

# ~ Murder On the Dead Zone Express ~

by Trekgrl

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Notes and Disclaimors:

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

I don't have any money, so suing me for copyright violation would be fruitless. Plus, I'm not making money from this endeavor. It's fanfiction. I'm a fan.

Rayna Merris is an original character. Please don't use her without my permission, especially if you figure out a way to make some bucks! J

This story is set after *Dragons Teeth*.

I like mysteries and have set this one up, quite on purpose, to be a salute to Agatha Christie. If you hate her work, you won't like this, so save yourself the frustration.

OK.

To Janet of "Janet's Star Trek *Voyager* Site:" **THANK YOU FOR PUTTING YOUR SITE BACK UP!**

There. I feel better now. Seriously, the site was down and I was in a panic. There's no other source of *Voyager* information that even comes close.

I am also immensely grateful to Memory-Alpha and Memory-Beta as well as Ex Artis Scientia. As a source of Trek information, there are no better sources.

Finally, the two women are going to end up in bed. To those of you who have stuck it out, your patience will be rewarded. For those of you who are underage: shame on you, where is your mother?

The definition of Ha'DIbaH can be found here: <http://mughom.wikia.com/wiki/Ha%27DIbaH>  
Constructive criticism and good wishes can be sent to:

[trekgrl@hush.ai](mailto:trekgrl@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. Anyone who wants a top-notch beta, need look no further.**

A special thanks goes out to RJ Nolan, who pushed and prodded and protested the ending until I

rewrote it. She was right, and the story is better for her input.

Jae, thank you for your support. I miss your wisdom.

Casper, you can stop holding your breath.

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The turbolift doors opened. Kathryn Janeway stood at the threshold, looking out onto *Voyager's* Bridge. It had been a little over three days since last she'd stood here. Her eyes tracked upward to the overhead, remembering the circular opening through which the Vaadwaur had dropped, and fear tickled at her insides. But there was no sign of it, not even a hairline scar where new metal had been fused to old. She lowered her gaze.

Gone too were the smells of blood and ozone. Her shoulders tensed at the memories of phaser fire. Ghost pain skittered down her back like beetles on dry leaves. The burns were healed, but the skin remained sensitive.

*Like the rest of us*, she thought dryly. *The battle is over, but the scars will be a long time fading.*

Beta shift controlled the Bridge at the moment; her senior officers were already in the Briefing Room. Janeway gave the staff on duty a warm smile.

As she left the 'lift someone announced, "Captain on deck."

"As you were." Her response was instinctive, but she felt its power, saw it echoed in the tense smiles of her crewmen. Completing that small ritual assured them all that the Bridge was, once again, fully functional.

Crushed grey carpet cushioned her boots as she moved past the consoles. Their blinking lights added dancing dots of color to the starkly illuminated surround. Janeway drew in a long breath. No ion blasters cut the air with green jets of destruction. No monsters clad in dull metal descended on her crew.

Just before entering the Briefing Room, she allowed herself the luxury of a final, sweeping glance, and an accompanying sense of satisfaction. Against impossible odds, they had triumphed. *Voyager*, unlike the Humpty Dumpty of nursery rhymes, was being put back together again.

She keyed the hatchway, leaving behind the accomplishments of today, to face the necessity of tomorrow. The Briefing Room was full. Chakotay sat to the right of the head chair. His florid features lit up in a smile that belied the fatigue engraved around his gentle, brown eyes. Directly across from him was Tuvok. Her old friend offered a nod of greeting, and Janeway returned the gesture. He, alone, appeared unaffected by the pressure of the last few days. B'Elanna Torres wore a much-stained grey t-shirt. From the unique patterns of grime, Janeway could tell that it was different than the one she wore last night. Even so, the engineer's muddy brown eyes held no evidence of sleep.

*She's been at it non-stop.*

Now that the ship was fully functional, Engineering had dispatched teams to assist the Vaadwaur. Crews had been working around the clock. There were still hundreds of minor repairs to be completed, but they didn't all require B'Elanna's personal attention. Janeway resolved to order the woman off-duty for the next two days.

Tom Paris' blonde head was a welcome sight. The helmsman grinned up at her.

She crossed to him and gave his shoulder a pat. "It's good to have you back."

"Thank you, ma'am," he replied.

Harry Kim was frowning down at his PADD. He didn't stir as she passed, but Janeway didn't mind. The young man had become more concentrated of late, displaying a single-minded determination to get through this section of space that was somewhat uncharacteristic of his normally easy-going nature. Just yesterday he'd admitted that he was sick and tired of the obstacles being placed between him and home.

She knew the feeling very well. However, in her deepest recesses, Janeway also knew that home, for her, had become an indistinct, elusive concept. Wherever, whatever it was, home no longer felt like Alpha Quadrant.

*So where is it, Katie?*

The Doctor glowered at her without amusement. As soon as this meeting was concluded, she expected him to badger her about reporting for a check-up. One was required for all personnel who had been treated for an injury. It was designed to both monitor the healing process, and to determine fitness for duty. She was twenty-four hours overdue. His expressive mouth screwed itself into a sardonic frown as Janeway took her seat.

Finally, there was Seven of Nine, sitting tall in her chair. The former Borg had the uncanny knack of appearing to stand even when she was seated. Each strand of blonde hair was captured perfectly into a bun. Cool eyes of clearest azure returned Janeway's gaze, but their icy cast seemed brittle.

*We're all nearing the limits of our endurance.*

"Good morning," she greeted, pumping vitality into her voice that she did not truly feel.

They responded, of course, some more enthusiastically than others and Janeway did her best to smile. "We've come a long way, in short time. B'Elanna, you and your repair teams have done an outstanding job." The engineer flushed at the praise, and seemed younger of a sudden. Janeway continued, "It feels good to be back in the Briefing Room, not that Astrometrics wasn't a good substitute."

Heads nodded. Shoulders relaxed.

*Good.*

She turned her attention to Chakotay. "Would you care to start us off, Commander?" It struck her then that such a lead-in would never work with Rayna, who would merely answer, "no," and leave it at that.

Janeway pushed aside such thoughts before they overwhelmed her consciousness, as they often had during the past two days. Rayna's kiss had become one of the many specters haunting the halls of her memory. Its ghostly touch beckoned her to return.

"Overall we're in good shape," began Chakotay.

He leaned forward, elbows on top of the table and referred to a PADD as he spoke. "Over 90% of all repairs are completed. I'll leave the specifics for Lieutenant Torres when she makes her report." His dark eyes swiveled toward B'Elanna and seemed to smile. "Deuterium levels are excellent. Sick leave use is down significantly despite the intense activity level and all shifts are reporting reasonable morale. Every section has significant information and/or progress to report. However, considering recent events, I want to begin with Security. He inclined his head toward Tuvok. "What is the current status of the Vaadwaur?"

"Of the seventeen vessels involved in the attack," Tuvok said in his resonant baritone, "only seven were salvageable. The rest have been cannibalized for useable parts." He stood and crossed to the Briefing Room's display. "Counting the two which recently joined us, that brings the total number of Vaadwaur ships to nine." His fingers danced lightly over the touchscreen, retrieving a schematic. "These are light-attack craft, built to house a crew of ten and transport up to twenty soldiers. However, they were never designed for long-term occupation. This limitation was of minimal concern when there were nineteen ships, and their population could be distributed among them all. It is of critical importance, however, with only nine." Turning to face the group, Tuvok finished, "There are one hundred fifty-six Vaadwaur. If they are all billeted aboard their native vessels, life support systems will fail within 2.3 months."

Janeway blinked her eyes closed a moment, opened them, and gave a reluctant nod. "So we'll need to find room on *Voyager*."

"Yes," he said, his expression inscrutable, as always. "The women and children would present less of a security threat than the soldiers. However, there is risk involved in housing any of the Vaadwaur."

Paris canted his head to one side and frowned. "What effect will all those extra bodies have on *Voyager*'s life support and energy reserves?"

It was Torres who answered. She gave her weary eyes a quick rub with one hand and performed calculations on a PADD. "We'll burn through our year's supply of deuterium in a little more than six months."

"Six months?" Tom scowled at her. "We aren't doubling *Voyager's* population, B'Elanna. Why so soon?"

"It isn't just environmental controls and life support." Lieutenant Torres sent her PADD's data to the room's monitor. "There are showers, latrines, food, all of which use deuterium."

Janeway held up a hand and silenced further discussion. "The alternative puts innocent lives at risk. We'll begin scanning for new deuterium sources once we clear the blast ring." She shifted her attention to Chakotay. "Initiate energy conservation measures starting 0600 hours tomorrow."

"Yes, Captain."

At her nod, Tuvok continued with his section of the briefing.

"As an interim measure," he called up *Voyager's* blueprints, "I suggest that we empty Cargo Bay 3 and use it as temporary housing." His dark eyes intersected hers. "A census of Vaadwaur has revealed that some of the children are without parents. Neelix has volunteered to assist with their care and education."

It was finally sinking in, the sheer immensity of what faced them. Janeway kept her features neutral, betraying none of the insecurity that dogged her thoughts.

The others, however, weren't quite so disciplined. Chakotay and Paris exchanged worried looks when they thought Janeway wasn't paying attention. Though Harry Kim had yet to raise his head, she could tell that he was listening intently by the minute tensing of his facial muscles.

Tuvok kept on speaking as if he were oblivious to the effect of his words. "Engineering has deactivated the particle cannons on all the Vaadwaur ships, and we are in the process of returning the soldiers to them. Once the holodeck is cleared, the simulation can be shut down."

"How cooperative are they being?" Chakotay asked.

"They are dissatisfied with being dependant on *Voyager* for protection, but otherwise are complying without incident." Tuvok returned to his seat.

"Who's in charge now?" queried Tom, glancing around the room. Having only just been released from Sickbay this morning, he was obviously playing catch-up.

"A Captain Drall," Janeway answered. "He was on one of the two ships held in reserve. According to the other captains, he's the most senior." It took an effort of will that was almost physical to keep the disgust from her voice. Though they'd had only a few, short conversations, the truth was she didn't like Drall.

Chakotay gave her a knowing glance before saying, "You'll all be meeting him tonight." At the surprised expressions from the other staff members, he continued, "There's a dinner at 1800

hours in the Mess Hall. Captain Drall, Captain Riza, along with their first officers will be attending, as will all senior staff from *Voyager*." When Torres snapped her head up with a protest on her lips, he added, "Including you, B'Elanna. No exceptions."

Her whispered oath did not quite reach Janeway's ears, and surprisingly, that was the limit of Torres' protests. Instead, she merely grimaced her displeasure and began to enter data into her PADD.

Satisfied that his point was made, Chakotay continued, "They have declined to travel via transporter," one corner of his lips turned upward, "and will be using a Vaadwaur shuttle. It seems that Captain Drall is concerned his molecules will be scrambled."

They all enjoyed a brief laugh at that. Scrambling molecules was an old joke in Federation circles, started by the legendary Dr. Leonard McCoy. Janeway found it ironic in that there were far more shuttlecraft crashes than transporter incidents.

Chakotay sobered slightly and then returned to the meeting's agenda. "Which brings us to Engineering."

Torres stood. The stoop to her shoulders told Janeway that the woman's back was probably hurting.

*Since half the time you've seen her, she was hanging upside down inside some access panel or other, it's no wonder.*

"All the hull breeches are repaired." Her report was cut short by a round of applause from the attendees. Even Kim offered up a warm smile as he clapped. There was still, to Janeway's mind, something wrong. The young ensign immediately returned to whatever data was scrolling across his PADD.

"Thank you," B'Elanna was slightly flushed with pleased embarrassment. "Everyone in Engineering has gone above and beyond, and I've entered several commendations into the log."

"For the record," Janeway announced. "I've reinstated Marla Gilmore to the rank of ensign. According to all reports, she was instrumental in defending Engineering during the Vaadwaur assault."

There were nods all around. Likely there would a similar announcement for Crewman Lessing, but Janeway wanted to speak with him, personally, before taking that action. There would be other acknowledgments as well: Seven, Harry Kim, Crewmen Geron and Bonneville...and Merris. Entries had already been made in the ship's log, personal commendations would follow.

Torres continued, "Not only have they been pulling double shifts to repair *Voyager*, they've also been assigned to repairing the Vaadwaur ships as well." She brought up a lengthy list on the room's display panel. "The last of the major projects has been completed, and all their vessels are ready for warp."

Grateful pride swelled into Janeway's bosom at these words. "Excellent work," she confirmed. "Neelix has spoken to the two Talaxian crewmen and confirmed the coordinates of their colony." Her eyes flitted to the Doctor. "We'll hear more about them during the medical briefing. Suffice it to say that their knowledge of this sector has been extremely helpful." Here Janeway offered up a tight, determined smile. "Now that the fleet is ready, we can be underway."

*Fleet...we have a fleet...*

It was a strange concept giving rise to feelings that were conflicting in the extreme. The Vaadwaur were a dangerous people. Having them along, even with their weapons deactivated brought with it the possibility of subterfuge and betrayal. And yet...for the first time in six long years, *Voyager* was no longer alone.

*Hmph. Chakotay and Tuvok are none too pleased with that development, either.*

*What if they're right?*

Janeway cut short the inner debate. Building alliances based on mutual respect was the heart and soul of the Federation. Even after all this time, she was still committed to that ideal.

"Mr. Paris," Janeway gave her helmsman a tight grin. "When this meeting concludes, set a course for the Talaxian colony, best speed."

He returned her smile with glints of anticipation in his deep, watery eyes. "Aye, aye, ma'am."

At her nod, Torres continued. "We've built a prototype of the deuterium reclamation unit, and have been running simulations on Holodeck 2. So far, everything looks good. Seven has handled most of the project, with support from Engineering. Frankly, Captain," the engineer's black eyes met Janeway's, "we couldn't have moved so quickly without her."

The words of praise achieved what Janeway thought was impossible: Seven sat even straighter than before. As if warmed by an invisible sun, ice crystals in the ex-Borg's eyes melted. Time wound backward until, for the span of a sigh, the child who lived behind the implants peered shyly out to glow with delighted pride.

*Hello, Annika Hanson, Janeway silently acknowledged.*

Then glacial veils closed; poise returned.

B'Elanna had done well. Bringing out the best in those around you was the mark of an effective leader. So was giving away the credit for achievements. Torres had just done both in a single meeting.

*She's ready for command, a little green yet, but no more so than you were.*

Janeway filed that bit of information away for future use.

The remainder of Torres' report included progress on the minor repairs, and concluded with, "We've started adapting our replicators to work with the Vaadwaur ships, but it's slow going. Their systems are antiquated in comparison to ours. Just building the interfaces will take another three days." She twisted her head around and glared at the schematic Tuvok had displayed, showing the merest spark of her volatile temper. "I haven't seen such outdated, dilapidated scows since leaving the Maquis."

They all shared a lighthearted glance, except for Tuvok. His ebony brow scarcely rose a millimeter.

Suddenly self-conscious, B'Elanna gave a sheepish shrug. "We've managed to increase the efficiency of their power systems about thirteen percent, by updating a few relays, but to make any measurable difference they need a major redesign. Look at this." Her fingers danced a quickstep over the monitor closing in on the auxiliary plasma relays. "The injectors are worthless. Back-up systems are substandard. Hell they can't even process synthetic dilithium without precipitating a crystalline waste. It's been hundreds of years since the Federation's had that problem."

Tom Paris was beaming at his girlfriend as if her frustration was the most wondrous thing he'd ever experienced. "Anything dangerous?"

"Most industrial waste is," she retorted and shot him a cross, but fond look. "Claudetite is stable, but requires proper handling and containment. The Vaadwaur have an adequate system in place. Unfortunately that's where we run into the real problem." The display transformed yet again. Copper-colored storage cylinders filled it. "These contain invidium...."

Several groans expressed the frustration that Janeway carefully controlled. Invidium had been used in medical stasis fields prior to 2366, but had been discontinued with the development of safer technologies. It wreaked havoc on replicators and other essential systems, and was, unfortunately, one of only four elements which could not be detected by Federation sensors. Janeway silenced the group with a scowl.

"I take it they aren't just using it in Sickbay," she guessed wryly.

"I'm afraid not." B'Elanna frowned as she answered Janeway's question. "All their force field technology, including hazmat and dilithium containment is based on invidium."

Chakotay sent her a brief glance. "So we'll have to reengineer their entire power system to install replicators." In the muddy pools of his eyes, Janeway found the same depth of weary humor. "Oh well," he quipped. "What's one more challenge?"

It seemed that Torres shared their view. Her cranial ridges deepened in an ironic smirk. "Well, I've got one for you: three of the derelict craft had broken containers, but," she squinted her eyes at Paris and cut off his impending outburst, "we issued polarity scanners and initiated



decontamination protocols on all Away Teams prior to returning to *Voyager*."

"Good." Janeway nodded. Polarity scanners were the only reliable means of detecting invidium, causing it to glow a vibrant purple, but they were limited in range. The safest practice was to prevent invidium introduction altogether. "Replicate a supply of cryonatrium, just in case." In the event of contamination there were only two ways to render invidium inert: lowering any affected systems to -200 oC, or exposing it to cryonatrium.

Torres contacted Engineering and relayed the order.

That settled, Janeway turned her attention back to the energy crisis. "Let's see the Vaadwaur plasma generators."

The display image transformed. Janeway saw at least six points where modifications would have to be made. "Once we modify their systems appropriately, what impact will replicators have on their fuel consumption?"

B'Elanna's ridged brow furrowed in concern. "If they use them for anything beyond emergency rations, their consumption of deuterium will increase by almost thirty-two percent."

"That's unacceptable," Janeway scowled at the news and continued to study the schematics. "What if you replaced the plasma injectors with ones from the Delta Flyer?"

Sparks of muted excitement were born in the brown depths of Torres' eyes. "I see what you mean," she confirmed, pointing at several spots on the display. "The dimensions are almost identical, but our injectors would substantially enhance fuel efficiency." She snatched up her PADD and made a few hurried entries. "I'll get Vorik and Gilmore on it, and meet them in Engineering."

"No." Janeway curtailed the sudden burst of energy. "You'll get your team on it and then take forty-eight hours of off-duty time. That's an order," she added when Torres looked recalcitrant.

Finally the woman's stubborn chin lowered and she nodded her acquiescence.

Janeway redirected her attention to Seven of Nine. "When will the deuterium recycler be ready for a real world test?"

Seven rose, and towered over the group like a demi-goddess carved in butterscotch. "I estimate that all simulated trials will be complete in less than seventy-two hours. It will, however, necessitate taking engines off-line while the prototype is deployed. That would be best accomplished once we have reached the Talaxian colony."

"At warp three, we should arrive in about a week," Lieutenant Paris chimed in. "I might be able to push a little, maybe to warp 3.5 or so. That would cut our travel time by a day or two."

Chakotay interjected, "I'm all for escaping the blast ring as quickly as possible." He raised his

brows at Tom. "Just don't run us aground."

The old nautical term now meant, "don't slam us into a star or planet and blow us to bits." Janeway couldn't help giving an inward chuckle. After all they had survived, navigational error was not her first choice of destruction.

"Agreed." She gave Chakotay a wry glance. "Doctor," she prompted.

The EMH cleared his throat, a superfluous action considering he didn't breathe. "The crew appears to be adapting to the heightened levels of activity. Despite the adverse circumstances, there have been few fatigue-related injuries or accidents. Most of the wounded," here he sent her a scathing look, "have reported for their follow-up exams without having to be coerced." His holographic fingers glided over new PADD entries. "The Talaxian prisoners were transferred to *Voyager* immediately. Like everyone else, they are malnourished. There are signs of torture..."

Janeway's anger flared briefly despite the fact that she had reviewed the Doctor's report in advance. Someone had beaten the captives, many times, causing fractures and deep muscle bruising. They'd also gained superficial burns on their hands and fingers. "Cleaning Detail," allegedly....

*Likely handling some of the industrial waste Torres spoke of.*

There hadn't been much time for debriefing, either. Interrogating what remained of the Vaadwaur command structure had taken priority. At Tuvok's suggestion, Crewman Merris had been tasked with questioning the Talaxians. Janeway roused herself from introspection in time to hear the EMH begin a new section of his report.

"The Vaadwaur captives are showing some signs of recovery as well. Most have begun to gain weight, and those who haven't are, at least, not continuing to lose it, unlike some of *Voyager's* crew." His muttered comment was directed toward Janeway.

She'd noticed how loosely her uniform fit this morning, a detail that had obviously not escaped the Doctor's photonic notice. Janeway forced her eyes not to roll. "What about the children?"

His holo-features softened. Small glints of pleasure lightened the artificial eyes. Janeway was struck by how human he had become.

*Our own version of Pinocchio.*

He tapped his PADD once or twice before speaking. "Dr. Kinel has been conducting physicals, but they are far from complete." His raven-black eyes held notes of concern. "There have been too many wounded, frankly, for him to do little more than update a few files. If I could transport over and help him..."

His voice trailed off in an unspoken request.

"We'll see." She wasn't satisfied that it would be safe. The Doctor's program had been hijacked in the past. His direct uplink to the ship's computer was not an issue to be ignored lightly. Even with the gap in technologies, the Vaadwaur had proven themselves to be remarkably resilient and adaptable.

"It would be more efficient, fuel-wise, than transporting them to *Voyager*." The EMH was determined it seemed.

"Duly noted, Doctor." Janeway cut him off. "Ensign Kim?"

The young Asian looked up at her in surprise.

He had not been scheduled to present at this meeting, but Janeway's curiosity had gotten the better of her. "Would you be so kind as to enlighten us on what you've been working on?"

"Yes, Captain," he obliged immediately, looking slightly sheepish. "We've had an intermittent sensor contact."

Harry's fingers glided like zephyrs over his pad and brought up a replay from *Voyager*'s sensors. For the barest of instants, there was a shadow on the scanner's field. Rounded and amorphous, it glimmered stark white against the grey backdrop of pulverized dust. Then it disappeared.

Chakotay frowned and had Harry play it once more. "How many times has it been seen?" he asked.

"Three," Ensign Kim replied, and brought up the recordings of the prior two contacts. "Two on Gamma Shift and one this morning. It seems to be circling our position."

Janeway watched the coordinates change with each contact. Harry was right. It did seem to be orbiting the small fleet of ships. She studied the images. Clearly they were incomplete. Whether the object was simply huge or the radiation created too much interference, she could not rightly say. Each of the shadows was identical in its density, bright, almost luminous against the interstellar haze.

"You've run a diagnostic?" Chakotay asked, needlessly, Janeway knew.

"Five of them," Harry said. "Each one by a different tech."

*Three shadows, at separate times, in disparate locations...*

"It looks," Lieutenant Paris shook his head, a frown crinkling his forehead as he stared at the sensor blobs, "almost like neutronium, but it can't be a piece of the star's core."

"Not likely." Harry folded his arms, looking thoughtful. "The explosion starts in the core and radiates outward. Besides..." his eyes gained sparkles of humor, "... the latest image appears to be almost a kilometer long. A chunk of neutronium that size would cause extreme gravimetric

instability, like a cosmic vacuum cleaner."

*With a weight of 1015 grams per cubic centimeter, "gravimetric instability" is an understatement.*

All in all, it was an intriguing point of contact. "Send out a probe," Janeway instructed Kim. "Delay our departure for one hour, Mr. Paris."

Tom nodded, still staring at the display. "There's something familiar about it. I swear I've seen sensor readings like that somewhere before." His lips thinned as he concentrated.

"That's impossible," Torres spoke up. "The only Federation vessel that's passed this way ended up a derelict in the Labyrinth." Like Paris, she was focusing on the strange image.

*Enough.*

"We've got a couple hours until our dinner with the Vaadwaur." Janeway brought the meeting to a close. "We've been through a lot in the last month, and this crew is overdue for rest and recreation. Unfortunately there's no time for either." Janeway sat up straighter and faced her staff squarely. "Words cannot express how proud I am of each of you, how honored I am to captain this vessel and this crew. Thank you all. Dismissed."

They all filed out at varying speeds, until only the Doctor remained. "Captain-

"Let's get this over with," she cut him off and motioned for him to scan her with the tricorder he produced as if by magic.

His holographic features reformed into a fierce scowl of displeasure. "I see we still aren't sleeping. Your body chemistry is so out of whack it's a wonder you haven't fainted. Do you eat at all, or have you had Seven put in some Borg implants so you can subsist only on coffee?"

Janeway gritted her teeth. She hated physical examinations as a rule and the EMH's penchant for sarcasm only made them worse. "Things have been a little hectic lately," she parried, sending him a glare that would have silenced any other crewman.

*Except Rayna...*

The thought waylaid her before she could check it. Fortunately the Doctor wasn't a telepath.

