

# ~ The Labyrinth ~

by Trekgrl

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Notes:

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

Rayna Merris is an original character.

This story has been kicking around my hard drive for the last couple years. It's actually the beginning of an arc of stories centering on Janeway and an original character. If you're expecting an immediate hop into bed between two women, this is not the story for you. On the other hand, they will eventually end up in bed, so if that offends you or you aren't over eighteen, please don't read the series.

This story takes place after "Equinox" and "Fair Haven," and makes references to those episodes.

I do acknowledge the friendship between Chakotay and Janeway. There was an undercurrent of attraction in the series, and I acknowledge that as well. Please don't think for one moment that Chakotay, in anyway, has a romantic role to play. He doesn't. He is too weak a character to match Janeway, IMO.

Constructive criticism and good wishes can be sent to:  
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**If it weren't for my beta-reader, 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.**

Translation for the Klingon curse word "QI'yaH can be found here:  
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8853/curse.html>

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*"Captain's Log  
Stardate: 53259.2*

*The last twenty-three days of travel have been through a veritable quagmire of navigational hazards. Gravitational anomalies and pockets of unstable, pre-nebula gas have slowed our progress to a crawl. There is no sign of its end, and many of the crew are on edge. Adding to the stress is the rapid approach of our sixth anniversary in the Delta Quadrant.*

*Ship's stores are still at acceptable levels, but we will need to replenish them once we clear this section of space. Mr. Paris has nicknamed it The Labyrinth. The name has become accepted*

*among the crew.*

*Despite the tedious circumstances, the former crewmembers of the USS Equinox appear to be adapting to life on Voyager. Most are receiving superior performance appraisals."*

Janeway ended her dictation and set aside the PADD containing ship's evaluations. Six years... Her gaze drifted to the observation window. Tendrils of faintly glowing vapor streamed past. Beyond them lay the endless darkness of the deep. A sip of her forgotten coffee confirmed that it was cold. She'd been drinking too much of it anyway. Leaving half a cup would probably do her good.

Her communicator demanded her attention. "Captain," Chakotay's gentle tenor called. "We need you on the bridge."

She swept past the rounded edge of her desk and exited her Ready Room. On the Bridge, all eyes faced forward in an atmosphere charged with excitement. Janeway followed the rapt gazes of her crew. The viewscreen was filled with objects of varying size and shape. Some seemed to reflect the surrounding stars, gleaming with brilliant points of light; others were silhouetted by it, like shadows given form.

"Magnify." Janeway took her seat in the command chair as the images abruptly enlarged.

Starships. Hundreds of them.

A twinge of adrenaline quickened her pulse. There were vessels of every size and shape imaginable. Some were vaguely recognizable. Many were inexpressibly alien. Only one thing gave them commonality: none functioned. They hung in the empty darkness as lifeless as the void around them. She shrugged off the chill which had stolen down her spine.

"Slow to one quarter impulse power," she instructed. "Sensors?"

"No energy patterns, Captain." Tuvok's even voice was soothing to her ears. "They appear to be derelicts."

Chakotay broke the ensuing silence. "I've heard legends, but never believed them." He glanced at her, shaking his head. "A graveyard in space..."

She knew the emotions fueling his awe. It was time, however, to dispel them. "Explanation?"

"None," Harry Kim responded. "I can't pick up any phenomena which could have drawn them here, especially through the Labyrinth. They're just...here."

*Curiouser and curiouser.*

The Lewis Carroll quotation seemed apropos under the circumstances. Janeway frowned into the mystery of this place. Her mind formulated and discarded a dozen theories in the span of a

breath. "It doesn't make sense," she voiced the thought aloud, to no one in particular.

*Enough.*

"Mr. Tuvok," she assumed her command voice. "Scan for Federation vessels." Her glance stole to Chakotay. "We might get lucky and salvage some spare parts."

"Scanning," Tuvok confirmed. "There is residual interference from the surrounding nebulae. One Romulan Warbird, extensive damage. A Cardassian vessel, Hideki Class-

The sudden beeping of sensors snapped Janeway's head around.

Tuvok's face had not changed, but there was a newfound tension in his stance. "Stasis tube, Captain. Operational. Unable to determine the status of the occupant." One dark brow raised as he met her eyes. "Our sensors are being jammed."

"Origin," Janeway frowned at him.

"The stasis tube, itself."

That took her aback. Her eyes once more turned toward the viewscreen. Curiouser, indeed. "Why would someone put themselves in stasis, and then not wish to be found?"

"Perhaps they wished to be found only by Cardassians," Commander Chakotay offered his opinion. An edge of anger tinged the edges of his voice. The bronzed man once lead a cell of the Maquis, a group of resisters or terrorists depending on who was doing the talking at the time. The former colonists resented their homes being turned over to the Cardassian Union; some resented the Federation even more for having turned them over.

"That is probable," her Security Chief agreed. "I cannot isolate its registry, but conformation is consistent with vessels in service approximately eight to ten years ago."

"Before the peace treaty," Janeway mused. She drew in a long breath. "Lock on stasis tube and beam to Cargo Bay One. Commander Tuvok, report to that location with a security team." At her nod, Chakotay joined the dark Vulcan as he entered the turbolift. "Bridge to Sickbay. Doctor report to Cargo Bay One."

"Understood," the Emergency Medical Hologram replied in a crisp, abrupt tone.

"All stop. Hold position." Her order sent Lt. Paris' fingers in motion, bringing Voyager to a stand still, the only light among a sea of lifeless ships.

The bridge had become a flurry of orchestrated chaos. Harry Kim was running a search for any Cardassian vessels reported missing by the Union at the end of the war. Miscellaneous crewmen manned instrument panels, alternately making adjustments and coordinating scanning patterns. Lt. Ayala had replaced Chakotay. He was a lean, watchful man. Despite his relative youth,

Janeway had learned to trust his common-sense approach to command. Right now Ayala was frowning slightly.

"Lieutenant," she prompted.

Cerulean blue eyes met hers for a moment. "If we sent a team over, we might be able to access their logs. It's worth a shot."

"Good idea." Janeway was already nodding. "Assemble a boarding party."

The former Maquis tapped his Comm-Badge and started the process.

She smoothed an errant strand of auburn hair back from her eyes, and tried to settle in the command seat. There was something haunting about this place, something more than the silent wrecks floating outside. Janeway could not pinpoint the source of her unrest. Certainly, she'd seen her share of destruction, not on this scale, nor involving such a myriad variety of crafts, admittedly, but still...

"Tuvok to Captain Janeway."

"Go ahead," she was grateful for the interruption.

"The stasis tube has been successfully beamed aboard." A strained note laced the undercurrent of his voice. "Its occupant is not a Cardassian." He hesitated, "Captain, perhaps you should report to this location."

Janeway was already in motion. She turned the conn over to Lt. Ayala and entered the turbolift.

Cargo Bay 1 loomed into her view like a cavern designed by Picasso. Cool silver walls clashed sharply with the gold and blue uniforms buzzing about. In the center, the stasis tube seemed almost sedate, despite the orange diodes flickering on its front. Janeway strode over to her Security Chief without pause. Commander Chakotay and The Doctor followed her lead.

"Report."

"The tube contains what appears to be a Deltan female." The dark Vulcan appeared to her eyes as almost too controlled.

*Small wonder.* Janeway could have been knocked over with a zephyr of breeze. In the middle of uncharted space, inside an alien vessel, was - a Federation citizen.

"Actually," the Doctor interjected, "her physiology contains both Deltan and Orion genome characteristics."

"You've got to be kidding. Of course you're not." She waved away his objections, turning her attention to the tube's occupant.

The woman was painfully thin. Parchment-like flesh stretched over a delicately shaped skull. She was bald, like her Deltan ancestors. Two pale brows contrasted sharply with the angry looking bruises around her eyes. A half-healed scar marred one side of her elfin features. Even so, she was beautiful.

*What happened to you?* Janeway wondered.

She turned back to her crewmen. "Have you identified her?"

At that, all three exchanged tight glances.

*Uh-oh, Kathryn. I expect the surprises have only just begun.*

It was Chakotay who answered. "Her Intradermal Transponder Tag registers as Quasia Rahl, Counselor, USS Saladin."

Glacial realization stole over her nerve endings. Two years before Voyager was commissioned, the Saladin had limped home, warp core jettisoned, her captain and two security officers dead. Lt. Rahl had been found to be a Cardassian spy, caught relaying information to the enemy. She'd been arrested and imprisoned in the Saladin's brig, but had escaped, killing two security officers in the process. The woman then hunted down Captain Shin Fong, brutally stabbed him to death and escaped in a ship's shuttle. Everyone in Starfleet had been stunned by the incident.

Fury replaced shock. "Are you certain she isn't Cardassian?" Her head whipped toward the EMH. Seska had appeared Bajoran, after all.

"Without a doubt."

At the question which formed in her eyes he continued, "For one thing, I have scanned her physiology and it is clearly that of a Deltan/Orion cross. For another, the pheromone levels inside this tube, cold sleep or no, are high enough to cause an immediate, embarrassing sexual response in all parties save Commander Tuvok and myself. She's not Cardassian."

Janeway's eyes stabbed toward her security chief. "Can we confirm identity independent of the ITT?" It was doubtful. She knew that before asking. Voyager didn't keep DNA on every member of the fleet, even on those accused of treason and murder.

Tuvok did not immediately reply. For the first time, she noticed the tautness of his jaw. "What is it?"

The dark-skinned Vulcan stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Captain, unless I am mistaken, I know this woman, and her name is decidedly not Quasia Rahl." Muddy eyes intersected hers. Without further words, Janeway knew that her old friend had much to say, and that here was not where he wished to say it.

She slapped her communicator. "Senior officers report to the Briefing Room." Closing the link, she continued. "Chakotay, post armed officers at the Cargo Bay door. Doctor, gather as much medical information as you can and join us in five minutes." A twitch of her head brought Tuvok to her side as she strode toward the exit. It was time for answers.

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When Janeway reached the conference room, the assembled officers were already involved in a heated discussion. She silenced them with an imperious look. Everyone sat. Moments later the Doctor joined them.

"Is it true?" Lt. Tom Paris demanded. Eyes of Caribbean blue flashed with anger. "Captain Shin was one of my instructors at the Academy. He was a good man."

Janeway held up a hand to silence him, then briefed all assembled on what was known about the woman's identity at present. "Wait," her command voice stifled the impending outburst from B'Elanna Torres. "Tuvok, you made an incredible statement earlier. Please explain it now."

His expert fingers rapidly entered data into a PADD, and the room's console displayed a picture of Lt. Rahl. It was a younger and softer face, but definitely that of their unwanted guest. Her Starfleet record scrolled past too quickly to read as Tuvok's data recall continued. Another image joined the first. This woman had skin the color of fresh limes and startlingly pink eyes. Snow white hair cascaded to her shoulders. Despite the physical differences, and the look of unbridled rakishness in her expression, it, too, was that of the tube's occupant. Janeway's eyebrows slammed downward in a frown.

"Shadiyah Vas," Tuvok announced almost casually. "An Orion Ornament..."

*What the hell?* Ornaments were highly prized in Orion culture. They trained for years in various forms of entertainment, including music, conversation and sex. Bound to upper class Orion families, Ornaments were rarely seen by outsiders.

And still Tuvok was not finished. The Vulcan tapped his PADD once again and brought up a third picture. Here the skin tone was a vibrant gold, and black eyes looked out from beneath silvery-white brows. Her head, once more, was hairless. Though she wore a Starfleet uniform, there was no rank insignia or colors beyond gray and black. It was the same woman.

"Commander Rayna Merris." Tuvok lowered his hands to the conference table. "Starfleet Intelligence."

One second passed. Two.

"How did she get recruited into Starfleet?" Chakotay queried.

"Who cares?" Paris interrupted. His voice was colored in crimson shades of anger. "Whoever she is, the Saladin was still sabotaged. Captain Shin and the others are still dead. And she..." he

stabbed a finger toward the screen. "...still has to pay for her crimes."

"If she committed them."

Tuvok's quiet response phased the hot-headed lieutenant not at all. "Are you saying she didn't," he challenged.

The Vulcan's regard was unwavering. "No. I am merely pointing out that according to Federation Law, she is considered innocent until her guilt is proven."

Janeway studied her Security Chief. "But you believe her to be innocent."

"Belief is not a function of logic, Captain." Murky eyes met hers and held for a moment before sliding to Commander Chakotay. "She joined Starfleet intelligence after the Cardassian raid on Uvidia Tyr, a Deltan colony. Most of her kin-group, including her mother and two half-brothers, were killed. I find it improbable that she would willingly spy for that species."

"How is it you know so much about her?" Lt. Torres raised the question foremost in Janeway's mind.

At first it appeared that Tuvok would not answer. He steepled his fingers and stared into nothingness for long moments. "We spent 2.4 years on Romulus gathering intelligence."

*Just when I thought we were finished with surprises.* Janeway's mind was filled with new questions. Before she would give them voice, her comm badge beeped.

"Ayala to Janeway."

"Go ahead Lieutenant," she replied, almost grateful for the distraction. It gave her time to quiet her racing thoughts.

"We've managed to download a portion of the ship's log, but it's encrypted."

*Why does that figure?*

She acknowledged his message and caught Harry Kim's eye. "When we're finished, meet the Away Team and begin with data extraction. Seven will assist you."

