It was the Admiral. He looked so stern. *"Do you hear me?"* Suddenly his face was all she could see; his voice all she could hear. It rumbled in her ears, echoing without end. *"You hold on to life."* His head snapped upward and tilted, as if listening. *"And while you're at it,"* a crooked half-smile formed, *"you might want to hold on to the chair as well."*

Impossible though it was, she could feel his fingers guide her hands into gap between the chair's back cushion and its seat. Janeway dug in instinctively. In an instant the world erupted went nova. Radiant incandescence burned past her clenched eyelids to set her mind on fire.

Then she was weightless. Janeway strained to keep her grip. Her legs drifted upward. All around, the Vaadwaur were floating languidly toward the ceiling. It would have been funny if she didn't hurt so badly.

Heavy, clanking footsteps warned of a soldier's approach. Blonde hair and glacial blue eyes filled Janeway's perception.

Seven.

No. More lies. Do not trust your senses. That section of her mind which still functioned issued its warning.

"Captain." She knew that voice, or thought she did. Then a metal clad hand reached toward her shoulder.

Another trick.

She kicked out, striking the enemy in the thigh. The move caused her to lose her grip on the chair cushion and she was airborne.

More voices, none of them real; none of them trustworthy. "No," Janeway protested as hands tried to pull at her. She lashed out with both feet, thudding them into something solid; the impact sent Janeway spinning through the air to collide with one of the armor-clad Vaadwaur. His gleaming claws reached for her and she twisted away, hard enough to tear open the wound on her shoulder. Pain gave her clarity of purpose. They would not take her quietly.

Rayna followed Seven across the bridge at a dead run. The duct by the engineering station put their group closest to Chakotay and Janeway. When they moved into position, Seven had claimed the captain, leaving no room for argument.

That left the first officer for her.

Time stalled as if caught in the obdurate grasp of a black hole. Her eyes swept the scene, taking in the lazily floating Vaadwaur as they drifted toward the overhead, lingering a fraction too long on Kathryn, then noting positions of the three warriors without armor.

There he is.

Bound and apparently unconscious, Commander Chakotay sailed on the air currents just above the helm. His uniform was ripped to shreds.

Tear the clothes off a man to make him feel powerless. Make a woman strip off her own to degrade her.

Grim lessons in interrogation techniques excreted from the bowels of her memory.

Rayna veered toward him. Little droplets impacted her face.

Blood.

The crimson fluid liberally coated Chakotay's face, staining his chest and the remnants of his t-shirt. Pain coated the air with its caustic signature. Its boon companions fear, desperation, and anger struck her senses head on and buried her alive beneath an avalanche of chemicals. Even so, she registered that some of the blood belonged to Kathryn, and more faintly, some to Tuvok. All of it caused her emotions to ice over with a frigid kind of rage.

Keep moving.

The gravity boots beat out a hollow rhythm on the carpet and sounded like some angry child banging the floor with a hammer. It was distracting. She was accustomed her movements being silent.

Something heavy collided with Rayna's back just as she reached up toward Chakotay. They sent her stumbling forward to crash into the conn. There was a sharp cracking sound from her side, and a brief pulse of pain. It dissipated immediately, drowned in a flash flood of endorphins.

Rayna recovered, ducked beneath the flailing arms of a floating soldier and turned to confront her attacker.

It was Janeway.

The captain was fighting against Seven of Nine as if the Borg were the very emissary of the Underworld. Rayna's eyes took in her friend's bruised face, swollen jaw and bleeding shoulder.

They beat her.

She struggled against the besetting urge to abandon her mission. The need to comfort Kathryn and simultaneously kill her assailants caused Rayna to hesitate.

Seven attempted once more to take hold of the captain, and was met with a whimpered protest and kicking feet.

Failsafe.

The term flashed in neon across Rayna's memory. Capture by hostile cultures was always a danger. Starfleet devoted countless training hours to prepare its command staff for that eventuality. Failsafe was the penultimate of that program. It marshaled every shred of willpower and channeled it into resisting. Kathryn no longer trusted her senses. Only a recognition code would snap her out of it.

Blaster fire erupted, dispelling the surrealistic instant of calm. Bursts of emerald fire struck the deck, sent a console into a sparking fit, and etched jagged black burns on the bulkheads. It was likely panic fire. Even for seasoned troops, Zero G was supremely disorienting. They had no real target at which to aim, but the random shots could be just as deadly, and there was no way to predict their direction.

We don't have time for this.

They couldn't fight both the captain and the Vaadwaur. Lacking an alternative, Rayna moved to assist Seven. She grasped Janeway's uninjured shoulder, and ignoring the unsettling pang of guilt that burned in her belly, and squeezed hard on the trapezius nerve bundle. Kathryn went completely limp.

"Go," she shouted to a shocked looking Borg, and turned back to her original target.

She reached Chakotay and snagged him by an ankle. At least she didn't have to try and carry the man. He was half again her weight. Rayna dragged him through the air as she ran back to the maintenance tube.

Fire lanced across her thigh. From the intense burn, it was very likely from blaster fire. More hormones poured into her system, relieving the pain. Her eyes sought the source, and found one of the unarmored Vaadwaur pointing a pistol at her.

Oh look. It wants to play.

Before she could even draw her phaser, a stream of golden light blazed past her and struck the Vaadwaur center mass. He transformed into a white hot silhouette and vanished.

Twisting her head back around, Rayna saw the taut face of Crewman Geron squinting over a compression rifle.

Figures.

Fortune never smiled on her when she wanted to avoid someone.

Seven had already pushed Janeway through the opening and crawled inside. Rayna did likewise with Chakotay, then tapped her youthful guardian on his shoulder. Geron followed her inside

and secured the hatch.

There was no time for first aid. They crawled down the tube with their weightless charges. Rayna cringed inwardly at the blistered flesh peeking through the scorched holes in Janeway's uniform. The burns were inflamed and oozing. Bruises and blood marred the woman's noble features.

Kathryn was still unconscious, but that wouldn't last long; when she awoke her training would reassert itself, and she would continue to fight.

They beat her.

The thought would not leave her alone. It teased her from the edges of her reason.

Outrage flared but briefly and then seeped away leaving only a chill vacuum in its wake. Rayna savored the quiet. Her mind had become so clear, so honed in its purpose that she was almost giddy. The Vaadwaur had incurred a debt that could never really be paid, but it would be more than entertaining to attempt collection.

To her eye, Chakotay was in no better condition. One of his legs kept twisting at an odd angle and was probably broken. His face, like Kathryn's, was swollen and bloody.

They were nearing the cargo hold. A team of crewmen were waiting there with gurneys and medkits. Once they'd all rendezvoused, Engineering would restore gravity.

Which will allow the Vaadwaur to follow...

An hour glass turned over in Rayna's mind and measured seconds in bone dust, not sand. Lessing, Bonneville and the others soon arrived. Everyone was accounted for, and all prisoners had been retrieved. Within minutes the injured were positioned over the mobile cushions. Their magnetic cuffs were deactivated and removed.

Rayna keyed the communicator in her head and made contact with Torres. "We have reached the rendezvous point."

"Acknowledged." The lieutenant's voice held a note of triumph and relief. "Well done, all of you."

The familiar weight of her body returned immediately, sending the floating restraints clanging to the deck. Rayna removed the clunky boots. Her thigh wanted to protest, but was outvoted by her endorphins, a state of affairs she was content to leave as is.

One by one, the rescued officers were secured to gurneys. She moved to Tuvok's side and gently caressed her fingers over his brow. The skin of his face was raw and occluded by peeling flesh and blisters. Each shallow breath wheezed and rattled its way through moisture.

I cannot lose you, old friend. That thought stabbed through her stomach.

Lessing administered a hypospray as she watched, and her friend's breathing eased.

"No." Janeway's desperate protest pulled Rayna to her. The woman had regained consciousness, and once more was fighting off perceived attackers. This time she had both her arms free. Several staff struggled to hold her down. They wanted her to lie on her side, to protect her injured back, but Janeway's desperation gave her strength. Four people, including the Borg tried to restrain the woman still enough for Lessing to program the hypospray of antidote. And they were losing the battle.

Seven attempted to calm her captain, but Janeway cringed away from her soothing touches. The Borg's brows wrinkled in confusion. "She does not recognize me."

"It's called failsafe mode." Rayna pushed past Lessing. "The 'fleet builds in safeguards in case of capture. You need to give a command level rescue code."

From the lights of understanding in the Borg's eyes, Rayna knew Seven was familiar with the term. Then the impassive features became deeply regretful. "None of the ones catalogued by the Collective are current."

Rayna bit back curse. It wasn't Seven's fault. Wolf 359 had occurred in 2367; any knowledge gained from assimilated captives would no longer be valid. Considering the eclectic mix of crew on this vessel, Tuvok was the only person guaranteed to know any of the recognition sequences.

And mine are nigh eight years old. Useless.

She could feel Kathryn's pain pouring through her skin, could sense the fear and absolute determination fueling the woman's struggles. It could not be ignored.

Give her another nerve pinch.

No.

In truth, she could not bear the thought of causing more pain. Rayna pressed her fingers against the captain's neck feeling the raging pulse point there. She leaned near, brushed her lips across the human's ear and whispered to her of rain. They were old words, learned as a child on her grandmother's knee. Promising cool respite from heated agony, they triggered deep hormonal changes in Rayna's body. Glands responded, secreting invisible messengers that seeped through her skin and "spoke" to Janeway. Pain retreated, vanished, but Rayna needed more than that. She needed Kathryn to know her.

You have only touched her like this once.

Once is enough. Her body should remember.

It was communication at its most primitive, more basic than any code. To Rayna's relief, her

friend responded. Rigid bands of muscle yielded, and the captain's struggles eased.

"Butterflies." The susserant word was scarcely audible, and Rayna did not understand what it referenced. Nor did she care. It was enough that her friend no longer suffered.

She pulled back and the gray eyes gazing back at her were free from the veils of torment.

"It's all right now, Kathryn." Rayna sighed in response, caressing a finger down the woman's sweat-coated neck. "You're safe."

Lessing used the modified tricorder, then administered the hypospray of antidote. Almost immediately he pulled out a second 'spray, likely corophizine. The powerful antibiotic would eliminate the possibility of infection.

Janeway didn't flinch. "Safe," she repeated softly, radiating trust that weakened Rayna's knees.

Sul make me worthy.

That thought caught her unawares. Not since childhood had she asked the sea goddess for favor. It never did any good. The Deep was a fickle wench, as lief to sink you as bear you up.

"I've got action." Crewman Bonneville was staring downward at a tricorder. "Twelve Vaadwaur signatures just entered the J-Tube in the Briefing Room."

Seven got them all moving. The gurneys would make the Jefferies tubes with difficulty, but they would make it.

We will be too slow to outrun the Vaadwaur.

