

~ Through the Looking Glass ~

by Trekgrl

Notes:

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

Through the Looking Glass is a story by Lewis Carroll. I like that story very much, and wanted to give a nod, not violate any sort of copyright.

"There's no place like home," is a quotation from the Wizard of Oz, which, again, doesn't belong to me.

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

Rayna Merris is an original character.

This story 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.

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Through the Looking Glass

The shimmering mist of metreon gases was finally thinning. Beyond, lay a field of stars. Captain Kathryn Janeway exhaled a long breath of relief. After weeks behind a curtain of multi-colored fog, the argent glow of a thousand suns was its own kind of homecoming.

She patted her helmsman's shoulder. "You did it, Tom."

That murmur of praise sparked echoing cheers from the Bridge crew. Harry Kim clapped his hands vigorously, hero worship for his colleague clearly etched across his youthful features. Chakotay's emphatic, "well done," caused Lt. Paris to smile a little wider.

Janeway stepped back from the helm. Paris deserved his moment in the spotlight, and she had no desire to diminish his glory. She settled in the command chair, and closed her eyes for a heartbeat or two.

From entrance to exit, it had taken forty-one days to be free of the Labyrinth.

Seems more like forty-one years. Plasma clouds, pre-nebula gases, and ion storms...oh, my. Only you can't just click your heels three times and say, "There's no place like home."

Her eyes felt desert dry as they opened. They'd all been burning the midnight oil on this one. Yesterday she and Chakotay had logged over eighteen hours on the Bridge. Voyager's passage out from the starship graveyard had been far more difficult than the journey in.

Which, when you think about it old girl, makes sense when dealing with a labyrinth.

"Pick your star, Tom," she offered him a proud smile. "Get us back on course for the Alpha Quadrant."

The words had only escaped her lips when sensor alarms sounded. Beneath her, Janeway could feel the ship shiver.

"Our warp drive is offline," Tuvok called out from behind her. Chakotay's dark eyes intersected with hers before he contacted Engineering. "B'Elanna, report!"

"The warp core initiated a spontaneous shutdown." Torres sounded as though she were speaking from inside a conduit. "We're trying to restart."

"Do better than try." Chakotay moved swiftly to one of the Bridge consoles. "Can we do a manual restart?"

The viewscreen's display of pristine stars faded in and out of focus. Janeway's pulse quickened as adrenaline shot into her system. As if from some child's dream, space seemed to tear open.

"Subspace fracture," Ensign Kim supplied her with more data. "'We're in some kind of

gravimetric gradient." He looked up at the shimmering rip. "We're being pulled in."

"Full reverse," she barked to the helm.

Nothing happened. No shudder, no engine whine...nothing.

Lt. Paris turned troubled blue eyes toward her. "Our impulse engines aren't responding."

Damn it.

"Use the auxiliary thrusters," she ordered.

"Auxiliary thrusters are offline." Tuvok had no good news to impart.

"B'Elanna, what the hell is happening?" Chakotay returned to the Bridge's center.

"You tell me." The Chief's voice crackled with frustrated impatience. "The plasma reactor turned itself off; the warp core is unresponsive." Something banged metal on metal in the background. "We've done everything but go outside and push!"

Janeway raced to a console. Half of Voyager's systems were inoperative. She ground her teeth together in frustration. There was nothing to do but watch helplessly as Voyager was pulled into the rift.

Ensign Kim called out more information. A muted beep caused Janeway's head to snap toward him. "I'm picking up a communication's beacon."

"Origin?"

"Inside the tear." Kim sounded scared.

Janeway straightened and put both hand on her hips. "On screen." Whatever was happening, she would meet it head on.

The pulsing rip in space was almost upon them. An instant later the viewscreen lit up with the profile of ...someone. There were no features that could be vaguely construed as human. Multifaceted eyes glimmered rainbows in the dim lighting. Mandibles chattered staccato clicks like some mad composer's rhyme.

"Translation?" Janeway studied the alien's features. The lack of illumination made colors difficult to discern.

"Working," replied Tuvok. His voice was reassuringly calm. "Captain, the beacon appears to be automated, and at least five hundred thousand years old."

"Time before we're pulled through?" Her mind edged into warp speed.

"Twenty-five seconds." Paris tapped buttons on his panel. "No response from the helm."

Chakotay re-contacted engineering, "Bridge to Torres. We need power, B'Elanna! Reroute everything through auxiliary systems. Pull it from life support if you have to."

"We've already tried." Torres' voice was muffled. "The gel packs in propulsion are malfunctioning. I pulled some from other systems and they stopped working as soon as I linked them to the warp drive."

Damn.

"Ten seconds to subspace fracture," Paris continued the countdown. "We could eject the warp core," he suggested. "That sometimes closes a tear."

"And sometimes doesn't," Janeway rejected the idea. "We'd also lose the core. Ready photon torpedoes. Put a spread from end-to-end." There was no guarantee that would work, either.

"Weapons are offline." Tuvok's announcement was as unwelcome as tribbles in the quadro-triticale.

"Is there anything still working?" Janeway's ire at the hopeless situation had reached flashpoint.

"Translation of the beacon is complete." Harry Kim confirmed that the ship's computer, at least, was functioning.

Janeway set her jaw. "Let's hear it."

There was no time. Voyager shuddered as it passed through the glimmering rip. She staggered starboard, but Chakotay caught her before she fell. Klaxons sounded. The deck heaved. It felt like her insides were flipped upside down; then it was over.

"We have returned to normal space." Kim was bent over the sensors. "Engines and weapons systems are still off-line."

"Where are we?" Chakotay returned to his seat.

"Unknown." There was an inflection in Tuvok's voice that drew Janeway's attention. She met his eyes, and found them filled with concern. "We are no longer in the Delta Quadrant."

Janeway turned her weary gaze toward the viewscreen. The stars there glittered in monochrome colors of white and red. Huge balls of scarlet fire were silhouetted next to tiny dots of silver flame.

Red giants...white dwarves...

"Long range scans can find no identifiable systems." Tuvok had left his station. She heard his voice near to her, and found that he had joined her study of the stars. "We appear to be in a different galaxy."

"Confirmed." Harry Kim's voice was filled with awe. "It's ancient. Sensors indicate that every star in range is either dead, or dying."

"A dead zone." Paris sat back in his chair, gazing at the tableau of stellar carnage. "It's like the Labyrinth cubed. There are gravity sinkholes, collapsed stars, black holes and quasars. Even if we figure out where to go, getting there is going to be almost impossible."

Another maze...that can't be coincidence. Janeway's brain spat out the only conclusion that made sense.

"Tuvok, play the beacon's message." She moved back to her command chair, and exchanged a speaking glance with Chakotay. "I think it will shed some light on our current situation."

The viewscreen once more depicted the insect-like alien. "A thousand cheers to you." Plumed antennae quivered atop its head. "By successfully navigating Phase One: Close Quarters Impulse Maneuvers, you are halfway to earning your place in the Surveyor's Guild. You are free of the Labyrinth. Your engines will be restored in exactly seventy-two standard hours at which time you will commence Phase Two: Interstellar Cartography and Warp Navigation. It is strongly suggested that you use the time to recuperate from your journey." Gem-cut eyes glittered silver as he leaned forward. "Welcome to the Land of the Dead."

"Senior officers to the Briefing Room." Chakotay anticipated her instructions. "Seven, stay in Astrometrics. Gather as much information on this system as you can." He shook his head as he closed down communications. "What doesn't kill us..." His dark eyes intersected with hers.

"...makes us stronger." Janeway stood with all the command confidence she could muster. "Mr. Ayala, you have the Bridge."

A few minutes later, she faced her staff. Their faces were somber.

It doesn't take a telepath to know what they're thinking. First we're lost in the Delta Quadrant; now we're just lost.

"All right people," she leaned her elbows on the cool metal of the table, "let's work this problem." Janeway looked at each in turn until all eyes were no longer staring fixedly downward, then she turned to Tuvok. "Theories?"

His was the only face not weighed down by fatigue and despair. When he answered, her old friend's voice was reassuringly level. "The transmission is no doubt as old as the beacon, itself. It may, or may not be native to this system." He replayed the message on the room's central display, stopping it after the words "Surveyor's Guild". "Most cultures develop rites of passage, some marking the transition from adolescent to adulthood..."

Chakotay nodded. "True. My father had to cross two hundred miles of jungle when he was twelve as a demonstration of manhood."

"Wait." Lt. Paris waved a hand at Tuvok. "Are you saying that after everything else we've gone through, Voyager has to pass some extinct culture's trial by fire?"

Janeway shot her helmsman a warning look.

"No," the security chief continued without rancor. "Some professions also have traditions which mark the passage of a person from one skill level to a higher one, the transition from journeyman to master in a typical guild structure, for instance."

Janeway considered this a moment and attempted to follow his line of reasoning. "Like completing a series of basic exercises to earn a pilot's rating."

"Correct," Tuvok confirmed. "It is probable that the Surveyor's Guild was an organized group of explorers who charted unknown systems."

Torres nodded her head. "So, they would need to prove themselves capable of navigating through adverse conditions."

"You mean this is an obstacle course," Paris suddenly seemed less tired, "designed to test piloting skills?"

"Quite likely." Tuvok turned back to face Janeway. "The subspace tear then becomes an entrance."

Janeway nodded her understanding. "If they created an entrance, then they would have also created an exit upon its successful completion."

"That follows."

Lt. Paris suddenly stood, blue eyes flashing enthusiasm. "What are we waiting for?" He shot B'Elanna Torres a cocky grin.

"As you were, Lieutenant," Janeway instructed gently. Tom's optimism was infectious, but he'd been putting in more Bridge hours than anyone.

"That's strange." Ensign Kim was staring down at his PADD. He seemed to realize that everyone was looking at him, and quickly explained. "I cross referenced 'labyrinth' with 'land of the dead'. Both are found in the myths of Ancient Greece. Theseus traveled to the center of the Labyrinth to slay the Minotaur, and Odysseus crossed the land of the dead in the Odyssey."

Chakotay frowned in concentration. "We entered the Labyrinth and killed a dangerous lifeform. The parallel is uncanny."

"Like everything else thus far, it can't be mere coincidence." Janeway leaned back and steepled her fingers. "Alright. According to the beacon we have three days. I suggest we use the time to get some much needed rest and to gather as much information on this sector as possible. Harry, expand your search to the folklore of other species." She fixed them all with what she hoped was a look of encouragement. "Tidy up whatever loose ends you have, and then go off duty for at least twenty-four hours."

"Including you, Captain?" Chakotay offered her a warm smile. No doubt he would use the down time to finally corner her for that talk he'd been wanting to have.

You can't avoid him forever, Katie.

"Including me." Janeway followed him to the Bridge.

After sixteen days, the Doctor had finally declared Rayna fit for duty. The announcement had come as no surprise. Once he had successfully produced artificial blood that was compatible with her physiology, the healing process had significantly accelerated. So here she was, staring at the uniform lying across her old biobed and wondering if there was some way she could sneak out an airlock.

"You don't seem particularly eager to go," the EMH observed.

Rayna turned to find his dark eyes upon her. The photonic gaze was penetrating, capable, she'd learned, of stripping away masks and half-truths. It was strange, really. No one, with the notable exception of Tuvok, had heretofore been able to read her moods with any accuracy. Then came this artificial man with preternatural perception.

She ran a finger over the uniform's fabric before replying, "In the twenty-odd years I've served the Federation, I've spent only eight months aboard a starship. Two-thirds of that time was on the *Saladin*, where I was pretending to be someone else."

He moved to stand beside her. "It was difficult for me to fit in, too. My program was never designed for long-term operation. Just give it some time."

"I'm not the 'fit in' type, Doctor." Rayna gave him a feral smile then pulled off her hospital garb. That sent the hologram fleeing across the room.

He's even programmed to be embarrassed at another's nudity.

The dismal gray t-shirt went on first. Rayna could swear there was funeral music echoing in the background. The equally boring black trousers followed. There were no pockets, of course.

What the Federation has against something so innocuous as pockets is quite beyond me.

The jacket was a dreary black and gray, 'fleet Intelligence colors, no doubt the only such uniform on Voyager. She zipped it closed.

"I'm surprised the captain hasn't been down to see you." The Doctor's voice came from behind her, somewhere across the expanse of Sickbay. "She usually tries to interact with new crewmen and help them get settled."

Rayna did not rise to the comment. Truth was Janeway had been to visit on three occasions, all of them in the wee hours, what her Grandmother used to refer to as the "deep black of night." In all three cases, Rayna had feigned sleep. Janeway never stayed very long. Each time, the compact woman was tired to the point of exhaustion, haunted by fear, and in possession of a throbbing headache.

None of which is any of my business, or concern.

Yes, she was proud of her resolve to keep Janeway at a distance. The captain's health was someone else's problem.

Patent leather shoes completed Rayna's foray into discomfort. The uniform made her feel like a swollen finger or thumb, sticking out for all the world to see.

"If you want to continue reviewing replicator programming, I'm generally free in the evenings, unless there is a medical emergency," the Doctor dispelled her musing.

"That would be fine."

Six months on Epsilon Theta under the tyrannical tutelage of Chef Thaddeus Yule had given Rayna a crash course of replicator manipulation. Yule knew a plethora of tricks to tweak replicated food.