Both crewmen nodded.

Tuvok's guarded and controlled behavior had not escaped her notice. Her old friend was never reluctant to share relevant information without good reason. Janeway decided further discussion on his relationship with Commander Merris would be best conducted in private.

"Doctor," she called for his attention. "Patient status."

The EMH was gazing intently at the images still displayed on the room's display. "My initial assessment of her condition does not support a cozy relationship with the Cardassians. She has multiple bruises and hairline fractures, so she was beaten. Some of the injuries are fresher than others, indicating that more than one beating was administered. There are also histamine skin reactions are consistent with the application of a neural pain inducer."

"She was tortured?" This information sent Janeway's thoughts caterwauling.

He finally turned back toward the table. The total absence of his normal sardonic demeanor spoke more eloquently than words as to the woman's condition. "Tortured, starved, probably raped. I can't confirm the last without a full examination, but there are injuries to her sexual organs."

Torres breathed out a Klingon curse.

*My sentiments exactly.* Janeway remembered all too well her treatment while in Cardassian hands. Her rescue had come swiftly enough to spare her any violation.

The EMH continued his report. "In addition, she has deep, vertical lacerations on both wrists, more than likely self-inflicted. I imagine that the resulting exsanguination necessitated placement in stasis, unless Cardassian vessels habitually maintain a stock of Deltan/Orion blood." His brown eyes flickered round the table. "Ironically, she cannot remain in stasis much longer."

"Why?" Chakotay beat her to the punch.

"Because she's dying. The fact is she was put in a Cardassian sleep tube, and she's not Cardassian. In the eight odd years since she was put there, her blood toxicity has increased by 10%. It's now at critical levels."

Janeway looked at each of her officers in turn. Chakotay's bronze face betrayed his conflicted emotions, but she knew him. He would not favor leaving their guest to die. Tuvok was unreadable as ever, despite the cloud of unease that hovered about him. The rest, except for Lt. Paris, looked confused.

Commander Merris' frail features winked into her mind's eye. So much pain to be born by one so fragile seeming...

*She deserves a chance to defend herself. I have no right to sentence her to death.*

*Oh really.* The devil's advocate inside her head began its diatribe. *In case you've forgotten, Katie-dear, that is exactly what you did with Crewman Lessing. Remember him?*

Ensign Kim's voice granted her a brief respite. "You said she suffered severe blood loss. Won't she need a transfusion?"

"Yes." The Doctor seemed to know where Kim was going. "Unfortunately, we only have a few



units of Deltan blood on hand. Since she is at least part Orion-

"Half," supplied Tuvok.

"Whatever." There was the first trace of the EMH's customarily abrasive personality. "-her body may well reject it."

*So she could die anyway.* Nothing was ever simple anymore.

"Move the tube to Sickbay and proceed, Doctor." Her eyes swept to Tuvok. "I want a full security detail present at all times. Commander," she addressed her first officer, "I'll need you to oversee and coordinate the salvage teams. Get what you can. We have no idea how large the Labyrinth is."

"Will do," Chakotay assured her.

"Mr. Tuvok, you're with me. The rest of you, dismissed."

Though Paris seemed none too pleased, he left with the others.

Janeway found herself unable to sit. She walked toward the console, studying the images displayed. Rahl, Vas, Merris...all were strikingly lovely. All possessed a high forehead and piercing regard. Who was she really? How had this woman ended up here? How was it that in all the vast reaches of the Delta Quadrant, Voyager had stumbled upon her? What were the odds of that? And what were the odds that there would be someone on board who knew her?

*Someone you trust, Kathryn. Someone you depend on.*

"Please explain your relationship with this woman," Janeway continued to look away. She could tell more by listening to the subtle inflections of Tuvok's voice than by observing his face.

"She saved my life."

A subtle hint of affection unmasked his rigid control. Janeway was not fooled.

"You and she were more than teammates."

"We became friends, Captain." He joined her at the screen.

"And you trust her." Finally, slowly, Janeway turned toward her Vulcan companion. He returned her penetrating gaze.

"I did."

"What if she's guilty?"

Brown eyes hardened with resolve, and at the same time softened with something akin to regret. "Then she will stand the court, and be punished."

Janeway was satisfied for the present. "Agreed. We'll conduct a preliminary investigation. We owe any Federation officer that courtesy." She offered him a grim smile.

Tuvok erased the console's display. "I have uploaded her service record to your PADD."

"Good." Janeway gestured her dismissal. Seconds later, he was gone.

Silence settled on her like a dead man's shroud. *Alone again.*

*What else is new?*

Ruthlessly Janeway suppressed thoughts of self-pity. There was too much to do. She tapped her badge. "Mr. Chakotay have you found any likely targets?"

"We've identified one of the derelicts as an old Scout class, NCC3871, the Magellan." The man's resonant tenor crackled back. "Registry lists her as being lost 47 years ago. She's sustained a massive impact, maybe an asteroid. Sensors indicate her warp core initiated an emergency shut down. It may be intact. We're preparing to beam over."

"Very well." Janeway cut transmission. Outside the room's transparent aluminum windows, she could see a few of the drifting hulks.

*How eerie. Full of phantoms and memories.*

"Sickbay to Captain Janeway."

"Yes Doctor." *So much for solitary contemplation*, she thought wryly.

"We're opening the tube now."

Minutes later, outside Sickbay, she found four armed security guards.

"Why aren't you inside?" Janeway demanded, eyes sparking.

"There's a detail already assigned." The young ensign appeared tense, shifting his weight from foot to foot. She could not for her life think of his name. "Commander Chakotay ordered additional security to guard the entrance."

Janeway gave an absent nod and keyed the door. Inside, her steely gaze took in Tuvok, bent over the biobed. Its occupant was nude. Welts and bruises covered legs, arms and abdomen. The now-sealed wounds on Merris' wrists looked like they had been rips, not cuts. Above the bed, Janeway attempted to decipher the med scan readouts. It didn't take a physician to realize they were dangerously low. Opposite her security chief, the Doctor had hooked tubing to the woman's

arm. Blood the color of an Indiana sunset flowed down it. He administered a hypospray, but there was no effect.

"Report," she asked quietly.

"She's out of stasis. Vitals failing," the EMH's voice crackled with impatience.

"Rayna," Tuvok's voice rumbled beneath the hum of instrumentation. "You know me. The answer you seek is forty seven. Come to harbor, Wind Singer. Bring your vessel home."

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For Rayna, time did not exist, or if it did, it was measured by millennia, not minutes. She sailed through limitless nothing, forever seeking light. Or perhaps she was falling forever, never reaching bottom. In a disassociated way, she reckoned that she should already be there. From nothing to infinity, to infinite light...

A sudden warmth quickened her fall. That was good. Time ran downhill, faster, then faster still.

"Rayna."

A distant voice...calling someone...her? Names were meaningless in the void.

"You know me."

Negative. Don't know. Don't care.

The darkness was pleasant, and her journey almost over. Voices were no longer of importance.

"The answer you seek is forty seven."

Numbers now. How intriguing. Forty seven. She hesitated. There was something familiar about that figure, something both old and comforting. The midnight image of a man with brown velvet eyes painted itself on the canvas of her mind. A crystalline façade of logic over a sea of roiling passion.

"Come to harbor, Wind Singer."

Hope, a forgotten memory of an imaginary time caught her in its gravitational field. She did know him.

"Bring your vessel home."

Tuvok.

*It is simply another game of deception,* hissed part of her awareness. *All that waits for you is*

*pain.*

No. A friend. No other knew that answer, and no other dared call her "Wind Singer."

*I have to go back.*

Stopping her journey proved problematic. Awareness and identity had returned, but her momentum was substantial.

*Why bother? You will have been branded a murderer.*

*Because for him I would give my last breath.*

Her descent slowed, halted and, at length, reversed. Eternity compressed into a single second. Her memories of torture, of violation, the rage of her captain and his vice grip on her neck. They attempted to ensnare her. Almost, almost, they succeeded.

Rayna Merris opened her eyes to the earthen tones of skin and hair that comprised Tuvok's form. She was in a bright, clean place. Weak though she was, the scent of sanitizer was unmistakable. Her hand did not wish to obey, but she forced two fingers to extend, lifting them upward, seeking contact. The dark Vulcan hesitated, which should have told her something, but Rayna's skull was filled with sand. Then he placed complementary digits against hers.

She strained to speak and managed a whisper. "You're getting old." A private jest, from another place and time. Exhaustion's smothering blanket covered her. "Thirty-four," Rayna offered a half smile before the darkness claimed her. "And don't call me Wind Singer."

Tuvok slipped his fingers away from the skeletal remnant of Rayna's hand. The EMH was studying his tricorder. "She's sleeping. Vital signs are low, but stable. I've given her anti-rejection drugs and nutrient shots - human, I'm afraid. We have Deltan blood, but not vitamins. Most of the elements are compatible with her body chemistry, though. Thirty-four?" The Doctor's irascible sense of humor promptly reemerged. "What is that, the number in her kin-group?"

Allowing his eyes to return to Rayna's alabaster face, Tuvok replied, "No." He gave no explanation. There was too much to do, and undoubtedly more questions to answer from his Captain, given the scene she had just witnessed.

Captain Janeway watched the gentle way her Security Chief broke physical contact with this woman he called, 'Rayna.' There had been an intimacy to their exchange, one that far exceeded the closeness of friendship.

*Jealous, Katie? Her inner critic challenged.*

*Hardly.*

But it was disturbing that Tuvok might be concealing information about his relationship to a suspected traitor. She motioned him into the Doctor's private office.

"Mr. Tuvok," Janeway adopted a tone of command, but lowered her voice to respect his privacy. "I think we need to revisit the subject of you and Commander Merris. I can make it an order," she added when he remained stoically silent.

The dark Vulcan's expression did not alter a jot, but she could sense the tension hovering about him like an orbiting starship. His murky eyes lowered, and at length, he answered, "We shared a Pon Farr."

Well, she had suspected that, hadn't she? Still, the reality that Tuvok had committed adultery was not something she could readily wrap her mind around. In fact, had Voyager's solid decking opened up and swallowed her, Janeway would have been less astonished.

Fortunately Tuvok was still staring downward and seemed not to notice. "Our extraction from Romulus was delayed by several months. I was unable to return to Vulcan, and my erratic behavior threatened to expose our presence. Commander Merris interceded, thus saving my life."

With an effort of will that was almost physical, Janeway banished the images that rose in her head. She did not wish to see the two of them together, and she was unwilling to question why that was. "Does your wife know," she stammered, regretting the words even as they left her mouth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even asked that question. It's none of my business."

Her old friend merely quirked a brow at her. "I am not offended, Captain. Of course T'Pel knows. I told her immediately upon my return to Vulcan." He paused here, finally looking at her. "Commander Merris accompanied me there, and spoke with my wife in person. It was an unneeded gesture, for all its nobility. T'Pel is an eminently logical creature. Given the choice between having a living mate or a dead one, she was persuaded to forgive us both. The two of them became friends, and remained in touch for many years."

*Any more knots in this tangled skein of yarn, and I'll have to import additional brain matter to unravel them.*

"Perhaps I should appoint someone else to oversee security where Commander Merris is concerned," she voiced her doubt aloud.

The brow raised again. "That is at your discretion, but it is unnecessary. I do not confuse sentiment with duty; nor do I suffer from the confusion of conflicted emotions."

*Same old Tuvok. Solid as neutridium.*

"Very well, Commander. Forgive me for doubting you." Janeway gave him a lopsided grin.

There was an almost imperceptible softening of his face. "You are human, Captain. You cannot be other than you are."

"Amen to that, old friend. Amen to that."

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Six hours later Janeway finally had time to finish her latest log. Setting all the day's occurrences into the record had been a lengthy process, but it allowed her to gain perspective.

The ship's chronometer sounded 0030 hours.

No wonder her eyes felt packed with dust. She'd been up since three o'clock yesterday morning.

It was quiet in her Ready Room. Outside, Gamma shift was manning the bridge and lower decks. Salvage operations continued without pause. Chakotay had only just reported in for the night. As it turned out, the Magellan's warp core contained viable anti-matter, and Lt. Torres had successfully injected it into Voyager. It wouldn't last as long as the modern product but did ensure another four years of operation.

*Not bad. Not bad at all.*

In other respects, the older vessel was as much an enigma as it was a blessing. She'd been severely damaged, but it appeared the crew had abandoned ship long before. There were no bodies. Yet life pods remained unlaunched. Personal effects had been left behind as if there were no time to collect them, but someone had painstakingly erased all data from the ship's computer.

She leaned wearily back, wishing she could afford to sleep, wishing she were able to sleep.

*When did my bed become a war zone between wakefulness and slumber?*

The nightmares didn't help. Haunted corridors populated by Voyager's dead hardly inspired rest. Too often she awoke choking down a scream.

*Running toward Earth while awake. Running away in my dreams.*

Sometimes she felt as though her mind was starting to fracture. The prospect terrified her. It was why she so ruthlessly kept herself apart, especially now. She was the captain and if she stepped away from that role for one instant, if she acknowledged her own needs and insecurities, she would crumble under the weight. Being human was not an option anymore.

*Hopefully Lt. Paris will have Fair Haven up and running again. With thoughts like that running around in your head, you could use a bit of shore leave.*

Even memories of Michael didn't comfort. He was a hologram, and she was halfway in love with him. No matter what the Doctor said, that couldn't be good.