That was a distinct possibility. Rayna motioned to Lessing to give her the medkit. Relieving pain had its price. Between the stitch in her side that warned of a broken rib, her wounded leg, and the supremely stupid move of helping Janeway, her body would soon require recuperation. She could ill afford to fight off slumber in the middle of a battle.

She selected two ampoules of Cordrazine, loaded one in a hypospray and tucked it, and the second vial, in her waistband. The powerful stimulant would forestall her descent into coma-like recovery...at least for awhile.

You'll be out for six hours behind taking that shit.

It seemed her mind had an endless supply of irrelevant information with which to clutter her synapses. A coma later was infinitely preferable to a coma now.

Lowering the stretchers down the ladder to Deck 2 proved to be an arduous, and time consuming process.

"Seven. Report," Janeway's weak, but steady alto queried. It seemed the captain was beginning to stir. Rayna handed the woman down to Seven and let the Borg deal. The two passed quickly beyond her range of hearing.

You definitely should have nerve pinched her. No doubt the noble idiot would soon be trying to move on her own power.

She guided Chakotay through the open hatchway, then Tuvok. Her old friend seemed better; his dark face held a more natural color.

Knots of tension eased in her spine, and Rayna dared to hope that he would recover.

The last gurney slid downward. Lieutenant Paris had not so much as grunted during the entire process. She spotted a tiny trickle of dried blood in one of his ears. In humans that was a bad sign. Some nameless shipmate monitored the pilot's condition, staring gravely at the display on a medical tricorder.

"They've reached the cargo hold." Bonneville glanced up at her. He and Geron had lingered behind to assist with the wounded. "We're not going to make it at this speed."

A not unexpected, but unfortunate development. They would need to delay the Vaadwaur.

"Use your phaser to weld the hatch shut." Rayna suggested. That would slow the pursuit. She contacted Seven and relayed the plan.

"Understood." The Borg would have climbed back up, but Rayna waved her to continue on. She did the same with Geron, but the Bajoran man ignored her.

Bonneville adjusted the beam on a hand phaser and drew the golden light down the hatch's edge. Metal fused and hardened. "Did I ever thank you for saving my life?" he asked while he worked.

"No, and I was rather hoping you would spare us both the awkwardness of the moment," Rayna rejoined.

He laughed and sent her a friendly glance. "And here I figured you for one of those simpering, sentimental types, you know...like all spies." Dimples emerged on his cheeks as a tight-lipped grin formed.

Camaraderie. Rayna recognized the sensation. She hadn't felt it for a very long time, and it disturbed her to the core. Most of her career had been spent on solo-assignments. The care of others was a heavy burden and she preferred to travel light.

I have to get off this ship.

Becoming enmeshed in the shining chains of teamwork and fellow-feeling was a trap she could ill afford. Caring clouded judgment and instinct.

Bonneville finished up and they took off after the others, sliding down the ladder, feet to the outside, then crawling into the next horizontal run. Gerron kept his watchful black gaze on Rayna as if she would disappear into thin air, and she ardently wished she could.

Distant clanking confirmed that the Vaadwaur had reached the hatch. She smiled. Just setting up impediments was extremely satisfying. Spite very often didn't require much effort.

Janeway's mind cleared incrementally. She made Seven stop long enough so that she could modify the command lock out, still restricting the Vaadwaur, but allowing 'fleet personnel access. Someone took advantage of the momentary pause and ran an osteogenic stimulator over her jaw. Knitting bone tingled, and the swelling decreased.

They had exited the Jefferies tubes minutes ago to avoid a ruptured plasma distributor. The corridor was empty and silent, but they moved through it at a jog.

Twisting her head, she saw Seven of Nine in the lead. Seconds later they paused at a new maintenance hatch. A crewman tried to open it. He failed. Two others joined him.

"Where are we?" she asked, gingerly sitting upright. Itching from her back told her that the burns had been covered with synthetic skin. There was a cloth sling securing her right arm. The blaster wound would require surgery.

No time for that.

"Deck 3." A young black man ran a medical tricorder over her. He looked up from the screen as the other two gurneys pulled along side. "Welcome back, Captain."

It was Lessing. His terrified features had become branded on her conscience. Confronting him and the raw patches of her guilt was the last thing she wanted to do. Surprisingly, however, there was no reproach in his manner. Janeway took note of the scrapes and mild contusions that dotted his face. His uniform was a little worse for wear, too.

"Are you all right?" She hoped her voice was confident.

"Fine, ma'am." He put the tricorder away.

"Good." Janeway hopped down, keeping her one good hand on the gurney...just in case her legs were uncooperative. She walked unsteadily to each stretcher and briefly touched the injured officers. Concern competed with absolute fury for dominance in her psyche. "How are they?"

Lessing answered, "They're stable. We have a hospital set up in Holodeck 2."

That was smart. Very smart.

"It's jammed." One of the crewmen at the Jefferies tube hatchway pronounced. He aimed a tricorder at it. "More plasma leakage. Fire must have fragged the controls before suppression measures kicked in. I'll try to override them."

Janeway's lethargic thought processes could not produce the man's name. Higgins, maybe?

The stately form of Seven stepped back into view. She carried a phase compression rifle that bristled with strange looking diodes. "Lieutenant Torres has transferred all Bridge functions to Engineering."

Janeway nodded. "Damage report?"

"Starboard thrusters have been restored. Impulse and warp engines are still non-functional." The taller woman's impassive countenance shifted just enough to express disapproval that Janeway was standing. "We have detected new breaches on Decks 15, 10 and 8. Fifty additional Vaadwaur troops have boarded."

"Heavy infantry?" Janeway could already guess the answer.

"Yes."

Damn it.

"What about transporters?"

"They are still offline."

Light footfalls announced the arrival of Crewmen Merris, Bonneville and Geron. The three all bore the tell-tale badges of combat: cuts, bumps, and streaks of grime. Janeway's eyes lingered on Rayna unbidden, taking in the singed hole in her uniform pants and the charred flesh beneath. Her new friend held an elbow pressed close to her left side, in a protective manner.

She's hurt.

When Janeway looked up, it was to find the bald woman with one white brow cocked upward and pale glimmers of amusement decorating her eyes...which immediately roved to Janeway's injured shoulder and back as if daring her to speak.

That battle will have to wait, Katie.

"You should not be standing," Seven declared. The taller woman glared down at Janeway. "You have been shot and the wound requires treatment."

"I'm fine." It was almost true. From the corner of her eyes, Janeway saw Crewman Merris begin a snap inspection of her fingernails, an action which did not quite conceal the evil smile that had crossed her elfin features.

Let's take a page from Rayna's book on conversation and change the subject. She glanced down at the rifle in Seven's hands. "Modified with Borg technology, I take it."

"Yes. The Vaadwaur' tactical exoskeletons proved resistant to both type two and type three phasers. Compression rifles were only moderately effective."

Nothing like a little Borg adaptation...

Janeway quickly assessed the tactical situation. Her thoughts were finally flowing in some modicum of order. First priority was obtaining medical care for the wounded. Then she had to get to Engineering. If the Vaadwaur wanted a war this badly, it was time to give them one. "Are the turbolifts operational and secure?"

Her question sent half the rescue team reaching for their tricorders. Within seconds several heads were nodding, but it was Seven who answered. "The shaft is clear to Deck 8, where it appears that the Vaadwaur have broken through the doors. All but two of the lifts are functional."

"Fine." Janeway commandeered a hand phaser and gestured down hallway. "We'll take the turbolift from here." That would be a faster method of travel...now that the lock was lifted.

There was a muffled explosion from down the corridor.

"The Vaadwaur have blown open the hatch to J-Tube 1B." Bonneville squinted down at his tricorder. "I figure we have about twenty seconds before they reach this location"

Everyone was immediately in motion. The fast pace made Janeway lightheaded, and the world around her started a slow, starboard list. She gritted her teeth. Weakness was unacceptable. Someone slipped an arm around her waist and hoisted Janeway's good arm over their shoulders.

Rayna.

She knew it before cutting her eyes to look. How was another question entirely....

Apparently the same way you knew it was her before, when she called you back to reality.

How she had accomplished that feat was yet another mystery.

The run seemed to last forever, though Janeway knew from experience that time did odd things during high stress.

There it is.

Seven reached the 'lift first and keyed it. The doors opened with merciful swiftness.

"Get the wounded in first," Janeway ordered, still leaning on Rayna. Her vision swam in and out

of focus.

Pull yourself together. It was a command easier given than obeyed.

Gurneys were crammed inside with their attendants sandwiched between. Janeway could swear that some of the crew were holding their breaths to make additional room.

At her nod, Crewman Lessing called for Deck 6, and the doors started to shut.

Which was when Merris shoved her inside without so much as a "by-your-leave".

Janeway's shoulder complained loudly at the violent maneuver. She slammed into Lessing's chest good-arm first. His arms surrounded her waist feeling both extremely powerful and yet gently protective, all at once. Even more miraculous was that he somehow avoided the burns on her back.

"Son of a bitch!" Janeway cursed aloud, something she never did in front of subordinates. "Who are we missing?"

Lessing eased her upright, but kept a steadying hand on her elbow. "Seven of Nine, Bonneville, Geron, and Merris." His voice and expression were absolutely neutral.

Anything else would have moved Janeway to apoplexy. She was damn well sick and tired of being managed.

The 'lift doors opened to a 'fleet security detail bristling with weapons. Harry Kim had a bandolier slung across his chest that contained extra power packs and additional hand phasers. Like Seven's his rifle was liberally sprinkled with extra wires and flickering lights. Dots of soot bedecked his rounded face. Equally black hair fell in disarray over his forehead. "Captain," he greeted and motioned for them to disembark.

"There's another group," she informed him tersely, stepping aside so the car could empty.

"Yes, ma'am. McCallister, Ryson, wait for it." Kim adjusted his grip on the compression rifle.

McCallister looked to be in his mid thirties. He had a nasty looking gash on his cheek that was caked with dried blood. At Kim's order, he pulled a tricorder and made adjustments.

Homing in on their commbadge signals.

Janeway's mind spewed out snippets of information with its usual speed. That was comforting. It meant that at least her cognitive ability was back to normal.

"Status." She wanted to linger, to wait for the remaining team members. Instead Janeway fell in step with her ensign.

Are you worried, or do you want to light into Merris?

That would be an added bonus.

"Sir?" McCallister's query cut Kim's reply short. "The group on Deck 3 is moving away from the turbolift. It looks like they're under fire."

He held out the tricorder for inspection, and there were at least a dozen red-coded enemy signatures converging on her crew.

The Vaadwaur came too close. They didn't want to lead them here.

It was a perfectly reasonable tactic. She would have done likewise under those circumstances, but the thought she might lose anyone else....

Anyone? This is Seven and Rayna you're talking about.

This could not become personal. If her emotions became engaged it would paralyze her.