"It's the imperfections that make real food taste so different from replicated. Tiny inconsistencies in soil and fertilizer, bits of foreign matter, even a little dusting of insect droppings all contribute to the taste," Thaddeus had thundered at her while programming a Bolean stinkfish soufflé. His florid features, beady green eyes, and mop of brown hair were vividly displayed in the viewscreen of her mind. *"Replicators make food too good. Living creatures can't accept perfection. We're limited, finite. Hell, the human tongue can only detect five things: salt, bitter, sweet, sour and savory...whatever that is."*

The philosopher cook...Rayna still missed him, now and again, even his cyclonic fits of temper.

Programming imperfections and refining the taste of spices was a skill she'd cultivated even after she returned to the Intelligence Corps. The trial and error process was soothing, in its way, relieving some of the stress associated with undercover operations. Fortunately it would also come in handy on Voyager. So far, she and the Doctor had successfully reprogrammed the coffee, tea and cream subroutines for Sickbay's replicator.

"You should let me remove those scars." The Doctor approached her with a dermal regenerator in hand. It was the seventeenth time he'd offered.

She drew in a deep lungful of air. "I have already told you no." Rayna turned her wrists over. Only a corner of the raised flesh showed beyond her uniform's sleeves.

He frowned at her, black brows lowered in disapproval. "I'm well aware of that. As a computer program, I possess perfect recall. I simply don't understand your irrational attachment to them."

Last time I checked, your understanding was not required.

Rayna killed that unkind remark before it left her throat. The holo-man had been extraordinarily attentive. Being churlish was no way to repay his kindness. She met his obsidian gaze. "To the extent possible, Doctor, the outside should match the inside."

She was saved from further explanation when the doorway to Sickbay whooshed open. Framed in it was a short humanoid. Hair sprouted from his head in a swooping sort of mohawk and grew from his face at odd angles, reminding Rayna of whiskers. His eyes danced with humor; his clothes fairly vibrated with color. Only the comm badge on his chest was familiar.

"Ah," grunted the Doctor. "Mr. Neelix. Right on time. Ready to take our newest crewmember on a tour?"

"Indeed I am." The new arrival transmitted good will in Rayna's direction. "I'm Neelix, a Talaxian and native to the Delta Quadrant. I'm the cook-" he paused, seemed to reach some kind of realization and grinned at her, "-with your arrival, I suppose I'm the Chief Cook. I'm also Morale Officer and diplomatic liaison. I'll be showing you around the ship and then escorting you to your new quarters...unless you want to go to your quarters first. I would understand that. I mean you need to get settled in. Which would you prefer?"

Rayna drew one breath, then two. This Neelix radiated chemicals like a walking catalyst. He was cheerful, eager to please, filled with kindness, and yet, behind the bluster and bluff, there was a well of melancholy intermingled with a healthy dose of skeptical watchfulness.

A fellow con artist, perhaps?

Her mind evaluated the conflicting signals even as her lips offered up her widest, friendliest smile. "A tour would be lovely. I am so pleased to meet you, Mr. Neelix." She offered him her hand, which he shook vigorously. "You have many duties, I see. Please forgive me for intruding on them."

"Not at all, not at all. Commander Tuvok was going to go with us, but he was called to the briefing room. Probably related to that nasty fall we had through a subspace tear. Thank you, Doctor." The little man shot the last over his shoulder as he led her out the door. Rayna's mind veered sharply to starboard as it digested that pearl of information.

Boredom is not an issue on this vessel, apparently.

She had no chance to ask questions. Indeed, Neelix seemed oblivious to her reaction. "It is difficult to have good morale when one is an outsider. I remember my first days on Voyager. The captain was always kind to me, of course, but many of the other crew thought I was something of a joke."

His oblique mention of Janeway sparked a sudden shift in his emotional currents. Admiration bordering on adoration, seeped from his pores, that and a loyalty so profound Rayna could not plumb its depths.

School your features. Pay attention.

Rayna clasped her hands behind her back and focused outward. This vessel, like all those belonging to the 'fleet, was disconcertingly clean. Dust and dirt seemed not to exist, and if they did, would never have the temerity to cling to any part of the sleek metal surfaces.

"I was lucky, though," Neelix continued to prattle. "I came on board with someone else."

The tide of his feelings shifted yet again gaining undercurrents of grief and abiding love.

"Who was she?" Rayna voiced the most logical question.

"Her name was Kes..."

She listened as Neelix described the love of his life, her blonde hair that reminded him of a Talaxian sunrise; her delicate features, softer than flower petals. The colors of his love were painted in simple hues: the deep reds of passion, the gentle pinks of affection, and the indigo blue of loss.

"I'm sorry." Rayna touched his sleeve.

The contact almost moved him to tears. Then he shot her a cagey, calculating look. "You can read minds."

"No. I can read chemicals."

They walked in silence for a moment or two. Rayna noticed that he really hadn't gotten around to showing her anything but passageways. She kept that observation to herself.

"How does that work?" Curiosity apparently got the better of Neelix.

"Most lifeforms produce chemicals in response to emotional states," Rayna recited the textbook answer by rote. "Deltans have vestigial sense organs in their skin which are sensitive to those chemical changes."

They entered the turbolift for the third time. Rayna could not recall anything from the previous deck except corridors.

"Fascinating." Her guide had given her his complete attention. "I don't think I've ever met an empath of your type before. What I mean is, we have some empathic races in the Delta Quadrant, but their abilities were based on some kind of psychic power."

The turbolift's doors opened. She saw two security officers moving her old stasis tube through large blast doors.

Neelix motioned her to precede him. "You know; I've been enjoying our conversation so much, that I've neglected your tour. I do beg your pardon. This is Cargo Bay Two, by the way. I'll take you to aeroponics, in Cargo Bay Three once we are finished here." He indicated the blast doors. "I'm sure you recognized your hibernation chamber. Seven wanted to do her own examination now that Lt. Torres is finished. Normally we would just transport it from one location to the next, but we're conserving power. Oh dear." He paused at the hatch. "Have you met Seven?" Neelix shot her a twinkling glance, then continued. "Actually it is Seven of Nine, Tertiary Something to the Something or Other." He gestured expansively to punctuate his statement.

Rayna recalled the blond Amazon clearly, skin-tight biosuit and all. She said only, "I have."

The little humanoid positively beamed at her. "Must have been quite a shock, eh?" He motioned toward the hatchway. "She lives in the Cargo Bay. When Captain Janeway rescued her from the Collective, it was a bit of an adjustment on everyone. Seven is adept at all the sciences and runs Astrometrics. I'm afraid she is a little lacking in the social graces. Not long ago, she went on her first date and tore all the ligaments in her dancing partner's arm."

"How old is she?" Rayna waited for him to key the hatchway.

"In her twenties, I think. She's human, by the way. The Borg assimilated her and her parents when Seven was still a child."

It is miraculous that she survived with her sanity intact. To Neelix, she merely stated, "It must be lonely for her, to be without the voices in her head."

A surprising understanding illuminated the depths of Neelix's eyes. "I have thought that, myself. Though, I confess, I have never asked. It took me a long time to get used to her. We, Talaxians, have not had good relations with the Borg."

"Until they're assimilated, no one has good relations with the Borg," Rayna commented dryly.

Neelix chuckled and keyed the latch.

Before the doors were even a quarter open, something exploded. Rayna was knocked to the floor by the powerful shockwave. Alarms sounded.

Janeway's finger stabbed a button on her command chair. "Engineering, report."

The Bridge's intercom system came alive with traffic. "This is Torres. I'm reading an explosion in Cargo Bay Two. Chemical hazard detected. Cryogenic fluid levels at toxic levels. My loading team is still in there! So is Seven!"

"Bridge to Seven of Nine," Chakotay attempted contact with Astrometrics. "Seven, do you read?" There was no answer.

Janeway raced him to the turbolift, hurling orders through her comm badge. "Engineering, send fire control and hazmat teams to Cargo Bay Two. Sickbay, get ready to receive casualties."

"I'll meet Torres and her team in the Cargo Bay," Chakotay called out to her.

Commander Tuvok was just behind them. "I will lead a security detail."

That left Sickbay for her.

Rayna struggled to her feet. She was vaguely aware that her face was hot and uncomfortable. Her eyes burned. Neelix was on his knees. The Talaxian smacked his comm badge. "Neelix to Seven of Nine." Looking up she saw that the hatchway was closing.

Safety Protocols.

She dove through the portal without thinking, realizing as she hit the deck and rolled upright that this was probably not one of the more intelligent choices she'd made.

Inside, suppression subroutines had already erased all traces of fire. Yellowish mist billowed over the sleek, shiny floor, moving stealthily, like a predator. Everywhere it touched turned grey. Ice crystals winked at her from walls, crates and hatchways. The acrid aroma of cryo-fluid burned the back of Rayna's throat as she drew breath.

Your sleep tube.

The air was already toxic. Her stomach twisted itself into knots as the poisonous vapor seeped through her pores.

Killed by your own sleep tube. Elegant proof that there is, indeed, a higher consciousness in charge of the universe - with an ironic sense of humor.

Rayna tried to shield her eyes with a forearm. It was only partially successful. She crept forward,

holding her breath, and trying not to vomit. To her left she saw movement, and was almost toppled when someone crashed into her. One of the deckhands? She couldn't make out the color of his uniform. Ice crystals occluded the fabric. The man was screaming, holding his hands over his face. Gray-white and frozen, his fingers were hopelessly adhered to the skin of his cheeks. She grabbed his elbow, and slapped his comm badge. "Transporter, one to Sickbay." He dissolved into a million dancing lights.

That's one.

Condensing moisture had created a dense fog. Somewhere at its center Rayna heard more screaming.

There was someone beside her. From the height and build of the silhouette, Rayna judged it to be Seven of Nine. "My nanoprobes can compensate for the toxins. You must evacuate," her toneless voice instructed.

Was that an order? Rayna savored the sweet possibility of rebellion. *My, my, I haven't disobeyed a direct order in -well-years, actually.* She did not waste her air on those comments. Instead she shouted, "Can you see the other crewman?"

The Borg pointed aft of their location. Together they headed to him. The cold was so deep it burned her exposed skin. She felt tiny dots of something hitting her head, her cheeks, cutting the flesh like microscopic razors. The pain was exquisitely novel. So was the tell-tale burning in her lungs.

You are running out of air. The observation caused Rayna to smile, an expression others would no doubt find mad, under the circumstances. She simply found it amusing when her mind supplied information that was both redundant and useless.

Her insides quivered like the tentacles of a Markasian anemone and lunch threatened to put in an unwelcome appearance. Ice on her eyelashes made it impossible to see. She lost sight of her companion. Moments later, she tripped over an obstruction on the floor and found both Seven and the missing crewman. Rayna knelt beside the fallen man. He was curled in the fetal position, still keening with pain. Frost coated his lips and nostrils. One of his legs was crushed beneath a piece of wreckage. Seven plucked it up like crushed paper and tossed it aside.

If you live through this, Ray-Ray, do not tease or irritate the nice Borg.

She touched the crewman's shoulder. The fabric of his uniform shattered like glass and sliced open her fingers.

Sul's Blood.

Rayna brushed aside the fragments, and grabbed one of his arms. Her palms burned as the flesh adhered to his exposed skin. It occurred to her that she now had no way to tap her comm badge for transport.

Did you have your brain with you when you left Sickbay?

That made her snicker even as dark blotches threatened her consciousness. Then Seven grasped her shoulder. "Astrometrics to Transporter Room Two. Intraship beaming. Three to Sickbay."

The world around them disintegrated into a billion pinpoints of light.

Janeway entered a Sickbay gone mad. Her ears were assaulted by relentless screaming. On the floor lay one of her crew. The Doctor, Seven of Nine and Rayna Merris struggled to put him onto a biobed. She rushed to assist.

Half of the fallen man's body was covered in glistening diamonds of ice and his legs were unnaturally twisted. His uniform was literally crumbling away. The skin on his face was cracked like a reflection in a broken mirror. Trails of frozen tears tracked down his cheeks to mingle with scarlet drops of blood. He screamed again, and pink bubbles popped at his lips. The Doctor injected him twice, without visible effect.

"He's on the bed, now let him go," he barked at Merris. Only then did Janeway notice that the woman had not released her grip.

"I would if that were possible," the words were spoken through clenched teeth. Merris' fingers were as gray as the slate colored carpet in sickbay.

Jesus.

"Seven," Janeway called the ex-Borg over. "What happened?"

"The Cardassian Hibernation Unit exploded as Crewmen Bonneville and Mallory were moving it into the Cargo Bay. Cause is, as yet, unknown." Seven's voice was flat, almost toneless. It was a peculiarly hollow sound that she adopted only when something had profoundly affected her.

"Crewman Merris rescued Bonneville almost immediately." She nodded toward another biobed.

Lt. Paris was bent over its occupant. Janeway couldn't see Bonneville's face because his hands...if the gray, lifeless lumps could be called such...were frozen fast to it.

"I instructed her to leave the Cargo Bay," Seven continued her narration. "I do not know if she heard me; however, she did not leave. We found Mallory moments later and beamed to Sickbay."

"It's raining." The whispered words snapped Janeway's head around. Merris still held Mallory by the arm. "Can you feel it on your face?" Dark eyes closed. "Cooling... soothing..." Pale brows lowered. "The flames of pain are dying." Merris' face suffused with golden color as blood rushed to the surface of her skin.

Janeway remembered the silken brush of this woman's fingers on her brow. *Like butterfly wings...* In that moment, she found herself missing the sweet touch of Merris' hands.

Sweet?

Mallory drew in a ragged breath, and did not cry out in agony. His body abruptly relaxed.

Sweat beads formed on the Deltan's satin scalp, but her dark eyes opened, and stared unflinchingly into Mallory's clouded, unseeing orbs. For his part, the injured man seemed transfixed by the woman holding his arm.