Janeway picked up her cooling mug of coffee, eyes straying to the PADD with Commander

Merris' service record. She'd only just finished the background information. Born on Delta, Merris had been raised by her mother's kin-group until age ten when her mother was assigned to Uvidia Tyr. The record was not specific, but apparently Merris had joined some kind of religious enclave, and had remained on Delta with her maternal grandmother. When her mother was killed in the Cardassian raid, Merris' father sued for custody of the child, and took her to Rigel V. Chamry Merris had a sizeable dossier. He was allegedly involved in the Orion Syndicate, and was suspected of piracy.

The record for his daughter was extremely vague, however. Merris was taken into a training house for Ornaments until she reached the Orion age of majority. Instead of entering service to her father's house, she left and applied to Star Fleet Intelligence.

"Seven to Captain Janeway." The comm link's interruption pulled her back to the present.

"Go ahead."

"Log decryption is complete."

Janeway felt her heartbeat hasten. "Good work. I'll need senior officers to the conference room."

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"Most of the log entries detail the various steps taken to extract information." Harry Kim swallowed hard. Janeway noted the way his jaw locked. Kim was a remarkably sensitive young man. It was clear that the descriptions of Cardassian torture filled him with revulsion.

"There are two entries that Seven and I found interesting." A deft touch to his PADD filled the room's display with the ridged face of a Cardassian male. He was a trifle more slender than most of his kind, but was possessed of a glacial demeanor. In a voice both quiet and menacing he began to speak.

"Commanding officer's log. Gul Refak of the Obsidian Order reporting."

The mention of Cardassia's secret police caused Janeway's stomach to tighten.

"This female has managed to cut her own wrists and has lapsed into a coma." He spat out the words like whispered curses. "I have placed her in stasis to preserve her life. Whether she discovered all our agents and passed on that information to the Federation remains unknown. Once on Cardassia, I am confident the Order will find a way to maintain her life long enough for the information to be ripped from her screaming lips. Gul Refak, out."

The room's temperature seemed to have plunged to sub zero. Distant, unpleasant memories of another Cardassian voice slipped from the mists of the almost forgotten and tried to reform. Janeway thrust it away. She also cast out a burgeoning sympathy for Merris' suffering.

*Don't be suckered a second time. You felt sorry for Ransom, too.*

"Agents," Chakotay murmured, frowning at the screen. "On the Saladin?" His question was directed toward Tuvok.

The Vulcan gave the equivalent of a shrug.

Janeway noticed that Lt. Paris was punching buttons on his PADD, but said nothing. She nodded for Kim to continue.

"The next entry is also the last." His fingers trembled ever so slightly as they flitted over lighted buttons. There was something in the closed look of his rounded features that caught her attention. Janeway felt her eyes narrow.

A new image replaced the old. It was Gul Refak again, only this time he was bleeding. Fresh wounds marred the ridge over his eyes and laid open his cheek. Blood dripped down his elongated neck, staining his uniform.

"The Maquis ships attacked without warning. Our energy levels are fluctuating and life support will last only minutes. Death is inevitable." The image fuzzed out and sound crackled. "-some kind of worm hole. We cannot escape. Any Cardassian discovering this vessel, take heed. The alien female is not what she appears. Her true identity is unknown. She has killed one of our operatives already, and may have knowledge of others. It is vital that she be broken. The Federation could easily feed us false information through compromised agents. Break her-"

The log abruptly stopped in a hail of static.

"QI'yaH," Torres' whispered Klingon curse was the only word spoken for several seconds.

Paris lifted the PADD he'd been using. "As much as I hate to do this, I found something interesting in the Saladin's crew manifest." The list of crewman was displayed and scrolled down until it reached... "Raymond Boone." Paris highlighted the name. "Engineering. This guy was found to be a surgically altered Cardassian. He tried to frame Miles O'Brian for arms trafficking." A self-conscious wince punctuated his next comment. "I, uh, heard about it before I transferred to Voyager."

*Probably when he was in Auckland's Penal Settlement.* Janeway shook her head, trying to assimilate the new information. She'd seen the reports from Deep Space Nine. "All right." She rose to pace around the table. "We know that there was at least one Cardassian onboard the Saladin. The logs suggest that there was more than one. Based upon Gul Refak's own admission and Commander Merris' physical condition, it is certain that she was no friend to the Cardassian cause. So where does that leave us?" Janeway stopped behind Tuvok's chair and rested an arm on its back.

"There are exculpatory elements." Chakotay ventured. "But the fact remains that she is also accused of murdering Captain Shin. Nothing we've found contradicts that."



Lt. Paris cocked his head in a characteristic gesture of thoughtfulness. "I think we need to hear her side of the story." When everyone stared at him, he held up his hands defensively. "Hey, I was ready to flush her out the airlock, but now...now I've got more questions than answers."

Janeway wheeled around to face the Doctor. "When can we talk to her?"

"You can have fifteen minutes in twenty four hours." When Janeway started to protest, he continued, "I may even have to cut that short. She's extremely weak, and her body is pumping blood that is not designed for her physiology. Stress and exertion will accelerate her rejection rate. Fifteen minutes is the best I can do."

Janeway pinched the bridge of her nose. Sharp wires of sensation fanned out over her brain, precursors of the headache which was to come. "Contact me," she instructed the EMH, then dismissed the assembled officers.

In the silence that followed, her mind began warring upon itself.

*You should put her in one of Voyager's stasis tubes. That's the safest solution.*

*What if she's innocent?*

*What if the moon is made of green cheese? You are so naïve, Kathryn. Trusting Ransom almost cost you your ship and your crew. Have you learned nothing?*

She closed her eyes. The budding headache was fully flowered and pounding to the tempo of her heartbeat.

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Awareness returned to Rayna by degrees. Beneath her body was softness. That was nice. The air still smelled of sanitizer and held the unnatural cleanliness found only onboard a ship. She was warm, dry. Wherever she was, it was not a Cardassian cell.

*Tuvok was real. You did not dream him, and he would not call you back among enemies.*

There was movement beside her. Her eyes opened. A tall man, dressed in the emerald green of Federation Medical, manipulated touch sensors above her head. What little hair he had was black as a Xiva's wing. The top of his head gleamed.

*Bald. How charming.*

The man turned, revealing dark brows and eyes that matched. His mouth carried a bit of sarcasm in its shape. Aside from his physicality, he was an empty space. There was no body chemistry to betray his emotions. It was as if he did not exist. And yet she knew him.

"You are an Emergency Medial Hologram."

Eyes that glittered with artificial intelligence swept to her face.

"Well, it's good to see that electrolyte imbalance, a suppressed immune system, and malnutrition haven't affected your brain."

*Same sardonic wit.*

He continued to mutter. "What gave it away? The fact that I don't breathe or that I don't show up on your chemical radar?"

*He knows about Deltan empathic sensing.* Rayna allowed herself a slight smile. "I've met your relatives."

The Doctor snorted, "Yeah, well, you know we all look alike."

*He's tactless and rude, too.*

Cool metal touched the flesh of her neck, causing her to flinch. Other implements had caused her to scream.

"Hypospray," he explained gently. "I've managed to replicate a nutrient supplement optimized for your unique genetics."

His voice had altered. Rayna's sluggish mind noted the minute difference in inflection automatically. There had been compassion; she'd heard it. "Your programming has been modified."

Obsidian eyes silently queried the origin of her information.

"I told you." She drew breath before continuing. "I've met your relatives."

Nausea assailed her. Sul's blood, but she was weak! Things around her suddenly tilted to port. Rayna scrunched her eyes tight shut. Gul Refak's sadistic visage, the smell of his breath, the feel of him inside her, tearing flesh, all these seized upon her momentary weakness. They tried to drown her in an ocean of memory.

*"Coolness and Control, Rayna."* Mistress Tarilla provided rescue. She strode down the corridors of Rayna's mind, tall and green as Terran grass. *"Coolness and control. We Orions never let anyone see our distress, our anger, our fear."* Copper colored eyes twinkled mischief. *"No one knows when we're bluffing. No one can guess what we're plotting. That's why we are the best con artists, smugglers and pirates in all the coreward marches."*

The Doctor rested his hand on her forehead. It felt cool against her skin and served to pull her out of her self. "Cryo sickness. Prolonged cold sleep has residual side effects. They'll pass in a few hours."

*Prolonged cold sleep.* His words lingered, taunting her. "How long," Rayna asked softly.

The hologram ignored her question. "They want to talk to you."

She closed her eyes, feigning disinterest. "The sooner, the better."

"You're not strong enough."

Rayna laughed at that, and instantly regretted it. A wave of nausea made her want to vomit. "I'm looking at life in a penal colony, Doctor. Forgive me if health is of secondary concern."

His full lips thinned, but he contacted the Captain. Janeway. Janeway. It was a familiar name. Where had she heard it? Not Captain...no that was not the rank. Admiral? That was it. Admiral Janeway. He'd been responsible for one of her demotions.

*If this Janeway is anything like him, you'll spend the rest of the voyage in stasis.*

*Who cares? At least you will escape the torment of your memories, and there are no nightmares in cold sleep.*

Right now, escaping her memories would be good. She felt dirty inside and out.

The Doctor did not move away. Perhaps he sensed some part of her turmoil. Rayna waited until she was certain her voice would not quaver. "I wonder if it would be possible for me to have a bath?"

He squeezed her hand sympathetically before saying, "I'll see what can be arranged."

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The EMH's call at 0500 did not disturb Janeway. An hour earlier, and scarcely two hours after going to bed, she had awoken with a strangled scream. Sodden bedsheets lay knotted around her legs. Her pillow and blanket were scattered around the bed, casualties of her battle with the demons of sleep.

It was always the same. Voyager arrived home. Earth, that beautiful blue sphere, glowed from her viewscreen. Filled with elation, she turned in her captain's chair toward Chakotay, only to find that he was dead. His skeletal remains still bore remnants of flesh and fabric. Empty sockets that once held eyes stared at her. She rose to her feet in horror, gaze flitting wildly around the bridge. They were all dead. So she ran. Into the turbolift, where two more corpses waited; down the dim hallways were only the dead remained. Tuvok, Seven, Torres, everyone. Dead.

Janeway tore her mind away from those memories. At 0630, Voyager's corridors were brightly lit. Her crew moved about her, busily seeing to their duties. There was no point in dwelling on dreams.

"Captain." Tuvok fell into step beside her. The Vulcan was a living example of composure. "Did you rest well?"

She nodded, unwilling to divulge the truth of things. Questions for Commander Merris formed and rephrased as they continued toward Sickbay.

*Remember, Kathryn, she may be Starfleet, but that doesn't make her trustworthy. If you learned anything from the Equinox, it's that. The woman is an accused murderer/saboteur, and she's fleet Intelligence-trained to lie convincingly.*

Chakotay stepped from the turbolift a few minutes later. "Good morning," he greeted them both. "Salvage teams are still aboard the Magellan, no telling what they'll find. We've discovered an Orion freighter. I sent a crew to it as well."

"Good." Janeway flashed the taller man a quick smile.

"As a suggestion," he continued. "Perhaps Commander Tuvok could lead the questioning. Given his acquaintance with Ms. Merris, it may make things easier."

They reached Sickbay. "I have neither the intention nor the desire to make things easier for her." Janeway strode forward without pause.

A fully armed security team waited just inside. They nodded as she passed.

Commander Merris was lying at slight incline, not quite sitting up. She was as wan and wafer-thin as when she lay in stasis. Her face held a bit more color. At their entrance, pale brows contracted downward over eyes so black there was no discernable pupil. They were cool, like lumps of basalt. Those eyes took in each of them in turn, but lingered on Tuvok and perceptibly softened.

*The sooner she's back in cold sleep, the better.* There was something about the bond between Tuvok and this woman that made her uneasy. "Commander Merris," she began. "I'm Kathryn Janeway, of the Starship Voyager. This is Commander Chakotay. I believe you already know Commander Tuvok."

Rayna studied her visitors. She'd grown accustomed to the undisturbing presence of the Doctor. As a hologram, he released no chemical messengers into the air around her. Her empathic senses had, literally, nothing to sense. But now, between the tightly-wired security team, the mildly sympathetic First Officer, and this Captain who radiated suspicion, she found herself under siege. Tuvok, at least, did not add to the cacophony.

*You're done with the preliminary introductions. Get on with it. There's only so much I will tell you anyway.* Rayna refocused upon Janeway. The austere woman was quite beautiful, as humans went. Fiery hair told a tale of passion that the steely eyes belied. She radiated command presence, but there was something brittle about her. Beneath the icy surface of the captain was a

deep and troubled sea.

"Commander, you are charged with the murder of Captain Shin Fong, the sabotage of the USS Saladin, and collaboration with the Cardassian Union." Janeway's voice was irritatingly officious. "Would you like to make an official statement?"

"Not particularly." Rayna elected to answer the question in a literal fashion. Spite was Orion value. There was satisfaction to be found in denying an enemy that which he desired, even when it was to one's own detriment, and right now, Janeway felt very much like an enemy. She then met the captain's suddenly agitated gaze with all the casual indifference she could muster.

"Excuse me?" Janeway frowned at the bald woman. "I don't think you're in any position to..." She never got to finish.

"Fuck my position." Cool words fell like hailstones. Black marble eyes held not a hint of fear.

