

~ Points Of No Return ~

by Trekgrl

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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!

This story is set after *Dragons Teeth*. It references the TOS episode: *The Doomsday Machine*. It also references VOY: *Equinox I*, and *II*.

Glob flies can be found here: http://memory-alpha.org/en/wiki/Glob_fly

Klingon curses can be found here: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8853/curse.html>

For directions on taking apart a communicator, read *The Starfleet Survival Guide*.

"BLT" as a nickname for B'Elanna appeared in *Equinox*.

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.

Constructive criticism and good wishes can be sent to:

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If it weren't for my beta-reader/creative consultant, Pam, this story would never have seen the light of day. She is the best, and I will defend that assertion with every fiber of my being. Anyone who wants a top-notch beta, need look no further.

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The world was on fire.

Captain Janeway stood at the windows of her Ready Room and stared into the conflagration beyond. Plasma roiled, devoured itself, spat out fresh embers, and belched forth a sea of flame. If Hell existed, this was surely what it looked like.

Ion lightning danced over the shields, keeping time to music no mortal could hear. *Voyager* trembled in reply, and Janeway's heart, sensitive to the primal rhythm, flung itself against the cage of bone that encased it.

Storms were her bane. They eroded years of cultivated maturity and revived the stealthy terrors of childhood. The dark skies of Indiana were light years hence. Yet, she relived the screaming winds and deafening claps of thunder with each blinding coruscation.

At least the worst is over.

It had been a long eleven hours. Axion and Lex had warned them of the fiery tempest that marked the blast ring's outer boundary, but traversing it was the best and fastest way to reach the Talaxian colony. Going around would waste precious weeks. The two men had mapped out a delicate path of least resistance through this maze-like inferno. Just as Virgil guided Dante, the Talaxians had led *Voyager* through the bowels of Hades. Only in this retelling, they skirted the outer circle and did not delve further down. Centermost in this netherworld was not Lucifer, but a particle fountain. Powerful enough to show up on long-range sensors even amid all the stellar radiation, the Talaxians theorized that it had set the fog ablaze centuries ago. It made sense. Of course, so little was known about particle fountains, that they could spew out Irish leprechauns and no one would be the wiser.

More lightning. Its white hot shadow bounced off the bulkheads making her decorations jump in surprise. No. That was just the ship's tremors causing them to quake.

I thought nothing could be worse than the Badlands near the Cardassian border. I was wrong.

The first Vaadwaur ship foundered two hours after they entered storm's rim. They had rounded up survivors immediately, despite the risk. Captains Geelon and Riza proved to be tenacious allies, coming about to help without hesitation.

It was only the beginning, however. Two more ships lost their engines. One was dragged into a plasma cyclone and never seen again; the other, Geelon's own, lost half her crew before *Voyager* could beam them over. Survivors had been billeted in the cargo bays; the wounded now occupied the Mess Hall. There simply wasn't room for them in Sickbay.

Lieutenant Torres had noted that they now had Vaadwaur coming out their ears; she'd smiled oddly, then and added, "Good thing we aren't Ferengi."

Janeway and Chakotay had laughed at that, holding on the merriment as if it were a lifeline. As hours crawled past with all the speed of frozen tundra, they'd tittered and chuckled until Tuvok was driven to distraction.

How many Vaadwaur would fit in a pair of Ferengi ears?

She was so punch-drunk with stress and fatigue that she still found it amusing. It was silly, and

illogical, but it got them through.

As the storm waned, they'd established communication with Beta-Talax, and its leader, a Talaxian named Xexes. *Voyager* was still on Yellow Alert, but it was more a precaution than a necessity. The shields were holding strong. Their course was steady. In light of that, Janeway had decided to tie up as many loose ends as possible before reaching the colony. That meant meeting with Captain Geelon, who was currently occupying the Mess Hall; Axion and Lex, whom she planned on turning over to Talaxian authorities; and Noah Lessing, the last of the Equinox crew to be reinstated his former rank. The final meeting would be the most difficult.

It's never easy to confront your demons.

No it wasn't. Her stomach cringed at the very idea of speaking with Lessing. She'd relived that fateful day a thousand times, saw the look of horror on his face, the panic in his eyes. Only Chakotay's intervention had saved the man...and her as well.

You never even thanked him.

The door chime chirped.

"Come in," she called, and turned away from the storm.

Chakotay stepped in. He looked as tired as she felt, but managed to pin a tight smile on his face. "Captain Geelon is here."

"Send him in."

She crossed to her desk and took position. One deep breath and a gulp of coffee later and her game face was in place. "Please, sit down." Janeway waved a hand at the lime green chairs. Even now they looked like sculptural pieces. Alas, their form was less successful than their function: she had it on good authority they were uncomfortable.

Her guest strode over and accepted her offer, perching on the seat's edge. "Captain," he began in a raspy tone, "you rescued my crew. Thank you."

The Vaadwaur's brusque demeanor made him seem angry, even when he was not. Though she'd known him but a little while, Janeway was tallying up his disparate actions in the abacus of her mind. There were things about Geelon that didn't add up. He'd attempted to murder his superior officer, and that made him suspect, but he'd also saved the Talaxians when he didn't have to. Lex and Axion had both admitted that after Geelon interceded, the beatings had stopped. Oh, they had worked like slaves, and been treated like cattle, but they housed, fed and kept unharmed. From brief conversations with Riza, she'd learned that the remaining Vaadwaur acquiesced to Geelon, not out of fear, but out of respect. He was a veteran of many conflicts.

One by one, she slid the mental beads from one side to the other until the equation was complete. She was surprised at the total. Somewhere, beneath the glittering emerald eye that returned her

speculative gaze, behind the hardened, ruthless exterior there laid a deep well of honor and not a little compassion.

"You're welcome," Janeway replied at length. "Are your people getting settled?"

He nodded, an action which caused silver hairs to sparkle like strands of webbing. "Your hospitality has been generous."

Without further preamble, she dove into her agenda. "We've made contact with the colony." Since there was only one, she didn't feel the need to elaborate. "I've made arrangements for Lex and Axion to be transferred once we dock." Janeway narrowed her eyes and called up her most commanding voice. "I don't expect there to be any trouble."

"There will be none." Geelon's answer was quick, but not smooth. His naturally gruff demeanor removed any possibility of that. "As you have been made aware in the report filed by Captain Riza, the general consensus is that they did our people a great favor, much like your Crewman Merris did when she killed General Gaul."

That much was true. From what Neelix and other crewmembers had gathered, both of the Talaxians and Rayna were hailed as liberators.

Perhaps they're right.

It was difficult for her to marry the words, "right" and "murder." Others, it seemed, had no such difficulties.

The topic closed, Janeway moved on. "I also brought you here to discuss crew integration."

A violent shudder caused bulkheads to rattle. Her eyes closed involuntarily. When they opened, it was to find Geelon's single orb fixed upon her face, watching.

Displaying weakness in front of anyone, particularly a race of beings as aggressive as the Vaadwaur was ill-advised. Janeway gritted her teeth and swallowed down the cloying taste of fear. "We may be trapped here for some time. For myself, I think our odds of survival are better if we cooperate. However, I'm not ready to fully trust your people, yet." It was her turn to study his features. They were hard, determined, and closed.

Virescent forks of energy sparked and popped as they bounced off *Voyager's* shields. From the corner of her eye she could see them, raking over the invisible barrier like jagged claws. A millimeter of purchase, and they would peel it away to rip and gnaw at the vessel's soft underbelly. Janeway suppressed a shudder and focused on her grim companion.

Sparkles of ironic humor mirrored the ion lightning; they scattered over the green of his eye, but did not reach his lips. "Under the circumstances, I would say your caution is prudent. Perhaps we can begin with an exchange of non-essential personnel, say in the Mess Hall or on planetary surveys."

It was exactly what she'd had in mind, but now that he'd made the offer, it didn't sound like such a good idea any more. The Vaadwaur had betrayed them before, and she did not wish to play into their hands.

Her skepticism must have been betrayed by her expression for Geelon began to chuckle.

"Changed your mind already, eh?" The smile in his eye was finally echoed by his mouth, but only slightly. It faded. Fatigue and something akin to despair replaced it. "Captain, my race is reduced to little over a hundred members. We have no home and no prospect thereof. Our technology is antiquated, barely useful for keeping us alive, and worthless for trade. From the lofty position we once occupied, we are reduced to wandering the galaxy as beggars." His concentrated stare never wavered. "There were some of us who sought to restore the golden age of our past. In doing so, they succeeded only in depleting our numbers. Me, I'm a practical man. I prefer to learn from the past rather than repeat it. Captain Riza and I seldom make promises, but when we do, we keep them."

And that, Katie, is all the guarantee you will get.

"Very well." Janeway rose, holding out her hand for him to shake. "This is how humans seal a bargain."

"As you like." He stood, and towered over her by at least ten centimeters. His grip was powerful, but not painful when he returned her gesture.

She contacted Chakotay and had Geelon returned to the Mess Hall.

"Bring me Mr. Lex and Mr. Axion," she instructed him.

More lightning. This time golden balls of energy rolled across the deflector grid. They disappeared in a brilliant flash, and *Voyager* was rocked by their force.

Her head was about to pop. Pain threaded its way through her temples, creating a skull-cap of discomfort. If the doctor were to split her brain open, she was certain he'd find some fiend with a sledgehammer beating her synapses on an anvil.

I wish Rayna were here.

Janeway had lost count of the times she'd wanted the comfort of her lover's hands. The thought flowed out so naturally, but gave her pause.

"Lover," she whispered aloud. "It's been a while since you've used that word."

Ten days had passed since the murders. Between the fog and the fire, progress had been painfully won. There was more, though. Three separate times, Ensign Kim's sensor anomaly had been glimpsed. Like a phantasm in the gloom, it remained just out of range, appearing and

disappearing.

It's stalking us.

There's no evidence of that.

There's no evidence of anything. All three probes we've launched have been lost.

Not surprising...the radiation levels are lethal. Probes don't have the ability to generate shields of the same strength as a starship. In all likelihood, their circuitry was fried.

Makes sense. So why do you have this sick feeling in the pit of your stomach, and prickles on the skin of your neck?

Janeway dismissed that train of thought. Right now there were enough tangible problems to master without conjuring up new ones. Their supplies of deuterium were shrinking; it would only get worse now that they were over-populated by forty-four souls. The storm had caused minor failures in a few plasma relays; repairs were underway, albeit cautiously. Whilst they were keeping pace with a snail, all else was happening at warp speed, the Labyrinth, the Dead Zone, the Blast Ring...

She'd had very little quality time with Rayna since Drall's murder. It was something she regretted, but could not avoid. Long hours, short nights had reduced their time to sleeping and eating...interspersed with furious bouts of uninhibited sex. Janeway was no simpering virgin, but compared to Rayna, she was a babe in the woods when it came to pleasuring the senses. Whether it was Orion ingenuity or Deltan pheromone enhancement, every orgasm was explosive.

And satisfying.

Her lips turned up at that. "Satisfying" was exactly the word. The fact that each release was shared added to the experience in an indescribable fashion. It was a new kind of closeness, far beyond Janeway's ken, and she found the allure irresistible. Brushes became touches, touches became caresses, and they tumbled into bed, onto the couch, the floor, the table...

That's what you get for being celibate for so long.

She sat down again. So much was the same: they were still lost, more lost than ever, in fact; home was but a wisp of memory. Yet, so much was different. It was strange, really. Some days Janeway found herself staring at nothing, the wall, the grey, dismal viewscreen, the shiny surface of her desk, and grinning for no apparent reason. Having other ships to help them was out of the norm. That, in part, had rejuvenated her. But, the greatest change was more intangible. There had been an emptiness inside her. She used work to fill it, but it only got larger, becoming a hole in her spirit that sucked her down. Sad to say, but she hadn't realized how deep. Rayna had been the first new breath after years of suffocation. Suddenly the void in her soul was gone.

Love does that.

Dear God, did she love Rayna?

Her door cried out for attention.

That would be the Talaxians.

At her bidding, Chakotay brought in the "prisoners." He and a security detail remained by the entryway. Lex and Axion moved to stand in front of her desk. They have every appearance of being dejected and ashamed.

Janeway did not ask them to be seated. Instead, she rounded her desk to stand in front of them, staring her unspoken accusation into their eyes. "You two committed murder. By rights, you should be imprisoned for the rest of your lives."

Both men flinched, and lowered their eyes to the carpet as if seeking a means of escape.

"I understand your motives, but I cannot approve of your actions," Janeway continued. Then she relented, moving closer, saying in a gentler tone, "However, your knowledge of this sector has been invaluable, and I'm grateful that you shared it. When you've returned to the colony, I'll speak on your behalf."

Lex raised his dark eyes to meet hers. The close-cropped red mohawk he sported had grown out a centimeter or so, but was still very short. "Thank you, Captain," he said. "We are grateful you didn't just toss us out an airlock, though it was within your right."

"That isn't the Federation way." Janeway looked past them and found Chakotay giving her a slightly amused look. They'd gone round and round about the Federation way while crossing Kazon space. Bending the rules had been difficult for her, but she'd learned to adapt. In his turn, Chakotay had regained a measure of loyalty to Starfleet ideals, leaving behind some of the bitterness that drove him to resign.

She returned her attention to her guests. "I'm hoping we'll all start with a clean slate." Her emphasis on the word all reminded her of the way Chakotay had used it, weeks ago, when he'd spoken of shore leave. "You'll continue to work with Neelix, and remain under guard until your transfer."

She motioned that the meeting was over.

Wordlessly, Lex and Axion were escorted out. The others followed, and she was alone.

There was no longer the buffer of activity or time. Janeway became aware that she was fiddling with her commbadge, a gesture she had in common with her father. She blew out a long breath and tapped it. "Mr. Lessing, report to my Ready Room."

He acknowledged the summons.

The clock was ticking down, down, down, like the bells in Poe's mournful rhyme.

Janeway paced over to the transparent aluminum windows and stared at the fading fire. She would rather have turned *Voyager* around and headed into the heart of it, than have this conversation. But, the *Equinox* was a secret that she could no longer keep. It had festered long enough and its poison was killing her. Janeway hoped that once she had lanced this wound, maybe, just maybe, it would begin to heal.

And after this, she had to tell Rayna.

A sharp, deep pain punctured her chest, forcing Janeway to squeeze her eyes shut. The storm outside could not match the fierceness of the storm within her. She didn't want Rayna to know how close she'd come to murder, couldn't bear to see the disappointment in those ebony eyes.

On the other hand, she might congratulate you on your ruthlessness.

That thought engendered little comfort. She didn't want to be admired for her vices.

You have to do this.

Lines had been crossed between them. Janeway hadn't even known they existed, until one by one, they passed by. Between stranger and friend, between friend and lover, lay borders and boundaries that defined relationships. There was no going back. To continue forward she had to slough off some of the baggage she carried.

But, I'm afraid.

There was the heart of the matter. What if Rayna rejected her outright?

For the third time in as many hours, her hatchway jangled. For a third time, she answered. Turning, she met the dark brown eyes of Crewman Noah Lessing. They stared at one another for several long seconds, then he broke the silence.

"Crewman Lessing reporting as ordered, Captain." Though his words were official and impersonal, his tone was mild.

"Thank you for coming." There would be no desk to hide behind. Janeway moved to stand near him. Her fingers interlaced themselves several times. Not even the residual flashes of ion lightning phased her as much as this. "You performed well during our battle against the Vaadwaur," she began at an easy spot. "In light of this, and your exceptional performance evaluations, I am reinstating your rank to that of ensign, effective immediately."

She picked up the single pip sitting on her desktop and approached him. "May I?"

Lessing continued to give her a neutral, but amicable look. "Yes, Captain, and thank you."

The pip pinning gave her something to do with her hands, and distracted her from the burning sensation in her stomach. Her fingertips quivered; motor coordination faltered, but she managed to affix it to his collar.

Though his expression remained calm, there were tiny beads of sweat on Lessing's forehead. His nervousness was reassuring.

My father was right: misery loves company.

"Ensign," she began, but faltered. "I... I owe you an apology."

That sounded absolutely lame. Janeway felt her brows slam down and her eyes did the same, roving from the polished surface of her patent leather boots to the dull carpet, to Lessing's similarly gleaming footwear. She gathered herself. "What I did was...despicable..."

Before she could continue, Lessing cleared his throat. "You did what you had to, Captain."

Janeway's head snapped up with enough force to pop one of the bones in her neck. "Let's not gloss over the past," she countered. "I threatened your life."

"You did," his rumbling baritone pronounced without rancor. "And I helped a maniac commit genocide, or at least attempt it." Umber eyes were filled with sympathy and understanding. "I'm one who should be seeking forgiveness, and from a higher-order being than you."

They stood stock-still, just staring at one another. Tension abandoned Janeway with sufficient force to weaken her knees. Relief and gratitude took its place. Something must have shown in her manner because Lessing drew nearer, actually laid a hand upon her elbow, feather-light, but soothing.

"Let it go." His words reverberated others spoken, first by her, then by Rayna.

Janeway could feel herself trembling, and not from the force of the storm. Her throat was tight enough that the air should have been squeaking as it entered and exited her lungs. "I'm afraid it isn't that simple," she murmured, amazed that she could even speak.

"Actually," he gave her a tight, one-sided smile, "it is that simple, but that doesn't make it easy."

You're not acting like a captain, her inner critic admonished.

No. I'm acting like a human being, though I'm a little out of practice.

She took a deep pull of air, finding it somewhat sweeter than before.

"Thank you." Janeway straightened.

Lessing released her arm and obligingly stepped back. "Will that be all, Captain?"

"Yes, Ensign," she responded. "You're dismissed."

Then he was gone. Janeway managed to reach her desk chair and collapsed into it. The remnants of coffee in her cup were long cold, but she drained them anyway. Bitter liquid cleansed away the last dregs of her runaway emotions.

That went better than you deserved.

Yes.

Her mother used to speak of unexpected "gifts" like the fresh smell that lingered once a storm was past or a rainbow painted against the blue sky. They were unpredictable, inexplicable, and irreplaceable. All you could do was say, "thank you."

And, silently, she did so.

The Mess Hall shuddered; sparks showered down from the overhead like electric drops of rain.

Rayna Merris stepped nimbly to one side, careful to keep her tray of empty mugs balanced. Great basso booms resounded through *Voyager's* hull as if an angry god were using the metal skin as a drum.

I do love storms.

From the time she was but knee-high to her grandmother, Rayna recalled staring at the angry tempests that raged on the Lustern. Grey water churned; grey clouds roiled. Without the white-hot forks of lightning, there would have been no way to distinguish sea from sky. They would watch for hours, as rain battered against forcefield windows and sand swept over beach and dune in a whistling rush.

Retching sounds from nearby dispelled her childhood reminiscences. Between the sounds of space sickness and the atmosphere so filled with pain, fear, anger, and nausea that she could hardly choke down her next breath, Rayna could scarcely believe she'd managed to form a pleasant memory, let alone savor it.

"Here you are," Neelix handed a pot to one of the Vaadwaur children, who promptly lost what was left of his breakfast in it. "Doctor?" he called, but the EMH was occupied with another patient. Patting the child on the shoulder, he assured, "We're almost through it; you'll see."

As Rayna recalled, he'd said much the same two hours ago, when *Voyager* suddenly pitched downward so fast the inertial dampers had been unable to compensate. Glassware, food, and people had been turned ass over elbows...or "ass over teacup" as Harry Kim had observed,

having been upended whilst trying to get a cup of coffee.

Where do humans come up with these things? Ass over elbows makes so much more sense.

No matter... Eleven hours ago, when they'd entered the storm front, Neelix had declared that it wouldn't be so bad at all. The ion storms on Talax looked far more ominous, he'd reckoned.

Tempting the gods is never wise...

So far, three Vaadwaur ships had been lost, one with all her crew. The survivors from the others had been transferred to *Voyager*. Sickbay was overrun, necessitating the conversion of the Mess Hall into a clinic. It was a good thing that the Doctor never grew tired or hungry; he'd been tending to everything from broken bones to spacesickness. The current energy saving protocols negated the possibility of using the holodeck, so no extra nurses could be conjured from photons. As a result, some twenty-odd Vaadwaur of every gender and age group lay, sat, and roamed about the Galley, seeming shell-shocked and lost. The rest were in one of the cargo bays...except for Captain Geelon.

Once freed from the Brig, Geelon had been promoted to captain of Drall's cruiser. It seemed he and Riza were old shipmates, and got on quite well. Geelon's vessel had been the third one to fall beneath the plasma storm's fury. From what Rayna had been picking up from the survivors, the old salt had been dead last to be transported. It either raised his esteem in her eyes, or lowered it because of his abominable survival instincts. Rayna wasn't sure which. After his meeting with Captain Janeway, he'd returned to the Hall, and had been limping from person to person alternately chastising them for showing weakness and encouraging them that the Vaadwaur race could not be defeated by mere "bad weather."

She cast about and espied Lex and Axion. Both looked about as happy to be surrounded by Vaadwaur as she did. They'd been released from the Brig the same day as Geelon and Riza. Captain Janeway had decided to confine them to the Mess Hall, and their assigned quarters - no access to other ship areas. At the next available port...which conveniently enough would be the Talaxian colony...they would be put off ship.

Thus far, Rayna had avoided both men. There could be no love or like lost among them for her. She'd bamboozled them into confessing to murder. Certainly that did not encourage affection.

She wound her way into the kitchen area and placed her tray aside. A few bits of leola root had been dropped on the otherwise spotless floor. Rayna picked them up and placed them in a small covered container labeled, "mouse food."

Naomi will be pleased.

As if that mattered a Romulan damn... Wasting sustenance was a fool's endeavor. At least the mice would put the refuse to good use.

Neelix, Torres, and Seven of Nine-of all people- had fashioned a lovely habitat for the mice

down in Aeroponics. Transparent enclosures connected by long, winding tubes provided room for the tiny creatures to wander. Every time Rayna went down there, another little section had been added, until the thing rambled down an entire side of the bay.

Exiting the galley, Rayna found Lex and Axion eyeing her up. They did not seem overly hostile, but they definitely looked frightened.

Rayna did not linger near them, though she was sorely tempted to give them reason for their fear, just on general principle. She managed to refrain, however, owing to their recent contributions to the ship.

Their information about this part of the blast ring had been invaluable. Here the storm was at its weakest, being distant from the particle fountain that powered it. Harry Kim had been kind enough to show Rayna scans of the one *Voyager* had discovered in the Delta Quadrant. It was beautiful, glowing a brilliant blue, casting pearls of energy into the ether, but like a maelstrom, it was as fatal as it was fair.

A huge inferno churned around it constantly, blocking exit from the blast ring, and offering the colony a barrier of protection from unwanted guests. Yet, it could be crossed. The Talaxians often did so, seeking new derelicts to scavenge. It was a perilous, but necessary risk when you were trapped in the Dead Zone.

If this is the safest point of passage, I have no inclination to venture toward the center.

The Doctor swept past her and injected the still-vomiting boy with something that would hopefully stop those dreadful groans. His was the only body that did not pile additional chemicals onto her overburdened senses.

More thunder. The lights flickered black, then returned.

Rayna exchanged a delighted glance with Neelix. The Talaxian's dark eyes held fear, but also elation.

"I do so love a good ion storm," he repeated...for perhaps the tenth time.

"Me too," she confirmed...ensuring their redundant statements continued ad infinitum.

It had been less violent, though. In the last hour, Rayna had noticed a marked decline in the power of the *Voyager's* shudders.

Apparently the Doctor had also taken note of the change. "Well, we seem to be coming out of it," he opined. "Perhaps I'll have fewer patients in short order."

"You always seem to be short on patience." Rayna flicked a brow at him.

Her play on words caused a sardonic scowl to fall over the EMH's photonic features. "Keep it up,

Merris, and I'll see if Captain Janeway will let me train you to be a medic."

Oh I think not.

Rayna kept that caustic thought to herself. Caring for the sick required empathy of an altogether different sort, one she had no desire to cultivate.

"I wonder how the captain is doing?" Neelix's question took her by surprise.

Turning, Rayna gave him a piercing stare. "I'm sure she is doing as she always does." *Too much, for too long, with too little.* The latter answer she held back.

"Oh I'm certain you are correct," he agreed, too readily, in Rayna's opinion. Then the dark eyes became somewhat conspiratorial. "Did you know that she doesn't much like storms?"

Ah.

Not liking something was an oft-used human euphemism for being afraid. Neelix, of course, would never imply that Kathryn was scared of anything.

"Indeed, I did not." Rayna kept her voice light and conversational.

There was much about her lover that she didn't know. Conversations had been few and far between. The fleet was underway and there had been problems of every kind from logistics to navigation. In the ten days that had passed, Rayna had seen Kathryn only at night, just long enough for Rayna to feed her and then tuck the exhausted woman into bed. Sometimes she even let her sleep.

Don't flatter yourself. Half the time it's she who starts it.

The human's sexual appetite was admirable. What she lacked in skill and endurance, Kathryn made up for in enthusiasm. After years of sophisticated dandies and clumsy lummoxes, it was refreshing to have someone so...genuine. Yes, that was it exactly. Kathryn was genuine.

In any case, each morning brought about a repeat of the day before, until today. Once they'd reached the outer edge of the storm, Kathryn had been on the Bridge. It was now well past midnight.

Another booming shiver passed through the ship. Yes, there was little doubt that the fun was over.

Her head was pounding to the staccato rhythm of the passing tempest. No doubt a residual effect of all the emotions trapped in the Mess Hall. "Perhaps we can deliver meals now," she suggested. It had been too turbulent to do so earlier. The crew were probably famished. The fact that it would get her out of this hellhole was a decided bonus.

"I think you're right." Neelix seemed jubilant at the prospect of having something constructive to do. He headed toward the kitchen. "I think you should take the upper decks this time," he called as he disappeared.

That's odd.

Rayna narrowed her eyes. The cagey bastard wanted her to deliver to the Bridge, so that she could check on Captain Janeway.

And is this a problem?

Well, it wasn't, actually, other than Rayna didn't like being managed. The quickening of her pulse at the idea of seeing Kathryn again countered any thought of rebellion, however.

Look at you.

Rayna followed Neelix into the kitchen and helped him assemble the trays. Extra passengers meant more energy conservation, which meant little to no replicator use. With the Mess Hall full of wounded Vaadwaur, the crew couldn't even eat here.

Listen to your hearts race.

So, Neelix had been harvesting the leola root from aeroponics and cooking it into stew. News of this flew through *Voyager's* grapevine with all the speed of a phaser bolt, and poker games for replicator credits had suddenly sprung up like blades of grass on an open plain. Apparently no one liked leola root much, especially Lt. Paris. He was a mean card player and was allegedly cleaning house during the few hours that he quit the Bridge.

You're positively doting on the woman. When did you become so missish?

For herself, Rayna found the taste of leola to be quite pleasant, but she knew that her tongue did not quite match that of a human when it came to sensing. She'd joined a few of the games anyway, and had a sizeable cache of replicator rations because of it. Those were used to make Kathryn's dinner.

Do you think this human is going to keep you?

Her inner dialogue had gained a frustrated sound. Rayna smiled to herself as she helped Neelix load up the food trays with stew and health drinks. Keeping the crew's electrolytes balanced was critical during prolonged exertion and stress. The Doctor had ordered the synthetic beverage to be included with all meals.

She won't. As soon as you get back to the Alpha Quadrant, maybe even before that, she will grow tired of you.

Ignoring one's inner critic was always the best policy. That way one could enjoy a small piece of

spite during an internal diatribe.

"Shall I make a tray for Captain Janeway?" Neelix was giving her a narrow-eyed, calculating glance. Before Rayna could make to reply, he continued, "She doesn't care for leola root stew as I recall. I tried to make coffee once as well, but it was too..." Here he paused canting his head to one side as if thinking. "...goopy. I think that was the word." His expressive features reformed into good-humored resignation. "Most of *Voyager's* crew found Delta-Quadrant cuisine to be unpalatable, honestly. But I think it is important to appreciate all aspects of the places you visit, especially the food. Did I tell you that we Talaxians recount the history and preparation of each meal so that we are appropriately grateful for it?"

"No," Rayna lied like the carpet beneath her feet, and contentedly listened to her companion extol the virtues of Talaxian food and meal customs. It was by far preferable than to have his overly long nose delving into her plans for Kathryn's meal.

They fed the Mess Hall's occupants first, and minutes later she was rolling a cart full of insulated trays toward the exit. Lex and Axion passed her by as they went to join Neelix. She noticed the Vaadwaur made way for the two murderers as if they were VIP's.

Because of them, the Vaadwaur children are no longer held in bondage, Windchild, came her grandmother's voice, like a distant wind wending through swaying trees. Ever since her dream, Yetara had been nearer. Sometimes Rayna felt if she could just turn a corner fast enough, there she would be. But the corners contained only crewmen, and she would look foolish sprinting with a food cart.

She rode the turbolift down to Deck 5, feeding those Vaadwaur billeted in Sickbay, and the security team assigned to monitor them.

Help, but be wary...a sound approach for a paragon.

Deck 4 took considerably more time. The cargo bay was filled with refugees, all of whom were grateful to eat anything, including leola root. They didn't pull a hair to eat it thrice a day.

Starvation is a nasty end, and they had endured it for months.

Rayna handed out her trays silently. Here emotions ran thick as cooling lava, and she was hard-pressed to maintain her equilibrium. Desperation, fear, and uncertainty intermingled with pain, despair, and the thinnest sliver of hope. It was too-rich a diet, and her stomach clenched in protest.

The next Deck, 3, contained private quarters, and those were currently vacant. Just above it was the Mess Hall, which had already been done. She summoned the 'lift. Only the Bridge remained. Already her heart rate had accelerated. Rayna shook her head in dismay.

All this just at the prospect of seeing her...

The turbolift arrived; the doors slid open in a whoosh of air. Noah Lessing stepped out and grinned at her.

"Hello Cooky!" His coffee colored features betrayed both fatigue and delight. "More critter-fritters and bug juice?"

Rayna's eyes ricocheted off the new pip on his collar. It seemed that his rank had been reinstated. Later on she would see if Neelix heard any rumors about it.

"Yes sir," Rayna acknowledged his heightened station, but winked at him. Her empathic senses detected a new peace about the man, as if something unsettled had been put to rights.

Lessing chuckled in return and continued down the corridor.

The 'lift was empty, thankfully. Rayna eased the cart in and tucked herself in next to it. More than three people and a food cart made for tight quarters.

"Bridge please," she asked *Voyager's* omnipresent guardian, and then relaxed against the cool walls of synthetic metal. The ship shook a bit and the lights of the turbolift dimmed and brightened. Getting stuck in here during a power outage wasn't exactly a thrilling thought. Rayna drew down a long breath to quiet her suddenly jangled nerves.

Another slight boom and a shiver confirmed that they were still feeling distant effects of the ion storm. The temperature dipped a little; the lights dimmed once more.

And something changed.

Her breath formed vapor as the turbolift reached the freezing mark. Just beyond the food cart was a shadow. Barely visible in the black, the figure radiated no chemical signature, but it was no hologram. Now her heartbeats accelerated from dread, not desire. It was moving. She could hear it breathe, a hissing sound that chilled her bones. Though it was a futile gesture, Rayna snatched her commbadge from her chest. The point was always a convenient weapon, but was useless against something incorporeal.

The lights came up and the figure was illuminated. Grey hair stood out wildly, like an unruly mop. It was male, to all outward appearances. Heavy brows flinched downward over gunmetal eyes. They stared at her as if taking aim.