"Am..." his words were slurred, seeping like water from a sopping sponge. "Am I going to die?"

Without an instant's hesitation, Merris answered, "Yes."

A glance at the Doctor's grim countenance confirmed that as true. Janeway's throat tightened. She'd already lost so many.

Mallory sucked in another liquid breath, then rasped, "I'm not ready."

The fear in his voice flayed Janeway to her core. She moved next to Merris, placing a hand on Mallory's leg.

Merris leaned down and pressed her lips against the crystalline wasteland that was once Mallory's cheek. "I know," she breathed out so softly that Janeway scarcely heard, "but there are some appointments we have to keep."

The words must have brought some comfort to Mallory because his cracked lips turned upward in a slight smile.

And then he was gone.

Rayna straightened with great difficulty. She quickly cast her head to the side as her stomach finally rejected its contents. The wrenching in her gut was so violent that she half expected to see toenails intermingled in the vomit.

With all her being, Rayna wished she were anywhere else, even back in a Cardassian cell. The chemical bond forged with Mallory was complicated, intimate in a way that few species could comprehend. Easing his pain had been an instinctive act. When he died, she'd felt it, not in her mind - no - deeper, like a vortex in her soul.

They are all staring at you. She heard her father's basso disapproval. *Displaying weakness in front of strangers. Have you learned nothing?*

"Crewman."

Janeway's voice came from somewhere behind her. Hands touched her back, rubbing small, comforting circles. The touch was tentative, as if the captain feared Rayna would recoil.

You can see her eyes, can't you, even though you've only gazed into them but rarely. Grey eyes...like the volcanic ashes of Azra as the white sun rises...beautiful, but desolate...

My, my, Wind Child, but you wax poetic, the cynical portion of her mind taunted.

Go fuck yourself. Rayna enjoyed these internal debates. They were useful distractions.

I don't think it's me you'd like to fuck.

"I need to give you something to neutralize the poison you absorbed," the Doctor's voice was to her right, though Rayna did not raise her head to look.

She managed a nod. Cool metal briefly touched her neck.

"And another for nausea..."

He was so considerate. Since the first time she flinched away from a hypospray, the EMH always announced when he was about to inject her.

Within seconds, her stomach had ceased rebelling. She watched the Doctor spray something on her hands to free them from Mallory's arm. Janeway stopped rubbing her back and helped put Rayna in a biobed.

"Thank you, Captain," she murmured gratefully, meeting the human's troubled gaze. "No one has rubbed my back in decades."

Janeway's eyes lightened momentarily. Rayna would have liked to toss out a few more quips, just to see if she could coax the elegant woman into smiling, but her body demanded time to recuperate. Awareness faded and she slipped into oblivion.

"She'll be fine," the Doctor answered Janeway's unasked question. "She has moderate frostbite on her face and hands and superficial abrasions on all her exposed skin. Ten minutes with a dermal regenerator and a few hours rest are all she needs. Her semi-comatose state is more of a physiological defense mechanism. The Deltan nervous system has an extraordinary capacity for pain suppression." He checked on Lt. Paris' patient. Apparently satisfied, he motioned for Seven to lie down on a biobed. After giving the hologram a look of imperious impatience, the Borg complied.

The EMH began a series of scans, but continued to speak about Crewman Merris. "According to

my data banks, Deltan children are all taught rudimentary control of their endocrine systems. They can enhance pleasure, control pain, increase sexual appeal, etc." He studied the biobed display for several seconds, then addressed Seven. "Your nanoprobes have successfully assimilated the cryogenic vapor. You've got a mild case of frostbite on your nose and ears along with superficial abrasions. Those have already begun to heal. You should regenerate a minimum of two hours accelerate the recuperative process."

Seven responded with typical stubbornness, "I will regenerate when my investigation of the explosion is complete."

"Do as he says, Seven," Janeway intervened with a gentle order. "Tuvok will lead the investigation. I doubt he will finish in two hours, so there will be plenty left for you to do."

Her gaze locked with the Borg's glacier blue eyes, and they engaged in another contest of wills.

Finally Seven relented, "Very well." She slid off the bed and took her leave.

Lt. Paris blew out a heavy, heartfelt sigh as he moved back from Crewman Bonneville. The injured man's face and hands were covered with the pink glow of newly regenerated skin. He appeared to be resting comfortably.

The Doctor was pulling a white sheet over Mallory's remains. "He looks so peaceful, despite the damage." Photonic eyes lingered on the dead crewman's face. Janeway saw that Mallory's lips were still slightly upturned.

"Merris' doing, I take it?" she asked.

"Yes. However sophisticated the culture, most living beings retain the ability to communicate on a primitive, chemical level." The Doctor frowned at her as if searching for the right words. "In response to injury, the human body produces endorphins and enkephalins. These polypeptides bind themselves to neuro-receptors in the brain to give relief from pain. Crewman Merris used her body's chemical messengers to stimulate Mallory's brain into a state of hyperproduction. The downside for her is that she's only half-Deltan. Her body can't recover as quickly a full-blood." He moved back to Merris' biobed. "Now that the crisis is over, her central nervous system has temporarily shutdown."

Janeway shook her head. Rayna Merris was packed full of surprises.

Lt. Paris set aside the dermal regenerator. His clear blue eyes were illuminated by a mixture of regret and fatigue. "I'm sorry about Mallory, Captain."

She patted his arm, offering reassurance that she was light years from feeling. "You did well, Tom." Janeway looked at him for a long moment, then at the mournful face of the EMH. "You both did. Some things are simply out of our hands."

They were empty words, but all she had. Later she would put together more empty words in a

letter to Mallory's next of kin.

Feeling sorry comes later, Kathryn.

Damn right it does. One of my crew is dead and more are injured.

Janeway strode from Sickbay. She wanted answers.

Commander Chakotay surveyed the damage in Cargo Bay Two. It was virtually unrecognizable. Broken crates of supplies lay strewn on the deck as if a pouting two year old had smashed them. Melting ice drizzled down walls marred by scorch marks. Small scarlet crystals slowly liquefied into blood spatter. A few yellow stains on the bulkheads were all that remained of the toxic vapors that claimed Mallory's life.

Seven had only just finished running a diagnostic on her alcove. It had escaped major damage. The tall woman approached him, and he saw a myriad of small scratches across her classic features.

"Commander," she began. "I do not require regeneration at this time. I would prefer to assist in the investigation."

"I know you would, Seven, but the Doctor instructed you to rest. So did the captain."

The ex-Borg's pale blue eyes betrayed the worry that her carefully schooled features concealed. Chakotay had only begun to appreciate Seven as a person. Janeway had seen the woman's potential from the beginning, had believed in her without question. He regretted the prejudices that blinded him. Taking Seven's elbow, he walked her to the alcove. "I'm glad you weren't injured." Chakotay spoke from his heart, as he'd seen the captain do when working with Seven. "You've become a valued member of this crew. Believe me. We'll need your help to piece together what happened here. Once you've regenerated, you'll be at peak efficiency. By then some of the team members will be tired, and you can take over."

Seven held his eyes for long moments, then said, "I will comply." She stepped into her alcove.

"Thank you." Chakotay gave her a quick smile, and returned to work.

Commander Tuvok and Lt. Torres were crouched near what remained of the exploded sleep tube, tricorders in hand. He angled toward them, winding his way past teams from security and engineering.

On the silver deck was the grotesque outline of a man lying on his side.

Where Mallory lay. Chakotay slowed his pace out of respect, and offered up a silent prayer, *Spirits of my ancestors, guide our brother home.* He would conduct a traditional ritual in the

privacy of his quarters, but that would be hours, if not days away.

Ensign Dalby knelt beside the silhouette snapping a holo-imager. The former Maquis looked up at Chakotay.

"Whoever did this needs to be spaced," he growled.

Chakotay patted the man's shoulder. "We don't know that it's anything other than an unfortunate accident."

Dalby twisted his lips in a sneer. "Faydra piss. We ran every diagnostic in existence on that thing before Bonneville and Mallory moved it to the Cargo Bay. It came back fine. I'm telling you, Commander, this reeks."

He's right.

I know.

A few more steps brought him next to Tuvok and Torres. The two were bent over several pieces of the tube's coolant tank, easily identified because of the tell-tale lemon stain coating the inner surfaces.

"Have you found anything?" he asked quietly.

They stood. Tuvok folded his tricorder, facing Chakotay in his usual impassive manner. "I have eliminated the most logical suspect, Crewman Merris. According to Mr. Neelix, he was physically with her from the moment they left Sickbay until the explosion occurred. Prior to that, Merris was confined to Sickbay."

Chakotay nodded. He'd already dismissed the possibility of Merris' involvement. Destroying the hibernation chamber eliminated the original logs - which had contained exculpatory evidence. No one in their right mind would blow up their only shot at freedom, and his gut told him that Merris was far from insane.

The darkling Vulcan continued his report, "Preliminary scans show no signs of tampering. It appears that there was a small surge of power in the tube's plasma reactor which destroyed the internal temperature control. The cryogenic fluid reached absolute zero and ruptured containment. That, in turn, caused the plasma reactor to explode."

"You're saying it could be an accident." *Why don't I believe that?*

Torres piped up, "It's possible, Commander." She sounded doubtful too.

They were interrupted when Harry Kim contacted Chakotay by comm link. "Commander, I've checked the access logs in engineering, there is no record of the sleep tube ever leaving."

"So someone tampered with them," Chakotay confirmed.

"Son of a cave sloth." B'Elanna Torres spat her curse in hissed undertones.

"It gets worse." The young ensign's voice was tight. "The logs we downloaded from the Cardassian vessel have been deleted."

"Do you think you can recover them?" Chakotay frowned at Voyager's deck.

"I'm not sure."

"When Seven is done regenerating, I'll send her to assist you." Chakotay closed communications. "That settles it." He gave his two companions a worried stare. "We have a saboteur."

The whoosh of doors preceded the captain's arrival. Chakotay nodded his goodbyes and went to meet her.

After six hours of reading engineering reports, tricorder scan results and medical progress notes, Janeway's eyes finally begged for respite. She scrubbed her hands across them, but it did little good.

Her door chime sounded.

"Come in," she called wearily.

It was Chakotay. The bronze-faced man looked about as ragged out as she felt. His broad shoulders were semi-hunched as if beneath a full pack on a forced march. Deep wrinkles clawed at the corners of his eyes. He gave her a half-hearted smile, though, and took a seat in front of her desk.

"B'Elanna confirmed that someone initiated the sleep tube's self destruct sequence," he began. "She's pulled all the surviving engrams from its computer core and is running a detailed analysis."

Janeway stood in a sudden rush of movement. Molten fury filled her insides, suffused her being. "What the hell is happening here?" She paced the length of her Ready Room, wheeling around to face him before continuing, "We pass through a maze, find Sleeping Beauty, slay the dragon, cross into the underworld and find a traitor in Camelot! Maybe the Srivanni sent more scientists to study us, because this suspiciously resembles a behavioral experiment." She stopped her tirade with a long exhalation of breath. "Maybe I'm just feeling paranoid. We've had more than our share of strange occurrences before."

He was smiling at her fondly. "It must be contagious, then. I've had Seven and B'Elanna adjusting the phase variance of our sensors and conducting internal scans for the past two hours."

Janeway put her hands on her hips and gave him an appreciative grin. "You're a fine first officer. Find anything?" she added hopefully.

"I'm afraid not." Chakotay shrugged in helpless exasperation. "I was almost disappointed."

"I think I am too." She sank onto the sofa by the room's large windows, and rubbed the rock-hard muscles of her neck.

He moved to sit near her. "Why don't you let me cover the investigation for the next twenty-four, Kathryn? If anything turns up, I'll contact you immediately. I'll take the next rotation off duty."

"I'll think about it." Janeway was unwilling to make promises. Her ship and crew were in danger. All other concerns were secondary.

But Chakotay was not easily put off. "Look, if the beacon's message is accurate, we only have two and a half more days before it's 'all hands on deck.' Everyone's tired; you most of all. This may be the only opportunity to rest for who knows how long."

Janeway patted his forearm, grateful for his concern, but still refusing to yield. "I said I'll think about it. That's the best I can do."

He finally nodded. A few minutes later, he was gone.

Chakotay waited until he'd reached the turbolift before contacting Tuvok. "She won't listen. Deck Eight," he added for the computer's benefit.

"Captain Janeway is quite predictable in this regard," the Vulcan replied quietly.

Truer words were never spoken. "Have any ideas?"

"None at present. I will improvise if the opportunity presents. Should I meet with success, I will contact you."

Chakotay signed off with a quirky smile. *Conspiring with a Vulcan...who would have thought it?*

Eight and some odd hours later, Rayna Merris stood at the threshold of her new quarters. Located on Deck Three, they were, according to Tuvok, normally reserved for visitors of particular importance, and were situated just down the corridor from Captain Janeway.

Considering you are accused of murdering your last captain, it is a tad odd that you would be billeted here. Perhaps Janeway wishes to keep you under her watchful, suspicious eye.

She keyed the door and looked inside. The room was starkly under-decorated. A mint-green sofa

occupied the main living area, flanked by a mauve colored easy chair and glass-topped occasional table.

Occasional table. A strange human naming convention...was it occasionally a table and occasionally a chair?

Starboard from the entry way was a dining table with four chairs. Large windows of transparent aluminum lined the far wall, giving Rayna an unimpeded view of the stars. Right now, nothing moved. Huge gas giants and fading dwarf stars hung like macabre ornaments bedecking a black tree.