"Don't try to blame this on the Vaadwaur." Holo eyes flashed with the intensity of a phaser blast. "You probably hold the distinction of being least healthy captain in all of Starfleet. Your insomnia could supply me with enough material for a treatise on sleep deprivation. Not to mention your inability to maintain weight." The EMH picked up a PADD and entered data with enough force that he appeared to be attacking it. "Mr. Neelix reports that he can't even find you half the time, let alone get you to eat something."

"Doctor," Janeway warned.

"I've reached the limit of my programming when it comes to you and your health." He set the PADD down. "You don't listen. You don't delegate." Illusory eyes fairly crackled with frustration. "Despite searching my databanks and soliciting advice, I've come up empty handed. The only person who has had any useful suggestions for this appalling situation is Crewman Merris."

The mention of Rayna's name caused all of Janeway's senses to prickle. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear anymore, but could not resist. "What did she suggest?"

"She said just to let you pass out, then shove a feeding tube down your throat." The Doctor placed both hands on his hips and faced her squarely. His features were reddened with emotion.

That sounded like Rayna. Though she didn't mean to, Janeway found herself smiling. It didn't last. The memory of their kiss resurfaced and pulled her into an emotional maelstrom. She spun away from her unwelcome companion and returned to her chair.

"Captain?" The Doctor's voice was less irritated and more concerned. "You seem troubled, not that you don't have enough on your mind between the Dead Zone and the Vaadwaur." He moved closer. Cool fingers composed of force fields and light palpated beneath her ears and down her neck. The touch was clinical, but quite gentle. "I've not been hearing many confessions lately, but I would be happy to listen."

Janeway could only stare at his sternum. Its emerald green color reminded her of Ireland's rolling hills.

*If only real life were as easily resolved as a holo-novel...*

She could feel his eyes upon her. His hands retreated, leaving her without any distraction. The warm, velvet touch of Rayna's lips stole over her consciousness, and she was defenseless against it.

"Do you miss Michael?" The Doctor's question was so off-base that it startled her.

Janeway snapped her head upward and stared at him. "No," she answered honestly. "No. I haven't given him a thought of late." And it was true.

"Then what is it?" His gaze was piercing in its intensity.

"I don't care to continue this discussion." Janeway raised a hand to emphasize her point.

"There's a surprise." His ironic rejoinder cut across her nerves with all the disharmony of misaligned torque sensors.

"What do you want from me?" She rose to pace the narrow space between bulkhead and table. "I

have no private life. The only things I can keep to myself are my thoughts and feelings, and you want to intrude on them."

That had been an unfair remark. She knew it as soon as the words left her lips, and like a phaser bolt, they could never be undone. The Doctor picked up his tricorder wordlessly and made to take his leave.

"I'm sorry." Janeway stopped him by laying a hand on his shoulder. "I didn't mean that. I'm just so damn..." She hesitated, fumbling for the right word. "...uneasy."

His expression was not unkind as he turned to face her. "As you've already said, Captain, the last few days have been hectic. Forgive me if I have overstepped my bounds. I can tell that you're troubled. Sometimes it helps to talk about it."

"I kissed her," she whispered.

"Who?" The EMH seemed utterly baffled.

There was no avoiding it, now. Janeway collapsed in her chair with a dull thud. "Merris."

He joined her, sitting to her right. "Ah. And it bothers you because of her gender, her social class, or her status as a passenger?"

"It bothers me because I want to do it again." Words tumbled down like stones in an avalanche; they crashed at Janeway's feet with all the impact of falling stars. "I think about her when I should be reviewing reports. Someone mentions her name and my mind goes off on this flight of fancy. Here we are, stranded, surrounded by potential enemies, enshrouded by a cloud of space dust, and all I keep thinking about is how good it felt to kiss her."

As he had when she'd revealed her feelings toward Michael, the Doctor fixed her with a look so filled with understanding that it brought a lump into Janeway's throat.

"She's not in your chain of command," he observed thoughtfully. "I don't see the problem, unless your feelings aren't reciprocated." The last was added with sympathetic flinch of his ebony brows.

Janeway wondered what the holo-man understood about unrequited desire. The depth of sadness in his eyes was as real as if he were made of flesh and blood.

But the EMH was already pursuing his own line of questioning. "Are they?" he asked.

"They seem to be." Her thoughts relived the second kiss, the one initiated by Rayna that had set Janeway's world on fire. "But that's not the point."

The Doctor's glare would have curdled fresh cream. "Oh really? What, pray tell, is the point?"

"It wouldn't be fair to her." She sighed, looking down at her hands as they tied themselves into knots in her lap. "I don't have time for a relationship. Hell, I just managed to kiss her when the Vaadwaur soldiers started to riot." Her eyes shifted to the display and the sensor shadow that was still appearing and disappearing. Then, they traced the outline of the Briefing Room's table. Anything was fair game so long as it kept her from looking at the Doctor.

He was silent for seconds on end. When he finally spoke, it was with deliberate slowness. "Captain, I must begin by pointing out the obvious: you're not a hologram. You don't have infinite time. Your life is not on hold until we reach the Alpha Quadrant. This is your life, happening right now. When your interests turned to Michael, I encouraged you. You needed something other than work. You still do."

"I don't want to use her." Janeway laid bare a portion of her concern. "What if I've just been alone too long? Maybe it could have been anyone; she just happened to be there. She's been used so much."

When he rested a hand on her forearm, it struck Janeway that he was the only person to touch her with any regularity, other than Rayna. His force field fingers gave a brief squeeze, then continued to rest atop her sleeve. "If it could have been anyone, then it would have been anyone, Neelix, Chakotay, me..." He smiled at the last. "But it wasn't. In the end it's your decision. As your physician, I am concerned with your wellbeing, in total, emotionally, mentally, physically. What you're doing isn't working. It hasn't for a long time. Maybe it's time to try something new."

With that he left.

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Rayna twisted the last linen napkin into shape and sat it atop one of the white china plates. It was the final decorative touch. She surveyed the long banquet table with satisfaction. A dozen swans formed of cloth floated atop round pools of glass. All the silverware sparkled smartly under the Mess Hall's slightly dimmed lighting, and crystal goblets glittered like carved ice. Pink candles rested in silver holders. They were not yet lit, but soon their warm glow would add to the ambiance of the place.

At her side, Naomi Wildman radiated equal parts satisfaction and displeasure. Ever since the dinner with the Vaadwaur had been announced, the child had been grouchy and on edge. Rayna resisted the urge to question her. Information gathering was a game to be played only with adults except in the most dire of circumstances.

Orbiting around the largish room were three Talaxians. Axion was a slender reed of a man and kept his fiery red mohawk cropped close to his scalp. Long auburn whiskers sprouted from his face giving him the look of a burst pincushion, or a sea anemone, she couldn't decide which. He seemed younger than Neelix, but Rayna didn't know enough about the Talaxian race to be certain how they aged.

His companion, Lex, was taller by a head and heavier by at least twenty kilos. Likely the weight difference had shrunk during captivity. He still tended toward the pudgier end of stocky. Golden

hair swept back from his forehead in an iridescent wave and then cascaded to his waist in ringlets. "There's no incense," he noted in an alarmed tone. "How can you have a formal dinner without incense?"

*Oh now that would set off the fire suppression subroutines for sure.*

Rayna stifled a chuckle at the thought of all the Vaadwaur being swallowed by a dry-chemical haze. She glanced at Neelix. He was making his own last-minute survey of the room. His normally smiling features were serious, and his dark eyes roved incessantly. Finally he looked up at her and nodded.

"It's perfect," he proclaimed.

"Thanks to you." Rayna inclined her head just slightly. "I didn't think anyone kept formal dinnerware in storage anymore." Truth be told, she'd almost opened her mouth like an idiot when Neelix broke out containers of china and glasses.

He pursed his lips a moment, then winked. "I didn't come on board yesterday, you know. I've been through replicator rationing many times. When I became Diplomatic Liaison to the Delta Quadrant, I made sure to stockpile a few necessities." His twinkling eyes checked the ship's chronometer. "Twenty minutes. I hope the chadre'kab isn't too tough."

The comment caused Lex's cheeks to color. "Too tough? You've already cooked it too long. It will probably fall apart when you try to serve it."

"I think I know the convection systems on *Voyager* a bit better than you do," Neelix replied with a sniff.

The two headed into the galley, still arguing. Rayna looked after them a moment, not fooled in the least. They were overjoyed at finding more of their race, especially out here in this inhospitable sector. She moved to the replicator and ordered up three carafes of wine. Axion pattered at the table, straightening utensils that were already aligned.

"Nervous at seeing the Vaadwaur again?" Rayna asked, studying him from beneath veiled eyes. His body chemistry had been out of whack since this morning.

Her question caused the man to draw in a deep breath, obviously intended to be calming. Pale blue eyes met hers with a cautious kind of friendliness. "Yes," he admitted. "They weren't most gracious of hosts."

"They're mean," Naomi offered her first opinion. Clear, blue eyes narrowed with ill-concealed anger.

Rayna recalled how Kathryn had been treated, and her blood iced over. The debt owed by the Vaadwaur had still not been fully paid, not in her opinion. She elected to ignore Ms. Wildman's statement and directed her attention to Axion. "You said that Gaul had you beaten," she



remarked drawing him several steps away from Naomi. The two of them had initiated this conversation two days ago, when both Talaxian's were transferred aboard *Voyager*. Time, activity and interruptions had kept them from finishing it. "Once you were moved to a different ship, did that continue?"

"At first." Axion's eyes unfocused and stared into memory. "Captain Drall is not a kind man, and he considered us..." he shuddered as if the room's temperature had plummeted, "...a waste of valuable resources."

"Did he?" It took an effort of will for Rayna to keep her voice neutral.

Her companion's gaze remained inward as he continued to speak. "Once he realized that Lex and I would not tell him the coordinates of our colony, we expected to be tortured to death, or spaced. Instead he gave us to his first officer, Commander Geelon." Axion shrugged in a nonchalant manner. "It was like we were stray animals." He quirked an ironic smile at Rayna. "Geelon wasn't cruel, but he made it clear that if he were going to feed and water us, we would have to work. So we did. We built urine recyclers to help conserve water and cleaned the decks with handheld ionizers. No job was too lowly, even if it included scrubbing the inside of plasma conduits, or hauling refuse." He splayed his fingers and held them up for her to examine. They appeared perfectly normal to Rayna. "I had cuts and burns all over my hands. So did Lex. Your Doctor, though, healed every one of them, even the scars." Clearly overawed at the EMH's prowess, Axion gave a delighted grin. His face sobered as he continued his tale. "In exchange for our labor, Geelon gave us quarter rations and two sleeping racks. I suppose we should be grateful."

The signs of slow starvation were something Rayna had seen in Dr. Kinel, as well as the Talaxians. Even now, Axion's cheeks remained sallow. Time, food and rest would slowly lend them color and fullness.

For all of Rayna's precautions, it seemed Naomi had been eavesdropping. The child crossed over and took Axion's hand. Her sunburst of compassion slammed into Rayna like a force field. "I tried to play with the children once," she related. "They said Neelix was stupid and had funny ears."

*Good.* The thought rose unbidden, and contained the resonant intonations of her father's voice. *It is always best to be underestimated.* Neelix was many things, but stupid wasn't one of them. If the Vaadwaur characterized him as such, more fool they.

Her moment of reflection was interrupted by a cry of distress from the galley. Both she and Axion exchanged a fleeting glance then sprinted toward the kitchen, Naomi in tow. The clanging of metal on metal, followed by a clatter of pots hitting the deck made them move all the faster.

Inside, Lex and Neelix were frantically stomping their feet as a small, furry creature flitted across the floor.

"Don't hurt him!" cried Naomi.

Rayna watched the diminutive mammal scurry beneath one of the silver cabinets.

"What was that?" Lex demanded. He clutched his chest as if his heart would burst out of it.

Neelix held up an aluminum spatula and scanned for signs of the creature. "A mouse," he answered. "It's a rodent from the Alpha Quadrant. Lieutenant Paris tracked one through the Jefferies Tubes and showed me what it looked like. I don't know if it's the same one or not." He patted Lex on the arm and started chuckling. "They are quite harmless." Glancing at Rayna he explained, "We found it nibbling at the Jiballian berries, and it gave us both quite a fright."

"So I see." Rayna could not help but grin. Every cook in the 'fleet had been startled by a rodent at some point. She'd come face to face with a Tellarite bilge rat. They were reptilian-looking creatures with huge mouths and lime-green tongues. Tellarites used them on freighters that lacked replicator technology because of their penchant for eating organic waste. The practice had allowed the creatures to spread onto everything from starbases to colonies. Unfortunately Federation vessels recycled all organic refuse, so the beasts generally found their way into dry storage. The one Rayna encountered was far more terrified than she was. It demonstrated its distress by urinating all over the shelf and expressing its anal glands. The stench had been vile. Even with emergency ventilation and odor neutralizers, the Mess Hall had been uninhabitable for days.

*Chef Yule was highly vexed.*

Indeed he was. The fact that Rayna found the whole scenario greatly amusing had not improved his humor.

Her comical trip into memory was truncated by Lex's horrified cry, "There are droppings in the nessel strips!"

She could see brown, seed-like specks scattered among the chopped vegetables. They were certainly not part of the spice.

*And now we have only ten minutes...*

The ship's chronometer chipped relentlessly at the cushion of time between the current disaster and the upcoming meal.

"Oh no." Neelix looked as if he might cry. "Those were the last fresh ones I had. The replicator doesn't quite capture their flavor." Then he drew back his shoulders. "All right then. No nessel strips." He scrunched up his mouth as he thought. "Miss Merris, I wonder if you would mind replicating that Tellarite salad you told me about. It seems we will have to make a last minute substitution."

"But," Axion looked appalled. "What are we going to do about the rodent?"

Obviously distressed, Naomi shot a pleading look to Neelix and another, much to Rayna's astonishment, toward her.

"He won't eat much." Rayna brushed past and headed to the replicator. "And mice never complain about the dinner menu. I vote we let him stay."

An argument immediately ensued behind her. She found herself grinning widely as she called up the new opening course.

"Thank you." Naomi had apparently followed her out.

"Don't mention it."

Why couldn't this waif leave her in peace? It was not to be. Young Ms. Wildman moved in front of her and peered with interest as Rayna continued to program. "I've been feeding him," she whispered. "Just leftovers. I didn't want him to starve." Innocent eyes wound their way up to meet Rayna's. "I suppose you think that's dumb."

"No." Not even Rayna's deformed hearts could find enough malice to be cruel to a child. "I think it's very sweet. But you should be getting home, now. It's almost time."

"Okay." Her unwanted friend smiled up at her, setting off plasma charges of affection in the wake of her departure. "Mom should be getting off shift. Will you show me how to make that stuff tomorrow?"

"If you like." The girl had shown great interest in cooking, especially in anything she thought Janeway would like. Rayna watched her depart.

*Sul be praised.*

For the hundredth time, she vowed to avenge herself upon Tuvok for siccing Naomi on her. The little chit was harder to remove than a Regulan bloodworm.

She removed the salad and carried it to the table. The chartreuse leaves were crisp and fresh as if newly plucked from the earth. Perhaps she'd sock some away for Naomi to feed her little pet.

It was truly amazing. Here in the most desolate reaches of space, on a ship that could barely manage to produce dust let alone crumbs to feed on, was the least of the Maker's creations eking out its existence. There was hope in that, something on which she seldom thought and never sought. And yet here it was.

*Maybe there is hope for you and Kathryn, as well.*

That was an uninvited reflection, and pushed the bounds of belief. Miracles only happened in ones when they happened at all.

Still, Rayna hummed an old tune as she continued puttering about. Where there was one mouse, there were more, perhaps an entire litter.

A whispered whoosh of air let her know that someone had entered the Mess Hall. She did not turn around. Likely it was Janeway come to check on dinner's progress.

Her suspicion was confirmed by the familiar chemical signature that eased around her. Rayna breathed in Kathryn's aura, tasting equal measures of worry and weariness. There was something else, though, something new. She frowned in concentration. Excitement? Perhaps. The prospect of breaking bread with the Vaadwaur was enough to set anyone's nerves to jangling.

"Good evening, Captain," she greeted and faced her.

Janeway was in full dress uniform, a cumbersome drapery of maroon that did nothing to accentuate her figure or sensuality. It had become Rayna's opinion that Starfleet should adopt form fitting biosuits as their daily attire. They did wonders for the Astrometrics officer. The brown one in particular was most alluring.

"Good evening," Janeway returned. "Is everything ready?"

"Almost. We had an unfortunate infestation of mice in the nessel strips."

The odd little half-smile on Kathryn's lips froze there momentarily. "Mice?" she echoed, her grey eyes mirroring the shock of her voice.

"Well, only one mouse, actually." Rayna bustled past the captain just as Neelix and his two assistants began filing out of the galley. She donned a white, double-breasted jacket and transferred her communicator to it. Perverse humor overtook her reason and she elected to exaggerate...just slightly. "But I'm afraid it peed on the main course. We've salvaged what we can, but I don't know if salad will satisfy the Vaadwaur. They rather strike me as carnivores. However, I did contact Seven of Nine regarding the situation, and she advised that she would conduct a sensor sweep and beam all mouse life forms into space."

The horrified expression on Janeway's face almost caused Rayna to burst out laughing.

"She did no such thing, Captain." Neelix ruined the ruse. He was pulling on his own double-breasted cook's jacket. It was a mottled combination of puce, mauve, and fuchsia. On his head was a matching toque. "In fact, Rayna was instrumental in its escape."

Janeway's eyes shifted to Rayna and that delightful, crooked grin transformed the austere features, making them much younger seeming. "And dinner?" she inquired, still holding Rayna's gaze.

Neelix gurgled forth information in an excited gush of verbiage. "We lost the nessel strips and won't be making more Jiballian berry salad anytime soon, but everything else survived unscathed. The chadre'kab and ailis pate are particularly good, if I do say so myself. There's also

laurellian pudding for dessert. It's been simmering for four hours and I anticipate that it will be excellent."

"Good." Janeway nodded, her smile still lingering.

It finally dawned on Rayna that Kathryn was pleased to see her, that the excitement in her chemistry was due to Rayna's company, not the upcoming dinner.

*She's happy to see...me?*

That was an odd development. Odder still was the quickening of Rayna's pulse that had begun the moment Kathryn entered the Mess Hall. She'd not really noticed it, but now blood hammered in her ears.

The surreal moment was shattered as the hatchway schlicked open to admit Commander Chakotay, Tuvok, and a horde of Vaadwaur officers. Janeway moved to greet them, once more the stalwart captain.

Rayna remained where she was, putting her hands behind her back and observing the proceedings from a distance. The Vaadwaur males wore grayish uniforms festooned with varying decorations. All were loose-fitting and utterly devoid of redeeming qualities.

*There's a first. I never thought I would encounter uniforms uglier than those of the Federation.*

One of the Vaadwaur was tall and lanky. He had a narrow face and prominent chin. His ebony eyes swept the room with barely concealed contempt. They passed over Rayna, moved to the Talaxians, and immediately came back. Black met black as they stared, and in his eyes, Rayna found all the warmth of deep space.

He moved around Captain Janeway and strode over. From the corner of her eye, Rayna saw Axion and Lex stiffen.

The Vaadwaur stood half a head taller, but was not terribly heavy. Rayna reckoned she could take out his kneecaps with little effort.

"You killed General Gaul." His voice was high pitched and as frigid as the vacuum of his eyes.

"I certainly did." The grin forming on her lips had nothing to do with humor.

Janeway followed him over, a frown of disapproval creasing her forehead. "Is there a problem?" she asked, coolly.

"I don't want her here," replied Drall. Malice dripped from every word. "She's a murderer."

Rayna's smile widened.

"Crewman Merris is a valuable member of my crew." It seemed Janeway had decided to intercede. "Your general fired at her. She defended herself."

*Oh really?* The unexpected statement caused Rayna's brows to crash downward, and she glanced at the captain in mild amusement.

"Self defense, was it?" Drall howled with laughter. It was an unpleasant sound. When he finished, he nodded once as if reaching some unspoken conclusion. "I am Drall." He held out his hand to her.

Mindful of Janeway's presence, Rayna took the offered appendage. "Sir," she replied.

Another Vaadwaur joined Drall. This one was more thickly built, and a bit shorter. One eye was covered by a grey patch, but the other glittered bright green, like an emerald.

"This is Commander Geelon, my first officer." Drall swept his hand toward the man, but continued to take Rayna's measure. "They say you blew him up."

"And they say you are a cruel, heartless bastard," Rayna parried his jibe neatly, "but who pays attention to such rumors."

Chakotay and Tuvok had come over, along with a Vaadwaur woman, the first Rayna had encountered.

Drall held out his hand and the woman took it gingerly, as if it were a live grenade. "My wife, Aja."

At one time the Vaadwaur would probably have been beautiful. Her hair was a rich brown and fell in waves to her waist. Her face was unlined, but hard and as if blasted by sand for a thousand years. Dull amber eyes rested upon Rayna but briefly and then lowered to the deck. Unlike the others, she was not in uniform, though her attire could not be described as cheerful. The double-skirted dress was beige and fell to mid-calf. Bell sleeves swallowed Aja's arms and hands.

A shadow fell over them, and yet another Vaadwaur lumbered into view. This fellow was two meters tall if he was a cubit. Younger by face, his black hair was shorter, hanging loose instead of being bound at the nape of his neck. Brown irises lay like river stones in the milk of his eyes, and behind their hardness was cunning.

"Captain Riza," Drall intoned. Intense dislike eddied about the senior captain, and Rayna gained the impression that no love was lost between the two men.

Awkward silence held reign.

Fortunately, Neelix came to the rescue. He offered everyone a glass of synthetic wine and busied himself pouring it out. Drall and his wife moved to one side, seeming to chat with Captain Janeway. Geelon, however, remained with Rayna. Past him, she could see that Lieutenants

Torres and Paris had arrived, along with Seven of Nine. Ensign Kim came in last, looking displeased and distracted.

"The captain likes you," Geelon observed cagily. "He has a softness for the ladies."

This fellow struck Rayna the way Edward Janeway always had: military through and through. She took a closer look at him and found his dark hair peppered with silver. Wrinkles around his one, good eye and on his neck would have put him at about sixty in human years, but she didn't know enough about his species to hazard a guess.

Rayna did not answer. Unlike Drall, Geelon was not filled with contempt for everyone and everything. Rather, he had the resigned cynicism of one who had seen too much.

They were joined by Captain Riza.

"Sir." Geelon inclined his head in deference. Not mock deference, either, at least if Rayna read him correctly. There was a smattering of respect between the two.

*Their alliance could prove useful, if Drall becomes a hindrance.*

Neelix sounded dinner's start. Within minutes, everyone had settled at the table.

"What is this?" Drall waved a hand at the Tellarite greens.

Both Neelix and Rayna opened their mouths to explain, but Drall would have none of it.

"I don't eat green things. Green symbolizes putrifaction and death among my people. I am highly insulted that such a dish would be served." His thin lips curled into a sneer of disdain. "Bring me something else."

"You might not have noticed," Captain Janeway's voice purred out with a hard edge of warning, "but we're currently in a galaxy devoid of food. Wasting it is ill advised."

Drall spared her a brief stare. "I agree, but your vessel seems to be more than capable of producing it. A type of technology you have been reluctant to share, I might add."

"We've had to repair our own vessel and yours." Commander Chakotay's bronze features were flushed with anger. "We've adapted the technology, but there hasn't been time-"

"Of course there hasn't," Drall cut him off. "You've been too busy launching probes to give us the means to feed our starving children."

Janeway's grey eyes hardened into bits of flint, promising fire.

"Here you are," Axion said with a smirk. He sat the nessel strips down in front of Drall. "Nice and orange."

*And seasoned with mouse shit. How fitting.*

A pain inducer could not have spurred Rayna to utter a single word of warning. She saw Neelix's eyes widen to egg size, but he, too, remained silent.

"Don't eat those..." Janeway started to speak, but was too late.

Drall heaped a pile of the shredded vegetable on his plate and immediately shoveled a forkful into his mouth. He chewed, nodded and then grunted his approval.

Fearful that he might pass the bowl to someone else, Rayna plucked it from the table. "We hadn't planned on serving this dish, Captain," she explained, and handed it back to Axion. "I fear there isn't enough for everyone to partake. You don't mind being the exclusive recipient, do you?"

"Planning on saving the best course for yourselves, eh? Typical." He motioned her close and spooned out an additional serving. "Still, I am inclined to overlook the slight," he crooned back at her, and his black marbles roved over her tunic and trousers as if he might rip them from her body, "especially when I'm being serviced by someone so lovely."

Rayna bowed her head as if in gracious acceptance of his compliment. On the inside she contemplated the pleasure it would bring her to flay him alive. Suspended upside down, he would last for hours. Perhaps she might roast him as well before he expired. There was a happy thought.