Her mind cataloged details out of habit. Black pants, gold top, Starfleet rank embroidered on the sleeves...a commodore. The apparition was unkempt and unshaven. It carried small colored cards in its hands and shuffled them incessantly. Step by step it came forward.

"It's coming." The words were spoken as if from the bottom of the ocean. They were cold, wet, and strangled. "Out of Hell...it's coming."

The doors opened to the flickering, multi-colored, beauty of *Voyager's* bridge.

Blinking, Rayna made her hands grip the cart, forced her feet to propel it forth. Everything here was utterly normal.

What was that?

A wandering spirit, her mind obligingly supplied, a harbinger.

Survival instincts forged from years of undercover work made Rayna refocus on the here and now.

The Bridge hummed with power, harmonizing with the chorus of plasma conduits and anti-matter. After all her years in Starfleet, she still marveled at the care displayed not just for function, but for form. Engineers seemed as committed to artistic expression as to practical considerations during the design of starships. *Voyager* was no exception. Gleaming silver framing served to reflect the light, making the Bridge seem filled with tiny rainbows. The rounded design made the place seem less formal, almost relaxed. On Delta, engineers paid similar attention to aesthetics, but then they weren't designing vessels with the armament *Voyager* carried. Orions, on the other hand, cared not one Circassian fig for how the thing looked, as long as the engines, shields, and weapons worked. Many of her father's freighters gave every appearance of being ready to fall apart. Their decrepit appearance disguised speed and stealth that would make Ferengi pirates seem clumsy.

"Good evening, Crewman," Tuvok's rich baritone greeted.

Rayna smiled a little smile for him. She couldn't help it. Her fondness for the Vulcan was quite disgusting, really. "Sir," she responded, and handed him a tray.

An ebony brow slid upward. Whether it was indicated surprise that she delivered the meal or was a statement regarding the tray's contents, she couldn't say. His keen gaze lingered on her face a second or two longer than necessary, an indication that he'd spotted her disquiet. Rayna inclined her head just a tad in acknowledgement. It gripped her endlessly that he could so easily read her, but there was nothing for it.

"It's coming."

The words made the marrow inside her bones curdle, and she didn't even know what they meant.

She reached for another tray. From out of the Briefing Room, swimming through the doors as if they weren't closed, came her Bronard, ugly as ever.

"Still having the occasional vision, Wind Singer? How inconvenient for you."

Obviously, it was time to have her brain checked. The Doctor would have to schedule some scans.

She worked her way 'round the Bridge and delivered each meal with a polite nod and an occasional kind word. Commander Chakotay took his tray last and pointed toward the Captain's Ready Room.

"She's inside updating her logs," he informed Rayna with gentle look.

As if I wouldn't have noticed her absence.

There's no need to be shrewish, Ray-ray.

She could feel their eyes upon her, though, all but Tuvok's. Even the Bronard was staring, its eight, button-black eyes unblinking in their regard.

Rayna pulled a tray from the cart. The metal lid covered an empty plate, a fact Rayna did not find fit to share. She keyed the hatch and was admitted into Captain Janeway's office.

Air poofed against her face as the doors opened. On its currents came Kathryn's exhaustion...and fear.

Neelix was right.

There were other emotions, distress, relief, guilt...they created a landscape as colorful and vibrant as an artist's painting. She hesitated. Here was another of her lover's secret places, and crossing the threshold was a somber, nay, sacred moment.

Did you use the word, "lover?"

It wasn't a term that Rayna bandied about. She'd never had a lover, really, but in any case, it was just a figure of speech.

This room was softer, done in muted shades of mauve and green. Compared to the starkly masculine Bridge, the space was clearly feminine. Opposite the entrance was a raise area, with a round coffee table. Right now it held a silver teapot and cups, giving a lie to its namesake. Perhaps that was what "occasional table" meant...it occasionally held coffee and occasionally held tea.

Just to Rayna's right was an odd sculpture. It was vaguely spherical, and purple. Unless her keen eye failed her, it was also made of glass, real glass. On Delta it was used to make ceremonial objects, sculptures, and glassware for use in Temple. All the gods preferred their offerings to be served on glass; no doubt because it was supremely inconvenient to use something so fragile.

Kathryn sat behind a half-moon desk of silver and green, mint green, to be exact. Her weary grey eyes met Rayna's and brightened. The auburn head indicated the sofa near the observation windows as if inviting her to sit.

What a coincidence that you served the Bridge last, nay? You have time to dally.

Rayna placed her tray on the coffee table, next to the sterling tray and moved to the replicator at the rear of Janeway's desk. Brown carpet sighed beneath her weight as she passed over it. The Captain's words followed her in a soothing monotone.

"...we have cleared the storm's outer ring. Three of the Vaadwaur vessels were lost, but many of their crew and passengers were rescued thanks to the swift actions of the transporter teams. The Doctor reports that most suffered relatively minor injuries. We are billeting them in Cargo Bay 1 for the time being, except for wounded. They are being housed in the Mess Hall."

"Captains Riza and Geelon performed competently during every aspect of the perilous journey. Their guidance to the other ships' captains was instrumental in the loss of so few vessels."

A brilliant flash of argent lightning split the grey-dust of the blast ring. *Voyager* trembled down to her bulkhead in the wake of such energy.

How lovely!

Rayna's pleasure at the storm's last gasp of fury was truncated as a fresh wave of terror swept through the Ready Room. From the corner of her eye, she saw Kathryn's eyes shut for a moment. Dictation paused, then continued, though the captain's voice trembled slightly.

"The dust from the supernova is thinning, and long-range sensors have come back online."

Wisely, Rayna pretended that she didn't notice anything amiss. It would not do for her to see Janeway's weakness. The woman was too proud.

Get on with dinner....breakfast...whatever it is.

An excellent notion...

Rayna used three of her replicator rations and summoned up chicken noodle soup, and sourdough bread. From what she remembered, humans called this "comfort food." It was also easy on the stomach, and Kathryn's was sure to be roiling by now.

She carried the meal over to the room's coffee table and let the smell waft about. There was more to see. Her footsteps took her back to a shelf directly across from the sitting area. Real books, of bound paper and leather sat upright to port. Next to them was the umber colored mask of a bearded man.

So much hair.

Despite her travels, Rayna marveled at just how long humans could grow their whiskers, though it was odd that only males could do so. One would think the universe would be more even-handed than that.

A geode on a golden base was next. Amethyst? Rayna thought that correct. The mottled crust of grey and brown belied the loveliness within. Nature did love to deceive. Earth and water contained mysteries yet untapped. Multiply that times the number of planets and there was an unending supply of wonder.

"It's coming."

What in Sul's frothy name did that mean?

I thought you weren't interested.

She wasn't. But if it were an omen, it was best to pay attention. Letting fate get the drop on you was unwise.

Janeway continued to speak. "Communications have been established with the Talaxian colony, though it is audio only. I've made contact with someone called Xexes and have gained permission for the fleet to enter colony space."

Humph. I'll bet the Vaadwaur were much put out behind the whole "asking permission" thing.

Only a noble idiot would ask for what they could easily take. Rayna took a seat on the sofa, finally and regarded the woman behind the desk.

Yes, Kathryn was a noble idiot. She wouldn't survive ten seconds on Rigel V, what with all the con artists, swindlers and smugglers running about.

She's survived five years in the Delta Quadrant.

Obviously her inner voice was determined to disagree with everything. Rayna resolved to cease the pointless conversation.

Centered on the curved shelf of synthetic stone was some sort of potted plant. Rayna didn't recognize its species. Slender and straight it shot up in the air with rangy leaves of jade. Like those in her quarters, this plant was testament to Kathryn's devotion to life. It had been tended with great care.

A dragon carving guarded it. Another fascinating fact about humans was how diverse they were. Lacking wings, the serpent-like body of this fellow was characteristic of "Eastern" dragons. Alas, her courses on Terran mythology were long forgotten, covered by the dust of time and more recent memories.

If you could render her soul, this is what it would look like.

What a foolish notion... Despite her resolve not to contradict, Rayna was moved to dispel that idea outright.

The last ornament was a microscope. It was old, using lenses and slides to examine microscopic organisms. Cause and effect, reason and reflection, these were the altar at which Kathryn worshiped.

She swept the room a final time. Each bit of decoration was a piece to the puzzle that was Kathryn. Perhaps one day Rayna would assemble those bits into a better understanding of her lover.

There was that word again. No matter. Rayna turned, letting her gaze drift over Kathryn's drawn features. They were still somewhat sallow, as if the human were recovering from an illness, and thin, almost transparently so. Flame red hair was a little dull, looking less like fire and more like embers. However, the dark circles around Kathryn's eyes were receding.

Sleep does that.

And then their eyes met, and Rayna's world froze.

No one had warned her about this ebullient joy that filled her core whenever Kathryn looked at her.

A rumbling growl from Janeway's stomach shattered the moment, but made them both smile.

"Computer, save log," the captain stated flatly. "You cheat, you know." Rising slowly, the woman crossed over to sink into the couch's cushions. Rayna joined her there.

"I could have resisted leola root," Janeway pronounced.

Sitting so close, Rayna could feel the fine tracings of pain that lay over Kathryn's scalp like a lace coverlet. She brought her fingers to Janeway's neck and activated the pressure points there.

A sussurant groan and wave of relief was her reward. Grey eyes closed again, this time in contentment.

"I've missed you," Kathryn whispered, then seemed to gather herself. One hand slowly moved to cover Rayna's. Flesh met flesh. Fingers intertwined, and it was Rayna's turn to know contentment.

"You're going to run out of ration credits, if you keep on fixing me meals." A frown formed between auburn brows. "I don't expect to eat better than my crew."

"Since you don't eat at all unless I chase you down and tie you up, I don't see what the issue is." Rayna's rejoinder was tinged with good humor. "Besides," she grinned cat-wise and comfortable, "I have an abundant supply of credits. It's amazing how many people actually like leola root stew. They don't seem to mind sharing their rations."

"I don't believe that for a second." Janeway threw her a sharp glare, but set about eating all the

same.

Rayna stared out the lavish portholes. The plasma inferno had become a distant glow. Wisps of dust replaced it.

Minutes later the bowl was empty and the bread reduced to crumbs. Kathryn leaned into the sofa and let her head slowly sag backward until it rested on the cushion. "What time is it?" she asked softly.

Rayna took in the gentle planes of her lover's face, the sharp angle of her nose, the stubborn jut of her chin. "After 0200," she answered. "How long until we rendezvous with the Talaxian colony?"

"Five hours, present speed."

The steely eyes had lowered to half-mast, as if mourning the loss of so much night.

As well they should...

"I need to tell you something." Kathryn's words were but a whisper. "But I don't know how."

Dread wound its clammy coils around Rayna's innards, squeezing. Kathryn had grown bored with her. She'd not expected it to happen so soon. Swallowing down the bile that filled her throat, Rayna said only, "All right."

Silence held sway long enough for Rayna's hearts to fall into her toes, at least it felt that way. Kathryn's eyes remained closed, but her brows lowered and her jaw clenched. Fear and shame poured out of her skin in a river of regret. It struck Rayna as odd. These were not the emotions one associated with breaking off a liaison.

"We'd been in the Delta Quadrant for a little over five years." Eventually Kathryn's words tumbled forth, slowly at first, the faster as if gaining the momentum of an avalanche. "There had been a few, brief contacts with the Federation, just enough to remind us of home, but not enough to make us feel connected." She drew breath here, likely to calm the tremor in her voice. "Then suddenly we picked up a distress call from a vessel named *Equinox*..."

Rayna listened in silence as Kathryn related a tale of reunion, betrayal, and genocide. Bitter regret and its companion, recrimination, colored her emotional spectrum black.

"We chased after Ransom," Kathryn murmured, eyes still shut. "I wouldn't let it go. I was ready to pay any price, make any sacrifice. Chakotay thinks I was determined to rescue Seven and the Doctor, but that wasn't it." Her lips trembled here. "I was after blood." Shame flushed Kathryn's face crimson. Her story continued, through the long chase, culminating in the cargo bay. Here Kathryn leaned forward, elbows on knees, head bowed. Her eyes were squeezed tight as if she could block the pain of the memories. "I almost killed Noah Lessing. I would have too, if not for Chakotay." Her voice faded into nothingness.

Rayna took several seconds to digest what she'd heard. To her surprise, it seemed as though Janeway expected some sort of negative reaction. Even now her lover would not look at her.

"Well," Rayna began. "You should have known better."

Auburn brows flinched even lower as if reacting to a physical blow.

"You should have put one of his teammates in the cargo bay and made Lessing watch."

Kathryn's head shot upward as if shot from a phaser array. Eyes opened wide to face her with astonishment.

"What?" Rayna tsked. "'fleet types are inoculated against self-serving behavior. The only way to work them is to put someone else's life at risk. Didn't you take Interviewing and Interrogation?' She uncurled from the sofa and began to clean up. "Next time leave that sort of business to the professionals."

Janeway's surprise and confusion wended their way through the Ready Room at breakneck speed. Whatever reaction the human had expected, clearly she hadn't gotten it. A fact that was proven when Kathryn stammered, "Don't you understand, I tried to murder him?"

"In which case, you did a lousy job, because he didn't die." Rayna finished recycling the dishes and turned back around. "That makes you an almost-murderer, and 'almost' only counts in plasma grenades and photon torpedoes." Then she became quite serious. "Did you really think I would reject you over something like this?"

Kathryn nodded. "It's no more than I deserve. I betrayed everything I hold dear."

Rayna smiled a sad little smile, and said only, "Who am I to judge you?" She would liked to have said more, would like to have found the words to wash away her lover's guilt and pain. But words could not cleanse the soul; only time and redemption could grant such a boon. Instead Rayna offered the only solace she could, saying, "I know a thing or two about murder, myself."

Grey eyes that glittered too much beneath the harsh Ready Room lights finally rose to meet hers. There was a look of desperate hope in them that stole Rayna's breath. It slammed into her that Kathryn valued her opinion, that Kathryn was concerned about how she appeared in Rayna's eyes.

She cleared her throat of constricting emotions and recalled the feeling of peace that had orbited Ensign Lessing. "I take it you have already spoken to him."

Janeway nodded. "He forgave me," she muttered obviously still overawed.

"Then forgive yourself," Rayna instructed firmly. "You'll find it a much harder task, but well worth the trouble. Now," she once more faced the replicator, "how about some dessert?"

The weight of Kathryn's gaze tickled the skin of her neck, like a touch. Arousal floated past, warming the edges of her empathic senses with its heady perfume. It appeared that her lover had a different sort of sweet in mind.

Wait for it.

There. As if snuffed beneath a tyrant's boot, the sensual cologne faded. Only in the privacy of closed quarters, were Janeway's desires allowed off their leash. Even then, sometimes the captain in her recoiled. Habits were hard to break, as Rayna well knew.

Rayna heard her shift. She looked behind to find the woman leaning forward, elbows on knees, as if praying for forgiveness. "It isn't easy, is it?" she gently asked. "Allowing yourself to want?"

The regal countenance lifted. Eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in frustration. Kathryn growled, "No." Her defensiveness faded. "It isn't. For years I've been resigned to being alone." Austere features reformed into aching vulnerability. "Every time I've wanted someone, I've had to control the impulse, except with-" Her voice broke off without warning, and Janeway stared down at the carpet.

"With Michael," Rayna finished.

"Yes." The word was almost a sigh. Kathryn's embarrassment colored her cheeks red. She opened her mouth to speak.

Oh no.

Rayna crossed the room in a trice and gave the human something far better to do with her tongue. She kissed Kathryn until her lover lay supine on the sofa, hips pressing upward against Rayna's. The desire that had been quashed returned tenfold. Moist heat radiated from Kathryn's center adding its sweet scent to the tumultuous emotions already churning.

The uniform was both bulky and inconvenient. Fortunately the zippers yielded readily enough. With an ease born of countless lessons in human anatomy, Rayna's fingers slipped beneath the cloth barriers and found flesh. They pressed expertly against the sensitive skin of Kathryn's hips, then moved past the flame-red curls that marked the threshold of yet another secret place.

One of Kathryn's knees bent up and pushed between Rayna's legs.

Perfect.

The kiss deepened. Rayna's skin flushed as her body unleashed a tide of pheromones. Their effect on Kathryn was immediate. Her hands tightened, dug into Rayna's back. Her breath became a rapid series of hoarse moans. Their bodies crested upward, soaring to the primal music of desire. The wave crested. Rayna felt herself grinding against Kathryn's leg, heard herself moaning.

The hatchway is unlocked.

That thought echoed in the distant reaches of Rayna's consciousness for but an instant. It was far too late for such concerns. The tide was flowing. She could feel it in the hot liquid streaming through her fingers as she touched Kathryn. She could taste it in the salty touch of her lover's tongue.

So close...

The wave broke. Rayna could not distinguish her cries from those of Kathryn, could not separate their passion. There were no such boundaries any longer. Nothing remained but bliss.

How long they lay together was unclear. Heartbeats slowed. Breathing eased. Sensibility returned.

Rayna slid from the sofa onto the carpet and sat a moment.

That was unwise in so many ways. What if someone called for her, or asked to enter?

She heard Janeway sit up. The last vestiges of arousal had dissipated. Surely anger would replace it.

"I'm sorry, Kathryn." Rayna did not look up. For the first time she noticed that the carpet here was of a different weave than in the rest of the room...Berber was the name, she thought.

Her lover blew out a long, slow breath of air. "Our timing could have been better." Fine-boned hands brushed wrinkles out of her uniform. Grey eyes met Rayna's, and softened. Anger was abruptly displaced by ironic humor. "It isn't as though I were an unwilling participant." Kathryn's raspy voice was liberally speckled with laughter. Her fingertips brushed across Rayna's temple. "But I think from now on you should just tell me I'm being silly. Showing me in my Ready Room is a little awkward."

That made Rayna titter, and she met Kathryn's fond glance with a lingering smile. "Well," she began, "you had it coming."

"No, I came later." The quip was out and suddenly both she and Kathryn were guffawing so hard that it was a wonder the ablative armor did not tremble.

Rayna eventually collapsed on her back to enjoy the carpet's padding. She watched Kathryn reassemble her uniform, smoothing out wrinkles. Hair was put back in place, and the captain once more held sway.

Only there was a pleasant flush about the commanding countenance that had nothing to do with rank.

Time to go. Past time, most like.

Retaking her feet, Rayna used the motion as cover and wiped her fingers on the inside of her tunic. She was surprised to find that she was still breathless. Their climax had been more intense than the storm. It gave her a peculiar feeling of elation to be carrying a small piece of Kathryn's chemistry with her. The sweet smell clung to her fingers, and it wouldn't do for the Bridge crew to detect it.

Fortunately neither humans nor Vulcans possess keen olfactory senses.

Janeway rose as well and offered up a half-grin. "Give me twenty minutes, and I'll come to your quarters."

"Deal," Rayna replied. "I need to return the food cart, but my shift is officially over."

She gave silent thanks to the Sea Goddess for getting her out of a bad scrape unscathed. Next time she would react to Kathryn with more care...and control. The need to comfort her lover, to drive away her pain had been overwhelming. She'd not expected it to go quite so far. Strange that she'd been so overwhelmed, like an unschooled adolescent just learning the pleasures of sex. That thought disturbed her, and Rayna felt her brows constrict in a frown of concentration.

That won't do. Assemble your features. There.

Habit took over, assisting Rayna as it always did. Her face and body resumed their imitation of military bearing, and she left the Ready Room without a backward glance.

Kathryn Janeway returned to the Bridge at 0700, hoping that no one noticed her flushed appearance. Bad enough that she was only just on time, not several minutes or hours early as was her habit. Instead, a bit of frolic in the ion shower caused a substantial, albeit pleasurable delay.

She nodded at Chakotay and took the center seat. Ahead, the viewscreen revealed pinpoints of starlight. It was a welcome sight. Weeks of stellar dust and hours of flaming plasma had worn them all down. Even Tom Paris had grown leaner and harder looking. Chakotay had remarked on the change in the helmsman's appearance only yesterday.

We're all likely to be wafer-thin by the time we're out of the Dead Zone.

She cast the nay-saying thought from her mind. Grey dust had become thinner still, and more diamonds and rubies glittered against the deep black velvet of the night. They were finally emerging into normal space.

Well, as normal as it gets in the Dead Zone.

"Looks like a lively system up ahead," she remarked with dry humor. Dead systems and fading

stars were better than fog and flame any day.

"Yes it does," Chakotay said. His lips curled upward slightly and twinkles that mirrored starlight gleamed from the night of his eyes.

Tones from Operations preceded Harry Kim's announcement. "We're being hailed, Captain. It's the Talaxian colony."

And the distant contact becomes a reality... Janeway felt a twinge of adrenaline course through her veins. "On screen," she ordered.

The image which appeared was of a Talaxian male. "Captain Janeway," he began, "I am Xexes, elected leader of Beta-Talax. It is good to finally get a look at you."

"And you." Janeway inclined her head toward the display. This man was easily the homeliest Talaxian she'd ever seen. It was an ungenerous assessment, but true. Brownish hair stuck out in every possible direction, seemingly at random. Deep-set eyes were so veiled by shadow that their color was impossible to discern. Instead of subdued spots on his face, Xexes had dark brown blotches that bore a striking resemblance to bird droppings in their shape. Whiskers actually stood out straight from his broad features. She took it all in and categorized it with scientific clarity. "It's been a long journey."

Xexes nodded in an understanding manner. "So it was for us. Though," he added in the tone of afterthought, "we didn't have to fight a battle at the time of our crossing." His features gained an expression of worry. "You're quite certain that the," he paused a moment chewing his lip, "Vaadwaur...the foolish ones...you're quite certain that they are no longer a threat?"

There's the question, eh Kathryn?

Beside her, she heard Chakotay shift uneasily. It seemed that question was on everyone's mind. Suddenly Janeway recalled that "foolish" was the translation of "vaadwaur" in old Talaxian. Her thoughts accelerated. "It seems you're familiar with them," she observed.

"Oh yes, Captain." Xexes nodded vigorously, causing his whiskers and hair to undulate wildly. "I'm something of an amateur historian, you see."

I do.

Janeway saved this new bit of data, but earmarked it for further study.

"Captains Geelon and Riza have committed to my leadership," she answered carefully. "However, as a precaution, I've had all the weapons on their battle cruisers disabled. With a third their numbers billeted on *Voyager*, I don't foresee any problems."

She and Chakotay exchanged a brief glance. Though she'd not revealed it to Xexes, Tuvok had armed security details assigned to all decks containing Vaadwaur refugees. It was a necessary

precaution.

Her reply seemed satisfactory to Xexes, because his hair and whiskers set to bouncing as he nodded once again. "Capital!" His hands rubbed together as if in anticipation. "And you have goods and services to barter?" Tiny eyes glittered.

"Yes." Janeway rose, putting a welcoming grin on her face. Though the question had been asked before and answered, she felt the need to formalize relations. "Permission to enter your space?"

The beetle brows twitched lower; a wide, pleased grin took form. "Granted." Xexes leaned toward the screen. "Granted! Thank you very much for asking. Your respect and courtesy do you credit, Captain." Of a sudden, his countenance was wiser and cagier by half. He pressed an unseen button on the console beside him.

Sensors beeped out a discordant warning.

"Two ships decloaking at our port and starboard bow, Captain." Tuvok spoke in calm tones. "They appear to be Talaxian freighters, but are using cloaking devices similar to those in Romulan warbirds."

The words "Red Alert" poised on Janeway's lips, but Xexes' next statement stifled them.

"Our vessels are standing down," he announced, eyeing her intently.

"Confirmed," Tuvok announced. "Their weapons are going offline."

Where the hell did they get cloaking devices from?

No sooner had her mind asked the question, then it offered up an answer.

There was an old Romulan vessel in the Labyrinth, and a disrupter on the space station. They must have stumbled across a warbird.

Or, they found similar technology somewhere else.

Suddenly the tactical situation had become much more difficult to predict.

Chakotay appeared to be just as displeased by this turn of events as she was. "You set a trap," he accused, anger coloring his rich tenor.

"I'm afraid so, Commander." Xexes sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. Jutting whiskers appeared to droop. "We've encountered our share of pirates and desperate folk over the last two-plus years. It makes a body cautious." His head lowered, but his eyes, what Janeway could see of them, stared into the viewscreen with unyielding intensity. "I am inclined to trust your good intentions. Be warned, however, we are not helpless and we will not be conquered quietly."

"Conquest isn't the Federation way, Mr. Xexes." Janeway took several paces toward the viewscreen, arms akimbo. "We mean you no harm." Her voice lowered to a raspy growl. "But we won't go quietly either, and I assure you, this vessel is more than capable of defending itself."

Her words were met with a sharp nod, and then a sly wink. "So we are even, Captain Janeway. I can live with that." Apparently well-satisfied with the day's events, Xexes placed both hands behind his head and said expansively, "The freighters will guide you in. Welcome to Beta-Talax."

Communication was cut.

Janeway gave Lieutenant Paris a nod. "Follow them in. Seven," she contacted Astrometrics, "run a metaphasic scan." Cloaking devices using antiquated technology could be easily detected. "Mr. Tuvok," she turned toward his station, "scan for tachyon emissions and ionized gas." Those were the usual suspects when hunting for a cloaked vessel. Residual antiprotons might be detected, as well.

"Aye, Captain." His ebony fingers glided gracefully the console.

"Seven of Nine to Captain Janeway."

"Go ahead." She tapped her comm link.

"The Talaxian vessels are using twenty-third century Romulan Technology. Our sensors can easily pinpoint them."

Now that we know to look.

"Well done, Seven," Janeway answered.

She sat back more easily in her seat and exchanged a tense look with Chakotay. "I don't like surprises."

"Me neither," he replied tersely. His jaw was tight. In the black pools of his eyes was anger.

Though they often disagreed, Chakotay and she stood united on protecting the ship and crew.

"Captain Riza is hailing us." Ensign Kim was bent over his display. "He sounds displeased." The last was said with an ironic undertone.

"Welcome to the club," she murmured to herself. "Patch him through." Janeway faced the screen once more. "Captain Riza."

Indeed, the Vaadwaur leader looked as happy as a thundercloud. "Are you simply going to blithely follow?" he asked baldly. His basso voice was deep enough to feel. "They've taken us

unawares once. Why give them another opportunity?"

The last thing she needed was someone questioning her command. Best settle this now and finally.

"If you dislike my decision, Captain, I invite you to pick up your people and head back into the storm. Otherwise, I expect you to afford me the same respect and courtesy as you would any other fleet commander. Do I make myself clear?" Sparks could have flown from her eyes, so great was her ire.

Instead of becoming angry or flustered, Riza raised both brows in mock astonishment. "Like rarified quartz," he rumbled, sounding like a distant herd of cattle. "Do bear in mind that if you get yourself killed there are more of you somewhere. We, Vaadwaur, can't say the same. If we die, so does our entire race." The last was intoned solemnly as if pronouncing a doom he feared would come to pass.

Her irritation drained away. The omnipresent threat of extinction was enough to make anyone desperate. Janeway nodded at her erstwhile opponent. "I understand what is at stake." She put all the reassurance she could muster into her words. "The Federation believes all life forms have equal value. I will defend your people just as fiercely as I will defend my own."

His brown eyes measured her for several long seconds. Finally, "I believe you will at that," Riza said. "Very well, Commodore. Lead on."

Communication was cut. Chakotay shot her a wide grin. "Congratulations on your promotion."

"Thanks," she fired back, a trifle sarcastically.

The title "commodore" used to identify senior captains who commanded squadrons of more than one vessel. Starfleet had discontinued it decades ago. The Vaadwaur apparently had not.

The responsibility implied by that one word unleashed a pestilence of doubt, insecurity, and second-guessing. It was an awesome prospect to hold the fate of an entire people in your hands.

Janeway hoped, in earnest, that Riza's trust was not in vain.

And here would be the first test of it. The Talaxian's seemed friendly enough. They dropped out of cloak, when they didn't have to, a sure sign of good faith.

Really? What are the odds their weapons could damage Voyager anyway?

It wouldn't be the first time she'd been blind to treachery.

Janeway slowly sank into the soft depths her seat. She motioned for Paris to continue on course.

Please, she entreated the universe, don't let me be wrong.

Time froze and the trip seemed interminable. They passed three outer planets, all gas giants, churning with hydrogen and ammonia. One looked to Janeway like a mirror image of Jupiter, only green and blue, instead of red and yellow. Storms raged across its surface forming huge, eye-shaped patches of boiling jade.

"I have the innermost planet on sensors, Captain," Harry Kim announced, and sent the image to the viewscreen. It was of a large sphere, covered by heavy white clouds. "It appears to be an ice world."

Paris chimed in at that. "Ice? It's the closest planet to the star, Harry. Doesn't that make it kinda hot down there?"

Water reacts not just to temperature, but to pressure. Janeway recalled lessons of fluid dynamics. The planet's opaque atmosphere made it impossible to discern the surface. Technical readouts would have to suffice. She listened passively as Harry ran down the planet's specifications.

"It has a diameter of 500,000 kilometers, about four times the size of Earth." Harry did not look up, but remained focused on his console. "Surface temperature is approximately 300 degrees Celsius. I'm reading hydrogen gas for an atmosphere, but 98.1% of its surface is water, and it's all frozen solid." Wonderment flavored the bland tone of his voice. "This phenomenon has only been recorded on two other worlds, GJ-346, about 30 light years from Earth, and another in the Klingon Empire."

"We should take some readings from it on the Delta Flyer," Chakotay suggested. His face was alight with weary excitement.

Janeway considered the prospect for only half a second. "We are explorers, after all," she said, and found that a tingle of anticipation had awakened in her belly. The joy of discovery...it seemed years since last she'd felt it.

Her words brought a lightening to the Bridge's mood. Lt. Paris raised his hand to volunteer, needlessly. Trying to keep him out the Flyer's cockpit would be next to impossible under any circumstances. Add to that his love of water...frozen or otherwise...and you had safe bet that he would pilot the mission.

She realized that Chakotay was staring at her, his expression difficult to label.

"What?" Janeway asked, giving him a quizzical cut of her eyes.

He grinned at her. "Nothing. It's just that you're smiling."

"There's something wrong with that?" She furrowed her brow.

As if suddenly self conscious, he redirected his attention to the front. "No. You used to do that

often, like when we went looking for coffee in a nebula."

"That's because there was definitely coffee in it as well as omicron particles." They had fallen back into an easy banter. "I have a nose for these things."

"We are picking up the space station, Captain." Commander Tuvok sounded utterly unimpressed by either the conversation or the day's events.

She knew that was not the case; few races possessed more scientific curiosity than Vulcans. However, she appreciated his solid demeanor as always.

"Let's see it," Janeway instructed.

The construct which orbited the ice world bore no resemblance to any of the orderly stations of Janeway's experience. It was neither round, nor square; it did not spin like an oversized top. In fact, it appeared to be a mish-mash of vessels that had been slammed into one another at random. She saw docking pods that had obviously been Talaxian freighters. The main structure was built by joining a Kazon battle cruiser to a large ship of unknown origin. Smaller vessels were spliced to the main body by joining airlocks. Her eyes fell on a familiar shape.

"Is that a Federation shuttle?" Janeway did her best to sound merely interested. Inside, her heart had begun to race. They'd been following a breadcrumb trail left by the Magellan for weeks. Here, might be a crust.

"Yes," Harry said. His voice trembled slightly with controlled excitement. "There are no numbers on her hull, and transponder codes are non-functional." He looked up at her with disappointed eyes. "I can't confirm her identity."

"Then we'll just have to get permission to go aboard." Chakotay's voice offered encouragement.

Good for him.

Having a crew that helped prop one another up was no small blessing.