It seemed to Rayna that she had read a human story about a girl called "Alice" who fell down a rabbit hole into a strange wonderland. She couldn't recall if Alice ever found her way out, however.

Step inside.

She probably should. Standing motionless in the doorway was stupid. The problem was, if she moved into the room, the hatchway would close behind her.

The thought filled her with fear, sending her pulse racing into triple digits. It was ludicrous. Weeks in Sickbay without difficulty and now she was paralyzed in her own doorway.

Sickbay is never locked.

These are my quarters. The door will open when I request it.

Are you sure?

"Computer," Rayna addressed the omnipresent guardian of Voyager. "Lock the hatchway open until otherwise ordered. Thank you."

"Acknowledged." All Federation computer systems seemed to have the same mechanical, yet oddly feminine, voice.

Rayna entered her rooms and was relieved when she did not hear the door shut.

You appear to have acquired claustrophobia during your foray among the Cardassians, or at least a fear of being imprisoned.

Either one was bad. Enemies could exploit such weaknesses.

And you may have an enemy on Voyager. She dismissed the errant thought. It could not be happening again. This vessel had been lost for six years; she'd been in hibernation for eight. All of her hard-won information was old news by now. Whatever problems plagued this vessel, it was ludicrous to believe they were linked to her or her last assignment.

She removed her ruined uniform jacket and recycled it at the replicator. Her shoes and socks were shed in small piles on the carpet and Rayna exhaled a soft breath of relief. The drab carpet which clothed the deck was stiff and itchy, but felt divine to her feet. Pity the rest of her garb could not be shed.

Clear up that little issue you've gained about closing the cabin's door and you can run about naked all night.

Rayna smiled a little to herself. That was incentive of a different color.

"Computer," she made fists with her toes in the carpet. "Access the replicator in Sickbay. Copy files coffeemod1, teamod1, and creammod1 to this location."

"Modification complete," the tinny voice announced.

"Thank you." It always paid to be polite to machinery. "Please compile a list of Captain Janeway's most requested food items."

Ever the spy, eh, Wind Child.

A good cook knows the captain's favorite dishes.

Right. The fact that you're attracted to the woman has nothing to do with it.

Rayna considered that possibility as she waited for the results of her search. It never paid to lie to one's self. Truth was, she did find Janeway attractive, though at present she could not label it as sexual. Rather, there was an affinity between them, almost like she knew the captain, understood her.

"Coffee," the computer interrupted her. "Buttered toast, peanut butter and jelly, and coffee ice cream are the most requested items."

"Thank you." *So, the captain isn't eating properly. Surprise, surprise.*

Later this evening she would do more extensive research.

"Rayna."

She turned to find Tuvok by the sofa.

Oh dear, caught with your door open.

"Please come in," she invited. It was decidedly too late to feel sheepish, so she met his stern gaze without flinching.

He had a Vulcan lute under one arm, and a box under the other. Both items were placed on the dining table. "It is illogical of you to have your door unsecured when there is saboteur on board."

Rayna bit her bottom lip. *Why in Sul's name couldn't she lie to this man?*

There was nothing for it, however. "I can't abide it being closed." Shame burned her throat more bitterly than the cryogenic vapor had.

Her old friend merely nodded. "Perhaps it would be prudent for you to sleep in Sickbay?"

He never chides you for displaying weakness. "Agreed." She studied the carpet a moment, this time embarrassed by the rush of grateful affection that had flooded her hearts. *I wonder what I ever did which made me worthy of such a friend.*

"Are the recent events in any way related to your previous mission? It is a logical question," he added.

Rayna gave him an appreciative smile. "I was considering the possibility moments ago," she told him. "Given the amount of time between now and then, coupled with your vessel's unique predicament, the likelihood of a causal connection is remote."

"That was my estimation as well, for the present." The topic closed, Tuvok picked up the square box from the table. "This is for you."

Rayna accepted it, finding that it was wrought of simulated wood and hinged on one edge. Inside was a circular shaped instrument made of mottled brown metal. Her breath caught. "A Romulan ring flute," she whispered.

Tuvok picked up his lute and moved to the living room. "Do you still play?"

"It's been a while," Rayna answered when she could trust her voice not to crack. "Where did you get this?" She touched its smooth surface reverently before taking it from the box. The Romulans still made these by hand, combining several types of ore in a crucible, and pouring the resulting metal into a dilithium mold. Multiple chambers within the tubing produced sounds that were beguilingly beautiful.

Lightly played notes told her that Tuvok was tuning his instrument. "I had a large number of unused replicator rations."

Rayna blinked back unshed tears. "I am doing my best not to engage in a frightful excess of emotion." Humor was the only refuge left to her.

"I appreciate your efforts, but they are unnecessary." Tuvok shot her a quick look as he tightened a string. "We, Vulcans, have become accustomed to the unfortunate excesses of other races."

That stemmed the tide of maudlin sentiment. Rayna chortled with laughter so suddenly that she

thought she might have pulled a muscle in her abdomen. She carried the flute into the living area. Sitting on the sofa's end nearest to him, her fingers sought to become reacquainted its keys. After several minutes, she performed a scale or two.

Not too shabby considering the length of time since you last held one of these. At least you didn't shatter the glass table top.

Tuvok plucked a few strains on his lute. "Preference?" he asked.

"The Desolation of Kohl-Resh," Rayna answered after considering the possibilities. "Actually anything Vulcan would do, I suppose. They're all slow, mournful and dull."

Her friend's flat stare of disapproval sent Rayna into another fit of chuckles. "You always make me laugh. I've missed that."

"And you always fascinate me with your displays of inappropriate humor."

If Tuvok had intended his admonition to quell Rayna's cheer, he was disappointed. All she did was snicker louder.

They began to play, and soon Rayna was lost in the music of heat, sand and an abandoned temple filled with ghosts.

Janeway leaned forward, cradling her aching head in her hands.

We have a traitor on board.

The words taunted her. She wanted to strike out and destroy the enemy threatening her vessel, the same enemy who had murdered a member of her crew. Only he had no face. There was no one to fight.

You should listen to Chakotay. You're already exhausted, and things won't get better any time soon.

For about two seconds, she considered lying down on the couch by the windows.

No, Katie, you spent the night in your Ready Room yesterday. If talk starts to circulate that the captain never goes to her quarters, you'll have all your senior staff climbing on your back.

It was just that she didn't want to go home. There was a time when she'd closeted herself inside. During their trek across the Void, her rooms had been a sanctuary. No longer. Now the immaculate cleanliness of her cabin only reminded her that there was no one there to mess things up. The solitary pillow on her bed testified to her perpetual isolation. Peace had abandoned her quarters. She didn't know how to bring it back.

You should have had Paris start up the revamped Fair Haven program. A little slap and tickle with Michael and you'll be right as rain.

Unlikely. Though it might help her sleep for at least a night or two.

Janeway forced herself up and closed down her Ready Room. She greeted and bid goodbye the new shift of Bridge staff.

The final task she'd completed was writing a letter to Mallory's parents. Its contents haunted her as she rode the turbolift to Deck Three.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Mallory,

It is with great regret that I inform you of the death of your son, David. He was killed by an accidental shipboard explosion. Please know that he died instantly and did not suffer. David was a fine man, and an outstanding member of Starfleet. I was honored to know him.

Captain Kathryn Janeway

There was no need to torment Mallory's family with the knowledge that he'd suffocated on his own blood, a small mercy only falsehood could provide.

She could still see the poor man's ruined features, and Janeway knew that Mallory would soon be one of the corpses haunting her dreams. The prospect made sleep even less enticing.

The lift doors opened. Illuminating the normally dim corridor was a rectangle of light. Janeway's attention was then arrested by the half-forgotten aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the rhythmic chords of alien music. It was a multilayered sound. Part of it was more of a subliminal thrum; part of it sounded like silver bells reverberating over water. Janeway followed both music and scent to the open hatch of the VIP quarters.

Tuvok and Merris were in the seating area. The normally obdurate security chief was swaying slightly in time to the melody, eyes closed, fingers dancing over the strings of his lute. Merris played a wind instrument, circle-shaped and metallic. How long she stood mutely, Janeway was uncertain. Eventually the last notes faded and both crew members were looking at her.

"I didn't mean to interrupt." She was sorry they stopped. The music had been soothing. "The door was open." Which was odd now that she thought about it. "I just followed my nose and ears."

"You are not interrupting, Captain," Merris rose in a single, fluid motion. "Please." She motioned toward the sofa. "Sit. Would you like some coffee?"

When Tuvok repeated the woman's invitation, Janeway acquiesced. "For a little while. And yes to the coffee," she added, taking a seat.

Moments later, her hostess brought over a steaming mug. Tuvok had already begun another song. "I've never heard you play before." Janeway was surprised at how good he was.

"I normally use music as a meditative tool, and that is best accomplished in private." His dark eyes intersected hers. "You look tired, Captain."

"A little," Janeway admitted. She sipped her coffee. It was stronger than usual, and surprisingly full-flavored. "This came out of a replicator?" she twisted her head to look at Merris.

The bald woman settled cat-like and comfortable on the opposite end of the sofa, tucking her legs beneath her. "I made some modifications to the subroutine."

"You're a woman of many talents." Janeway gave her hostess a lopsided smile. She hesitated, her mind returning to earlier events. "What you did with Crewman Mallory...that was...that was very kind."

Their eyes met. Janeway found herself drawn into Merris' endless black depths. Something electric trickled down her spine. Finally the Deltan looked away. "Thank you."

The droning of Tuvok's lute continued. Janeway let her head loll back against the couch's firm cushion. Her lids grew heavy. The day's exhaustion returned laying a blanket of apathy over her.

All right, Katie, time to go.

Before she could generate the energy required to rise, Merris picked up her strange instrument. Low, clear tones intertwined with the burring hum of the lute's strings. The notes were susserant, slowly drifting around the room in a lazy dance, bringing to mind images of waves and sails and long ocean voyages. Janeway decided to stay. Leaving in the middle of song was rude.

Something in the music seemed to short circuit her runaway mind. Her eyes closed, opened, closed again. She'd just rest them for a moment. When the music ended, she'd say her goodbyes.

Rayna watched the captain's body relax. For whatever reason, Tuvok had selected The Lay of the Lost, an ancient Orion ballad about seafarers far from home. The notes of the melancholy melody came back to her as if the years since she'd learned them had not passed. Janeway's breathing became slow, deep and even.

At last she sleeps.

The austere woman's face was softened by slumber and behind the dark circles surrounding her eyes, past the lines of care etched in her forehead, Rayna caught a glimpse of who Janeway might have been without the crushing burden of constant command.

They continued to play by unspoken agreement until the lost sailors had finally returned to

harbor. Rayna set the ring-flute aside and instructed the computer to play Valley of Dust in G Minor, a particularly boring and lengthy Vulcan symphony. She stood, moving away from her guest a little.

Now comes the hard part.

"Computer, please secure the hatch." The door whisked shut. Rayna struggled to ignore it, and failed. In her mind she loosed every curse word in Rigellian Trade Language and heaped them upon her Cardassian captors. That didn't ease the grip of panic pinioning her chest. She tried another tactic.

You aren't trapped. You're with the captain. Captains have all the access codes. Captains can open any door. You aren't trapped.

The mantra worked enough so that she didn't feel like fainting. "Lights to one quarter," she softly added. Janeway did not wake.

"Perhaps our performance was lackluster," Tuvok observed in low tones as he moved to the dining area.

She shot him a look that was both sour and grateful. He would never convince her that he had no sense of humor. "Speak for yourself," she teased, straight-faced. "I was outstanding." His banter temporarily freed her mind from fear.

The imperious Vulcan did not dignify her comment with a response. Rayna saw a minute change in the set of his jaw.

Uh-oh, Wind Child, he's about to get serious.

"Captain Janeway is my friend."

She glared at him. His declaration came as no surprise. Rayna had observed the affection between captain and security chief soon after her arrival. "My condolences. Captains make lousy friends."

That was not the response he wanted. See? There goes the ubiquitous brow, again.

Rayna poured herself another cup of coffee. The hatchway was still closed. She turned her head away from it.

The music played. Janeway drifted deeper into the realm of Morpheus. Tuvok continued to ignore her comment. Finally he spoke again, "This vessel could not have come so far, still intact, without her leadership."

His gaze shifted to the sleeping human. An outsider would not have noticed the tiny changes in his demeanor, but Rayna could see the depth of his concern as clearly as the dark pigment of his

skin. "Things have happened," he continued gravely. "Though she has recovered, I do not believe she has begun to heal."

Rayna lounged onto one of the straight-backed eating chairs and adopted a look of utter disinterest. "Why should I care about the captain's psychological scars?" On the inside, however, her hearts had begun a staccato drum beat in her chest.

"Because I am asking you to." Tuvok picked up his lute.

"Are you mad?" Rayna lurched to her feet, facing him incredulously. "I am not a counselor, and the last time I acted like one, the captain ended up with his throat slit."

He merely regarded her with those penetrating brown eyes of his. "You would never harm a friend of mine."

Rayna swallowed all her protests. He didn't fight fairly; he never did.

If your father only knew, he'd breech a warp core. Imagine a quick-witted, silver-tongued Orion losing to a logical, predictable Vulcan.

"How long should I allow her to sleep?" she asked the only other question that came to mind.

"All senior staff were supposed to take at least twenty-four hours off duty. The incident earlier has delayed that for most. As the Captain included herself in this directive, and Commander Chakotay is handling the preliminary investigation, it would be logical to conclude that she is not reporting for duty tomorrow." He raised his hand in the Vulcan salute, and made his departure.