She looked up to find Kathryn eyeing the two of them, a look of absolute fury cloaking her aristocratic features. Rayna ignored it. Mouse shit was the least this one deserved. Only rarely did the universe apportion punishment with any justice. Such a moment was to be savored.

Drall shoved another forkful of nessel strips in his mouth. He chewed quickly, swallowed, and then continued to eat. Rayna carried the serving bowl to the recycler, purged it, then returned.

The rest of the Vaadwaur and all of *Voyager's* staff appeared to enjoy the green salad. Rayna made sure she collected Drall's dish personally when he was completed, and allowed the slightest fluttering smile to cross her lips. If her presence was a distraction to him, so much the better. Now and then Kathryn's outrage slipped up Rayna's nostrils. She wasn't entirely sure it was due to her excretory faux pas.

Neelix and Lex served the chadre'kob and ailis pate. Everyone, including Captain Drall, ate without incident. Carrying a pitcher of water, Rayna refilled glasses as they emptied. It gave her the opportunity to circle the room and get a feel for the emotional temperature.

Her quest was hampered by two things: the waves of anger radiating from *Voyager's* officers, and her lack of experience with Vaadwaur physiology. Both conspired to keep her observations limited mostly to body language and voice tone.



Rayna noted that Aja never once looked at her husband, nor did she speak to any other persons. She ate, stole sly glances at the various members of the table, cast Rayna a studying stare at least once, but otherwise did not interact with her surroundings. Control and concealment were useful tools; obviously Aja had cultivated them. And with a mate like Drall, they would be necessary survival mechanisms.

*They also make her a dangerous opponent.*

Geelon had cut his eyes toward Drall a number of times, but had otherwise not addressed his superior. He had politely replied to Janeway's efforts at small talk, and the two seemed content to discuss the various navigational hazards in this sector. As for Riza, the hulking Vaadwaur had lapsed into absolute silence. His gaze roamed from face to face, finding hers. Their eyes intersected once more, and Rayna thought she saw amusement.

Drall interrupted the instant of understanding. "Don't you have inspections to conduct?" He cut his eyes at Riza.

Another wave of loathing passed between the men, despite the fact that both twisted their mouths into vague imitations of smiles.

"I will take my leave, if I have Captain Janeway's permission." His stony gaze fell upon his hostess, and he gave her a slight bow.

"Of course," the human replied. "I'll have you escorted to your shuttle."

"It is my shuttle," Drall corrected, "and Riza doesn't mind getting his molecules jumbled about. Do you?"

"Not at all, my liege," he crooned.

Janeway summoned a security escort and Riza took his leave.

Finally the main course ended. Everyone but Drall had a look of full contentment on their faces.

"Captain Drall," Janeway began. She was still angry. Rayna could feel the heated emotion crashing against her empathic senses. "According to our calculations, your vessels were not designed to house passengers for long-term periods."

"That is true." Drall picked something from his teeth and dropped it on his plate. It was umber colored and a little smaller than a grain of Terran rice. "Your point?"

Drawing in a long breath, Janeway continued. "Your life support will fail in approximately two months. We are willing to house the children and their mothers on *Voyager*."

Only Kathryn would offer shelter to a race that tried to kill her. Rayna suppressed the urge to shake her head. Such an offer, she was certain, would not have been reciprocated had the

Vaadwaur emerged victorious.

Drall bared his teeth once again. As before, it was supposed to be a smile, but there were no lights of merriment in his eyes. "So you can blackmail us by threatening the safety of our children? No, I think not."

"I beg your pardon?" B'Elanna Torres spoke in a controlled manner, but wrath blazed from her body such that Rayna took an involuntary step back to escape the tsunami of feeling. "If it weren't for our assistance, you and your people would probably be dead already. We've spent hours repairing your ships. You think we would stoop-

Commander Chakotay lay a tanned hand upon his shipmate's sleeve. He was every bit as angry, but had a tighter rein on his emotions. "Children aren't tools or bargaining chips." His rich brown eyes were narrowed. "The Federation doesn't traffic in blackmail."

For the first time, Aja was looking to her husband. There was something in her manner that struck Rayna as furtive. If the woman had pulled a blaster and killed him, Rayna would not have been overly surprised.

*Fortunately our guests were scanned for weapons prior to leaving the shuttle bay.*

The stealthy look was gone already, replaced by Aja's studied neutrality.

"Forgive me if I remain skeptical." Drall coughed once and shifted in his seat. Something in his body chemistry had changed, but Rayna couldn't identify what or why. "You *are* the same people who woke us from hibernation only to sell us out to the Turei."

Janeway was on her feet, arms akimbo. "I see there is little point in continuing this discussion." Her voice was strident and commanding. "We have a strict policy of non-interference. If it is your intent that your race be extinct within two months, we will grieve the loss. Let me know if you change your mind about housing arrangements."

The entire table rose as one, except for Drall, who stood much more slowly. Rayna edged nearer to him. Her eyes detected tiny patches of discoloration forming on the Vaadwaur's cheeks, rounded welts that reminded her of insect bites.

"So you will simply leave us to die?" Geelon was staring at Janeway as if he'd never actually seen her before. Calculations passed in the green of his eye as he took new measure of this woman.

Janeway regarded him with regret cooling the ardor of her temper. "We can't risk housing soldiers on *Voyager*. Civilians pose the least threat to our safety."

The Vaadwaur nodded, and addressed his superior. "Perhaps we should accept her offer. I do not believe Captain Janeway would threaten our children." He paused and turned a glittering emerald orb toward Drall. "She has too many scruples to resort to such a base action." Something in how

he said it caused Rayna's skin to prickle.

From his reaction, Drall also read deeper meaning into Geelon's words. Anger, or what seemed like it, colored the air about him, and he snorted with derision. "If I am certain of one thing, it is that our race will not survive if it follows such naive reasoning as yours."

One thin hand rose to clutch at his stomach, and it was now obvious that something was wrong with Drall. He bent over, leaning on the table's top, breathing heavily. His color paled. Without warning he keeled over backward and crashed to the deck. His arms and legs twitched violently. Foam dribbled from his lips.

*Not good.*

Perhaps the Vaadwaur were allergic to mouse shit. Rayna surveyed the tableau without much emotion. In her opinion, the universe would be brighter if Drall died of anaphylactic shock.

"Janeway to Sickbay. Doctor, we need you." The captain raced over to the fallen man.

Her path was blocked by Aja who darted past Rayna and knelt beside her husband. "Drall," she cried and tried to cradle him, but his violent convulsions tore him from her grasp.

*Oh well done.* Aja's show of concern was entirely put on. Though Rayna wasn't an expert in Vaadwaur emotions, she could certainly pinpoint their absence. The shrewish woman was surprised by this turn of events, but not distressed in the slightest. That much had been betrayed when she ran by.

Geelon grasped Drall's head perhaps to restrain it from beating against the deck. The fallen Vaadwaur's death throes flooded the space with a myriad of chemicals, and Rayna could feel nothing else. She stepped back, swallowing down her rising gorge.

The Mess Hall glittered with transporter sparks and Doctor appeared, an emergency kit in hand. A pool of black blood had formed beneath Drall, seeping outward in a tidal flow. Even as the EMH administered a hypospray, it was too late. All movement had ceased, and Drall lay limp and lifeless.

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Janeway stared dumbly down at Drall's corpse then turned shocked eyes upon the Doctor. "How-

"

Her question was cut off when Geelon flinched toward Rayna fists clenched in rage. "What did you do to his food?" he demanded. "Was it poisoned?" He spun on Janeway, eyes blazing. "You lured us here under pretext of peace? Clearly I overestimated your scruples."

Behind him, Aja had begun to wail in grief, holding her own shoulders and rocking to and fro. Chakotay knelt beside her and tried to offer comfort, but she shrank from his outreached hands. "No!" she shouted, jumping to her feet and backing away. "Don't touch me!"

"Mr. Tuvok. Secure this deck." Janeway rattled off orders out of habit. "Have a security team report to the Mess Hall."

"Already done, Captain," he replied calmly.

An instant later and the Mess Hall admitted Crewman Bonneville and a team of armed guards. They quickly moved Geelon and Aja off to one side. Tuvok had the two Vaadwaur separated. He then ordered Rayna and the rest of the galley workers taken into custody.

"Confine them to quarters," Janeway commanded. She couldn't bring herself to look at either Rayna or Neelix. It was inconceivable that either of them had been involved in a plot to poison Drall, but she couldn't take any chances. Bonneville and another man escorted them out. "Doctor?" she essayed her inquiry again.

The holographic man was still taking tricorder readings. "There are foreign substances in his system, but it will require extensive testing to sort them out. He suffered a mild allergic reaction to something, histamine levels are elevated. I can tell you this..." He rolled Drall's body to its side. The hilt of a knife protruded from his lower back. "Poison isn't the only possibility."

*What the hell?*

She rounded on Tuvok and Chakotay. "Did the Vaadwaur receive a full security scan?"

"Yes, Captain," Chakotay confirmed.

Tuvok was already striding into the kitchen, no doubt to take an inventory of the cutlery.

"It was the bald woman." Aja spoke from across the room. "First she murdered General Gaul, and now my husband."

"Captain?" The Doctor was staring into his tricorder. From his tone and expression she could tell that he was deeply shocked by what he was seeing. "This weapon is carved from bone," he met her troubled gaze with one of his own, "Vaadwaur bone, to be specific."

The words seeped into her with infinite slowness. Janeway's linear mind struggled to wrap itself around the notion that someone would use the skeleton of a sentient creature to fabricate weapons. It didn't compute, not really.

Her eyes tracked back to the two Vaadwaur. Suddenly both were silent.

"Mr. Tuvok," she called him out of the kitchen. There was no further need to count knives.

Her old friend appeared almost instantly.

Janeway nodded toward her "guests." "Search them carefully, then secure them in the Brig."

The security team escorted Aja and Geelon out, despite their protests. Janeway turned to the rest of her staff and found Paris and Kim clustered around one of the replicators. They appeared to be engaging in an intense discussion.

"Gentlemen," she prompted.

Paris' head snapped up in surprise. "Sorry Captain. Harry and I were just checking the recycler records. Merris disposed of the nessel strips during dinner, but the computer automatically scans for foreign substances. There's no poison." A light of concern in his pale blue eyes held Janeway's relief at bay. "However, there is evidence of an extraneous organic substance: mouse, um," he licked his lips nervously, "dung."

"Served him right."

Torres' impassioned statement caused Janeway to whirl around and glare at her Chief Engineer. "This was a formal, diplomatic function," she chided harshly. "I don't expect members of Starfleet to use the occasion as an opportunity for petty vengeance or childish pranks." Her anger fueled, in part, by her own guilty conscience. Even though she'd attempted to warn Drall, she could have been more insistent, could have ordered Merris to take the dish away.

"Axion is not a member of Starfleet," Chakotay pointed out.

He was correct. It had been Axion, not Rayna who had served up the tainted food. Crewman Merris was guilty only of remaining silent.

*Which makes her less culpable than you, Kathryn. You're the captain.*

"I need to transport Drall's body to Sickbay." The Doctor seemed shaken. His simulated features were flushed as if blood actually rushed to his face. "If I may, I would like to have Dr. Kinel assist me with the post mortem. Our databases on the Vaadwaur are extensive, but his experience may be invaluable."

"I'll consider it." Janeway watched them disappear in a cloud of glittering twinkles. "Tuvok?"

He moved next to her and waited.

"I'm placing you in charge of the investigation." Her insides felt hollow. "Have Drall's quarters sealed, Geelon's too, and Aja's if she has a separate compartment. Conduct a thorough search. Also," she drew in a deep breath and slowed her racing heart, "contact Captain Riza and inform him of what has happened."

"Yes, Captain." Tuvok went into motion, contacting another security team and detailing them to Drall's ship.

"B'Elanna?" Janeway crossed over to the engineer. "Go over the sensor records from the shuttle

bay. The knife should have been detected as non-living organic tissue. Find out why it wasn't."

The metallic hum of the replicator sounded louder than normal. Janeway turned her head and saw a bowl of nessel strips sitting in the alcove. No one was near it.

"Is this your idea of a joke?" She turned on Paris, eyes flashing grey fire. The helmsman was known for his poorly timed humor, but this was ridiculous, and inappropriate.

Immediately his hands rose, palms out. "It wasn't me, Captain." Paris shook his head in emphasis. "Not even on my worst day-

He was interrupted when the adjacent replicator came to life and spat out another bowl of nessel strips.

Janeway turned back to Lt. Torres. "While you're at it, run a full diagnostic of the replicators. Harry, help her."

"Aye, ma'am." He and B'Elanna departed to shed their dress uniforms and obtain tricorders.

Another bowl of nessel strips appeared. It materialized in an already occupied replicator and knocked the first bowl onto the floor with a muffled crash. Orange vegetation spilled out to cover the carpet in neon blotches.

A chill washed over Janeway as if the temperature had dropped thirty degrees. She stiffened, remembering the simulation of Tau Ceti Prime, and the horror that followed after.

Her commbadge clamored for her attention. "Bridge to Captain Janeway."

"Go ahead."

"The Vaadwaur are protesting the presence of armed officers on one of their vessels. They are demanding to speak with you."

She met Chakotay's eyes. They looked as weary as she felt. Even so, he managed a slight smile. "Shall we reconvene in your Ready Room?" he asked.

"We may as well." She redirected her words to the Bridge. "Tell them that Commander Chakotay and I will contact them within ten minutes."

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Two hours later, Janeway was heading to her quarters. Captain Riza had assumed temporary command and was cooperating fully. She had denied his request to speak with Geelon, but agreed to let Kinel assist the Doctor with the autopsy on Drall. It was easy to do; the EMH had already made a similar request.

Preliminary testing had ruled out the nessel strips and mouse dung as the culprits. Apparently

Drall had suffered some allergic reaction to the strips, themselves, but none from the extraneous ingredient.

The turbolift doors opened, and Janeway stared down the long corridor. Emergency conservation measures had dimmed corridor lights to half their normal strength. Everything lay veiled in shadow. Rayna's door was always open, but not tonight. Instead of a welcoming square of light fall across the carpet, the gloom remained unbroken. Two armed officers were stationed outside of cabin's hatchway.

It struck her then, in a flash of remembrance and guilt, that she'd ordered Neelix and Rayna placed under house arrest.

She quickened her pace and addressed the two crewmen posted outside. "You're dismissed. Inform Commander Tuvok that Neelix is to be released as well."

They departed, reporting in to Tuvok as they went.

*How could you shut her in like this? You know how she reacts to closed-in spaces. The Doctor told you she had a mild heart attack.*

She keyed the door chime.

There was no answer.

Her heart pounded with apprehension as she used an override command to open the hatch.

It was dark inside. Only the ghostly pallor of clouded space through windows of transparent aluminum gave any illumination at all. The door slid shut behind her.

"Lights, one quarter." Janeway's eyes roved about until they found their quarry.

Rayna Merris was sitting in the living room's arm chair, facing the windows. She did not move when Janeway approached. There were tiny dots of sweat atop her bald head that glimmered coolly, like bits of starlight on a cloudy day.

Janeway thought she heard the woman whispering, but couldn't make out what was being said. "Rayna?"

"Yes, Captain?" In seamless motion, Rayna came to attention. She was still wearing the white cook's jacket. Her voice was curiously flat, a sign that she was deeply troubled.

All the anger that had built up inside of Janeway gave way into concern. "I'm sorry," she stammered.

"Business is business." Rayna's matter-of-fact comment stifled Janeway's tide of words. Turning to face her, the slender Delta looked pallid in the dismal chamber, her face drawn and tense. "I

indulged in a personal agenda during a diplomatic function. You had every right to be irate. It is I who must apologize."

*Will I ever get her measure?* Janeway wondered. She was normally a quick study when it came to people. Years of command had taught her to size up those around her. Yet, somehow, Rayna Merris continued to confound.

"As it turned out, Drall suffered only minor effects from the dish and none from its unsavory addition." Janeway searched Rayna's face unsuccessfully for some breach in the mask. "The Doctor is conducting an autopsy, and Tuvok is heading up the investigation. I'm releasing you and Neelix from house arrest. The other Talaxians will remain, however. I don't want to run the risk of more pranks." She heaved a soft sigh. "I accept your apology. So far as I am concerned, the matter is closed."

"Would you like to sit down?" The question marked an abrupt transition from business to personal matters. Janeway moved to the sofa and settled against its oh-so-familiar cushion. Immediately her body responded, relaxing muscles and increasing the weight of her eyelids.

Without another word, Rayna moved to the replicator. Janeway was almost relieved to see that the machine produced two cups of coffee rather than the orange-colored salad that had spewed forth in the Mess Hall. Thirty-seven bowls of the stuff had been created. The only way Torres had managed to stop it was to cut power to the replicators.

"Breakfast is going to be interesting," she commented, taking the coffee, and then filling Rayna in on the current malfunctions.

"We'll manage." Her hostess sat one of the steaming mugs on the glass top table, and curled up in the arm chair once more. "Even if cooking must be done the old fashioned way." Color returned had returned to her elfin face and Janeway saw that her shoulders had slumped somewhat.

"Why is it you seem calmer?" she inquired. "The hatchway is closed."

Black, endless eyes met hers with a quiet sort of resignation. "You're here," she replied simply.

It took a while. The meaning didn't strike Janeway at first; it had to soak in like raindrops on packed ground. But soak in it did, and she was made humble by it.

After assembling and discarding a dozen replies she lamely replied, "I feel better around you, too."

Which...truth be told...she did. Confused by her own reactions, Janeway sipped her coffee, finding it excellent. She reached up and pulled open the top of her dress tunic. This wasn't how she'd envisioned their encounter. She'd thought that they would argue, or that Rayna would stubbornly refuse to speak.

"You said Tuvok is in charge of things?"



Rayna's question pulled Janeway out of her reverie. "Yes. Someone stabbed Drall with a weapon made from Vaadwaur bone." She continued on, filling in the gaps in Rayna's knowledge.

Dark eyes narrowed, and Janeway was certain her friend had gleaned more from tonight's events than she had.

"What is it?" she prompted.

It took a few moments before Rayna answered. "They used bone. That changes things." When Janeway looked bemused, she continued. "It could have been a political assassination. Someone wanted Drall out of the way, so they used the opportunity offered on *Voyager* to strike. They could conceivably blame it on us since it took place on this vessel. It's a tremendous risk, but ambition knows no bounds." Rayna shook her head, still gazing into Janeway's eyes. "Bone, however, makes it personal; at least it would in my culture. Even we Orions wouldn't save the bone of a stranger on the off-chance we might get to stick it in our enemy."

After carefully digesting her friend's words, Janeway mused, "Maybe I should assign you to the investigation."

That made Rayna laugh, and suddenly Janeway's world seemed brighter.

"I'm a spy, not a detective." Black eyes danced with humor. They sobered after a few moments. "And you're exhausted."

There was no hiding it. Janeway had suppressed a couple of yawns just during the short time they had been seated. "Seems like I'm always exhausted, but there's too much to do, especially with this murder."

"Ah." Rayna's cool gaze offered not a whit of quarter. "Tuvok being incompetent to run the investigation you assigned him..."

The trap had been sprung, and Janeway was caught in it, just like last time. "You know I don't believe that." She gave Rayna a half-grin of defeat. "Are you going to tuck me on your couch again?"

The graceful Deltan rose, crossed over to her, and set aside the mug of coffee. "No," she grasped Janeway's hands in hers, "I think I'm going to tuck you into bed."

"Bed?" Her throat was suddenly too tight.

And this time Rayna's laughter was a gentle, clear sound that tinkled in the air like wind chimes. "You know," she quipped, "that flat thing in the next room." At what was apparently a distressed look on Janeway's face she added, "Not to worry, oh captain, my captain, I'm shan't take advantage of you. Your virtue is safe."

As Janeway took her feet, she found herself arrested by the perfect smile on Rayna's face, the lights shimmering in Rayna's eyes. It awakened a buoyant feeling inside her chest. She couldn't form a coherent sentence as they made their way into the small chamber just aft the living room.

There were no decorations. No pictures on the night stand, no book or PADD lying about. Even the bed was pristinely undisturbed. A single pillow stood lonely watch over the covers.

Rayna released her hands long enough to retrieve a garment from the room's only closet. It was a sheer bit of cloth that shimmered like liquid as it was laid down on the bed. "Here is a nightgown. I suggest you put it on." Her hostess then came up behind her and tugged at the shoulders of Janeway's uniform. "You can start by shedding your overly large tunic."

There it was again, that feeling of intimacy between them. Janeway had felt it, even before they had kissed, felt it now as she allowed the leaden weight of her shirt to fall away. Before she could rub at the sore flesh of her neck, Rayna's knowing fingers found the knotted muscles and released them, one by one. The sudden relaxation caused her to lean backward into Rayna's chest. Arms snaked around her waist and tightened. Janeway's eyes closed. For a moment, there was only perception, the warmth of Rayna's body, the comfort of her nearness....

"If you fall asleep here, that would be a bit uncomfortable." Rayna's breath tickled her ear, and Janeway chuckled, reluctantly extricating herself from the embrace.

Her friend left, and Janeway finished removing her clothing, visited the latrine, then put on the nightgown. It was softer than spider's web and woven so tightly that the threads couldn't be discerned. Fabric flowed over her skin like cool water, and settled upon her flesh weightlessly. "Did you replicate this?" she called out the open bedroom door.

"No, I stole it from Tuvok. Who knew he was a cross-dresser?" Rayna's grinning face appeared in the doorway. "It certainly adds a new dimension to his character, nay?"

The image of her stoic security chief in a negligee was too much to bear. Janeway guffawed so hard that she nearly toppled forward on the bed. She managed to sit down on its edge and hugged her stomach until the merriment subsided.

"You're always doing this to me, ambushing me with a joke." Her voice was hoarse from the exertion.

She found that Rayna was standing stock still, her lips slightly upturned as if almost smiling, looking at her. The gaze was steady, moving slowly down her face, to her shoulders, and lower. Janeway was abruptly made shy. She felt heat fill her cheeks. "Did I put it on backwards or something?"

"No." The intensity of Rayna's gaze did not diminish.

"Then," Janeway swallowed a mouthful of insecurity, "what is it?"

Twinkles played tag in the black eyes and the smile on Rayna's face grew wider. "I'm enjoying the view, Kathryn."

"Oh."

The honesty was simply too much, or maybe it had been too long since anyone looked at her as something other than the captain. Janeway plucked nervously at the silken fabric of her gown unable to form a reply.

Fingers brushed her cheek, and she found Rayna standing in front of her.

The cook's uniform was gone, replaced with Academy sweats and a t-shirt. Janeway wished she were wearing that instead, suddenly wanting to see what Rayna looked like in this gossamer nightgown. She traced the willowy curves of Rayna's figure with a look that felt almost hungry. "I want to kiss you again," she confessed.

"I would like that as well, but not tonight, I think." Rayna turned down the bed sheets and gently pushed Janeway to lie down. "I would keep you up past your bedtime."

Color once again rushed to Janeway's face at the thought of love-making with Rayna, accompanied by an uncertainty that nearly made her flee. "I've never been with a woman. I don't know what to do."

"You mean you don't masturbate?"

The question jerked Janeway's eyes upward in astonishment. "I-" She stammered and stopped, now well and truly at a loss for words.

Both Rayna's white brows arched upward in feigned appellation. "Humans." She shook her head, but her gaze was filled with tender humor. "If you truly don't pleasure yourself, think about what your male partners did that you particularly liked."

That suggestion seemed similarly useless and embarrassing. Janeway felt her face flush hot.

Without missing a beat Rayna continued, "I can replicate appliances if necessary. Now, lie down." Her smile was positively evil.

*Anything is better than continuing this conversation.* Janeway reclined without protest.

Covers were pulled up around her and Rayna stroked her hair. "Goodnight, Kathryn."

Her friend made to leave, but Janeway caught her wrist. "Stay." She couldn't believe the word found room enough to escape her tight windpipe. "Please."

Janeway slid over and tugged Rayna into bed beside her. The look of complete befuddlement on the normally composed features was delightful. It evened the playing field knowing that they

were both uncertain about the give and take of their relationship. That made things better, in an odd way. She could feel how fast Rayna's hearts were pounding, like drumbeats to Souza march. It awoke a fierce sense of protectiveness in her.

"Are you alright?" she whispered.

"Of course." The reply was smooth as glass. "Why do you ask?"

"Because it feels like your chest is going to burst."

Schooled features crumbled into an expression of utter insecurity. "This is an intimacy beyond my experience," Rayna murmured. Her dark eyes were fixed upon the overhead as if searching for a familiar star. "I've never spent all night with anyone without payment or ulterior motive."