Suddenly, Janeway was irrationally angered by Merris' audacity. It took a deep breath and much of her willpower to keep her voice even. "Given the charges against you-

"And fuck my charges."

*That's it.* Janeway was finished. Playing games with a traitor was absolutely useless. *She can rot in stasis for the next decade.*

"Ray."

Janeway's head snapped toward her Security Chief. She'd never heard him use a nickname for anyone, let alone adopt a tone so gentle. He moved to Merris' biobed and placed an object in her hand. It looked like some sort of seashell. Muted colors of blue and pink shimmered in the stark lights of Medical.

Commander Merris' face momentarily froze. "Old man," she whispered. "You cheat." Thin fingers closed over Tuvok's gift. Midnight eyes slowly lifted to once more regard Janeway, but this time they were filled only with weariness.

"I was assigned to the Saladin to investigate the possible presence of a Cardassian spy. Captain Shin was fully briefed on my mission." Rayna found that equilibrium was returning.

*About time, too. He outmaneuvered you easily.*

*Yes, well, who would expect such an unemotional person as he to keep your paltry present.*

Even as the words formed, Rayna dismissed them. Tuvok had great sensitivity. It was ironic that he was born to a race that did not value such things. She squeezed the shell tight and continued. "Lt. Raymond Boone was the object of my investigation. 'fleet Intelligence had zeroed him upon his release from a Cardassian prison. He immediately began dismantling his life. Spouse,

children, home-all abandoned."

Her voice was growing weak. Rayna could hear it. Apparently so could the eavesdropping Doctor as he suddenly materialized at her bedside. "Let me finish," she requested when he gave her a disapproving frown.

The EMH's arrival let Janeway know their time was growing short. She was surprised when Merris asked to continue.

"When I encountered Boone, I sensed that his body chemistry was not human. I tracked his movements and covertly monitored ship's transmissions. There were several made at odd hours; they had been deliberately rerouted to make them difficult to trace. All were being relayed into Cardassian space. I took my information to Captain Shin." The frail woman's lips twisted into a self-deprecating grimace. "Unfortunately, Boone was already in the Captain's office with evidence that I was the spy. So I ended up in the brig." The Doctor interrupted long enough to give Merris something to drink.

*She's paler than before.* Janeway tried to ignore the concern which blossomed. It went against her better judgment.

Sounding stronger, Merris continued, "By this time, the Saladin was deep in the Badlands. I knew that Boone had two choices: Escape to the Cardassians or kill those who could jeopardize his cover. Even the existence of ship's logs would be a threat." Alabaster lids closed over the woman's eyes. "When the forcefield on my cell disappeared, I knew that he was taking action. In order for everything to be pinned on me, I had to be free to commit the crimes. I went to the Captain's Quarters first, but was too late. Shin was already dead. I left, only to find Boone and two security officers conveniently positioned in the corridor. They fired. I defended myself. Boone fled. The two remaining died."

*She might as well be making commentary on a tennis match.* Janeway was appalled at the lack of emotion in Merris' voice.

"I chased Boone to Engineering. The warp core was overheating. I can only presume that he tampered with it. We fought, but too many of the Saladin's security force responded. So I ran, stole the shuttle and tried to make it to Federation Space. Instead, a Cardassian warship decloaked and intercepted me. The rest you know." Utterly spent, Commander Merris fell silent.

With that, the Doctor tossed everyone out of Sickbay. She, Chakotay and Tuvok retired to her Ready Room. Janeway sank gratefully behind the silver and mint-green curve of metal that was her desk. The story was plausible. Boone had already been exposed for a spy, and there was no way for Merris to know that. She was in cold sleep by that time. "So now what, gentlemen?" Janeway asked, scrubbing her hands over her face.

"Commander," she prompted when no one answered.

The tanned face of her First Officer went through series of expressions, finally resolving itself

into uncertainty. "Captain, I honestly don't know. Given what we know about Boone, her story is credible." His voice trailed off. "I find myself wanting to believe her," he finished with a shrug. "We have no authority to convict or exonerate her. In that, she is no different from the Maquis or the Equinox crewmembers." Eyes the color of rich loam met hers. "It's a long way to Alpha Quadrant. We may as well give her a position on Voyager."

Janeway nodded. Her mind had reluctantly followed the same logic. "Tuvok?"

"It would be a more efficient alternative than keeping her in the brig or placing her back in cold sleep."

*Well that was certainly no surprise given his earlier behavior.*

*Give it a rest.*

"We're all in agreement then." Janeway ignored the internal debate. "Recommendations for placement?"

Chakotay picked up a PADD from her desk. "Her career spans about 20 years, but I'm not authorized to view her entire jacket. Her security rating is higher than mine." He glanced at Janeway before tapping the screen several times. "The training she received as an Ornament put her on the fast track for Starfleet Intelligence. She graduated the Academy in two years, majoring in psychology and xeno-psychology. I show minors in botany and religious studies." His dark brows lowered suddenly. "It says here that she is qualified as a chaplain. That's odd. Apparently she never served in that capacity. In fact it's just a footnote along with the unusual fact that her telepathic rating is negative six." He glanced sideways at Tuvok. "That would make her something of a psionic black hole, wouldn't it?"

The darkling Vulcan nodded, but remained silent. Janeway made a mental note to finish Merris' file.

After a moment, Chakotay continued. "She did two years on Romulus monitoring the activities of the Tal Shiar, then transferred to the Cardassian Division. It's non-specific on the length or content of the assignment. Her disciplinary record is interesting, to say the least. Starfleet revoked her security clearance for six months during which she worked as a cook on Starbase Epsilon Theta. It doesn't say why, but simultaneous to that, she was awarded the Federation Star."

That got Janeway's attention a second time. The Star was presented for courage and sacrifice under fire. It not only required a commanding officer's recommendation, but also approval from the Federation Council. Only a few hundred had been issued in the history of Starfleet. *So she was highly decorated and demoted at the same time. There's a rare occurrence.*

If Chakotay had expected Tuvok to shed light on this latest mystery, he was disappointed. Even to Janeway's practiced eye, there was not a hint of change in the Vulcan's stoic façade. She smiled ruefully at both her officers. "So Commander Merris has a past as full of contradictions as

her present... Anything else?" The last was directed to Chakotay.

"She made Lieutenant and Lieutenant Commander twice." Humor rippled across his face as he answered. "Only one of her demotions is explained: gambling. Apparently she cleaned house when posted on Fusarin III."

Tuvok spoke up, finally. "The ability to gamble is highly prized among Orions." He inclined his head toward Janeway. "Given your concerns about Commander Merris, the logical solution would be to suspend her security clearance and assign her to the galley or aeroponics. I am certain that either Mr. Neelix or Ensign Bronowski can supervise her."

*He knows you so well.*

Janeway gave her old friend a grateful look. Truth was, she hadn't expected him to suggest such a downgrade in rank. "Since she already has experience as a cook, the mess hall seems like a good fit."

Chakotay looked guardedly pleased. "I'll get B'Elanna to block access to sensitive areas on Voyager." He and Tuvok took their leave.

Janeway ordered a mug of coffee and reopened Merris' record.

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The compact figure of Janeway entered Sickbay, rousing Rayna from her light slumber. "Captain," she greeted.

"How are you feeling?" The captain's face was kinder than it had been, almost friendly. It appeared that some portion of her tale had been believed.

"Usually with my hands, but I'm too tired to lift them."

It took only a microsecond for Janeway to realize that Rayna was making a play on words. A half-grin softened the command façade even more and added faint twinkles to Janeway's eyes. "I'm glad to see that you keep your wit about you."

"It is currently my only possession." When the captain looked down at the shell still resting at her bedside, Rayna added, "That is Tuvok's. A gift I gave him, years ago. May I ask you a question?" Gray eyes connected with hers. Rayna felt the impact of Janeway's gaze as if it were a palpable force. "How long was I in stasis?"

The captain stepped closer and took her hand.

*It must be bad.*

"Eight and a half years."



It was. She licked her lips to force moisture back into her suddenly parched mouth. All her willpower funneled into keeping her features still. Janeway's skin was cool, comforting. Rayna made herself focus on the sensation, grounded herself in it.

"When will we make contact with 'fleet authorities?'" Her voice sounded vaguely disinterested. That was good.

The captain's other hand joined the first.

*Oh dear. Now what?*

Janeway gathered her words carefully. Merris was shaken enough by news of her lengthy cold sleep. Voyager's situation could only make matters worse. "Almost six years ago, our vessel was pulled through a wormhole into the Delta Quadrant by an entity known as the Caretaker." She stroked Merris' hand gently with one thumb. "Apparently the same thing happened to your Cardassian captors. We are currently thirty-five years from Federation Space."

The Deltan's face did not move a muscle, but her grip on Janeway's hand tightened.

*She's so warm.* Janeway seemed to recall that Orions had a body temperature several degrees higher than human normal. *When was the last time you held someone's hand?* Mark, maybe, but none other, not in many years. Doing so now, even as an act of comfort, felt almost foreign. She looked down at Merris to find the woman's eyes closed. *Perhaps she fell asleep? No. Her fingers haven't slackened their hold.*

Finally, Merris opened her eyes and gave a small shrug. "So I have some time until my court martial."

Janeway chuckled in surprise. "I suppose that is one way to look at it." She broke their contact. "I thought you'd taken a nap on me for a minute there."

"No. My dreams and I are not on speaking terms." Black eyes saddened and became somehow older. Their naked emotion captured Janeway and held her motionless. A sudden feeling of kinship overtook her and she found herself nodding. "I know something of that, myself."

Quickening curiosity made Merris' gaze piercing, and Janeway was immediately self-conscious. "Well. I have duties to attend. Try to get some rest."

She retreated with all speed to the safety of the corridor.

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Rayna was pondering her recent encounter with the captain when she received another visitor. "Tuvok," she greeted. The tiniest of grins played at the edges of her lips.

It was the first time that Rayna had a chance to truly see him. Their most recent encounters had been marred by her own weakness or the worrisome presence of other people. His brown skin was as she remembered, warmly colored in shades of wood and cocoa. If he'd aged, she couldn't see evidence of it. No new lines crinkled about his eyes. He looked as he had, years ago.

"There are things you have concealed." His resonant baritone still reminded her of the rolling sound of the sea.

*And he reads you accurately, even now.*

"It is a matter of *Shashuna*." Rayna heard the universal translator kick in. It was long moments before it spat out "compassion." A poor rendering, but all that Terrans could manage. On Delta, that single word encompassed love, kindness, and loyalty. *Shashuna* was irrational and obdurate as madness.

*He knows what it means.*

*Aye, and though he would never admit it, Tuvok of Vulcan understands the depths of love.*

"For Captain Shin?" he asked her.

She hesitated, "No." Her hands idly played with the sheets. "For his wife and two sons." *Who would be disgraced and ruined by their father's betrayal. No, Wind Child, you are fallen from the grace of Singers, but you are not so low as to drag innocents with you. Not yet.*

Tuvok held her eyes a long time, then wisely changed the subject. "Captain Janeway is allowing you to join Voyager's crew, but she has suspended your security clearance. In addition, I have instructed the Doctor to deactivate your communications implant."

Embedding a communications device was standard for Intelligence Operatives, so was cloaking it from routine medical scans. Without Tuvok's guidance the device would doubtless have remained unnoticed.

"It's a small matter as I currently have no one to report to." Rayna opened her hand, offering up the Trillias Shell. "I believe this belongs to you."

He took it. "As you well know, having given it to me."

"So now what?" she asked with more ease than she felt.

An ebony brow flicked upward. "How are your culinary skills?"

The question made her smile with genuine mirth for the first time in...ages it seemed. "Galley bound again, eh?"

"You seem to ascend and descend the ladder of command with excessive regularity."

At that Rayna snorted, then began to snicker. "Is that Vulcan for 'you just can't stay out of trouble?'"

Her old friend nodded, looking characteristically stern, which only served to make her laugh herself into a coughing fit. That was a mistake. It felt like glass shards had collected in her lungs and windpipe. Then it was over. Her Deltan-based endocrine system suppressed the pain in less than a second, leaving her feeling pleasantly content with her lot in life.

*One of the many reasons 'fleet Intelligence was pleased to hire you.*

Voyager's omnipresent EMH sparkled into solidity. The hologram studied the instrument panel, glowered at Tuvok and then glared at her. "I'm a doctor, not a miracle worker. No one, including you..." a photonic finger jabbed the air in Rayna's direction. "...seems to take your physical condition seriously." He readied two hyposprays, and injected her.

"I feel fine," she protested mildly.

"No doubt. Your body has produced enough endorphins that I could amputate one of your limbs and you wouldn't feel it." He turned his displeasure on Tuvok. "Out."

The shadowed Vulcan raised both brows before nodding his goodbyes.

Rayna settled back into the blissful comfort of the biobed. She decided that she rather liked the Doctor. He'd managed to assemble his programming into a perfect balance of kindness and contrariness. Being in his Sickbay felt safe, and that was a rare treasure.