The sight of the door opening for him was reassuring. Rayna inhaled free air deeply. Then it closed.

"Fuck." Rayna wished her coffee could be transformed into Orion Spice Brandy, but she had not yet programmed that beverage in. She was unsure what upset her more: the closed hatch or Tuvok.

Definitely Tuvok.

Of all places the universe could have tossed her, it had to be near the only person who could ask anything of her...and have it granted.

Janeway whimpered, bringing Rayna's inner tantrum to a swift close. Sweat dotted the captain's brow. Tremors wracked her body. Beneath closed lids, the woman's grey ghost eyes darted wildly.

Rayna moved to her side, placing a hand on the racing pulse of the captain's neck. The torment of Janeway's nightmare colored Rayna's perception in the grim colors of guilt, grief and fear. "Shhh," she whispered.

With gentle care, Rayna brought her other hand to Janeway's cheek and stroked it softly. It was a dangerous game. If she roused her too little, the dream would be unbroken; too much, and Janeway would awaken.

And be very unhappy with the uninvited contact, no doubt.

Her gamble paid off. The captain breathed a final moan of relief and settled more deeply into slumber. Though she knew better, Rayna lingered, running the back of her fingers lightly down the sharp plane of Janeway's cheek.

So soft, so cool and dry, like linen...you like her skin, don't you, Ray-Ray.

Oh yes.

Rayna straightened and reluctantly broke contact. The worst was past. She moved to the adjacent chair and perched on the arm. Getting close to this woman was foolish; she knew that with every synapse in her brain. In all her life, Rayna had only ever kept one friend: Tuvok. It never bothered her much. As an Ornament and later as a spy, her world was comprised of deception and manipulation. Those made for poor soil in which to grow the vine of friendship.

Look on the bright side. Janeway has no reason to trust you. You make an effort to get to know her. She rejects you. End of story.

Why did that notion not bring her joy? Rayna sat with the sleeping captain and her own stormy thoughts for an interminable amount of time. Finally she shook her head. "Fortune pisses on me," she said to the stillness, and thought she might have heard an answering chuckle.

The cheery chime of Voyager's chronometer greeted Janeway when she woke. It was 1100 hours.

"Shit," she murmured, sitting upright. A brown blanket fell from her shoulder. Janeway blinked, looking around. *Where the devil was she?*

"Good morning, Captain." Rayna Merris placed a steaming mug of coffee on the end table next to the sofa. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes. Too long, it appears." Memory returned to Janeway with the creeping slowness of Martian winter. She'd only meant to rest her eyes a moment. Instead, she'd apparently spent the night.

You dreamt of butterflies. Why she was so certain of that, Janeway could not say. She really didn't remember anything concrete. *Well that's certainly a step up from your regular night time companions.*

Casting about, she found her shoes neatly placed on the carpet nearby. Her uniform tunic was

unzipped, and the gray undershirt beneath it had come half untucked.

"I made breakfast," Merris announced, placing a covered plate on the coffee table.

"Thanks, but I'm late as it is." Janeway picked up the cup and hurriedly swallowed a mouthful of - truly exquisite coffee. She couldn't resist a second sip.

For her part, Merris was regarding her with a look of mild surprise. "Really? Tuvok indicated that all the senior staff were given twenty-four hours off duty. Strange that he would be mistaken." She lifted the protective top from the plate of food revealing a tantalizing combination of hollandaise sauce, eggs and English muffins.

Janeway's tactical mind registered the fact that she had been subtly outmaneuvered, by both her security chief, and her hostess, at about the same time as her stomach announced that it was empty.

You may as well surrender to the overwhelming odds, old girl. Defeat seldom smells so delectable. Besides, you were exhausted enough to sleep in strange quarters. You obviously need to take a break.

She picked up the fork, and in short order found that the Eggs Benedict tasted every bit as good as it smelled. "This is wonderful," she said between bites. "Mark used to fix it on special occasions. It's been years since I had any."

"Mark?" The bald woman took a seat in the arm chair, gracefully crossing long legs and regarding Janeway with disconcerting frankness.

Suddenly embarrassed, Janeway tried cover her reaction. "He was my fiancé." She pasted a self-deprecating grin on her lips. "I'm not sure what to call him now. He married someone else. We managed to receive some letters from Starfleet when we tapped into a transmitter array."

"'Idiot' would be my first suggestion." Merris' eyes danced with wicked twinkles.

Janeway couldn't help but chuckle.

She's not intimidated by you at all. Most crewmen would be falling over themselves with awkward politeness. Not her.

Indeed, Crewman Rayna Merris seemed self-possessed and confident.

But not arrogant. I don't sense that about her.

"He waited two years before moving on." Janeway still felt the need to defend Mark, even after all this time. "It would have been foolish of him to wait forever." She finished the last bite.

"What about you? Any fiancés back home?"

Janeway leaned back and regarded her hostess. Merris had taken a sip of her own beverage, coffee presumably, and seemed to be giving her answer careful consideration. Eventually she said, "Girls like me don't get proposals of marriage." Dark eyes still glittered, but this time with a kind of cynical merriment.

"Girls like you?" Janeway frowned. Someone so exotically beautiful should have had droves of suitors, should have had to beat them away with a stout club.

Merris tilted her head to one side. "My, you are polite," she observed. "Whores, Captain."

Angry indignation filled Janeway. She scowled at Merris. "I don't much like that word." Her tone spontaneously took on the edge of command.

"Truly?" Merris offered up a sugarcoated half-smile. "I don't like the word 'turd', myself, but shit is shit and comes in pieces, so what is one to do?"

The comment made Janeway snort her next swallow of coffee. She had difficulty banishing the smile from her face. "You know what I mean," she admonished, scowling at Merris. "I don't think of you that way, and I would prefer that you didn't either."

Her new crewman didn't back down a jot. Endless black eyes grew hard as onyx before Merris answered, "I prefer whore to murderer or traitor."

Janeway lowered her gaze. *She got you with that one, didn't she?* "I had many suspicions about you. That was before you risked your life to save my ship." Somehow or other, she kept losing control of the conversation. It was disconcerting.

"I wasn't casting judgment, Captain," the gentleness in Merris' voice startled Janeway a little. "You must protect your vessel. I was merely pointing out that epithets directed toward my sex life don't really bother me." Rayna cleared away the dish and silverware.

For the first time, Janeway noticed the woman was barefoot. Merris moved differently here, flowing across the carpet like a gently blown leaf. She stepped from toe to heel as she walked, a stark contrast to the heel-thumping march that Starfleet instilled. Despite the uniform trousers and rumpled t-shirt, Rayna Merris was arresting in her graceful movements. Janeway found herself staring.

This is absurd. Her mind ground out a warning. *You obviously slept too long, and your head won't clear.*

"Thank you again, for your hospitality." Janeway rose.

Merris faced her squarely. "A friend of Tuvok's is always welcome in my home." There was something almost reverent in her tone.

Once more at a loss for words, Janeway took her leave, pleasantly surprised that the hatch had

been closed. She headed for her quarters, a long sonic shower, and some much needed relaxation.

"Would you like more coffee, sir?" Rayna Merris paused beside an occupied table. It was her first day in the mess hall. At 0645 hours, most of Alpha Shift had reported for chow. Neelix assigned her to refill duty, and that pleased her. Moving about the room gave her the opportunity to observe. It also helped her wake up a little. Not that she was overly fatigued, but she'd stayed up with the captain the night before last. Sleeping in sickbay last night had been reasonably successful, despite the Gul Refak's recurring appearance in her dreamscape.

Looks like the captain isn't the only one with psychological scars. I wonder if she slept without you there to guard her?

Enough.

Rayna refused to get caught up in speculation about that particular human. Bad enough Tuvok had coerced her into babysitting; she wasn't going to crowd her brain by renting space out to Janeway's memory.

She poured another cup. The crew's mood was subdued this morning.

Not surprising, really. Falling into an unknown galaxy when you are already so far from home is enough to subdue a Klingon.

Speaking of which...

A petite woman in gold and black had entered the dining hall. Ridges on her forehead testified to her ancestry, though Rayna's trained eye detected human characteristics in her features as well. While she attended a new table, Rayna mentally scrolled through the crew's manifest.

B'Elanna Torres, Chief of Engineering.

A few moments later, Torres was joined by Tom Paris. Rayna remembered him from holo-images of Admiral Paris' family. Recognizing flag officers and their relatives was mandated for Starfleet Intelligence. It was rumored that young Thomas and his father were estranged. Her eyes fell upon Paris' collar pips. *Lieutenant...he was an inmate when last you were briefed, some kind of shuttle accident.* Apparently 'fleet life had become more agreeable.

She walked into a cloud of arrogant discontent which surrounded a lone crewman. He was feverishly entering data into a PADD. Rayna glanced at the screen in passing. *Dissertation on Intergalactic Variances Between Temporal Anomalies... Great Maker...who in their right minds would read such flotsam, let alone write it.*

The myriad of emotions in the dining room was more than a little overwhelming, but the

conversations made up for it.

"I'm telling you there's something crab-sided about that accident in the bay," said an unknown crewman.

"Who are you telling?" said his companion.

"More coffee?" Rayna smiled at them sweetly, and moved on when they declined.

"-I'll bet its one of them." A new table...a new topic. "Those *Equinox* guys should never have been allowed on board after what they pulled."

Equinox? The name was unfamiliar to her, unless it was a seasonal time reference.

"I hear the captain spent the night with her." A male ensign whispered across a different table. Rayna didn't need to see the blue of his skin or the roundedness of his shape to identify him as Bolian. Their blood had a base of muriatic acid which gave them interesting properties in both their eating and digestive habits - and had the additional byproduct of causing queasiness in Deltans.

"Can you blame her?" the human with him replied. "She's flamin' gorgeous. I'd like to run my hands down her -"

Rayna passed by before she could discern where his fingers were roaming, and replenished the container of coffee she carried. The atmosphere was a veritable soup of chemical messengers, and it was difficult to navigate with equanimity.

"The naked stars can see you."

Out of habit, her mind spun a diversion, this time in the form of *Dreadnaught*, a Klingon death-metal group. Raucous rifts and angry shouts punctuated their lyrics.

*"Only the naked stars can free you.
You can never hide (you fucking coward)
Don't try to lie (tear down the tower)
Time to fight
Beneath their sight"*

"Coffee?" she asked Lt. Paris, and filled his cup when he nodded.

"Today is a good day...a very good day...a very good fucking day...to die."

The helmsman gave her an appraising glance that his companion fortunately did not see. Rayna had no desire to deal with a jealous Klingon, and from what Neelix said Paris and Torres were very much an item.

Across the rectangular room sat Tuvok. Rayna sought his gaze, finding a momentary harbor amid the sea of diverse feelings. He was seated with Commander Chakotay. Both men appeared to be engrossed in conversation. The First Mate leaned forward, tapping his finger on the table, forehead crinkled in concentration.

He has a kind face, this Chakotay. Rayna's eyes traced the dark lines of what looked to be a Native American tattoo. She could not identify the tribe. It had been too long since she'd taken *Tribal Customs Among Human Aborigines* at the Academy.

She turned away, and continued to circulate. At the next table sat a young Bajoran male. He wore scientific green and black. No pips bedecked his collar. "Coffee, sir?" Rayna addressed him with the honorific in deference to his senior status in the crew. His liquid brown eyes rose to hers, stared, and widened. Shock and something else...recognition maybe...flickered across her empathic sensors.

Rayna did not linger. As she retreated, she could feel the crewman's eyes on her back.

He knows you, or thinks he does.

She joined Neelix in the galley. "Do you need any assistance?"

The Talaxian was slinging greenish goo into a large sauce pan. He smiled at her widely. "No, I'm managing. The crew is hungry this morning."

While he spoke, Rayna's mind began flipping up snapshots of Bajoran contacts. Years in the Cardassian arena had acquainted her with dozens of dissidents and freedom fighters. This man's face wasn't among them. So who was he? How did he know her?

The answer was not forthcoming.

Commander Chakotay narrowed his eyes as he studied Crewman Geron's face. He'd know the boy for nine years - three in the Maquis, almost six on Voyager. Geron had been through a lot: his parents were murdered by the Cardassian military, he and his sister were confined to an internment camp. They'd escaped, but not before his sister was brutally gang raped. The girl still was unable to speak. He'd never pressed Geron for details. One look into the crewman's haunted brown eyes told Chakotay all he'd needed to know.

"Commander?" Tuvok was regarding him with steady curiosity.

Chakotay turned back to their conversation. "Sorry."

"I observed Geron's reaction as well," the Security Chief confirmed.

"Could he know Merris?" Chakotay tried, unsuccessfully, to dissect Tuvok's expression and tone.

"Possibly," the Vulcan confirmed. "As you are aware from her service record, Crewman Merris was active in the Cardassian Intelligence Theatre for many years. However, she would have been surgically altered in order to blend in."

So how could Geron recognize her? Chakotay gave a mental sigh, and made a note to speak with the Bajoran crewman at a later date. "You were saying that Kim recovered the missing logs?"

Tuvok raised a brow at him, indicating that Chakotay's memory was obviously flawed. "Seven of Nine had a copy of them in her cortical implant, and Ensign Kim downloaded them into Voyager's computer."

Chakotay grinned at his companion. To think he'd kept Tuvok at arms length for so many years. "Right. Have Harry and Seven go over the logs again. Maybe they missed something. Whoever sabotaged the hibernation chamber thought those logs were important enough to destroy. I have a feeling that whatever's going on, part of the answer is in them."

"That is a logical conclusion."

Further conversation was interrupted when Captain Janeway's voice crackled over the communicator, "Senior Officers report to the Bridge."