"Let's go," Janeway ordered them all to make for the holodeck. The willpower it took to redirect her attention back to the strategic overview was disturbing in the extreme. Her heart was racing, fueled in its pell-mell rhythm by worry and fear. "Status," she prompted Harry once again. Facts and tactics were the only cure for this malaise overtaking her mind.

Security officers ringed the party. They moved in concert, the ones in front scanning forward for signs of trouble, the one's aft keeping track of their rear.

"We've erected Level 10 forcefields at all Jefferies Tube access points on this deck," Harry began a quick run through. "Armed officers are posted at the holodeck entrance, and a forcefield has been set up there as well. Torres has got repair teams dodging the Vaadwaur and fixing what they can. Plus, she's dispatched a squad to the Armory."

"Good." They would need the munitions. Now came the part she dreaded most. "Casualties?"

Kim glanced at her gravely. "Six confirmed dead, and over thirty wounded."

It was actually better than she'd expected, considering how sudden and well-coordinated the Vaadwaur attack had been. Even so, the deaths weighed heavily on her conscience.

She tore her thoughts free of that mire. "Whose idea was it to cut gravity?"

"Merris thought if it." Harry sent her a grim smile. "Unfortunately sensors indicate that the Vaadwaur have realigned the magnetic fields produced by the armor."

"You got the sensors back online without lifting the command lock?" Janeway was impressed.

Her admiration only increased when Harry replied, "No, Seven and I jury rigged a display console using the sensor arrays in Astrometrics. Main sensors are now accessible, though."

They passed a damaged section of corridor. Janeway's brows plunged down as she took in the carnage of broken armor and body parts. "What did this?"

"Phaser grenades." Kim used the colloquial term. "B'Elanna's team cleared a path to the hospital with them."

More 'fleet soldiers greeted them as they reached the holodeck. The mass casualty simulation was fully operational. Nurses and medtechs bustled about in a purposeful dance of healing. One of them waved a medical tricorder in her general direction and Janeway deactivated him without hesitation. Others swarmed around the stretchers.

Her chest loosened a bit now that Chakotay, Tuvok, and Paris were safe, and in a place where they would receive care. The Doctor was summoned and ordered all three immediately sent to surgery. Seeing him in action was also reassuring. Irritating the hologram might be, but he was an excellent physician.

"Captain!" Lieutenant Torres shouted a greeting as she jogged over. The woman's dark eyes roved toward Paris as he was carted off and her brow wrinkled in concern. "Is he going to be all right?" she asked a passing nurse.

"It's too early to say," the hologram replied, and continued on.

The not knowing is the hardest part. Janeway could empathize with Torres' plight. Tuvok was her oldest friend; Rayna was her newest. And Seven? Seven was, in so many ways, her wayward daughter, much like B'Elanna. Right now they were all in danger. "Report, Lieutenant," she prodded gently, yet again trying to dispel the feeling of dread that gathered in her abdomen.

Torres beckoned her to follow. It looked as though a corner had been reworked into a forward command post. Janeway spied a Master Situation Display and several smaller screens on either side of it. Red and green dots moved in random patterns across all of the images. Flashing sections of the ship warned of structural damage.

"We've got just over a hundred Vaadwaur on board, most of them in armor."

The news brought a frown to Janeway's face. Those were bad odds.

B'Elanna touched one of the consoles and a set of schematics was displayed. "We retrieved one of the helmets," she pointed to a singed hunk of metal sitting on a table just to port, "and got a more detailed scan of its targeting controls and body/exoskeleton interface. Harry and I have just begun analyzing the readouts." Her normally expressive features were concentrated. Tension hummed along her clenched jaw and tight shoulders.

"Is Engineering secure?" Janeway noticed more than twenty Vaadwaur signatures on that Deck.

Torres nodded. "The Vaadwaur have been trying to reach Engineering since they first boarded. There are forcefields every ten meters; Gilmore and Vorik rerouted several power couplings to reinforce them. So far two have been overloaded by blaster fire, but the rest are holding strong."

"Good." Janeway gave Torres' shoulder a reassuring pat. "Is there any sign that the Vaadwaur are aware we've transferred helm control?"

That at least made the half-Klingon smile a little. "No, ma'am. Harry hacked into their comm system. They've ramped up efforts to get to Engineering, but it seems to be a response to the forcefields."

That's something, at least.

One hundred troops.... Voyager still held strength in numbers, and had the advantage of fighting a defensive war. They knew the ship and had control of her systems.

The armor, Kathryn...we need to neutralize the armor.

Plasma charges would likely be effective, but they would do just as much damage to the surrounding structures.

If you're going to destroy the ship, just activate autodestruct and get it over with.

Her eyes began tracing over the helmet schematics. The technology was older; there had to be a way to defeat it. She followed the spider web of sensors that lined the helmet's inside surface. Neuro uplinks fed data to the Vaadwaur's central nervous system, and interfaced their brain's commands with the reactions of the suits. At the center was a central processing core. The circuitry was relatively primitive, but effective.

The answer is here. I know it.

Voyager's computer systems were shielded from every sort of threat from viruses to outside intrusion. They were hardy against radiation, electro-magnetic instability, and ...

That's it.

"B'Elanna." Her sharp tone caused the other woman to snap her head up. "I'm not seeing EMP shielding."

The Chief Engineer's fingers flew over the console at warp speed. Suddenly her face became triumphant. "There isn't any." She smacked her commbadge. "Vorik, Gilmore. I need you to oscillate the resonance frequency of the Plasma System power taps so that they emit a broadband, high-intensity burst."

"You wish to generate a non-nuclear electromagnetic pulse?" Vorik's Vulcan equanimity was

very much intact.

"Exactly," Torres verified. "About 200 nanoseconds should do it. Voyager's systems are shielded from the Compton recoil electrons and photons, but the Vaadwaur armor isn't."

"Understood. It will take approximately three minutes to realign the power taps. Any personnel in the immediate vicinity of a ruptured plasma relay will be rendered unconscious."

Janeway nodded to B'Elanna. Unconscious crewmen she could deal with. Dead ones she could not. "Do it."

Dismissing the internal display, Janeway brought up external sensor readings. They had six ships attached to the hull, ugly blobs of metal that reminded her of leeches. Working with only one hand was tedious, but she called up the old scans of Vaadwaur warships. "Their main computer processors aren't hardened either," she relayed to Torres.

That set the half-Klingon's mental wheels to turning. She edged Janeway to one side and began a series of lightning-fast calculations. "We lost several shield grids during the attack, but if we," her hand movements altered, entering a series of commands, "force a harmonic reset and re-modulate the frequency, we could generate an energy flare that would approximate EMP." The ridges lining Torres' forehead deepened as she looked up at Janeway. "We could disable the parasites attached to our hull."

Janeway's tactical mind performed a quick review. *There were seventeen enemy vessels when we started. Two were destroyed and three disabled in the first volley, two more in the second...plus the six used for boarding.* Only four enemy ships would remain.

"Do we have enough energy for a few phaser shots?" she asked.

Torres cast her eyes on another monitor. "Maybe a dozen."

That will have to do.

"We'll have to time this to the millisecond." Janeway drew a cleansing breath. She still could not banish the worry gnawing a hole in her stomach. "Contact Vorik and tell him to put his best officer on tactical, and B'Elanna," she added, sending the other woman a speaking glance. "If this doesn't work..."

Torres raised her chin a notch. "I know. We'll make it happen." She opened a channel to Engineering and began to relay instructions.

Rayna's leg had started to hurt. Her brain registered the pain in an off-hand manner. It had more important things to focus on. Heated green energy ricocheted off the starboard bulkhead near her shoulder and left a darkened streak in its wake. They'd led the Vaadwaur on a merry chase around Deck 3, hopefully buying time for the rescue team to reach safety. Now all they wanted

was a convenient exit. Unfortunately their opponents had other ideas. The turbolift had four armored grunts posted there and two more were guarding the Jefferies Tube hatch. That left nowhere to go.

Your usual destination...

Having company on the trip to oblivion, however, was an unwelcome development, for all its novelty. She preferred to meet her Maker alone...that way she could curse Her in private. Maintaining the dignity of the divine was always wise.

They reached a dead end. Forcefields barred their passage. According to Crewman Gerron, Voyager's main computer core lay beyond them. Stretching for five, full decks, the huge structure required massive amounts of ventilation to keep it running cool. Those shafts would provide an escape route...if they could get to them.

Seven entered the access code to deactivate the first forcefield. The other two had their rifles trained back down the corridor. Rayna merely leaned against a silver wall. The tell-tale throb in her leg warned that her body's chemical compensation was at an end, a precursor to recuperative shutdown. She pulled out the hypospray of stimulant and applied it to her neck. Immediately, her pulse and thought processes picked up speed.

Kneeling, Rayna began to disassemble her hand phaser. Seven had not had time to add any Borg technology to the device. It produced a lovely lightshow as it bounced off the Vaadwaur's armor, but that was all. However, the boom it made when overloaded, would be most satisfactory.

Heavy, metallic footfalls warned that the enemy was near.

"It is done." Seven's announcement caused them all to scurry backward.

An instant later, and the forcefield crackled to life once more. If Rayna's memory served there were three more between them and the core, each with a more complicated access code. Right now they were sandwiched between the first and second.

You're trapped here.

Panic attempted a coup. Her heart rate trebled.

If I had remembered my phobia a tad earlier, I could have saved the stim.

At least her sense of humor still functioned.

The first forcefield sparked with blue fire as the Vaadwaur blasters struck its surface. A bunch of metal-clad soldiers had taken up firing positions in the corridor. Their rapid shots made for a neon waterfall of turquoise and green as they impacted the energy barrier. Rayna thought she heard one of the enemy soldiers shout a disgruntled curse. That made her smile.

Her spiteful glee was short-lived. An unarmored Vaadwaur, muttered instructions she would not discern to his troops. Something about his bearing told her that he was accustomed to command. Immediately they began to systematically target the edges of the forcefield.

Eight soldiers with heavy blasters, firing in rapid succession will probably cause the forcefield to collapse, sooner or later. Rerouting power to it would be a timely proposition, and time was one thing of which they were in short supply. Her narrowed eyes met those of the squad leader and found them glittering with cold intelligence. The dark orbs skittered away from Rayna's to rest on Seven of Nine. Hatred ignited within their depths.

"We need to kill him." Rayna put the cover back on her weapon and stood. Hate that implacable was impervious to both common sense and fear. That made for a supremely dangerous opponent.

Seven glanced up from the keypad she worked on. "That is General Gaul, the leader of the Vaadwaur." Her tone was passionless as ever, but contained a razor's edge of anger.

Is it indeed?

Rayna experienced one brief moment of pleasure before her mind became barren of feeling. Terror and fatigue drained into the vacuum of her soul.