Pulling the other woman near, Janeway placed a chaste, but tender kiss on her mouth, savoring the feel of flesh on flesh. She heard Rayna make a whispery groan, and suddenly the kiss wasn't chaste at all, but deeper, more sensual. Her heart was competing with Rayna's in a race of deep arousal. If only she weren't so tired...

"Shh, Kathryn." Rayna pulled Janeway's head to her shoulder. "Rest, now."

Her eyes closed once more, and did not open.

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"It was an accident!" Axion protested.

Tuvok of Vulcan merely fixed the Talaxian with his most inscrutable stare, and said nothing.

Nor did he have to.

Axion threw up his hands in exasperation. "Well, giving him the nessel strips wasn't. I knew they were befouled, but I thought it would make him sick, not die. I never intended that. I just wanted to pay him back for his brutality. Please." He turned wide, pleading eyes toward Tuvok. "You must believe me. I am not a murderer."

"That remains to be seen." Tuvok's softly spoken answer merely served to agitate his suspect...as he had intended. "It is your official statement that you did not tamper with any of the food items?"

"I already told you I didn't." Axion paced the confines of his quarters. "Twice!" He glanced at Lex's bed for the twelfth time. The other Talaxian had been moved to the Mess Hall under guard and was being questioned by Commander Chakotay. Apparently Axion felt less secure without his companion. "I was in the dining area talking to Crewman Merris when the mouse was discovered. Afterward I was with Neelix and Lex the entire time. I didn't do anything."

"Beyond serving contaminated food to a guest on this vessel." Tuvok was satisfied by Axion's

look of consternation.

"Yes, Mr. Vulcan," he agreed dejectedly.

Though his interviewee did not know it, the Doctor had already ruled out both the nessel strips and the foreign matter in them as having caused Drall's death. Surprisingly, he had also ruled out the knife. It had struck no vital organs or arteries. The post mortem was still in progress, however, and as of yet the definitive cause of death was unknown.

Nevertheless, Axion and Lex were not necessarily innocent. As former captives, they had motive, and being present at the dinner party, both had opportunity. If the Doctor discovered some toxin in Drall's system, all those assigned to the galley were prime suspects.

*With the exception of the nessel strips, everyone ate the same food.*

True...including the other Vaadwaur, and while the effects of poisons varied significantly between species, they tended to be universal within a single race.

Even so, the Talaxians were the least probable of suspects, in Tuvok's opinion. There was a cold-blooded ruthlessness required for this sort of killing, and none of them possessed it.

Rayna, on the other hand...

*...does not murder without cause...*

"Why aren't you questioning the Vaadwaur?" Axion had apparently decided to go on the offensive. His hands had curled into fists at the mere mention of that species, and his manner became defiant.

Tuvok found the inquiry impertinent. Logically when one was a suspect, agitating one's captor was unwise. "I have already done so," he replied.

He had personally interrogated Geelon and Aja. Both refused to cooperate. The search teams dispatched to their quarters had found nothing.

Nor had questioning the Vaadwaur crew been fruitful. All claimed to have no knowledge of any ill will harbored toward their late commander. To hear them speak, Captain Drall was well-respected and admired. The responses did not rest well with him. Even on *Voyager*, there were those who would criticize Captain Janeway. Apparently everyone held Drall in great esteem, a notion that Tuvok found highly improbable.

Axion was not finished. "What about Merris?" His features had become veiled. "She's already killed one of the Vaadwaur. Why isn't she under interrogation?"

"Did you witness any criminal activity from her?" Tuvok had no intention of entertaining groundless accusations.

"No, but she asked me many questions about Drall."

*Since she was assigned to debrief you, that is only logical.* Tuvok did not share this observation, however. It was best to keep Rayna as an unknown commodity.

This conversation was pointless. "Unless you have evidence to offer, Mr. Axion, it would behoove you to concentrate on your own activities."

"Sickbay to Commander Tuvok." The Doctor's succinct tenor broadcast over his commbadge.

"Go ahead."

"I'm finished with the autopsy."

"On my way," Tuvok assured him, closed communications and exited Axion's quarters. Two security guards snapped to attention before the hatch completely closed. He nodded to them curtly, and continued to the turbolift. His link chimed again.

"Torres to Commander Tuvok."

"Yes, Lieutenant?" He had instructed Engineering to conduct a sensor sweep of the shuttle which had delivered Drall and his companions. Tuvok had calculated that the odds of them finding something related to the crime were approximately 3,355.5 to 1. However, it had been, as Captain Janeway sometimes said, "worth a shot."

"We're done. I think you should see this."

Obviously something significant had been found. Moments such as these were proof that the cosmos did not follow the dictates of mathematical probability. It was a lesson which bore repeating.

"Acknowledged."

To his surprise, Torres continued to speak. "Commander? I...uh...haven't contacted Captain Janeway." The Chief Engineer's voice lowered to near a whisper. "She's not officially logged as off duty, but, well, I checked her location, and..." There was a long second of hesitation.

"Understood," Tuvok interrupted. Obviously the captain was in Rayna's quarters. "I am meeting with the Doctor, and then will report to your location."

"Yes sir."

He checked the ship's chronometer. It was 2104 hours, relatively early.

Once inside the turbolift, alone, he adjusted the frequency of his communicator.

"Rayna." His contact would be heard only by her, through the device implanted in her brain.

"Yes." The response was more breath than voice.

He chose his next words with care. "Would it be prudent to log Captain Janeway off duty?"

The door opened on Deck 5.

"Aye, it would." A breath of laughter colored the airwaves.

It pleased him that the captain was resting. Janeway had pushing her own considerable limits in recent time.

So, Tuvok selected an alternate target. "Commander Chakotay, would you meet me in Sickbay?"

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Minutes later, they were both present, facing the Doctor and his Vaadwaur counterpart, Kinel. Drall's body lay on a biobed beneath a stasis field. Red lights on the panel above him gave warning that he was deceased. Other readouts assured that the rate of decomposition was zero.

Chakotay immediately moved next to the EMH and Dr. Kinel. "So what have we got?"

Both wore expressions that Tuvok would have characterized as "troubled."

The Doctor spoke first. "Well gentlemen, Drall was quite unpopular." He brought up images from his PADD. "The most obvious injury is from the knife. As you know already, it is carved of Vaadwaur bone. What you don't know is that the bone was still alive."

His revelation caused Commander Chakotay fold his arms and frown. "Alive?"

"Alive," he repeated with finality. He walked them over to a small biofield that contained the blade. He picked up a polarity scanner. Glowing purple dots flashed in stark contrast to the ivory color of bone. "As you can see, someone kept it in stasis."

The knife explained many things: The residual invidium had obviously contaminated the replicators, causing them to malfunction. Nessel strips had been produced by chance. Tuvok relayed this information to Lieutenant Torres. She was, understandably, less than pleased.

In addition, as the knife was comprised of living tissue, it would have not have been detected as separate from the Vaadwaur who carried it. DNA analysis still required an organic sample.

He and Chakotay exchanged a glance. At the very least their adversary was clever.

"Is there precedent for this in Vaadwaur culture, Dr. Kinel?" Tuvok asked.

He watched the physician's reaction closely. The high forehead crinkled. Brown eyes lowered to trace the length of the knife. "My people are not forgiving. However, retribution is normally reserved for the State. In the case of grievous injury," he glanced up at Tuvok, "some prefer to exact their own punishment. It would be considered poetic to use an object directly related to the perceived wrong."

"Great." Chakotay rolled his eyes wearily. "So someone is out for revenge, not political gain."

"They would be if the knife had caused his death. As you are already aware, it did not." The EMH's schooled fingers brought up a close up of the knife wound. "The entry point is approximately three centimeters in width, and penetrated at a 45 degree down angle to a depth of 3.7 centimeters. Another 2 millimeters and it would have severed a primary artery."

Tuvok replayed the evening's events in the theater of his mind. The Lady Aja had run up to her husband as if to comfort him. What if her intentions were somewhat less altruistic? "Would you say that the attacker lacked sufficient physical strength to imbed the weapon deeply?"

"That is a possibility," the Doctor answered. "You do remember I said Drall was unpopular?" At Tuvok's humorless stare he heaved a sigh of surrender. "Right. You have the memory of an elephant." He picked up a PADD. "I've isolated a relatively fast-acting toxin in Drall's system. It appears to have been introduced here." He brought up a holo-image of the man's left palm. There was a swath of skin in a rectangular pattern which had begun to turn necrotic. "Dr. Kinel helped me identify it."

"Furonox is derived from the venom of an arachnid native to my homeworld," the Vaadwaur explained. "It is called the Frostbite Spider, and is a unique creature, secreting poison not only in its bite, but also glands on its abdomen. Changing the vector of introduction does not alter its effects, a suppression of the neuromuscular system causing paralysis and eventual suffocation."

Chakotay frowned at the man. "You mean it can be absorbed by the skin."

"Yes," Kinel confirmed. "It would take longer to get into the bloodstream. I would say maybe thirty minutes or so before the effects were felt."

*...a fact which complicates matters exponentially.*

Tuvok frowned in concentration. The substance could have been coated on a cup or utensil, anything that was held in the hand.

"I instructed Lieutenant Paris to scan everything left over from the banquet." The Doctor caught Tuvok's eyes. "With the replicators off-line, nothing had been recycled." He gave his head a reluctant shake. "We've found nothing."

"I'll get a team over to Drall's ship." Chakotay activated his communicator.

That was a logical action. Anyone on Drall's vessel could have planted the substance. The Bridge



or his private quarters would have yielded them the greatest margin for success.

"Unfortunately for your investigation, that didn't actually kill him, either." The Doctor brought up yet another display. The image showed clear signs molecular decomposition. "The venom wasn't fresh. Time and exposure had degraded it. At worst, Drall would have suffered respiratory distress and numbness in his extremities, but his physiology would have withstood the toxin."

Chakotay took a seat in one of the many rolling stools in Sickbay. He rested one cheek against his right hand, leaned that elbow on his knee and heaved a deep, exasperated sigh.

Though he did not share in the commander's emotions, Tuvok admitted to a certain level of displeasure at the findings.

The Doctor thankfully did not indulge in one of his customary moments of melodrama. He continued without prompting, "There was another poison in his system." His touch brought up a new image. White crystals dotted the screen, each with a distinctly rhomboid structure. "In the briefing this morning, Lieutenant Torres said that the Vaadwaur power systems produced a variety of heavy metals as waste. We've just isolated one of them. This, gentlemen, is arsenic." The Doctor shook his head as if he couldn't believe the data on his screen. "Samples from Drall's fingernails and hair follicles indicate that he'd been consuming it for the last month." His dark, artificial eyes turned toward Dr. Kinel. "According to the medical files, Drall has been complaining of nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain for about that long."

His peer nodded. "What he says is true." Kinel's face was crestfallen; his expression was one of self-castigation. "He had been complaining of stomach pain and nausea. I ran every test our limited resources had available, ruled out radiation, disease... everyone had been under such stress... I attributed it to that." His head bowed; his hands flopped helplessly at his sides. "The symptoms gradually got worse, diarrhea, dry mouth, vomiting. Just before the dinner on your vessel, Drall insisted I inject him with a massive dose of anti-nausea medication." Here his voice gained a honed edge of irony. "He didn't want to display weakness in front of you or your captain. Now, he's dead." At last he raised listless brown eyes to meet Tuvok's. "We know about the element of arsenic, but no one has used it in centuries. I never thought to test for it."

The Doctor's face became sympathetic and he gave his companion a friendly pat on the elbow. "Our equipment is much more sophisticated than yours. Unlike you, we can run open ended screens, looking for anything out of the ordinary, not just targeting specific anomalies. If it weren't for that, believe me, I would never have found it either."

"So is that what killed him?" Commander Chakotay had obviously had enough.

"Yes, though the Furonox, certainly didn't help matters." The Doctor changed the display again, showing the results of a battery of tests. "As I said earlier, he'd been consuming arsenic for approximately four weeks. Before he arrived on *Voyager*, however, he consumed a lethal dose. Death was caused by hypovolemia, a sharp drop in blood volume. His blood pressure plunged to almost zero and his circulatory system collapsed."

Tuvok digested the information for several moments. "We will need to isolate the source of arsenic." He reached for his communicator, but stopped when the Doctor waved him off.

"No need," he insisted. His photonic features came alight with self-satisfied pride. "I already have that figured out."

*He is obviously expecting a reaction.*

Satisfying human social interactions was often tedious. Tuvok raised his left brow approximately two centimeters as a show of mild interest.

The gesture was accepted, but not before the EMH declared smugly, "When you have access to several thousand gigaquads of scientific information, you don't miss much." Not receiving further reaction from either Tuvok or Chakotay, he continued, "Lieutenant Torres said in her briefing this morning that the precipitate from processing synthetic dilithium is claudetite." He brought up a picture of elongated, clear crystals. "Its other name is arsenic trioxide."

Information from *Voyager's* computer scrolled up. The compound was toxic if inhaled and was water-soluble, making it ideal for ingestion in most liquid substances.

*It is fortunate that you are incapable of feeling discouraged.*

Chakotay, however, was not immune to the emotion. "So, we have a murder weapon that almost anyone could access, multiple assailants who either didn't know about one another or really wanted to be certain Drall died, and no guarantee that either of the Vaadwaur we currently have in custody is actually the perpetrator. Is that about right?"

Tuvok recognized that his question was rhetorical, but he answered it anyway. "Yes, the question is why would so many be motivated to kill a single person." Here he turned to Kinel and fixed him with his most unrelenting stare.

The Vaadwaur could not long endure the gaze. He stared down at the floor. "I'm sure there were many reasons."

Chakotay moved in on him. "Whatever you know, you'd better tell us, before you become a suspect." He crowded Kinel against a biobed.

"He already is," Tuvok interjected. "Certainly a physician would have knowledge of the proper use of poisons and the necessary procedures required to preserve a bone alive."

"I didn't kill him!" Kinel's protest was swift and passionate. "I should have. As soon as we reached this forsaken part of space, I should have killed both him and General Gaul, but I was too frightened. I took shelter behind my oath as a physician." He turned away from Chakotay and shoved several instruments off one of the small tables. They clattered to the deck in a rush of noise.

Tuvok pulled his phaser as a precaution, but it was not needed. Kinel's violence seemed to burn itself out with that one outburst. He stood there, chest heaving, glaring at the fallen instruments as if they were to blame for everything. When he spoke, his voice was heavy with regret. "We were tired of war, most of us, anyway. All we wanted to do was find a planet somewhere that would support us. But no! Gaul wanted vengeance. He blamed your captain for everything, even though it was our arrogance that brought about our ruin. He chased after her, through the tunnels in subspace, trying to get ahead of *Voyager*, to lay a trap. Instead we ended up here." His hands gestured wildly about. "There wasn't enough food, and nowhere to resupply. The crews became mutinous..." Chest heaving, Kinel froze in place, compulsively opening and closing his fists. "...which is when Drall and Gaul moved the women and children onto two vessels. Their safety was linked to our obedience."

"They held your families hostage." Tuvok could not say that he felt outrage, but the injustice disturbed his calm.

"Yes." Kinel finally faced them. He was utterly spent and defeated. "So you see, you have a suspect list with over one hundred members. We all wanted to kill him."

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Rayna lay awake. Her eyes stared upward into darkness, seeing nothing except starlight and metal. There was no sound save for the furious pounding of her hearts and the soft purring of Kathryn's breath. Strands of auburn hair tickled Rayna's neck. Silken flesh pressed against her. The barriers of clothing were faint protection.

She tried to distract herself by thinking about the Vaadwaur. Aja's histrionic cries of grief had been staged, barely registering on Rayna's empathic sensors. Though she could not be entirely sure, it felt like Aja was pleased at the evening's turn of events. The Vaadwaur woman was certainly not taken aback when her husband collapsed.

And Geelon...his outrage at the death of his commander, complete with clenched hands and gnashed teeth had been masterfully enacted...and also feigned.

Kathryn's arm tightened about her as if worried Rayna would disappear. Absent the inhibitions of her conscious mind, the human had intertwined their legs and snuggled close.

It was all too much...too much intimacy...too much sensation.... It overwhelmed Rayna's consciousness and deprived her of sleep. How could she even close her eyes? She'd be pulled beneath the tide and drowned.

Still, it was very like the sea. Humans were born of the ocean and it was echoed in their blood and sweat. She closed her eyes. Even now Rayna's senses could taste the salty sweetness of Kathryn's chemistry, feel the rise and fall of combers in the rhythmic movement of Kathryn's breast, hear the breeze reflected in her breathing. Home used to be only a memory...

...but now it had returned. Rayna found herself walking naked on the shoreline of the Lustern. Grey and stormy, its waves pounded against the beach as if seeking entry into the earth's secret

places. The air was fresh in a way that no starship could replicate. Drawing in a deep lungful, she froze in mid stride. It had been decades since she last walked on Delta. Her life had carried her light years hence.

*This is a dream.*

She knew it in the same, sure way she knew with which hand to eat.

Yet, the grit of sand between her toes was as real as her next heartbeat. Feelings awakened, of belonging, of yearning, of wonder; things she'd thought dead and lost.

"Greetings, Mother," she whispered to the depths of creation. All life began in the sea and one day, all would return to its chill embrace.

Her knees grew weak. Rayna knelt; a zephyr drifted past her. There were things she ought to do, rituals to perform, songs to give voice. Returning to the Source was a sacred moment. She did none of them. One had to be worthy to embrace the deep. Instead she remained rooted in place as the kiss of Sul played soft upon her skin, for the sea's lover was wind.

"Rayna."

The word was softly spoken in a melodious tone that she recognized immediately.

"Yetara," she replied, which meant, "mother of my mother" in Deltan, an old word from a language she seldom spoke.

Sul's caress carried the familiar chemistry that belonged to her grandmother on its back. It awoke ancient hurts that Rayna had thought healed. They besieged her. Tritonium fetters bound her chest and tightened. How could emotion be palpable?

"You do not bathe?" Her grandmother joined her. Though old, the other woman was strikingly beautiful. Her skin showed little sign of aging and was pristinely smooth in the warm light of a blue sun. She was nude, also. There were no such prohibitions in Deltan culture. Nor did one approach the sea hidden by clothing. Deception belonged to the Deep, not Her acolytes.

Rayna blinked back tears. How was it that one could go a lifetime without crying and then lose control so easily? She shook her head in disgust. "No," she murmured. "I do not bathe."

"Think you've killed more people than the sea?" Her grandmother was smiling that knowing, kindly smile of hers. "Doubtful." She rose with timeless grace. "Perhaps you should pay heed to your own lessons on arrogance."

*She knows.*

The realization struck Rayna like a bolt of lightning from a mid-summer storm. "How?" she stammered, dumbstruck.

Her grandmother began a languid walk to the ocean's edge, but turned to smile at her once more. "You're in The Land of the Dead, Rayna. Use your brain to do more than insulate your skull." As her toes hit the water, she laughed. "It still tickles. Are you sure you won't come in? The cold should be quite bracing." A serious cast fell on her face. "The sea is unforgiving of stupidity, but does not judge our vices. Like all women, She is a fickle mistress. Unlike many, however, She is no hypocrite." Sea foam spattered Rayna's face with moisture. "The sea awaits you, Rayna. And so do I."

Her name reverberated in the wind, repeating endlessly even as the Lustern faded.

"Rayna?"

Someone touched her shoulder gently.

"Rayna?" More insistently, now.

She opened her eyes to the dimness of night and the concerned features of Kathryn. The human woman was leaning over her, rubbing a hand up and down Rayna's arm.

"I'm awake," Rayna assured. Her face was cool as if the Lustern's salty spray had been real. She felt moisture on it, still.

"You were crying." Kathryn reached up with a knuckle and brushed down Rayna's cheek.

*Not again.*

Rayna growled her pent up frustration. She was fucking tired of her tears bursting the dam of her will. Had it not been for Kathryn's gently restraining hand, she would have quit the bed. The weight of a single hand, it seemed, was too much to dislodge. Rayna stayed where she lay. Her pulse gradually slowed.

Kathryn crooked her elbow and propped a hand against her cheek. She had a delightfully mussed appearance. "What were you dreaming about?" she asked, her free hand still stroking Rayna's arm.

*I do not wish to have this conversation.*

Then Kathryn's misty grey eyes intersected hers, and Rayna's common sense lost yet another round.

"My grandmother." Odd how the uttering of it aloud made it more real... "It was just a dream." She tried to use more words to dismiss that sensation, and failed. Rayna met Kathryn's eyes without flinching.

Doubt and skepticism clouded the stormy orbs. "Are you certain of that?" The question was

fraught with hidden meaning and Kathryn's tone gained an introspective color.

*Rethinking your encounter with Daddy, perhaps?*

Unable to resist the invitation, Rayna said, "I'm as sure as you are."

The crooked grin gave both youth and rakishness to Kathryn's austere features. "Point made. Let's just say that I've begun to ask questions." She shifted her touch to Rayna's abdomen. Her hand rested there, quiescent.

Its light pressure crept through Rayna's t-shirt bringing her senses to red alert.

In halting words, Kathryn told her how she'd seen her father again, on the Bridge, just before she was rescued. "He told me to hold on to the chair," she finished. "It could have been just a hallucination. They gave me a lot drugs, but...I don't know anymore."

"Good beginning." Rayna quoted an old saying on Delta before she could censor her reply.

And suddenly it was her turn to share. The obligation was implied. She closed her eyes. "The Lustern is a violent ocean," she began. One word followed another until the tale was told.

"You must have loved her a great deal." Kathryn was attending closely. Her statement was accompanied by a frown between her brows.

Rayna made to rise, but the hand on her belly seemed to have increased its gravimetric weight. "In another life," she grudgingly admitted. "I did not see her after I was seventeen. She died while I was working the Cardassian theater."

Her voice was steady enough and the grief welling inside of her was not betrayed by it. Despite that, it seemed Kathryn knew anyway. Soft lips pressed against her cheek. The gesture was simple enough, but cut deeply all the same. Not since she was a child had anyone kissed her thus. Even as she struggled to recover, Kathryn's mouth moved, finding her lips. Rayna opened to her with a groan of longing. The weight of Kathryn's body slid atop hers slightly. Desire's perfume sweetened the air and set Rayna's chemical senses into warp. She traced down the contours of Kathryn's body, feeling her spine, too pronounced by half, through the sleek cover of negligee.

Though the fire of Kathryn's ardor did not dim, Rayna sensed hesitation. The human's hands moved more tentatively as if uncertain of their destination. Rayna cupped Kathryn's face and deepened their kiss, then took one of Kathryn's hands and moved it to her breast. Her nipple hardened at the contact.

"See?" she whispered hoarsely, pulling back to look into the other woman's face. "Easy-peasy."

The Terran saying had the desired effect. Kathryn gave her a half-smile, and her explorations became more confident. In short order, Rayna's t-shirt and sweats were shed in small heaps on the carpet.

Kathryn kissed down her neck, pausing at the hollows of her collar bones. Her mouth drifted lower, and lavished attention on both of Rayna's breasts by turns. Though she wanted to throw the human on her back and have her way with her, Rayna held back. Kathryn needed to lead, needed to know she could please before she would allow herself to be pleased. Rayna sensed that; she yielded to the knowledge.

"God, you're so smooth," came the throaty whisper. "So soft." Kathryn's tongue quickly found something better to do when it discovered that Rayna had two navels, one atop the other.

The pleasure was exquisite. Rayna's nerve endings called a red alert and her body trembled.

"Is this okay?" Kathryn's question made Rayna want to throttle her.

"Don't be an idiot," she snapped and heard the other woman chuckle as she returned to her exploration, boldly going lower until she found the source of Rayna's aching desire.

It wasn't the first time she'd been touched there. Some of her clients had been at least moderately concerned that she have a pleasant experience during their sessions. A few had even gone out of their way to ensure her needs were attended. None felt like this, like they had nothing else on their minds except pleasing her. Kathryn's inexperience with female anatomy was balanced by her earnest intentions and hard work. Her mouth, her fingers, her formidable concentration zeroed in on Rayna's center and did not relent.

As her ecstasy mounted, her control slipped. Her endocrine system surged in response and she felt Kathryn's touch grow more passionate, sensed her arousal reach a fevered pitch. The climax which followed rolled in like a tsunami. It blinded Rayna to all else, cut her off from her self-awareness and sent her bucking upward into her lover's mouth. In the distance she heard Kathryn's answering groan and felt the hands at her hips clinging to her. Together they rode the crest of the sexual wave until, at last, it crashed, bringing them both back to reality.

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Torres surveyed the damage done by her team. The impulse engines of Drall's shuttle lay about ten meters from the ship, itself. Several consoles had been removed and were scattered on the landing bay floor. All of the seats had been pulled. Ensign Gilmore had detected power fluctuations in their inertial dampers. The only way to isolate the problem and determine if it was a malfunction or sabotage was to disassemble the entire row and trace the circuits one-by-one.