He and Tuvok acknowledged the summons, joining Paris and Torres at the Mess Hall's exit.

"Any idea what's going on, Commander?" Paris asked.

They reached the turbolift together.

"None. B'Elanna?" He addressed the last to the Chief Engineer.

She gave a shrug, but there was worried cast to her features. "The captain asked Seven and me to alter the phase variance on the external sensors a couple of hours ago. We completed it just before breakfast. Maybe they found something."

Smart. He'd thought of checking inside Voyager, but not the surrounding section of space. Of all her traits, Janeway's ability to think outside normal boundaries was the one he most admired.

Which is why she's the captain.

She was also up at 0430 this morning thinking about phase variance. The captain's dedication was inspiring, but worrisome. It seemed as though she was never off duty, anymore. At least Tuvok had maneuvered her into taking a few hours to rest. That was something.

The lift doors opened. Seven of Nine, Janeway and Ensign Kim were already on the Bridge. Filling the viewscreen was a bell-shaped object, translucent-white and luminous against the dark

backdrop of space. It resembled a jellyfish of immense proportions, complete with billowing sapphire tentacles. Hanging there in the night, it was a breath-taking vision. Prickles cascaded down Chakotay's spine congealing into something close to fear.

"Ancestral dread, Little Cat," his father whispered an old lesson. "Our genes carry more than physical traits. We fear spiders because our ancestors feared them, because there is something dangerous and deceptive about their stillness...waiting...oh so patiently...for their prey." In those days, Chakotay had been an unwilling student. Now, staring at this...thing... he understood.

The captain nodded to Harry Kim, and the view abruptly changed. Wrapped around Voyager's nacelles was a single strand of blue. Soft light pulsed the length of the tentacle.

Sky-Spirits have mercy.

"Is it alive?" Chakotay stepped closer to Janeway, meeting her eyes. They were clouded with concern.

"There are organic properties to its structure," she answered quietly.

Like the vessel we encountered. He half-expected to see the tentacle contract, drawing Voyager to the beast's hidden mouth.

Lt. Paris had moved to the front, staring at the image with something akin to awe. "It's stunning," he murmured, "like something from a dream."

"It's also holding our ship," Janeway pointed out.

Chakotay shook off a sudden chill, and forced the analytic portion of his mind to function. "It's big enough to be some kind of space station. Could it have pulled us through the subspace fracture?"

The captain nodded. "Long range sensors have detected an identical structure approximately one hundred light years from our current position."

"The exit?" Chakotay posited hopefully.

"With any luck," she replied.

He did some quick mathematics. "That's at least six months of travel at warp five."

"We'll never maintain that kind of speed." Lt. Paris turned to face them. "We'll have to drop out of warp for course correction periodically."

"Well if this one brought us in," B'Elanna bent over a console, "maybe it can send us back." A few deft movements of her fingers brought up an internal scan of the construct. The cross section

revealed groupings of asymmetrical chambers and twisting hallways. Centered was a shaft the traversed from the top of the dome-like structure to the bottom. "Sensors indicate a series of plasma reactors and isolytic power relays similar to those used in subspace weapons."

Look at all those hallways, the way they wind and wend...

Seven's contralto monotone broke the train of Chakotay's thoughts, "If we can access its controls, it is possible we could free the ship and open a portal back to the Delta Quadrant."

The warning in his head would not stop. *...it bears no small resemblance to a maze. There are no accidents, Sudea, only plans we cannot discern.*

A guttural growl from his left snapped Chakotay's head around. His spirit-panther slunk past Harry Kim, eyes glimmering with scarlet light.

"Chakotay?" Janeway's hand fell on his shoulder.

The cat disappeared into shadow. He faced his captain. "Something's not right."

"I have to agree," the compact woman turned to the rest of the crew. "How long would it take to configure our transporters and communications systems to compensate for the phase variance?"

Torres scrunched her forehead in concentration. "I'll have to realign the pattern buffers. We can use Transporter Room Three; I already have a team there running diagnostics." She bent down, sticking her head inside one of the Bridge consoles. "Communications will be the tricky part." Her head reappeared abruptly. "The Away Team will need modified comm badges in addition to any changes made on Voyager. I'd say at least four hours."

"Do it," Janeway commanded.

"Captain," Chakotay lowered his voice. "I don't like it. Our last encounter with an organic vessel almost cost us the ship." Memories of that experience were still fresh in his mind.

"The composition of ...that..." Torres gestured toward the viewscreen, "...is vastly different from the one we boarded in the Labyrinth." She stepped near and folded her arms. "However, even if that floating squid doesn't wake up and raise shields, transporting back to Voyager may prove problematic. Any change in power output can change the phase variance. We'd have to recalibrate the sensors and transporter. That will take time." She shifted liquid brown eyes to meet his. "The Away Team could be stranded for an hour or so."

Janeway nodded, but the set of her jaw and glints of determination in the slate of her eyes told him the argument was already lost. "If there is the slightest chance that we can get back on course for Earth, we owe it to the crew to try. I'm willing to risk a few hours if need be."

He exhaled slowly. The truth of her words was undeniable. There was absolutely no guarantee that even if they reached the next station, it would be a way out. "I'll lead the Away Team,"

Chakotay reached up to tap his communicator.

"As you were." Janeway cast him a wry look. "You and Tuvok are already conducting an investigation vital to ship's security. I'll take this one."

A dozen protests formed on Chakotay's lips, but he had no chance to speak.

"This isn't open for discussion, Commander." Janeway's tone was harder than neutridium.

She won't delegate the risk.

"Okay," he reluctantly acquiesced. "B'Elanna, you and Seven need to generate alternatives for extraction." Both nodded, and strode to the turbolift with purpose. He returned his full attention to the captain. "I would be more comfortable if a full security team and an engineering complement accompanied you. Things could get a little exciting over there."

Janeway's lips widened into a genuine smile. "I feel like a teenage girl going on her first date." She headed in the direction of her Ready Room. "You and Tuvok pick the team members, Dad, and let me know when the car keys are available."

For once, Chakotay found himself left with nothing to say.

Breakfast shift was over. Rayna wiped down the last table in the Mess Hall, then gave the room a quick inspection. *Spotless...not bad for one so out of practice.* She had a slight kink in her shoulders from bending over, but otherwise found herself feeling remarkably content.

You could be happy doing this for the rest of your life.

There was something calming about simple tasks: cooking, cleaning, serving coffee...no secrets to gather, no risk of failure, no lives depending on the outcome or injuries to avoid...unless she gave Stinkfish Soufflé to a Vulcan...that would be ugly.

"Hi."

Rayna turned, finding that she had to cast her eyes downward. The person who addressed her was approximately one meter tall. Shoulder length blonde hair crowned an impish face. Eager blue eyes gazed intently into Rayna's.

That is a child.

"May I help you ma'am?" Rayna stammered out a formal salutation, because it was the only thing her brain was capable of producing.

The messhall was suddenly painted in the uncomplicated hues of curiosity, welcome and humor.

Definitely a child, the purity of feeling is unmistakable.

This little person found Rayna's greeting to be extremely funny, because she erupted in a fit of giggles. "I'm Naomi Wildman," she smiled at Rayna, and extended her hand. "No one's ever called me 'ma'am' before."

For a heartbeat, Rayna stared stupidly at the offered appendage. There had been no children at the training house for Ornaments, and during her Starfleet career, she'd done her best to avoid interaction with them. Children were dangerous. Their powers of perception were instinctive, and could see through the most elaborate deception. Even worse, they radiated emotions like miniatures suns, making it impossible to focus.

Why is there a child on Voyager?

An interesting question...however, you might want to consider shaking her hand.

She did so, and was mercifully spared any further awkwardness when Neelix emerged from the galley.

"Naomi!" He smiled warmly at Ms. Wildman. The mess hall blossomed amid the spring of their affection.

Rayna backed away. Scenes like this made her distinctly uncomfortable.

The strength of their love makes you uncomfortable. Lie to someone else.

It was obviously time for more coffee. Rayna retrieved a cup and sipped it by the replicator. Children unnerved her. It made little sense, when considered. She had charmed her way into the beds of beings who would throttle a newborn with its own umbilical cord. Yet, here she was, fleeing a conversation with a little girl.

You should rejoin them.

No, she decided, they would remember her soon enough.

"Chakotay to Crewman Merris," her communicator sounded.

"Sir?" She tapped the infernal thing after a second's confusion. Wearing a comm badge was but one of a whole host of things she had to get used to.

"Meet me in the Briefing Room."

She acknowledged the command and turned back toward Neelix, steadfastly refusing to look at Ms. Wildman. "Briefing Room?"

The Talaxian smiled his understanding, and said, "Naomi and I will show you where it is."

Rayna followed them out, swallowing down a feeling of impending doom. *She's going to talk to you. There's no avoiding it in a turbolift.*

"Do you play kadis kot?" the child inquired eagerly. "Seven and I play once a week, but Neelix and I have a game almost every day."

"I play," Rayna responded with words that had become the theme song of her life, "but it's been a while." She resigned herself to her fate. *Perhaps Chakotay will send you out to demagnetize the collector grid.*

"You would be welcome to join us tonight for a game." Neelix patted the girl's shoulder. "I have to warn you, though, Naomi is very good."

The universe granted Rayna a reprieve when the turbolift doors opened.

Three point six one hours later, Lt. Commander Tuvok entered Transporter Room Three. It was nearly time. Lt. Torres had contacted the captain with word that all modifications were complete. Team members in various sections of the ship were making ready for departure.

A soft whoosh of air preceded the arrival of his most recent addition. Rayna Merris' features were carefully controlled, betraying no emotion. Tuvok lowered his gaze to her fingers and observed the tiny, but tell-tale tremors that told otherwise. She approached within arms length of him, holding his gaze with unworried eyes. At his nod, the crewman manning the console departed. Tuvok had already arranged to operate the transporter.

He made adjustments to a tricorder and used it to reactivate the communicator embedded in Rayna's brain. She blinked once, then skewered him with a narrow eyed stare.

"A precaution," he explained, "in case regular communications are lost. Make the frequency Gamma-098."

Her eyes unfocused for a moment. "Testing," she murmured, and his communicator echoed the word.

"Have you been briefed?" He extended the tricorder.

Rayna accepted it and began a standard diagnostic to check its function. "Commander Chakotay uploaded the sensor data to my PADD." She hung the tricorder from her belt. "How did you persuade him to include me in the Away Team?"

Tuvok pondered her question as he retrieved one of the emergency medkits. "You assisted in saving the ship, and then risked your life to save a crew member who was unknown to you."

Tuvok handed over the kit. "The captain and first officer believe you have proven yourself worthy of trust."

She smiled at him. "They'd make easy marks." Her manner was cynical, colored with the craftiness she often used as a mask. The kit's strap was slipped over Rayna's shoulder. "I take it we have a medic going along?"

"Yes, Lt. Paris." It was understood that as the lowest ranking member of the party, Rayna would carry any baggage. "I have also vouched for you." Tuvok dropped that little bomb with a certain amount of unVulcan-like satisfaction, and was pleased that it had the anticipated response: a string of Rigellian curse words spoken in an undertone.

Though her reaction was predictable, he still found it baffling. Under most circumstances, his friend was a rational being, practical, poised and invariably polite. However, when faced with the reality of their friendship and the - logical - trust he placed in her, she inevitably resorted to coarse language.

The Transporter Room doors whisked open to admit Captain Janeway. Rayna retreated to a neutral distance from him and adopted an air of formality. For all her innate tendency to rebel, she would never compromise his position as her superior officer.

Other Away Team members arrived. Chakotay and he had selected Lt.'s Paris and Ayala to anchor the group. Ensign Vorik and Crewman Marla Gilmore formed the complement from engineering. Seven and Torres would have normally been selected, but they were still deeply entwined in the analysis of the sleep tube's wreckage and computer logs.

Of all the surviving crew from the *Equinox*, Gilmore by far, was the least accepted. She had received good performance ratings, but Chakotay was concerned that she was unable to interact socially with other crew members. Once she had been eliminated as a suspect in the current investigation, they agreed to place her on the Away Team rotation. Perhaps a display of confidence in her abilities would ease her integration, especially if she performed well during this mission. It was the same logic that Chakotay had applied to Rayna's inclusion when they had proposed it to Captain Janeway.

Tuvok watched them all ascend the Transporter pad. Rayna had placed herself to the rear and left of the captain. He took a moment to consider the two women, both his friends. Janeway remained austere and aristocratic, facing every obstacle with a fierce tenacity that would rival a Klingon warrior. She had moved Voyager across the quadrant by the sheer force of her will. All of her being was committed to the struggle, but each light year exacted a toll. Janeway had re-created herself into the perfect captain, displaying neither doubt nor fear. He had admired the control she placed on her emotions, the way she channeled them into fuel for the drive homeward, and he had been wrong. Janeway was meant to live as a human being, not an ideal. She was meant to have companionship and comfort, needed them as a flower needed light and water. Without those simple things, an essential part of her had withered.

And Rayna? Tuvok moved behind the control console. Rayna had acquired the hollow look of

one indentured to a cruel master. She took whatever punishment the universe hurled at her, and adapted, one eye on situation at hand, the other anticipating the next strike. Betrayal did not surprise her; she accepted without question that others valued her for utility alone. Her father had used her to seduce his rivals. Starfleet had used her to spy on its enemies. In Rayna's world, everyone had an ulterior motive.

What will become of them, son of Vulcan?

He had no answer. Time and circumstance would not allow him leave to ponder, either. Once the saboteur was neutralized, he would meditate on this matter, and illogically hope that it was not too late to intercede.