Here was the creature ultimately responsible for the harm inflicted on Tuvok and Kathryn. Here, within a few scan meters.

Fortune finally smiles upon you, Wind Child.

Now all she had to do was dump her companions, pretend to surrender and throw down her weapon...just after she pressed the fire button and initiated the destruct sequence. In thirty seconds, this blight named Gaul would reach several thousand degrees Kelvin.

A strong hand grasped hold Rayna's upper arm. She snapped her gaze to find Crewman Gerron standing next to her.

"Don't." He stared at her with knowing eyes.

"Don't what?" Rayna hissed. She tried to extricate herself, and failed.

The Bajoran puppy hauled her backward when Seven cleared the second forcefield. He was surprisingly strong. When Rayna resisted, Bonneville yanked hold of her other arm and helped him.

They pinned her against a bulkhead as Seven reactivated the barrier.

Bonneville had a quizzical look on his face. "All right Gerron, I've backed your play. What gives?"

I would be interested in the answer myself, Rayna thought, before I crush his genitals with my knee.

"I've seen that look before, on Bokter loxKardasia." Gerron's words caused a chain reaction of memory inside Rayna's brain.

Victory for Cardassia...

It was both a slogan, and a place. The space station orbited Taspar, one of several outlying worlds in the Cardassian Union. Listed formally as a "Recycling Station," it broke down decommissioned vessels and turned the scrap into building materials. 'fleet Intelligence had dispatched her to investigate it because of reports that Bajoran children were being sent there.

She'd expected to find a thriving den of child labor and slavery. As it turned out, that would have been a kindness.

The outermost shield collapsed in a violent flash of azure. The Vaadwaur began laying down a new barrage automatic fire. Energy sizzled across the field filling the air with a crackling roar.

"Seven," Bonneville urged in a tight voice.

The Borg's fingers were a blur of motion on the next keypad, but nothing was happening. "Voyager's computer has registered the Vaadwaur assault, and has engaged its emergency defense systems. I will have to override them before it will accept my access codes."

Excellent.

Rayna found herself hoping for failure. She did not want lose the opportunity to eliminate Gaul. Of course it would mean sacrificing the other three as collateral damage.

I can live with that.

Perhaps you can, but can Kathryn?

"I was there," Gerron pushed against her chest, hard. His black eyes were ablaze with passion. "I saw this same look on your face as you stabbed the Commandant."

It was you?

Images of a little boy weeping silent tears played like a silent movie across her consciousness. Bokter loxKardasia was trying to recycle more than ships. They were brainwashing Bajoran children. It had taken months of surveillance and the seduction of several workers before she'd found the right Cardassian. Gul Fahad was a clumsy pig in bed and out, but once his sexual appetite was sated, he was easy to manipulate. A few compliments and reverent awe at his esteemed position, and he happily took her for a tour.

The children were subjected to every form of brutality from rape to sodomy. They were forced to watch their parents be tortured, listening to a recorded voice tell them that Bajorans were weak, that Cardassians were stronger, smarter... She had swallowed down disgust and revulsion until she choked on them.

Fahad took her into what he called a "school room." Horribly thin, the children were being forced learn the Cardassian alphabet. Food was their reward for compliance. Starvation was their punishment. The guards had laid out a table filled with Bajoran sweets. Several children were being allowed to eat.

"Our star pupils," Fahad proclaimed. He stepped behind a podium at the front. "See." His words were directed toward the children who refused to write, "Learn well and you will eat well."

Black gloves veiled his hands. Rayna remembered them clearly. Flat and non-reflective, the fabric seemed to suck up the light. At Fahad's gesture, two guards brought in a small boy.

There were bruises on his face. Every finger was deformed and swollen.

"Unfortunately," Fahad's voice took on a note of pained reluctance, "there are those among you who refuse to accept our assistance." He plucked a knife from his boot. "Here you are, my dear." The hilt was extended toward Rayna. "I will give you the honor of conducting today's lesson."

She'd taken the blade. How much blood had it spilled?

The Bajoran boy looked up at her with eyes devoid of hope, too tired to even be afraid.

No one should have their innocence ripped away. Rayna recalled a perverse calmness creep over her mind. Her orders were to infiltrate and report, not interfere. *Good. A little rebellion, now and then, was good for the soul. Still, one did what one could. On Orion they had a saying which she repeated in an absent whisper: "I am only a small blade," she buried the knife hilt-deep in Fahad's throat, "but you'll feel me."*

She tried to block out the memory.

Reality conspired to assist her. The final forcefield between them and the Vaadwaur whined its last and fell. Bonneville and Seven immediately began to fire. Gerron joined them, and Rayna brought her thumb to the phaser's trigger.

There was a hard-edged pulse of energy that swept over her skin. Her eyebrow hair stood on end.

It was gone less than a breath later.

"Fire," Janeway ordered.

The display erupted in a volley of yellow light as Voyager's main phaser bank came to life. She

watched, her heart scarcely able to beat, as the beams struck the remaining Vaadwaur ships.

"Direct hit." Lieutenant Torres was monitoring a sensor array. "Two of the enemy vessels have lost propulsion."

Deck after deck began to report in. The Vaadwaur heavy infantry was frozen in place; their suits of armor transformed into metal prisons.

Good, now to disable the remaining ships... Come on, Voyager, Janeway silently coaxed. You can do this.

She ardently wished she was down in Engineering; being a spectator was not a role with which she was comfortable.

A second round of phaser fire flickered across the display.

"Yes!" B'Elanna's clipped cry of victory told Janeway all she needed to know.

"Engineering to Captain Janeway," Vorik's cool tenor called. "We have successfully disabled the weapons systems on the remaining Vaadwaur vessels. Our phasers are now offline."

Talk about cutting things close...

"What about the ones attached to our hull?" Janeway looked toward Torres. The last thing she needed was for them to open fire at point-blank range.

The half-Klingon tapped commands into the console. "Completely non-functional, Captain." Her relieved grin shone like a homing beacon. "You did it."

"We did it," Janeway corrected. "Open a hailing frequency to the lead Vaadwaur ship."

Torres nodded, and the central monitor displayed the image of an enemy captain. His features were fuller than those Vaadwaur Janeway had previously encountered. He was bleeding from a scrape across his forehead.

Eyes that were startling blue-green met hers. "Before you offer terms, Captain," he began, in a basso voice so deep you could almost feel it reverberate in your chest, "I am not in command. You must speak with General Gaul."

Janeway's eyes narrowed as her ire was raised. "I will speak with whomever you like, but for the sake of your vessel, I suggest you make your own peace." She gave him a confident half-smile. "Otherwise, I assure you, we will not hesitate to blow you out of the sky."

A sharp glance at Torres caused the woman to cut communications. "Captain," she began. "Remind me never to play poker against you."

"Here's hoping they won't call our bluff." Janeway scrubbed a hand across her temple. "Find Gaul. We need to end this."

Rayna watched in rapt fascination as one of the Vaadwaur soldiers crashed to the deck with a thunderous bang. The others stood stock still, as if they had locked eyes with a Basilisk. Only Gaul was still mobile. He stared, open-mouthed, at the frozen warriors, and then turned on heel to flee.

Oh, no. I think not.

Rayna gave pursuit without a second thought, wishing that she hadn't repurposed her phaser. It would be so much simpler just to shoot him. His knees would be her first choice.

There were footsteps behind her, and they were gaining.

Your leg...

The fucking hunk of flesh seemed to be spontaneously producing glass shards, and ramming them into her muscles with every step. Her side was little better. Each breath brought with it a grinding stab of pain.

Oh fuck it.

She squeezed the trigger, and her phaser began to keen.

No turning back now.

The Vaadwaur leader pulled out a blaster pistol and shot at her, but his aim was wild. There was an art to firing on the run, and apparently he was out of practice. Rayna ducked instinctively, but the piercing agony in her side made her wish she hadn't.

Gaul turned a corner. He was nearing the turbolift.

Without warning, his blaster poked back around the bulkhead and sent stray jets of energy down the hall. Rayna crouched low, but continued forward.

She heard a frustrated yell. Apparently the soldiers left to guard the 'lift were as immobile as the other ones.

Another step and you'll clear the intersection.

Now.

She flattened at the corner and snaked her head around. A near miss from Gaul's blaster was her reward. Rayna heaved her weapon down the hallway at him. There was a muffled clatter on the

carpet. Someone snatched her backward by the collar.

Gerron...

Rayna knew who it was without looking. The sweat on his hand betrayed him registering on her chemical sensors like a transponder code.

They started to run back, but her leg buckled. She crashed downward in a heap. It hurt. A lot. She was disinclined to rise.

Gerron had other notions. The stubborn fool hauled her up, his hands pulling at her armpits.

"Go," Rayna tried to push him away. Her injury would only get them both killed. Already the phaser's banshee cry had reached fevered pitch. There couldn't be more than a few seconds left.

Seven of Nine reached them, plucked Rayna up as if she weighed no more than a snowflake, and threw her unceremoniously over one shoulder. The Borg sprinted back down the hallway, Bonneville and Gerron in her wake. A thunderous explosion rattled the bulkheads, knocking them all down. To her credit, Seven tried not to fall on her, but failed. Between the impact on the deck below, and the weight of the body from above, Rayna's injuries flared with the heated force of a photon torpedo.

It was almost pleasant, it hurt so much. Part of her Deltan ancestry was an appreciation of all sorts of sensations. When her senses cleared, it was to the luxurious feel of Seven's pillow-like breasts pressed into her abdomen. Rayna owned that she would very much like to nestle her head between them and sleep for a few thousand years.

When her vision cleared, they were all still alive.

"Janeway to Seven of Nine," the somewhat muted commbadge on Seven's chest demanded attention. "Are you all right? We picked up an explosion on your level."

"Yes, Captain. Crewman Merris requires treatment. Everyone else is uninjured." The larger woman shifted to answer, and then clambered to her feet. "The Vaadwaur soldiers appear to be incapacitated. General Gaul perished during the fight." Clear blue eyes drilled into Rayna's. There was no disapproval in them.

"We've got a rescue team on the way. Rendezvous at the Jefferies Tube entrance in the central corridor." Kathryn sounded strained, but very much in control of things. That was nice.

Rayna accepted Seven's offered hand, and quickly found her arm firmly ensconced around the Borg's shoulder. Bonneville and Gerron took up guarding positions, rifles at the ready, and they cautiously proceeded to the rendezvous point.

It took nearly fifteen minutes for the Vaadwaur to figure out who was in command. The death of

Gaul left their rank structure in a state of disarray. Eventually a Captain Riza made contact. Janeway breathed a deep sigh of relief when he unconditionally surrendered.

The worst was finally over.

She spared B'Elanna a warm smile and gave the woman's arm a squeeze. "Well done, Lieutenant."