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*"Captain's Log Stardate: 53259.6*

*"We have spent four days among the derelict vessels. Salvage teams have been in operation around the clock. Most of our efforts have centered on the Magellan. Though dated, many of her components can be reworked for emergency repairs. Lt. Torres has catalogued and stored everything that she and the rest of engineering could safely remove. Voyager owes her older sister a mighty debt.*

*Last night, Commander Chakotay and I held a short service for the Magellan's lost crew. A memorial beacon was erected in what is left of the bridge. Perhaps it will help other lost craft to navigate the Labyrinth. Here among the dead, they may find resources to help them on their way."*

Janeway dug her fingers into the muscles of her neck, trying to loosen the knots. Fatigue lay heavily on her shoulders and back. Loath though she was to rely on sedatives, it was swiftly coming down to that, at least one or two days out of the week. She blew out a long sigh and continued dictation.

*"A fifty year old Orion freighter yielded boxes of Tholian silk, crates of unrefined dilithium, and gourmet vegetables from Rigel V. Everything was perfectly preserved by the absolute zero of space. Mr. Neelix is already experimenting.*

*Even the Cardassian ship was not without its treasures. Gul Refak had several Bajoran artifacts among his personal possessions. We have placed them in secure storage until our return to Alpha Quadrant."*

She took a long drink of cooling coffee.

*Funny isn't it, Katie, how you don't even call it home anymore.*

The door chime to her ready room sounded.

"Come in." She closed down the log.

Chakotay entered. Janeway immediately noted the sparkles in his amber eyes and the hand he kept so conspicuously behind his back. He said nothing, merely sat an ornate bottle of azure liquid in the center of her desk.

Dawning realization caused her to slowly stand. "That's not -"

A wide grin spread over Chakotay's face. "Yes it is."

She leaned forward, both hands on her desk. "Romulan Ale."

"Every drop." One thick finger tapped the stopper. "Four bottles, three of which I've stored in my quarters, for medicinal purposes of course."

"Oh, of course." Janeway thanked him with a warm glance, an answering smile still lingering on her lips. It had been months since they'd been so comfortable with one another.

He sobered only slightly. "The Warbird was in a helluva fight. Her warp core's been ejected, and it looks like her cloaking device overloaded. There's blast damage on every deck. I don't think any of her crew escaped." The tall man eased into one of the chairs. "We've downloaded everything in her logs. Tuvok and Seven are reviewing them now. With luck we'll find out what she ran into."

Janeway retook her seat and nodded for him to continue.

"All we know so far is that she's called the Temet." Chakotay's gaze shifted to the room's observation windows. "Captain, there's a ship out there, iridescent blue and layered like lotus petals. Her hull composition is unlike anything we've ever seen." He looked back at her, excitement painting the timbre of his voice. "A few of us are itching to get a closer look."

That brought a wistful smile to her face. Inexhaustible curiosity was encouraged in Star Fleet. For a moment, Janeway felt the old fire ignite in her heart. "How long until the last of the teams return?" she inquired.

"At least four hours, best estimate."

"Do it."

Chakotay's face glowed with child-like delight. "Thank you, Captain." He was tapping his comm link even as he whisked out of her Ready Room door.

Janeway shut her eyes. Sometimes she missed the sciences, the thrill of discovery, and the utter simplicity of cause and effect. Navigating the muddied waters of command was infinitely more difficult. For her, Away Teams were few and far between.

She ran her fingers over the cut crystal bottle. It was lovely. The stopper was elegantly carved into the shape of a raptor. Etched on the decanter, itself, were Romulan letters. Janeway made a mental note to look up a translation later.

It was nice of Chakotay to bring it. Being on cordial terms with him had eased some of the tightness which had pinioned her chest since the *Equinox*.

Memory of their confrontation replayed unbidden.

*'It was a calculated risk.'*

The glowing life forms seeped in through a fissure. Lessing's terrified face tattooed itself to her consciousness. Chakotay had belayed her orders and chastised her. How clearly she could see the revulsion in his face.

*'It was a bad call. What's happened to you, Kathryn?'*

It was lunacy.

Janeway's feet carried her to the transparent aluminum windows. A ship drifted lazily past. She stared at the chartreuse hull. Cigar-shaped and covered with rounded bumps, it looked like a floating cucumber. Observation ports randomly dotted its side. They were as empty and sightless as the specters haunting her dreams.

*You could have killed him. He was a terrified young man. His captain offered him the only hope of home. That makes a man loyal, even unto death.*

*If not for Chakotay, you'd be a murderer.*

She leaned both hands against the cool glass.

*Then you followed up that winning decision by turning your vessel over to alien control and promising the Equinox as a prize.*

*What kind of captain are you?*

\*\*\*\*\*

Chakotay chose Lieutenants Paris and Torres to accompany him. Depriving B'Elanna the opportunity to examine the strange vessel's propulsion system would probably incite her to violence. The half-Klingon delighted in modifying Voyager's engine. It gave her deep satisfaction to speed them homeward, and to please the captain, though B'Elanna would never admit the latter.

Sensors indicated there was no atmosphere or heat on the alien craft. He contacted the other two and instructed them to don EVA suits.

*Ah, ah, ah...SEWG. Standard Extra-Vehicular Work Garment.* His mind supplied a wearisome correction. Why Starfleet had to complicate a simple acronym, was beyond him.

Truth be told, they all wanted Janeway's approval. She was mother to one hundred forty-three children, himself included. The situation was horribly unfair. Chakotay pulled on the bulky gear, and ran a diagnostic of the suit's life support.

*That's the way she wants it. Spirits know you've tried to shoulder some of the burden.*

Lately, however, Kathryn had become more withdrawn. She'd not retreated to her quarters as when they'd crossed the void. No, this was worse, somehow, like some piece of communication gear inside her was broken. The captain could receive, but not transmit. So nothing got out. Nothing relieved the pressure, or the pain.

*She'll bounce back. She always does.*

Maybe. It was past time since they'd had a good talk. If he could find the right moment, that oversight would be rectified.

The rest of his team waited in Transporter Room 2. They were dressed and ready. B'Elanna flashed him a grin of anticipation. Paris kept his expression composed, but his pale gray eyes were practically luminous with excitement.

"We only have two hours and forty five minutes," he instructed, plodding up to the dais. Both nodded.

"Energize."

His command caused the familiar world to disappear in a flicker of blue light. A different and infinitely darker one took its place.

Their SEWG utility lights ruptured the night, falling on walls of translucent coral. From what he could make out, they stood in a circular room. Interlocking hexagonal shapes formed tiles of a domed ceiling. Maybe some of them were also viewscreens; it was too early to tell. Mushroom-like protrusions sprang up at seemingly haphazard intervals.

"These may be navigational consoles." Torres' voice crackled over the comm link in his helmet. She was bent over her tricorder, frowning. "They have an odd composition of elements, almost organic, but not like anything I've ever seen before."

"Confirmed." Lt. Paris called from an adjacent mushroom. "Sensors can detect no recognizable power relays or controls."

Chakotay watched the younger man exchange a delighted look with his on-again, off-again girlfriend.

*We're all explorers at heart.*

His own scans took in the decking below. It, too, had biological properties. There were no seams, no gel packs, no plating, no metal framework. In fact, there was no discernable metal at all.

His heartbeat hastened with each new reading. Too bad they couldn't fire up life support. Tricorder data was no substitute for the satisfaction of touch, and right now, he wanted to know how the stuff felt.

Torres was kneeling beside one of the toadstools. "There're no joints. "It's like everything was grown. Damn, I'd like to tow her back home. Two hours isn't enough time. Why is it we have to wait until the last minute to do something really interesting?"

Chakotay smiled to himself as Voyager's Chief Engineer grouched her way around what he guessed was the bridge.

"And where beneath the naked stars is the exit?" her exclamation was punctuated by an exasperated flapping of her arms.

"This might be it." Paris' beam was illuminating a lens-like aperture.

Perfectly circular, the multi layered door was tightly sealed. The blond helmsman intently scanned its edges. "But like everything else in here, I'm not finding a means of activation." Apparently Paris was experiencing the same desire for contact, for he brushed a gloved hand over the lens' ridges.

And it opened.

The motion was jerky, as if the doorway had awoken from a long sleep. All around them, the walls pulsed with phosphorescence, first faintly, then bright and steady.

B'Elanna whispered a Klingon curse that the universal translator refused to render.

"Voyager to Chakotay." Tuvok's voice shattered their momentary awe. "We are reading energy fluctuations from the alien vessel."

Chakotay answered with a touch of irony. "We see it."

"We don't have a clue why it's happening," Torres provided a sarcastic counterpoint. "But we see it."

"I'm reading minimal life support." Tom glanced toward him. "Chlorine based. Temperature increasing to twenty-five degrees Celsius."

"Summertime on an abandoned starship," Chakotay mused. "Voyager, are you reading the environmental changes?"

The accompanying silence caused them all to freeze. "Voyager?" he repeated. The other two made similar attempts.

Nothing.

They were cut off.

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Janeway settled into the command chair. "Report," she demanded.

"The ship's energy levels increased without warning, Captain," Harry Kim responded. "We lost contact with the Away Team when she raised her shields." The young ensign never once broke his gaze from the incoming sensor readings. "Shield harmonics fluctuate at an exponential rate. Ambient energy is blocking a full scan. We can't establish a transport lock."

"Keep trying." An unnecessary order, she knew. Serpents of concern twisted in her stomach. "Has there been any change in the attitude of the vessel?"

Tuvok answered, his even baritone soothing to her ears. "Continuing to drift. No sign of engine function."

"Life signs?"

Kim shook his head. "Negative, captain. We can't penetrate the shields."

*Damn.*

Janeway stared at the floating hulk as if the force of her gaze could lay open the opaque hull. It



failed.

Energy, but no engines. Shields that blocked communication and transport. No way to know if the away team was alive or dead.

*How do you defeat a vessel's shields? Think Katie.*

*You can overload them with phaser fire.*

Too risky, the away team could be killed.

*Force a shield harmonic reset.*

The shields were already shifting too rapidly. That was the reason for the blockage in the first place.

Her head began to dully throb. Janeway ignored it. She couldn't afford to give credence to pain.

*Come on. How do you tell another starship to lower its shields?*

Without the proper codes, it couldn't be done, at least not among Federation crafts.

Basic Starfleet tactics included ways to level the playing field when a ship's shields were weakened. Using planets or asteroids as obstacles, was one method. Better still was taking refuge in a -

"Mr. Tuvok," she barked, catching the Vulcan's eye. "Time to the nearest nebula at impulse power?" The Labyrinth was dotted with clouds of gas.

"Thirty-six minutes, seven seconds." He already knew where she was going. She could hear it in the tiny changes in his voice. "Mr. Kim," Tuvok addressed the operations officer. "Stand by for tractor beam."

"Tractor beam, aye."

One by one, the bridge crew followed Janeway's unspoken logic. It showed in their posture; it lent purpose to the very air.

Nebulas neutralized shields, at least all known shields. There was a chance it wouldn't work.

"Lt. Ayala, plot course to the nearest nebula, best speed. Mr. Kim, lock the tractor beam."

Her orders were carried out immediately. A slight shudder vibrated through Voyager as the two vessels were bound together.

"Mr. Ayala, engage." Janeway watched the viewscreen's image shift. The graveyard of starships

gave way to faint glimmers of starlight and pockets of glowing metreon gas. Thirty-six minutes would be an eternity.

She flexed her shoulders, trying to loosen taut muscles. Waiting was always the hardest part. The action was easy.

A stifled scream from behind made Janeway leap from her chair. Tuvok was bowed over his console, his face ashen. She'd only crossed half the distance between them when he collapsed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chakotay led the team down a cylindrical hallway of glittering aquamarine. Footing here was treacherous. The floor curved toward the center, and was terribly smooth. Cool luminescence from the very walls lit their way.

*At least we don't need flashlights anymore.*

"Temperature is stable at twenty-five degrees, Commander." Tom Paris kept a steady stream of information available. None of it was of any help, so far.

Cut off from Voyager as they were, he could only guess what was happening. One fact was certain: The captain would have transported them out as soon as communications were lost. That she had not meant that she could not.

He also knew they were in motion. Minutes ago, the vessel had shivered slightly. Her pitch had changed, but there was no increase in energy output. It was doubtful they were moving under their own steam.

"No sign of any kind of power source." B'Elanna gave the tricorder a smack. "Maybe this piece of crap is on the fritz."

Paris chuckled. "Banging should fix it then."

"Screw you, Paris," the half-Klingon rejoined. "Banging always seems to fix you." She turned her helmeted face toward Chakotay. "I'd cut off my right arm to know what's happening."

He could hear the frustration in her voice. "Me too," he assured her. "The captain will figure a way to pull us out. In the mean time, the best thing we can do is learn everything we can on this end. Maybe we can reestablish communication if we find the right controls."

Torres growled her reply, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just hate feeling trapped."

"The rest of us love it," Paris grimly observed.

Claustrophobia. Chakotay remembered the Doctor saying Paris had crawled out of a stasis tube three times. Voyager was passing through clouds of dangerous radiation, and the entire crew had

been placed in cold sleep. "You okay, Tom?"

"Oh yeah." The helmsman made adjustments to his tricorder. "What doesn't kill us..."

"Makes us stronger," B'Elanna finished.

Chakotay could only smile to himself. That phrase typified Voyager.

*Yep. That's us. Lost in the Delta Quadrant, getting stronger. We should be rivaling Hercules by now.*

A sudden chill passed through Chakotay's suit. He frowned at the temperature drop, but it was already gone. "B'Elanna, are you picking up any temperature fluctuations?"