Tuvok met and held the steely eyes of Kathryn Janeway. "Energize," she instructed. He obeyed, watching his friends and coworkers disappear.

The familiar silver walls of Voyager dissolved into fireflies, and coalesced into a chamber of white pearl. Janeway turned her head to port and starboard, fore and aft. They were in an irregularly shaped room. Pale walls shimmered with muted phosphorescence. Around her, the Away Team fanned out with tentative steps.

Lt. Paris made adjustments to his tricorder. "I'm picking up an increase in energy output."

"Confirmed." Crewman Gilmore studied her own instrument.

Every step caused the deck beneath them to fluoresce. Argent light pulsed upward through bulkheads and ceilings until they were bathed in a pale shower of highlights. Janeway felt a slight vibration through her shoes, a momentary sensation that vanished almost as soon as it started.

"Ensign Vorik to Voyager," the Vulcan's tone was smoothly unimpressed. "Are you reading the energy fluctuations?"

"We are," B'Elanna's voice was a welcome sound, but it was interspersed with static.

"...transporters...recalibration." Janeway's scientific ear picked up minute sounds of comm link adjustment.

"Chakotay to Captain Janeway." Her first officer sounded a little miffed. "Torres has compensated for the phase variance in our communications systems; are you reading us loud and clear?"

Her mouth quirked upward on one side as she replied, "We are, Commander. I take it that transporting out will be delayed."

"Engineering is realigning them as we speak." She could tell by his tone that he was attempting to be reassuring. "B'Elanna estimates a minimum of two hours, provided the phase doesn't

continue to shift."

"Understood." She closed the channel. "Let's have a look around, shall we?" The last was directed to her team.

They had all moved out several meters from their point of insertion. Crewman Gilmore was crouched by the starboard bulkhead, frowning at her tricorder.

Janeway joined her. "Find something?"

A look of surprised pleasure darkened Gilmore's clear blue eyes. Janeway gave herself a mental smack. She'd not interacted much with the *Equinox* castaways. The stark reality was that she couldn't bring herself to face Noah Lessig, not after she came so close to murdering him.

No excuses, Katie. Your shame doesn't ameliorate your obligation to the crew. You're the shepherd of this flock.

"I'm picking up isolytic relays in the deck, walls and ceiling, but there's some kind of interference." Gilmore held up the tricorder display for her to look at. The readings were skewed as if the device were scanning through a dampening field. "That's odd." Janeway made some adjustments, but there was no effect. "Could it be a malfunction?" She glanced up at Gilmore.

"I ran a standard diagnostic before departure," confirmed the blonde woman.

"Vorik and I are having the same problem, Captain," Paris interjected. "The structure itself is undergoing isolysis, and the resulting feedback is interfering with our sensors."

Janeway stood arms akimbo and looked for the other two team members. Ayala had gone aft and was scanning the deck. Crewman Merris had not so much as drawn her tricorder. Instead, she had moved to one side and was slowly running a hand down one of the pulsing white walls. Pale brows were furrowed in concentration.

What the devil is she doing?

As if sensing Janeway's scrutiny, Merris turned and met her eyes. "It feels like skin," she reported. "Perhaps a medical tricorder would be more apropos."

When Janeway nodded, the bald woman extracted one from the medkit she carried and handed it to Paris.

Movement to starboard caught her eye. There, scampering merrily up the bulkhead, was her lizard friend. Janeway had almost forgotten about the strange hallucination she had experienced in the Labyrinth. She'd chalked it up to the incredible amounts of psychic energy the alien vessel had unleashed. What the hell was it doing back?

It's your animal guide. They don't go away unless you try to kill them.

"Check the far wall, Tom," Janeway instructed quietly. The reptile had already disappeared in a brilliant pop of light.

He did so, without giving her so much as a quizzical glance. Seconds later he reported, "The relays' are laid out like a network of nerve fibers, but there are clear signs of non-organic materials." Deft fingers made subtle adjustments to his tricorder. "However...there's a gap here...looks almost door-like. I think you found room's exit, Captain. How'd you do that?" Paris' eyes contained just a hint of hero worship.

Janeway did not answer at first. There were times when being the one everyone looked up to was more of a curse than a blessing. "Sheer luck, Lieutenant," she answered. "Let's see if we can get it open, I'd like to find the main control room."

"Aye-aye, ma'am." He and Vorik stepped up to the wall and continued to scan.

So you're getting guidance from the spirit world these days?

It a disturbing thought. The possibility of her own madness terrified her.

Maybe its time you spoke with the Doctor.

No.

Janeway brushed those thoughts back into the cluttered corners of her consciousness. She gave the room a sweep, ensuring all team members were still accounted for, and found Crewman Merris' dark gaze upon her. Reading eyes so black was difficult, but she thought the look was one of appraisal. The Deltan hybrid seemed unapologetic in her study.

I think she knows you aren't telling the whole story, old girl.

A soft hiss of sound preceded the opening of an oval aperture in the bulkhead next to Ensign Vorik. "We got it, Captain." Paris flashed her a triumphant grin. He started to thump his Vulcan partner on the back, but stopped short...fortunately.

Janeway returned his smile, finding his enthusiasm infectious. For all its potential danger, this Away Team might have been the shot in the arm she needed.

Chakotay entered Cargo Bay Two with trepidation. Seven's message had been routed through a coded channel, and that was highly unusual.

The clean up process here was nearly complete. Only the sleep tube wreckage remained, neatly arranged off to the side. All the scorch marks and blood stains were gone. Voyager's wounds were easily healed. For the rest of them, it wasn't so easy.

The statuesque woman was waiting near a console. To his surprise, Tuvok, Torres, and Harry Kim were already there. He looked each in the eye; except for Harry, they all looked as baffled as he did.

"Computer, seal the room and disable all sensors." Seven's instructions did nothing to allay his unease.

He crossed to the console. "What's going on?"

Icy eyes held his for an instant. When he saw pinpoints of concern in them, Chakotay knew it was bad.

"Ensign Kim and I finished our analysis of the Cardassian Logs." She tapped her console. Gul Refak's image filled the small display. More taps followed, and the image transformed into bright green bits of code.

"A hidden message?" Something hard and frozen settled in the pit of Chakotay's stomach. To his left he sensed rather than saw Tuvok stiffen. *Now what?*

"Yes." Seven touched another key. The codes assembled into the wraith-like symbol of the Obsidian Order. The ice in his gut began to migrate outward, chilling his blood. "It is a quotation from a Cardassian myth, The Fall of Kamrut, to be precise." She looked him in the eye as she spoke, "We are bound to our promises as slaves, so we keep them and pretend to be masters."

Chakotay's brows slammed down. He knew this myth. He'd read it a dozen times, that and others. *"To know your enemy, Little Cat," his father had told him, "you must know his stories."* So he had absorbed the old fables. This one was about a general's son who had been ensorcelled to slay his father, eventually becoming the first ruler of a unified Cardassia.

"That's great, Seven," B'Elanna Torres demanded with customary eloquence, "but what the hell does it mean?"

"Trouble," Harry Kim spoke up. "Immediately after decoding the glyph, we discovered the schematics of the hibernation unit embedded in the code, along with orders to destroy it, kill its occupant, and erase the logs."

"So we have a Cardassian agent on board," Chakotay concluded. "As if Seska wasn't enough."

Seven displayed the messages with a touch of her finger. "What I find most unusual is that these were not encrypted, but hidden. Anyone viewing the logs would have been exposed to them on a subliminal level."

"That doesn't make sense," he muttered aloud, half to himself. "If they were sent to a Cardassian infiltrator, they should have been scrambled." Thoughts careened through Chakotay's head like the old cars in a demolition derby, leaving him with nothing but scattered pieces, and a banging headache.

"Commander," Tuvok's softly spoken use of his title drew everyone's attention. "Though my experience with Starfleet Intelligence is limited to only two missions, I have extensively studied the history of espionage. Subliminal messages are historically used to contact a 'sleeper agent'."

"But they're just a legend," Ensign Kim scowled, an expression that was ill-suited for his innocent features. "I mean, I've read about them." He looked up at Chakotay and slowly shook his head. "The idea is to take a person from an enemy culture, completely brainwash them, then erase all memory of the experience."

"What good is that?" Torres sent the young oriental a much more worthy scowl of her own. "You have a spy who doesn't remember anything."

Tuvok answered, "It is necessary to construct some sort of password or pass phrase, possibly a rare image or an obscure quotation that will serve to activate the recessive conditioning." He met and held Chakotay's eyes. "Theoretically, they are the perfect spies, having no awareness of their true purpose until activated, if, indeed, they are aware even then."

"How could they not be aware?" Chakotay asked, frustrated by his own ignorance. He had no real experience with the cloak and dagger world of spies, except for those, like Tuvok, who had infiltrated the Maquis.

"If the conditioning is completely successful, it results in an artificial form of Dissociative Identity Disorder. A separate personality is created and repressed into the person's unconscious mind. The 'host' personality would have no memory of the actions taken by the alternate, although there would be lapses in time." Tuvok somehow managed to recount all of that information without sounding the least bit disturbed.

Chakotay heartily wished he could be so unruffled.

Torres took a few steps away, then turned, arms folded to face the security chief. "Wait. What you're talking about is someone who has no idea that he or she is a Cardassian spy until something triggers him to wake up."

"It uses extreme sensory deprivation, psychological conditioning and telepathic manipulation," Tuvok confirmed, "and because the person has no memory of the incident, he or she is virtually undetectable."

Chakotay's mind had finally processed everything. He moved close to Tuvok, holding his stoic gaze. "This is what your friend was working on, and she must have found one. That's why the Obsidian Order was so desperate to break her."

The Vulcan nodded once. "That is probable. If Rayna found a sleeper on the Saladin, it would have been vital to discover what else she learned, and even more important to discover who, if anyone, she told."

Now one of them is loose on Voyager.

"Why didn't she disclose this information?" Chakotay asked, then added a corollary, "Did she tell you?"

"She did not," came the expected answer, and the Vulcan's regard was steady. "Nor would she, as such information is likely to be classified for flag officers or higher."

I hate spies. Chakotay reined in his anger. For all they knew, the saboteur was on the Away Team, with Janeway.

"B'Elanna." He faced the engineer. "We need the captain back on Voyager yesterday. Go make it happen."

"Aye sir." She left the Cargo Bay at a jog.

"Seven, we need to generate a list of every person who has viewed the logs, and verify their movements throughout the ship, including computer access, holodeck use, replicator requests, all of it," he drew in a steadying breath, "including myself, Tuvok, Torres, Janeway and you, Mr. Kim." He nodded toward the ensign. "Seven," Chakotay moved up to the tall woman and touched her shoulder. "You've been with the Borg since childhood. That precludes an extended stay with the Cardassians. You, the Doctor, and Neelix are currently the only senior staff members on this vessel who can be eliminated as suspects. I'm placing you in charge of the investigation until further notice. Contact the other two and bring them up to speed, then get to work."

"I would suggest that you arm yourselves." Tuvok's manner remained dead calm. "The agent is unlikely to be peaceably apprehended." He faced Chakotay. "Commander, I would also suggest that you and I remain here until such time as our whereabouts and actions are accounted for."

"Agreed." Chakotay paced as Seven summoned Neelix and the Doctor. He examined and reexamined his memories of the recent past and could find no missing time. Hopefully that meant he was one of the good guys.

Rayna trailed the group down a winding corridor of iridescent white. This place emitted a low frequency vibration not unlike the comforting hum of a warp drive. She'd always loved that sound.

It reminds you of home.

Home...a euphemism for nowhere.

Surely there were more pressing thoughts with which to occupy her mind: like walking blithely around inside a construct that looked like a jellyfish, for example.

Exactly...for all we know we're meandering the length of its intestines.

Rayna secured her inner dialog. Janeway had already noted her lack of interest in the tricorder, though for now the captain had made no comment. In all honesty, she wasn't uninterested. It was just that she wasn't accustomed to using one anymore. A Federation tricorder tended undermine one's capacity to blend in with an enemy culture. So, they weren't exactly standard issue in 'fleet Intelligence.

Over time, Rayna had come to rely on her senses first. The air here had smelled stale when they first materialized. It was fresher now. There had been a gradual increase in the ambient temperature. More than that, however, was a tickle in her palms that warned of subtle changes in the chemistry of this place. Without a frame of reference for the biological components of the structure, it was impossible for her to discern what those changes meant - beyond the inescapable conclusion that it was "aware" of their presence.

Lieutenant...Ayala...she thought that was his name...glanced back at her for the thirteenth time. Everyone was nervous, either because of their surroundings or because of her. Janeway kept track of everyone in the Away Team, running a close second to Ayala in the number of times she'd checked the rear. Lt. Paris was interested in a very different kind of rear and had surreptitiously glanced at both hers and Gilmore's more than once.

Still, Ayala was definitely more focused on her, in particular. On Rigel, if a man looked at a woman thirteen times, it was a clear indication of his desire for sexual relations. Considering the suspicion that seeped through his pores, she rather doubted that coitus was his intention.

He was a Maquisard, unless your memory of Neelix's scuttlebutt betrays you. Freedom fighters seldom mix well with spies.

Rayna smiled at him and offered a jaunty wave.

Ahead of her the Away Team paused at a four way intersection. The junction was skewed and asymmetrical, nothing like the perpendicular variety usually found on vessels. A discussion ensued.

Janeway began it. "Are the energy readings higher in any particular direction?"

"No, ma'am," Paris answered. Strange that he did not follow protocol and use "sir". Perhaps Janeway did not care to be stripped of her femininity.