Torres fairly glowed with pride at the praise. Her rich brown eyes met Janeway's with undisguised affection, and then took on a shrewd cast. "You know, Captain...we have a lot of Vaadwar POW's to round up. The holodecks have a separate supply of power, and I was thinking...there is a prison simulation program that Starfleet uses."

The penal station orbiting Neptune...perfect.

"Bring it up in Holodeck One and have the soldiers held there until transport back to their own vessels can be arranged," Janeway instructed. Torres had a creative mind, and was seldom constrained by conventional thinking. "You have a talent for command, you know."

That caused her chief engineer's face to dissolve into bashful pleasure. "I'm glad you think so, Captain," she replied, and hastily relayed instructions to Security.

"There you are." The Doctor's tone made the observation into more of an accusation. "I take it you are the reason one of my triage nurses ended up deactivated."

Somehow the holo-man managed to look both irate and ecstatic to see her at the same time. Janeway waved him off. "I didn't have time then, and I certainly don't have it now, Doctor. How are Chakotay and the others?"

Torres edged nearer, looking intently at the EMH.

"Commander Chakotay is conscious and attempting to argue his way out of the biobed. Both Lieutenant Commander Tuvok and Lieutenant Paris are resting comfortably. I anticipate everyone will make a full recovery."

The doors to the holodeck opened to admit Seven of Nine. Behind her came Bonneville and Geron, both supporting a very discontented looking Rayna Merris.

A final band of tension that Janeway hadn't even been aware of loosened its grip on her heart. She brushed past the Doctor and intercepted the group.

"Captain," Seven greeted. Her blonde hair was frizzed out in a golden halo. Twinkles of joy warmed the glacier depths of her eyes.

Janeway rubbed her good hand over Seven's arm. She touched her crew as a matter of course, but in this instance had the irrational urge to make sure that Seven was really here, solid and safe.

Then she spoke briefly with the two men. That left Rayna, who somehow managed to look cocksure and utterly disaffected despite her wounds.

"Oh good." The Doctor caught up with them. He waved a tricorder at everyone, including Janeway. "Your shoulder needs surgery," he pronounced, "and your back is a checkerboard of first and second degree burns." His mobile features frowned suddenly. "Your trapezius nerve cluster is traumatized. Who neck pinched you?"

Janeway's brows shot up. She had no idea when, who or how she'd received a Vulcan Nerve Pinch.

Not that the EMH waited for a reply... "I see someone at least had sense enough to administer a dose of corophizine." His attention transferred to Merris. "And you've managed to get yourself shot as well. I take it it's some sort of competition. Two broken ribs, a separated anterior serratus... You also need surgery. Who injected you with Cordrazine?"

Merris did not deign to answer. Instead she yawned, a more than adequate expression of how little attention she would pay the Doctor. Her glittering black eyes traced over Janeway's injuries before silently issuing a challenge.

She'll not consent to treatment until you do.

"How long will it take, Doctor?" Janeway gritted her teeth and continued to hold Rayna's stare.

"Thirty minutes for your shoulder and back, more or less," he answered easily enough.

"Make it less." Janeway turned on heel and headed for the nearest biobed. It would take at least an hour to round up all the Vaadwaur. Until that was accomplished, the repairs would be delayed. She could better spare a few minutes now than later.

Rayna swam toward consciousness against a riptide of lethargy. It wasn't so much that she was tired, more that the darkness was comfortable. Like ebony cotton, it pillowed the mind in a luxurious absence of sensation. Alas, it was but a temporary respite. She opened her eyes. Stark white light glared down from fluorescent bulbs. Her nose inhaled disinfectant coupled with filtered air. On it floated pieces of pain, the dank aroma of fear, and the metallic tang of blood.

You are in the hospital, remember?

Ah. Yes. Holodeck Two.

She'd been admitted along with Kathryn for surgery. No doubt Voyager's captain had long since quit the scene. Rayna's body was not so forgiving. It craved time to recuperate, and seized the inactivity to drag her into slumber. The Doctor had shown an uncommon amount of acumen by billeting her next to Tuvok. Nearness to her old friend brought a measure of reassurance and peace. He was still close by. Copper added a unique feel to Vulcan chemistry, setting it apart

from iron-based physiologies. But even if this vessel were a bevy of Vuhlkansu, she would know Tuvok's from all others.

Turning her head, Rayna found him seated next to her biobed. Though careworn and slightly pallid, Tuvok seemed well enough.

If he's up and about, Wind Child, you've been unconscious for several hours.

"Hello," Rayna greeted. Her voice was hoarse, and she swallowed to clear her throat. "You look like refried Wi'rik'da." That particular Klingon dish was made of ground gagh that was dipped in egg batter and fried, then pounded with a two kilo hammer, and fried a second time. "How long?" she asked.

Tuvok's ever-vigilant eyebrow slid upward. "Seven point four two hours," he replied in a velvet tone.

"And why are you sitting up instead of lying down?" Rayna found the controls for her bed and increased the incline so she could see him better.

"My lung tissue has been successfully regenerated. Otherwise my injuries were relatively minor." He shifted the chair a few centimeters closer. "I am not cleared for a return to duty until twenty-four hours from now. It was more...acceptable," he finally inserted, "to be here."

Tuvok's coolly uttered statement caused Rayna to drop her eyes a moment. His friendship was an undeserved blessing in her life.

Speaking of friends...

"Has the captain recovered?" Rayna looked back up at him.

He nodded. "Her shoulder and back were treated. She visited each of the wounded, and is currently on the Auxiliary Bridge, overseeing the recovery and repair operations."

Which is where she will live until repairs are completed or she collapses from exhaustion, whichever comes first.

Her friend spoke again. "How are you?"

Rayna took inventory. Her brain felt fuzzy; there were dust balls in her throat, or at least it felt like there were. She was a bit achy, too. "Do you remember when I got into that drinking contest with Dhiemm?"

"Unless I am mistaken, I was the one who administered the antidote for alcohol poisoning when you were finished."

That almost qualified as sarcastic.

She chuckled at his remark. "Yes, well that Romulan bastard was hollow from the waist down. I swear it."

Orions could hold their liquor better than most races, and Deltans weren't slouches, either when it came to indulging in all sorts of pleasures. Even so, the somewhat corpulent merchant had managed to drink Rayna clean under the table.

Tuvok cocked his head to one side, giving her a stern look of censure. "You could have conceded the matter."

"Conceded!" Rayna essayed sitting, and found that it was doable. She hung her legs over the bed's side. "Sul's foamy ass I would have conceded to the likes of him. Besides," she wagged her brows at Tuvok, "we did get all his access cards, and half his bank account before it was over with."

"We did not require his bank account."

Picky, picky...

"No, but it came in quite handy for bribes and such." Unlike the Federation, Romulans still had money, and buying favors never came cheaply.

Tuvok's features became serious of a sudden.

Beware, the winds of this conversation are changing.

Tuvok appeared to ponder his words. Finally, "According to the reports filed by Seven of Nine and the others, you went to great lengths to kill General Gaul."

"He fired first, and my phaser had already been repurposed," Rayna responded with ease. She'd been through enough use-of-force inquiries to know what to say. "Who is asking, Tuvok or the Security Chief?" she parried.

"Tuvok." He inclined his head in deference.

Rayna mirrored the gesture. Friend-to-friend, there were few secrets she kept from him. "Gaul was on some sort of personal vendetta. I saw the hate in his eyes. There was no peace to be made with him." She hesitated and drew in a long whisper of air. "And he hurt you and Kathryn."

He nodded once more, looking thoughtful, and his gaze became keener. "You care deeply for the captain."

"I already told you we were friends." Obviously it was time to find something to do, because examining the depths of her feelings toward Janeway was not an activity in which she cared to engage. Rayna slid off the bed. She pulled off the hospital garb and picked up the uniform near

her bed. It looked freshly replicated. "Courtesy of you?" she asked, indicating the garments.

"Yes," he replied calmly. "Seven also reported that Captain Janeway recognized you, even without the use of command identification."

Obviously, I nerve pinched the wrong one.

Rayna dressed with an economy of motion. "It would seem the Borg is a veritable fount of information." She pulled on patent leather shoes. "I eased Kathryn's pain in the Labyrinth. Her body simply recognized the contact." Inside her own self, though, Rayna knew things weren't so simple. With recognition had come trust, a much more precious commodity. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"She said that Geron mentioned a place called Boktor loxKardasia."

Rayna's fingers twitched ever-so-slightly. She straightened to give Tuvok her full attention. "It seems he was interred there."

"I see." His voice was dispassionate as ever, but there was a gentleness to its timbre. "It is probable that inquiries will be made."

Meaning Seven will tell the captain, who will worry the topic like a targ seeking its next meal.

"It was all reported to 'fleet authorities.'" Rayna picked up her shipboard communicator and attached it to her chest. "So far as I am concerned, the matter is closed." She walked to his side and softly pressed her palm to his cheek. "Thank you for the warning, old friend."

He took his feet, a little unsteadily, and Rayna helped him back to his assigned bed. After getting him settled, she headed out of the hospital. Perhaps she could get herself assigned to hull repair. A nice spacewalk would be the very thing to clear her head of the past.

Janeway struggled to keep up with all the matters competing for her attention. She was an ace at multitasking, but at the moment there were simply too many tasks.

Impulse engines and shields were back up. Weapons systems were ninety percent restored. From what Torres was saying, the warp drive would be online in another four hours. All in all, it was good progress considering only seventeen hours had passed since the Vaadwaur surrender.

There was just so much to do, so many decisions to be made.

She picked up one of the twenty-nine PADDs scattered on her desk...her temporary desk. It would be another two days before all the hull breaches were patched. Until then, the Bridge was in Engineering, and her Ready Room was Torres' office. B'Elanna had offered its use immediately. It was a small kindness, but one that warmed Janeway's heart.

All of the Vaadwaur onboard Voyager had been rounded up and were safely confined inside the prison simulation. The program even included a complement of guards. That meant minimal impact of crew staffing. Janeway had diverted a few security officers to the holodeck to act as supervisors. The powered armor was being recycled. It made for excellent raw material.

"The Doctor to Captain Janeway," her communicator chimed.

"Go ahead."

"I have completed my initial examination of the Vaadwaur prisoners, and I would like to discuss the results with you."

"I'll meet you in Sickbay." Janeway closed down her PADD and exited the office.

Engineering was a whirlpool of activity. Torres was hanging almost completely upside down making adjustments to one of the panels at the top of the warp core. Lieutenant Vorik was holding on to her waistband. The young-looking Vulcan was doing his best to be impassive, but he clearly thought the Chief was out her mind.

Janeway enjoyed a brief chuckle before passing into the corridor. B'Elanna was certainly dedicated.

She also displayed a talent for command. Under the most exigent of circumstance, Torres had responded with deliberateness and initiative.

Make sure you tell her, Katie.