"Torres to Vorik." There had been a team in the Mess Hall for two hours. The erratic behavior of the replicators coupled with the invidium already found on the murder weapon made contamination almost certain. She hoped it could be isolated. "Report."

"We have lowered the core temperature of the replicator power systems to -225o Celsius. They should be back online in 21.34 minutes."

In the background, she heard a team member speak. The words were indistinct. The tone was

not. Torres heard clear indications of stress in the pitch and meter. "What is it?" she pressed for information.

"The glassware from dinner is dissolving." Vorik's unflustered reply caused Torres' pulse to pound.

*Spontaneous nucleosynthesis...another sign.*

"Hazmat teams report to the Mess Hall." She wanted to personally whip the ass of every Vaadwaur *Ha'DIbaH* that had ever existed, all the way back to the first. "Vorik, put the entire Mess Hall on quarantine status. Prepare to initiate emergency decontamination."

Torres closed the connection and unleashed a barrage of Klingon curses.

"Problem, Lieutenant?" Gilmore asked.

Torres glared at her. "We've got invidium coming out our ears," she grouched.

The other woman gave a humorless chuckle. "Good thing we aren't Ferengi. That would be **a lot** of invidium."

"Heh. Yeah." Torres managed a grim smile.

Gilmore sat down in the center chair of the row and crossed her ankles. "Thank you, Lieutenant." Her blues eyes caught Torres'. "For recommending a reinstatement of rank."

"You deserved it." These kinds of discussions always made her uncomfortable. Torres abruptly skipped topics. "Find anything?" She gestured at the seats.

"Someone disconnected the port power coupling to the inertial dampers on this one. It would have been a bumpy ride if they'd encountered any turbulence." Gilmore stood, rubbing her hands against her thighs. "Emergency maneuvers would have sent its occupant flying. Do you think this was Drall's chair, that someone meant for him to be injured or killed?"

"Dunno," Torres shrugged. "It seems like a piss poor attempt in light of what we've already found."

"Which is what?" Chakotay's resonant baritone came from the hangar hatchway. Tuvok followed him in.

They both wore equally grave expressions.

*That's not surprising where Tuvok is concerned.*

"What's going on, Commander?" she asked as they approached.



"You first." Chakotay ran thick fingers through his jet-black hair.

Torres waved them over to a table she'd set up. On it were bits of machinery, electrical connectors, and plasma relays. She picked up a small, but surprisingly heavy device. "This detonator was attached to the temperature regulators on the impulse engine. Once activated, the fusion reactor would have overloaded in a matter of minutes."

She watched Chakotay send a speaking glance toward Commander Tuvok, and then hang his head.

"What? You act like we just surrendered to the Cardassian Union." Impatience jangled her nerve endings raw.

"B'Elanna." Chakotay dragged her name out in warning. His voice softened, then, and he gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Well done. I know you've got your hands full. I hear the Mess Hall is off-limits."

Blowing out a long jet of air, Torres brought her two friends up to date on the invidium situation. "I don't know where we're going to eat for the next few days, but I've got to flood the place with cryonetrrium."

His muddy eyes became worried. "That stuff is dangerous. I'd hoped we wouldn't have to use it on a large scale."

"Tell me about it." Cyronetrrium remained gaseous even at absolute zero; it was highly toxic as well. "We'll have to turn off life support for that entire section. Believe me, I wish there were some other way."

A sudden clatter of noise caused them to spin. Marla Gilmore had fallen into the dismantled shuttle seats. She leaned over them, gasping for air, her face a ghostly shade of pale. "Can't. Breathe," she croaked.

They raced to her side, but Torres was first. "Engineering. Emergency Intraship Beaming. Two to Sickbay."

She vaguely heard Chakotay make contact with the Doctor before everything flew apart in a trillion pieces of glitter.

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Kathryn crawled her way upward and collapsed atop Rayna. Though she'd been the one making love to the Deltan, it felt as if she'd just experienced the most intense orgasm of her life. Her body shook uncontrollably. Beneath her, she felt Rayna's tremors. That, and the salty taste of Rayna's desire on her mouth, reassured her that she was capable of pleasing this woman. There had been some nerve wracking moments, but in the end, Rayna's advice was sound. This was something Kathryn's male lovers had done that she thoroughly enjoyed. It was easy enough to share it.

Some of her timidity where her sexual prowess was concerned had been allayed, and she was beginning to feel pleased with herself. Warm arms slid around her waist and shoulders. They squeezed. Rayna's breath went from hoarse gasps to quiet inhalations gradually.

Without warning, she was rolled to her back. Rayna fixed her with a pure roguish delight and kissed her. Kathryn's lips yielded. Their tongues wrestled for dominance, and she lost. Wherever Rayna touched, sparks flew, skittering over Kathryn's skin and igniting a conflagration.

*Oh God.*

Her nightgown was tugged up and Rayna's fiery touch moved lower, circling slowly. Their kisses kept pace, tongues and lips meshing with increasing speed. When Rayna entered her, Kathryn moaned. Her hips rose in complementary rhythm. Friction and pleasure became the totality of her being. Unable to do more than hold on, Kathryn's body surrendered to the sensations besieging it. She was so close, so close. Her nails dug into Rayna's back. Tiny spasms rippled down her torso.

*Don't stop.*

Her back arched.

*Don't stop.*

Kathryn's consciousness narrowed into pressure and elation. She couldn't control her body's reaction and it frightened her.

*Don't...*

"Let it go," Rayna whispered in her ear. "Let it go. I've got you." Then she brought their mouths together in a passionate tangle of flesh.

Orgasm consumed her. It flooded her being. Kathryn called on the divine and clung to her lover helplessly. She felt Rayna's body twitch in time with hers and knew that she too had come. Sensation tripled, going on and on holding her suspended and clawing for purchase amid a maelstrom of decadence.

Only when the pleasure caused Janeway to whimper from overstimulation did the powerful caresses of her clitoris cease. The lips on hers softened, but continued to assault her senses. Involuntary shudders were all her sated body could manage.

Little by little, awareness returned.

Janeway felt her wetness staining the bed sheets; she felt Rayna's heat against her thigh. The touches at her center finally ended. The kiss became sweetly platonic.

She opened her eyes to find Rayna gazing down at her with those endless black eyes. They were filled with warmth and a kind of tenderness. Soft fingertips traced the edges of her lips. Janeway reached up and stroked down the back of her lover's head. Rayna leaned into her hand, closing her eyes.

"Did you..." Shit. She couldn't even manage to ask. Janeway drew in a steady breath. "It seemed like you..."

"Climaxed?" Rayna opened her eyes and grinned. "Ever the scientist. Our chemicals feed each other, Kathryn. When you climax, so do I, and vice-versa."

*Oh Katie, you're not only not in the same league, you're not even playing the same game.*

Janeway wrapped her arms around her lover's waist and pulled her on top. The moment froze. Her senses drank it all in; Rayna's weight and warmth, the sweat coating their bodies, the scent of their lovemaking in the oh-so-sterile atmosphere.

"Thank you," she whispered.

A soft nuzzle at her neck was the only reply.

Janeway closed her eyes and enjoyed the perfection of things.

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All too soon it was 0600 hours. Rayna showered first and dressed in the bedroom. The uniform pants seemed to accentuate the contours of her body.

"You're staring," Rayna pronounced without turning around.

"Just enjoying the view." Her own forwardness caused Janeway a touch of consternation, but the other woman merely laughed.

Dark eyes canted about to meet hers. "And here I thought you'd had your sex drive surgically removed."

"I was beginning to think so too." Janeway made to quit the bed, pulling the sheets aside. The nightgown was bunched up around her armpits. She didn't know rightly whether to pull it down or pull it off.

Thus far their nudity had been concealed beneath the veils of darkness. Rayna had since brought up the lights. Suddenly Janeway was painfully aware of her middle-aged body. She'd not been exercising like she should and her muscle tone was lacking.

*Isn't that silly, Kathryn? You've just made love with the woman.*

Her dilemma was solved when Rayna came over and tugged the sheer fabric upward. The Deltan

visually explored every inch of Kathryn's body. It was disconcerting to be so exposed, especially when the observer was a living representation of the goddess Aphrodite. Warm lips interrupted her musings with a searing kiss that left Janeway utterly breathless. It was over an instant later.

Rayna headed out the bedroom door. "I hope that disabuses you of the notion that you could ever be unattractive." She turned for a last look. "I'm fixing breakfast now."

"How did you know?" The words erupted from Janeway's mouth unbidden.

Black eyes glittered coyly from across the room. "Your emotional spectrum shifted from mild arousal to embarrassment just as you started to get up. I watched your eyes lower to the sheets, the color rush into your face and the frown appear between your brows. It doesn't take a mind reader to figure it out."

*'Elementary, my dear Kathryn,'* Janeway silently paraphrased.

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An ion shower and fresh uniform later, and Janeway made ready to face the day. Breakfast's decadent aroma set her mouth to watering, but she contacted Chakotay before sitting down to eat.

"Good morning. I take it nothing earth shattering took place," Janeway called.

"Nothing we couldn't handle," he advised. "Ensign Gilmore was hurt during the examination of Drall's shuttle, but the Doctor says she'll be fine."

*One of my crew was injured?*

"Why didn't you call me, Commander?" When someone was injured, she expected to be notified immediately.

"It only took place about half an hour ago." His voice sounded a little hurt. "I was waiting on an update from the Doctor." He paused. "We've also got an invidium problem. The Mess Hall is closed until further notice, but B'Elanna has a solution."

"Understood. I'll meet you in the Briefing Room at 0630 hours." She closed communications. If Chakotay had any notion where she was, his voice did not betray it. Reality was starting to set in.

*Invidium now. Just what we need on top of murder.*

Thoughts of Drall's death vied with the irrational idea that everyone on *Voyager* would know what had transpired between her and Rayna.

*And this is a problem, why?*

Her mind had supplied her with a fair imitation of one of Rayna's questions. Lacking an answer,

Janeway sipped the coffee which sat waiting for her. The smell alone was enough to restart the warp engines of her mind. Odd how coffee could do that.

Her hostess did not speak, but Janeway thought she sensed a bit of tension in the slender shoulders.

"What's for breakfast?" Janeway decided to make small talk. She watched Rayna through hooded eyes, wishing she had a guidebook for Deltan body language.

*And Orion, too, which is likely just as complex.*

Her new lover put a plate of biscuits and gravy down. There were bits of sausage throughout and it smelled wonderful. Janeway found herself thankful for replicator technology. Otherwise, her arteries would already be clogging. She dug in. Considering the weight she'd lost recently, a few heavy meals would do her no harm.

Rayna was having a bowl of something; it looked like Andorian figs and cream. "Do you still want me to assist with the investigation?" she asked, glancing up at Janeway.

The sausage had a smoky flavor, reminding Janeway of chorizo. Probably that was what it was. She swallowed, nodding. "Yes. I'm meeting Chakotay in about fifteen minutes. I'd like you to attend."

"All right." Rayna finished her meal and pulled on her uniform tunic. "I'll see what Neelix has in store for today."

"Wait," Janeway called, before Rayna could exit. "The Mess Hall is shut down." Crossing the room, she caught her lover's face between her hands and placed a warm kiss on her lips. "Apparently we've missed a few things." She lingered near a few moments, then pulled away. Janeway stroked her fingers along Rayna's scalp. It was something she'd wanted to do almost from the first time they met. "I'm discovering that I have a thing for bald women," she murmured through a smile, then drew in a long breath. "I'm not going to be good at this, any of it. I won't know how to act when we're in public. I haven't had to set personal and professional boundaries in years."

Rayna's black eyes were steady and calm. "I'm no young miss, Kathryn. Don't worry. I shan't do anything to jeopardize your position with the crew. Since the Mess Hall is closed, I'll catch up with Neelix at his quarters...arriving at the Briefing Room together would only cause tongues to wag."

A warm, velvet palm stroked down Janeway's forearm, and then her new lover departed.

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"How's Gilmore?" Janeway strode into the Briefing Room and cut to the heart of her immediate concern. She'd contacted the Doctor during the turbolift ride, but irrationally wanted confirmation.

The others were already seated, Chakotay and Tuvok in their usual seats, Merris across the table from them.

"Fine," answered Chakotay. "She should be up and about this afternoon. Thanks to her, we inadvertently discovered where Drall picked up the Furonox, from the arm of the chair he sat in during his shuttle ride to *Voyager*."

*This is unreal.*

"I understand that you were waiting for an update, but in the future I expect to be notified immediately whenever one of my crew is hurt," Janeway was in no mood for excuses, "especially when the injury could be lethal."

Chakotay narrowed his dark eyes. His forehead crinkled turning his tribal tattoo into a mish-mash of random ink. "I apologize." There was anger in his voice. "Things were happening pretty fast. It wasn't our intention to leave you out of the loop."

*They know where you were.*

Immediately the captain within began to upbraid her.

*You knew better than to get involved with someone.*

*No.*

Janeway crushed the upsurge of recrimination. She felt Rayna's eyes upon her, and knew that her struggles had not gone unnoticed.

*I will not regret you. Their eyes locked for a microsecond. Whatever course my life takes from this moment forward, I will not regret you.*

Janeway took the head chair, her ire momentarily spent. PADDs of data lay on the smooth tabletop of silver and black. They all picked them up.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed that Rayna's brows flinched downward just slightly.

"What?" she asked without thinking.

Chakotay and Tuvok both looked up at her in surprise. Rayna merely turned her PADD around to face them.

"Murderer" was etched across the tiny screen. It repeated in blood-red letters all the way across and cascaded all the way down.

Tuvok's ebony brow flitted up in pointed contrast to Janeway's. She could feel her anger

returning and felt it reflected in her frowning forehead. "Is this someone's idea of a joke?" she demanded.

Chakotay reached across the table and took the PADD. He punched several buttons. "It won't erase." His dark gaze turned toward Tuvok.

"I uploaded the data to the PADDs, myself." The dark Vulcan gestured that he wished to examine it. "It is not possible that anyone tampered with it."

When Chakotay handed it to him, Tuvok vainly pressed buttons, with similar results. He flipped the PADD over and removed the power cells.

The screen flickered. The PADD issued the oddest noise, almost a metallic wail, but the display did not waver.

*Impossible.*

Two seconds passed, then three, then four when, finally, the macabre word faded from view.

A chill whisked its way down Janeway's spine. Gooseflesh prickled across her skin as the temperature inside the Briefing Room plummeted.

"Chakotay to Torres." Her First Officer slapped his commbadge. Condensed breath painted wisps of fog on the air. "Check the environmental controls for the Briefing Room."

Half a second later, B'Elanna's voice responded. "We see it, Commander. I'm overriding the automatic thermostats."

They felt the change almost immediately. Warmth returned. The cloying cold retreated, almost reluctantly, in its wake.

Janeway glanced around the table. Her mind was a jumble of theories and a tangle of emotions. Something was happening to her ship. First the replicators, then the PADD, now the environmental controls....

She contacted Engineering. "Janeway to Torres. B'Elanna, the invidium contamination seems to be spreading."

"Agreed," Torres responded. "I'd hoped exposure had been limited to the Mess Hall, but it doesn't appear we're that lucky. I'm passing out polarity scanners even as we speak and organizing teams."

"See if Seven of Nine can come up with a way to interface the hand scanners with ship's sensors." Janeway pursed her lips as she thought. "A little Borg technology would be useful right about now."

"Acknowledged."

After closing down the commlink, Janeway rose to pace the room. She had been overly sharp with her senior staff. They all knew their jobs and had proven that time and time again.

Janeway shot the two men a gentle look. "It's never a dull moment on *Voyager*."

Both of them met her eyes, and each in his own way, acknowledged and accepted her unspoken regret.

Chakotay nodded agreement. "As if the Dead Zone wasn't enough..."

Across from him, Tuvok was sober as a judge, not unusual, but there was something about his demeanor that gave Janeway pause. "Commander?" she prompted.

His cool, dark gaze turned to meet hers. "Captain, the odds of randomly generating the word, 'murderer' are approximately 900 million to 1."

"I'll admit it is a very odd coincidence." Janeway wondered where he was going with this. "You don't think it is related this incident do you?"

"No, Captain, however, there are elements of the crew who harbor resentment toward Crewman Merris because of Lieutenant Ayala's death."

His softly spoken words blew air upon the faintly-glowing embers of Janeway's temper.

Ill-treatment directed toward a crewman was something she would not tolerate. She'd deal with that issue later. There was more, though, a fierceness of emotion that surprised her. It dawned on her that having animosity directed toward Rayna, in particular, was the root cause of her fury.

*You'll have to be careful, Katie. Favoritism in ship matters is unacceptable.*

*Easier said than done.*

Finally Janeway spoke, making an effort to keep her voice even and business-like. "It was self-defense."

Tuvok gave her a patient look. "A logical response, but I have noticed that many species tend to embrace irrational beliefs."

"Let it go," Rayna interjected. She had an expression of boredom on her face. "If the PADDs link to the ship's computer were corrupted by invidium, it could have extracted the word from any number of historical articles in *Voyager*'s database."

His raised brow acknowledged Rayna's point, and Tuvok nodded. "That is possible. I will have Lieutenant Torres run a diagnostic of the PADD and the historical archives in case of data



corruption."

That settled the matter. Or it should have.

Something niggled at Janeway's ease, setting tiny hairs on the back of her neck to standing. Invidium was a convenient excuse for the strange behavior of *Voyager's* systems; perhaps it was too convenient.

*Don't be silly.*

Silly? After encountering her father, the notion of the supernatural no longer seemed quite so childish or primitive.

*Not to mention thirty-seven bowls of nessel strips....*

Chakotay had another PADD brought to the Briefing Room and handed it to Rayna. He continued with the briefing, mercifully truncating Janeway's musings. "As you can see, traces of invidium were found on the floor beneath Drall's body, on the banquet table, and inside the replicators."

"Hence the reason B'Elanna wants to pump the room full of cryonetrinum." Janeway leaned back in her chair and sighed. "It's a dangerous move, but I don't see any other choice," Janeway frowned at the polarity scans taken from the Mess Hall. "Tell Torres to proceed."

She turned her attention to Drall's autopsy. Scads of information scrolled past, but one fact leaped out:

*The bone was still living. That's why we didn't detect it.*

Creeping realization, like frost on transparent aluminum, stole over Janeway's consciousness. Rayna was right. This was personal. Even if the weapon wasn't responsible for Drall's death, the callousness and forethought required for such an attack could not be ignored.

"Have we identified who used it?" She scanned over the rest of the data but saw no results.

"Based upon the angle of entry and penetration, our current working hypothesis is that Lady Aja wielded it." Chakotay clasped his hands together as he leaned his elbows on the table. "We think she concealed it under her dress and stabbed Drall during the confusion of his collapse."

Janeway met his serious gaze. "Can we prove it?"

Tuvok spoke up. "Not at present. Lady Aja has refused to answer any questions, and no biological transfer was found on the weapon, except for Drall's blood." He steepled his fingers. "The Doctor extracted DNA, and identified the bone as belonging to a male of approximately six years of age, but we will need reference samples from the Vaadwaur. Thus far they are all refusing to cooperate," he added, meeting her eyes. "Captain Riza is demanding that a Vaadwaur

liaison be assigned to the investigation."

Janeway shook her head. "Until we've begun to eliminate suspects, that's not possible. Dr. Kinel will be privy to all medical data; that will have to suffice. Based on the medical report, we have sufficient evidence to compel Lady Aja to give us a DNA sample."

Tuvok entered a notation on his PADD then walked over to the room's display. "Ascertaining the cause of Drall's demise was a necessary prerequisite for eliminating potential suspects." He brought up holo-images of the post mortem. "Unfortunately, the Doctor's report served to broaden the list of suspects, rather than narrow it." He continued in that dispassionate tone of his, through the stabbing, the fast-acting poison, and onward to the build up of heavy metal toxin that ultimately ended Drall's life.

When he broke the news that Drall and Gaul had been holding the children as hostages, Janeway felt the ice in her veins give way to fiery rage. "That's why he jumped to the conclusion that we would do likewise." She stood in a rush of motion. "To use innocents so casually...is unthinkable..."

"Indeed," Tuvok confirmed softly.

"And it gives every adult Vaadwaur motive," Janeway finished.

Chakotay full features became grave. "That's not the end of it, either." He nodded and Tuvok brought up an Engineering report. "Drall's shuttlecraft had been sabotaged. The impulse reactor had been programmed to overheat ten seconds after its second liftoff. It would have exploded during his return trip."

"That follows." Rayna joined in. Her face was once more a mask and behind the darkness of her eyes, Janeway could see the warp speed of her thoughts. "It could be blamed on us." She leaned back into the chair and folded her arms. "It also demonstrates the commitment of the assailant. He or she was willing to kill everyone on that shuttle, possibly including himself. What I find most interesting is that the two assassination attempts appear to be unrelated. Why plant what is supposed to be a lethal dose of poison and simultaneously blow up the shuttle? You can only kill him once."

Janeway's skull had begun to throb. The whole convoluted mess made her sick. Subterfuge and intrigue...God how she hated them. Oh she knew how to use them, Kashik found that out, but she despised those methods. A clean fight, if there had to be fighting, was her preference.

Chakotay continued the briefing, oblivious to Janeway's inner turmoil. "We searched Drall's quarters and found arsenic residue in a wine bottle. The remnants of liquid tested at 75mg per liter, well over lethal."

Rayna interjected a second time. Her black-velvet eyes appeared slightly bemused. "At those levels, a human would be dead in less than an hour. Yet, the Doctor indicated that the poisoning had gone on for weeks. Either the Vaadwaur are of hardier stock or..."

"The poison had settled at the bottom," Tuvok answered her quietly.

"Ah." Rayna furrowed her brow, obviously deep in thought. "So the lower the level of liquid, the higher the concentration of poison."

From the inflection of her voice, Janeway knew that Rayna had drawn some sort of conclusion from that information. She caught the woman's eye. "What does that tell you?"

"That whoever added the poison only had limited access." Rayna's facial muscles tightened minutely. "Else he or she would have periodically shaken it."

*She's right.*

It appeared to Janeway that they all were chewing over the last tidbit. Unlike a snack, it brought no satisfaction. She motioned for Chakotay to continue.

He cleared his throat. "There was nothing else of interest found in the cabin, no invidium or Furonox." He tilted his head slightly, confusion lightly flavoring the cast of his face. "Oddly enough, there was no personal log. Either he didn't keep records at all, which is unlikely, or he hid them."

"Or someone deleted them." Janeway ground her teeth together in frustration. "Have Kim and Seven examine the Vaadwaur computer system for tampering."

"Will do." Chakotay scrolled down a page. He explained the Doctor's findings regarding claudetite, then sat the PADD aside. "They periodically jettison their waste, but don't keep disposal records."

"So virtually anyone could have collected it," Janeway finished. This investigation was like escaping from a quantum singularity, all but impossible.

Rayna's next question caused them all to stare. "Why are we pursuing this?" She met their astonished expressions with cool indifference. "Drall was holding his own people hostage. Obviously they and we are better off without him."

The lights dimmed without warning, then brightened.

It was in Janeway to give the crewman an upbraiding that would not soon be forgotten, but she belayed the impulse. Knowing Rayna's background made it easier to understand her attitudes and motives. On Rigel, no doubt, Drall's death would be celebrated as a victory.

"Condoning murder, no matter who the target might be," Janeway steadied her voice and tried to dispel some of her fury, "is not something I will tolerate on this vessel, now or at any time in the future. Am I understood?"

Of course the woman could not be abashed. "Yes, Captain. I have many failings, but they are not of comprehension."

Janeway suppressed a smile by disguising it as a scowl. She was growing accustomed to Rayna's wit, but there was no need to show it to everyone else. "Good," she replied sternly, then turned her attention back on Chakotay. "Go on."

His muddy brown eyes snapped away from their study of Rayna's face. In their murky depths, Janeway found a mixture of curiosity and speculation.

*So despite your best efforts, he's noticed something in the way the two of you interact.*

There would be questions later, most likely.

Chakotay glanced back down at his PADD and then continued his section of the briefing. "Aja and Geelon are both refusing to cooperate." He used his fingers to form quotation marks in the air. "They do not recognize our authority to investigate or detain them." The last was said with a touch of cynical amusement.

"Sounds rehearsed." Janeway voiced the thought aloud. "Maybe they were working together."

"Maybe." Chakotay rubbed his chin. "It is theoretically possible that the various attacks were coordinated, but that seems unlikely."

Tuvok steepled his fingers. "No more so than four individuals plotting separate attacks and having them coincidentally occur on the same day."