"Captain?" Harry Kim drew her attention once more. "I'm picking up two more vessels, still cloaked. They're orbiting the station."

Tuvok added, "Energy levels indicate their weapons are fully charged."

Oh no you don't. Janeway wasn't about to be surprised again. "Red Alert. Hail Mr. Xexes," she ordered coldly

The klaxon blared. Scarlet light bathed the Bridge. As if adrenaline had been pumped into Life Support, the very air gained a charge.

"Colonial Guard Vessel Fury to Federation starship *Voyager*." The angry voice of a Talaxian

commander filled the Bridge. "You are charging weapons. Stand down at once."

And I don't take orders from you.

Janeway would have smiled at the resemblance her thoughts bore to Rayna's daily attitude had the circumstances been less grave.

"Mr. Xexes is available." Ensign Kim routed the signal to the main viewscreen.

She didn't give the Talaxian time to draw breath.

"I'm getting tired of your deception. Tell your cloaked ships to stand down, or I will open fire." Janeway approached the Talaxian's image, staring him down.

Tuvok's voice shattered the tense atmosphere. "The space station is charging two disruptor banks." He paused, and Janeway turned to find him momentarily still, one brow raised. "The Vaadwaur ships have raised shields. They have taken up flanking positions."

We have help.

Xexes appeared to be issuing orders to someone off-screen. Then he brought his attention back to Janeway. "Forgive us Captain. Your ship is the most powerful vessel we have yet encountered." His eyes became sadly earnest. "I was attempting to maintain the upper hand in case of trouble. It seems our technology is truly no match for yours." With an air of defeat, the colony leader slumped back in his chair. "So we are now at your mercy."

"The Talaxian vessels are powering down," Tuvok's steady stream of information continued, "as is the space station."

"Captain," Kim called, "Captain Riza is hailing us."

Motioning for audio to be cut to Xexes, Janeway had the Vaadwaur patched through her command chair's speakers.

"Your orders, Commodore?" Riza's voice was completely calm. "We, also, have detected the *frwashi*."

A second later the Universal Translator tossed out the word, "bogies."

"Maintain flanking positions." Janeway routed sensor readings to the command chair.

"Bogies?" Chakotay inquired, looking baffled.

The answer came from Tom Paris. "An old Earth term meaning, 'unidentified blips on the radar screen.'" His attention never left the helm. "It's just about as outdated as 'commodore.'" Humor liberally spiced his observation, despite the circumstances.

Chakotay leaned toward her and winked. "I happen to like commodore, myself."

"You can belay that kind of talk." Janeway refused to encourage him.

"Captain," Ensign Kim called, "the Talaxian freighters are pulling up behind us. Captain Riza is requesting permission to ram them."

Janeway stifled a surprised snort and hastily keyed the communicator. "That won't be necessary," she told the Vaadwaur leader, adding, "for now."

"As you like." Riza's rich bass tones throbbed with feigned disappointment, and he signed off.

"Did he have that put out over open frequency?" Janeway asked Tuvok on a hunch.

"Yes, Captain."

Nothing like letting them know you mean business.

Against her better judgment, Janeway allowed that she could get used to having other ships around for assistance. Unfortunately such show of force would do little to allay the Talaxians' suspicions.

How can we build relationships based on mutual trust when trust is the scarcest element of all?

She couldn't hold Xexes' actions against him. *Voyager* was an imposing vessel, easily capable of instilling fear and intimidation.

On the other hand, she is a most desirable prize.

Doubts and second guesses launched an offensive against her judgment. To trust or not to trust. That was the only question that truly mattered. Hamlet be damned.

Any promises she made would be hollow words, meaningless to the Talaxians.

"Mr. Tuvok," she called, her eyes still fixed on Xexes. "Lower our shields."

There was the barest hesitation. She felt it, rather than saw it. No one knew more than she how great a risk it was to expose the ship. A single disruptor blast could be deadly.

Xexes leaned forward and she finally saw his eyes, pale brown and glistening. "You play a dangerous game, Captain Janeway."

"This is no game," she replied. "When I said the Federation way was cooperation not conquest, I meant those words."

His shaggy head nodded once. "So I see."

Janeway approached the viewscreen a second time and offered up a gentle grin. "Does this mean we are still welcome?"

"Yes." Xexes returned her expression of friendliness. "We will guide you to dock, if that is acceptable."

"It is," she said. "I look forward to meeting you in person."

The conversation ended. No new starships decloaked. After several seconds passed, the Bridge crew's collective breath was released. Tension drained.

Chakotay gave her an appraising stare. "I want you to know that took twenty years off my life." His florid features transformed into concern. "What would you have done if they opened fire?"

"Hoped they left us a working weapons array." Janeway retook her seat, turning to face her first officer. "Nothing else would have proven our good intentions." She faced forward once more. "Mr. Paris, resume course for the station."

"Aye, Captain."

The Operations console was alight with transmissions.

Probably Riza and company...

Janeway motioned for Chakotay to handle it. During the next few hours, she had to persuade the Talaxians of their friendly intentions. It was a task that would require complete concentration. There was a great deal at stake now, and the tentative alliance with the Vaadwaur was a distraction she didn't need.

Janeway contacted the Mess Hall. "Mr. Neelix, we will be requiring your services as diplomatic liaison."

"Yes, Captain." Neelix sounded positively exuberant.

"Mr. Chakotay, you're with me." Her last order was met with a solemn nod.

Neelix ran a finger along the collar of his dress uniform. It was his best one, woven of replicated Arrithean silk with swatches of fuchsia, mauve, teal, and lemon. He'd designed it himself, but seldom wore it. As a result it wasn't quite broken in. In point of fact, it itched about the neck.

The turbolift was taking entirely too long to reach Deck 12. Maybe it was malfunctioning. Even on an advanced ship like this one, equipment broke down.

A glance to his right confirmed that his assistant looked similarly uncomfortable. Rayna Merris was bedecked in an official Starfleet dress uniform. The colors were dull, black and grey, not at all like the personality of the wearer. Unfortunately, the military seldom considered fashion when it came to uniform design. Her delicate features were closed, revealing nothing, but Neelix knew she was discontent with her present circumstances.

"I'm a spy, not a diplomat," she'd answered when he asked if she would accompany him to Beta-Talax.

"I know that," he'd responded, having anticipated her reluctance. *"However, these Talaxians have proven themselves to be full of surprises, what with the cloaking. I think having an empath along would give us a secret weapon of our own."*

Not having found an argument to counter his reasoning, Merris had grudgingly agreed.

He had expected reluctance. Merris did not go out of her way to associate with anyone save the captain and Commander Tuvok. She was polite to others, unfailingly so, but always maintained a certain distance from them as well. Even though they worked together every day, Neelix didn't feel especially close to Merris. There was something elusive about the woman. Just when you had her almost pinned down, she shifted and was gone.

Despite that, Neelix was slowly gaining understanding where his assistant was concerned. She felt things deeply, but masked them. In that way she had much in common with Mr. Tuvok. The resemblance ended there, however. Rayna's feelings often guided her actions, up to and including the savage protectiveness she felt for her friends. The Vaadwaur were supremely fortunate that she'd only killed one of their number. From what Bonneville had said, Merris was a deadly enemy to have. Her methods weren't subtle, but they were explosively swift.

Almost as swift as her flight from Naomi whenever the child made her presence known. The sour expression and dour demeanor didn't fool Neelix at all, not after the mouse incident. Any hope of purporting herself as a "child-hater" had been lost the moment Merris had urged them to spare the mouse; it was absolutely dispelled when she'd asked Paris to save it.

Neelix stole another look at her. She was right. The uniform just didn't suit her. Maybe he would speak to Captain Janeway about designing a new tunic, something cheerful, with a few splashes of color here and there. Lime-green, cherry, banana, maybe even a bit of orange...come to think of it, that sounded too much like a fruit salad, but the idea was sound. These lonely wanderers were desperately in need of cheer.

Maybe turbolift is stuck? We don't seem to be moving at all.

It is your perception that is skewed, not time.

That was probably the case. He was excited, and he had every right to be. Here were a group of his people, here amidst this graveyard of stars. Only a fool would not be excited, and he was no

fool. Plus, he would be of use again. Lately, all he'd been good for was cooking. During the battle with the Vaadwaur, he'd managed to keep Naomi safe, but had made no other contributions to victory. Afterward, there'd been no need for an ambassador. Captain Janeway rightfully handled all negotiations with Drall, and later with Riza and Geelon. It rankled, though. He owed this ship and crew so much. A few meals and jokes didn't seem to be sufficient repayment.

Merris ran her fingers over her uniform tunic, smoothing it...as if the garment had developed wrinkles during their ride. Maybe she was nervous as well. Certainly her duties on *Voyager* bore no resemblance to her previous employment. With a population less than a border outpost, and a gossip network that would rival the most sophisticated computer system, there was no need for a professional spy. Everyone knew everyone's business, and speculated on what they didn't know.

Peering narrowly downward, Neelix spotted the tiny tremors in Merris' fingers. Naomi had told him to look for them during one of their many conversations. She was a brilliant child and very observant.

The 'lift halted.

"Well," he said, breathing deeply, "here we go."

Cool, black eyes slid over to meet his, as placid and featureless as deep space. Merris swept her hand forward gallantly as if bidding him to precede her out. He bowed, playing along, and smiled at her. The ebony marbles softened.

Hard on the outside, mush on the inside...like a Tilusian marshmallow.

Waiting at the doorway was Captain Janeway. She was also in full dress. Auburn hair glistened beneath overhead lighting. Grey eyes smiled their welcome. "Mr. Neelix," the captain greeted.

Yes, she was still too thin. Her uniform practically hung from her dainty frame, like a great magenta drape. Obviously Janeway had not wished to waste the energy replicating one that fit. Changes were taking place, however. There were sparkles of joy in the human's bleak eyes. Fatigue no longer smothered them into oblivion. New color enlivened Janeway's face, giving it a healthy cast.

The grey eyes shifted to Merris, and lightened. "Crewman." Her terse acknowledgement belied the depth of emotion that was revealed in her gaze.

He'd first seen it when Janeway had come into the Mess Hall, just after Drall's murder and the horrific confessions that followed. He'd wanted to see Lex and Axion, but had turned back to repeat his gratitude at the hatchway. The captain was standing near Crewman Merris, so intent she didn't see his hesitation. On her face was the tiniest smile, like a first ray of sunshine after a moonless night. Merris hadn't noticed him either, miraculously. That one was half-again as perceptive as most beings, and three times as cagey. There had been a...transformation...in her closed features that night, a change of mood and feeling, not body or position. The two had

suddenly become almost intimate.

He'd retreated hastily, and never mentioned what he observed to another living soul.

Behind the captain stood Commanders Chakotay and Tuvok. The severe-looking Vulcan zeroed in on Merris. "You appear to have forgotten your star," he offered cryptically.

Neelix's confusion was dispelled when Tuvok pinned a gleaming golden starburst to Merris' dreary tunic. From her narrowed eyes, his assistant was not too pleased with this turn of events, but she said nothing.

"All right then." Captain Janeway spun about and began marching toward the airlock.

They all fell in place after her, and Neelix took the opportunity to whisper a question to Commander Chakotay. "What is that?"

"It's the Federation Star," he said. "They are rarely awarded." His broad features split into a wide grin. "If I had one, I'd wear it to bed."

His last statement was said somewhat loudly, and he directed a pointed stare at Merris, who ignored him as if he did not exist at all.

Tuvok, on the other hand, kept his silence, seeming to be utterly unaffected by his friend's displeasure.

They are an odd pair.

It had taken years before Neelix and Tuvok had reached détente. Theirs had been a long, cold war. He remembered the arguments as if they'd just occurred.

"You are becoming emotionally distraught. There is little point in furthering this discussion." The words had been uttered quietly, coolly.

Neelix wasn't fooled. *"I'll tell you who's being emotional. You. You hide it behind that Vulcan calm, but the truth is you're filled with contempt and sarcasm and I'm tired of being the target of all your hostility."*

They had come along way since then. Still, remembering their past made it difficult to understand the Vulcan's inexplicable affection for Merris.

A security detail waited at the airlock entrance. Axion and Lex were there as well, looking uncomfortable and frightened.

I hope they aren't punished too harshly.

Although he did not think he would have made the same choices, Neelix had been in enough bad

scrapes to understand their desperation. Clemency was in order, and if he was given the opportunity to speak, he would certainly ask for it. Besides, their actions, as awful as they were, probably saved the colony. Maybe they would be treated as heroes.

Everyone trooped in. The air lock hatchway closed behind them. The next one opened with a hiss.

Waiting on the other side were three Talaxians, two males and a female. They stood in a kind of triangular formation with two behind and one in front. The male in the foreground was a handsome fellow. His freckles were large and dark, quite comely, in fact. Neelix felt plain in comparison. Long, stiff whiskers jutted majestically out in all directions. There was an old myth that you could tell the size of a Talaxian's maleness from the length and stiffness of his whiskers. If that were so, this gentleman was truly blessed.

"I am Xexes," he announced, and gestured to his companions. "This is my daughter, Xandra," he swept one hand grandly toward the female.

Oh dear.

She was stunning. Neelix had to draw in a deep breath to keep from dropping his jaw to the cold, hard floor. Lovely flaxen tresses cascaded down her back in waves of gold. Her spots were symmetrical and even darker than Xexes'. Pale, almost colorless blue eyes regarded them all with great excitement.

Not realizing the effect his offspring had engendered, Xexes waved his other hand at the male. "And here is my second-in-command, Tiriex."

This one wasn't nearly so fortunate in his looks. Limp whiskers drooped, and were scarcely five centimeters long. He had no freckles whatsoever. Even his hair was dull and coarse looking.

From behind them came three more expatriates, dressed as guards. They all looked properly sinister. The prisoner transfer took place without further preamble. It was so very sad. Neelix said his goodbyes to Lex and Axion, promising to visit them as often as he was allowed.

Once finished, Captain Janeway introduced them all. Pleasantries were exchanged. Soon they were walking down the corridor of an old Kazon mother ship. Glyphs marred the walls every few meters, grim reminders of the brutal people who'd built this vessel. The lighting was a disconcerting green. It lent a sickly pall to the place and made Neelix uneasy. He didn't care for the Kazon. After what they'd done to Kes...

An ache overtook his core at the thought of his love. He missed her. One would think that time would have bandaged the wound, but it had not. Time was the enemy. As the seconds turned to minutes turned to years, Kes had grown up and their love had grown stale. Or perhaps they had simply grown apart. She was no longer the innocent girl who needed his wits and cleverness. He was no longer the amoral con artist.

Things were different. She was gone. So why was the hurt still the same?

There was the briefest brush against his hand. It jolted him from the prison of memory. His head jerked left and found Rayna Merris had passed him. Though she didn't look back, he knew that she had touched him of a purpose.

I see you, Neelix reckoned silently. Hiding your kindness beneath layers of cynicism will do you no good.

Their journey was not long, down a corridor, through a hatchway, turning port at the next intersection, and into a large room. It might have once been a ceremonial room. Centered was a huge circular table made of stone. There were numerous Kazon carvings atop it, but Neelix did not attempt to read them. Chairs from a different culture altogether surrounded it.

"Please, sit." Xexes beckoned. He took a seat, flanked by his daughter and aide.

They all did likewise.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Janeway began with courtesy, as was her habit. "It's nice to find a safe port."

Xexes beamed at her. "The Great Fire is deadly. You are fortunate to have traversed it with so little damage." His eyes drifted over to Neelix. "And you are a most welcome sight, Brother. We had lost hope in finding more of our kind."

"As had I," Neelix admitted. "Over the years I've encountered one or two Talaxians, but never a group like this. To have established a viable colony here is nothing short of a miracle." Inside, though, the wheels of his mind were turning ever faster.

He used the word, "Brother."

There had been a political party on Talax which used "Brother" and "Sister" to address members of their species. They were considered zealots by the old guard.

Humph. The most radical acts attributed to them were advocating that everyone learn the Old Tongue, and that we make teaching our myths and legends mandatory. If that makes a zealot, then a liter of anti-matter and a dilithium crystal make a warp engine.

It would be best if his suspicions were made public. Janeway need every scrap of information.

"You're a member of Dirixi-Ki," he observed, watching Xexes closely.

Delighted pleasure blossomed over the colony leader's face. "Indeed I am." He immediately volunteered the group's origins and political goals. "Which explains my familiarity with the 'foolish ones' who currently accompany you."

Neelix enlightened his companions about the organization.

When he finished, Xexes added reassuringly, "Please be not alarmed. We aren't xenophobic, just mindful of our own past."

Janeway and Chakotay took turns relaying *Voyager's* two encounters with the Vaadwaur. As they did so, Xexes' face became grave.

"You are as trusting as you are courageous," he said, thoughtfully.

His daughter spoke, and her voice was like tinkling of lead crystal, melodious and sweet. "If their race is faced with extinction, then they are desperate. We cannot rely upon their promises."

Ah, well, there was that. Neelix had, himself, felt great qualms about cozying up to the Vaadwaur. There was no use in arguing the point, however. Captain Janeway was too ethical to ever condemn her enemies to starvation and death. She said as much, now, to the Talaxian representatives.

After much discussion, Xexes agreed that *Voyager* would be responsible for the Vaadwaur's good behavior. "...for now," he added, then dismissed the topic for another. "How did you find your way into this space?"

What followed was a recitation of their trip through the Labyrinth, into a subspace tear, and out into the Land of the Dead. Xexes and company nodded politely and appeared mildly interested until Chakotay mentioned the space stations."

"Stations," Tiriex repeated incredulously. "We saw nothing more than the message and empty space."

"They're out of phase," Janeway explained. "We had to adjust our sensors to detect them, but there are two space stations. One at the entrance to this place, and another on the opposite end. We're hoping that is the exit."

Suddenly the welcoming committee was alive with excitement and speculation. "You mean, you think there is a way out," demanded Xandra. "You believe that it is a way back to the Delta Quadrant."

Janeway shook her head with regret. "We have no way of knowing if it is an exit and if so where it leads, but we believe that the stations were built by members of a guild that explored deep space."

Tuvok pulled up the message they'd received upon arrival in the Dead Zone. It played from his PADD with a tinny sound.

"By successfully navigating Phase One: Close Quarters Impulse Maneuvers, you are halfway to earning your place in the Surveyor's Guild. You are free of the Labyrinth. Your engines will be

restored in exactly seventy-two standard hours at which time you will commence Phase Two: Interstellar Cartography and Warp Navigation. It is strongly suggested that you use the time to recuperate from your journey."

When it finished, Janeway continued, "Based upon that transmission, we surmise that only those who passed a series of tests were allowed to become full-fledged members. It would make sense that if there was an entrance built, that an exit had been built as well."

Discussion ensued and eventually Xexes nodded. "Can you reach this station?" he asked, scarcely able to contain the excitement in his voice.

"I believe we can," Captain Janeway assured him. "Shall I have our sensor readings downloaded to your computer system?"

Ah, excellent.

Janeway had just segued into formal negotiations, and without so much as a flick of her red brows. Things progressed rapidly from that point. Shore leave was discussed and granted. Xexes and his people needed parts to repair some of their smaller craft. Those could be replicated.

Finally Janeway broached one of the more sensitive topics. "There is a shuttlecraft attached to this station. It's a Federation ship, from our home quadrant. We would like permission to examine it."

"We claim right of salvage," declared Tiriex. He did not appear hostile or uncooperative, simply committed to asserting colony claims.

Commander Chakotay glanced toward his superior, then said, "We understand, and acknowledge your right of ownership. Over the years, the Federation has lost many ships and this might help us solve a mystery or two."

Xexes and Tiriex whispered to one another. Neelix took the opportunity to glance at Merris. Her face was a mask, of course, but she was watching Xandra from beneath hooded eyes.

I wonder what she senses.

Neelix resolved to corner his assistant at the earliest opportunity.

At length, Xexes agreed to the request. "We use the transport technology on the shuttle to harvest ice from the planet, beaming it into space then collecting the ice crystals after it converts from steam back to solid form. That's what we use to water our crop of leola root." He hoisted himself upright and activated a small, circular display screen in the center of the table. A multicolored diagram of the make-shift station was displayed. "There," one stubby finger pointed to several cargo bays, "on this old Kazon junker. We set up hydroponic gardens in all three of these."

Ingenious.

His people were brilliant improvisers. It was a racial trait.

Discussions turned toward to this sector and any navigational hazards it might contain.

"Oh we have those in abundance," remarked Tiriex drolly. "Rogue moons, wander willy-nilly through here about once or twice a standard year. Not to mention a few asteroid belts, the plasma fire, and a black hole."

Those were bad. The captain requested that the star charts be uploaded to *Voyager*, and Xexes immediately agreed.

Seven will be pleased to have the additional data.

It had taken him many months to grow accustomed to the former Borg, but now she was very dear to him. When they'd first encountered the Vaadwaur, it had been Seven who had helped him uncover the truth about that race, and their dealings with others.

The meeting drew to a close. Captain Janeway said her farewells, but Neelix wasn't quite ready to leave just yet.

"Would it be acceptable for my assistant and I to get a tour?" he asked Xexes. It was an innocent request. If granted, they would get a look about. If denied, well, perhaps these Talaxians weren't so open as they wished to appear.

"Of course." Xexes grinned broadly. He motioned toward Xandra. "My daughter will escort you."

Neelix found himself flummoxed. This creature was so radiantly beautiful he could barely look at her.

Luckily cover came from Commander Tuvok who asked, "We encountered a sensor anomaly while in the blast ring."

He got no further. Already the Talaxians had gained an expression of alarm.

"Was it large?" asked Tiriex. "Several kilometers at least?"

"Yes," answered Janeway. Her face held a frown. "It was of a very dense alloy, almost like neutronium."

Xexes sucked in a lengthy breath and let it out slowly. "We have encountered it several times, but never came close enough to get good readings. It seems to favor larger vessels. Our freighters rarely encounter it. But," he reached up and patted the Kazon ship's bulkhead, "When we found this vessel and repaired it, that thing followed us all the way to the storm."

"It stays just out of range," Tiriex offered. His lifeless whiskers seemed to have straightened a bit, a sign that he was much upset by this discussion. "We have a few sightings recorded. Would you like us to transmit the data?"

"Please," answered Captain Janeway. "I'll get my staff to analyze it and then share our findings."

She is truly the perfect captain.

Neelix watched as Janeway, Chakotay, and Tuvok departed. He couldn't think of a better person to lead a crew. Turning, he saw that Merris' gaze lingered in that direction as well, likely centered on the captain. One corner of her sensual lips was upturned and her face held all the affection and wonder of a young boy looking at his first racing shuttle.

He looked away before she noticed him, feeling that he'd intruded on a private moment.

Xandra led the forth down another long, dark corridor. They passed through private quarters, and Neelix was delighted to see more of his people. He smiled and waved at them all. It was a joyous moment, made all the better by their gleeful responses to him.

Against his wiser senses, Neelix found himself thinking that everything was going to get better from here on out.

"Thanks for volunteering." Torres directed her statement to Marla Gilmore. She gave the woman a warm smile.

Blue-grey eyes spared her a warm glance. "No problem, Lieutenant." Gilmore returned her concentration to inventorying her repair kit. "I had to cancel my vacation in the Swiss Alps, and nix dinner with the Federation Council, but anything for the cause."

Torres snickered. "Well you could have taken shore leave, you know."

"I know. All that leola root...pies, cupcakes, roast leola root on a spit, pureed, diced, sliced and fried...how will I bear the deprivation." Sarcasm dribbled from Gilmore's words pooling in a puddle of sardonic humor that sent Torres into a brief spasm of laughter.

That was her thought as well. After docking with Beta-Talax yesterday, the colonists had opened up the station for crew visitation and recreation, and many had opted to take advantage of the liberty. There was a luncheon this afternoon, kind of a "meet and greet" between the Talaxians and *Voyager's* crew. Neelix had personally invited her to attend, but the thought of dining on leola root variations made her feel queasy.

Admit it. You didn't want to go alone.

She heaved a mental sigh. Leave it to her to hook up with a boyfriend who would rather fly

planetary surveys than take shore leave. That was unfair. If they'd been orbiting a friendly planet, Tom would have jumped at the chance to for a little vacation, but one ship was pretty much like another, just dirtier and clunkier. Like the Kazon junker masquerading as a space station...

That piece of forshak should have been scrapped years ago.

So she and Gilmore had rendezvoused in Transporter Room Two in preparation to board the mystery shuttlecraft, box shaped with a pointed nose, twin nacelles flanked the port and starboard sides. Carbon scoring had obliterated all markings, but the lines were unmistakable.

Definitely Federation.

Replicator rations were anted up as to which starship lost her. So far, the betting pool had the *Magellan* as the front runner. They'd found so much of that vessel scattered about, small wonder it was the odds-on favorite. If she recalled the reports correctly, all the shuttles were missing from their bays. But, just to be different, she'd dropped five replicator rations on it belonging to the *Excelsior*. She'd figured that would be the darkest horse. On the contrary, a couple of crewmen had bet on the *Cousteau*. That didn't make any sense whatsoever. For one thing, *Cousteau* had a Type 15 shuttle, which was shaped like a triangle. For another she was lost on a planet that was still very much in Alpha Quadrant.

Torres opened her own kit. Inventories were tedious, but necessary.

Superconducting flux degausser...check. It powered on with a pleasant-sounding hum.

Plasma torch...check. She didn't turn this one on, merely confirmed power levels.

Isolinear chip recorder...

The list continued automatically, and the rest of her mind wandered a bit.

Crewman Bonneville manned the transporter controls. He was average in about as many ways as a human could be average: brown hair and eyes, not especially tall or short. His age appeared to be somewhere in the mid-thirties; it was hard to judge. Smile lines testified to his good humor.

Torres had always liked him. Even back in the beginning, when the Maquis found Janeway's slavish devotion to protocol more hindrance than help, Bonneville had been a steady, unobtrusive presence. He stopped at all hatchways and let women through first, always had a good word to say, or he offered up nothing at all. His easy manner was endearing, even to her.

She closed her repair kit and glanced up to find that gentlemanly Crewman Bonneville was currently eying Gilmore's backside. Apparently feeling her regard, his eyes tracked over to hers and a bit of red colored his cheeks. Torres just grinned to herself.

Lately most of the crew had been paying favorable attention to the newly promoted ensign. She was no longer the "traitor from the Equinox." Her performance during the Vaadwaur battle had

earned her both respect and acceptance among the crew. Once Janeway reinstated her rank, it was a done deal; Gilmore was in.

They mounted the dais.

"Energize," Torres instructed.

Their glittering technological world disintegrated into particles and light...

...and reformed in an earlier time. The shuttlecraft was an old one, all right. Torres pulled her tricorder, peripherally noting that Gilmore had done the same. She alternately took in her surroundings and checked her readings. Despite its obvious age, it wasn't an early enough model to originate from the *Excelsior*.

Looks like it's going to be leola root for the next few days, BLT.

"Life support appears nominal." Ensign Gilmore began the standard recitation of status. "No damage to the hull that I can find."

Torres nodded. Her readings confirmed that. They put away their tricorders and moved to the two-seat cockpit area.

No dust.

Her expert gaze took in the system status display. Impulse engines were functional, but off line. What she saw next made her eyes widen with excitement. "I didn't know the old shuttles were manufactured with warp capability." She sat down with an excited plop. "Looks like this baby can do warp two, in a pinch."

Gilmore settled in the co-pilot's position. "The matter-antimatter mix is nominal, and dilithium decay is almost non-existent." Twinkling green eyes skimmed rapidly over the readouts. "They don't build them like this anymore. This is old school."

It was a nice moment. Torres smiled at her companion; Gilmore did the same. Then they both returned to work.

The computer was another matter. Many of its circuits were fried. Torres put in a call to Ensign Vorik and requested some replicated replacement parts. "Transponder ID is still down," she informed him, "but she looks like a Galileo-C-class, long range shuttle."

"There's a cargo bay extension." Gilmore patched her tricorder into the console, bringing up a schematic. She studied them for several seconds, "And here's a utility-rated transporter pad." Her long, slender finger pointed out another surprise.

Torres nodded and re-contacted engineering relaying the new information. "According to the Captain Janeway, the Talaxians have been using it to harvest water from planet."

"Smart," Gilmore remarked, frowning in admiration. Her blue eyes continued to study the tricorder. "There can't be many models with these features."

"True." The new parts arrived, and Torres moved aft to claim them. "Pull up the *Magellan's* manifest, if we have it. Did she have any of this type shuttle?"

After a brief pause, Gilmore nodded. "One, Class-C, modified Galileo, with warp capability and enhanced sensors was brought on board two years after the *Magellan* was commissioned, just before she was sent to survey the Badlands." Her green eyes narrowed and a frown pulled down the corner of her full lips. "It doesn't say why, but look at this," she brought up one of the sections of text, "it's an SI logo."

Starfleet Intelligence?

A growl issued from Torres' throat that she made no attempt to stifle. Why were there so many recurrences of that agency out here? First Merris, then Ayala, now this.

"Let me see that." She scrolled through the information displayed on Gilmore's tricorder at a furious pace. Not only was this shuttle equipped with a small warp drive and more powerful sensors, the *Magellan*, herself, had been retrofitted with enhanced magnetic scanners.

How strange...

There was no indication of her mission, but clearly the *Magellan* had been dispatched to investigate some sort of intense electromagnetic phenomenon. Realization crept over her, sending a chill to freeze her bloodstream and raise goose bumps on her flesh. "What if they knew about the displacement waves caused by the Caretaker's Array, and sent the *Magellan* to investigate?"

Gilmore's expression became grim. "That's certainly possible," she said thoughtfully. "But why would SI keep it secret? Once the *Magellan* disappeared, why wouldn't 'fleet Intelligence warn other vessels, set up a quarantine zone? It's been over fifty years."

"Who knows?" Torres grumped. "The Badlands is claimed by the Cardassians, maybe SI didn't want them traipsing through and expanding their territory or worse, taking over the Array and using it."

That caused Gilmore nod thoughtfully. "And they would have too, enslaving and killing along the way; then deporting the conquered to the Delta Quadrant. The Cardies aren't known for their kindness." Her world-weary gaze lowered to the deck as melancholy reflection overtook her. "Considering how things turned with the *Equinox*, there's no monopoly on cruelty. SI might have been right, for once. Secrecy is the best policy."

There was a time when Torres would have thought that all the *Equinox* survivors deserved to be spaced. Those days had passed, however. "We all fuck up, Gilmore." She patted the human's

shoulder and felt it tremble. "I certainly did. Just have a look at my Academy record: expelled in the first year. I was just lucky enough to end up on *Voyager*."

Eyes that glittered with a drop of amusement surrounded by an ocean of regret raised to meet hers. "Lucky?" Gilmore offered up a wry smile. "You call being stranded in a dead galaxy, surrounded by questionable allies and confronted by an unbelievably long journey 'lucky?'"

They shared another brief laugh. "Well," Torres admitted. "Everything is relative."

That was when she heard it: an incessant, high-pitched buzzing.

A glob fly?

"You've got to be kidding me." Torres growled.

Gilmore gave her a quizzical look. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Don't you hear that," B'Elanna demanded. "It's a fucking glob fly."

She stood up, eyes searching the shuttle for some sign of the creature. The sound was unmistakable. Found on Qo'noS, the bulbous-eyed pests fed on waste materials of all kinds. They were three times the size of a Terran housefly, with both a nasty bite and a vicious sting.

What is it doing here?

The last time she'd encountered one was during one of Chakotay's ridiculous vision quests. He'd told her she'd meet her animal guide. Instead she'd been besieged by glob flies that simply refused to die. Biting and stinging her, it felt like being attacked by a sand-blaster. The only way she'd escaped was dive into a creek and hold her breath. The cold water sensation roused her out of the trance. She'd almost whipped Chakotay's ass over that one.