*That was a stupid question. You're wearing a SEWG. Run a diagnostic.*

He started the internal process, peripherally watching numbers scroll up a small screen in his helmet.

The engineer did a sweep of the surroundings. "Nothing. Temp's been steady for the last ten minutes."

Chakotay gave her a terse nod. Gooseflesh still prickled up over both his arms, belying her sensors and his suit's diagnostics.

*Very strange.*

He found himself glancing over his shoulder as they continued to explore. The only person back there was Paris, but Chakotay could not shake the sensation of being watched.

"Commander?" Tom's blue eyes were a tad wider than usual, but his voice was dead calm. "You don't have to keep checking on me. I'm fine."

*Well, what did you expect him to think/*

Chakotay blew a sigh, trying to dispel the paranoia inside him. "I know, Tom." He steered the topic to a more immediate threat, "How long before the suits run out of air?"

"Four hours, give or take," Lt. Torres reported. "We've got time, just not much of it."

\*\*\*\*\*

Rayna was bored with Sickbay. The bed was comfortable, and the Doctor was scintillating in his conversation. She was simply ready to move - a notion which the EMH had swiftly countermanded.

"Bed rest means bed rest." His holographic eyes had slashed across the room at her when she'd broached the topic of a short walk.

So here she lay. Wishing something would change.

Scant seconds later the storm surge hit. Alarms sounded. The Doctor was besieged by calls from engineering, the bridge, and Deck 15, all reporting a crewman down.

*"Never, ever give fate an open invitation."* Rayna recalled sage advice from her grandmother. The sweet-faced Deltan lady had a voice softer than gossamer webs. *"It will inevitably become an unwelcome guest."*

The first casualty arrived via intership beaming, a Vulcan male. His face was frozen in a rictus of agony. Rayna watched the EMH take readings, then employ a neural stimulator. It had no effect at all.

"20 cc's Melorazine," she offered quietly. At the Doctor's shocked expression, Rayna only shrugged. "When in doubt, knock them out," she quoted one of her 'fleet instructors. Of course, he was discussing the handling of hostiles when there was no kill order. Melorazine was an excellent tranquilizer for Romulans and Vulcans.

The photonic features cast her a glare. "Is that your expert medical advice?" he continued muttering to himself even as he prepared a hypospray. "Ordered around in my own sickbay. Another fine example of hologram discrimination."

Still, Rayna noticed that he administered something that rendered the Vulcan unconscious.

Further conversation was truncated by the arrival of another crewmember. This time it was a female, Betazoid from the look of her. Officers wearing scientific green lay the trembling woman down. The EMH sedated her with alacrity, all the while firing questions.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. She screamed and collapsed," a fresh-faced ensign replied. Rayna imagined that puberty had but recently left him.

"No power surges? No noise? No injuries?" The Doctor scurried about Sickbay examining both patients and preparing a third biobed.

"No sir."

Sliding doors schnicked open to admit Janeway and some other officer supporting Tuvok.

*Fuck.*

Even as he was placed on a bed, the Vulcan struggled to rise. "I can control it," he hissed through

gritted teeth. "There is. No. Pain."

"Get in bed; that's an order." The captain snapped her command, but Tuvok seemed not to hear.

Rayna could sense his torment. It pulled at her, compelled her to take action. Forcing legs of jelly to support a body of lead, she staggered across the room, past the Doctor and grasped the hand of her friend. Instantly, the pain was gone.

Tuvok inhaled deeply then opened his eyes.

*If touching you neutralized it, then it involved psionics.*

Rayna held Tuvok's dark gaze as her mind digested recent events. Null psi's generated a type of biokinetic energy that modulated in opposition to traditional telepathy. They were almost impervious to psychic attack.

"Doctor," Captain Janeway's calm, but tight alto captured everyone's attention. "What's happening?"

The EMH frowned into his tricorder as he passed the device over Rayna's chest. "All three of my new patients are telepathic. Since there is nothing physically wrong with any of them, I'd say it is some kind of mental attack." He snapped the device closed. "Then again, I'm a doctor, not a medium. You." The last was directed toward Rayna. "Back to bed."

Before Rayna could either protest or obey, Tuvok began to speak. "The Doctor is correct in his hypothesis. However, I cannot sense any consciousness behind it. It felt-" He paused. "- almost automated."

"Perhaps we triggered some sort of defense system when we tractorbed the alien vessel," Janeway offered, still eyeing them both with a mixture of suspicion - directed more toward Rayna - and worry - decidedly more toward Tuvok.

*She's in pain.*

Rayna registered the chemical signals leaking through the captain's pores, but had no time to devote to such distractions. "I'm going to let go of your hand," she told Tuvok. "If there is no pain, I will slowly back away."

After about one meter, Tuvok motioned her to stop. She did so.

*At least we don't have to hold hands for him to gain the benefit.*

The damper effect increased with proximity. In her childhood, this gift had been more of a cosmic insult. Everyone on Delta was telepathic. Kin-groups formed a hive mind.

*And I was a living, breathing disruption of that bond. Oh well, at least Starfleet Intelligence had*

*been thrilled.*

Her thoughts were disrupted by the Doctor's imperious bark, "I said, bed," he grumbled to Rayna. "First, you give me orders, then you ignore me. I'm going to develop a complex."

"I'm fine," she assured him quietly.

"Janeway to the bridge," the captain barked over her comm link, negating further discussion.

"Bridge."

"Time to nebula?"

"Seventeen minutes, thirty-two seconds, present speed."

The human woman drew breath then addressed the Doctor. "I'll need Tuvok on the bridge. If the nebula disables that vessel's shields, there's no telling what other defense systems will be set off."

"And I will need Crewman Merris to remain in close proximity to me," the security chief voiced.

Had steam shot from both the EMH's ears, Rayna would not have been much surprised. Every photon of his demeanor screamed his displeasure at this turn of events. "Neither of them is anywhere near 'fine.'" The artificial man replicated a large tumbler of liquid and several multi-colored pills. He gave everything to Rayna, but continued to direct his words to the captain. "Crewman Merris is malnourished, suffering from cryo-sickness, and requires regular treatment to keep her from rejecting the transfusion I gave her. Her endorphin production is so high my tricorder can't even register the levels." Suddenly the Doctor snapped his gaze to Tuvok. "I just gave her a high calorie nutrient supplement and more vitamins and electrolyte balancers than the average human burns off in a week. Make sure she sits down the entire time she's out of Sickbay. Her body can't take the strain of too much exertion." Shaking his bald pate, the EMH turned back to Janeway. "Commander Tuvok is in somewhat better condition. His vital signs are elevated but stable. For now," he added dramatically.

"I'll make sure they return as quickly as possible, Doctor." Janeway motioned the others to follow her, then whisked out the door.

Rayna cast her Vulcan friend a wry smile. It seemed that fate had been paying attention, after all.

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Their first intersection.

Chakotay stared, unnerved, at the T junction. One cylindrical corridor phosphoresced in a pallid green, the other in a baleful red.

His companions flanked him, aiming their tricorders down each path.

"I'm getting slightly higher energy levels from this direction," B'Elanna reported. "They're strange, a mixture of plasma wavelengths and who knows what." She moved her instrument closer to the crimson walls. "Even the composition of the structure is different. The molecular chains are-" Torres broke off abruptly, whirling around. "Tom, are you screwing with my suit?"

"What?" The blond helmsman was a full two meters away.

Chakotay laid a calming hand on the woman's shoulder. "He never came near you, B'Elanna. What happened?"

Fury clouded the mocha depths of her eyes. "My SEWG's temperature dropped about fifteen degrees! That's what happened."

"Run a diagnostic." Chakotay didn't like this one damned bit. The chill he'd felt earlier was no longer an isolated event. Maybe something in the ship's atmosphere was causing their suits to malfunction. "Tom, did you pick up anything on the tricorder?"

Lt. Paris had come over to join them, his pale brows lowered in confusion. "No sir. Other than the icky green, this end is pretty much the same as the bridge." He tapped Torres' helmet. "Hey, B'Elanna, let me give you a hand."

"I don't need a hand with simple suit diagnostics," the half-Klingon snarled.

"Maybe I just like pushing your buttons." Paris wagged his brows and leered.

B'Elanna laughed, then. "What is it with you and environment suits? A fetish?" There was no rancor in her voice.

*I wish I felt like joking.* Chakotay blew out a long breath. There was something making the hair on his neck prickle. He had the irrational notion that if only he could turn his head quickly enough, there would be someone watching.

*Stop scaring yourself.*

"Commander?" Lt. Torres was giving him a narrow-eyed stare. "Diagnostics complete. All systems nominal."

"Good."

In truth, he was not terribly reassured. The crimson hallway looked too much like illuminated blood. Chakotay found himself wanting to pull out his phaser. He resisted the urge. "We'll follow the plasma emissions, but from now on, nobody touches anything but the floor."

Two sets of questioning eyes drilled squarely into him.

"Just humor me," Chakotay said by way of reply, and shrugged.

"You're starting to creep me out, Commander." Torres shook her head and returned her attention to the tricorder.

"Hell, B'Elanna," Paris chimed in. "If you're just beginning to be creeped out, you're on the lower end of the learning curve."

"Fuck you, Paris." She hissed.

"And you think I have a fetish."

Chakotay elected not to dampen their banter. Like Captain Janeway, he was of the opinion that some relaxing of Federation rules was a healthy thing. These two knew their jobs. Letting them blow off a little excess steam in a situation like this, even if their language was unprofessional, did no harm.

Someone whispered in his ear.

Chakotay froze.

Nothing.

"Sir?"

He held up a hand to silence Paris. There had been voice in his ear, not over his comm link. Though too soft to be understood, it had definitely not been one the crew.

Slowly he released the breath he'd held.

*This place is getting to you.*

"Must have been static on my comm link," Chakotay waved for them to continue walking, but saw the doubt in Torres' eyes. Clearly she did not believe his lie.

Ahead was another lens-like doorway.

"The energy readings emanate from here." Lt. Paris made some adjustments to his tricorder. "Plasma and some force-field ion residue. Maybe we found the engine room."

"Well," Torres observed with wry humor. "We generally have to touch the doors to open them."

Chakotay gave her a mock glare, then brushed his gloved hand over the closed aperture. From behind it came a pale azure glow.

"Kahless' hand," B'Elanna murmured.



The door had opened into a huge, octagonal room. Taking up a full half of it was a tank-like structure composed of forcefields. There was something inside it that looked like lightning incarnate. Blue energy had coalesced into a vaguely spherical shape. At their entrance, it puffed itself up and slowly changed color into a brilliant scarlet. It flung itself against transparent walls, causing tendrils of plasma to spark and skitter.

"What is that?" Tom's awestruck question crackled over Chakotay's comm link.

It was Torres who answered. "I have no idea, but it looks really pissed off." Remembering herself, the young engineer consulted her tricorder. "I can't penetrate the forcefield. There's too much phase interference."

Chakotay only half heard them. He was cold again. The voice was back, breathing tenebrous words he could not understand. An instant later he saw the image of his totem animal, the Jaguar, speckled fur gleaming with bloody highlights. The great cat looked at him, then through him to the depths of his soul. It hissed, teeth bared. He stood transfixed as it slowly faded into memory, but it left something behind: a single, alarm-laced word.

*Danger.*

"Everyone out," Chakotay shouted. "Move, move, move!"

Though the other two were utterly surprised by his outburst, they raced with him to the door. Even as they reached it, he felt a tingling of energy. It swept past the layers of his SEWG, making the system's monitor flicker in and out of frame.

An argent flare of light rendered him sightless. He fought for consciousness, strained to see his teammates, but the darkness dragged him inexorably down.

\*\*\*\*\*

Janeway tried to ignore her throbbing head.

Three minutes until they reached the nebula.

In the short time since she'd left Sickbay, the dull ache behind her left eye had become an ice pick through her skull. The Doctor reported debilitating headaches from all decks and had only just exited the bridge. Several crewmen had accepted analgesic injections. She'd refused the shot. Until this situation was over, she needed an absolutely clear mind. The pain was preferable to sluggish thoughts.

Two minutes.

A glance behind her confirmed that Tuvok still manned his post with typical Vulcan composure. Crewman Merris sat next to him in a chair from Janeway's ready room. The slender woman was immobile, fingers steepled at her chest, bald head slightly bowed. A fine sheen of sweat covered her forehead, betraying the strain she was under. Beneath the golden complexion, a new pallor

had settled upon the half Deltan. She returned her gaze forward.

One minute. Damn her head hurt!

"Any luck isolating the alien transmissions?" she asked Tuvok.

"Negative, Captain." His soft, unexcited voice made a peaceable counterpoint to her pounding skull.

Janeway closed her eyes a moment, gathering her concentration.

Thirty seconds.

"Red alert," she ordered.

The lights dimmed to a dull crimson. Fortunately some incredibly thoughtful crewmember had disabled the audible alarm.

Voyager entered the ghostly vapors of the nebula.

"Shields down, Captain." Harry Kim began a running tally of information. "Sensors functioning, but range limited to one thousand kilometers."

"Put the other ship on screen."

Pink and orange mist occluded the view, but she could still make out the alien vessel's outline. It would enter the nebula in seconds.

She turned to Ensign Kim. "The instant we get a transporter lock, bring them back."

"Understood." The young Asian shook his head as if to clear it.