And he had a point as well. The more Janeway contemplated the possibilities, the more snarled and tangled they became. It was a Gordian Knot worthy of Alexander. Unfortunately they couldn't solve it with a sword stroke. "Get DNA samples from both of them, by force if necessary. I'll speak with Captain Riza. Since he's as much a suspect now as anyone else, perhaps he'll be more inclined to cooperate."

The lights in the Briefing Room abruptly went out, leaving only the display's flickering light to illuminate the gloom. Janeway blew out an exasperated sigh. "That's it. After I speak with the Vaadwaur, I'm going to Engineering and help track down the invidium problem before we lose any more systems. Continue the investigation and keep me posted. Gentlemen," she addressed Tuvok and Chakotay. "You've done an excellent job."

The two nodded, both looking pleased in their very different ways. As they all rose to exit, Janeway suddenly recalled another topic for discussion. "What about Harry's probe?" In the chaos caused by Drall's murder, she'd nearly forgotten the sensor anomaly.

Chakotay tapped his PADD and glowered at its display. "We lost contact with it prior to data transmission." He gave her an apologetic glance. "I should have checked in with Harry sooner. We're too far out of range to launch another one."

*Why do I have the feeling we'll regret that?*

To Janeway's mild displeasure, Rayna did not even turn around to wish her good day. Instead the Deltan woman had fallen into an intense conversation with Tuvok. It struck Janeway then how closely the two tended to stand, the intimate way they bowed their heads toward one another. They had a short-hand method of communication that only came from spending time in another's company. Why hadn't she registered it before?

"Captain?"

Chakotay's prompt jarred her mind free of its misgivings.

"I'm sorry, Chakotay," she answered with a half-grin. "So much has been going on lately we're all being driven to distraction." Janeway patted his elbow. "I'm going to make contact with Mr. Riza."

She left, still trying to free her mind of Rayna.

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*Your concentration is shit.*

Rayna knew herself well enough to recognize that fact. She did her best to focus, but it was like escaping the implacable clutches of a black hole. Even as she followed Tuvok to the Brig, the buoyant padding of carpet beneath her feet, watching as *Voyager's* gleaming walls of silver and grey passed by, even now she could still smell the salty sweetness of the sea...or was it Kathryn...clinging to her nostrils. The whispery touch of an ocean breeze, or the remembered velvet of Kathryn's hands still swept across her skin.

*Murderer.*

Ah. And interspersed with the pleasant afterglow was a lingering reminder of her recent past. Was it Drall's ghost or Gaul's? No telling. It would be nice to know, however. While she'd murdered the latter, she had no part in killing the former. She wanted to deserve the haunting, if that was what it was. Then again, it could be Ayala's phantom....There was a cheery notion.

The Brig's hatchway appeared as if sprung from the ether. Seven of Nine waited at the entry, like a lone centurion left to guard the Neutral Zone. The Borg's expression was closed. Her body chemistry was unreadable, cloaked by the nanoprobe coursing through her bloodstream. That was Rayna's take on it, at least. She'd not been exposed to Seven overmuch. On the prison ship they'd been separated by environment suits most of the time. During their rescue of the Bridge crew, there had been so many competing chemicals in the atmosphere, she'd been unable to sort them out.

*Fuck. How did we get to the Brig? I don't even remember the turbolift ride down.*

The plan to use Seven in Aja's interrogation had been hatched between Tuvok and her in the Briefing Room, and it was a sound one, but if she didn't take her head out of her ass, it would be for naught.

*You had sex and dreamed of your grandmother. It is certainly not the first time for either of those events.*

But it was, because the dream was more than some fantasy dredged up from her unconscious mind, and the sex was so much more than a physical encounter.

*Heh, and the malfunctions plaguing Voyager aren't simply the result of invidium.*

...an observation she would keep to her own self. Unlike Deltans and Orions, most advanced civilizations no longer believed in the presence or power of the dead.

"Are you ready?" Rayna studied Seven's face. There was confusion and a bit of recalcitrance etched in the blue-ice of her eyes.

"Yes, but I do not understand."

Rayna brushed past her with a cocky grin. "Then just take it on faith."

She keyed the hatch, but allowed Tuvok to enter first. His dark eyes appraised her coolly, and Rayna met them with her most inscrutable expression. A single black brow lofted upward, clearly indicating that he was unimpressed.

*The perceptive bastard knows you're off your game.*

They passed the sentry...Lieutenant Baxter? Rayna gave the balding man a nod. Yes, that was his name. Neelix said he frequented the gymnasium. Judging from the human's muscular frame, the quest for fitness was paying off.

Beneath her feet, *Voyager's* deck-plating was solid and stable. Why, then, in her imaginings could she feel the rhythmic undulation of waves?

She drew a breath and at last turned off her wayward thoughts. It was time to go to work. As Tuvok deactivated the force field of a cell, Rayna focused her senses upon its occupant.

Lady Aja was seated upon the bunk, hands neatly, calmly folded upon her lap. Both feet rested completely on the deck, and did not tap or twitch or shift. Eyes like citrine gems stared forward. They blinked slowly in the cell's stark lighting, but moved neither port nor starboard. Even Rayna's empathic senses detected precious little, a nagging hint of irritation combined with a touch of contemptuous disdain. That was all.

"We have isolated the DNA of the bone knife," Tuvok began, "and are in the process of gathering samples from the remaining crew." He removed a collection tube from the kit on his

belt. "We require a sample of your DNA in order to eliminate you as a donor."

Still nothing. No fear or nervousness. Not so much as a twitch of her head in Tuvok's direction. The Lady was cold and hollow as the void of space. Then she sniffed in a short burst of air and answered, "I do not consent. I do not recognize your authority to either investigate or prosecute my husband's murder."

"Fortunately your consent is unnecessary." Rayna steeled herself and crossed the threshold. The walls immediately began to squeeze ever closer. She clasped her hands behind her back and assumed a casual stance, one shoulder leaning against the aft wall, but her fingers dug into one another with enough force to cause numbness. "We already know you killed Drall. The knife angle, the wound location, it all gave you away." Here she paused, sending a bored look toward Seven. "From what I'd heard of the Vaadwaur, I must say I expected better. How in the world did they manage to defeat your people with such clumsy efforts?"

Aja's laugh was anything but jocular. It had a dry sound, the way bare branches would scratch over windows during the bitter Rigellian winters. "If you are trying to bait me, I suggest you try something a little less transparent." Arrogance colored the cell with its putrid perfume. "I have no intention of answering a servant."

*You just did.*

Arrogance was woefully predictable.

At Rayna's nod, Seven of Nine stepped forward and scanned Lady Aja with a tricorder. The Vaadwaur woman deigned to glance in the Borg's direction and her eyes narrowed. "What is she doing?" She turned irate eyes onto Tuvok.

"Calculating the number of Borg nanoprobes necessary to assimilate you." His answer was smoothly spoken without inflection of any kind.

*Perfect.*

Vulcans found it illogical to lie, and thus far he had not. Seven *was* estimating the nanoprobe count. It was a fine line, but an essential one.

At Aja's horrified expression, Rayna countered with her own mirthless cackle. "What? Do you think that the Federation is filled with sweetness and light by accident? We are the new Borg. Each one of us part of a higher order Collective. Oh..." Here she smiled, meeting Aja's nervous orbs with all the frigid malice she could generate. "...you thought we were noble buffoons, too? Poor lamb. That ruse fools everyone." She gave a derisive snort. "As if we could reconnoiter the Delta Quadrant shackled by such idiotic ideals!"

Tuvok gave the tiniest nod to Seven and the Borg moved forward, her tubules extending from the mechanism on her hand.

"Resistance is futile," intoned the Borg in a monochromatic whisper, and even Rayna had to suppress a shudder.

Aja shrank back against the bulkhead behind her bunk. "You can't do this."

"Who will stop us?" Rayna unclenched her hand and conducted a fingernail inspection. In her experience, it was a universal expression of total boredom with the occasional side-benefit of being annoying to any observers. "We know you killed Drall. What we don't know is why. I think it was because he was a swine both in and out of bed, but perhaps you prefer the company of animals. Tuvok," she yawned in his direction, "is of the opinion that the blade holds some special significance, and wants to prove his point. Either you give us your DNA and your story willingly, or we will learn it all once you join the Collective. Your choice." Their gazes locked in a meeting of amber and black. "I imagine you've made a life of reading people, Lady Aja. Am I bluffing?"

Aja gave way. "No." The Vaadwaur gave a shuddering breath outward and covered her face with her hands.

*Wrong again.* Rayna did enjoy a moment of satisfaction from that. Luckily Aja could not see.

Tuvok collected epithelials from inside the woman's mouth and ran them through his tricorder. Half of the alleles matched. The bone came from Aja's son.

But not Drall's.

The tricorder had already compared it to a sample from the dead captain. Nothing matched.

So Aja had played him false.

"He found out," Rayna voiced her opinion. "He found out that the child wasn't his and had him killed."

Seven of Nine's face recoiled in an expression of horror. There was a beguiling innocence about her, a bare contradiction to the menace she presented. Within the azure waters of her eyes, Rayna found someone else worthy of protection. Her list was becoming cumbersome.

Fortunately Tuvok began to speak, and saved Rayna from the quagmire of useless sentiment. "Is this what happened?"

"Yes." Aja's voice broke in a muffled sob. "He found out. Two days later, my son died in an accidental fall from our balcony. But I knew. I knew the truth." She raised a tear-stained face. "Under our laws, wives cannot initiate divorce. He kept me chained to him as punishment, knowing I loathed his every breath. I waited for years, through the war, through hibernation only to wait longer. Gaul would have killed all the children in retaliation for Drall's murder, you see. I had to wait until he was gone...and then you killed him." She wiped away her crying and glared at Rayna defiantly. "Assimilate me if you wish. I no longer care."



"Sorry old girl," Rayna replied with grudging regret. "It was all a lie. You didn't kill Drall, and we aren't members of the Borg."

After a second of astonished silence, Aja launched herself at Rayna. Seven and Tuvok interceded and a nerve pinch later, the woman lay unconscious on the bunk. They called the Doctor to check her over. Rayna took her leave before Aja woke. There was no need to add salt to a fresh wound.

Tuvok and Seven shadowed her out. Both asked about her health, but Lady Aja hadn't managed to injure her.

"Brightly polished," Rayna answered. Playing with the emotions of others was old news and an old game. Even so, this time it left a bad taste in her mouth.

*You've spent far too much time in the company of paragons. Corruption is sure to follow.*

Her father's voice...it could always be counted on to remind her that reality was an interesting paradox, and consorting with the virtuous exacted a toll.

"So," she offered up a honeyed grin, "what's next?"

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Chakotay escorted Captain Riza into the Ready Room. Despite her best efforts, the Vaadwaur leader refused to cooperate until he met with Janeway face to face. That was fine with Chakotay. He would have the man taken into custody in a warp nine minute at the first sign of hostility. Babysitting a bunch of arrogant idiots who'd just tried to take over *Voyager* wasn't high on his list of priorities.

The hatchway opened, and he motion Riza forward. Easily half a head taller than he, the alien captain was a brick of solid flesh and bone. According to the Doctor, Riza was ten kilos underweight, but Chakotay couldn't see it.

Janeway beckoned them both to sit. She was troubled; the wrinkle in between her auburn brows gave that away, but to an outsider, it could be seen as displeasure.

To his surprise, Riza bowed slightly before taking his seat. It was an unnecessary courtesy, and not in keeping with the hubris of the Vaadwaur.

"Captain," Janeway greeted, and picked up her coffee mug. Her steely eyes studied her guest over the rim of the cup, another characteristic gesture. "You wanted to see me?"

*She never gives anything away.*

Just when he thought it was impossible to admire Janeway more, she did or said something to increase his esteem.

Riza seemed to gather himself before speaking. His face was immobile, but his gaze was centered on the mint-green curve of the Ready Room's desk. "Let me begin by offering our..." he appeared to almost chew on the word, "...apologies."

Meeting Janeway's quick glance, Chakotay found as much astonishment as he felt, maybe more.

The Vaadwaur continued, "Needless to say, humbling ourselves in front of other is a distasteful act. Were I in your position, though, I would have significant doubts as to my veracity. Let me attempt to allay your suspicions. I am the person who sabotaged Drall's shuttle." At last he lifted his eyes, first to look Chakotay dead in the eye, and then to affix Janeway with the same open stare.

"You believe that confessing to attempted murder will convince us to trust you?" Chakotay half questioned, half demanded.

"I did not have to tell you anything," Riza countered calmly. "I offer truth, however distasteful you may find it."

Captain Janeway set aside her coffee and leaned back in her chair. Her face was closed, impossible to read. "Why?"

*Why what? Why did he want to kill Drall? Why is he telling us about it, or why did he apologize?* Chakotay was confused.

Apparently Riza had no doubt as to Janeway's meaning, however. "We attacked your vessel without cause. Yet you have attempted to help us, even though it lessens your own chances of survival. I am not the smartest of beings, but from whence I sit, that is what honor looks like, though some might mistake it for stupidity." He turned to face Chakotay. "My race is almost extinct, and if we continue to behave as we have in the past, death will come all the quicker."

"So you're making an alliance of necessity." Janeway gave Riza a hard look. "And later, when you've recovered from this latest battle, then what? Another sneak attack?"

An expression that was almost regretful passed over the alien's visage. "Our arrogance has taken us to the brink of annihilation. Unlike others, I have learned from the experience." He stood slowly and extended his wrists toward Chakotay, but continued to address his comments to Janeway. "I assume that I will be taken into custody now."

Not wishing to disappoint him, Chakotay wasted no time in summoning Commander Tuvok and an armed security detail. The Vaadwaur was taken to the Brig with alacrity, and he and Janeway were left alone.

They sat in silence for a time, and it gave him a chance to study her. Still thin and wan in the stark Ready Room lights, there was something different in her face, a lightness that had heretofore been missing. It both pleased and pained him. They'd been living with a shadow of the old Janeway for months. Everyone had seen the joy and life slowly draining out of her. Chakotay

had done what he could, but she wouldn't let him in, not the way he'd dreamed. Then Merris arrived. Rumors about the pair had been bandied about from the moment the captain had stayed there overnight. He'd paid no attention to them at first. Little by little, though, he'd seen the two disparate women grow closer.

"What do you think?"

Janeway's question startled him. For a moment he feared she somehow knew what was going on in his head. Then he realized she was referring to Riza. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "They're a blood thirsty lot, if you ask me."

"True," she admitted thoughtfully, "but we can't travel through the Dead Zone surrounded by enemies." A bit of the old sadness crept back into the storm of her eyes. "Damned if we do; damned if we don't. It's the same old quandary over and over." She scrubbed a hand over her face.

In that instant of vulnerability, Chakotay reckoned that whatever could bring a measure of happiness to his friend...well...it was all right with him. "We'll figure it out, Captain," he assured her with more confidence than he felt. "We always do."

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Tom Paris adjusted the frequency of his polarity scanner and continued down Jefferies Tube 35C. The deck of the maintenance shaft was sporadically dotted with tiny bits of fluorescing lavender. He glanced at the tricorder in his off-hand. Of the invidium there was no trace, of course; the tricorder used modified sensors and invidium wouldn't register. But it would find mouse droppings, which the polarity scanner would not. There they were, little grains of organic waste. But if his instinct was correct...he waved the polarity scanner over the area, and it glowed a lovely purple. He tucked the device back in his belt.

"Well, now," he said aloud, "that explains the leeching systems failures. B'Elanna." Tom gave his commbadge a smack. "I think I've located your Invidium Mary. The ever-elusive mouse must have picked up some of it from the Mess Hall and now he's spreading it willy-nilly all over the J-Tubes."

"Terrific. So we can't track it with ship's sensors." B'Elanna didn't sound any happier with his discovery. "What do we do now? Play 'find the needle in the haystack?'"

He grinned at the frustration in her voice. Something about a riled up half-Klingon just made him feel good about being Tom Paris. "I can think of better games to play," he parried, then remembered they were broadcasting over an open channel. "I'll track him down for you. We'll have to shut down all the access tunnels and hit them with cryonatrium."

"Acknowledged." *Damn it.* B'Elanna didn't say it, but he could hear the line delivered in the theatre of his mind.

"All right, mousey." Paris made minor adjustments to his tricorder. "I'm gonna play cat." Since

the little critter was coated in invidium, it wouldn't show up, he'd have to follow a trail of urine and feces. "Bread crumbs would be more palatable," he grouched to himself.

Minutes passed and he continued slowly forward alternately looking for waste with his tricorder and checking for invidium with the polarity scanner. Mice didn't live very long, no more than two years. So the odds were, there was a den of them living in the Jefferies Tubes. It would only complicate matters.

*The story of our lives in the Delta Quadrant and beyond.*

Hey, there was a great title: Captain Proton and the Great Beyond.

The lighting flickered twice, but returned. "Oh come on." A power failure was the last thing he needed.

*Where is the nearest repair station?*

He pulled up a diagram of the shaft. Deck 13 was peppered liberally with them. "Okay. Ten meters on the starboard side." There would be Sim's beacons stored inside.

*Why can't 'fleet just call them "flashlights"?*

*Just add that to your list of unexplained traditions...* Sometimes he engaged in internal dialogue just to amuse himself. Paris pulled up a cross section of the deck on his tricorder screen.

The Brig wasn't too distant, and with all the Vaadwaur getting locked up in it, he didn't want to be left in the dark if the force fields failed, something the presence of invidium made more likely than not.

*What a happy thought.*

Actually it would give him another opportunity to play hero, and that was one role he relished. "Captain Proton will save you," he muttered to nobody. "That sounds pretty good actually: Captain Proton vs. the Invisible Death Ray." He could have hours of fun with that on the holodeck, and it sounded so much more compelling than: Tom Paris Plays Hansel and Gretel with Invidium Mouse.

A few minutes later and he reached the repair station. He attached the beacon to his wrist, but didn't turn it on. No need to waste the battery. Pulling the polarity scanner, he cast about for the mouse's violet trail.

Something cold passed him by. Paris looked over his left shoulder. It was the oddest thing. Not a pocket of cool air that you walked into...no...it was like an iceberg floated past.

"Only there's no iceberg, Tommy boy." He chuckled to himself. What he wouldn't give for another run at Fair Haven. The last visit had gone all strange, complete with an unexplainable

encounter with his mother. Even now he was still unsure what to make of it.

Much like the current murder mystery. It was worse than an old Agatha Christie. His imagination spat out a new title: Murder on the DZ Express. That one was actually kinda cheesy.

The lights died. No warning. No sputter. Just. Dead. Only the screen of his tricorder and the faint glow of invidium beneath his polarity scanner gave any illumination at all.

He activated the beacon, then tapped his commlink. "Paris to Engineering. I've got an outage on Deck 13, Section 35."

Lt. Vorik responded. "We are aware of it, Lieutenant. Repair teams have been dispatched." The Vulcan's tone was calm and controlled.

*Wish I felt that way.*

His heart was playing a drum rift on is ribcage. Sweat prickled over his upper lip and a rivulet slipped down the back of his neck. Being boxed in wasn't exactly his favorite thing. He took a deep breath, consciously trying to slow his respiration and forestall the feelings of panic that chased at his awareness like hounds.

Skittering noises in the black caused his head to snap toward port. The beam of his wristlight revealed nothing.

*Shit.*

He was as jumpy as a new recruit on his first flight. Nervous laughter was his best defense, so he indulged in it. The sound died in a strangled croak when the temperature took a nosedive. The inside of his nostrils actually crisped when he breathed in.

*This is beyond freaky.*

Paris crawled forward. The Sims Beacon was almost useless. Too bad he couldn't strap the blasted thing to his forehead. Air colder than the boreal winds of Rura Pente surrounded him, clung to him. Scratching noises, closer this time, caused his chest to tighten. He looked around, but saw nothing.

Suddenly there was a jaundiced glow and the sound of clanking. One of the hatchways was opening. He gripped his scanner like a club and made ready to meet...

...Crewman Rayna Merris.

"Cripes, Merris," he sighed out in relief. "You could have called out or something."

The bald woman squinted against the stark illumination of his wrist light, but Tom thought he detected a little humor in her black eyes. "We saw the power fluctuations." She was half-in, half-

out of an entry hatch.

"Is the Brig still secure?" Paris asked the only pertinent question he could think of.

"Yes." Merris waved him forward. "Auxiliary power to the force fields kicked in.

"Good." Tom was more than ready to exit and crawled rapidly toward her. "Engineering will have to decontaminate the whole works," he imparted. "The mouse is spreading it all over the ship."

Merris' schooled features immobilized and she stared long into his eyes. The experience was not unlike a full-body medical scan. "I rather like the mouse, Mr. Paris," she said quite softly. "I would consider it a personal favor if you would see to it that he is not harmed."

*What the hell is she interested in a mouse for?*

Her backhanded request took him completely off-guard, but Tom was nothing if not adaptable. "Well that will take some doing." He hemmed and hawed a bit. "I've tracked one before, but it was only because I was totally bored. Plus, it's bound to have a family."

Her black eyes offered no quarter. They did not demand or plead, but steadily examined him.

Finally Paris gave in. "So you'll owe me?" *Nothing better than having a spy in your debt.* That was his philosophy.

Rayna's face gained a most serious cast and she replied, "Yes. I will owe you." She sounded none too pleased about it.

It was an attractive idea. All that art and artifice locked inside that Rigellian brain could be invaluable under the right circumstances. But why was she interested in the mouse at all?

*Never look a gift Orion in the eye...or was it a gift Vulcan in the ears?*

No matter. You had to take advantage of whatever good luck you found.

They clambered out into the main corridor. Emergency lights functioned here and the temperature was normal, at least it felt so to his skin.

To his surprise, Paris found Seven of Nine was also present. She must have been waiting there.

"Hi." He offered a wave.

"I see Captain Proton was rescued." Her monotone voice was sprinkled liberally with humor. It was something to which he still was unused.

Paris ignored the raised brows from Tuvok and Merris. "I was following a trail of invidium," he

explained.

"So we heard," Tuvok replied coolly. "It is probable that the mouse encountered the invidium in the Mess Hall; there were traces of it on the banquet table."

"Right." Paris digested this information. "But how did it get on the table? The knife was concealed until Drall was stabbed." His thoughts spun to tornadic speeds. "Lady Aja could have had it on her hands."

"True." Seven appeared to be considering things as well. "It would be more effective to simply examine her and Commander Geelon." She nodded toward his polarity scanner.

With that they all headed into the Brig. Paris felt pretty good about visiting the place and not being on punishment. It was a change of pace and he liked change. Baxter gave him a nod as they went past. They were overdue for some downhill skiing. This time Tom was confident he'd beat him for sure.

"Hello Lady Aja," Paris greeted her curtly. She did not return his pleasantry, but he'd not found this race to be especially pleasant. It was no surprise that her hands glowed under the scanner. Tom contacted Engineering so they could send another team.

The next cell contained Captain Riza. He was a new addition. "I need to scan your hands, sir." There was no need to be jerk about it.

"Of course." Riza held out his hands. They were clean.

That left Geelon. Tom repeated the greeting and the scan and there it was...glowing speckles of lavender.

*Oops. Looks like someone got caught with their hand in the invidium jar.*

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Seven observed the evolving chain of events with great interest. Traversing the labyrinth of intrigue that surrounded Drall's death was challenging to say the least. Her cortical node had computed several hundred possibilities, arranged them in order of probability, and discarded them one-by-one as new evidence was discovered. More fascinating, however, were the varied roles played by *Voyager's* crew. They functioned independently, a fact which should have rendered them completely ineffective. When she had first been introduced to the myriad of species on this vessel, she could not fathom how they had survived four days in the Delta Quadrant, let alone four years. Her appreciation of their talents as well as their tenacity had grown with exposure. Just when she believed that she had cataloged all available data and could learn nothing more, this crew managed to produce something entirely new. They succeeded where others failed, every time.

Today was no exception. Following a hodge-podge of clues, they had duped a confession from one Vaadwaur, impressed a second into making his own, and now stood poised to close in on a

third. Her gaze drifted over the controlled excitement in Lt. Paris' face, glimpsed the serene aplomb of Commander Tuvok, and settled on the shuttered features of Crewman Merris.

This woman was indeed a puzzlement. Even more impossible to comprehend was the attachment that obviously existed between her and Tuvok. As a Vulcan, he possessed an enlarged neocortex and superior analytical ability. These traits made their species desirable for assimilation. Unfortunately for the Collective, Vulcans chose to die rather than merge.

Her own experience with Tuvok, as an independent entity, had impressed upon her the depth of his wisdom and the precision of his cogitation. Yet, what did he see in Merris? Seven seldom indulged in what Naomi Wildman termed, "wishing," but she wished her Borg sensors could penetrate the hybrid's skull.