There it was.

The four-centimeter creature hovered in front of the aft hatchway. All four wings beat so fast it was impossible to see more than a blur of motion. The stupid *Qovpatlh* shot right at her as if aiming between her eyes. Torres tried to grab it, but missed. It swept past her ear, sounding like an overloading phaser.

"Look out, Gilmore," Torres barked a warning. She spun around to give chase.

But Gilmore wasn't there. The shuttlecraft was, but it was vastly transformed. Torres found herself in a much older model, complete with seven identical, plasticized seats, primitive navigational radar and a laughably small sensor display. Gloom had settled on the place, dark and heavy like a storm cloud. The air crew crisp with cold. She stared about in disbelief. One of these old type F's was on display at the Starfleet Museum, located on academy grounds. She'd boarded it wondering how it was able to fly at all.

This was a perfect re-creation. Grey walls, black consoles and...a human male.

Shock made Torres blink twice before accepting what she saw.

From behind he seemed ancient. Hair as dreary and dull as the surrounding walls topped his head in a disheveled heap. A gold velour shirt bedecked his shoulders, but that was all Torres could see of him.

She approached gingerly, unsure of what her senses told her. It all seemed completely real, even the overly bland atmosphere, sanitized of all microorganisms and bereft of all odor.

The communications panel beeped, a mournful sound, like the opening notes of a funeral dirge.

"Matt, you'll be killed," someone's voice called. Distress colored it.

The man, if man he was, pressed a button on the panel. "I've been prepared for death ever since I..." his tenor voice cracked as an unseen army of emotion vanquished his vocal cords, "...ever since I killed my crew."

Drawing along side him, Torres found herself looking at a man in an antique Starfleet uniform. Piping on the sleeves pronounced him an officer, but she couldn't recall which. The old insignias hadn't been used in a century, at least.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

His head didn't so much as twitch in her direction. Watery grey eyes stared blankly ahead. They lacked focus and emotion, like this poor creature had been drained of his soul.

Drained of his soul?

She'd been around Chakotay too long. Torres balled her hands into fists. Whatever was going on here, she didn't like it. Fortunately there were few problems that couldn't be solved with the proper application of force.

She never got to strike. This mournful human reached up with trembling fingers and pressed another button on his antique console. A tiny cover opened, revealing an equally tiny viewscreen. Then his arm fell as if that effort alone had exhausted him.

The comm panel crackled to life again. "No one expects you to die for an error in judgment." This time the disembodied voice sounded desperate, almost grieving.

Torres shifted a little so she could have a look at the display. Framed in it was this...thing. Larger than a dozen starships, it look liked a huge maw filled with fire. Its tongue was flame; its teeth were embers. Larger and larger it loomed.

"Kahless' hand," B'Elanna muttered.

"The commander is responsible for the lives of his crew, and for their deaths." "Matt" sounded resigned to his fate and lost in it. No inflection tinged his tone with feeling. "Well, I should have died with mine."

The panel's speaker squawked once more, but the voice was different. "You cannot succeed, Commodore. Your only logical alternative is to return to the ship."

That's a Vulcan.

Having worked for so long with Vorik and Tuvok, it was impossible to mistake the cool, undisturbed rationality that underlay the words in a foundation firmer than bedrock.

Her eyes drifted over the pilot taking in his careworn features, the growth of whiskers, desperate clutching of empty hands.

And you, you were once a commodore...

Now, the fiery opening was much closer. Silent alarms flashed, warning of radiation danger.

"Matt. Matt, listen to me. You can't throw your life away like this." The unknown contact was even more upset now, and Torres sensed that he was pleading for a friend, not just a shipmate. "Matt, you're a starship commander. That makes you a valuable commodity."

But Matt did not answer. He merely stared forward into fire. There was a hollowness to his gaze that confirmed what Torres already sensed: something inside him had withered and died. The shell which remained was only going through motions.

More pleading came. "We need you, your experience, your judgment. Matt!"

The commodore reached out one last time and turned off the speaker. Silence reigned. Only the ship's hum was audible.

We're going to be swallowed.

Torres tried to manipulate the controls, but her hands passed through them as if clutching the wind.

Nothing existed but flame now. It burned angrily, almost greedily as they drew nearer. The shuttle's engines began to whine, louder and louder...

Until it became, once more, the annoying buzz of a glob fly.

And she was back with Marla Gilmore.

"Lieutenant?" Questioning green eyes were turned toward her. Blonde brows lowered with concern. "What just happened?"

B'Elanna let her eyes rove about her surroundings. She was back to reality, back to the Class-C, Galileo shuttlecraft. There was no gaping pit of fire. No half-mad looking commodore piloted the craft. No voices shouted warning or begged for clemency.

"Lieutenant?" Gilmore rose, approaching gingerly as if afraid of Torres' reaction.

Where do I begin?

"I don't know." It was the safest reply, and the truest. B'Elanna scoured her brain for a scientific explanation: a time displacement wave, temporal singularity, neurogenic energy...nothing fit. "Did you see anything unusual?" She studied Gilmore's face.

Asking a question before answering one bought her additional time, and right now, she desperately needed that time. Every second helped her encode the experience into memory.

I think I would rather forget.

No shit. Unfortunately a feeling of deep foreboding urged her to review what had transpired, to look for clues.

"Nothing, except you." Gilmore came close and gave Torres' shoulder a squeeze. "You started complaining about hearing a fly buzzing, and then you just stood stock still, like you'd been paralyzed or something." She returned to the console, speaking introspectively. "There was a temperature drop. Frost formed on the-" It was Gilmore's turn to imitate a statue. "-console," she finished. "Lieutenant, the screen's changed."

So had her tone. Torres noted the mystification that had crept into it. She quickly paced forward to have a look for herself. There, on the screen, was another logo; a black, malformed star on a field of white. Beneath were the words "Star Fleet Intelligence." A bland, maddeningly normal screen asked for an access code.

Gilmore essayed a few keystrokes, to no avail. The display refused to give up its secrets. "This is an older entry," she said absently, "way older than this shuttle. SI hasn't used this emblem for a long time. I remember seeing it in, "Federation Heraldry and Uniform Evolution." The other woman smiled somewhat sheepishly and looked up at Torres. "It was a non-credit course, but I took it anyway. If I hadn't gotten into the Academy, I was going into clothing design."

Both of her brows raised before B'Elanna could stop the reaction. While her natural curiosity led her to question the supremely strange juxtaposition of clothes-making and quantum physics, the circumstances wouldn't support such a trivial conversation.

Starfleet Intelligence...again.

She was more than sick of that agency. It appeared and disappeared at will, always annoyingly out of reach with its information. To crack this shit you had to be an agent.

B'Elanna smacked the back of Gilmore's seat. "Where's Merris?" she demanded. "Maybe she can make some headway."

"Delta Flyer to *Voyager*," Tom Paris gripped the joystick a little tighter, "we've penetrated the planet's atmosphere and are commencing our first pass."

"Acknowledged." Commander Tuvok's deep voice rumbled through the communications system like the distant thunder of an unseen storm.

The shuttle quivered as if in response, but it was only turbulence.

If your imagination keeps running along these lines, you're going to need an emergency dose of Captain Proton. Maybe "Captain Proton and the Day the Sky Caught Fire".

Around the shuttle, signs of entry burn had begun. Flames streaked past the aluminum windows. Sparks skittered about the hull. From a distance, the *Flyer* would look like a miniature comet, a column of fire against the backdrop of night.

Good thing we used tetraburnium alloy, or this would be a short ride, unimatrix shielding not withstanding.

"How are we looking, Harry?" he called over one shoulder.

"Atmospheric entry complete." His friend spoke in 'fleet shorthand. "All systems nominal."

"Right," Tom drew out the word, savoring the way it sounded.

It had been too long since he'd piloted the *Flyer*, way too long. Part of him longed for controls he could feel. Tapping the console screens on *Voyager* was impersonal, cold even. But here, the subtle shifts in his craft were transmitted to his palm, up his arm, making him feel bonded to her.

*Just not **too** bonded, eh. Remember Alice?*

Like he could forget. Melding his mind with that ship had almost cost him his sanity and his life. Yet, the feeling of oneness had been cloyingly addictive. Alice had shown him what he was born to do, and living without it left him empty inside. He'd never admitted that to anyone. It would probably get him a psych evaluation. The freedom of the experience, the exhilaration of flight, true flight, where he was the ship and the ship was him...that was something he missed.

He nosed the shuttle down. Clouds of rust-colored vapor gradually gave way to blue ones as their altitude lowered. They glowed faintly in the faint rays of the dwarf star. As a child he'd played

"guess what the cloud looks like" games with himself. There went one that looked like Santa Claus, flopped over hat and all. Another passed. This one was shaped like a big, twisted cone. Lying sideways and drifting in a straight line, it swallowed several cotton-ball clouds. For some reason it sent a chill down his neck. It transformed while he watched, looking more like a bowl of ice cream, and the uneasiness in his belly faded.

"Shouldn't hydrogen clouds be colorless?" he asked.

His question had been rhetorical, but Harry responded nonetheless. "There are traces of sulfur in them." Footsteps down the narrow center ramp preceded his friend's approach. "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Tom felt the weight of Harry's elbow settled on the back of his seat. "If you like piloting through cotton candy."

There was something he needed to replicate. He'd been saving holodeck time for weeks, hoping he and B'Elanna could sneak off to a drive-in movie or the simulation he'd created of an old time carnival. She'd probably never been to one of those.

Not many people have.

As a child, his father had taken him to *Turner and Thompson's Authentic Country Fair*. The smells of popcorn, hamburgers, and cotton candy had turned the air into a banquet of odors guaranteed to make you ravenous. For months he'd been working to recapture a fraction of the experience in a holo-simulation. All he needed now was cotton candy. Maybe he would take some his hard-won credits and make some.

B'Elanna will love it.

Yeah, his girlfriend had a sweet tooth. Anyone who ate banana pancakes and maple syrup wasn't afraid of a sugar rush. Too bad you couldn't get one from replicated confections.

The clouds parted and they got their first look at the surface.

Vast fields of grey "ice" lay motionless beneath their vessel. Here and there the planar surface was punctuated by jagged spears of rock, some several kilometers tall. Nothing moved except the heavy cloud cover.

This is too weird.

Water was supposed to be wet. On the Monean homeworld, the oceans had been vibrant, dynamic, teeming with plant and animal life.

And ice was supposed to be cold, like the pristine, white-blue floes of Antarctica. He glanced at the gauges and dials to his right. The exterior temperature was 321C, a furnace. Odder still, was that the water was fresh, no appreciable salinity. Even so, the heat made it non-potable.

Words slithered up from his subconscious, reciting themselves in spectral whisper.

*"Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink."*

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner...Times like these, Tom really wished he could lock the doors of his memory.

Harry seemed to sense his disquiet. "It's kind of creepy," he observed softly.

"Yeah." Paris shook off the returning unsettledness. "Where were the Talaxian's harvesting?"

"We should be coming up on it any time." His friend leaned around the seat's back, staring out the windows. "There." A single finger pointed slightly to port.

Large holes in the ice, perfectly round, pockmarked the area. They looked like inverted pimples from the air.

Tom guided the *Flyer* lower. "I see them." He circled about, ensuring that that the sensors could get a good reading on the craters. "How exactly did they manage it?"

"According to Xexes, the Federation shuttle had a working emergency transporter." Harry retreated to the Operations console. "They transferred it to one of the freighters and used it to beam chunks of ice into space."

Paris whistled softly. "I'll bet that was interesting. The water would have immediately exploded into steam."

"Yes, but it froze into a crystalline mist once it cooled. The Talaxians gathered up the ice in a ram scoop and let it thaw, then carried it to the space station."

"Right, so how did they avoid the hydrogen clouds and sulfur?" Tom found the whole process difficult to comprehend for some reason. Maybe that was because he was still hung up on the whole hot-ice thing.

"The water is plain, fresh water, according to them." Harry returned to the Ops station. "And our sensors confirm that."

"Which is how they watered themselves and their crops," Paris finished. "So much for not having a drop to drink..." He made one final pass and then moved their shuttle to another sector. Here the ice was bluer than grey. Though it was stupid, he found himself looking for fish suspended in the translucent solids. "Hey, Harry," he called. "Speaking of creepy, any more sign of that sensor ghost?"

For days, Ensign Kim had been obsessed with monitoring the scanners.

"Not since we entered the plasma storm." Harry's voice was distracted, but very, very serious.

Tom had learned not to tease him about "space monsters." A single, ill-timed wisecrack had caused the two of them to almost come to blows. In a twinkling, he'd realized that Harry was genuinely disturbed by the sensor contact. He'd asked Tuvok to mention it to the Talaxians, hoping they would offer a reassuring explanation.

They hadn't.

Neelix had questioned a few of the pilots, trying to get a little more information. Their tales hadn't been much more enlightening, just glimpses of strange objects, and unexplained power drains. Parts of the blast ring were considered forbidden owing to bizarre navigational anomalies that made long-range sensors go haywire.

Like the Bermuda Triangle of the Dead Zone...

With the additional information uploaded by Beta-Talax, Harry's obsession had been given new fuel. Every spare second was spent analyzing and comparing sensor logs as if Harry thought the specter would continue to pursue them.

Without warning, Paris' rebellious memory spat out another stanza from the old poem:

*"Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread."*

He shivered a little at the words, and immediately felt foolish.

You're spooking yourself, Tommy.

Pushing aside the inexplicable dread that suddenly flooded his psyche, Paris offered what he hoped was a comforting thought, "It probably got waylaid by the storm. That's why no one has encountered it outside the blast ring."

If it existed at all...

With all the radiation flying around out there, glitches were bound to happen.

On the other hand, nothing had been normal since they'd been pulled into this sector. Jellyfish-shaped space stations contained both metallic and organic compounds; the dead occasionally

recreated on the holodeck; every sector contained some sort of hazard to navigation. This place was a surveyor's dream, or his worst nightmare.

Paris altered course for the planet's dark side. They needed readings on night-time temperatures and atmospheric conditions. Gloom settled about them. No stars shone. No moon lit up the night. Beneath them lay more darkness. Only the shuttle's running lights provided illumination. Now and again, they reflected from a gleaming piece of rock or sparkled over the empty tundra.

"The planet is fundamentally uniform," Harry announced at last. "There aren't any great variations in the composition of rock or ice." Paris heard his friend coming down the ramp.

He dropped lower to skim along an ice floe, reveling in the smoothness of the *Flyer's* controls. If only he could have added dynametric tailfins. She'd really glide. Alas, Tuvok had no appreciation for the aesthetics of a hot rod. Looks were just as important as performance.

His reverie was broken when the off-key notes of a sensor alarm split the cabin's silence.

"What's going on?" Tom demanded. His flight instruments showed nothing dangerous.

"It's a distress call." There were chords of disbelief flavoring Harry's tenor. "Federation in origin." There was a minute pause. "Not *Voyager*."

Unbelievable.

"Can you home in on its origin?" Paris was already heading for orbit. Even if the call came from the surface, he could move faster out of atmosphere. Angle up, find the signal, angle down...lickity-split.

From behind he heard fingers tapping against the console. "Negative," Harry said. "It's too badly garbled."

"Terrific." Paris angled the *Flyer* upward. "See if *Voyager* is picking it up, and tell them that we're on our way home."

The planet fell away beneath them and Paris decided to follow the advice of the Ancient Mariner: he didn't look back.

Rayna passed a hand over her forehead, rubbing at the sore spot just above her brows. Her headache was getting worse. Coming here had been a supremely stupid idea. She'd said as much to Neelix, but he'd insisted she accompany him to this cursed luncheon.

"There will be recipes to be exchanged," he argued. *"It's part of our duties."*

Apparently no one else had volunteered to accompany him. Rayna knew for a fact that he'd

invited Torres, Paris, and Kim. Unfortunately they all were on duty. Seeing the clouds of loneliness dimming the sunshine of his eyes, she'd foolishly agreed.

Obviously your brain was damaged while in cold sleep.

So here she was. Trapped.

The cargo bay was relatively small when compared to *Voyager's*. Tables had been jammed in together, forming row upon row. Talaxians and a few, hapless, Starfleet personnel crowded around them, eating, drinking, and talking. Everyone was happy.

The Talaxians were a boisterous, joyful people, and their enthusiasm was transmitted faster than Quazulu VIII virus. *Voyager's* crewmen seemed swept up in the merriment.

Scads of welcome and torrents of good cheer rained from on high until the atmosphere was saturated with emotion. Added to the sensory overload were the outrageous colors the Talaxian's wore. Fuchsia, chartreuse, and neon blue competed with orange, magenta and yellow. If it were a symphony, the noise would be deafening. She'd thought Neelix's taste in costumes was born of poor taste. Not so. Apparently it was a cultural statement.

The only bright moment came from the wealth of uses they'd found for leola root. Rayna eagerly recorded recipes into a PADD for future reference. It was the only thing that preserved her sanity.

"Neelix!" The gleeful voice of Naomi Wildman heralded her arrival.

Oh no.

She'd hoped that Neelix was speaking hypothetically when he'd said that Naomi would like the colonists. Obviously, he wasn't for here the waif was.

It was the last dilithium crystal in a bad warp matrix. Rayna found her way to the cargo bay's exit as surreptitiously as possible. She was, quite frankly, of the opinion that all Talaxians suffered from an excess of personality. Clearly their love of vibrant colors was a warning to all species.

Young Ms. Wildman would add her own nova of feeling to the mix, and Rayna could stand no more of it. She slipped out the nearest exit, narrowly avoiding a collision with an unnamed colonist.

You're much out of practice.

Aye, that was true. Eight years in a sleep tube had passed in an instant, but had taken a toll on her ability to tolerate crowds.

Yet another weakness...Ray-ray. Soon you'll be of no use whatsoever.

Once in the corridor, Rayna drew in a deep lungful of relatively free air. Only a few colonists passed her by, and they were more intent on getting their meal, than lingering in the hallway.

This would be an excellent opportunity to have a look around.

It would, indeed.

Rayna decided to go for a stroll. Tours were all well and good, but they included only what the guides wished you to see. Not that she'd detected deception, no, Xandra and her father were exactly as they appeared. It had become more difficult to focus, though, what with Neelix's newfound attraction. The poor lamb was clearly smitten with Xandra. Fortunately for him, the feeling was at least partly reciprocated.

She pulled herself outward, taking in her surroundings. This hallway had fast become deserted, a fact that suited her. Her pulse was slowing; her respiration had become more normal. Perhaps her powers of observation would follow suit.

It was her first time on a Kazon vessel. The glyphs were attractive in a masculine way, and reminded her of Klingon. Likely this species was male dominant, like their Federation counterparts.

You don't have enough information to make such a judgment.

Though she's pulled up the records of *Voyager's* encounters with that species, she'd not had the opportunity to review them.

Pale green light shown down from above, and here and there, lighted grids in the floor made for a whitish counterpoint. Like the lower decks of *Voyager* this place reminded her of an Orion freighter, all dark and barren. She never thought to miss those cramped, smelly wrecks, but it seemed that one longed for the most peculiar things when stranded in another dimension.

I wonder if Kathryn would like to see the inside of one of them.

Her father had a fleet; his brother had two. It was doable should they make it back to Alpha Quadrant.

Have you gone mad? One minute you're positive she's going to dump you, and the next you're making irrational plans for the future?

Fanciful whims like that crossed her mind more often than not, of late. They were annoying. First of all, she and Kathryn were unlikely to remain a couple. Even if they did, visiting her family's ships was out of the question. No self-respecting smuggler would let the likes of Janeway within a hundred parsecs of his vessel. Plus, Uncle Hiril would pinch Kathryn's rounded ass within thirty seconds, and then Rayna would be forced to remove the offending limb...not good for familial relations at all.

Are you getting jealous?

The notion stopped her in her tracks. Jealous? Is that what this is, this anger at anyone pawing at Kathryn?

Rayna didn't think she'd ever experienced the like before. It was a new sensation. For several moments she envisioned a variety of men and women accosting Kathryn and found the semi-angry feeling in her bosom sprout into a vast weed of resentment.

Part of her relished the sensation. Deltans believed each new experience, for good or ill, was to be embraced on its own terms.

Not that torture was so easy to appreciate....

Part of her recoiled. Emotions were a handicap when it came to conducting business. They dulled your edge. More than that, they befouled your concentration, and hers had been abominable here lately.

Ever since the kiss....

That was a lie. It had started before then, when she'd first stood vigil over Janeway, holding back the demons of nightmare.

I wish Yetara had met her.

More foolishness. Rayna shook her head to clear away the clinging webs of sentiment. The past was useful only when it assisted in surviving the present. As for the rest, it was naught but mist.

Janeway set down her brush and rolled her head backward to loosen her neck. The muscles were complaining, but not because of tension. The last few hours had been quiet. That suited her. Lately, there'd been too much action, too many challenges. She stood, turning away from the canvas and facing the windows of her Ready Room.

Beta-Talax floated languidly near. Some of the crew were already taking advantage of the station, walking around new surroundings, hopefully making new friends. The Vaadwaur had been invited as well, once Xexes was absolutely certain they would be searched and unarmed. Geelon and some of the refugees were stretching their legs, but had eschewed attending the informal luncheon. She had as well. It wasn't a diplomatic function; those would come later. Right now all she wanted was a little peace and quiet, and had said so to Neelix. He'd understood, though very disappointed.

She retook her seat. This morning had dawned beneath the light of a red dwarf. Rayna's body was melded to hers. Sweat from their evening of passion had dried and only a pleasant warmth remained. Janeway had lain there, staring at her lover for several minutes, marveling at the

smoothness of her skin, drinking in the golden glow of her complexion. What a tangle of contradictions she was...this woman who had somehow awakened her heart. There was kindness and innocence beneath the jade exterior. Maybe the latter was only wistful thinking, but Janeway clung to it nonetheless. Rayna still kept the child inside her alive, if malnourished.

As if sensing her regard, her lover awoke, and they began a new round of lovemaking. The feelings of elation, of ecstasy buoyed her still, and moved her to paint for the first time in years.

Imperfect though it was, she could see the form of Rayna emerging, the rounded skull, high forehead and cheekbones, the rakish cant of the brow. Time would hopefully grant her leave to finish before too long. Not that she knew what to do with the painting when it was done. She just knew that she was, at long last, ready for change.

Laying the phantoms of the Equinox to rest had done more than ease her conscience; it freed something inside her. Just this morning, Janeway had taken down the pictures of Mark she had in her cabin, placed them inside drawers. She did the same with the one on the desk here. That phase of her life was over. A new one had begun.

Aren't you a little premature, old girl?

Maybe, but no matter what happened in the future, a line had been crossed inside her. There could be no going back to the woman she'd been for so long.

"Woman"...there was a word which was hardly accurate..."nun" was closer..."ghost" was painfully apropos. No matter. The Doctor had been right. What she'd been doing wasn't working.

She stared at the incomplete picture several minutes...long enough to fill in the blank spaces with color, if she'd bothered to pick up the brush.

The red sun passed by as *Voyager* continued its orbit. The scarlet rays seemed to fill her Ready Room, bouncing off the portrait, giving it life.

Too much life, it seemed, because the figure turned in the canvas to look at her. Below it, on the easel lay her estranged brown lizard, the spirit guide Chakotay had led her to. Dark eyes glinted at her. The little mouth let out a cry of...warning? She did not know. Her attention was arrested by the figure above. It was not Rayna, but it favored her. Pale brows shone silver against a golden forehead. There were more tiny wrinkles, like cobwebs around the eyes. Deep lines surrounded a mouth that had smiled enough to carve them. The eyes were black, like Rayna's, and filled with a knowing, penetrating look.

What the devil is going on?

Behind the strange woman, the background shifted, waves rose and fell along a glimmering shoreline. The water was grey, almost angry looking, but stunningly majestic. White birds soared above, and in the glare of a white star they were too brilliant to stare at for long.

"Who are you?" Janeway breathed her question. She could smell the salt spray, hear the rhythmic crash of the ocean.

"My name is unimportant," came the answer as if from a dream. "Call me 'Yetara' if you must call me anything at all."

Naked and graceful, the strange woman drew nearer as if she would step forth into Ready Room. She didn't. Dark eyes studied Janeway kindly, but intently. "You have a good heart," she pronounced after a moment, "and an old soul, perhaps older than your years."

Clouds gathered behind the woman. Lightning flashed.

Janeway felt the familiar tickle of fear in her belly, but she did not look away.

As if oblivious to the tempest behind her, the woman smiled, setting off a chain reaction of wrinkles across her aged face. "I have it on good authority that you're very intelligent, a definite plus when dealing with my granddaughter." Her brows scrunched down in mock seriousness. "I give her leave to like you."

The tempest raged; wind roared, sending sand whirling about.

Something's wrong.

Her imaginary lizard-friend abruptly scrambled to its feet and fled the easel. It disappeared through the closed hatchway leading to the Bridge.

The woman glanced backward at the storm then returned her gaze toward Janeway. "Time grows short. I will ask the wind to carry you to safe harbor."

What on earth is going on?

"Chakotay to Captain Janeway." Her commlink jangled to life. "We've picked up a distress call."

"On my way," she answered. Her footsteps carried her past the painting which was once more an incomplete portrait of Rayna.

Status lights on the Bridge announced yellow alert. Chakotay stood just behind the helmsman. With Lt. Paris was still out on planetary survey, the position was filled by Ensign Pablo Baytart. He was a fine pilot, running a close second to Tom in talent and skill.

"Report." Janeway took the command chair.

She noted that Tuvok was at his station. Another officer was manning operations. Farley was his name. The young ensign was a solid performer whose main claim to fame was having snored boisterously during one of the Doctor's lectures.

Chakotay took his place at her side. "The Delta Flyer reported picking up a Federation distress call. Moments later, we did too." At his nod, Tuvok played it. White noise and an electric whine filled the Bridge with discordant music. Then she heard it.

"...constellation..."

The sounds ceased and then repeated anew until Tuvok cut the audio.

Constellation...

The pattern was regular, lacking the natural inflections and rhythm of living words. "That's an automated beacon," Janeway reasoned. "Are you sure it's Federation?"

Her security chief nodded, but there was something in the tautness of his jaw that let Janeway know she wouldn't like what he said next. "It is using a frequency code that has been out of service for one hundred-five years."

Tuvok's information only stirred her thoughts into chaos.

Enough.

"Point of origin?" Janeway sat up straighter. The last time they'd answered a Federation call for help, things had taken a deadly turn.

You've learned from that mistake, Katie. Don't let the past become a prison.

It was Farley who answered. "Just outside this system." He squinted at his console. "I can't get a clear fix. There's some sort of dampening field being generated by the blast ring."

Dampening field?

She shot Chakotay a frown. He returned it, saying, "Those don't occur naturally."

"No they don't." Janeway gathered her thoughts. "Red Alert." Her order sent the klaxon into a wailing frenzy until someone killed the audio. "Mr. Baytart, set a course for the beacon, best speed. Mr. Farley," Janeway redirected her attention, "location of the *Delta Flyer*?"

"They're on a return vector."

She was unwilling to delay. "Have them rendezvous with us at the edge of this system. We'll investigate the source of the signal and then pick them up."

"Aye, Captain." Farley sent the transmission and confirmed its receipt.

Voyager's pitch and yaw altered with her course.

"Time to intercept?" Chakotay asked, anticipating her request.

"Fifty-two minutes." Bayart alternated his attention between the viewscreen and his controls.

Janeway took the time to mull over the information they currently possessed. "Constellation," she said aloud.

"If it's an automated beacon," Chakotay's thoughts mirrored her own. "It would transmit location coordinates, not star groups."

"That's right." She knew where he was going. Her mind had already followed that path of logic. "Which means 'constellation' isn't a reference to the surrounding area. It must be the name of the vessel."

Their eyes locked. Troubled understanding passed between them.

There had been only been two ships called "Constellation." One was a recent vessel dispatched to Deep Space Nine around the same time as *Voyager*. Before that...about a century ago...there had been another. She'd been lost battling a doomsday machine, a weapon designed to annihilate planets. Knowing about the battle was mandatory for all second year Academy students. They'd all studied the history. During summer vacation, her father took her to Rigel Colony to see the memorial. The vast machine floated eerily in space, dead as the worlds it had devoured. On it had been placed a plaque with the names of Commodore Matthew Brand Decker and the four hundred souls who'd lost their lives trying to destroy it.

For one hundred years, Starfleet had mourned the loss of that vessel, retiring the name out of respect for the dead.

If the current Constellation were lost, she wouldn't use an antiquated distress beacon.

Phantom snakes seemed to slither down her spine as if they chased after prey.

Janeway shook off the feelings of foreboding. Nothing precluded an old merchant-class vessel from taking the name. Or a subspace echo of the original beacon being replayed here. *Voyager* had once spoken to a Romulan ship some forty years in the past through a pin-hole in space. That tiny wormhole had collapsed, but it enabled communication across thousands of light years.

And four decades...

"I've patched our sensors into the main deflector, Captain," Operations reported. "It's boosted their output enough for us to lock on the beacon. There's a large asteroid near it," he paused, studying the readings, "or maybe a small moon, but there are no other planetary bodies."

"Could be a rogue," Chakotay suggested.

That was possible. The Talaxians had indicated these existed in this sector.

Commander Tuvok continued to feed out information. "The dampening field is growing stronger." His voice never lost its even tone. "I estimate that within 15.23 minutes we will be unable to communicate with the space station."

Chakotay frowned deeply and cast her a dark glance. "That's a powerful field, Tuvok. Any effect on our shields?"

"Negligible, however, the closer we approach, the greater its effect. I will alter the resonance frequency of the main deflector to offset it."

"The lead Vaadwaur ship is hailing us," Farley called out. "They would like to know what's happening."

Wouldn't we all.

"Tell them we've received a distress call and are going to investigate." Janeway didn't have time to bandy words. "They are ordered to hold position."

Farley quirked a half-grin before relaying her instructions. Obviously he felt much better with the Vaadwaur at a safe distance. Come to think of it, so did she. With their particle cannons deactivated, the warships wouldn't be of much use anyway.

"Long range sensors are picking up a ship." Tuvok's announcement sent a new surge of adrenaline coursing through her veins.

"Can we get a visual?" Chakotay queried.

His answer was a shift in viewscreen magnification. There, dangling in the night was a silvery shape.

"Magnify." Janeway's command caused the image to become larger.

It was a Federation starship, complete with nacelles and saucer. Whatever had happened to her, it had been devastating. Plasma leaked from holes in her hull like arterial blood. The bones of her structure were visible in places. One nacelle was crushed as if made of paper rather than ablative aluminum.

Janeway leaned forward and stared. "Can you identify her?"

The minute pause before Tuvok replied caused Janeway to turn and face him. "Yes, Captain." His voice was almost hushed. "NCC-1017, *USS Constellation*."

Impossible.

Before she could give voice to her objection, a disembodied voice filled the Bridge. "Captain's

log, stardate 4202.1. Exceptionally heavy subspace interference still prevents our contacting Starfleet to inform them of the destroyed solar systems we have encountered. We are now entering system L-374. Science Officer Masada reports the fourth planet seems to be breaking up. We are going to investigate."

Decker. She recognized the voice. His logs were part of historical archives now, and accessible by any student.

Abruptly, as if someone turned off a light switch, the starship disappeared. Behind it lay the opaque mist of the blast ring...only the particles were boiling as if some great beast were surfacing from an endless sea.

"They say there's no devil, Jim, but there is. Right out of hell, I saw it." The voice came not from a commlink, but from the very air around them. It reverberated through Janeway's brain, down her spine, chilling the marrow of her bones.