*The pain killers.*

*You should have taken one.*

*I need my wits.*

*The pain is only getting worse.*

In truth it was agonizing.

Without warning, a lizard danced across the viewscreen. Janeway blinked, but the reptile remained, brown scales reflecting bits of starlight. It looked her in the eye and let loose a shrill chirp. Then it was gone.

*What the -- ?* She was hallucinating. That was bad.

"The alien vessel is now entering the nebula," Tuvok spoke once more. "We have lost the tractor beam. Attempting to reestablish."

"Captain, I'm picking up a tremendous surge of plasma energy." Kim sounded alarmed. "Unable to locate Away Team members." This time, his head shook in regret. "I can't get a lock."

On screen, what had once been a derelict starcraft now pulsed with fiery energy. It hung there, like a macabre rose, and radiated malice.

"Tractor beam unsuccessful," Tuvok continued. "Energy levels increasing."

Janeway's head imploded in a white dwarf of excruciating pain. She heard herself screaming. Every muscle in her body tightened to the point of snapping.

"It's raining." There came a soft whisper.

Electricity prickled across her scalp. "Can you feel it on your face?"

Janeway drew breath and tasted a dew-kissed Indiana morning, crisp and cloudy.

"Cooling...soothing."

It was like someone spread a balm over the fevered welts in her mind.

"The flames of pain are dying." Merris' voice, clearly, from somewhere above her.

Janeway cried out again, this time in relief, as the white hot agony was washed away. She opened her eyes and saw the concerned face of Crewman Merris. The bald woman's fingers pressed at the edges of Janeway's hair. Some residual tingling remained but quickly faded as the digits, one by one, were removed. Their touch had been almost insubstantial, reminding her of...something...nothing...

*Butterflies. They felt like butterflies on you skin.*

*First lizards, Katie, now insects, what's next?*

It gradually dawned on Janeway that she was lying on the bridge floor. Tuvok and Merris flanked her, one on each side, kneeling.

"Thank you." She sat up quickly and looked to her other crew members. They all lay unmoving. The resemblance to her nightmare was striking. Panic ate a hole in her heart. "Are they...?"

"Merely unconscious," Tuvok answered, staring down at his tricorder.

Janeway clambered to her feet. "Bridge to all stations. Sound off."

"Sickbay reporting. I have far too many patients," the Doctor sounded harried, and just a little put out. "So far everyone is physically fine, except for elevated serotonin levels. They're just out cold. I'll keep you posted."

"Astrometrics, fully functional" Seven of Nine responded coolly.

No one else did.

"All stop, Mr. Tuvok." Janeway concentrated on their immediate situation.

He and Merris moved to the helm and halted Voyager's motion.

"Status of the alien vessel?"

Merris examined the sensor readings. "Drifting."

The flickering bridge lights revealed how truly pallid the frail woman was. "Crewman," Janeway commanded softly. "Report to Sickbay."

"If she does, then I will be unable to assist you." Tuvok met her eyes with keen regret. "Though I am reluctant to admit vulnerability, I am a telepath. Without her proximity, I would be no more conscious than my ship-mates."

"Why is it that I'm still awake?" Janeway was across the room from Merris.

Tuvok raised both brows. "You are not telepathic. She does not need to be so close to you, but must be kept near."

Janeway was forced to relent. With the rest of the crew out cold, she needed every hand. It was a grim decision.

*All right, old girl. You can't transport. Destroying the vessel would kill the Away Team.*

*It may come to that.*

*Aye, it may, but not until every other option is exhausted.*

She tapped her commlink. "Seven, prep the Delta Flyer." Time to do things the old fashioned way.

"Understood."

Tuvok opened the bridge armory, removing a hand phaser and compression rifle. Janeway followed his lead. "You'd better arm yourself, crewman," she instructed Merris.

The slender woman made no move to obey. "My hands are not steady enough to safely wield a phaser."

After casting the woman a searching glance, Janeway accepted her word. "Doctor," she once again contacted Sickbay. "Report to the hanger and do what you can for Crewman Merris."

The turbolift's long ride was broken only by Merris' inquiry. "Have we anything vaguely resembling a plan?"

"Get to that starship." Janeway performed a weapon's check by rote. "Find a way inside. Bring back our crew."

"Eminently logical," Tuvok replied.

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"Wake up Little Cat."

Chakotay awoke to green leaves and blue sky. His nostrils drank in the rich scent of loamy earth. To his left, crouched on a stump, sat his father, and the wind whispered his name through the trees.

How could that be? Like so many of his people, his father passed long ago.

*You are either having a vision, or you're dead. Which is it?*

"You are not dead." Kolopak grinned tightly at him. "Nor am I your father." The ancestral tattoo etched in his forehead suddenly sparkled blue light. "I am a memory given form so that you will listen, for there is little time."

Chakotay stood gingerly. In his dreamscape, there was no SEWG, no uniform. He was dressed as had been so long ago when his father had dragged him to Central America. "Then who are you? Where are we?" It was so real. He remembered the cool embrace of ground. The smells were right, the sounds. Somewhere to his left, an unseen creek giggled its way over brooding stones.

"We are in your mind, Sudea."

The use of his spirit name brought Chakotay's startled gaze back to the image of his father.

"And who I am is irrelevant." Kolopak stood to face him squarely. "Who I was once guarded a dangerous entity, an entity you have released." Sunlight dappled across his face, and then began to burn little holes through the flesh as if an old piece of film were overheating.

Kolopak's double cast his eyes skyward, and starlight glimmered through them. "The hour grows late, indeed. Your captain has brought us into a nebula and inadvertently released my prisoner. This vessel will hold it for a time. Soon it will burn new connections to the engines and weapons

systems." The almost-man looked into Chaoktay's eyes. "It will kill you all without regret."

An earthquake caused the ground to tremble. His father stumbled. When Chakotay tried to steady the other man, his hand passed right through. "Can we imprison it again?"

"No, Little Cat. It is too late. You and your tribe must flee this place and destroy it."

The rainforest world began to fray. "Wait!" Chakotay shouted into the tatters. "What about you?"

This time the wind chuckled. "I am already dead."

\*\*\*\*\*

Rayna kept herself absolutely still during the short flight. Things had gotten off to an interesting start in light of this person called "Seven of Nine." She was quite grateful for Tuvok's timely explanation. Without it, she would never have been so sanguine about the presence of a Borg.

More interesting than that was the deep relationship between Janeway and Seven. Even Tuvok was unsure of its measure. Apparently the captain had simply bonded with this Amazon.

*Perhaps they're lovers.*

Rayna considered that possibility. It would certainly add an interesting dimension to the captain. The Borg's oddly adorned left hand with its implants and mesh sparked several intriguing possibilities for pleasure.

*Pity you have scruples about taking advantage of the less sexually mature, nay?*

"You are growing tired," Tuvok's voice whispered soft and low, interrupting her speculation.

*An understatement and a pointless observation...*

The Doctor had been displeased with her body temperature and metabolic rate. Apparently the anti-rejection drugs were wearing off too quickly.

"This is killing you."

*Equally useless.* Her last breath belonged to him, and there was no need to waste precious energy telling him so.

A childhood song, long buried and many times forgotten played gently in her mind.

*The sea waves roll*

*Her bottom waits*

*Only her winds can save us*

*We seek the shoal*

*But yield to fate*

*And live out the dream that made us.*

Rayna could almost picture her grandmother's sea blue eyes, could almost hear her melodious soprano. She had put thoughts of her childhood on Delta far out of her mind. Holding to the past was dangerous. It clogged the mind like unrefined sewage, preventing it from focusing on the present. Strange that such things should return to her now.

Janeway piloted the Delta Flyer on its second pass over the alien craft. Neither her eyes, nor the shuttle's sensors could detect a docking port.

"Anything Seven?" she asked more from vain hope than expectation.

"Negative, Captain."

Janeway's hands tightened on the controls. *I will not give up.*

Something moved. Janeway's eyes snapped to the crimson hull of the alien vessel. The hallucination was back. Happy as a grig and dancing like a mad hatter, the lizard bounded in a circle.

*You are losing it, Kathryn.*

She squeezed her eyes closed and reopened them. The reptile was gone. In its place was a circular pattern faintly visible on the ship's surface.

"Seven?" Janeway immediately angled toward it.

"Confirmed." The ex-Borg was clearly bemused by the turn of events. "The aperture was not there before, Captain. I did not overlook it."

"Neither did I." She guided them to it. A thud followed by the sound of hermetic seals confirmed that her aim was true. "Can we pick up any sign of the Away Team?" Close as they were, there was always a chance.

"No."

*So much for luck.*

Seven frowned into the sensor readings. "However, I am receiving atmospheric readings. We will require environment suits. The base gas is chlorine."

*When luck flies the coop, it moves at light speed.*

"Tuvok, Merris." Janeway turned to find them both unpacking SEWGs. Sweat beaded on the half-Orion's hairless scalp. There were deep furrows slicing across her brow, testament to the strain she was under. In that moment, Janeway found that she was no longer suspicious of

Merris. Her loyalty to Tuvok was clear.

*She helped you too. Whatever it was she did, it is the reason you're conscious.*

*I know.*

Janeway banished those thoughts, donning the protective suit and running a quick diagnostic. All systems were nominal.

*Hurry.*

A stopwatch in her head seemed to be counting down. To what she did not know, but some intuition, some instinct urged her to be quick. She felt a chill ripple over her skin. Janeway shivered as if someone had plunged her into the frigid cold of space.

Her imaginary lizard darted to the airlock, tail twitching. It froze in place, then slowly, quite deliberately, looked back at her.

Seven's foot stepped through the apparition a moment later, and it disappeared into nothingness.

"Wait." Janeway's command stopped the blonde woman in her tracks. "Tuvok." She nodded toward the port side of the hatch. He moved into position, phaser at the ready. Taking the other side, Janeway knelt. She trained her weapon on the door.

"Now."

Seven of Nine keyed the airlock while balancing on the balls of her feet. As it slid open, she moved smoothly to Janeway's flank. A howling tentacle of scarlet plasma burst through, narrowly missing the tall woman. Janeway and Tuvok opened fire. Smoking black gashes appeared wherever their phaser light struck.

It retreated. Only the sickly yellow of chlorine gas remained.

"Does anyone have an idea of what that was?" Janeway asked as she clumsily regained her feet.

"It appears to be a mass of sentient energy." Tuvok checked his tricorder. "Beyond that, sensors can offer little information."

Seven of Nine carefully peered beyond the airlock hatchway. "I see no sign of it at present. Captain, we will need to purge the Flyer's atmosphere before returning to Voyager." The former drone had replaced her compression rifle with a hand phaser and tricorder. "Lifesigns. Three signatures. Aft."

"Can you track the entity?" Janeway could see a pulsing hallway of luminous green waiting outside. Her internal stopwatch started to tick more quickly.



"Negative, Captain."

So they would fight blind. "Seven, lead the way. Tuvok at the rear. Merris stay with him." She turned to find that the young woman was leaning heavily on the back of a chair. Her gaze flicked up to that of her Security Chief.

"We must be quick," he confirmed.

"Understood."

*Yet another death on your conscience, Katie?*

They stepped into unknown territory. Janeway pushed the reproachful voice aside. She had no choice.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chakotay dragged himself up to his knees. All around, the chamber throbbed with scarlet light. "B'Elanna! Tom!" Translucent gases filled the room. Trying to see more than a couple meters was impossible.

*The atmosphere was clear before, and room glow was steady.*

He crawled forward, feeling across the floor for his teammates.

"Chakotay?"

It was Janeway's voice. Hope caused his heartbeat to treble. "Captain!"

"Commander, where are you?"

"In what's left of a prison cell. I think it's aft to the starboard side." He saw the silhouette of a bulky environment suit and crawled to it. "It's good to hear you."

"You too, but we're not out of it yet. Work your way forward and stay in voice contact." Chakotay rolled the recumbent figure over. It was Lt. Paris. "Tom," he called, shaking the man's SEWG. Bleary blue eyes opened, blinked several times, then cleared.

After pulling the young man to a seated position, Chakotay continued his search. Torres was not far away and had begun to rise. He helped her up.

"What in the hell happened?" She pressed a hand to her helmet then glared when it could not reach her head.

"We let an inmate out of jail." Chakotay pulled his phaser. "The captain's on board. We need to rendezvous. Fast." Both crewmen looked at him. "I can't explain now, but we have to move. It won't be long until this thing has control of the ship."

He cast desperate eyes about, trying to pierce a hole in the mist. It was all but impenetrable. They'd be searching for hours, just to find the doorway.

*You who took the form of my father, he offered up a silent plea. Guide me and mine from this place.*

A low, bestial growl spun him left. The amber eyes of his totem animal were beacons in the fog.

"Follow me," he barked to his companions.

And they did, phasers at the ready, trusting him to lead them. Chakotay was humbled by their faith.

*If they knew I was following a phantasm, they might balk a little.*

The jaguar's golden fur glistened like dewed grass, making it easy to follow.

He contacted the captain, "Chakotay to Janeway. We're moving toward you. No sign of the entity."

"We're clear also." The edge of command and concern sliced over his comm link. "I'm afraid we're on a time table."

That brought a half smile to his lips, despite the circumstances. "Aren't we always?"