*Voyager's* newest addition did not seem to notice her scrutiny. The bald woman's black eyes were focused solely on Geelon. Seven followed suit, but, just as with her study of Merris, could discern nothing.

"I do not know how I came into contact with it." The Vaadwaur's voice was well-modulated and lacked any indication of stress.

"Yet you have it on your hands," Tuvok countered adroitly.

For some reason, Geelon upturned his lips approximately 1.2 centimeters, a slight grin, humans would say. "Well, it is invisible to the naked eye, Lieutenant Commander. I routinely tour our medical section as part of my duties. Perhaps I picked up a bit of invidium there. It isn't something we pay much attention to. We may be primitive when our technology is compared to yours," here his voice became mildly sarcastic, "but *our* systems are not compromised by that substance."

The slight did not go unnoticed by *Voyager's* helmsman. Paris glared down at Geelon as if the man had just importuned B'Elanna Torres for sexual favors. The attachment to *Voyager* among her crew was another source of befuddlement to Seven, especially Janeway's. It was only a vessel. The modifications had made her superior to many, but hardly unique and irreplaceable. If the Vaadwaur had developed technology that neutralized invidium's more dangerous effects, then it was an excellent opportunity to make additional modifications. *Voyager* would be better, not worse from the encounter.

"Nice try." Lieutenant Paris had folded his arms across his chest and was giving Geelon a thoughtful look. His initial spark of anger had apparently been doused. "But if there's that much lying around, then everyone, including Drall would have been exposed. The Doctor didn't find any."

*An excellent point.* Seven awaited Geelon's parry with mild anticipation. It was not long in coming.

"It isn't for me to solve this riddle for you, boy." Geelon turned his lone emerald eye on



*Voyager's helmsman.*

Paris seemed not to mind the slight about his age, or if he did, he chose to ignore it.

"We require a sample of your DNA," inserted Tuvok.

"Why?"

For the first time Merris spoke. "To see if it matches the knife in Drall's back." Her words were conversational, and that struck Seven as strange.

*Many things about her are strange.*

Species 5434, Deltan and Species 6579, Orion had been deemed unsuitable for assimilation. The Deltan endocrine system rejected Borg nanoprobe resulting in fever, coma, and death. Orions had no qualities which benefited the Collective. They were not particularly intelligent, lacked telepathic abilities, and their physiology was entirely unremarkable. And yet...somehow they had combined into a person Tuvok called "friend." More bewildering by half was the attachment rumored to exist between Merris and Captain Janeway. Given the hybrid's mysterious background, her propensity for killing those who crossed her, and her reckless habit of disregarding protocols and orders, it was completely unfathomable that the captain would tolerate her, much less be fond of her.

*Is your background less mysterious, your history of killing less extensive? You, yourself, disregarded Away Mission protocols when you awoke the Vaadwaur in the first place. This entire business is your fault, but Captain Janeway is still irrationally attached to you.*

Geelon gave his consent, awakening Seven from her introspective slumber. Moments later they were waiting for the comparison results, all except Merris. She was still studying Geelon.

"It won't match." Merris' pronouncement preceded Tuvok's confirmation by several milliseconds. When they all turned questioning eyes toward her, she continued, "Confidence cannot be faked on the chemical level." She took several graceful steps toward the suddenly somber Vaadwaur. "You did not stab him." Her eyes became more piercing. "You did not even know he was going to be stabbed. I was there when the blade was discovered and your surprise was genuine. Yet..." There was a pause and Merris appeared to mull something over. "...you did not approve of Drall. You said that holding children hostage was 'base,' a jibe aimed at your captain."

Tuvok joined her, leaning over Geelon from the opposite side. "Indeed. You appeared to find that thought distasteful."

Some kind of communication was taking place between Tuvok and Merris, a wordless rapport that Seven had observed between Janeway and some of her crew. It defied categorization. A single look, a twitch of the head, a shift in the lights within the eyes, its manifestations were as varied as were the people who employed them. The message varied also, from instructions to information to intention, but somehow these beings translated the signals into meaning. Just as

Tuvok and Merris were doing now.

"Distasteful enough to act upon," Merris inserted her comment. "Poison is typically a woman's weapon, at least among my kind. What about in your culture?"

Geelon did not answer, but his lone emerald eye glittered with shrewdness.

Of a sudden, Merris was looking at her and Seven realized that one of those nonverbal messages was being sent her way. She struggled to decode it.

The scope of interrogation recently expanded to include gender-bias as it related to methods of murder, with Merris noting that poison is more often used by females of her species.

Perhaps she was expected to fill in the vacant space with her knowledge of Vaadwaur preferences when it came to murder...only she had no such information. The Borg databases from 900 years ago were inadequate.

*Of what significance is it anyway?*

Unless...Geelon chose his method because it could be more easily blamed on a woman. In which case he meant to implicate Lady Aja.

This was another bluff and Merris wished her to "play along."

Proud of her ability to comprehend, Seven announced in a factual drone, "That is consistent with what the Borg know of the Vaadwaur." She fixed Geelon with an imperious glare. "Did you mean to lay blame on Drall's spouse?"

The green orb blinked only once. There was no other reaction.

Apparently for Tuvok nothing more was required. "As Drall's second-in-command, you would have been privy to his private life to some extent. You knew about his wife's indiscretion," he pronounced solemnly. "It is highly unlikely you would not have anticipated her desire for retribution."

"Right," Paris said, drawing the word out slowly. "So you off Drall, frame her, and take his spot. Brilliant."

Seven did not find the plan to be particularly ingenious. It was cruel, cowardly, and dishonest. Captain Janeway would never elect to use such tactics.

The Vaadwaur heaved a beleaguered sigh and settled back against the bulkhead. He folded his arms over his chest and regarded them with weary acceptance. "Not bad," he spoke as if to himself. "Not too bad, for a group of aliens having only limited experience with my people." His next words were directed to Merris; he stared long into her eyes. "I poisoned him because it was quick and convenient. Whether or not it was blamed on his shrike of a wife mattered not at all.

Once I confirmed Gaul's death, it was time to remove Drall." His one green-stone eye narrowed to a slit. "I'm a soldier, not a monster. I don't make war with children. Nor do I use them as weapons."

*He committed a dishonorable act for honorable purposes.*

The inherent contradiction did not sit well within Seven's orderly thought processes. It did not compute. It did not make sense. It was, to quote Tuvok, illogical. Yet there it was.

Her Vulcan counterpart voiced the only question remaining, "From where did you obtain the Furonox?"

Yes. Geelon had stated already that his use of poison was motivated by speed and convenience. Arsenic was anything but.

There was a pause before Geelon replied, "Ah, that is another riddle you must solve for yourself. I am finished giving answers."

Merris' black gaze found Tuvok's brown one and they both made to exit the cell. After exchanging a more quizzical glimpse with Paris, Seven followed. The force field was reactivated just before Merris spoke.

"He was confused by the question." Her pale brows had contracted downward and she looked at the carpet as if some sort of revelation lay upon its stippled surface. Suddenly Merris became still as ancient bedrock. "I don't think he knew what the poison was called."

"Which means..." Tuvok had become equally impassive. "...that he obtained it from someone else."

Exactly how many Vaadwaur did it take to kill one of their own kind? Seven could not wrap her mind around the anfractuious routes taken to bring about Drall's demise. They spiraled outward in ever more complex weavings, but the tapestry was incomplete. There were only loose threads. It would have been by far more efficient to simply shoot the man, if he needed to be eliminated.

*Murder is wrong.*

True. Captain Janeway had taught her the value of each, individual life. Yet, there were times when killing became as necessary as breathing...or continuing to breathe.

"Have we collected DNA from all the Vaadwaur?" Merris' sussurant question pulled at Seven's attention.

Tuvok replied, "Yes. Geelon was the last. There were no matches."

The slender woman cast her attention back inside the cell. Its occupant had risen and was looking out her, a smile on his face that Seven thought might be characterized as "sly." Merris' manner

became even more deeply introspective. Finally she nodded to herself, or to Geelon, Seven could not be sure. "That makes sense." Turning, her black eyes impacted Seven's with palpable concentration. "All the pieces are in place."

*I do not see that at all.* Seven had begun to feel like a rather slow learner; nothing that had been revealed produced a demonstrable conclusion.

For his part, Paris gave every appearance of being equally baffled. Blonde brows knit together. One could almost see the impulse engines of his brain coming up to full power.

Two strides brought Tuvok abreast of Merris. "You suspect tampering." It was a statement, not a question.

Merris gave a nod, and said, "I believe the Doctor should compare all the samples taken to one another, not just to the bone. I will wager my contract there will be a duplication."

*Intriguing, but unlikely.*

"It is infinitely more probable that the father is not present." Seven did a quick calculation of the odds and was satisfied with her choice of adjective. "Only 600 Vaadwaur survived. Of them, only 156 are present in the Dead Zone."

"Life pays no attention to probabilities." Merris gave a grin. "The father is here."

"Is this the big reveal, then?" Paris' eager voice interrupted. "That's how they always did it in the old movies. Gather the suspects at the crime scene and then lay out the clues." He actually rubbed his hands in anticipation.

There passed another round of unspoken messages between Tuvok and Merris. Seven acknowledged a growing fascination with this process. She would ask Captain Janeway about it when circumstances allowed.

Eventually Tuvok nodded. "Yes, Mr. Paris. That would be acceptable. I believe that Crewman Merris needs to pay one more visit to the Doctor and then we can proceed."

Seven felt her brows raise. This was highly irregular. Certainly it would break more than one protocol in the handling of Federation prisoners. If Captain Janeway granted permission for this unusual endeavor, it would require considerable explanation.

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*This is damned irregular.*

Kathryn Janeway strode into the Mess Hall, a storm-cloud of discontent in her wake. Preparations were already underway. Tables had been pushed aside to make room for a large ring of chairs. Surrounding them was a circle of security officers, all of them armed.

*Tuvok's taking no chances.*

That was for the best. Unconventional situations had a habit of getting out of hand, and Janeway couldn't think of a more unconventional situation than this.

The Talaxians were already sitting. Neelix shifted in his chair and played with the hem of his multi-colored jacket. Lex and Axion stared wide-eyed at the guards and sent furtive glances toward the exit. Clearly they wished to be elsewhere.

*We all will before this is over.*

It was a statement that carried an ominous ring of truth.

Chakotay entered, looking nearly as displeased as she did.

"Do you think this will work?" he asked.

The question drew a deep scowl across her face. "I don't know," she answered truthfully. "I'm not even sure that I want it to."

His tanned features melted into an empathetic half-smile. "Me neither. If they're right..." His voice trailed off. Silence lengthened. Then, "We'll just have to wait and see."

*Wait and see...*

Janeway hated waiting. The inevitable would come in its own time and she had always resented it. Life didn't come with forward and rewind, however, and there was nothing to do but let it all play out.

*God I hope they're wrong.*

That thought had dogged her footsteps ever since Merris and Tuvok laid out their theory, and the unconventional means required to prove it. Both were convinced that this was the only way.

The hatchway opened. Ensign Kim came in first, followed by Geelon, Riza, and Aja. Tuvok trailed them. Two more security officers flanked him. All wore expressions that would have frightened a raging Klingon.

*Intimidation begins with the set of your jaw.*

Her father used to say that. As a child she remembered watching him don his uniform tunic and fix it just so. Then he would stare into the mirror and put on his "game face," as he called it. It looked like the security officers can here to play hardball.

Pride filled her chest. They were so professional, all of them. No captain could ask for a better crew.

Seven of Nine was next to enter. She carried a PADD in her Borg hand. Though her normally impassive features were impassive as ever, there was an agitated energy to her movements. Clearly something had upset her equilibrium. Janeway made a mental note to find out what.

The prisoners were seated opposite from the Talaxians and they all glared at one another in a mixture of suspicion, contempt and fear...though the last was by far less characteristic of the Vaadwaur.

Chakotay gave her a skeptical look. "I still say this is a little melodramatic for Tuvok."

That it was. Janeway's thoughts were interrupted when the hatchway opened yet again to admit Rayna Merris. She was studying information on her PADD and Janeway didn't think she was aware of her surroundings at all, but then her dark eyes rose. They looked at one another for a few heartbeats, made all the faster because Janeway's had quickened. Then Rayna crossed over to Tuvok.

*I wonder if she likes to sail...*

The thought was engendered involuntarily, and she squashed it with deliberate swiftness. It was absolutely ludicrous to think about inconsequential things when grave matters were afoot.

*She isn't fond of the holodeck anyway. You wouldn't want to make her sick.*

Janeway gritted her teeth and closed her eyes for a second.

"Captain?" Chakotay's tone was undercut with concern.

"I'm fine," she muttered. "I just wish it was over." It was as good an excuse as any, made all the more credible since it happened to be true.

*Maybe you could invite her to your place for once.*

The Mess Hall admitted another set of visitors, most fortuitously. The Doctor and his Vaadwaur counterpart, Kinel, took their seats near both the Vaadwaur and she and Chakotay.

"Is this everyone?" she asked, a trifle impatient now. The feeling of dread cutting into the pit of her stomach put an edge on her voice that Janeway hoped sounded like anger, not nervousness.

"Just one more to go," Merris answered. Her voice drifted over Janeway from behind. It entwined about her like a tapestry of sound. "Here he is now."

Lieutenant Paris jogged in. His blonde hair was slightly mussed as if he'd been hurrying the whole way. One hand gripped yet another PADD. The other held a small plastic box containing several mice.

*What on Earth?*

"As everyone is aware," Tuvok's rumbling baritone demanded attention, "Captain Drall was murdered. In reality, there were four, separate attempts against his life, only one of which was ultimately successful." He began to pace just outside the circle of chairs, coming to a halt behind... "Lady Aja wielded a dagger fashioned from the bone of her deceased son. We discovered that Drall was not the father, and by her own admission, Aja held him responsible for the death of her child."

Janeway digested this information slowly. Tuvok had briefed her on it prior to the meeting, but it still hadn't quite been absorbed. The willpower required to stay married to the man who killed your child...it was mind boggling. More so was the fortitude to bide time until it was possible to strike.

Her musings ceased when Rayna began to speak. "Of course, most of you know that the knife wound did not kill Drall. It was too shallow. However it did lead us to the first thread in a very complex weave. Captain Drall and General Gaul were holding the Vaadwaur children hostage, blackmailing their fleet into obedience. Finding that information only increased the number of possible suspects. Every parent now had a motive."

When she finished, Tuvok took over. "The investigation was hampered as a series of invidium-induced malfunctions began to plague the ship. They originated in the Mess Hall, where the replicators incessantly produced serving after serving of nessel strips." He paused, then moved to stand behind Captain Riza. "When it was learned that the bone knife had been preserved alive, it was only logical to conclude that invidium had been brought on board with the weapon. Also logically, since the murder took place in the Mess Hall, and the knife was used there as well, the replicators would have been exposed."

As always Janeway enjoyed the workings of Tuvok's mind. He was a deep, deliberate thinker, and it showed in his work.

Chakotay raised his hand like a school child; it was quite endearing. "We started to get malfunctions through out the entire ship."

*Good. He sounds baffled.*

This whole charade hinged on the guilty being taken by surprise. Janeway forced herself to nod as if never having heard the objection raised before.

"Indeed we did," Merris answered as if it were simply her turn to do so. "Thanks to Mr. Paris, we found out how."

*Voyager's* helmsman raised up the trapped mouse. "I found a trail of dropping intermingled with traces of invidium in the Jefferies Tubes. As it turned out, minute quantities were being deposited all over the ship. I figured he picked it up in the Mess Hall."

"Only he'd been frightened away before the meal even began," Rayna was circling now, stealthily, gracefully. Janeway was reminded, once more, of a cat. "Which meant that he had returned to the crime scene later and there was still invidium there, possibly on the floor where Drall lay, or on the banquet table...."

*There's your cue.*

Janeway spoke up, finding her lover directly across the room, "...where the would-be murderer was sitting."

"Exactly." Tuvok now moved to stand behind Geelon. "Both Lady Aja and *First Officer Geelon* had invidium residue on their hands. We soon learned that Drall's first officer had also attempted to kill him, with a compound known as Furonox. He revealed little more, but it was interesting to note that he was surprised neither by the dagger's unique composition, nor by Lady Aja's prior indiscretion, and was certain that his DNA would be eliminated."

"Which it was," piped up Paris. "Geelon portrayed himself as a simple soldier who only wanted to end indecent imprisonment of his people." Sarcasm leaked out of the lieutenant's tone like a steady flow of water. "Personally I think he just wanted to get ahead and Drall was in the way."

Tuvok referred to his PADD. "We discovered the vector Geelon had chosen for the Furonox quite by accident. Ensign Gilmore came in contact with it on the Vaadwaur shuttle." He gave Commander Geelon a stoic stare. "She sat in Drall's seat and absorbed it through her palm, just as he did." Turning to Janeway he added, "Our sensor sweeps would not have detected it. Only when the chair arm was scanned with a medical tricorder did the substance become apparent."

"Makes sense," Janeway ground out the words. Fury pulsed in her temples at the thought of Gilmore's brush with death. "Sensors only pick up weapons, explosives, and the like."

At this point, Chakotay obligingly raised his hand once more. "So Geelon didn't know about the sabotage, either?" he asked, looking slightly nonplussed, though when he caught her gaze, Janeway could make out the wariness lying torpid in the muddy depths of his eyes.

"No." Tuvok cast Captain Riza a cold look. "That particular assault was his responsibility."

Geelon gave grunt of mild amusement. "Going to blow us all up, eh, Captain. Subtle," he mused, "and cowardly, considering you arranged not to be on it."

"I will point out that I had no way of knowing Drall would have me sent back to my ship early." Riza gave every appearance of being unconcerned. "Still I saw no reason to confess my transgressions to the group and spare you."

Rayna was moving again. "What is notable is that *First Officer Geelon* never came in contact with the blade. He was not exposed to invidium by touching it." She was heading toward Tuvok now, drawing near to Janeway's position in the ring. "More importantly: Geelon was a tad unfamiliar with the toxin he had used. He did not recognize its proper, medical name, and



whatever faults he possesses, does not strike me as the sort of buffoon who would use a poison he knows nothing about."

A merry chuckle cut through the room. Geelon inclined his head at Rayna, his one good eye twinkling with genuine admiration.

"So, he got the poison from someone else," Merris finished and returned Geelon's gesture of respect. Her footsteps carried her past Janeway, then the Doctor, finally drawing up behind Kinel. "Which brings us to the next variable in this complex equation...who, in all the Vaadwaur would possess both a basic knowledge of toxins and reasonable contact with invidium." Her dainty hands came to rest upon the Vaadwaur's suddenly tense shoulders.

*Kinel, right on schedule.*

Janeway leaned forward and watched as the Vaadwaur doctor tugged at his uniform collar with a finger.

"Crewman Merris rightly deduced that we found no match for the male donor of the bone's genetic contents." Tuvok took up position on the other side of Kinel. "At her suggestion, we searched for two duplicate samples from the Vaadwaur. We found one." He peered down at the physician with hardened eyes. "Oddly enough the material you submitted, Doctor, matched that of Drall, who clearly could not have volunteered his blood twice."

"What are you saying?" Kinel twisted so that he could look at his two accusers. "Obviously a mistake was made somewhere. Here." He bared his forearm. "Take another sample."

"Oh that we will," Rayna purred at him. "But from the other arm, if you please."

The EMH produced a specimen kit from the breast pocket of his uniform. He never got the chance to use it.

Kinel was on his feet in a trice. "This is madness. I refuse to be publicly humiliated. By what authority do you treat me thus?"

"By mine." Captain Riza came erect, looking down at his medical officer as if calculating the force needed to snap his neck.

"You don't currently have any." Janeway rose. Her gesture to the security guards was unnecessary. Phasers had already appeared in every hand. The two Vaadwaur were quickly returned to their seats.

Janeway moved to stand over Kinel, hands on hips. "We'll take that sample now." She nodded to the Doctor. He and three security officers made ready to move in.

"It's no use." Lady Aja's voice set all their heads to turn. She was still sitting, legs crossed primly. Every hair was in place as if none would have the audacity to move. Her face was

streaked with newly shed tears. "We almost succeeded, my love."

"No!" Kinel pleaded. His affronted mask disintegrated. "No! They have nothing. Nothing!" He extended his arm in Aja's direction, as if trying to touch.

The EMH used his distraction, taking a dermal regenerator and reversing it to harvest a few skin cells from Kinel's extended hand. "Well," he pronounced, "we have your DNA, now, and it's a match to the paternal half of the bone's genetic code." The Doctor turned his tricorder's display around for them to see. Though his countenance was controlled, Janeway thought his photonic eyes were melancholy.

Kinel had fallen silent. He glared at them like an angry horta in a room full of broken eggs.

"We have a good deal more than that," Tuvok stated flatly. He motioned Mr. Paris to come forward. The lieutenant unclipped a polarity scanner from his belt and activated it. Kinel's hands and tunic came alight in a veritable galaxy of lavender stars.

"What did you expect?" the Vaadwaur demanded. "I work with stasis and containment fields all the time."

"You do, indeed," Tuvok continued without a hint of victory in his voice. "The ability to forestall death and decay are exceedingly valuable assets in the medical field. Are they not Doctor?" He turned toward the EMH.

The request roused the artificial man from his dolorous lethargy. "They are. However using an invidium force field to preserve living tissue over long periods of time requires exacting skill." His keen brown eyes fell on Kinel and sharpened into awls of glittering basalt. "You are the only one who could have managed it."

Janeway's mind was churning out cogent points of its own.

She turned her back to Kinel and fixed Aja with an appraising look. "You never revealed his identity." Her voice was gentle. Though she could never condone murder, it was clear this woman had been made to suffer. "No matter what Drall did, you kept that to yourself."

The jewel-like amber eyes blinked away more tears, meeting Janeway's head on. "No. I never told him," she breathed.

"And you," Janeway spun 'round on Kinel, "had the wherewithal to avoid detection."

Kinel was leaning forward hopelessly, elbows on knees, head bowed. She saw him nod once. When he spoke, it was in the tone of a man thoroughly defeated. "I inserted inert, hollow capsules just below the skin. All I had to do was fill them with someone else's blood, and it was easy to defeat the tests." He laughed, a horrid noise that reminded Janeway more of sobbing. "Your physician was very kind to me. When I suggested he use a method similar to ours, he agreed; he even let me choose the arm he drew it from."

*Which is how he made it through the first round of testing.*

The Doctor sent her an apologetic look. It was unnecessary. Janeway understood very well how seductive it could be to find a peer. Her dealings with Ransom had engraved that lesson in cruel strokes upon the canvas of her soul. She patted the EMH on his shoulder.

Silence held sway for an interminable time. Finally, Rayna's melodic alto eased into the hush. "You gave Geelon the poison and instructed him in its use. In doing so, you also stained his hands with invidium." Though her words were directed to Kinel, they were issued from somewhere nearby. When the willow-reed of a woman had breached the outer ring, was unclear. But Janeway felt her, just behind and a bit to starboard.

"Only you failed," interjected Tuvok.

Kinel sat up, clenching his jaw so tightly that his teeth ground together in an audible clash of enamel. "Yes. Failed." He grimaced as if his word left a bitter taste in his mouth.

She sensed rather than saw Rayna sidle closer. The woman's black gaze was locked on Kinel.

"Doctor..." Janeway summoned the EMH.

Something was wrong. Suddenly Kinel had grown pale. His breathing was labored. Sweat trickled down his brow. "It is a pity," he gasped. "To further reduce the gene pool of our race."

The Doctor took a tricorder reading, his sardonic features remolded into a mask of grave concern. He tapped his commbadge. "Doctor to Transporter Room One. Emergency beaming, two to Sickbay." His hand had barely connected with Kinel's shoulder before the two of them disappeared in a whirlwind of sparking energy.

"Live by poison," Rayna whispered low beside her, "die by poison."

It wasn't so neat and tidy for Janeway. She'd consented to this debacle, knowing it was gamble.

There was a choked cry of agony, and Lady Aja pitched forward to the deck. "No," she keened. "No!" Her next breath wheezed in as if drawn through a pinhole. Mottled white and gray blotched her cheeks.

It was Paris who made contact with the fallen woman. He quickly contacted the Transporter Room and they were both sent to Sickbay as well.

The room was frozen. No one else moved. No one spoke. It was as if the shock of recent events had turned them all into statues, timeless and silent. Chakotay stood in front of his chair, astonishment carved in the taut muscles of his cheeks. She wasn't much better.

*I should never have allowed this.* Her insides were cramped and twisted as a myriad of emotions

overtook her. They congealed into at spear point of absolute certainty: It was her fault.

"Pish-tosh," murmured Rayna as she brushed past. "You've no cause for guilt."

How?

*Your emotions, Katie. She can read your emotions.*

Janeway realized that she could nurture a true depth of dislike for empath's. Frowning, she watched as Rayna once more joined Tuvok outside the circle.