The fog parted. From its depths emerged a leviathan. Its mouth was easily 250 meters in diameter. Fire ringed it, spiraling backward into a pit of conflagration. The behemoth turned and its body trailed past, showing stark white on the sensor grid.

My God...

At least two kilometers in length, the machine would make twenty of *Voyager*.

"Where is it going?" Janeway directed her question to Tuvok.

"It is on an intercept course with the rogue moon. Power levels are rising."

It needs to eat.

Remembered history flooded her consciousness. These devices were thought to be self-sustaining. The planets they destroyed became fuel for their engines and weapons systems.

From the great maw came a beam of jaundiced light. It struck the moon full on turning rock into magma.

"Their weapon fires pure antiprotons." Tuvok's news came as no surprise.

Absolutely pure. That was the description used by Commodore Decker.

A chunk of rock the size of Indiana broke away it was immediately drawn into the thing's mouth.

"Energy levels are rising steadily." Operations added its readings into the fray. "It's getting stronger, Captain." Farley's voice was strained, barely containing his distress.

How long had it been out there?

There was no way to know. It was here now and the nearest system to this moon was home to several hundred Talaxians.

We have to warn them.

"Can we raise the colony?" Janeway already knew the answer. Tuvok's negative response did not jar her nerves. "What about the Delta Flyer?"

"Opening a channel."

The pinched faces of Lt. Paris and Ensign Kim were abruptly framed in the viewscreen.

"Captain," Paris acknowledged. "Is that what I think it is?"

His tone was awed and not a little anxious. Janeway couldn't blame him. It was how she was feeling, too, but this was no time to display it. "Tom, I need you and Harry to return to the colony. They need to evacuate. Transfer your sensor readings over to their computers, as confirmation of the threat. Lieutenant Torres is already there. You and Ensign Kim assist her." She cut off his protest with a sharp movement of her hand. "We have to engage the machine before it reaches full power."

"Captain-"

"That's an order, Lieutenant." Janeway closed communications before he could offer further protest. She fixed her eyes on the monstrosity that was down devouring chunks of lunar rock. "Power all weapons systems and stand ready."

The Bridge became a symphony of organized chaos. Information was relayed in short, economical sound bites.

"Weapons are online."

"Shields are at maximum."

"All phaser banks are fully charged. Torpedoes armed and ready, Captain." The last belonged to Tuvok. As always, his voice was dead calm.

"The ship doesn't appear to be aware of us," Farley called. "It's too busy...grazing."

Under other circumstances his word choice would have been funny. Janeway leaned toward Chakotay, and pulled up the database entry for the Doomsday Machine. "According to Kirk's report, he ordered the impulse engines on the *Constellation* set to overload." She frowned at the data. "The old Constitution-class cruisers had both a primary and an auxiliary reactor. That would produce an explosion in the 196 megaton range."

Chakotay leaned his chin into his hand, concentrating. "Photon torpedoes have a yield of approximately 25 isotons. If we could shoot four of them into its mouth, that would duplicate the explosive force."

"A gravimetric charge would increase it to 80 isotons," Farley offered.

Each isoton equals 2.6 megatons. Her thoughts entered slipstream. *We'd only need one.*

From behind them, Tuvok lent his input. "Photon torpedoes use a matter/antimatter mix. Starfleet records indicate that the *Constellation's* warp core was rendered inert by the planet killer's dampening field. It is unlikely they will be effective."

Damn it. Janeway gritted her teeth. Ramming a starship down its throat was not a viable option until every other avenue was exhausted. There had to be another way.

"What if we modified the torpedoes' shields?" In 2367, the Enterprise-D undertook a mission to save the collapsing star in the Kaelon II. She'd read Dr. Timicin's research treatise. He failed, ultimately, but his pioneering work proved that enhancing torpedo shields rendered them capable of surviving the heat of a star's interior. "The dampening field can't extend inside the structure, or it would drain its own power."

"Right," Chakotay agreed. "If we can shield the antimatter until it penetrates the aperture, the torpedoes ought to work."

"That is possible, but there is insufficient data to predict a probability of success." Tuvok offered no comfort.

Chakotay and she held one another's eyes for several moments, then he nodded. "It's worth a try, Commander. Work with Seven," he instructed.

Tuvok secured his station and made a b-line to the turbolift.

"How long until it reaches full power?" Janeway asked, setting her jaw and tightening her grip on the command chair.

Farley studied his readings. "If the present rate of increase continues...3.4 hours."

She opened a channel to Seven of Nine. "This is Janeway. You and Tuvok have one hour. Try to modify two torpedoes if you can." Closing the channel she said to Chakotay, "Once the torpedoes are finished, we'll do a strafing run with phasers, try to get it to leave the moon."

His brown eyes flashed understanding. "If we can keep it from reaching full strength, that gives us an advantage."

"Exactly." Janeway watched in growing dread as piece-by-piece the moon was disassembled.

"Once it breaks off, we come about, go straight at it and throw the photons," he finished. "That leaves us vulnerable to its antiproton weaponry and tractor beam."

"I know." *Voyager's* shields were formidable, especially since Seven had augmented them with Borg technology. Her engines were infinitely more powerful than those of the *Enterprise* era. Even so, they were going up against an awesome force.

She narrowed her eyes at the destructive tableau taking place. As always, the waiting was hardest.

The station was a buzzing hive of activity. Minutes ago, an alarm had sounded. Xexes' voice thundered over the loudspeaker, announcing that a credible threat to the station had been encountered. All non-essential personnel were instructed to report to quarters and remain there. An audible alarm began screeching immediately thereafter interspersed with, "Warning. Station separation begins in twenty minutes."

Rayna had found herself in a veritable stampede of sentients.

Most of whom, obviously are deaf.

She'd begun winding her way back to the cargo bay, hoping that Neelix and Naomi had remained at the luncheon. Instead, they'd come after her. Coordinating via commlink was difficult because of the incessant klaxon and Rayna was obliged to reroute things through the communicator embedded in her brain. It enabled her to hear well enough, but to reply she had to shout. They all met at an intersection beneath a Kazon glyph that had been painted over and now resembled the skeleton of a Terran swine.

According to Neelix, *Voyager* was moving to intercept the threat, and Beta-Talix's defense force had been scrambled. Lt. Torres had contacted him and left instructions to head toward the Federation Shuttle. They'd attempted to do so, but found the going difficult.

Talaxians sped through the hallways willy-nilly. Some were panicked to the point of hysteria; some were stunned into a disbelieving stupor. Rayna was forced to stop in mid-step to seek the cold stability of the wall. Her stomach threatened insurrection. It was difficult to breathe through the opaque cloud of emotions.

"Rayna?" Neelix touched her shoulder.

Her skull seemed to have absorbed the siren sound and transformed it into waves of pain.

"Brightly polished," she ground out through a clenched jaw.

"Indeed you are not," he countered emphatically.

Beside him, Naomi Wildman nodded her vigorous support.

I so despise children.

Fortunately her current state of queasiness precluded being rude.

The alarm silenced.

Thank the Maker.

She straightened just as another Talaxian flew by, crying, "Who's attacking us? Has anyone seen them?"

There's an answer we are all anxious to know.

Neelix voiced the same desire following it with. "I think the *Delta Flyer* has docked, but I couldn't hear over the din. I hope everyone is all right."

"As do I." Rayna finally swallowed her rising gorge. She gave Neelix a small nod to let him know that they could continue.

"The shuttle is further aft on the port side," Neelix supplied. "I made note of it during our tour. If we take the next two lefts and then a right..." He went on to discuss the various turns and twists required to reach it.

Rayna, also, had paid attention during the tour, but did not offer the information. She was content to let him prattle. His voice meandered in the background creating a soothing barrier of sound. Over their weeks together in the Mess Hall, she'd come to depend on his sing-song litany. The words, themselves, were unimportant. Just having him speak was familiar and comforting. Somehow, Neelix had become one of the rocks in the creek-bed of her consciousness and she found his presence as normal and natural as breath.

They rounded a corner.

"Paris, what the *tojo'Qa* is going on?" Torres' epithet reached Rayna's ears from somewhere further down. It was accompanied by the heavy pounding of rapid footsteps.

"Oh dear," Neelix opined. "That doesn't sound good at all."

They moved as one to the port side of the hallway. Torres bore down on them as if being chased by emissaries of the Klingon afterlife. Lieutenant Paris, and Ensigns Gilmore and Kim followed in her wake.

"It's a planet killer, B'Elanna. Like the one Kirk encountered." Paris was slightly out of breath.

"Planet killer?" Torres mouthed the words. "You say that like it should mean something to me."

She didn't complete the Academy.

Rayna's mind offered up that tidbit of gossip uninvited, but it was a sideshow event. Already her thoughts were rocketing forward at warp.

Planet-killer...

Those things were thought extinct, if such could actually die. The great machine that the *Enterprise* had encountered was a lumbering giant that ate planets like fruit. None had been seen in nigh a hundred years. They were a part of Federation history these days; Torres' ignorance was entirely understandable.

Before she could voice an answer, Paris had already begun one of his own. "It eats planets, B'Elanna, cuts them up and converts them to fuel. Starfleet believes it's some sort of doomsday device." His blue eyes snapped to meet Rayna's for an instant. "Janeway's ordered the station evacuated. She's going to try and destroy it."

Her bowels were transformed into wriggling snakes by his words, twisting and knotting themselves into a tangle.

"Destroy what?" The graveled voice of Captain Geelon ground its way from the opposite direction. Its speaker appeared in view moments later. His single, green eye glittered with wary curiosity.

Everyone stopped in a knot of bodies that clogged the entire corridor. Torres glared at the Vaadwaur leader, obviously reluctant to divulge any information.

There's no reason to keep it secret.

In point of fact, the thing is like as not to make its own self known e'er long.

"It is a weapon of unknown origin," Rayna began, and related a brief history.

Geelon grunted, a low, ominous sound. He stepped to one side and made contact with Riza.

Unfortunately Rayna couldn't hear what passed between them.

"We have to do something." Torres was pissed. Her white-knuckled fists were mute testament to her current state of tension. "We can't just abandon the captain."

Harry interceded, trying to be reasonable. "I don't like it any more than you do, but we have our orders. The best thing we can do is get the station mobilized as quickly as possible."

"He's right. You're wrong," Geelon pronounced, striding back over. His single green eye was placid as a becalmed sea.

"As if the judgment of a pathetic *maQDar* matters." Torres' eyes almost shot sparks.

Her Vaadwaur target, however, did not burst into flames. "I will gather those of us who are aboard and see to their departure. As you will certainly not acquiesce to my command, I will follow yours. Shall I have our ships form up with the Talaxian Defense Force?"

With a visible act of will, Torres calmed herself. "Yes. Do that." Her words sent Geelon quick-stepping back the way he'd come.

Suddenly Rayna found herself affixed with the woman's full attention. Something in her gaze had become speculative. "Merris, you're with me. There's something I want you to take a look at. Tom," her attention shifted, "there are a few crewmen on station. You and Harry round them up, and have them work with the Talaxians to expedite the evacuation process. If *Voyager* hasn't returned by then, billet them onboard whatever ships are available, but keep track of where they're posted. Once you're finished, meet us at the shuttle. Neelix," another shift of focus, "take Naomi and attach yourself to Xexes like you've been carbon-bonded to his backside. I'm going to coordinate with the Talaxians through you."

Command has become easier for her. Rayna had little time to examine the thought.

"Yes, Ma'am." Neelix performed a credible salute, grabbed Naomi by the hand and strode down the hallway calling to the nearest Talaxian he saw, "Is Xexes on the Bridge of this section or the other?"

The child turned about long enough to wave at Rayna, and being trapped by habitual courtesy, Rayna returned the gesture.

"You two," Torres jerked her head at Rayna and Gilmore, "come with me." She turned on heel and retreated.

There was scarce time for Ensign Gilmore to throw her a quizzical glance before they both fell in step behind the fast moving woman. They did not slow until the hatchway of the mystery shuttlecraft closed behind them.

Torres wasted no breath in speaking. She punched buttons on the nearest console as if attacking them, and brought up a Federation database entry. Displayed there was a somewhat familiar symbol, starkly black against a plain-white background. Dark letters formed a semi-circular border identifying as "Star Fleet Intelligence."

Two words, "star" "fleet." That nomenclature changed decades ago. Starfleet is one word now, one unit.

"This entry is encrypted. We found it by accident while trying to identify this craft." Torres folded impatient arms over her chest.

Rayna continued to stare at the emblem. It was a black, five-pointed star with the topmost point elongated. A white field filled with ebony stars glimmered behind it.

"This is old," she murmured and tapped the screen. A plain scroll of letters demanded an omega-level access code. "SI hasn't used that logo in over seventy-five years."

Which was fortunate, really...it meant that she might be able to figure out the codes; they were born of a simpler time and technology. Rayna tried several, to no avail.

Piss.

Then she remembered her ethereal encounter in the turbolift. The man depicted...his uniform...the style of it was from another century...as was the planet killer...

From the murky depths of memory arose one of the first lessons she'd received after joining SI.

"The agents of 'fleet Intelligence are charged with protecting the Federation from all threats, alien and domestic. To that end we have developed a rating system which evaluates the relative danger posed. Each category will require progressively higher clearance to access."

Like shards of pottery, the pieces began to fit into one another, taking shape. The ghostly encounter with its melodramatic warning...the age of the uniform...the planet killer...this archive...all from the same era.

Rayna tapped the screen a final time, and said, "E-Level threats use a universal algorithm for their encryption." Her fingers entered the security code, and the entire screen transformed.

"E-Level?" questioned Gilmore.

"Extinction," Rayna replied. The word was as self-explanatory as it was final.

A depiction of the original machine splayed itself across the length of the display. It looked more like a misshapen toy than a means of Armageddon.

Appearances are often deceiving.

Beneath it were a nigh-endless array of facts, including the names of planets, vessels, and commanders.

Torres' face had gained an introspective cast. "Matthew Decker," she muttered, "Matt..."

The name means something to her.

But the face depicted next to it meant something to Rayna. Her ghostly specter now had an identity. Though she would have liked to delve into it, here and now was neither the place nor time.

They read on.

"Doomsday Machine, The

Origin: Unknown;

Hull composition: Neutronium plating over a diburnium-osmium alloy

Weapons system: Antiproton Beam Convergence, slicing intensity, non-pulsing

Propulsion: Conversion Warp Drive, theoretical maximum unknown

Authorized Response Level: X, prior authorization not required

Supplemental Information, command level, Omega-Epsilon clearance."

Torres remarked, "I suppose 'Response Level X' is some sort of code for how far you can go to destroy it."

Rayna admitted to a growing respect for this woman, hotheaded though she was. "Oh yes. It is named after Malcolm X, a human reported to have coined the phrase, 'by any means necessary'."

Two sets of eyes fluttered upward to meet Rayna's.

"Can you access the supplemental information?"

Torres question caused Rayna to enter in a second set of decryption codes. The screen brought up an Intelligence log with blueprints attached, apparently depicting the planet killer's interior. Reading quickly, she said, "SI did an extensive examination of the original vessel prior to its being converted into a memorial."

The new data apparently pleased Torres and Gilmore to no end; both of them leaned over and began studying the summary report. Rayna, on the other hand, felt only a deep, abiding fear. Somewhere, out of reach, Kathryn was preparing to take on this monstrosity. She knew her lover too well to believe that it would be a battle to anything but death, and this horror had been constructed for no other purpose than to kill.

Nor was reassurance forthcoming.

"Stardate: 5703.5. Admiral N'galla reporting." The surname labeled the recorder as an Andorian. "After extensive study of the planet-killer's wreckage, we have reached several unsettling conclusions:

First: The victory achieved by Captain James Kirk is inexplicable in light of the relative differences in size between the weakened starship, Constellation, and the planet killer. An explosion of approximately 200 megatons should have had no appreciable impact on the energy conversion process.

Second: Our attempts to repeat this outcome in a simulated computer environment and have resulted in failure. Therefore we must conclude that Kirk's defeat of the planet killer was for want of a better term, a fluke."

"Son of a cave sloth," Torres muttered hotly. She spun on Rayna. "Are these files available on *Voyager*?"

And how in Sul's name would I be aware of this?

Common sense overrode sarcasm and prevented Rayna from uttering her scathing comeback. "I don't know, Lieutenant," she replied simply. "If they were, then the moment ship's sensors picked up the doomsday machine, a coded message should have been sent to Captain Janeway."

"Neelix to Lieutenant Torres."

Slapping her chest hard enough to shatter steel, Torres answered, "Go ahead."

"Colony sensors report two of the Vaadwaur vessels leaving station orbit. Their trajectory exactly matches the one *Voyager* took. Captain Geelon was taken aboard one of them. The other is under the command of Captain Riza. Xexes has dispatched one of the Defense Force cruisers to follow."

How Torres stifled the curses that surely rose to her lips, Rayna could not say. Fury turned brown eyes black as if an inner fire charred them. Finally, "Understood," Torres sent a clipped reply, then redirected her communications. "Torres to Kim. Report to the *Delta Flyer*. We'll meet you there. Lieutenant Paris, stay here and continue coordinating the evacuation."

Two "ayes" responded; one excited and tense; the other angry and frustrated.

"Give me your PADD." Torres pointed to Rayna's collection of recipes.

After receiving it, she downloaded the Intelligence report on the planet killer and all accompanying appendices. "Merris," Torres handed the device back, "finish this report and be prepared to conduct an in-flight briefing."

They sprinted down chaotic corridors to reach the *Flyer*. Kim was waiting for them. "Separation of the station sections is about to begin," he advised. "According to Xandra, the two vessels should be mobile in a little over an hour."

Everyone piled into the airlock that separated them from the waiting shuttle.

"Why so long?" Gilmore asked bluntly.

"The main engines have to be prepped and warmed." Kim settled in the pilot's seat. He began a quick, but thorough pre-flight check. "For the last year they've only fired docking thrusters to maintain orbit."

"Right." The clipped response of Lt. Torres left little doubt as to her opinion on Talaxian preparations.

Minutes later they were speeding away from Beta-Talax. "The Vaadwaur have a substantial head start," Kim said.

"Then step on it." Torres glared at the forward windows as if her will could add additional speed to the craft.

She even acts like a captain....next she'll be demanding an additional two million kilometers from the sensor array.

"It isn't here." Gilmore's unheralded statement took them by surprise. Rayna had almost forgotten about the other woman. Now, blue eyes rounded on them all, finally intersecting Rayna's. "The entry on the doomsday machine, it isn't in our database."

The curses that Torres had thus far thwarted finally were given voice. Once again, Rayna was forced to admit a smidgeon of envy at the hybrid's prowess and creativity.

Not there...

Its absence from the *Flyer's* computer was troubling.

Why wouldn't it be there?

Her question went unanswered. There were a variety of reasons that an intelligence report was scrapped; age, obsolescence, inaccuracy were among myriad justifications. What it meant, though, was that Kathryn was operating with only partial information, thinking an explosion within the vessel's forward aperture was sufficient to neutralize it.

"What entry?"

Harry Kim's baffled inquiry prompted Gilmore to relate a synopsis of recent events.

"So Captain Janeway doesn't know." His youthful face was occluded by doubt and worry.

"It seems doubtful," said Torres.

Though his features remained drawn and grave, Kim attempted to be reassuring. "*Voyager* has the most sophisticated arsenal in the Delta Quadrant. She's been retrofitted with Borg technology. There's no way 'fleet Intelligence could even begin to estimate her capabilities." He returned dark eyes forward. "It'll be okay. What Kirk managed by accident, Captain Janeway will replicate on purpose."

"Well," Torres grouched from a nearby seat, "ramming *Voyager* down its throat might be more effective than a broke-down *Constitution*-class starship, but there's no guarantee of success, and the end result is: no *Voyager*."

Hmph.

Rayna gave herself a silent, derisive snort. There was truth in those words, more than Torres realized. Kathryn would order all hands to abandon ship, and guide her craft into the thing's mouth herself. Any other course of action would be deemed "unacceptable." The realization gave birth to a panic almost as overwhelming as the terror of being trapped, and caused the hourglass in her brain to turn over and count down.

She pushed aside her worry, or attempted to, and used the next several minutes to read the scads of data scrolling up her PADD. It was a pale distraction when set against her hammering pulse and racing emotions, but it was all she had. Concern for Kathryn's safety threatened to devour her reason.

Coolness and control, Ray-ray, her father's voice reminded.

To save Kathryn, she had to be clear-headed. This was business. She let her mind become mired in the planet killer's blueprints.

They cleared the planetary system and moved to warp.

"All right." Torres spun her seat around. "SI had to have developed some plan of action for this. Let's have it." Her tone was hard as neutridium.

It had been many years since she had delivered a briefing, in-flight or no. Punching up the schematics on the console nearest her position, Rayna pointed to a small, round indentation at the very tip of the planet killer's tail. "This is a hatchway that leads to a crawlspace, probably used by maintenance personnel to service the construct prior to activation. It provides access to critical systems, including guidance, engineering, and the central power grid." She looked away from the neat and tidy drawing.

"Why do I hear 'bad news' coming?" Kim twisted around to give her a doubtful glower.

Like everyone else in this crew, the young ensign was no intellectual slouch. Rayna inclined her head to acknowledge his perception. "The passage contains a series of scanners, probably designed to detect incursion. That is conjecture, however. Most of the interior was destroyed and none of the systems were functional. We don't really know what lies down that shaft or whether it can be accessed at all once the vessel is operational."

Kim whistled; a long, low, tuneless sound. Rayna observed him and Torres trade speaking looks. "I still can't raise the ship," he confirmed. "The dampening field has gotten stronger than it was when Tom and I were out here last time."

This was a torment worse than any Cardassian ever imagined. To know the danger Kathryn faced and to be unable to deliver either rescue or warning was purest agony.

Enough. If she dies, you do not have to live but a few moments longer. Nothing holds you here,

save her.

Ah. That was a comforting fact. As it had during her captivity, the notion of a quick, final escape brought peace. Rayna breathed out as much of her tension as would fit through her nostrils and returned to her study.

"Modified torpedoes are loaded, Captain," Chakotay reported. He checked the small display near his command chair. "Commander Tuvok is on Turbolift 1 in route to the Bridge."

"Very well," Janeway answered curtly. Her face was drawn, every muscle in her jaw tight to the point of snapping.

He doubted that his face looked much better. Muscles in his back were tight enough to pulverize his spine.

I really hate this part, the anticipation, the uncertainty...so much depends on what happens here, today.

A whoosh of air from aft foretold the arrival to Tuvok. The security chief swiftly relieved his replacement.

All eyes moved forward to the horror of destruction that was still unfolding. The moon was half devoured. Small bits of it had begun to impact their shields, reminding him of hail. Each contact was marked by a shower of golden sparks. It might have been pretty on another day.

"Take us in, Mr. Baytart," the captain ordered. "Full impulse. Mr. Tuvok, deflectors at maximum."

Chakotay did his best to look collected and confident. What he felt was light years from that. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Janeway's hands grip the arms of her seat. Small knuckles turned bone-white. A growl to port caused him to snap his head left. His jaguar stalked past. Its hackles were raised and a low growl in its throat warned of danger. He hoped its presence was a good sign.

Walk us through this, my friend, he asked with reverence. *Walk us through this.*

They were getting close, but the planet killer seemed oblivious. It continued to eat as if nothing else mattered.

We have to get its attention.

"Ready phasers," he instructed.

"Phasers locked." Tuvok betrayed neither worry nor fear.

The final order came from Janeway. "Fire."

Forward banks streamed forth golden light. It was lovely in color, and deadly in power. *Voyager's* weapons had cut a swath across the Delta Quadrant. Yet, Chakotay watched in stunned disbelief as the bolts hit the construct's hull point blank, and left not so much as a scorch mark. They finished the pass, firing aft phasers for good measure. Ahead loomed the heavy clouds that marked the blast ring's edge.

Tuvok began a dispassionate commentary. "The vessel is breaking away from the moon and giving pursuit, Captain."

"Ready torpedoes," Janeway instructed. "Bring us about."

It begins.

He set his jaw.

The view shifted from stellar fog to the fiery mouth of hell. It just kept getting bigger.

"Sensors are detecting a rise in energy, Captain," Tuvok announced.

"Reinforce the forward shields." Chakotay knew the drill. It was his job to handle the logistics while Janeway set the strategy.

His order came but an instant before the dragon spat fire. The antiproton beam slammed into *Voyager* with the impact of a falling star. It set the protective field of energy alight with purple-white flame.

"Forward shields down 13%." Tuvok's information flow continued unchecked.

"Return fire, all banks."

Janeway's order was pointless. He knew it as surely as she did, but he also knew the psychological value of fighting the good fight. The crew would take heart from that and be strengthened by the action.

Voyager's formidable arsenal responded with a lethal barrage of energy.

"Six thousand kilometers," Lieutenant Baytart called. "Fifty-five hundred."

"Steady." Janeway's granite tone anchored the Bridge. "Maintain phaser fire."

Tuvok reacted without question, and the weapons' arrays sang out once again.

And still the monster spewed vitriol. Unlike conventional weapons, the antiproton beam was

designed to cut, not blast. There was no let up. It pounded relentlessly against them rendering it impossible to see beyond the impact stream.

I don't want to see where we are going, anyway, Chakotay decided. He focused his attention on the situation display beside his command chair. They were losing power.

"Shields are holding, but down 28%." A growing hum in the Bridge caused Tuvok to voice his report louder than usual.

Chakotay sprang into action. "Engineering. Reroute auxiliary power to the forward shields." Tension put a razor's edge on his tone.

"Acknowledged," Vorik replied, his Vulcan equanimity very much intact.

The helm continued the countdown. "Four thousand kilometers."

"Lock torpedoes." Janeway leaned forward glaring into the main viewer. "We have to wait until it ceases fire to launch or the torpedoes will explode once they pass our shield wall."

"Shields down 35%." The strain on their main deflector was so great that the ship had begun to whine. Tuvok was shouting now. "We are losing impulse power."

Chakotay contacted Engineering, but they were already on it.

"Impulse power down 16%. The warp drive is offline. Two hours to restart." This time it was Lt. Carey who reported in. Tension transmitted itself across the commlink. "Structural integrity fields are holding. We're pulling power from all available systems."

Janeway gave a tight nod, her gaze never wavered. "Tell them to pull from life support. Scrape ions from the showers if they have to."

He grinned at that, feeling not a little mad at finding humor while in dire straits. Stealing from the ion showers had become running joke between them. On the other hand it was also an indication that things were about to get ugly. Chakotay relayed her instructions, and turned his attention back to his console. They were continuing to lose power, not just from the shield grid. The dampening field was taking its toll.

Tuvok's solemn litany came as no surprise. "Shields down 47%."

"We can't take much more of this." Chakotay's quiet statement earned him a quick look of comprehension from his captain.

Suddenly the viewscreen cleared.

"What's happening?" Janeway demanded.

They began to accelerate toward the pit of flame. Nuclear fire glowed a baleful orange and promised a painful death.

"The weapon has ceased to fire," Tuvok answered. "We are caught in a tractor beam."

Baytart's countdown kept pace with them. "Three thousand kilometers. Twenty-five hundred."

"Fire torpedoes." The captain's order rang out like the crack of doom...or hope.

Twin sunbursts shot from beneath the saucer. They flew into the vortex of energy and were drawn into the maw.

"Get us out of here," Janeway commanded. "Hard to port. Full power."

Voyager shuddered as she struggled to free herself. Plasma conduits in the overhead burst, filling the air with sparks of electricity. The Operations console vented smoke. Alarms sounded.

Tuvok's voice rang out over the din. "Torpedo impact in 5, 4, 3, 2, impact."

They all cast hopeful eyes at the viewscreen.

And saw only fire. There were no explosions, antimatter bursts, no change in the inexorable pull of the tractor beam.

Lieutenant Farley told the dismal news. "Torpedoes ineffective. They must have been nullified by the dampening field."

"Damn it," Janeway hissed, too quietly to be heard by the rest of the crew. She immediately recovered. "Hit it with everything we have."

Phaser blasts and photons launched from the ship in a cacophony of violence, but had no visible effect.

All the while the planet killer drew closer. "We need more power!" Chakotay called to Engineering.

The answer did not please him. "We've transferred every last deciwatt." Carey could scarcely make himself heard over the roar of the engines. "The impulse reactors are overheating. If we don't shut them down, they'll go critical."

"If we do shut them down, we're dead," he replied. "Fire the starboard thrusters."

The beast's jaws seemed to open wide.

Sensor alarms sounded.

Tuvok, still managing to seem unphased, reported, "Two vessels on fast approach." There was a miniscule pause. "Vaadwaur."

"Maintain fire." Janeway turned worried eyes toward Chakotay. "Just what we need," she said.

He echoed her sentiments.

Farley's next announcement floored them. "The Vaadwaur ships are opening fire."

What?

Chakotay smashed his fist into the seat's arm. "We deactivated their weapons."

Captain Janeway seemed similarly mystified, but there was no time to be concerned about it. The entire viewscreen was filled by the planet killer's mouth, an endless abyss, burning.

"They appear to be attacking the planet killer." Commander Tuvok still had to shout to make himself heard.

The ship quavered a final time.

Suddenly, the tableau shifted; the fiery chasm moved away.

"We have been released," Tuvok said. There may have been a hint of relief behind his words. Chakotay thought he heard on, in any case. "The machine is pursuing the two Vaadwaur ships."

Janeway recovered almost immediately. "Open a channel to them. *Voyager* to assisting vessels."

Operations obeyed and the Bridge was filled with comm-chatter.

"Stand by *Voyager*. Riza, come round to mark three two seven." The unmistakable grit of Captain Geelon grated across their speakers.

"Mark three two seven, aye," Riza answered. His burring basso displayed no excitement.

Neither did Geelon. "Break to starboard on my mark. Mark." Suddenly one ship sped left, the other right. Between them the great machine churned forward, seemed to hesitate, then broke off pursuit. It altered course toward the remnants of the moon.

Farley called for their attention. "Captain. There's a Talaxian cruiser coming in. She's hailing us."

"*Rixad* to *Voyager*." The Talaxian was somewhat pinch-faced; his voice was pitched higher than most. "We followed the two rogue vessels in hopes of being of assistance." Silvery, almost colorless eyes twinkled in greeting. "Fortunately, their intentions appear to be benevolent."

Astonishment mingled with surprise crossed Janeway's somber features. "Thank you."

The words had only just left her mouth when Operations broke in, "The *Delta Flyer* just arrived and is making contact."

From the deep frown on Janeway's face, Chakotay knew she was displeased by this. When she gave orders, she expected them to be obeyed.

"Captain." Ensign Kim wasted no time. His youthful face was older seeming, filled with stress and care. "The Vaadwaur ships left without warning. We thought it best to give chase."

Some of the displeasure fled from Janeway's expression. "I appreciate the effort. What is the status of the evacuation?"

Torres leaned into view. "Lieutenant Paris is in command. I've assigned Neelix to coordinate with the Talaxians."

"Have everyone form up at a safe distance from the planet killer." Whatever else Janeway might have said was interrupted when Farley said, "Captain Geelon has returned our hail."

The Vaadwaur's grizzled visage appeared on the display. "Commodore," he greeted with the barest hint of a grin. "We received your distress call."

Confusion overtook Janeway's features. She managed a tight smile and said, "We're grateful for the assistance, but we never sent a distress call."

Her emotion was mirrored on Geelon's worn features. "Indeed? It was badly degraded. In fact we could only understand one word in it, '*Voyager*'."

Cold fingers played down Chakotay's spine as if invisible hands plucked a keyboard. His jaguar appeared beside him, sat upon its haunches and smiled.