Her tight chuckle helped revive vestiges of the bond they once shared. He had truly missed that. Chakotay knew they needed to talk, about the *Equinox*, about the heavy stress she carried. Somewhere amid all the emotional damage lay the foundations of trust they'd constructed. It was time to rebuild.

His ethereal guide suddenly turned left.

*Uh-oh, Sudea, forget your musings. Follow the cat.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Rayna trailed Tuvok as closely as she could. Black spots sporadically occluded her vision. Both her hearts raced at frenetic speed. Her respiration was too fast and too shallow. The dying had accelerated. How truly ironic that her cryogenic hibernation had been interrupted so that she could die anyway.

Tuvok continued to cast worried glances toward her. Clearly he was afraid she would collapse.

*Never, old friend.*

Death was the only thing which would tear her from his service. The iron fetters of obstinance, rebellion, and honor bound her to it.

*Until my last breath.*

She sensed, however, that he would be displeased with her resolve.

*Ah, well, disappointment awaits us all sooner or later.*

The SEWG's temperature was really quite lovely. One could almost drift off to sleep.

"Your ship is not yet to harbor, Wind Singer."

Her eyes beheld to the unmistakable image of a Bronard swimming just to Tuvok's left. All jagged teeth and coarse hide, they were the ugliest fish on Delta. Six beady black eyes stared back at her as it hovered in mid air.

*Hmm. You are not on Delta, and there is no sea water here. So why is this hideous creature trolling through an alien space craft.*

"Have I not always been your link to Sul?" Perhaps that was a smile on its Batrachian face - or maybe a grimace. Hard to say... then again, Bronards were stupid creatures. They were always hungry, attacking creatures twice their size without thought of injury or loss.

*No vocal cords, either.*

Hallucinations were not required to make sense.

"Or am I a vision?"

*I don't have visions.*

"You used to."

*Do not open this door.*

"Too late. You are a Wind Singer of Sul." Now its voice resembled the musical timbre of her grandmother's.

*I refuse to have a conversation with a fish.*

"You must live." Its words caused coolness to filter over her skin, rousing her a little from the cloying lethargy.

*Keep it up, and I'll die just to spite you.*

Laughter tinkled on her ears. The Bronard's toothy grin expanded, and the temperature dropped even more.

Rayna groaned in mock exasperation, and focuts son putting oneclÿyedin front of the other.

\*\*\*\*\*

Janeway strained to see the path ahead. The walls were fluorescing more rapidly with each passing minute. She constantly looked behind to ensure her companions were not lost, in front for a sign of the Away Team, and all around for some sign of the creature. Finally she saw white figures parting the mist.

"Commander?"

"We're here." Chakotay was a welcome sight, as were Torres and Paris.

Janeway breathed a sigh of genuine relief. Her first officer stepped close and spoke again. "We have to destroy this ship."

She nodded briskly. Chakotay would never recommend killing anything without reason.

"Everyone back to the Flyer."

The entity attacked. Long spikes of crimson struck Janeway dead on, frying half her suit's electronics and tossing her against the corridor wall. Alarms sounded as regulators failed. Torres was the next person she saw. The chief engineer knelt beside Janeway and made quick adjustments. Redundant life support kicked in.

All around her, phasers flashed, lighting up the thick clouds of chlorine gas. Torres and she separated, bringing their own weapons to bear. "Keep moving." Janeway fired as she spoke. The thing retreated as dark swatches spread over its glowing surface. It flew past them overhead, striking Paris with a glancing arc of energy. He staggered back into Seven. The ex-Borg was scarcely rocked by the impact. Tuvok had slung Merris' arm across his shoulders and was half-supporting, half-carrying the woman.

*Just a bit further.*

There was the airlock. Janeway motioned everyone inside when it seemed they all wanted to cover the retreat. Chakotay ignored her. The two of them laid suppressive fire down the hallway in hopes of discouraging additional attacks.

"In!" she snapped when it became apparent that he had no intention of going first.

With a scowl that would have curdled fresh milk, he obeyed. Janeway discharged her rifle twice more then followed. Seven keyed the hatch closed.

"Evacuating the atmosphere and recharging." Torres' gloved fingers lumbered over console

controls.

Lt. Paris had taken the pilot's chair and was initiating separation.

"Once we're clear, come about for an attack run. Be creative," she added, then cast about for her remaining teammates. Seven and Tuvok crouched beside a crumpled environment suit.

Merris.

Even through the looking glass of her face shield, the woman looked bad. Her golden skin was fevered. There were dark circles hollowed beneath her eyes. As Janeway stepped closer, those eyes shifted to meet hers.

*How are you even conscious, much less aware?*

Tuvok's face was grave. They were losing her.

"Voyager to Delta Flyer."

Harry Kim's tenor crackling over her commlink was sweetest sound Janeway had ever heard.

"This is Janeway. Is everyone okay over there?"

"Yes, Captain. We've been trying to contact you for the past twenty-eight minutes."

"Lock phasers on the alien vessel and fire at will. Beam Crewman Merris and Tuvok directly to Sickbay."

The two disappeared in a twinkling of blue.

Janeway and Seven were thrown off balance when the shuttle rolled ninety degrees to starboard. All weapons fired. She saw a narrow pattern of fissures rip down the alien craft's center. Her surprised gaze swept back to the pilot's chair. "You used the Sulu-Alpha offensive pattern?"

Paris had an almost-grin on his lean face. "You said be creative," he quipped.

*That I did.*

Beams of golden light told Janeway Voyager's formidable armament had been brought to bear. An instant later the Flyer's screen was alight was fiery orange as the alien craft exploded. It was over that fast.

Cheers from the crew threatened to overload her commlink. She caught Tom's eye and gave him a wide, grateful smile. Torres let loose a triumphant howl and pounded the man on his back.

Voyager was safe. The Away Team was back, unharmed. Only one remained at risk. "Take us

home, Mr. Paris," Janeway instructed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tuvok attempted to restrain the fear which threatened his peace. It was illogical to be worried. Either his friend would live, or she would not. Any emotion of his would sway the outcome not at all.

Upon their arrival to Sickbay, Rayna had slipped into a coma. The Doctor took charge immediately. So far he had administered over a dozen injections and had restarted her primary heart. Vital signs were still dangerously low.

"Raise bed temperature five degrees." The EMH pulled out an alpha wave inducer and affixed it to Rayna's brow. He shook his head in answer to Tuvok's unformed question. "I don't know if she'll make it. I have to slow her metabolic rate, and I don't dare use sedatives. Most people would have passed out before burning their reserves this low. She's like a fusion reactor with two molecules of hydrogen left."

Yes, that was Rayna Merris. On Romulus, Hanaj once said she had a soul born of water, but heart made of flame.

*Hanaj was a Romulan adolescent in the throes of infatuation. His observations hardly qualify as logical.*

Tuvok moved to the bedside and rested his hands on the mattress, near his friend, but not touching. Whatever her fate, she would not be alone when it was decided.

Thirty minutes later, when Janeway entered Sickbay, he was still there. The captain had shed her SEWG and was once more in the red and black uniform of command. Her hair was tousled, but otherwise, there was no evidence that the woman had just emerged from combat. She conferred with the Doctor briefly, then approached.

"Voyager is secure. Headaches and bruises are the worst injuries reported so far. Vorik and Jalet have both been released, but are on medical leave for two days." Tuvok saw her gray eyes focus on the pale face of Crewman Merris. Concern knit a frown between auburn brows. "I'm sorry that she had to be put in jeopardy."

Tuvok nodded. After a steadying breath, he was able to answer. "Captain, you did what was necessary and logical to save your vessel and your crew. Neither I, nor she would reproach you."

The captain left after a few minutes, but Tuvok remained.

He was still there 4.7 hours later when Seven of Nine walked in. By this time, the Doctor had removed the alpha-wave emitter and Tuvok had regained enough control that his finger tips no longer tore the mattress' fabric. The taller woman took up position opposite him, ramrod straight, hands behind her back. Confusion trapped behind glacial blue eyes was eventually given voice. "Your presence here is illogical."

Tuvok considered the observation. He did not find Seven's presence disturbing. Since her arrival on Voyager, they had shared many conversations. Her temperament was volatile, but for the most part her reasoning was remarkably sound-wrong in this instance, but sound.

"Among Deltans it is traditional to keep vigil over the sick. I honor the ways of her people."

One flaxen brow lifted to the heavens.

"I think she does not believe you, old friend," Rayna's nearly inaudible whisper came as a welcome surprise. He looked down into obsidian orbs that were unspeakably tired, but filled with humor.

"May I please get to the biobed," the EMH's impatient sarcasm interrupted Tuvok's...satisfaction... at Rayna's momentary awareness.

Seven stepped aside. After checking vital signs and tricorder readings, the Doctor pursed his lips. "Better. Not good, but better." A few touch screens later and he gave Tuvok and Seven an imperious glare. "Now, everyone out. And you," he stabbed a finger in Tuvok's direction. "Twenty four hours medical leave. Consider it an order."

"Following your recommendations is only logical, Doctor." Tuvok countered smoothly. With Rayna out of immediate danger, he was willing to retreat to his quarters and take his rest.

\*\*\*\*\*

Janeway and Chakotay remained on deck until Voyager had cleared the nebula. They bid a silent farewell to the Magellan and its lost crew then guided their vessel back into the hazardous pathways of the Labyrinth. The derelict shipyard faded into the night. Only the memorial beacon marked their passing.

Janeway found within herself a mixture of regret and relief. She was grateful that the day's dangers had passed without loss of life or property, and yet there were mysteries about this place which would forever remain undiscovered and unsolved. It was time, however, to go.

At 0214 hours the last log entry was made and the last report reviewed. Chakotay stopped in to let her know that he was signing off for the night. She accompanied him to the turbolift.

Adrenaline and caffeine had finally worn off, leaving her bone-weary. All she wanted was a shower and the black oblivion of sleep. No dreams of Earth to remind her of what she could not have; no nightmares haunted by Voyager's dead to gouge at the tender scars of guilt; certainly no idyllic encounters with Michael or Mark. Those only left her with the emptiness of her heart and the raw, aching need of her sex.

*You are definitely overdue for a visit to Fair Haven.*

"Kathryn?" Chakotay broke the silence of their ride. "I've been trying to figure out how to

approach you..." He shook his head. "I want to talk to you. More importantly, I want to listen to you." One bronzed hand came to rest on her shoulder. "Things haven't been right between us." His brown eyes were warmed by undisguised affection. "Can we sit down together? It doesn't have to be tomorrow or the next day, but sometime soon?"

The touch of his hand, the gentle sound of his voice threatened to erode Janeway's mask of control. Struck suddenly mute, she merely nodded. He seemed not to see her raw emotions. For that she was thankful. Chakotay left the turbolift at the next level no doubt intent on collapsing to his bed.

Despite her fatigue, Janeway's path went to Sickbay, not her quarters. Crewman Merris had risked her life for Tuvok and Voyager, it was only right to check on her welfare.

*Tell the truth, Katie, you couldn't sleep if your life depended on it. Chakotay unnerved you.*

She had to be very careful with him, especially now. There had long been an undercurrent of attraction between them. It would be all too easy to cross the line of friendship.

*Would you want to keep him? Do you really think he's strong enough to match your will, or secure enough to deal with your need to command?*

*No.*

The lights in medical were dimmed. Glowing touch screens and monitors revealed that the Doctor was off line. She crossed to Merris' bed quietly. In sleep, the woman's face was softened, capable of a kind of innocence. The scar on her cheek had faded to a pale line. It did not detract from the woman's beauty. Nor did the lack of hair.

*So smooth, it looks like satin. Janeway had a sudden urge to stroke her fingers over Merris' scalp. Where did that come from? You must be more tired than you thought.*

The Deltan's black eyes opened. "Captain," she greeted, as if they were passing in the corridor.

"I didn't mean to wake you." Janeway leaned one hand on the bed, bringing the other to her hip. *How embarrassing, Kathryn. You were just standing there gawking at her.*

"I was not sleeping." Rayna interlaced her fingers across her chest and regarded her visitor. The captain was outwardly calm, but the demon planets of loneliness and exhaustion orbited about her. There were dark circles around the eyes of starship gray.

Janeway frowned at her. "Are you in pain? Should I call the Doctor?"

"No, and no." It was tempting to stop there. Irritating authority figures was an enjoyable pastime, but looking at Janeway, at her sad face and noble bearing made Rayna refrain. Instead, she told her the simple truth. "As I said earlier, I don't much care for my dreams."



Janeway's eyes lowered. Seconds passed, before she answered. "I remember." Her voice was small in the night. Hints of nightmare chased its edges. The captain quickly recovered. "I'd better get out of here before the Doctor pops in." She gave Rayna a quick glance and a half-smile. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Captain."

Rayna watched her guest depart, cursing the sympathy that burgeoned within her. The last thing she wanted to do was to like this woman. Captains were too much trouble to cultivate as friends. They were controlling and aggressive and stubborn and...the list of vices stretched on ad infinitum. Her grandmother had been a captain. Her father, too, had served in that capacity. The last captain she'd encountered had tried to murder her. This one had exiled her to the galley. She was fucking sick of captains, however tragically alone they may be.

*You cannot escape it, so stop struggling. Water is wet. Fire is hot. You are compassionate. Accept your nature.*

*I am not befriending this woman.*

*Hold that thought, her mind taunted.*

It was a long time before she slept.

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**Trekgrrl's Scrolls**  
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