Though Janeway fully intended to enter a commendation for Torres in the log, she also knew there was no substitute for a little one-on-one praise from the captain. Face time had no equal when it came to mentoring staff.

The turbolift arrived on Deck 12, and delivered six crewmen carrying freshly replicated plasma relays. Janeway smiled and nodded to each, then entered the car.

"Deck 5," she instructed.

In point of fact, there were several commendations to be logged. Seven of Nine had performed with Borg-like precision and speed. Lessing, Geron, and Bonneville had proven themselves to be cool under fire.

Aren't you forgetting someone?

No.

Crewman Merris should receive a commendation as well. Janeway just didn't want to think about the woman right now. Lately it seemed when her thoughts turned to Rayna, they tended to

remain there. It was maddening and unproductive.

You should reinstate her rank...and probably Lessing's as well.

Deck 5 had sustained heavy damage, having been one of three initial points of entry for the invading soldiers. In the distance, Janeway could see the glittering forcefields that blocked off Section 53; repair teams were sealing the hull so the Vaadwaur vessel attached there could be safely jettisoned.

Various hands moved past her, most offering a nod and a tense smile. Janeway returned the gestures, occasionally calling one of them by name, patting the next on the shoulder.

She needed to speak with Lessing as well. Memories of their previous encounter had tortured her for weeks. Yet, he did not seem to harbor ill-will. There had been no accusations in his eyes, no anger or loathing. Janeway didn't understand it, but was grateful for it nonetheless. It was an undeserved blessing.

The hatch into Sickbay was half open and canted to one side. According to the Doctor, the Vaadwaur had forced their way in. The hologram, however, was as slippery as he was sardonic. He uploaded himself into the computer and hid.

"Hello Doctor," Janeway greeted.

"Captain." The holo-man was entering data into a PADD. At her entry, he set it aside and picked up his tricorder.

Oh no. Janeway held her hand up in warning. "I'm not here for an exam, Doctor," she growled. "The last thing I need is a babysitter."

His full lips thinned with displeasure, and he huffed rather dramatically. "Since you are no longer a toddler, I can certainly understand your hesitance." He waved the infernal sensor in her direction anyway. "The Vaadwaur are suffering from malnutrition and mild dehydration. Everyone of them is at least twenty percent underweight."

"What happened to them?" Janeway frowned up at him.

"They don't have replicator technology." He glanced up from his tricorder and gave her a glare of chastisement. "I'm going to give you a vitamin supplement and something to balance your electrolytes." Without waiting for her reply, he moved to one of the workstations, and continued his narrative. "Like us, they were pulled into this sector of space without warning. They had no time to lay in supplies. According to the physician I spoke with, the crew and passengers have been on half rations for the last month."

They were starving.

Concern edge aside some of the resentment Janeway held. "So they turned to piracy?" she

inquired.

"Yes." The EMH crossed back to her, hypospray in hand. "Vitamins and balancers," he explained.

Janeway gave an impatient nod, but flinched as the spray entered her neck. For an instant she was back on the Bridge, being interrogated. It passed almost immediately. "Did you say passengers?" Her thoughts lurched back into motion.

He nodded confirmation. "And there's more, Captain. At least according to the Vaadwaur doctor, there are two ships with skeleton crews hidden amid the radioactive soup," his holographic eyes locked onto hers, "containing women and children."

Chill realization crept up from Janeway's gut. Her memories churned about until the flotsam of Gedrin edge to the surface. What had he said?

"...a single battalion and their families."

"Damn it," she breathed, then fixed the Doctor with a sharp stare. "Do you believe him?" It could be another trap.

"I do, Captain." The EMH gave her a mildly sympathetic look. "He seems very sincere, and according to Commander Chakotay, this particular Vaadwaur was on the Bridge during your interrogation, and spoke out against the brutality of his superiors."

Somewhere in the haze of her disjointed memories, Janeway recalled a voice that that used the word, "barbarian." Maybe it was the physician. Without seeing the man, she could not say. "Have him brought to Sickbay, Doctor." She crooked a grin at him. "What I wouldn't give for a Betazoid about now." It was the second time she'd wished for one when dealing with the Vaadwaur.

The EMH contacted Holodeck One and arranged for the transport. Then, he gave her a thoughtful look. "I can't replicate one of those for you, Captain, but I will point out that we do currently have an empath among us. She was released from the hospital a few hours ago."

Indeed we do.

Janeway gave her commbadge a smack and summoned Rayna.

When the willowy Deltan arrived, Janeway gave her an abbreviated briefing, finishing with, "I've had Mr..." she raised her brows at the Doctor.

"Kinel," he filled in the empty space with a name.

"...brought to Deck 5 and secured just down the hall. I have to ask him something, and I need to know if he's lying." Her statement caused a thoughtful cast to come over Rayna's face.

"My abilities are chemically based, Captain," she responded. "I haven't interacted with the Vaadwaur enough to have established a baseline of their body chemistry."

Janeway heaved a long sigh of disappointment.

"However," Rayna continued, "one can be established."

"How?" Janeway took note of a burn mark that cut across the top of Rayna's left hand. She picked up a dermal regenerator without thinking and stepped closer to her friend.

A single pale brow quirked up at her, but the slender Deltan held out the injured limb. "If you ask him a series of easy questions, ones that he has no reason to lie about, I can get a reasonable assessment of his physiology when he is telling the truth. Any aberrations thereafter will likely be evidence of falsehood."

Janeway supported Rayna's hand with her own, and slowly dragged the regenerator over the burn. "Plasma torch?" she asked idly, her mind still digesting Rayna's suggestion.

And just what are we doing now? Playing doctor?

"Yes. I was helping to splice conduit on Deck 8, and missed."

The fingers resting on her palm were warm and soft. Their touch soaked into her skin, like rain on dry soil. Janeway was almost sorry when the burn disappeared.

Kathryn, her inner voice was insistent, *what the hell are you doing?*

Peripherally, she could see the Doctor puttering about, trying to appear disinterested. She released Rayna's hand, overcome by self-consciousness.

"Thank you," her friend whispered.

"You're welcome." Janeway had no idea why she'd done that and did not bother trying to justify it to her internal inquisitor. Her palm still tingled as if grieving the loss of contact. She pushed that sensation aside. "Security..." she contacted the guards by commlink. "...bring in Mr. Kinel."

Commander Chakotay jogged lightly to catch the turbolift before it departed. His leg was still tender, and let him know that he wouldn't be skiing down glaciers any time soon. Inside the 'lift were Tuvok and Harry Kim.

"Hey," he greeted, smiling at them both.

Tuvok had been released by the Doctor about two hours ago. It had taken persuasion and persistence of Chakotay's part to get the crotchety physician to grant him the same leave.

There was some residual stinging in his side. The broken ribs were healed, but the surrounding tissue was holding a grudge.

Just be happy you're conscious and relatively healthy.

Considering a mere twenty-five hours had passed since he was admitted to Sickbay, Chakotay was thrilled to be functioning and on duty again. Tom Paris wasn't so lucky; the helmsman was looking at another two day stint with the Doctor.

"Any idea what's going on?" Harry asked. The question was apparently directed to anyone.

"None," Chakotay answered. "I heard senior officers called to Astrometrics. That's all I know. Hopefully it isn't some new navigational hazard." They had already encountered more than enough of those.

Ensign Kim shrugged. "Until the Bridge is fully repaired, Astrometrics has been designated as the Briefing Room. So, it isn't necessarily related to stellar cartography."

Well that's a relief.

Of course, it opened up a myriad of other possibilities.

They all entered the domain of Seven of Nine. Chakotay was still amazed at the complexity of the systems here. Stars were projected on the huge display with such clarity that he momentarily experienced the vertigo of infinite space.

There were six stools flanking the hatchway, three to port and three to starboard. Lighted consoles flickered as gigabytes of data poured in from Voyager's sensors. Centered on a raised dais were Seven and Captain Janeway.

Relief coursed through Chakotay's veins. It was one thing to hear that Kathryn was all right from the Doctor, and another to see it for himself. Though Janeway had visited him in the hospital, he'd still been unconscious. Her grey eyes sought out his and lightened a tad in greeting.

"Captain, it's good to see you." He smiled at her in return.

"You too. Are you fit for duty?" Her lips curved upward in that delightful half-grin for which she was famous.

Chakotay moved to one of the open seats. "Yes, ma'am."

He took note of the tension in Janeway's shoulders, and the lines of fatigue carved into her face. They'd all been through the wringer lately, her most of all.

The doors opened to admit Lieutenant Torres, who looked only marginally less tired than the

captain. Smudges of dirt, grease and cleaning fluid stained the grey t-shirt she wore. Sweat soaked through its back. The half-Klingon gave him a quick smile and a wave before finding her own seat.

The last to arrive was the Doctor.

Captain Janeway stepped forward and looked at each of them in turn. Even after all this time under her command, Chakotay always sat up straighter when the captain's watchful eye fell on him. The others, he noticed, did so as well...except for Tuvok, who always sat as if someone had shoved a metal rod up his spine.

"It's good to have you back," the captain began. She had the ability to make you think she was speaking directly to you, even when addressing a group. "A ship is only as effective as its crew, and you have been sorely missed." A gesture from her brought up a new display. On it were two dots, moving toward their position.

Spirits of my father...what now?

"These are two Vaadwaur starships. They are carrying the wives and children of the soldiers being detained in our holodeck as well as those still manning the disabled ships in our immediate vicinity. I hailed them an hour ago."

"Why?" Torres asked, but surprisingly her tone was not militant or demanding.

Janeway faced her, and her austere features softened. "Upon examining the captured Vaadwaur, the Doctor discovered that they were starving. They have no replicators, and this sector of space is devoid of food." She stepped down and paced. "I spoke with Dr. Kinel, the physician Chakotay heard speak out against Gaul's...methods."

The minute pause in her voice told him that Janeway was still dealing with the aftermath of her torture. Concern kindled a fire in his stomach. But there was no time to do more than acknowledge its existence.

"According to him," Janeway continued, "the Vaadwaur have been wandering through this space for well over three months."

That follows. Chakotay did a quick Stardate calculation. *We encountered them about two months before entering the Labyrinth. Their subspace corridors would have allowed them to cover the distance faster than we could.*

"The first signs of life they encountered were the Talaxians whose vessel they used to lure us here." Anger tinged the edges of Janeway's voice. "There were two crewmen aboard the ship; both have been imprisoned ever since. They are on one of the approaching vessels. We have approximately twenty hours before they arrive." She stopped pacing and faced the group. Her very being radiated determination. "Whatever their actions may have been, I will not simply condemn them to starvation."

They all exchanged glances. Torres' brow was wrinkled, but not with anger. The engineer was deep in thought.

Interesting, she would ordinarily be the first one to object.

Tuvok, likewise, appeared to be contemplating his response.

Ensign Kim puffed out his cheeks as he exhaled a long breath. "How do we know he's telling the truth?"