The Briefing Room was packed. Janeway moved past the chairs to take her seat at the head of the table. In addition to *Voyager's* senior staff, Mr. Xexes, Captains Geelon and Riza, along with Ensign Gilmore and Crewman Merris were in attendance. Lieutenant Paris was also present, having hitched a ride aboard Xexes' shuttle. The evacuation was complete, albeit with a few hitches. Those would be discussed soon enough. She let her gazes slip over each face without pause. It wasn't easy to pretend that she had no personal connection with Rayna, but it was necessary.

"You all knew why we're here," she began without preamble. A display at her starboard showed the planet killer demolishing the last chunks of what had once been a moon. "In approximately 17 minutes, this thing will turn its attention toward the nearest planetary system. Provided the rate of consumption remains constant, it will destroy and absorb the outermost planet in 5.5 standard hours." Her gaze flickered over every attendee, but lingered for an extra fraction upon

the closed features of her lover.

Rayna appeared to be utterly unaffected by the current situation. Black eyes studied the display screen with cool aplomb, but beneath the placid exterior, Janeway sensed a boiling hotbed of disquiet.

Raising his hand politely, Xexes began, "Station separation was completed without incident, but we have a problem with the warp drive of the *Brexaltis*, the old Kazon destroyer. Our engineers are working on it, but the best estimate for completion is 12 hours. We have dispatched two cruisers to assist you. The rest are on stand-by with near the *Brexaltis*."

Janeway nodded. She'd already instructed Lt. Carey to take a repair team and assist. After relating that information to the assembly, she continued, "That vessel contains the hydroponic gardens needed to feed the citizens of Beta-Talax. Abandoning it is not an option."

"Does she have impulse power?" Torres interjected a question.

"Yes," replied Xexes, whiskers quivering as the automated temperature controls sent in a breath of cool air. "We are in route to join up with the rest of the fleet. Again progress is painfully slow."

"So we can't run." Janeway clenched her teeth in determination. "Even if we could, I cannot in good conscience take the chance that it might find its way out of the Dead Zone. "We have to deal with here. Seven," Janeway addressed the Borg. "Do you have any information on this type of vessel?"

Pale eyes of blue ice met hers, and displayed deep concern behind their glacial coldness. "No, Captain. There are no references to it in the Collective."

So much for that long shot.

Lieutenant Torres stood. She concisely walked them through the information discovered on the Federation shuttle. "According its database," her fingers glided over several touch pads, "the doomsday machine is vulnerable in two places." The lurid devastation disappeared, replaced with a set of schematics. "Captain Kirk detonated the *Constellation* through the forward aperture. Despite SI's report, this tactic worked."

"But no one knows why and they were never able to duplicate the results." Paris was frowning. "That doesn't exactly lend confidence."

"True, but the simulations were run decades ago, before holodeck technology." Torres appeared to have a ready answer. "I wish we had time to run some of our own, but we don't." Her lips constricted into a tight line. "The shuttle's plasma reactor combined with a cargo bay full of our present-day ordnance would generate an explosion five times that of the *Constellation*."

Her words incited a flurry of conversation.

Lieutenant Paris was first. "There's too much subspace interference to use a remote interface. The signal will degrade exponentially the closer it gets to the opening. Someone will have to fly her in and be transported out prior to entry."

I don't like the sound of that at all. Janeway felt her eyes narrow. Transporters were precision instruments, but finicky by nature. Subspace interference and radiogenic particles played havoc with their targeting technology making it difficult to establish a lock.

"Can a shuttle withstand the combination of heat, energy loss, and radiation long enough to do any good?" Chakotay's question was a good one.

Janeway's mind did a quick set of calculations and came up with...

"Unlikely," she and B'Elanna said at the same time, the latter a trifle reluctantly. Smiling a little, Janeway yielded to her chief engineer.

"Even if we reinforce the shields and structural integrity field, the shuttle's framework might not withstand the pressure." Her assessment was precisely what Janeway had concluded.

"What about the Delta Flyer?" asked Paris. "We designed it to withstand a variety of hostile environments."

Pride welled inside Janeway's heart. Offering up the ship he had designed, drooled over, and lovingly constructed marked how far Tom had come in his journey to redemption.

Captain Geelon offered a different option. "Use one of our ships. They're antiquated anyway." His emerald eye intersected hers. "I will fly her."

"That's a generous offer," boomed Riza. The huge man leaned back a little in his too-small chair. "But I see no reason for you to be the sole recipient of glory." It was his turn to meet her gaze. "I will do it."

The world has somehow turned inside out and Janeway was struggling to keep up. Had someone told her but a few weeks ago that the Vaadwaur would become trusted allies, she would have had him committed for a psychological evaluation.

The two captains immediately began a friendly, but heated argument, each bent on enumerating the reasons why he was best qualified and most deserving of such an important mission. She raised a hand and silenced them. "Your ships aren't designed for a single pilot."

"True," agreed Geelon, his sandpaper voice all the rougher. "However, with the technological wizards under your command, I am certain something can be arranged."

Our technological wizards weren't sufficient to keep you for reactivating your particle cannons right under our noses.

Janeway did not utter that particular observation. It still rankled, but her ire had faded. Both Geelon and Riza had proven themselves under fire.

"What about the second option," Chakotay prompted.

That caused a second round of button pushing. Soon Torres had magnified the schematics and zeroed in on the leviathan's tail section. "Crewman Merris pointed out a small hatchway here." She pointed to it. "'fleet Intelligence noted it when they examined the original device."

Black anger flooded Janeway's consciousness. She'd needlessly risked *Voyager* in an attack sequence that had no chance of success. "Why wasn't this data made available to all Starfleet ships?" she demanded, turning furious eyes on Rayna.

...who didn't so much as flick a brow. "It was...at least up until the Magellan's time. Given that no others were encountered despite the expansion of civilized culture, I'm guessing that SI determined that it was no longer a priority." Here Rayna gave Torres a slight bow of acknowledgment. "Had the Lieutenant not stumbled upon it while working on the old shuttle, we would still not have the information."

Absolutely ludicrous.

Human beings had a long history of being short-sighted.

I had hoped we would outgrow that flaw.

The briefing continued. Only this time it was Rayna who led it. Her demeanor had transformed as she stood. Suddenly the crewman who served coffee exuded all the poise and confidence of a seasoned officer. "'fleet Intelligence did an extensive examination of the structure. Unfortunately it no longer functioned. We have a basic layout of the interior and an overview of the power systems." Black eyes swept the room. "There is no life support. It simply isn't there. Environment suits are an absolute necessity. There are also no temperature regulators. We hypothesize that the access crawlspace was designed for use prior to the weapon's activation."

"How hot will it get in there?" Paris asked.

"We have no idea." Rayna's reply brought a chill to Janeway's heart. "However, the planet killer is designed for only one purpose: total annihilation. From that we can infer that there will be safeguards in place to prevent the very thing we are contemplating. One of them is likely to be the intense heat and radiation given off by the conversion drive. There are vents all along corridor."

Her hand moved the display toward the bow of the device and stopped amidships. "Plasma reactors are located here. The highest probability of success lies in attaching explosive charges on a delayed timer. Barring that, sabotaging propulsion and/or weapons would be sufficient to disable it."

This is insane.

Any explosives would have to be sufficiently protected from the ambient heat and radiation or they would detonate prematurely. Getting them in position was dependent upon protecting the Away Team that deployed them. As for sabotage...no one knew if the systems were accessible or what defenses protected them.

Tuvok entered the discussion for the first time. "As neither of the options offers a high probability of success, logically, both should be implemented."

It made sense. The strategist within Janeway recognized that fact immediately...and hated it.

Rayna nodded agreement with absolutely infuriating calm.

However, Tuvok was not done. "Would it be correct to assert that there are standing orders from Starfleet Intelligence requiring that its operatives take immediate, decisive action?"

Again she nodded, this time with something bordering admiration shining from the depths of her ebony orbs.

Absolutely not.

Janeway bit back her instinctive response, knowing that it was inappropriate, knowing that it originated from her own, personal feelings, not her position as Captain. Instead she said only, "There will be no action taken without my approval."

Black eyes shifted to meet hers. There was no defiance or rancor in them, but there was no quarter in them either. Rayna merely stated, "This device has been determined to represent a clear and immediate danger to Federation security."

Special Order 66715 be damned. Fury, dark and heated filled Janeway. She rose, leaning both hands on the silvered table. "Let us make one thing fundamentally clear, Crewman. So long as you are aboard my ship, you, like everyone else, fall under my authority."

Rayna's expression altered not a jot. She was neither cowed nor intimidated. The bald head nodded a single time as if in deference to Janeway's position, and the conversation ended.

Still fuming, Janeway retook her seat. "Neither choice before us is acceptable." She tapped her fingers on the oh-so-solid table feeling as if the rest of the world were listing to port. "I need time to study the interior plans before green lighting an Away Team to the construct. In the meantime," her eyes lifted toward Geelon, "your offer of a vessel is accepted, Captain."

The green jewel of an eye moved from its singular study of Merris and met Janeway's. There was something moving in its depths, but she couldn't label it. After a terse nod, Geelon renewed his study of Rayna.

"Lieutenant Torres," Janeway's focus shifted, "take an engineering team and modify the controls for operation by a single person."

"Aye, Captain." B'Elanna's face was grim.

Here, Janeway turned to her first officer. "Chakotay, you, Commander Tuvok, and Seven calculate the amount of explosives necessary and then oversee the loading process. Rig a detonator switch with a 30 second delay."

"Who will fly the ship?" asked Captain Riza.

"We'll discuss that when the time comes." Janeway was in no mood to use the democratic process. "Everyone, dismissed."

They all filed out, including Rayna. Her lover did not so much as cast a backward glance. It hurt. Pangs of something akin to grief crushed against Janeway's chest. She could hardly breathe around the pressure.

She's upset.

Probably so. Janeway closed her eyes. Better upset and alive than dead. Standing quickly, she strode to the row of windows and glared at the unforgiving stars.

I should never have gotten involved with a crewman.

She ground her teeth together until her jaw ached. It was too complicated, too goddamn difficult, and much, much too painful. Her eyes squeezed tight. Her head lowered until it rested on the cool aluminum.

You promised not to regret her.

I don't.

There was no going back. From now on the highs and the lows of a relationship were part and parcel of her future...for as long as she had one.

She's going to do something.

That much was certain. The incident with Ayala had taught her the lengths to which Rayna would go in order to complete a mission. Without a doubt, her lover was already plotting a method of escape.

Why did the woman have to be so extraordinarily stubborn?

Bears no strong resemblance to you, eh, Katie?

Janeway thumped her forehead against the portholes, once, twice...then opened her eyes to stare out into the great black sky.

You already know that no one else is going to pilot that vessel. The risk is too great.

Truth was truth. It was hers to do, just as it had been Kirk's before her. Chakotay and Tuvok would likely disagree with her decision, but they would come around. Both would do exactly the same thing if the positions were reversed. In the end, it was the Captain's job.

And what is Rayna's job? To be housewife to the mighty Janeway?

Bitter laughter bubbled from her mouth to be lost amid the silent gloom.

Rayna's job was to sabotage the planet killer.

Straightening, Janeway looked back at the empty conference room wishing she could deny the truth of that assertion.

Rayna placed her commbadge on the glass top of her dining table. The hatchway was shut and it had become a bothersome distraction.

You must overcome this. Claustrophobia is a disastrous weakness.

She sat in one of the chairs and willed her pell-mell heartbeat to slow. At length, it did, but grudgingly.

Disassembling a communicator was child's play compared to repurposing a phaser as long as you had the proper tools. Fortunately there were engineering repair kits located on every deck. She retrieved the one she'd nabbed from this deck and opened it.

They'd altered the design of commbadges since she'd been in cold sleep. The rectangular backing was new. Hopefully its internal workings would be relatively unchanged. Using her fingers, she pried around the edges until the back snapped off.

There it is.

She selected a non-conductive monofilament probe from the kit. The RF transceiver had been moved, but was still a triangle-shaped circuit assembly. It took only a moment or two to adjust the preset frequency and amplitude. Near the bottom of the device was a three-position toggle switch. Rayna moved it from one to zero, transmit to record, and placed it against her chest. Counting the seconds was a fairly pleasant pastime. Though her mind urged swiftness, there was no point in shortcutting. A good minute of her lifesigns was essential.

Done.

The toggle switch was reset to its default position.

She made one more adjustment, then replaced the back.

Nothing like being thorough.

Most people just left their commbadges behind. It worked, but their lifesigns could still be tracked. Using the communicator to duplicate her lifesigns, Rayna could confuse *Voyager's* computer into thinking that she really was still in her quarters... a necessary deception for her to steal a shuttlecraft.

Her door chime sounded.

Now that is inconvenient.

"I don't mean to disturb you." Kathryn's voice crackled over the intercom. "May I come in?"

No. The sight of her lover was, beyond a doubt, the last thing she needed.

The door opened anyway, and Rayna grimaced in displeasure.

Command override.

That was just as inconvenient as an uninvited visit.

She rose and faced her guest. Kathryn's chemistry was in turmoil, a tumultuous mixture of fury, grief, and determination. Rayna made those observations dispassionately, all the while her hearts had begun hammer against her ribcage and her stomach had begun to flutter as if attempting flight.

"Captain," she greeted neutrally.

"No." Grey eyes lowered their shields and Kathryn drew near. "Not right now."

Switching from business to personal was akin to changing direction when the warp drive was engaged. It took a full second before Rayna was able to make the transition. Then she raised a hand and stroked down the severe plane of her lover's face. Kathryn's eyes closed; she turned her head to lay soft kisses on Rayna's palm.

There go your knees.

They weakened as if she'd been in zero-g for too long. The touch of Kathryn's lips faded and Rayna opened her eyes, not really having made a decision to close them in the first place. Their contact ended. Kathryn sat. Rayna did likewise, and waited.

"I couldn't leave it like this," her lover whispered, staring down at the clear table top.

How would a normal person react to this? What would they say? Rayna didn't know. Decades had passed since she'd been "normal." In the end, she said only, "Business is business, Kathryn."

Troubled grey eyes raised and studied her. A shrewd look overtook them. "Don't think I don't know what you were planning. I'm not as talented with word games as you are, but I'm a fast learner. How soon were you going to sneak off ship?"

Oh well done.

Rayna grinned at her lover, stupidly, widely, like an absolute idiot. "I'd already modified my commbadge."

"That figures." Janeway picked up the device and looked at it a moment. Her demeanor had sobered. "I know we have to implement both plans," she finally spoke again. "and I've already issued orders to that effect." A sharp intake of breath punctuated her words. "I just...don't want to lose you." As if ashamed of her inability to separate command from affection, Janeway dropped the communicator with a hollow clatter and bowed her head.

She's worried about you, so much so she's hesitant to endorse a tactically necessary course of action.

The impact of this realization took Rayna utterly off guard. Tuvok was the only one who had ever cared for her so deeply. The weight of a dwarf star settled on her shoulders. It was an awesome thing, one she was unworthy of.

Being worthy of a gift sort of defeats the purpose.

Her grandmother had said that. It was true, she supposed.

When in doubt, Admiral Nuriayev once told her, counterattack.

It seemed like sound advice to Rayna. "Just as I do not wish to lose you, when you pilot the Vaadwaur ship."

Kathryn's face betrayed surprise and then resignation. "Touché."

In this matter there would be no argument. Janeway was Janeway. She would never allow another to carry this burden. Knocking her unconscious wasn't an option either. Under these high-stress circumstances, she'd be missed too quickly.

So here they were, trapped by fate and surrounded by emotions that were fogging up a perfectly clarified path. All the reasons she had avoided deep attachments were laid out before her in a cornucopia of self-evidence.

Fuck it.

That was the past. Being attached to it was every bit as dangerous as being tied to persons or things. This was her present, here, with Kathryn. Somehow, they had to push forward.

There was only one thing to do when the irresistible force faced the immovable object: negotiate. Rayna lay both hand flat on the table and splayed her fingers. On Orion it was a sign that the slate was wiped clean and it was time to start from scratch. "We both have to go."

Janeway nodded. Steely eyes expressed great displeasure. "I know."

That was unexpected, a starship captain seeing reason. Rayna was of a mind to chuckle. Wisely she refrained. She drew one breath, then two; her mind opened a wormhole of intuition. "Therefore we both must come back."

Melancholy so deep it cut Rayna's soul filled her lover's eyes. "That may not be possible." The soft words drifted on the air currents, belying their weight and gravity.

Rayna felt Kathryn's focus as a palpable force. On impulse she took one of the human's cool hands, feeling the muscles flex and the fingers tremble. Unable to give voice to the hodge-podge of emotions she felt, Rayna pasted on a roguish grin and promised, "Kathryn, if I have to pick the locks on the doors to the afterlife, I will come back hale and whole."

A slight, sad smile kissed the corners of her lover's lips. "You can't make that promise."

"It isn't a promise," Rayna corrected. "It's a deal. I'll come back if you will. You're much more likely to attempt some stupidly noble act of self-sacrifice than I am."

She was rewarded with a breathy chuckle. Then Kathryn nodded, a touch of sadness returning. "I'll do my best to be selfish," she intoned solemnly.

"Let me help you." Rayna shot her a piercing glance. "I won't go alone, if you won't."

That brought a stubborn lift to Kathryn's chin. "The risk is too high."

"Oh I heartily agree."

"There's no such thing as an Away Team of only one member. As dangerous as this mission is, it is utterly impossible for one person to complete it." The Captain had forcefully returned.

"You're right." An edge harder than neutridium laced Rayna's words. "And as you will be away from your vessel, I advise you to set a proper example for your crew and take at least one other person." Still holding to her devil-may-care façade, Rayna added, "Take one of the Vaadwaur. No one will miss them."

Incredulous disbelief filled Kathryn's whole demeanor. Then she realized the last was more teasing than serious.

"Besides," Rayna stroked her thumb over her lover's skin, reveling in the texture of it. Human flesh was so much more varied than Deltan, covered with fine hair and tiny wrinkles. They added character and beauty. "Geelon will certainly not allow the use of his vessel if he isn't on it."

Shrewd grey eyes met hers. Rayna could fairly see the calculations taking place behind them.

"Commander Chakotay to Captain Janeway." The squawk of Kathryn's commbadge made them both jump. "Captain Geelon is declining the use of his vessel unless he can accompany the pilot."

Rayna, quite carefully, did not reveal the triumph that her insides sang with. She kept her features still with an act of sheer determination. Sometimes fortune favored the bold; sometimes it favored the foolish. Today, she was content to be a fool.

Looking as if a thundercloud had formed over her fiery head, Kathryn acknowledged the call and agreed to discuss the matter further with her Vaadwaur counterpart. Then she returned to the bargaining table. "Who will you take?" she demanded. There was no compromise to be made and no way to wheedle out of the arrangement.

But ultimately, Wind Child, fortune pisses on us all in turn.

"Ensign Gilmore." Rayna selected someone that she didn't know well of a purpose. Plus Gilmore's talents mirrored Torres'. *Voyager* could afford to lose her, if push came to shove.

You promised to return.

I have been known to lie.

Of course she didn't see fit to share that. It would defeat the purpose of this meeting.

"You'll need more than Gilmore," Kathryn stated. "I'll assign two other members."

Oh it was in her to rebel, in fact she would have only without warning Kathryn kissed her. Unlike the passionate embrace of tongue and mouth that characterized their kisses, this one was filled with longing and laced with regret.

They separated reluctantly.

Wind Child...for the first time...you just lost an encounter.

It was a humbling and disturbing development.

Rayna pocketed her commbadge. She'd use the one implanted in her brain for now. Janeway collected herself, smoothed her tunic.

"I'll need to reinstate your rank." Another surprise from the captain.

Rayna turned an incredulous gaze toward her lover. "Have you gone soft in the head?" she sputtered.

"You're the only one qualified for this." The captain was frowning at her, not quite angry but obviously displeased.

She bit back a retort. There were different sections within Starfleet Intelligence. Rayna's had been infiltration, not special operations. However, pointing out her lack of experience would get her axed from the team. So she said only, "I'll be of no use to you if my rank and position are commonly known. Right now, only high-ranking personnel are privy to the information. Keeping it that way would be preferable."

"That would entail deceiving my crew," the captain snapped. "I'm not willing to do that."

High-minded Federation ethics... Rayna despised them. In a universe filled with iniquity, those who played by the rules were at a distinct disadvantage. She pushed away her impatience. "That isn't true. Your entire crew knows about my past. It will not be long until the Vaadwaur and Talaxians do as well. However any other race we might encounter will not. I will glean more honest information as a servant in the Mess Hall than as an Intelligence Commander." When Kathryn still hesitated, Rayna added, "Think of it as an extended undercover assignment."

Thoughts scurried across the surface of her lover's eyes. Finally, Janeway gave a weary nod. "Agreed."

They looked at one another for the longest time. Rayna used the moment to memorize the harsh lines of her lover's face, the deep well of sadness in the sea of her eyes.

She moved to the hatchway and keyed it open. "Captain."

"Commander." The use of her rank sounded oddly anachronistic, a thing out of both time and place. "Report to the shuttlebay."

"Aye, ma'am."

They returned to world of duty and necessity...

...where everything had suddenly accelerated to light speed.

Kathryn headed to the Bridge, leaving Rayna to take the next turbolift. Almost immediately her internal communicator began pinging faster than a sensor alert in an asteroid field. Janeway used a coded channel to announce Rayna's reinstatement in rank and her appointment as Away Team leader. On that frequency, only command-level staff would receive the broadcast. Ensign Kim and Seven of Nine were also added to the team, much to Rayna's discomfort.

Why does it have to be Seven?

She's perfectly qualified, probably more than most.

Rational persuasion didn't make a dent in Rayna's reluctance. It couldn't. A thousand reasons congealed inside Rayna in to one, unpolished truth: Seven mattered to Kathryn. Though she had not yet begun to plumb the depths of Janeway's attachment to the Borg...the former Borg...Rayna was aware of its existence. The two women had bonded. Losing Seven would be difficult for Kathryn to bear.

The doors had only opened to the shuttlebay's deck when her commlink began demanding attention.

"Ensign Kim to Commander Merris."

Fuck. Closing her eyes, she activated the transmitter of her implanted communicator. "Yes?"

"We're using Shuttlecraft Number 3," he stated, flatly. "I've been assigned as your pilot."

Your very own pilot...imagine that. It's all brandy and hors d'oeuvres from here on.

Turning a corner, she faced the hangar's main entrance, and found that there were easily half a dozen guards posted, all of them armed.

That's abnormal.

Even with the Vaadwaur billeted on board, there were never more than two security officers assigned.

Tuvok.

The Vulcan bastard had anticipated her attempt to sneak off ship. That was the only explanation.

Bonneville was one of those standing guard. He offered a tight smile and a wave of greeting. "Well, well, well, look who's here." There was no element of surprise in his manner. "We've received orders to let you in, Commander." One of his dark eyes winked. "Which is a turnaround from our previous instructions."

"How fortunate for me," Rayna conceded gracefully. Against her better judgment, she liked Bonneville.

It seemed the feeling was mutual because the man keyed the hatch open for her and said, "Be careful, OK? I'm just getting used to having you around."

And there is was again, that feeling of belonging. It terrified Rayna, made her want to hop the

shuttle and head straight into the blast ring. She patted the human's arm. "Anything to make you happy."

His low chuckle stayed with her even after the doors shut.

The grey cavern of the hangar deck loomed above her, all dreary and dull. Bright yellow lines on the floor marked safe walking areas and designated landing zones. Inside them were several shuttles.

Rayna made her way to Number 3. It was a Type 8. That was good. Type 2's were notoriously small and she had no desire to imitate a Terran sardine. The tail number read, "74656: *USS Voyager*." If her memory still functioned, these models lowered the aft bulkhead to form a ramp. She made her way to the stern.

Harry Kim and Marla Gilmore were stowing gear inside. Phaser rifles and plasma grenades were among the packages Rayna recognized. Both crewmen were tense, slightly afraid, and willfully committed. They looked up at her approach.

"Status?" Rayna asked. She was the commander now. It was high time she acted like it.

Gilmore answered, "We've loaded everything and done a systems check. Once Seven joins us..." Her words faded as the object of conversation arrived.

Seven looked as impassive as ever, each sunshine hair in position as if the woman glued them there. Glacial blue eyes that shone as brilliant and clear as Tyvei Sea flitted over each of them.

And now you've fished another ocean out of your mind.

The Tyvei was as clear and beautiful as the Lustern was murky and ominous. You could see all the way to its bottom. It teemed with life of every conceivable variety, from the vast to the infinitely small.

...a stark contrast to the crystal depths of Seven's eyes.

Rayna turned away with an absent nod of greeting. She entered the shuttle and checked over the explosives. Her thoughts were dark. Seven was the last person, next to Tuvok that Rayna would have wished to accompany them. It wasn't just Kathryn's fondness for the woman. No, lying to one's own self was never a wise tactic. There was yet innocence to be found within Seven's eyes, a naiveté that was worthy of protection.

Not like you, eh, Ray-ray.

Worthiness had nothing to do with it. She'd long ago learned to take care of herself.

The mudslide has already begun; it is far too late for the dirt to resist.

Everyone entered and took their seats. Seven and Ensign Kim occupied the pilot and co-pilot's chairs. Rayna strapped in.

Her embedded communicator tingled.

"Yes," she whispered.

"This is Commander Tuvok." His voice intermingled with the communications taking place outside. Clearance for lift off was being obtained. The shuttle's engines had hummed to life. "Return to harbor, Wind Singer," he intoned. "Bring your vessel home."

She ground her teeth together until all feeling left her jaw. There wasn't time to respond, not that she would have broadcast such a vulgar thing over an official channel. That would be disrespectful. No she would curse her Vulcan irritation properly upon her return.

If they returned...

The next voice came from the intercom of the shuttle. With it came Kathryn's image on the viewscreen. "Good luck to you all," she said, her features encouraging, but grave, "and be careful."

That was it.

The shuttle lifted off. Through the forward windows, Rayna saw the hangar doors open. She exiled all extraneous thoughts from her mind. This assignment would require total concentration.

But first, she could catch up on her rest. There was nothing to do until they reached the construct. No need to waste time with worry. Closing weary eyes, she settled back into the seat's obligingly comfortable cushion.

Seven of Nine observed the planet killer with a clinical eye. It was an efficient device, one worthy of the Borg. Had the Collective actually constructed it, destroying it would be child's play for her. As it was, matters were infinitely more complicated. She glanced at Harry Kim. The human was frightened. His vital signs were elevated. Sweat beaded on his forehead, though the temperature of the shuttle was cool.

Ahead of them, the device had begun to devour the outermost planet of the Talaxian system. Bits of debris pelted their shields. The gas giant had lost approximately one quarter of its mass already.

Simple, functional, and efficient.

Part of her admired the utter purity of its design. Part of her... a newer, more sensitive part...found it horrific.

The device had not noticed their approach, or at least had not altered its present activity. Seven thought it probable they would reach the maintenance hatchway without incident. Afterward might be a very different story.

She conducted a quick scan of her shipmates. Ensign Gilmore was mildly agitated. Pulse and respiration were more rapid than her seated position required. Her attention turned to Rayna Merris, who was sound asleep. Blinking, Seven checked her readings again. Heart rate and breathing were slow and even. Basal metabolic activity had slowed. It all served as evidence to support an inevitable conclusion: there was something wrong with Crewman - Commander Merris. Sentients did not react to danger with slumber. Perhaps Captain Janeway had erred in promoting her.

"Come around to mark four, five, eight." Ensign Kim had begun an approach vector.

"Acknowledged," Seven confirmed his coordinates.

The shuttlecraft began to tremble. Alarms sounded.

Kim attempted to compensate, saying, "The breakup is causing gravimetric shear." He grimaced and made another course correction. "Between that and the planet killer's gravity, it's causing subspace turbulence."

Ensign Gilmore called from behind. "I've pulled auxiliary power into the structural integrity field."

That was a prudent decision. Seven had lately become impressed with Gilmore's capacity for thought and her talent for engineering.

The device now filled their visual field. It was hideous, silvery, and shiny, not like the metal tea set in Captain Janeway's Ready Room. The antique decorations were pretty and well crafted. This was not. Jagged, scale-like sheets of neutronium overlay one another in an impenetrable wall. Some of them were translucent. She could see the heated glow of plasma as it flowed like blood beneath the vessel's "skin."

"Scanning for the access panel." Seven initiated the sensor sweep. They had slowed significantly. Ensign Kim engaged docking thrusters to move them, centimeter by centimeter around the huge circumference of tail.

"The sensors are detecting a lot of interference. What if we can't find it?" he wondered aloud.

Seven shrugged. They would not fail.

"You'll find it." Commander Merris was awake.

Perhaps her hybrid physiology required frequent regeneration. Seven detected no residual fatigue

in her demeanor.

Merris moved to the bow of the shuttle, between Seven and Harry Kim. "The archive placed it about 15 meters from tip."

They made a minute adjustment to their position. Seven did another sweep. "There it is." She brought the image up on her console's viewscreen.

It was enneagonal in shape. All nine sides were of equal length, a fact which made it "regular." Internal angles were 140 degrees. Seven's cortical implant contained all necessary data concerning Euclidian geometry.

"I don't see any way to dock with it." Ensign Kim frowned as he looked on.

"That's because there isn't any." Merris moved astern. She and Gilmore began unpacking the environment suits. "SEWG" was the proper abbreviation.

Seven had an odd sensation as she looked at her companions. Humans would call it "déjà vu," a sense that she had been here before.

You are recalling the incident in the Labyrinth.

She, Captain Janeway, Commander Tuvok, and Merris had all donned environment suits. It was merely the familiarity of the scene that had triggered her feelings.

"Hold position," Merris ordered Ensign Kim.

"You're going to space walk to the hatchway?" His voice was disbelieving.

Seven found no innate difficulty in that course of action. "We must adapt," she intoned her agreement.

The chronometer program within her implant was ticking down. They had two hours and thirty-eight standard minutes before Captain Janeway would initiate Option One. The risk of that endeavor was unacceptable and placed the human at grave risk.

Her fingers opened the SEWG and she stepped in. Within minutes they were all suited, checked, and ready. Harry initiated a forcefield to protect the cockpit area from decompression. Their supplies had been distributed among them. Each now carried pouches of explosives and sported a phaser rifle slung over their shoulder.

Merris placed her hand on the ramp control, but hesitated. Black eyes turned to Seven's and stared. The moment passed quickly. Something had been in the dark depths, but Seven could not classify it. She was still learning about emotions, and had enough difficulty dissecting her own. Then Merris gave Gilmore the same steady gaze.

The ramp swung down.

Using the thrusters in their packs, everyone quickly jetted across the separating darkness and collided with the machine's hull. Neutronium worked to their advantage, providing a field of gravity that enabled them to move along the surface without fear of drifting away. It was even possible to stand.

Seven attempted to access her cortical sensors, but they were offline. Because of the bulky SEWG, she could not reach the implant to perform manual adjustments. Confusion caused her to freeze in place.

"What is it?" Gilmore asked. The young engineer leaned so she could look in Seven's helmet.

"My sensor array is non-functional." This was highly disturbing. Having only her human eyes to rely on made her feel nearly naked.

"Vulnerable" is the word.

Yes. Vulnerable. She was not enamored of the sensation.

Gilmore tried a tricorder. "This isn't working either." She placed it back on her suit's belt. "It's the dampening field. We're standing dead in the middle of it. We'll have to look for the hatch visually." Smiling gently, the woman patted Seven on her padded shoulder. "Remember, the dampening field can't function inside the vessel. Once inside, you'll be fine."