"So that's it, then?" Axion's warbled voice betrayed his upset.

*Now it comes.*

Janeway's taut muscles were to the point of snapping in twain from tension. The evening's activities had all been designed to propel things to this point...this one chance at finally catching Drall's killers.

She found her security chief on the move once more. He was slowly orbiting the room. Rayna paralleled him. Both were headed for Axion's position.

"There is one additional item." Tuvok's voice, alone, revealed no emotion.

*Solid as neutridium.*

Times such as this made Janeway cognizant of how much she depended on his unwavering stability.

He drew abreast of Axion and regarded him intensely. "The fact remains that neither the knife, the poison nor," his murky eyes moved to included Captain Riza, "nor the sabotaged shuttlecraft actually killed Drall."

"Sickbay to Janeway."

With great reluctance, she acknowledged the call. From the somber note in the Doctor's voice, the news was all but assured.

"Go ahead."

"They're gone. Both had Furonox hidden inside fabricated molars...in significantly greater amounts than had been introduced into Captain Drall."

"Understood." How high would this death toll rise? Such waste infuriated her. It was better when they were at war with the Vaadwaur, at least there was a tangible enemy and a straightforward fight. This...endless maze of plots and twists wound infinitely onward, and she was so sick of it.

Rayna's dulcet tones called her back from the edge. "You see, Axion..." The cynical smile was painted in the modulation of her words; Janeway did not have to see her face to know it was there. "Here's the thing: Kinel truly did not know about the arsenic. When I went to Sickbay, the Doctor and I carefully examined Drall's medical records for any sign of tampering or alteration. There was none. The arsenic was never detected, because Kinel didn't know to run a toxicology panel." She passed the conversation to Tuvok wordlessly, just like handing off a baton during a relay race.

And he ran with it. "Furthermore, it would have been illogical to launch any of the assaults against Drall's life, if there were already a lethal effort in progress." The security chief stood relaxed, his hand limp at his sides.

Lightning struck the synapses in Janeway's brain, spurring her to motion. There was naught else to do but play this out. She crossed the room to confront the former captives. "Meaning someone else poisoned Drall."

"Exactly," Rayna confirmed. Her ebony eyes were sharp and cagey. "Obtaining it was child's play, as, according to Lieutenant Torres, it was available on every Vaadwaur vessel," she looked down at the pair of Talaxians almost fondly, "as waste."

Both of them started to squirm.

"But," Neelix protested, looking aghast at Tuvok and Rayna, "they were prisoners."

Tuvok gave the distraught cook a look that bordered on regretful. "Indeed. However," he paused...dramatically...in Janeway's opinion, "they were given menial tasks to perform about the ship. According to what Lex confided to Crewman Merris, these included interfacing urine recyclers with the current systems as well as cleaning and disposing of industrial waste."

"And that gave them access to the claudetite precipitate," finished Chakotay. No longer did he appear lost; now his brown eyes were harder than sharpened topaz and colder than deepest space.

"That...that doesn't prove anything!" Axion lurched to his feet. "It's purely circumstantial."

"Do you think, Seven," Merris commented dryly, sending the Borg a blithely inquisitive glance, "that the Vaadwaur issued protective equipment to their Talaxian guests?"

After a minute pause, Seven responded, "Given predilection for hostility and arrogance, no. That is highly unlikely."

"So I thought as well." Merris grinned widely, though there were none of the customary twinkles in the deep of her eyes. "Arsenic causes burns and edema to the skin of most species. You were treated for those very injuries by the EMH. Shall we have your hair tested for arsenic exposure?" Her manner changed subtly, becoming gentler, almost sympathetic. "We have no authority to punish you, you know."

Janeway could have strangled the woman. This was not part of the plan. What the devil was she playing at making such a statement?

*They warned you that they would have to improvise the ending.*

*So they had, but this was over the top.*

Obviously Rayna sensed her anger, because she glanced in Janeway's direction. It did not shut her up, though. "You were prisoners of war, and therefore entitled to take whatever actions were necessary to secure your freedom. The act didn't even occur on Federation soil. Drall was dead before he ever set foot on *Voyager*."

*She's right.*

...a fact that only served to infuriate her further.

"You mean, we aren't going to be imprisoned?" Axion faced Janeway. "We are immune from punishment."

"Technically," Janeway ground the words out through a barrier of rage, "yes. This is unregulated space and my lawful authority ends with *Voyager's* hull."

The Talaxian turned to his friend with a triumphant smile. "Well then, yes. We poisoned him. We couldn't risk them finding our colony."

"Axion..." Lex's voice contained a note of warning.

It was ignored. "Once Geelon assigned us to cleaning detail, we were like pieces of furniture. The Vaadwaur ignored us, just seemed to forget when we were there. One day Lex overheard two soldiers discussing the poisonous crystals their warp engines produced."

Lex interrupted, more urgently this time, "Axion..."

Either his friend did not hear him, or did not care. "I volunteered for us for disposal duty." He cackled, a discordant sound, thick with the intoxicating nectar of triumph. "They were more than happy to delegate the task. I was able to smuggle some out a little at a time."

This time Lex lunged at his companion, and seized him by the collar. Security guards pulled him away. He was sobbing in distress.

Janeway turned helpless eyes on Neelix. He had buried his face in his palms and was visibly shaking.

Axion was staring at Rayna who still wore traces of an encouraging smile. There was a new fragility about it.

*What are you thinking? Is this what you wanted, what you planned all along?*

And still the dark twist of fate played on.

"We gained access to his quarters during an argument between him and his wife." Axion spoke haltingly, as if he wanted to be quiet, but could not hold back the floodgates of confession. "They stormed past us while we were cleaning the hallway floor and he left his cabin door ajar. I ran in and found a bottle of wine. I put the poison in it and snuck back out."

"Axion! No!" Neelix lifted his tortured eyes and called to his new friend.

"What was I supposed to do?" Axion gritted his teeth and grimaced in a death's head rictus of desperation. "Unleash that man on what is left of my people? Let him take our children hostage? Never!" His hand slapped downward against his knees. "I had to act."

"Of course you did," Rayna's razor-edged reply sliced through the Mess Hall in a chill whisper. "And yet once you were safe and sound on *Voyager*, I notice you neglected to mention the poison."

Here Axion's expressive features gained a furtive cast. "Well," he sputtered, eyes widening.

Lex sagged suddenly, and the security guards guided him to a chair, "Axion..." His tone was one of utter defeat.

"No, Lex, it's all right..." Axion held his hands toward his friend as if pleading for understanding. "That bastard deserved to die. Even his own kind wanted to kill him, and it doesn't matter. Didn't you hear them?" A terrible kind of hope came over his features. "They can't punish us. We didn't break any Federation laws. We weren't on board *Voyager*. He got what was coming to him, and we made a clean get away."

"Not quite." Commander Tuvok canted his head toward the pair and his officers closed in. "What Crewman Merris said is true. We have no authority to punish you, but the Vaadwaur do." He directed his next command to the security detail. "Take them to the Brig pending extradition to the Vaadwaur."

Janeway's intestines lurched as if her bowels would break. They didn't.

*You knew this was coming.*

It didn't make it any easier. No matter what they'd done, Janeway couldn't stomach sending the Talaxians back to their former tormentors. They'd been pushed to the edge. There was no telling what anyone would have done under those circumstances. And yet...they had remained silent about the arsenic. Their motives became less about survival and more about revenge.

Everyone began speaking at once. Security officers began shouting orders. Chakotay grabbed

Neelix' arm and pulled him back, trying to reassure the nearly crying man. Lex bowed his head in resignation, but Axion shot Rayna a look filled with bitterness. "You tricked us." He hissed as they were led out.

"I'm Orion," she replied coldly. "That's what we do."

Pandemonium reigned as the Vaadwaur shouted demands, the security officers shouted instructions, and everyone else shouted for order. Janeway quickly dismissed the group and ordered Riza and Geelon escorted to the Brig as well.

"Commander," she called to Chakotay. "You're with me."

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The Mess Hall was dim and quiet. In contrast to the chaotic display of noise scant hours earlier, it was peaceful. Rayna let the hatchway hiss shut behind her. Only memories remained. There was the overturned chair belonging to Lady Aja. It had fallen during her death throes, and no one had thought to right it. Two seats were situated in particularly close proximity. Lex and Axion had been there. She vividly recalled the horror that crept over their faces when they realized that they would be returning to the tender mercies of the Vaadwaur. Their fear had permeated every part of the room, clutching at her like the skeletal claws of the damned.

Even worse had been Neelix's reaction. He was alone again, and that loneliness cut him to his soul.

She began to straighten the furniture. Tables slid slowly back into place; chairs were tucked beneath them. It was simple labor. Right now that suited her very well.

*Kathryn is livid.*

For some reason that pained her...nay...crippled her with shackles of weary regret.

Rayna adjusted the last table, and then requested raktajino from the nearest replicator. An overdose of sugar and caffeine were exactly what she needed. Too bad such things were filtered out by replicator technology. She could only hope the taste would wash away the bitterness that only an undesired outcome could bestow.

*What in Sul's salty name ails you?*

*Proximity and attachment.*

There was no need to be obtuse or worse, be dishonest. Her assignments generally resulted in damage to someone. One could not wheedle information from an enemy without first posing as a friend, and betrayal was nasty business.

*The Talaxians weren't your enemies.*



*You think I don't know that?*

Usually she was long gone by the time her ruse was discovered. Being there, watching the injuries form, and caring about those who were injured to the point of feeling contrite...that was new and she did not relish the meal of emotions set before her.

*You set this table, Wind Child. Eat what is on your plate.*

A whispered whoosh of air told her that she had company. Two breaths later and she realized it was Neelix.

"Oh," he said. "Hello there, Rayna."

While his melancholy mood had not lifted, there was no recrimination in it, no anger. It caught her off-guard.

"Good evening." She took another drink. The deluge of decadent sweetness did nothing for her throat...which had become constricted for some reason. Hurting Neelix had not been her desire, but it had happened nonetheless. Soon she would have to turn around and mark the sadness in his eyes.

*Best get on with it.*

Before she could carry out the action, Neelix drew near and touched her on the sleeve. "I don't blame you." His gift was utterly unforeseen, and he wasn't done giving. "Most people think I'm a happy-go-lucky sort, and I am, for the most part, but that doesn't mean I'm stupid or blind. What you did today was necessary and right. Lex and Axion had ample opportunity to warn us about the poison. Vengeance clouded their judgment."

He bustled past her and asked the next replicator to produce something called "traggle nector." It looked like orange juice, except for the foam on top.

"It's been a rotten day." Neelix found a table and flopped in a chair. "Would you care to join me? I imagine it hasn't been a stellar time for you either."

Feeling a bit like she'd just stepped into some sort of alternate reality, Rayna settled across from him. They sipped their respective beverages in a companionable silence.

The door opened. Tuvok entered. Beneath his arm he carried the kal-toh pedestal.

"Mr. Vulcan!" Neelix quit his chair in a flash-fire of eagerness. "Can I get you something? Tea, perhaps? Or would you like a snack?"

The dark features of her friend underwent a series of minute shifts. There had been a worried cast to his face when he'd entered...whether aimed at her for the Talaxian, Rayna was not sure. When Neelix had been so welcoming, the severe line of Tuvok's face had moderated into a more kindly

regard.

"Tea. Thank you," he replied and took the chair to Rayna's left.

The pedestal was carefully placed at the center of the table and activated to a new game.

Neelix returned with a cup. From the smell Rayna knew it was that Vulcan swill of which Tuvok was so fond. He sat the beverage down and picked up his own as if in preparation for departure.

"Will you not join us for a game?" Rayna saw no need for him to go.

The Talaxian's face almost glowed with gratitude, but immediately backfilled with insecurity. "I'm not very good at kal-toh, I'm afraid. Spatial harmonics isn't really my forte."

"All the better," Rayna replied. From the corner of an eye she saw Tuvok looking as askance as a Vulcan could manage without changing expression. His reaction was nearly enough to counter all the negativity from today's proceedings. Not quite, but almost. She motioned to the chair Neelix had recently vacated. "I've always been of the opinion that victory in kal-toh is more due to blind chance than actual skill."

Her amiable jibe was registered in the muddy depths of Tuvok's eyes. He graced her with a sharp look that seemed to pierce the veils of her deliberate good humor and find the sore places which lay behind. Their gazes held for a time, then parted. The exchange had been meaningful. He knew she was ill at ease; she knew he was similarly troubled. Both were content to let it lie, for now.

Neelix's manner lightened with her invitation and light-hearted repartee. While he did not once more become a radiant beacon of joy, he settled in and stared at the t'ans with genuine anticipation. "Right." His whiskers quivered as he grinned at them. "What do I do first?"

The next few minutes were spent with Tuvok painstakingly attempting to explain the principles of kal-toh. Rayna leaned back in her chair and interlaced her fingers. The resonant timbre of her old friend's voice was soothing. She let her mind drift on the currents of the sound, rousing only once to say, "Just pick a rod at random and move it around." Tuvok's cutting glance made her chuckle and that, in its turn, made Neelix smile more widely. It was a comfortable moment.

Then the Mess Hall admitted someone else.

*In Sul's name! Does everyone spend their off-duty time here?*

Her frustration evaporated as the familiar fragrance that was Kathryn wafted across her senses. There was no residual anger in it, only a touch of fatigue, a slight headache, and...cheerful pleasure? Rayna glanced up and found that the captain's starship-colored eyes were resting on her. Both her hearts seemed to stop beating, then stutter forward once more.

"Captain!" Neelix was on his feet, showering the room with droplets of hospitality. His

admiration for Janeway bordered on worship and Rayna was obliged to relocate.

She refreshed her drink at the replicator as Neelix scurried forth to get coffee, which Janeway politely refused.

"I'm not staying," the captain admitted. "I wanted to give you an update on the situation."

Rayna turned at that and sharpened her ears. Her two companions were giving Janeway their undivided attention.

It was Neelix who spoke next. "I hope Lex and Axion will be all right. It pains me to think of them back with the Vaadwaur."

"They won't be going back." Janeway's austere features were brightened as her mouth lifted in a crooked grin. "As it turns out, Captain Riza and First Officer Geelon are the highest ranking Vaadwaur officers. In exchange for all charges being dropped against the Talaxians, I've agreed not to pursue charges against them."

The news set off new explosions of feeling in Neelix. He launched himself at Janeway and wrapped his arms around her tightly. The human's face revealed surprise followed immediately by a wistful contentment as she returned the embrace. Bleak eyes closed and there was only Kathryn who needed reassurance and comfort. The captain had temporarily retreated.

Words poured out of Neelix's mouth in a torrent. "I can't tell you how grateful I am. I know that what they did was wrong, but I believe they were truly desperate. Neither of them strikes me as malicious, just misguided in some respects. Do you think they can return to the galley? Or would that be a little unwise considering? I can guarantee you they would never put poison in anyone's food here. Rayna and I will watch them like Thorassian hawks. You have my word."

He finally released Janeway, who looked mussed, but not at all displeased.

For her part, Rayna admitted to feeling relieved. She and Tuvok traded their own, private congratulations: his in the miniscule inclination of his dark head, she by raising her mug in a subtle salute. It had been a desperate gamble. The animosity which the Vaadwaur harbored toward Drall had been a crucial game piece. She and Tuvok had counted on just such a bargain being struck.

The last vestige of watchful waiting slithered out of her, leaving only a vacuum of fatigue in its wake.

"You all right?" Janeway's question caught her unawares and came from close by.

*You must be distracted indeed not to feel her approach.*

"Good evening, Captain." Rayna set aside her raktajino. It disappeared in the recycler as if it had never been.

"It's closer to good night."

The response was so familiar, so right that Rayna could have curled up inside the shelter of the words and slept in safety. She found Janeway was looking at her with a warm tenderness swirling in the grey ocean of her eyes.

Kathryn's suddenly shy demeanor took over as she said, "I was hoping we could talk, but I see you've got company."

Behind the off-duty captain, Rayna saw Tuvok pick up his game. He gave her a friendly glance, and suggested that Neelix might wish to visit his friends now that they were being released from the Brig. That suggestion was eagerly agreed to.

"I think," Rayna began slowly, "the engagement has been postponed in light of your happy announcement."

"Oh." Kathryn waved to them as the two men made to depart. "I wanted to tell you that I wasn't angry any more."

"I did figure that out." It was Rayna's turn to grin. "I'm an empath, remember?"

"How could I forget? There have been times when I wanted to throttle you."

The wry manner in which Kathryn said that, caused Rayna to giggle. "It is a well-documented reaction," she said coyly, "among non-empaths."

Kathryn joined her laughter. "I'll bet it is." She sobered soon after. "I thought you were tying my hands, and that infuriated me. Only later did I realize that the two of you had opened up an avenue to settle the entire affair." Grudging respect and admiration seeped into her aura. "What you did took a great deal of courage and ingenuity."

Sincerely meant compliments were the bane of Rayna's existence. What the devil did you do with them? She was accustomed to shielding herself from the machinations of others. They always had an ulterior motive. Kathryn did not. She was forced to lower her eyes.

"Thank you," she muttered. It was all she could manage.

"You're welcome. Next time, though, I'd like you to tell me in advance."

"Improvisational maneuvers are by nature unplanned." Rayna offered up a conciliatory smile. "Tuvok and I were uncertain we could even get the Talaxians to confess, let alone keep them out of Vaadwaur hands."

"I understand." Kathryn edged closer, obviously wanting to touch her, but holding back. "Would you..." she hesitated, "...I'd like us..."

It was sweetly endearing to see the confident captain falter. Rayna made a quick check of the Mess Hall just to ensure she hadn't missed someone's entrance, and then brushed her fingertips along the sharp line of Kathryn's jaw. "...to get out of here?" she finished quietly.

Weary eyes closed with the contact and the noble head nodded. They headed out the hatchway. Here and there a stray crewman gave greeting as they passed. Some of them offered up knowing smiles when they thought Janeway wasn't looking.

They were wrong. The captain's cheeks flushed crimson. "Has everyone figured out that we're involved or am I just imagining things?"

"You're probably imagining things." The answer was instinctive. Rayna's mind had been thrown into turmoil.

*Involved?*

She'd said, "involved." There were many connotations to that word for humans. Far more than in a word like, "sex," or "fucking." It implied attachments beyond physical convenience and gratification. No one had ever used it in Rayna's direction before.

Obviously Kathryn thought they were involved or she would not have used the word. Her command of language was as formidable as her will.

*Involved.*

And if Kathryn was involved with her, then it followed that she was involved with Kathryn.

*Great Maker.*

The logic was irrefutable, undeniable, and uncomfortable.

Turbolift doors slid shut and they began a ride. Rayna could see that her...lover...and there was an even more complicated word...was eyeing her, probably wondering what she was thinking.

*I don't even know what I am thinking. How can I impart it to her?*

They disembarked, moving down the corridor toward her quarters at an easy pace. When Rayna stopped at her door, however, Kathryn intertwined their fingers and led further down, stopping at the far end.

"I thought we might come to my cabin for once, if that's okay." Insecurity and a hint of fear played about Kathryn like orbiting ghosts.

"And it would not be 'okay' why?" Rayna thought she hid her own stunned reaction very well. No one had ever wanted to take her home. Ornaments were for public display, and private

enjoyment, but not for homemaking. And of course her other profession, that of spy, was held in similar contempt by most. Yet here they were, poised on the threshold of Kathryn's domicile. It felt as though her hearts were going to beat themselves to death.

The hatch was keyed and they entered.

Directly across from the aperture was a commanding vista of windows, all facing forward.

*If we weren't socked in with stardust-fog, it would be a lovely view.*

"Light's one half." Kathryn followed her in.

The warm glow from above illuminated corners and spaces heretofore in shadow. There was a desk just starboard of where Rayna stood. Comprised of silver tubing and glass, it curved back toward the aft wall in a graceful arch. PADDs littered the top of it like fallen soldiers on a battlefield. An abandoned mug sat off to one side. Its contents, if it had any, lay forgotten and cold. Her eyes drifted to the far wall where the replicator flickered placidly. It stood sentry duty above the dining area. The table was oval-shaped. Miniature oil candles lined the recessed mirror in its center.

*Ah. She is a romantic at heart. I should have guessed that.*

Open flame was seldom used anymore, especially in space. Fire was no friend to starships. Neelix used it in the galley from time to time, of course, but cooking was a necessity. Candles were normally reserved for rare, formal functions.

*"We need the old elements, earth and air, fire and water."* Her grandmother used to say that. Rayna knew it to be true. They all had to breathe, eat, drink, and keep back the cold.

*That's not what she meant.*

No, it wasn't. Her grandmother had referred to spiritual, not material necessities. Taken in that light, the candles served to nourish the fires of Kathryn's soul.

*If you can see that, Wind Child, who then, is the romantic?*

A question so impertinent was simply begging to be ignored. Being in a magnanimous frame of mind, Rayna was moved to oblige.

She continued her inspection. There was much to be learned by the things one kept...one of the many reasons she tended not to keep them.

*...which is just as revealing...*

Shelves sat between the windows at port and starboard. Beneath the middle one was a sofa. Dusty rose and rounded, it added femininity to the starkly masculine surround.

*Did she select the color herself?*

No doubt. Captains were given considerable latitude in furnishing their quarters.

A chaise lounge sat near on the port side. Rayna let her footsteps carry over. It was gray, like the carpet, but looked comfy enough. There was a book on it, face down. She craned her neck and read the author's name.

"Poe," she said aloud, a touch of reverence in her tone.

"Do you like him?" Kathryn's voice was still across the room.

"Yes." Rayna did not yet wish to end her study, so did not look about. "He moves me."

There some sort of Earth-born plant flanking the chaise, on the window side where on those rare occasions when there was sunlight, it would be bathed in nurturing rays.

*She values life deeply.*

*You already knew that.*

A little confirmation was always nice. On the shelf nearby were two white candles, a box of some sort and a sword. Nor was it some the clunky blade of a medieval knight...no...this was a nimble sliver of steel which required brains, not brawn to wield.

*Ah...ever the swashbuckling hero...*

A wave of nervousness struck her senses, and it wasn't her own. Rayna turned to find Kathryn fiddling around the replicator. Insecurity leeches out of the human's pores wending its way throughout. After a moment, the aroma of coffee accompanied it.

*Perhaps she is rethinking her decision to invite you here. What ever will her crew think of a whore in the captain's quarters?*

"Should I go?" Rayna voiced her inquiry in a purposefully steady voice.

Kathryn's head snapped up, surprise in her every manner. Auburn brows lowered into a confused frown. "Is there something wrong?" she asked.

Rayna met her questioning gaze without flinching and without betraying any of her own insecurity. She inwardly congratulated herself for that. "You seem unnerved by my presence."

"I..." Kathryn let out a low rumble of frustration and rolled her eyes skyward. "I don't have much company and you're studying my quarters so intently..." Her voice trailed away, then continued at a whisper. "It's making me a little uncomfortable."

It was a feeling Rayna had become acquainted with in recent days, usually in Kathryn's presence.

*Turnabout, as they say, is fair play.*

Her perverse nature retreated as she watched Kathryn perch on the edge of the sofa. Her elegant fingers drummed against the smooth surface of her coffee cup. The normally confident mien had become so endearingly shy that Rayna relented, crossing the room to stroke the human's auburn tresses.

Kathryn leaned into the touch as she always did. Her emotional spectrum shifted toward the pastel shades of relaxation and comfort.

Kneeling, Rayna wrapped her hands around Kathryn's and looked up into the sea of her eyes. "Better?"

"A little." Kathryn set aside her drink, but returned her hands to Rayna's. "I told you I was lousy at this."

"At holding my hand? Please. You're a champ." The jest elicited a small upturning of Kathryn's mouth.

"You know what I mean." Kathryn stared at their intertwined fingers. "I've thought about bringing you here a hundred times today, and now..." She chuckled mirthlessly. "...I'm tongue-tied...again."

"You've thought about bringing me here?" Rayna was flabbergasted. "In the middle of all that shit, you took the time to think about me?" Straightening, she tenderly pressed their lips together, lingering until their tongues touched, caressed; until they were both breathless. "That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me." The whispered confession bubbled from her mouth involuntarily. Truth was rarely subject to the laws of convenience.

Kathryn's arms slipped about her and Rayna was transported to a new world, where everything was pillow-soft, and mid-summer warm. She never wanted to leave. Emotions churned within and she could feel herself shudder.

"Rayna?" Smoky, deep, with a touch of gravel...Kathryn's was the sweetest voice she knew.

"I'm all right," she assured weakly. "If anything I've even less experience at this than you."

The reassuring embrace tightened and her lover whispered, "We'll figure it out."

Perhaps...perhaps they would at that.

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