"I had Crewman Merris present while I spoke with him. She, quite reluctantly, I might add, indicated that he was being truthful." Janeway's tone momentarily became tinged with humor. It didn't last. "Lieutenant Torres has already diverted two repair teams to the Vaadwaur to stabilize life support on three of their ships. Once Voyager's repairs are complete, we'll continue to render assistance. But..." she held a hand up to forestall another question from Harry. "We'll send over teams from Engineering to disable their particle cannons. I may want to help them, but I'm not entirely ready to trust them, either."

"That means we will be responsible for defending them," Chakotay observed. "Depending on what else we run into out here that may be a problem."

"In addition," Tuvok interjected with typical Vulcan logic, "our supplies of deuterium are not infinite. Replicators use substantial energy, and if we share food with the Vaadwaur, we will certainly reduce our own chances of survival. I am not," he continued in the same even tone, "advocating that we abandon them."

Janeway nodded understanding. She and Tuvok were close, and it showed during their conversations. Much that would need to be said to someone else could go unspoken.

"I had Neelix download the logs from the Talaxian vessel." The captain once more addressed them all. "It came from a colony about one week's travel from our position, just at the edge of the blast ring. With luck, we can resupply there." Her brows lowered. "I realize that we are taking a substantial risk. I wish there were another way, but I don't see it. The Federation has always believed that helping is a better path than harming, and I will not abandon those principles." She put both hands on her hips, and was once more the confident captain. "What I need from you is a plan. To begin with, we'll need enough emergency rations to feed the Vaadwaur for a month, and provision must be made for their safety and health as well. Their technology is outdated, but they do have warp technology, so we have some latitude to share ours with them. Put your heads together. We'll reconvene in twelve hours." Janeway once more gazed at each of them in turn. "Dismissed."

"Captain," Seven of Nine spoke up for the first time. "Might I have a word with you in private?"

Chakotay jerked his head in Tuvok's direction and received a terse nod in return. Then he nudged B'Elanna in a friendly fashion when the woman went past, and she threw him a disgruntled

smile.

Harry Kim fell in step with him. "It's good to have you back." He swept dark eyes from Chakotay to Tuvok.

"It's good to be back, Harry," Chakotay confirmed. "Mess Hall, thirty minutes? We may as well eat while we hash out these new developments."

"Right," Torres grumbled. "Here we go again, 'what doesn't kill us...'"

"...makes us stronger. At least we aren't dead." Chakotay keyed in Deck 2, but upon thinking about the upcoming marathon that the next few days promised to be, he couldn't help but wonder if he hadn't stepped on the early morning turbolift to hell.

Rayna wound her way through Engineering. There were six crewmen, including Lieutenant Torres working on the warp drive. The Klingon woman was holding a plasma torch in one hand, a duotronic probe in the other, and a sonic driver clenched between her teeth. She slouched past Rayna with a grunt by way of greeting and pointed the probe at a tangle of fiber optic cables hanging out of a control panel. Two of the surrounding entourage nodded and immediately went to work.

Other crewmen were recalibrating the matter-antimatter flow on the warp manifold.

The level of activity was similarly high on all Decks. Rayna could say that without fear of contradiction. She and Neelix had been delivering meals to places she'd never known existed. There was even a plasma monitoring station in both nacelles. Noah Lessing had the misfortune of drawing the short straw on repair duty; he was sandwiched inside a meter and half square box of forcefield trying to replace a burned out plasma conversion sensor. It was all Rayna could do to hand up his tray and drink through the access panel from the Jefferies Tube. She wasted no time departing.

At least he got to eat.

There had been a few personnel who'd missed mealtime. Captain Janeway had been among them. Neelix reported that he had chased after the human for two hours, but could never catch up with her. Everywhere he went reported that she'd just left.

Commander Chakotay and the majority of senior staff held a short meeting in the Mess Hall. She'd eavesdropped, of course. Habits like that were impossible to break. The four officers had somehow drawn up a deuterium reclamation unit...a converter of sorts that would purify contaminated deuterium and make it fit for use as fuel. It was the brainchild, primarily, of Torres and Tuvok, but Ensign Kim had made several useful suggestions. For his part, Commander Chakotay's more practically driven mind had churned out several possibilities for either replicating needed parts or modifying existing ones for use in the design. If it worked, deuterium consumption would be reduced by twenty-six percent.

Rayna had also learned that Seven of Nine had closeted herself with Captain Janeway. That had been approximately two hours ago.

And since the captain just summoned you to her temporary office, you can assume that it is because of something the Borg said.

Perhaps it wasn't too late to cut out Seven's tongue.

"Captain," Rayna stopped at the open hatch of Janeway's office.

Gun metal eyes lifted from a PADD of data. "Come in, Crewman," Janeway beckoned. "Please sit down."

There were two small, black stools crammed into the limited space in front of Janeway's desk. Rayna chose one and settled, hands resting loosely in her lap.

Janeway stepped around the desk and keyed the hatch shut. Then she returned to her chair. "I've reviewed the reports relevant to the death of General Gaul..." She retook her seat and regarded Rayna with business-like aloofness. "...including yours. Would you care to explain to me why you felt compelled to take use such extreme measures?"

"No, ma'am." Rayna did not elaborate either. If Janeway could not yet remember to word her questions with more precision it was no sweat from her brow.

Anger flared within the bleak, grey orbs. "By all means let me rephrase. Why did you kill General Gaul?"

"He was shooting at me." The obvious answer would do nothing save cause further outrage. Rayna knew that full well.

She was not disappointed.

"There were three other people with phaser rifles who were perfectly capable of incapacitating him." Janeway stood in a single, fluid motion, slamming her fists down on to the desk in a loud thump. "According to Seven's report, you made statement only a few minutes prior that Gaul had to be killed." The captain drew in a deep hissing breath of air. "Please explain yourself."

Ah, she can be taught.

Rayna eyed the captain with as much casual disdain as she could muster. "When I made that statement, General Gaul had just issued orders to his soldiers which caused them use a firing pattern designed to overload the forcefield protecting our position. That made him a clear and immediate threat to the survival of our group."

"So you're saying that you didn't premeditate his death." Janeway's voice was filled with

skepticism.

No, Rayna thought. *I didn't say that at all*. "As I have stated in my official report, Captain. I had already modified my phaser. When his soldiers were disabled by the EMP, he fled, and we all gave chase. He fired at us, and my instinctive reaction was to fire back. Then it was too late; the countdown to detonation had begun."

Disbelief transmitted itself on the air between them. It warred with impatience until both were washed away in a strong current of sadness. The captain sank down and shook her head. "Damn it, Rayna. Why won't you let me in?"

There was a worn, almost defeated note in Janeway's gritty alto. Rayna took note of it, and the almost translucent pallor to the captain's complexion. She lowered her defenses, giving her friend a look of affection. "I will allow Kathryn 'in,' as you put it, and answer anything she asks. However, I fear that Captain Janeway is destined to a life of ever-increasing frustration."

A weary chuckle slipped from Janeway's lips, to die gasping atop the desk. "And if I ask about what transpired between you and Crewman Gerron?"

Rayna breathed deeply of Kathryn's exhaustion, then replied, "The same." She rose and took a tentative step toward the captain. "Come to my quarters for dinner, Kathryn. We can talk there."

Longing filled her friend's eyes and deep regret as well. "I can't." It was the expected response.

And Rayna had been prepared to hear it. "Do you really believe your crew to be so incompetent they cannot proceed with basic repairs unless you are on duty to monitor them?"

"No!" Janeway's response was emphatic. "I...just..."

"From what I overheard in the Mess Hall, your next meeting is not for another nine hours. I assure you it will not take longer than that to consume whatever dish I may choose to prepare." Rayna kept her voice light of a purpose.

Competing desires flitted across Kathryn's features. Duty wrestled against need in a tug-of-war that had doubtless been repeated many hundreds of times. The woman's gaze rested on the scattered pile of PADDs, moved over to her computer terminal, and finally returned to Rayna. "Give me an hour or two to tie up some loose ends. All right?"

"By all means," purred Rayna. She headed toward the hatch, but paused there, turning. "May I be dismissed, Captain?"

Janeway nodded, looking grateful that the question had been asked.

Rayna departed and retraced her steps through Engineering. Likely it would be closer to three hours before Janeway would be able to pry herself away from Voyager's journey to wellness, and that was perfectly acceptable.

Two hours and twenty-three minutes later, Janeway closed out her last log entry. She leaned her head from side to side, stretching out the knots of her neck. Her eyes burned as if someone had dipped them in acid, rubbing them only made matters worse. So, she'd given up and said her goodbyes to what work remained.

You're having dinner with her.

Lieutenant Torres had signed off about fifteen minutes ago. The most critical repairs were complete. All engines, weapons, and shields were at one hundred percent. What remained was the scut work: patching holes and splicing relays. It was time consuming and tedious, but quite basic.

Dinner...what the devil were you thinking? First you practically hold her hand in Sickbay to do what? Heal a burn that was superficial? The Doctor was right there. Now you're on your way to her quarters to share a meal.

She smiled at several passing crewmen on her way to the 'lift. Happily no one else had boarded it. "Deck 3," Janeway requested, still trying to ignore the diatribe in her head. The cool walls of the car were almost welcoming in their solidity. She leaned her head back against one of them.

What had she been thinking? For once, Janeway didn't really know. Maybe all she really wanted were answers to what had happened with Rayna, Gaul, and Geron, and the only way to get them was to go off-record.

The doors opened. Spilling out into the corridor of Deck 3 was the familiar rectangle of light. It silently promised succor from the day's labor.

Janeway hesitated. This was highly inappropriate. When the captain ate dinner with a crewmember it was always in the Captain's Quarters, and at the captain's invitation.

Too late.

A shadow fell across the doorway preceding the arrival of the object, herself.

Clad in a white, diaphanous dress that cascaded elegantly to the floor, Rayna Merris seemed to float across the carpet rather than actually touch it. Janeway's breath caught; her eyes became tangled in the folds of sheer cloth, but still managed to discern the lissome curves of flesh concealed beneath it.

Oh. Shit.

Always before her attraction had been to the chiseled strength of men, the way their bodies rippled with muscle, the confidence of their strides. Rayna evinced none of that, and yet Janeway could barely hear over the relentless beating of her own heart.

Midnight colored eyes reached across the scant distance between them, and came alight with sparkles of ironic amusement. "Shall I move the table into the hallway, or would you like to come inside?" her would-be hostess murmured, and then drifted away, disappearing into the open hatch.

Janeway followed, and found Rayna waiting near the entrance.

"May I take your tunic?" Slender fingers gently tugged at the shoulders of Janeway's uniform.

Once it was shed, Rayna sealed the doorway. She cupped Janeway's elbow and silently guided her to the dining area.