That was correct. Seven held on to the reassurance in those words and trailed along behind the other two.

Finding the maintenance cover was accomplished at length. Merris pointed it out. They circled it.

"How do we get in?" Gilmore inquired.

A fair question. There were no keypads, touchscreens, or handles.

Merris was running her heavily gloved fingers across the hatch and the surrounding surface. "According to the file, there's a hidden pressure plate."

Her quest was successful. The cover popped open.

And nothing happened.

Gilmore's long sigh filled their communicators. "Well that was anti-climactic," she ventured. "I was expecting a little more fanfare."

And Merris chuckled. The woman's capacity for inappropriate humor knew no bounds. Seven remembered well the day they both went running into the cryo-mist to save Mallory; this hybrid

had been grinning like a lunatic then.

The inside was darker than the space around them. From the illumination provided by her SEWG, Seven determined that the corridor within was a nine-sided structure. It appeared deserted.

Instead of clambering inside, Merris removed one of the spare power packs from her utility belt and tossed it through the opening.

An inferno ignited. The crawlway was flooded with flame, white-hot, and faster seeming than light waves. It exploded out the opening, forcing them to flinch away to avoid incineration.

"That's more like it," Gilmore observed ironically.

Merris merely nodded, lips pursed as if agreeing with the conclusion. "SI was right. Obviously there are sensor arrays along the corridor. We'll need to disable them."

Seven felt a pain in her stomach that she had learned to equate with disappointment. There was something missing from this equation. How could the sensor arrays survive the intense heat and radiation?

They are shielded.

Yet to function, they must not be shielded. Perhaps some sort of defensive mechanism was activated microseconds before the corridor flooded with plasma.

Once a successful hypothesis is formulated, you must test its veracity.

Seven pulled one of the plasma grenades, activated it, counted down, and then dropped it inside.

Everyone ducked back. The explosion was much smaller this time.

All eyes were looking at her with a mixture of astonishment, from Gilmore; and amusement, from Merris.

Ignoring them, Seven tossed in one of the repair pouches that each SEWG was equipped with. Nothing. A second passed. More nothing.

Quod erat demonstrandum. The proof was now complete.

Seven looked up at her companions expectantly.

"Subtle." Merris moved past them both and slid inside. "I like that."

"Would you like to explain what just happened?" Gilmore sent Seven a quick look before following the commander.

"I used a plasma grenade to destroy the internal sensors before the vessel's security could react."

"Which renders the ship just as blind to this corridor as we are while crawling on its hull," the ensign finished. "You're very clever, Seven."

The praise caused a pleasant sensation inside her chest. At first she'd only observed this reaction when in the presence of Captain Janeway. Lately, however, other crewmembers had engendered it. "Thank you." Lessons in courtesy guided her interactions. The Doctor has been very patient, but very exacting.

They proceeded slowly, Merris in the lead. Gilmore, brandishing her tricorder, was next. Both tried raising the shuttle, but were unsuccessful. The neutronium hull had effectively cut off communications.

"Radiation is at lethal levels." Gilmore's voice was scientifically unemotional. She waved the device at one of the walls. There were long streaks of charring. "The interior is plated with neutronium, at least that's what I surmise. If it were solid, we'd all weigh several tons, owing to its extreme mass. I can't detect what's underneath though." The tricorder was redirected down the hallway. "Alpha, gamma, and theta radiation are highly concentrated. Our suits will provide some protection, but it's a good thing the Doctor inoculated us during our travel through the blast ring."

"Where did the fire originate?" Commander Merris had halted in front of an odd looking indentation in the bulkhead.

It was nine-sided, like the corridor and the hatchway appeared to be comprised of black glass or a similar material. Seven's sensors quickly determined that it was an unknown element, but highly refractive.

A display screen or monitor?

Insufficient evidence existed to support any conclusion.

"There are louvered vents every nine meters." Gilmore examined her tricorder screen. "Simple structures, really, but highly efficient...and relatively undamaged."

Which means that if the device becomes aware of our presence, it is still capable of incinerating this everything in this corridor...

Seven did not find the possibility of her death to be particularly disturbing. On some level, she was certain that this was uncharacteristic of most sentients. Survival was a primal motivation. The Collective had taught her that to sacrifice the one for the betterment of the whole was a more proper path. It was a lesson that seemed appropriate on *Voyager*. Captain Janeway had often demonstrated her willingness to place herself in harm's way in order to safeguard her vessel and crew.

"What are you looking at?" Gilmore's inquiry pulled Seven from her introspection.

"I'm not sure," Merris answered, "but here's a smaller aperture below it."

Seven sidled closer. It was a small, nine-sided opening that lay approximately 45 centimeters beneath the refractive material. Her sensors indicated that it was some sort of input/output interface with a dilithium shell.

Efficient.

The crystal coating would shield any sensitive electronics from both heat and radiation.

Apparently Ensign Gilmore found it similarly interesting. "You said that 'fleet Intelligence believed that this was a maintenance access shaft."

Her words were redundant. That fact had already been established.

Nevertheless Merris answered, "Yes."

Gilmore made several adjustments to her tricorder. "The configuration is completely alien, but," she took another reading, "I think this is some sort of jack for diagnostic equipment." Dark blue eyes glanced at each of them. "We might be able to access the computer core from here if we can piece together an interface."

"My Borg nanoprobes can assimilate the technology allowing me to communicate with it." Seven stepped forward. "They will seal my suit automatically as well once I extend the tubules."

"That could work," Gilmore agreed. "If we can gain access to internal systems, we can frag them quite nicely."

Standing, Commander Merris turn to face them both. "An intrusion like that would likely activate the internal defenses." Her black eyes held a contemplative cast when they looked at Seven. "You destroyed the sensor arrays in the corridor, but the vents are still operational. Once you access the interface, the ship will know you're here, and react to it. Unlike the vessel, you don't have a neutronium hull, and I doubt Borg technology would protect you from a quick and untimely cremation."

The truth of her statement rankled, but was indisputable. She would be killed almost instantly, with no time to relay commands.

"We require a forcefield," Seven concluded.

"There's no time to return to *Voyager* to retrieve the necessary parts." Merris turned questioning eyes toward Marla Gilmore. "We'll need a little improvisation."

"Right," the engineer drew the word out in a long sigh. "Let me make sure I follow you." Her tone and mannerisms bespoke of extreme doubt. "You want me to create a forcefield without a proper power supply that's strong enough to withstand the flash point of a star and then maintain it long enough for Seven to 'hack' into the planet killer. Is that about right?"

The reaction was understandable. Death was all but certain in this scenario.

Merris merely smiled. "I think you've got it. We only need two sides, though. The neutronium plating makes both deck and overhead non-conductive."

"That makes things so much easier." Sarcasm cascaded from Gilmore's lips.

Seven could find no humor in this situation. "I believe that Lieutenant Torres erected a forcefield on the *Delta Flyer* using a phaser and an EPS relay." She strode over to the data uplink and took her own tricorder readings. "Bring me the necessary components and I can construct it without assistance. There is no need for the two of you to remain."

Suddenly Merris' expression changed ever so slightly, becoming what the Doctor would have described as "intractable." "Oh no. No one does something stupidly noble alone in my presence."

Before Seven had digested her meaning fully, Gilmore began to move. "Me neither. You're stuck with us. I'm going topside to see if I can raise Ensign Kim." She began trudging down the corridor. "We'll need two EPS relays, though. Can a type 8 shuttle still fly with two of its relays missing?"

The last was a question which sounded rhetorical, not that Seven had recovered from her surprise enough to answer.

Geelon surveyed the changes to his Bridge with satisfaction. Navigation controls appeared to be functional, if awkward. Changing the yaw would require using a foot pedal conveniently placed near the center seat. The ship was called, *Karrok*, a word which meant, "swift."

His fingers moved with practiced ease over raised switches, initiating a series of diagnostic programs. Pre-flight checks always had a soothing effect on his constitution. They were a ritual and all rituals were designed to bring comfort. In this case, it also eased tension and prepared his mind for battle. Minutes later, the computer screen pronounced all systems were go, weapons, shields, propulsion.

Excellent.

He stood, giving the conn one last look. Compared to *Voyager's* silvery surround this Bridge was dark and cramped. The dials and buttons were antiquated, but functional. Even after 900 years of storage, they still worked.

We built well, in our day.

Small cruisers like this required a crew of three to fly them. Today it would only take one.

"Uncle," Riza's bass rumble thrummed across the commlink.

"Yes." He was growing impatient with his nephew's incessant nagging.

The meter-square viewscreen came alive with the broad features of his fellow captain. Brows furrowed in a frown that made Riza appear angry. In reality, the lad was worried. Geelon knew his nephew well enough to recognize the difference.

"Are you sure about this?" It was the third time he'd asked that question.

Geelon swallowed the tongue lashing he longed to issue saying only, "Yes, " then immediately terminating the connection. "Now shut your mouth, puppy, and do as you're told." The last was said to a brooding Bridge. Happily, machines did not talk back.

"*Voyager* to Captain Geelon."

Ah, there was Janeway. He opened a hailing frequency and acknowledged her call. "Yes, Commodore?"

"Ordnance transfer to your cargo bay is complete." There was armor in her words, strong enough to withstand a collision with the sun.

"Thank you, Commodore." After closing communications, Geelon glanced at the small, innocuous-looking switch that had been newly installed next to helm control. Round and red, it was utterly out of place next to the battery of grey buttons that comprised the console.

A quick check of the chronometer showed that there was but an hour until launch. She would be making ready to transport over soon. Janeway had made her intent to accompany him plain.

There was still no word from the landing party. Sensors could not penetrate the dampening field, nor could communications. Either the tiny Federation shuttlecraft would return or it would not.

He contacted *Voyager* once more. "I am going to test the navigation systems one more time." He growled.

Their science officer, Tuvok...was that his name...granted permission. The voice was cool, distant, and supremely unconcerned. Yes, Geelon was fairly certain he was correct. It was Lieutenant Commander Tuvok.

It isn't natural to be so unemotional.

He raised the shields and edged away from the main body of the fleet. Riza's craft, *The Frostbite*,

as humans would render it, followed at a discrete distance. The next several minutes were spent with him familiarizing himself with the new controls. It was odd not to be barking commands to the helm.

No laughter or tears, no anger or passion...what joy was there in that kind of half-life?

Her keel favored to port. Geelon edged the ship back to center.

Maybe you're misperceiving.

He played with the yaw control, finding the pedal to be sensitive. After nearly somersaulting the ship forward, Geelon got the hang of it.

Fire Control is next.

Coming round, Geelon targeted a few chunks of debris with his particle cannons. He missed at first. After a few more tries, the debris had been transformed into dust. His mind returned to Vulcan musings.

I wonder how many more there are like him. A whole world, at least, according to some of the Federation data.

The commodore hailed him again, this time on-screen. Perhaps it was merely the poor quality of his display, but Janeway appeared haggard. There were lines of worry carved about her eyes, and a pall of hopelessness hung about her.

"I take it you haven't heard from your team," Geelon surmised from her subdued demeanor.

"No." Despite her formidable control, he thought there were notes of distress coloring the timbre of her words. "We'll have to implement the alternate scenario."

It was as he feared.

She was prepared to detonate his ship inside the belly of the beast, killing the Away Team if necessary. It was a sound strategy, but costly. Ensign Kim was said to be an excellent crewman, at least according to Neelix. Two, at least, were more than shipmates. The Borg was Janeway's friend, and Merris...was more than a friend...or his perception had become as outdated as his vessel.

She's still speaking, you know.

He roused himself to listen.

"Prepare to lower your shields," she ordered. "I'll be transporting over shortly."

And now here it is: the crux of the matter. Without flicking an eyebrow or missing a beat, Geelon

answered, "No."

Auburn brows slammed together as if they were two comets on a collision course. Grey eyes crackled displeasure. "Excuse me?"

Selective hearing was a talent usually employed by males in his species. It was strange to see it used by a woman. "I said, 'no,'" he repeated. Before she could open her mouth, Geelon continued, "Unless you are prepared to shoot me from the sky, we have nothing more to discuss." He closed communications and reinforced the shields.

That should send her into a right fit. Riza is probably receiving a heated transmission even now.

Geelon leaned back and interlaced his fingers behind his head.

This human had taken them in, sheltered them, fed them, kept them safe. She asked for nothing in return. Never in all his years had he encountered someone so generous, so willing to give. Though he could never quite repay her kindness, he had no intention of allowing her to give all.

The communications panel clamored for his attention. He ignored it.

Moments later, someone activated the emergency frequency.

Riza.

Displeasure filtered its way to Geelon's face. It was wasted. The emergency channels transmitted audio only. "What is it, puppy?" he demanded. The whelp was worse than an old woman with his worrying and concern.

"The commodore is expressing her unhappiness with recent events." Humor laced the words. "I've disavowed all knowledge, of course, and proclaimed that you've gone senile."

Geelon laughed. It pleased him that his nephew could be so officious. "Is she going to shoot me down?" He sobered only slightly. Aggression on Janeway's part would bring his little mutiny to a screeching halt.

There was a slight pause, then, "Not yet. Though I do believe you have sorely tempted her." Riza's tone shifted, transforming into something more serious. "She wants to make sure you lower your shields so they can beam you out. I would also prefer that as well."

"We'll see." Geelon had little patience with sentimentality. War was war, and it was best waged deliberately.

"Why are you doing this, Uncle," Riza pressed. "I have a right to know."

So he did. Geelon struggled to gather his feelings into words. "I am relieving her of a burden no captain should carry."

There. That was it. Riza would understand. He'd been a part of the last battle, the great war that had poisoned their homeworld.

He was there when you sent your own son into battle.

Geelon frowned at the painful memory. It had been Riza who had brought news of Emrin's death.

"I see." Understanding transmitted in the resonant bass of his nephew's voice. "May the fates smile upon you."

Geelon broke communications and leaned back once again, this time propping his feet atop the nearest console.

This was the only course of action to take. The commodore might have to enact a strategy leading to the death of her friends but she didn't have to pull the trigger herself.

He folded his arms and began to whistle an old folk song, watching as the clock ticked down to zero.

A chunk of rock the size of a light cruiser shot past the shuttle in a blur of destructive motion.

Harry Kim avoided it, narrowly.

This is ridiculous.

The outermost planet was almost gone, dismembered with surgical precision by the planet killer's antiproton beam. What remained was a debris field of meteors. The earthen missiles moved at impulse speeds, turning empty space into a deadly obstacle course.

Like one of those old movies Tom is so fond of...with aliens shooting at you from every side.

The real thing wasn't much fun. He jetted to one side as another rock pelted past.

His shields were taking a beating. Between that and the dampening field, it was only a matter of time before they collapsed.

And you can't raise the Away Team.

Communications were even more limited than his shield strength. From what he could see, there was a bubble of calm at the planet killer's stern, probably owing to the shape of the thing. The bow was much larger. Most of the debris streamed harmlessly past. Of course, without reliable sensors, his field of vision was severely limited.

Right. Well, you either leave them behind or land as close to the hatch as you can manage.

Which is really no choice at all...

He began his approach. Gravity eddies pulled at his ship. It was worse than an ocean's undertow, and completely invisible. Sensor range decreased to nil as he reached the thing's hull. Harry craned his neck and eyeballed the landing, using the tiny hatchway as a landmark.

This is beyond insane.

His pulse raced ever faster. Sweat beaded on his brow.

He was almost there...

Gravimetric sheer battered against the *Flyer* making her difficult to steer. Aborting would send him back into the meteor swarm.

Use the magnetic couplings.

There was a possibility. Emergency clamps were deployed during salvage operations. They stuck to drifting ships and pulled them close enough to dock with.

He tapped the appropriate control. The metal discs launched outward and stuck onto the planet killer's neutronium hull like butter to bread. Cables snapped taut, and began pulling his craft down at a controlled rate.

Within moments he was clear of the meteor stream and safely ensconced on the planet killer's surface. The hatch was only a few meters to stern.

Harry blew out a long sigh of relief.

Facing down the length of the doomsday machine, Harry grasped, for the first time, the sheer immensity of it. It extended far enough to the fore to become a horizon of sorts, partially blocking the disturbing scene below. Maybe others could witness such destruction and be unaffected by it. Harry could not. No beings should be able to unmake worlds. He'd thought the Borg were bad enough.

The ship settled with a gentle thud. A few button pushes later, and she was powering down.

Now this...monster had become yet another impediment between him and home. For years he'd borne their long journey with a determined optimism, but once they tumbled into this forsaken space, his spirits had waned. All he wanted to do was see his parents one more time, maybe play in an orchestra. They were simple dreams, nothing like the wild adventures of which Tom wanted to partake.

But they're mine.

He dragged his mind away from the clinging embrace of despair, and pushed out of the pilot's seat. The only way to make contact with the Away Team was to suit up, crawl out, and find the open hatchway.

That's doable, right Harry?

Right. He pulled out the last SEWG.

The aft forcefield sparkled to life, a precursor to the opening the ramp. Only he hadn't keyed it.

Harry rested a hand on his phaser, but didn't draw it. It was probably a member of the Away Team, unless some other idiot had landed on this misbegotten excuse for a hanger deck.

Sure enough, Marla Gilmore came into view. She secured the ramp behind her, stabilized the pressure, and then removed her helmet.

"Whew," she breathed. "That's better. These things always make me feel closed in. Good thing you parked so close."

He was grinning at her as if he had no sense whatsoever, and Harry didn't care. Just seeing that one of the party was all right was wonderful.

What about the others?

Worry niggled at Harry's stomach. "What about Seven and the commander?"

"Still inside." The engineer quickly brought him up to speed on what they'd discovered, including the plan to interface Seven with the planet killer's computer. She grinned at him, though there was little merriment in the expression. "I already know this baby will be grounded without the EPS relays. If we can keep at least one of them from burning out, we should be able to take off."

Harry chewed his lip as he thought. "She'll be very difficult to control," he thought aloud. "One relay will create a plasma flow imbalance."

"True, but you're a hotshot pilot." Gilmore grinned at him in a teasing manner. "You can compensate for a little plasma flow imbalance." She shed the rest of her environment suit and pulled down an access panel. Inside, an EPS cylinder glowed robin's egg blue.

"I'm not as good as Tom," he stated, just a hint of regret seeping into his tone, and turned to open up the cover on the shuttle's opposite side. The other relay was located there.

His words had the oddest effect on Ensign Gilmore. She momentarily froze. Her silence caused Harry to turn his attention back on her. Blue eyes, not quite so clear as Seven's, but every bit as

intense, stared at him disapprovingly. "You don't have to be as good as Lieutenant Paris; you just have to be good enough to get us out of here. And you are." She turned back to her task. "You managed to land on this rock in the middle of a meteor storm. Don't sell yourself short or live in someone else's shadow. Take it from someone living in the shadow her own past. The darkness is killer." Her last words were punctuated by a grunt as she removed the relay.

For the first time Harry realized how difficult it must have been for Gilmore to be on *Voyager*. He pulled out his relay as well and gave the woman next to him a final glance. Maybe they might have dinner one night.

If you live through this, you mean.

Obviously.

He moved back to the SEWG he'd selected and began to pull it on.

"What are you doing?" Gilmore asked. Her blonde brows dropped low over her eyes.

"I'm going in with you." Putting on these suits was a royal pain in the backside. Harry shoved his feet in first. "You'll need someone to monitor the other side of the forcefield, and I don't think Merris has the expertise, not unless 'fleet Intelligence is requiring quantum field manipulation from its operatives."

Serious azure eyes awaited him when he looked up. "Harry, the odds of this working are slim and none. Considering the temperature and intensity of the plasma fire, I doubt the fields will hold for more than a few minutes. If Seven hasn't figured out how to turn the defense grid off, we're fried."

"So?" Harry swallowed hard chasing away his fear with courage. He wanted to go home with honor, or he wouldn't go home at all.

His feelings must have shown in his eyes, because Gilmore cut short her argument and began donning her suit.

Minutes later they were making their way to the hatch. All around them streamed bits of earth and ice. In the lurid light of the planet killer's interior glow, it all seemed surreal.

They lowered the relays in to the waiting arms of Merris and Seven. The commander acknowledged his presence with a slight nod of the head. Beyond that, there was not so much as a flicker of concern between the two women.

I wish I were so sanguine about this.

They all moved down the strangely shaped corridor. Despite the tense circumstances, Harry couldn't help but be excited. They were probably the first people to walk here since the thing was launched. He eagerly absorbed every detail of the structure.

Nine sides...

Numbers were significant to most civilizations, but most still used the old square/rectangular shaped hallways. Some added an arch to it, but the basic shape tended not to vary. It was both simple and practical. For the architects of this device, "9" must have had had some special meaning. Why else go to all the extra trouble to construct a corridor, hatchway, and viewscreen with that specific number of sides?

They reached the display panel. It and the input terminal were enneagons as well.

Suddenly Harry was reminded to kal-toh. He wasn't sure why. The game used an icosidodecahedron, a three-dimensional figure with twenty triangular faces and twelve pentagonal faces for its base shape. Somehow he thought there had to be some sort of mathematical connection between the two, but couldn't isolate what it was.

"Here are the louvered vents." Merris pointed them out.

"What we have to do..." Gilmore began the painstaking task of disassembling her phaser. It was made more difficult by the gloves. "...is create a forcefield that covers from floor to ceiling between these two vents. The burning plasma will be blocked, giving Seven enough time to tell this beastly to go back to sleep."

I hope.

Kim added the last silently. It's what he would have said had he been speaking. He busied himself with his own phaser. When Torres had jerry-rigged this on the Delta Flyer, it had been to keep the new shuttlecraft from decompressing due to microfractures. She'd logged the details into a file and made it available to all crewmembers. Harry had read it a dozen times, at least. Half of *Voyager* had, according to the access records. Everyone wanted a little extra edge should disaster strike.

Gilmore finished first. "Once activated, you'll have about twenty minutes worth of forcefield. That will shrink exponentially depending on the intensity of the assault."

"Which will be intense," Merris said calmly. "Considering the immolation we observed, I would guess you have approximately thirty or forty seconds to decrypt the passcodes and deactivate internal security."

Harry felt his eyes widen, but made himself continue to work on the phaser. They were temperamental even when your hands weren't swaddled in layers of cloth. Holding the monofilament probe was tedious work.

There's the beam control assembly.

Sweat trickled down his forehead despite the controlled temperature of his suit, but the

concentration required soothed his racing pulse a little. Tying everything into the EPS relay was relatively simple.

Just a few seconds more...

"Done," he announced.

One press of the firing button and there would be a shimmering sheet of blue protecting them.

"Good work." Merris moved in front of Seven and looked up at her for what seemed minutes. In reality it was only a few seconds. The chronometer in Harry's suit confirmed that. He could see the Deltan's lips move, but she must have changed the frequency of her commlink. Nothing came over his. Seven's brows furrowed and she gave a single nod in reply.

What was that all about?

He doubted there would be an answer forthcoming. Seven stepped past him and knelt next to the input terminal. Tubules poked through her suit at the knuckles. Seeing them sent a shiver whisking up his spine to lift the hair on his neck. There was no hiss of escaping air.

Nanoprobes.

Sometimes he envied the miniscule machines floating in Seven's blood; sometimes he was terrified of the possibilities they entailed. The Borg were a force as destructive and unyielding as the machine on which they stood. Instead of cutting up worlds for fuel, they absorbed people into the Collective, paring away individuality and freewill.

No one should be able to make or unmake a person, either.

Merris met his eyes and nodded. He and Gilmore activated the forcefields. Seven knelt and aimed her tubules at the terminal.

All Hell broke loose. Literally. Flame and fire rushed in like vengeful spirits. It looked as if an ocean had been set ablaze and then loosed upon them. Despite appearances, it was plasma, raw, unchecked. It broke against their forcefields in a tidal wave of fury.

Shit.

His heart was going to beat its way out of his chest. Rivulets of perspiration ran down his forehead and neck.

He pulled out his tricorder. "Temperature, one hundred and two degrees Celsius. One hundred and four."

The forcefields held, for the moment, but they sparked blue amid the volatile onslaught.

Ten seconds had already passed, and still the fire burned.

"One hundred and twenty degrees Celsius." Gilmore joined his macabre recital. How much heat could the suits stand? He knew the information, but couldn't force the number forward. He glanced toward Seven.

Merris stood behind the woman, staring at the display screen that was alive with alien script. She held a tricorder in one hand, but the other rested on Seven's shoulder. Harry couldn't think why. Maybe to help keep Seven bonded to this reality? He decided to ask once this all was over.

Violent flashes from the forcefield tore Harry's gaze away from his comrades. It was deteriorating. White light sparkled across its length. Here and there patches of orange had begun to overshadow the blue.

Thirty-one seconds had passed. Thirty-two. Thirty-three.

We aren't going to make it.

"The outer planet is totally destroyed," Tuvok's soft announcement was more like the crack of doom.

Janeway did not react immediately. She breathed in, pushing down the constriction in her chest. Then she exhaled. "Contact Captain Geelon." Her words sounded distant, almost foreign, as if another person spoke them. Her eyes slid over to Chakotay's. "We cannot delay any longer."

The sympathy in his eyes was too much to bear. Cold regret latched hold of her heart, squeezing, squeezing until she could not breathe.

Standing, Janeway placed both hands on her hips. "Lieutenant Paris, move to intercept the planet killer."

Good. Her body language was under control. Her tone was strong, sure.

From just behind her Chakotay ordered, "Shields at maximum. Ready phasers and photon torpedoes."

War's overture had begun. Crimson light flashed as Red Alert was sounded. The Bridge crew came alive, calling out information, adjusting plasma flow, making course corrections. Everything moved with mechanical precision.

This is the only way.

There had been no word from the Away Team. One of the smaller Talaxian ships had ventured close to the planet killer and reported that the shuttle had landed on its surface, but could not

raise them. Time had now run out. This anathema had to be stopped before it devoured any more worlds.

Farley still manned Operations. He called out the positions of the Vaadwaur and Talaxian support craft. His presence only made Ensign Kim's absence more noticeable.

Don't think.

It was a simple plan. The fleet would launch an attack, attempt to lead the planet killer out of this solar system. That would give the Talaxian civilians more time to finish evacuating in case the attack failed. Captain Geelon would begin his run as soon as they'd traveled 150,000 kilometers. All they had to do was remain close enough to transport him out. If their estimates were correct, there were enough explosives in the cargo bay of his ship to do the job.

No one knew how that would affect the Away Team.

Don't. Think.

Janeway spun about and returned to the command chair. They had reached firing range.

She issued the order to begin.

Golden fire spat from *Voyager's* forward battery. All around them were additional flashes of weaponry. Vaadwaur particle cannons launched deadly jets of orange. The Talaxian guns loosed a volley that glowed blue. Suddenly the deep black of night was alight with the deathly colors of a destructive rainbow.

And like a great beast, the planet killer rounded on its attackers. Janeway imagined that it might have roared, but there was no sound in space. Compared to it, the attacking vessels were like biting flies, no more than an irritant, but they were irritation enough. The thing began to follow.

"Not too fast," she cautioned. "Maintain fire."

"Energy levels are rising, Captain." Tuvok's words contained an edge of warning.

The dampening field made all but the most rudimentary reading difficult. Rising energy levels mean weapons or tractor beam...no way to know which.

"Bring us about. Reinforce the aft shields." Janeway watched the screen's perspective shift.

Voyager shivered as the cutting beam slammed into them.

"Direct hit. Shields are holding." The information from security was essential. Even more necessary was the cool aplomb with which Tuvok delivered it.

The ship continued to quake.

"Evasive maneuvers," she ordered.

They turned sharply to starboard, looping back toward the system.

The shaking lessened, then increased.

"Vaadwaur and Talaxian ships are harassing its flank," Lieutenant Farley said, leaning over his sensors. Tiny impacts glimmered across their forward shields. "We're encountering some of the debris in the planet killer's wake. Nothing major, just small bits of rock and..."

Something in the empty space left by his pause told Janeway to look at him.

Farley's face was grave. "There are some metallic components as well, matching the composition of the Away Team shuttlecraft."

The news seemed to strike Janeway in her stomach, shooting pain through her bowels. Nodding, she turned back to the battle. There was nothing else to do. It was hard enough to go on breathing.

Beside her, Chakotay's head was bowed. His lips moved silently. Without warning he raised his head. "Are there organic compounds?" he asked, looking at Operations.

That sent Farley back to his sensors. "No." He frowned. "I can't be 100% sure because of all the interference, but I'm not detecting any."

"Shields down to 55%." Tuvok continued to drone out information as if he had not heard the news.

"Auxiliary power to the shields." Her instructions came instinctively. Janeway thought her voice was confident, a great feat considering that she felt utterly hopeless.

They're trapped onboard, with no way to escape.

Grief attacked her eyes, stinging them with tears she dared not shed.

Pull yourself together.

Her command conditioning took over, striking down the sentiment and the paralysis that came with it. "Mr. Paris." She prompted the helmsman to change course again. It was time to initiate the final run. Their circuitous route may not have been necessary, but without knowing how sophisticated the planet killer's computer systems were, it was a case of "better safe than sorry." Computers designed for combat could sometimes predict an ambush and initiate actions to avoid it.

After all we've been through, that's the last thing we need.

The ship lurched to port hard enough that inertial dampers kicked in to keep her and Chakotay in their seats, but the trembling ceased.

"Bring up the aft view," she ordered.

The planet killer was in pursuit, following them like a hound of Hell. *Voyager* was faster and more maneuverable. That gave them an advantage. Behind the construct, looking for all creation like a hoard of angry wasps, came the rest of the fleet.

"Captain Geelon is dead ahead," Farley called.

Good.

They pulled up slightly.

"Take us in right over his head, Mr. Paris," Janeway cautioned. "We want to make sure he has a straight shot down that thing's throat."

"Aye ma'am."

The vista switched back to the fore. There he was. Geelon's vessel was tiny compared to theirs. It was already picking up speed.

"Captain Geelon," Janeway hailed him.

The viewscreen came alight with the determined features of the Vaadwaur leader. A lone, emerald eye met hers with palpable determination. His husky tones gritted their way across the comm panel. "Attack run initiated, Commodore. All systems are fully functional."

Janeway nodded. She was still infuriated with Geelon's high-handed decision to go it alone on this run, but now was not the time or place to upbraid him. Instead she said only, "Warp Speed, Captain."

Her one-time adversary bowed his head to acknowledge her benediction, then broke the connection.

"Intercept in 15 seconds." Commander Tuvok began the countdown.

"She's passed us," Farley informed them.

"Hard to port." Chakotay's order prompted an abrupt change in attitude. The inertial dampers compensated, but even so, everyone was forced to grab hold of something. Both she and Chakotay ended up leaning far to one side.

She pushed herself upright. "Janeway to Transporter Room 2, get a lock on Captain Geelon's

commbadge and prepare to beam him out the moment his shields lower."

"Yes, Captain."

The voice sounded like that of Ensign Lessing.

Everyone stared at the tiny speck that was Geelon's ship as it was first bombarded with antiprotons, and then sucked up by the tractor beam.

"He's going in fast." Lieutenant Farley made some adjustments to his console.

Geelon's rasp once more filled the Bridge. "Activating the destruct sequence. Now."

Tuvok began another count down. "Thirty seconds to detonation."

Lessing made contact. "We've lost the transporter lock. There's too much radiogenic interference."

Damn it.

"Try inverse phasing," Janeway suggested.

Precious seconds ticked by.

"Lock reacquired," Lessing confirmed. "His shields have not yet lowered."

Relief paired with concern fought for dominance in her psyche.

"Ten seconds to detonation." Tuvok's inexorable countdown continued.