Plain china of bone white adorned the glass tabletop. Gleaming utensils flanked the plates, resting atop linen napkins. Everything was understated, yet elegant at the same time. Soft music played. It was Andorian. Janeway recognized the style, but not the particular piece. She sat in the offered chair.

"Thank you for coming." Rayna glided to the replicator and pressed a couple keys. The room abruptly filled with the hearty aroma of beef.

"Thank you for inviting me," Janeway managed to reply. She tried to pull herself together, and found it a difficult task. "You look lovely. I didn't know this was a formal affair."

The golden head turned and a snowy brow arched upward. "It isn't. This," Rayna tugged at her clothing, "is a lounging dress." Then she smiled. "You think I'm lovely?"

Janeway averted her gaze, feeling unaccountably self-conscious. "I'm sure you must hear that all the time."

When Rayna returned to the table, she carried a covered serving bowl. "Not lately, and never by anyone who mattered a Circassian fig." She set her burden down. "I found that you had logged a recipe for pot roast and purloined it. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." The aroma had already set Janeway's mouth watering. That reaction at least made sense. All she'd consumed in the last several hours was coffee.

Food and drink were portioned out, and the remainder of dinner was spent exchanging pleasantries. Rayna was the consummate hostess, keeping the conversation focused on the repair progress, mainly, with occasional forays into humor. Janeway found herself laughing more than once, especially when Rayna began to imitate some of the crewmembers...quite accurately, even down to their mannerisms and expressions. The one she did of Mortimer Harren was particularly riotous.

"My goodness," Janeway protested between barks of laughter, "I didn't realize you paid so much attention. Can you do one of me?"

"Yes, but I won't." Her friend began to clear away the soiled dishes. "I've found it impolitic to mimic captains, whether they are on or off duty." She recycled them and began to key in something else. "Besides, it's your birthday, and I would never poke fun at you on such an auspicious occasion."

My birthday?

Janeway blinked in surprise. What day was it? The Stardate was 53382.6. Her sluggish brain cobbled together a set of calculations and came up with May 20, 2376.

All right. So it is my birthday. How damn old am I?

Before that number could present itself, Rayna sat a small cake down on the table. It was the color of sun-kissed wheat, topped with walnuts and a drizzled with honey. Smells of apple and cinnamon wafted upward and slipped unbidden into Janeway's nostrils.

"I know that Terran tradition requires a cake with icing and candles," her hostess explained, "but the last time I did candles, it set off the fire suppression subroutines during Admiral Nuriayev's party." Rayna shrugged and retook her seat. "He speedily reinstated my security clearance, though." Her smile held both humor and sarcasm in equal measure.

She baked me a cake.

No one had done that since she was a child.

"I don't know what to say." Janeway felt her cheeks flush with emotion.

"Stuff your mouth. Chewing always buys time." Rayna cut off a slice, loaded it onto a small plate, and handed it over.

Take the advice, old girl.

She did, but managed to utter a few words of gratitude in between buttery-cinnamony bites.

When was the last time you spent an evening in such a relaxing manner?

Fair Haven...you, Michael... a picnic by the lake...

Those days seemed like ancient history, another life, maybe even another person. Janeway set her fork down, and rubbed at her neck. Muscles were coming loose, and they ached. As Rayna picked up the leavings of dessert, she brought her free hand to the base of Janeway's skull. Three or four quick touches later, and it felt as though someone had reversed the floodgates of her nerve endings. Oh, she was still relaxed, but suddenly every centimeter of her skin had become awake...and glaringly aware of Rayna's nearness. Sensations coursed down her spine and coalesced into a warm, pulsing throb. Heat suffused Janeway's cheeks, and she was glad when

her hostess carried away the dishes.

What ails you, Kathryn? You're like a teenager in puberty.

Maybe it's her and those Deltan pheromones. You never did ask the Doctor about them.

The possibility held merit for only a half second. Janeway's scientific mind was, if nothing else, honest; no one else on board had reported unusually strong sexual feelings when Rayna Merris was about, and that was one thing guaranteed to have made the top of Voyager's grapevine list.

So it's just you. Make your exit quickly and maybe you can escape before your over-active hormones become noticeable.

Are you daft? She's an empath.

Janeway pushed her fingers through her hair, sweeping it away from her face and trying to quiet her racing thoughts...and pounding heart. She found that Rayna was eyeing her calmly from beside the replicator. The Deltan's face revealed nothing, as always.

"You know, don't you?" Janeway stood and walked over to the sitting area. Her feelings were in freefall.

"That you are attracted to me?" Her hostess followed at a distance. "Yes. I also know how conflicted you are about it." The willowy woman folded herself into the easy chair and regarded her with a quiet kind of patience.

That's an understatement.

Still, having it all out in the open was comforting, in its way. Janeway settled on the sofa and propped her feet on the coffee table. However, now she felt vulnerable, almost naked. It was clearly time to regain some measure of control where this evening was concerned. "Are you ready to discuss General Gaul?"

Rayna shrugged with an attitude of nonchalant boredom. "His attack on Voyager was personally motivated. I read his face when he looked at Seven of Nine; it was filled with enmity and rage. He would never have surrendered, and we would have had no alternative but to keep fighting until one side or the other was destroyed. Besides which he almost killed Tuvok and..."

Janeway glanced up to find that Rayna had lowered her eyes and was studying the chair arm as if the color offended her. Gone was the smoothly polished mask that normally cloaked the woman's features. Shyness had replaced it.

"And?" Janeway prompted.

Her friend drew in one breath, then a second, before finally speaking. "He beat you, Kathryn."

"He wanted the access codes," Janeway answered.

Her memory of that period was, so far, splotchy, at best. With luck, it would remain so. Still, most interrogations involved some kind of physical punishment. As a member of 'fleet Intelligence, Rayna should know that. She'd been a prisoner, once, herself.

Then why would she raise that issue?

Janeway's mind hiccupped, and in a flash of intuition, she realized that the statement had not been an idle observation, but rather an answer to her question. Her emotions went numb, and her brain struggled to process the revelation.

Rayna did not look up, but whispered, "I did warn you it would not be easy to be my friend." She rose with preternatural grace and moved to the cabin's windows. Several of the Vaadwaur ships could be seen orbiting round Voyager like little flies against the gray background of stardust.

"I don't know how to feel about what you've said," Janeway confessed. Her reactions were slow in coming. First was disapproval, because she could not abide someone dying on her account. Immediately thereafter was anger, but it faded. Rayna Merris had been raised primarily in the cut throat world of Orion vengeance. "I certainly cannot condone it." She tried to speak gently.

"I know." The sentence was uttered in a supremely neutral tone as Rayna continued to watch the indistinct images of ships float past. "Though I said I would answer your questions, I never promised that you would like what you heard."

She expects you to just walk out.

Her brain coughed up another epiphany, an astonishing feat considering how clogged with fatigue it was. Janeway understood the cost of Rayna's admission, that the woman expected to lose her friendship by revealing the truth.

Before she could countermand the impulse, Janeway left the couch and came up behind Rayna at the window. Standing this close brought a new wave of arousal that stole her breath. All the words of reassurance that had formed as she crossed the room had vanished. Only desire remained.

Rayna spoke quietly, "It would be best for you to leave." She turned around. Her dark eyes were veiled, revealing no emotion whatsoever. "You're quite tired, and close to doing something you will regret."

She's right, the captain in her spoke with authority. *Nothing good can come of getting involved with a subordinate.*

Somehow, though, Janeway sensed that was not what Rayna meant. She laid a hand on the woman's arm, knowing it was a mistake. Only the faint barrier of cloth separated them. Her eyes closed. "If this is one-sided, say so." Janeway braced herself for rejection.

"You are crack-brained."

Rayna's comment startled Janeway into looking at her. The dark eyes were once more glimmering with humor.

"Anyone with sex organs and a pulse would be attracted to you, Kathryn." Her friend's face closed down again, and she slid smoothly past, breaking their contact.

"Then why are you avoiding me?" Janeway trailed her. In every battle, there was a time to retreat, and a time to advance.

"Because this," Rayna spun around and gestured down her body, "is well-plowed field, and you deserve something better." She executed a smooth about face and moved over to key the hatch. "Now. Good night."

Janeway slowly walked around the woman, reached the hatchway, and closed the door. Then she came back, moving until they were centimeters apart, until she could feel Rayna's body heat mingle with her own. The other woman tried to back away, but Janeway would not relent. She pressed Rayna against the closed door, reveling in the way their bodies meshed. Reaching upward, Janeway cupped Rayna's face. Their lips met.

Soft...

Janeway traced the outline of Rayna's mouth, silently asking it to open. It did. Their tongues entwined in a sensual dance that left her breathless.

Smooth...

Unlike human tongues, Rayna's was devoid of texture, slipping effortlessly over Janeway's.

She'd read in novels how the world could stand still for a single kiss, but that had always been fiction...until now.

The body beneath hers trembled.

Shit, Kathryn. You're scaring her. The woman was raped.

"I'm sorry." Janeway made to pull away, cursing both her libido and lack of consideration, but was stilled when Rayna's hand caught her wrist, then eased down to intertwine their fingers. It was a familiar sensation, and Janeway froze, captured by it.

"Do you feel guilty about absolutely everything?" The question was blithely phrased.

"I thought I might have frightened you." She looked down at the carpet as if it would open up to swallow her.

"You did. No one has ever kissed me like that before."

Janeway's head snapped up and she stared at the other woman stupidly for several moments. "Like what?" she asked, leery of the answer.

"Like they were kissing me, not just my mouth." Rayna brought the back of her fingers to Janeway's face and stroked it sweetly.

"Kim to Janeway."

For once in her life, Janeway would have gladly ripped off her communicator and jettisoned it into deep space. She forced herself to tap it. "Go ahead."

"I'm afraid we have something of a riot going on in Holodeck One." He sounded more frustrated than anything else.

"I'm on my way." Janeway started to mutter an apology to Rayna, but was stopped when two fingers rested across her lips.

"None of that now," her friend assured. "Being captain is part of who you are."

Janeway picked up her uniform top and pulled it on, moving her commbadge back to its customary location. This was exactly why she shouldn't get involved with someone. There would never be enough time.

Her self-recriminations were halted as easily as her apology had been, this time by the sweetness of Rayna's mouth on hers. Desire swirled in her belly, pooling lower and then rising on a tide of passion that left her shaking inside. Unlike the previous embrace, this one set all of Janeway's nerves on fire. Rayna's hands were everywhere, touching her in places she forgot existed. And then she was gone.

My God.

Janeway nearly toppled over, her knees were that weak. For her part, Rayna was grinning evilly next to the hatchway. She keyed it open with a finger and winked. "You didn't think I would let you win every round, did you, Kathryn?"

All Janeway could do was walk unsteadily into the corridor. For the first time in a long, long time, she wanted to be somewhere other than work.