"Come on," Chakotay urged. As he hadn't opened a hailing frequency, there was no way for Geelon to either hear or reply. "Lower your shields, damn it."

She silently echoed his sentiments.

"Five seconds to detonation. Four, three..." Tuvok's steady tone did little to calm her insides.

"He just dropped the shields," Farley announced.

"Transporter Room..." Chakotay hit his button just as Tuvok finished his count.

A jet of fire shot out of the planet killer's maw. At least a thousand kilometers long, it roiled and boiled in a baleful fountain of purest hate. The infernal light from the thing's mouth flickered, then winked out.

"Transporter Room 2 to Bridge, we've got him." Triumph and relief colored Lessing's tone.

Tuvok spoke again, "The dampening field is weakening. Energy levels inside the planet killer are falling."

They'd won.

Some of the Bridge crew broke into cheers and applause. It was a happy occasion, she supposed, the sort of victory that should be celebrated. Only, she didn't feel much like being cheerful. Neither apparently did Chakotay, Paris, or Tuvok, for they kept silent amid the revelry, and cast down their eyes.

All of Janeway's willpower was focused on maintaining her command persona. Her back was ramrod straight. Her face was frozen and without expression. Inside, she wondered how it was that a broken heart could still beat.

Maybe they were protected from the blast, a faint hope amid the desolation of despair.

It died, stillborn before taking root.

Rayna's gone.

Reality had been held at bay by the necessity of the present, but it never, ever went away. Now that the crisis had past, it pounced with the ferocity of a man-eating tiger, going for the throat.

She closed her eyes tight, trying to dam the torrent of grief with two, thin bits of flesh.

"I'm sorry, Kathryn," Chakotay whispered low. "I'm so very sorry."

Whatever reply she might have made was truncated by Tuvok's next announcement. "I am reading new power fluctuations in the planet killer."

Her eyes snapped open. Moisture clung to her lashes, cooling as she blinked it away.

"Confirmed," called Farley.

On the viewscreen they saw the beast's interior flicker and fade, then flicker again. Only this time it did not fade. The furnace was lit once more.

The monster was still alive.

What in Sul's name?

Rayna felt the deck beneath her booted feet lurch. Things were happening at light speed, and her mind was playing catch up.

You're still alive, Wind Child.

A count of her blessing was in order. First the plasma fire faded not a hair's breadth before the forcefields collapsed. Second, the blast which jostled them about was surely the vessel piloted by Kathryn and Geelon.

Then Seven began spouting some sort of inane drivel about rerouting power.

Alas, that was probably something very important, but worry for Kathryn had overwhelmed her sensibilities. Had her lover been transported out? Was she safe?

"Seven?" Harry Kim knelt beside his friend. "Can you hear me?"

If you wish to help Kathryn, you should mind your own mission.

She focused on her surroundings.

Instead of answering, the ex-Borg merely continued to blather on about damage control and emergency back-ups. Rayna glanced toward Ensign Gilmore and got a concerned, but confused look in return.

"I don't know," the engineer replied to Rayna's unasked question. "Maybe the interface has temporarily overwhelmed her implants."

So the machine has been taken over by a bigger machine.

Likely that was an ungenerous assessment. Certainly Kathryn would object, but it was the only thing that came to mind.

Rayna made a fist with her hand and whacked it down on the top of Seven's helmet. From what she'd read about the Borg and their "culture," subtlety would be a waste of time.

Glacier blue eyes blinked several times and then seemed to focus.

"Welcome back, Seven." Ensign Kim's words were punctuated with a tight smile.

"There was an explosion in the forward aperture." It appeared that Seven was still processing an tremendous amount of data. "Multiple power converters were destroyed. Secondary systems are fully functional."

"The explosion didn't work." Kim straightened. His youthful features were taught with concern. "Seven can find us a way to get to the power systems?"

Sabotage was now their only option.

"I am unable to comply." There was distress in Seven's voice. "The attack has activated an emergency defensive override. All hatchways have been sealed."

Including the entrance?

Rayna spun around so fast she made herself slightly dizzy. Mercifully the maintenance entryway was still open.

That's not right.

She found that Ensign Gilmore was staring in the same direction, eyes slightly narrowed.

Before either of them could speak, Harry asked, "Can you instruct the PK to shutdown?"

PK? Planet Killer. Ah. Rayna's brain was clogged with both concern for Kathryn and the confusion caused by the glaringly open hatchway. It flat refused to function at its proper speed.

Not good, Ray-ray. You have to remain focused.

"I am unable to comply." There was distress in Seven's voice. "The emergency override disables all external command sequences."

This information prompted a miniature explosion of frustration from Ensign Gilmore. "Come on, Seven. You shut down the internal security. There must be something you can do."

Instead of a curt, mechanical reply, Seven's next statement was uttered with deep regret and perhaps a little embarrassment. "I am afraid your assertion is incorrect, Ensign. I did not establish sufficient access to essential systems in time. The planet killer logged my connection to this terminal as a glitch and disabled the fire on its own."

And that is a Romulan of an entirely different sort...

Rayna glanced at her companions. You could fairly see the thoughts flitting behind their eyes. "OK. Now we have Plan C."

"Plan C?" Gilmore inquired. "What is that?"

"We figure out another way to destroy it." Rayna drummed her fingers atop Seven's helmet for no particular reason. The surface was simply convenient and she was somewhat nervous. "Forget about the how for the moment," she instructed. "Focus on the end result. Do you think crashing it into a white dwarf would do? We at least know where one of those is."

Her question caused Gilmore and Kim to both dive head first into their tricorders. They started asking each other rapid-fire questions that Rayna found to be utterly incomprehensible.

"You need an escape velocity of 5200 kilometers per second." Kim tossed out that information as

if it were a pearl of great price.

Gilmore seemed to agree with him. "Light can escape, so conceivably if this crate can make warp, it could pull it off."

Rayna rather thought that all translated into, "no."

The conversation, however, continued unabated.

"True," Kim countered. "That's presupposing that it would survive the pressure and the heat."

"It's made of neutronium." Gilmore's answer had a ring of finality to it. "It won't melt."

"You're right." Kim began punching more buttons on his tricorder.

Gilmore looked mournfully back at Rayna. "So we're stuck with either a neutron star or a black hole."

"We have the latter." Rayna recalled the initial meeting with Xexes. "Seven," she leaned down to meet the glacial eyes, "Did the Talaxians upload any stellar cartography?"

"Yes, however his scans were substandard. I have more exact data on its location and characteristics."

When silence ensued, Seven quirked a brow upward in a good imitation of Tuvok. "I am assigned to Astrometrics. We have been gathering telemetry on this sector from the moment we entered it. There are gravitational anomalies approximately .5 light years from this system that are consistent with a black hole."

I'll wager my scalp that it can't escape from one of those.

"All right." Rayna disliked having too many possibilities. It slowed things down. "We have a method of destruction. All that remains is devising a means to bring it about." A thought occurred to her. "Seven, I know you said that all commands from this terminal will be ignored," she reasoned, "but it hasn't severed the connection. Can you use your cortical implant to take over any of its systems?"

Seven furrowed her brow in concentration. Her eyes unfocused. Seconds ticked by. Nothing happened.

"No." The taller woman's tone was soaked in bitterness. "Though primitive and simplistic, its computer core is self-contained and supremely robust." Icy eyes skidded upward to meet Rayna's. "I cannot override primary systems."

Gilmore began to pace. Her manner was agitated in the extreme. "Okay, we can't hack into it. We can't reach the engines or weapons. Now what?" she demanded to no one in particular.

"We improvise," Rayna replied in what she hoped was a cool and collected manner. In reality, she was but a hair's breadth from curling up on the floor in defeat. If Kathryn lived, she would use *Voyager* to destroy this beast, taking herself with it, if necessary.

"Sensor contact." Seven's voice was entirely mechanical. It dispelled Rayna's despair as easily as a phaser destroyed plastic. "Bearing .458 off the port bow. Initiating intercept."

Rayna turned away to stare at the blank empty wall behind her. Was it Kathryn, initiating a last assault? Or had she been killed in the initial explosion, unable to transport out of the flying coffin disguised as a warship?

A strangled cry caused her to turn around. Seven was slumped against Ensign Kim, her attachment to the input terminal was severed. Rayna moved forward, but Gilmore was faster.

"What happened?" Gilmore scanned Seven with a tricorder.

"I don't know." Kim appeared baffled. "She just cried out and collapsed."

Fortunately Seven recovered almost immediately, saying, "I am uninjured." Rising gingerly, she steadied herself by resting a hand on the bulkhead. "My connection was severed abruptly. I believe the construct became aware of my 'eavesdropping.'" Confusion was painted on her features, looking very much out of place. "Before that, however, there was a transponder code broadcast from the attacking vessel. It was NCC-1017."

"...*USS Constellation*," Rayna finished. The numeric designation had been in the intelligence report.

Stunned silence reigned for several seconds.

"Do you have any idea where we're heading?" Gilmore asked in a hushed tone as if she feared breaking the quiet.

Seven nodded, still looking mystified. "The anomaly is leading us toward the black hole. If we continue on this course, we will reach it in 3.2 hours."

There are no coincidences. Rayna recalled that truism from somewhere.

Harry Kim spun on his heels and headed down the small corridor. "I'm going to go warm up the shuttle. We need to get out of here before we reach the hole or we might not get out at all."

That was an understatement worthy of a Vulcan.

The wry smile that crossed Rayna's lips was more due to nerves, than hilarity, but it felt good, nevertheless.

Her momentary joy receded when Ensign Kim returned too quickly. He stared at them all for several seconds and then said, "The shuttle is gone. There's scorch marks next to where she sat. It looks like she was destroyed in the battle."

Going nowhere again, eh Wind Child.

Her usual destination, and as it was the last time, she was not going by herself.

I'm sorry, Kathryn. I don't think I can keep my promise.

Rayna pushed away memories of her lover. They were like hot coals in her brain, burning, tormenting, driving her mad.

Think, she commanded, use your brain as more than a buttress for your skull bones.

They needed to signal the ships. Communicators wouldn't work

"We could get on the hull and fire off our phasers." Harry Kim seemed to be following her thoughts despite the fact that she hadn't given voice to them.

Gilmore was once more examining her tricorder. "I don't know if they would see them over the dampening field. Their energy output is miniscule in comparison."

We could always just jump off and hope for the best.

Of course, the gravity well created by the PK would pull them along in its wake, like the tail of a comet. Still if it was a choice between dying while doing nothing or dying while attempting something, Rayna would always choose the latter.

Just beyond her companions, hovering near the hatchway to the outside, her idiot Bronard had reappeared. It was ugly as ever, and twice as useless. Swimming down the empty corridor, using emptiness in place of water, it drew near enough to touch.

But Rayna was in no mood to commune.

Why don't you do something useful? Tell me if Kathryn is all right. While you're at it, let Voyager know we're alive.

Of course it did nothing. Hallucinations couldn't be bothered with utility. As seconds passed it faded from view.

"Well, I vote we jump." Rayna tossed out her suggestion. She'd never wanted to live forever anyway.

"What's happening?" Janeway stared at the viewscreen incredulously. She'd half risen from her command chair, unable to accept the scene playing out before their eyes. Without warning the dire machine had suddenly veered off and accelerated to warp speed. More unbelievable was what caused it: the silvery outline of a Constitution Class Cruiser.

Wounded to her death, venting plasma like an arterial bleed, the *Constellation* had appeared directly in front of the monster. Unbelievably, she opened fire just a bolt or two, then she darted away as if on wings, trailing vapor behind. The planet killer accepted the bait. They'd all been stunned into a stupor by the sight.

Luckily, Tuvok was completely unaffected, at least he sounded so. "The planet killer has reached warp 7...warp 8..."

"Go after it." Janeway forced the order past her ground teeth. "Match speed and heading. Mr. Farley," she directed her next to Operations, "can you figure out where it's going?"

The younger man studied his readings, pressed a few keys, studied again. "Just beyond this planetary system, there's an area of severe gravimetric instability." He straightened, meeting her grey eyes with worried brown ones. "Based on the figures here, it appears to be a black hole."

"The Talaxians mentioned one," Chakotay said, glancing at her. His brown eyes were deeply troubled and filled with a kind of awe.

She felt it too, in what miniscule portion of her soul that could still feel. They were bearing witness to something that truly defied explanation, yet was utterly undeniable.

It's like a will of the wisp.

In Ireland, legends spoke of a ghostly light that lured travelers into dark bogs, where they became ensnared in mud and suffocated.

The *Constellation* was doing an expert imitation.

The rest of the fleet reported in and took up flanking positions to *Voyager*. Chatter between the ships expressed disbelief and confusion, but they followed. Somewhere inside her numb heart, Janeway knew that it was nice to have companions, at long last. Only she would no longer have...

Don't think.

She'd become quite good at intercepting thoughts and crushing them. Years of denial had come to her aid now, allowing her to still function even though her heart no longer beat. If only this battle would last forever, then she would never have to face the loss of Rayna.

"Matt, where's your crew?" The comm system came alive without warning. The disembodied voice echoed off consoles with hollow, other-worldly sounds.

"On the third planet." Grief and bitterness rendered the words putrid with self-loathing.

Decker.

Janeway understood his pain all too well.

"There is no third planet." It had to be Kirk. From the reports contained in the old databases, only Kirk and Montgomery Scott beamed over to the *Constellation*.

An anguished wail caused them all to hold their ears. The sound grew, becoming a razor of noise that pierced the ear drums. "Don't you think I know that? There was, but not anymore. They called me. They begged me for help, four hundred of them. I couldn't. I couldn't." Decker broke into sobs that were worse than the wail had been.

Poor man...

Silence took over, but it was different. Her scrunched eyelids opened; her hands left her ears. The Bridge was dark. Shadows hung about like shrouds over furniture in a house long ago forsaken by the living. It was cold, worse, even, than Tau Ceti Prime. Janeway saw her breath hang in the air, crystallize, then sprinkle like snow to the floor.

"I lost my crew." The voice made her turn. There he stood, golden uniform, braids gleaming in the faint illumination. He was pale, bloodless. His grey hair clung to his scalp as soaked in a thousand years of sweat. Only his eyes, bloodshot and maniacal, held any semblance of life.

"Commodore," Janeway whispered.

"I lost my crew." If grief could be made palpable, if it could pulverize bones from its very weight, that was the depth of sadness contained in his words.

Though she was only a phantom of her former self, though Rayna's loss had crippled her, Janeway stirred from despair to offer what little comfort she could. "It wasn't your fault. You made the best decision you could under the circumstances."

Would that such absolution applied to you, Katie...

Tears leaked from Decker's ghostly eyes, became wisps of fog that danced upon the currents of air. Long did those orbs hold her fast with their steady regard, then the image melted into darkness. From it emerged a great fish, like a shark, but uglier. Eight black-button eyes stared at her through the gloom. Row upon row of jagged teeth ringed its mouth. In the background she could hear the distant sound of waves.

She'd never seen its like before, and yet, there was something familiar about it. Something Rayna had said...

"It is a sea predator native to Delta, not unlike your sharks, only with less brain and more teeth."

"A Bronard." Janeway stepped toward the apparition, but it was too late. The thing was gone.

Voyager's Bridge glowed once more in multicolored splendor.

"Captain?" Chakotay was standing near her elbow. He looked worried. "*Captain?*" more insistently, now.

"I'm fine." She waved him off and took several steps toward the viewscreen. The planet killer still sped away.

Rayna saw one of those creatures on the holodeck.

Hope ignited an ember in her heart, bringing heat and light to the barren darkness.

Chakotay followed her forward, but his brown eyes were surveying an area just to the starboard of the Helm. Dark brows lowered. Full lips thinned.

"They're still alive," they said together, though Janeway could not for her life understand why he would be so convinced.

"Did you..." she let the question fade. One look into his eyes told her that he knew, somehow, just as she did.

Answers could come later. "Lieutenant Paris." She found him already looking at her expectantly. "Prep the Delta Flyer. You're going to lead a rescue party."

Confusion dotted his features, but he rose without questions and exited the Bridge.

Tuvok was, however, another matter entirely. "Captain, given recent events, the odds that the Away Team survived are approximately 343,000 to 1."

"The odds are wrong." Janeway retook her seat.

Chakotay followed. "She's right," he confirmed, his voice brooking no further argument. "Bridge to Lieutenant Torres. Meet Paris in the shuttle bay."

"Aye sir." There was likewise no argument from Torres.

Leaning slightly toward her, Chakotay explained, "A little extra engineering ingenuity might be useful."

"Not to mention a little Klingon muscle." Janeway somehow managed to keep from pacing. She wanted to. Bleeding off some of the adrenaline that caused her heartbeat to slipstream would feel so good. But captains could not display agitation.

Pre-flight sequences were completed and the *Flyer* launched. She watched it dart away, disappearing into the silhouette of the planet killer.

The rest of her crew were poised at their posts. Not one of them questioned her judgment...a fact which might have changed if they knew she was following a mirage.

Even if it is a fool's errand, we would rather be fools than spectators.

Though she had never really believed in the divine, Janeway asked the universe for mercy now. Given what she'd witnessed in recent days, she was willing to concede that there were forces at work beyond her understanding.

She just hoped they would be strong enough to turn the tide.

Lieutenant Thomas Eugene Paris angled the *Delta Flyer* toward the planet killer delicately, as if approaching an elephant's backside trying to avoid its tail. Compared to this thing, the *Flyer* could more properly be called, "the *Gnat*." He lightly nudged the joystick to port, avoiding one of the larger rocks caught in the monster's wake.

He heard B'Elanna suck in a gulp of air. "That's some good flying, Tom," she complimented, and he flushed with pride.

"Yeah, well, Captain Proton has an image to maintain." His fingers tapped across the control panel, slowing their forward motion a tad. "Of course," he griped, "this isn't exactly what I would have picked for a landing field."

"That's for sure," Torres agreed. She was manning the Ops station, a place Harry normally occupied.

Don't worry, buddy. We're coming.

Gravimetric shift caused the *Flyer* to sway and rock. Tom compensated, but barely. "I don't know how Harry managed to navigate close enough to drop off the Away Team, much less land on the surface." He sucked in both lips as he focused on flying.

Torres called back, "He's a right fair pilot, you know. On the other hand, he wasn't trying to make his landing while traveling at warp speed."

Yeah, well, that's for sure.

"Tom?" Her inquisitive tone let him know that Torres had something serious in mind. "What do you think that is?"

"That" was probably the gleaming phantasm that looked a lot like the *Constellation*.

"I dunno." He'd asked himself that question a dozen times already. "Could be a temporal anomaly, maybe a time-space distortion."

Then again it could be a ghost.

Like your mother?

Yeah. Like his mother. Tom didn't linger there. He was still wrestling with what he'd seen and experienced on the holodeck. One thing was certain though, it was nice to hear that his mother was proud. Even if it was an illusion, or an alien trick, or a fluke of photons...it was nice to hear that.

Torres' next comment pulled him back to the present. "And while we're on the topic, what makes Janeway and Chakotay so damned certain the Away Team is alive?"

He wished he could turn around to see her serious brown eyes. They were so beautiful, especially when she was deep in thought. Before he could open his mouth, she continued to speak.

"Don't get me wrong."

She was going to make sure he knew that she was 100% on board with the mission.

Torres didn't disappoint him. "I would land on the worst demon planet sitting in the middle of a quantum singularity, perched on the head of a quasar to rescue a teammate. It's just...weird that they are so certain."

"Yeah," he agreed thoughtfully.

For the next instant or so, he was occupied with fine tuning their approach. They were going to be tight on time.

"How long do we have?" Even with the dampening field, his instrument panel was already registering the presence of the hole. Distant darkness had gained...weight...somehow, nothing like the wastes between stars...no...it was a thicker, denser kind of night.

"One hour until we reach the event horizon." Torres tone said it all.

The Event Horizon of a black hole was the point of no return. Light could not escape. What happened beyond it was invisible to an outside observer; anything sent toward the hole disappeared from view when it crossed this threshold.

In short, Tommy me lad, you don't wanna go there.

They'd disembarked from *Voyager* a little less than two hours ago. The *Flyer* was fast, and

maneuverable, but trying to negotiate an approach like this at warp was no joke. It took absolute precision.

Fortunately, Janeway had dispatched the best pilot in Starfleet, if he did say so himself.

The planet killer suddenly began to get much larger, much more quickly.

"B'Elanna?" he called back to her.

"I don't know. It's slowing down." Her growl of displeasure still managed to warm parts of his anatomy.

He quickly recalibrated their approach, compensating for the reduced speed. Ahead, he would see that the "*Constellation*" had disappeared.

"Now what?" he asked no one in particular.

"We are decelerating." Seven's report was more unwelcome than a cargo bay full of tribbles on a Klingon warbird. "My sensors have detected a change in the pitch and yaw of the deck."

Rayna merely shook her head in resignation. As always Fortune was a fickle bitch, like the sea, she was as likely to drown you as wash you ashore.

"Why?" Ensign Kim was quite frustrated, from the volume of his question.

How should she know?

Apparently Seven's cool glare was sufficient to silence further unanswerable questions, because the young man spun around and slammed his fist into the bulkhead. His cry of pain was loud and sharp.

Probably cracked a knuckle with that impact.

Being blind, however, was enough to make a Vulcan uneasy. "Seven," Rayna began. "Do you think it would be safe for you to jack into the planet killer a second time?"

Crystalline eyes of purest azure fixed her with a piercing stare. Then, "I do not know. What is it you hope to accomplish?"

"At the very least we might find out what is going on."

The answer seemed to satisfy Seven, for she immediately extended her tubules and reconnected with the machine. Her eyes glazed over, blinked, then, "Navigational hazard detected. Secure from battle mode. Reroute to nearest fuel."

"Son of a bitch," Gilmore's epithet voiced the sentiments in Rayna's hearts.

"We've got to do something." Harry Kim was frantically researching the limited data in his tricorder. "Seven..." He looked up suddenly. "Instead of using your nanoprobe to interface with it, program them to destroy the connection with the forward navigational sensors. Blind it."

Brilliant.

Rayna flashed Mr. Kim an appraising look. There was more to him than met the eye. It was a lesson she was coming to realize about everyone on *Voyager*.

"That is possible," Seven slowly answered. "However, it will require several minutes for the nanoprobe to reach the circuits and to replicate the numbers necessary to successfully sever the connection."

"Do it." Ordering was not something to which Rayna was accustomed. However, this was now the role in which she'd been cast. The least she could do was play her part.

The input terminal turned a silvery-grey. Tiny arms sprouted around it until it was identical to the implant just in front of Seven's right ear. Rayna had always thought it looked like a Terran starfish.

The ex-Borg removed her tubules. "It is done."

Now all we have to do is find a way to aim it.

"Hey!"

The shout came over all their commlinks, and made everyone start.

"Look behind you!" Lieutenant Paris' jubilant shout came from the hatchway. Looking, Rayna saw that he was hanging half-in the opening, waving his suited arm like a fiend.

"Woohoo!" Harry whooped and sprinted toward his friend, no mean feat in a spacesuit. "Boy am I glad to see you, buddy."

"Likewise," Paris replied and grinned at them all. "How the devil did you land on this rock, Harry? It's worse than flying blind in a nebula." He reached an arm down and helped his friend climb out. "B'Elanna's in the *Flyer*." Gilmore was lifted out next. "We need to hurry." His last statement was accompanied by a crooked grin and a helpful hand to Rayna.

How is this possible?

Even as they navigated their way to the shuttle, entered the ramp, removed their SEWGs and strapped in for lift off, she was flabbergasted. How could they have come here? And why?

"Is the Captain all right?" her question was posed coolly, but her hearts boomed so loudly that she thought everyone must hear them.

Torres gave her a friendly look and said, "Yes. Geelon wouldn't let her beam aboard."

Likely that development had gone over like a backwash from the lavatories. Rayna carefully hid her wicked smile, and asked, "Did he survive?"

It was Paris who answered, "Yes, ma'am. We beamed him out at the last second." He headed up to the cockpit.

Through the transparent aluminum windows, she saw *Voyager*, shining like a miniature star. She was the most beautiful sight Rayna had ever beheld, for within those gleaming bulkheads was Kathryn.

You are absolutely besotted.

Yes she was, and grateful to be so, but business was not yet over.

"Seven has sabotaged the main sensor array," she told Paris quickly. "Do you think you might persuade it to follow you?"

"You mean to the hole?" He whistled silently. "Probably, but it's going to be a rough ride. There's only one speed and trajectory to safely circle a black hole. Too slow and you spiral inward until you're flattened. Too fast, and we'll be slingshot halfway to nowhere."

Harry Kim had taken up the Operations post. Lieutenant Torres had moved to the science station. Without the barrier of the SEWG, Rayna was once more assaulted by all the emotions of her teammates: fear, hope, desperation, courage. They were an amazing lot. It was quite humbling to be part of them.

Part of them...

Belonging was something to ponder on a day less eventful.

They lifted off. Paris did not attempt to escape the construct's gravity by fighting it. He spiraled round the thing's circumference, building up speed before shooting from the front of the creature.

The aft phasers fired. They did nothing, of course. Rayna was reminded of when they were using hand phasers against Vaadwaur battle armor. Unfortunately the planet killer didn't seem to even notice.

...Which it should. We knocked out long range navigation, not tactical sensors. Our weapons aren't powerful enough.

From out of nowhere, at least a dozen ships blazed past, all of them firing something. *Voyager* led them, shitting photon torpedoes from her ass faster than a Boleyn with diarrhea. There were green bolts from Vaadwaur particle cannons and some sort of blue crap from the other ships, Talaxian, probably.

If it won't follow now, Seven did too good a job on fragging its innards.

"OK," Paris announced. "We have liftoff."

We had that several minutes ago.

It must have been another slang term of which humans were so fond. Rayna could scarcely keep them all straight in her head. Glancing at the Operations display, she saw that the huge machine was, indeed, following them.

To the fore, the darkness had begun to bend. There was no other way to describe it. Tiny particles of dust glittered enough to outline the empty space at the center. It was the second time she'd seen one of these, and it was as awesome as the first. Here was a creature with an appetite even more ravenous than that of the planet killer.

Feed it a thousand times, and still it hungers.

The fleet veered off, except for *Voyager*. It guided them onward in a graceful dance between death and devastation.

They still fired phasers, as if to maintain the planet killer's interest. It was a good idea, Rayna reckoned. Something that ate worlds was bound to have a short attention span. If it grew bored, it might go looking for lunch.

Now they couldn't see past the curves ahead. The great, black mouth opened wide to swallow them.

"Hold on," Tom cried out and pulled up on his control.

The centrifugal force was tremendous. Her endocrine system responded to the powerful forces, dumping enough endorphins into her system that Rayna almost climaxed. The *Delta Flyer* groaned from the stresses pulling against it. She saw the shimmering blue of the structural integrity field initiate. Things became heavier, and heavier still.

Where was *Voyager*?

She couldn't see anything but the endless black, felt nothing but the tremendous, unrelenting pull.

And just as suddenly, things eased. Oh she was still remarkably heavy. The hole's gravity was much greater than Federation norm, but there was not that horrible feeling that she was being stretched and twisted.

"We've achieved orbit." Paris' voice was relieved. "I can't see anything until we swing back around."

Rayna held her breath.

"*Voyager to Delta Flyer.*" It was Kathryn's voice. An instant later, her sweet face appeared on the viewscreen. "Is everyone all right?"

"Aye, Captain," Torres replied. "All crewmen are present and accounted for." The Klingon vixen's eyes swung over to meet Rayna's. Understanding passed between them. "What about the planet killer?"

"Swallowed whole." Traces of Kathryn's wry wit shone through. "Pardon the pun. We're in a parallel orbit with you. We'll swing out and rejoin the fleet. Then you can dock. Well done," grey eyes passed over them, but lingered on Rayna, "all of you."

"Thank you, Captain. We'll see you in a jiffy." Paris swung his chair around to grin at them all.

Harry Kim jumped up and hugged his teammate, laughing like someone who had lost his wits. The whole craft was flooded with joy, relief, humility, and gratitude. Rayna leaned back into her seat and closed her eyes. Here was a moment worth savoring. So she did.

It's over.

Kathryn Janeway listened to the turbolift doors as they hissed closed. "Deck Three," she requested. Her voice sounded thick with weariness, even to her own ears. The 'lift began to move.

Seven hours, fifty-two minutes had passed since the planet killer was destroyed. She had been in the hangar deck when the *Delta Flyer* returned, saw with her own eyes that everyone was well.

It was all so ethereal, more like a dream than a memory.

You're just tired, Katie.

Oh yes. She was exhausted, physically, emotionally...seeing Rayna, alive, stepping out of the shuttle with all the cockiness of a young fighter pilot...feeling the touch of those ebony eyes, so deep, so endless...it had almost undone her. All the tension held within had snapped free. Tears had reached the edges of her eyelids. And Rayna, ever perceptive had immediately pulled a textbook "attention," and reported in. This even as her dark gaze warmed with emotion.

They had bolstered one another. It gave Janeway the wherewithal to finish out her day. The Talaxians had decided to join the fleet rather than reestablishing the colony. She made sure that

Neelix and Naomi were safely back onboard, and thanked the Vaadwaur for their assistance. On and on it went.

A shift in temperature made her straighten from her slouch against the back wall. The 'lift had grown noticeably cooler, but was not frigid. Gloom settled close, like the folds of a caftan. Shadow and light interwove until they gained form, but not solidity. It was Decker. Gone were the whiskers that made him appear unkempt. His uniform was smart with creases. The braid-work glistened as if made of polished brass. "Commodore," he greeted.

No longer were his eyes shot with blood or wild with grief. They were calm, tired, and completely sane.

"Sir," she replied.

He pulled himself up straight, arms locked at his side, head erect, and asked, "Request permission to leave, ma'am."

And she understood. His task was completed. He was ready, at long last, to rest. All he needed was permission to disembark. Mustering what little remained of her command persona, Janeway nodded to him. "Permission granted, Commodore. Warp speed." The traditional farewell seemed right to add.

Decker nodded one last time and slid backward into shadow. She was left with a feeling of melancholy peace, as if something great had been lost, but not lost in vain.

The turbolift stopped. Its doors opened. There in the hallway was a familiar rectangle of illumination. Beckoning like the lighthouses of old, it marked the entrance to a harbor.

Your harbor.

Janeway stepped out, feeling every step sink just slightly into carpet. Music drifted past. The tune was alien, but familiar, bringing to mind ships, and sea, and salty breezes.

A shadow fell, and Rayna stepped forth. She wore the flowing white gown from the birthday dinner. It framed her figure in translucent silk. Bare feet slid soundlessly across the deck, bringing the woman nearer.

"Captain?"

It was a code, a secret communication that bounded their personal and professional relationships. Depending on how Janeway answered, their conversation would shift.

"Rayna." Tonight was not professional. The lump in her throat precluded it.

Her lover held out one, delicate hand. Janeway accepted the invitation, entwining their fingers into a tapestry of warm flesh. She was pulled inside. The door schnicked shut.

"Good evening, Kathryn." Another secret phrase...simple words that said so much more than the sum of their syllables.

"It's closer to..." Emotion surged upward, blocking her windpipe. Her voice broke. Janeway struggled to breathe in, but it was as if she were sucking air through a pinhole.

Arms pulled her into the softness of Rayna's embrace. Both of them trembled.

"...to goodnight," Rayna whispered into her hair, completing the ritual. Kisses fell upon her hair like the gentle rains of spring.

How long they remained rooted, she could not say, long enough that her throat opened once more, and the wetness staining her cheeks had dried. Still, Janeway did not pull back, merely buried her face into the softness of Rayna's shoulder.

She had finally come home.

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