Next to him, Ensign Vorik took a reading of his own. "Confirmed. There is nothing to distinguish one passage way from the next."

"Wind Singer."

Her grandmother's voice... For every lesson in control that she'd learned, Rayna gave profound

thanks. Without them, she would have snapped her head to starboard and gained the unwanted attention of her teammates. She leisurely twisted toward the sound, finding that the bronard-mirage was back. It smiled at her with seven rows of pointy teeth. Eight black-marble eyes regarded her before the creature turned and began to swim.

"This way," it whispered.

I know you don't think I'm going to follow.

"Crewman?"

Rayna found Captain Janeway looking at her. "Are we boring you?" Needless to say, the human woman did not look particularly pleased.

"Not at all, ma'am," she replied smoothly, ensuring that her voice was colored with the correct proportion of deference. "I was thinking that it might be more efficient to split up."

Grey eyes lightened a little. Rayna found she liked Janeway's eyes. They reminded her of the Lustern Ocean, the largest of Delta's nine seas. Unlike the others, it was always cloudy, always stormy. The Lustern guarded its secrets, the old priestesses used to say. She reckoned that Janeway shared that trait as well.

First you compare her eyes to a wasteland, and now to an ocean. What in the Deep ails you?

Lt. Paris spoke, "I think she's right, Captain." His voice betrayed reluctance. "We could cover more ground."

"Agreed," Janeway said.

Rayna found herself staring once more down the starboard passage. Of course the idiot bronard was gone. Hallucinations could not be counted on for anything more than irritation value.

"Paris and Gilmore, proceed straight. Ayala, you and Vorik go left. Merris, you're with me." Janeway came over, and gave her a wry look. "Since you seem so interested in this corridor, Crewman, I thought we ought to take it."

"Yes, ma'am." Rayna pulled her tricorder and aimed it forward. She took up position several steps in front of the captain. From here, she could scan for upcoming points of interest, and impending danger - whatever form that might take.

Just remember to look at the fucking thing now and again.

Janeway moved a little closer to her as they wound their way through a myriad of twists and turns. The captain seemed almost happy here, a stark contrast to the melancholy loneliness that surrounded her on Voyager.

There was a fork up ahead. Rayna made a fist and raised it above her shoulder. Then she scanned in both directions. Janeway leaned over to look at the readings.

Her illusory bronard reappeared some distance away, serenely swimming through the corridor angling aft. She noticed an object on the floor beneath it. With no expectation of cooperation, Rayna motioned the captain to stay put, and went to investigate.

Janeway was hard on her heels, predictably. What they found was a black rectangle bearing the Federation logo. Rayna's tricorder pronounced that it was an old-style communicator, the type used decades ago with a flip top. There was no energy signature, so the power supply was undoubtedly dead. She looked for indications of tampering or booby traps and found none, so she picked it up, and handed it to Janeway.

"What is this doing here?" the captain asked, meeting her eyes. "Could it be from the Magellan?"

Tuvok had told her of the derelict starship that had been found in the Labyrinth. "Looks like it's from the same era," Rayna answered. "Engineering should be able to access the registration transponder once we return to Voyager."

The lights in Janeway's eyes shifted. "What made you choose this corridor, Crewman?"

Rayna let a saccharine smile spread across her lips. "Sheer luck, Captain," she lied like a rug. "Sheer luck."

For a moment, the human seemed torn between being angry and laughing. Janeway was saved from rendering a decision, however, when they were both unexpectedly transported back to Voyager.

The Briefing Room was extraordinarily quiet. Janeway listened as Seven, Kim and Chakotay ran down their findings, and the actions taken to secure the ship. She looked at the hidden messages as they popped up on the room's display, heard Tuvok calmly define the inherent danger in dealing with a sleeper agent, read the names of the twenty odd crew members who had reviewed the Cardassian logs. Some had been eliminated as possible saboteurs. Some hadn't. Throughout the meeting, Crewman Rayna Merris sat, unmoving, in a chair. The dark eyes neither widened, nor narrowed. The full lips never thinned or frowned. Merris may as well have been a mannequin.

In stark contrast, Janeway found she could not remain seated. Every word made her more and more furious. Here was possibly the greatest threat Voyager-maybe even the Federation as a whole-had faced, and not a single hint had escaped the Intelligence Officer's mouth.

She finally threw up a hand, stopping the recitation of facts. "Were you investigating the existence of a sleeper agent on the *Saladin*?" Janeway leaned both hands on the Briefing Room's oval-shaped table and squarely faced Merris.

Coolly detached black eyes met hers. "Yes."

"Did you find one?" Janeway demanded, eyes narrowed. She could feel anger throbbing in her temples, warming her face.

"Yes."

Merris' flat, emotionless answer only served to fan Janeway's internal fire. "Did your investigation lead you to believe that there might be others?"

"Yes."

Janeway smacked a hand on the table in frustration. "And you felt no need to share this possibility with us?"

The Deltan's eyes were as sleek and smooth as black spheres of glass. "No," she answered.

It was a close thing. Janeway fought down the urge to lunge across the table and grab Merris by the collar, and almost lost. She inhaled deeply and walked away, staring at the room's display. The purplish insignia of the Obsidian Order rotated round and round, like a twisted kind of Dreidel. Her study was interrupted when Lt. Paris spoke.

"So who was the agent?" he asked.

Janeway turned back to face the group. Crewman Merris was looking directly at the helmsman, but said absolutely nothing. Her mind collated facts in the background, and suddenly produced a conclusion. "It was Captain Shin, wasn't it?" She approached Merris slowly, her thoughts slipstreaming ever faster.

Nothing...the Deltan hybrid did not move, did not speak. Janeway glanced at Tuvok and saw that her old friend was watching Merris' hands. She shifted her attention and saw the slightest tremor in those fine-boned fingers. "Harry, pull up Captain Shin's service record."

Moments later, the room's display lit up with a picture of a handsome Asian. The high forehead and glittering eyes spoke of a well-honed mind. Lt. Paris had mentioned that Shin was an Academy Instructor for a while. Janeway scrolled down the record until she found her quarry. "Shin taught Ancient Military History and Tactics for six semesters, then went on a five month Sabbatical," she noted. "When he returned, he requested a transfer back aboard ship."

Moving on a hunch now, Janeway knelt next to Merris' chair and placed a hand on the woman's arm. The muscles below were tighter than plasma conduit and Janeway saw Merris draw in a sharp breath at the touch. "You told the truth about Raymond Boone. That's who you were initially sent in to investigate, but you discovered something much worse." She continued to stare up at Merris' face; it rivaled the Borg for impassivity. "You discovered that the command conditioning of a Federation captain had been broken, and that he had been reinserted back into

Starfleet undetected." The other woman's eyes closed for an instant. "Why didn't you tell us?" Janeway kept her tone soft. Some intuition told her that demands and orders would result in obdurate silence.

At first it seemed that her tactical change made no difference. Finally Merris spoke, in that peculiarly flat voice she'd used in Sickbay. "My mission was classified 'Federation Council Only'," she began, but was interrupted by an outburst from B'Elanna Torres.

"We are 35,000 light years from Alpha Quadrant. Don't try to feed us a load of crap about regulations." The half Klingon stood in one lightning motion. "You'd hang this crew out to dry because of a lousy security clearance?"

"Belay that, Lieutenant," Chakotay interjected sharply. "Take a seat."

Janeway noticed that everyone, with the exception of Seven and Tuvok, radiated anger like a quasar going nova.

Though she did not rise, Rayna Merris' entire manner was that of unaffected disinterest. Her mouth opened to say something, but closed it when Tuvok raised his index finger.

What is it between them? He can silence her with a gesture.

"When I awoke," the weary black eyes looked into Janeway's at long last. "I discovered that eight years had passed and that Voyager was decades from home." Merris shifted so that her arm was removed from underneath Janeway's hand. "With so much time already gone, and so much distance remaining to travel, I did not believe my information was relevant any longer."

Janeway returned to her chair. Her palm still tingled from where it had rested on Merris, feeling oddly cold and barren without the Deltan's warmth.

Tuvok entered the discussion. "If Captain Shin was the agent, then what purpose did Raymond Boone serve?"

"Please let the record reflect that I have not identified the primary operative." Merris faced the dark Vulcan. "I believe that the Cardassians were conducting a test run. They inserted a surgically altered Cardassian to keep eye on their experiment."

Chakotay piped up once more. "Like Seska." He shook his head slowly. "She was supposed to be Bajoran." His warm, brown eyes intersected Merris' cool ones. "We discovered her to be Cardassian."

"If they keep to the same pattern," Lt. Torres leaned forward, very much back in control, "then the sleeper agent would have to be one of the Maquis."

That follows. Janeway's thoughts were already spitting out unpleasant conclusions. They'd have to keep a tight lid on this or the crew would split into two factions. *I won't allow that to happen.*

"So, was it Captain Shin?" Paris no longer appeared angry.

Still there was no answer, and Janeway had swiftly reached the conclusion that there never would be. It was a line of inquiry she would continue later. For now... "Do you have any suggestions that would help us?" She directed her question to Merris.

"The orders discovered by Seven of Nine are quite explicit," Merris replied. "With the sleep tube destroyed, he has only two other targets. I am one." The black eyes first intersected Janeway's, and then slid over to the Borg. "She is another."

"What do you mean?" asked Chakotay. "The Cardassians had no way of knowing about Seven."

But Janeway has already figured that out. "Seven's cortical implant has a copy of the logs. The only way to destroy them is to destroy Seven."

Merris nodded. "The best scenario for success is to use us as bait."

That fanned the embers of Janeway's temper, bringing it roaring back to life. "My crew are not expendable. I won't use them as a lure."

The bald woman's features spread into an infuriating smirk. "I could always take command away from you under Special Order 66715."

"Starfleet Internal Affairs is herein granted the authority to neutralize threats to the Federation by whatever means necessary." The words of the directive appeared on her mind's internal display and winked at her slyly. Janeway found herself absolutely livid. "I wouldn't suggest you try something so foolish," she ground out through clenched teeth. "You might find yourself in the brig for the rest of our journey."

Merris now regarded her with the smug demeanor of a well-fed house cat. "When you get to the part where I'm supposed to be intimidated into blind obedience, let me know. I would hate to miss it."

Slowly, centimeter by centimeter, Janeway stood. It was time to do what she should have from the very beginning. "Commander Tuvok, kindly escort this...crewman...to the brig."

Her old friend tapped his comm badge without hesitation, summoning a security team. Merris continued to sit, her features oddly serene, until the detail arrived.

Rayna clenched her eyes tight as the forcefield of her cell crackled to life. Both her hearts pounded in time with panic's frantic rhythm, threatening to break her ribs from the inside out. Sweat trickled down her neck and back. She wouldn't make it thirty-five days in this cell, let alone thirty-five years.

It was never your intention to live so long, anyway.

Scant steps brought her to the rear bulkhead. She rested her hands against polished walls of silver. The room tilted, or seemed to.

I can't do this.

Gul Refak's footsteps echoed nearby. His breath fell on her neck. Any moment cruel hands would rip her clothing, forcing her down...

Stop it.

It was difficult to breathe. Rayna's chest was heavy, as if Refak's boot pressed upon it.

Stop. It.

Her mind regurgitated the first in a series of conditioned distractions. Every member of 'fleet Intelligence was required to develop them.

"We the life forms of the United Federation of Planets determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war..."

The Federation Charter was one such mental defense.

"...and to reaffirm faith in the fundamental rights of sentient beings, in the dignity and worth of all life forms, in the equal rights of members of planetary systems large and small..."

Rayna's pulse slowed a fraction.

"... and to establish conditions under which justice and respect..."

The dizziness retreated, but was far from gone. Memorized words continued to play in a monotone, and that was okay. It helped her do a poor imitation of control.

"...for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of interstellar law can be maintained..."

She needed to think. Terror had the nasty side effect of neutralizing higher brain function.

"... and to promote social progress and better standards of living on all worlds..."

You didn't factor in your claustrophobia when you goaded the captain.

That might have been a fatal error. It was certainly an inconvenience.

Think, Ray-Ray. Use your brain for something other than a termination point for your spinal cord.

What if the sleeper goes after Seven first?

She remembered how her flesh tore when Refak mounted her. The neural pain inducer was turned so high it screeched out a metallic whine. It overwhelmed her body's defenses in scant minutes. Her vocal cords seized from screaming.

"...and for these ends: to practice tolerance and live together in mutual respect and understanding..."

Rayna sat on the bunk and pressed the heels of her hands hard against her closed eyes. Without a monitoring Cardassian, the sleeper should dogmatically carry out the orders. Killing Seven of Nine required extrapolation, equating the deletion of logs with the elimination of Seven. That would happen, sooner or later, but he should carry out his most obvious task first.

A second term of confinement in the brig may not be so effective as it was on the Saladin.

Pain stabbed her chest, and Rayna struggled to slow her rapid breathing.

"...to unite our strength and maintain intergalactic peace..."

If she wasn't careful, a coronary would do the job before the damned agent.

Which would be a waste...after all if you are going to risk your neck for an ex-Borg that you scarcely know, the least you can do is live long enough to be useful.

She saved my life. Corrupted I may be, but I pay what I owe.

Getting herself locked up had seemed like such a good idea. She was the perfect target.

I have to get out of here. I can't breathe.

"...to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and as a last resort..."

Rayna made herself straighten, and molded her face into a placid mask of arrogance. If she could not control the panic, she could, by Sul's endless depths, conceal it. All she had to do was live long enough for the sleeper to come kill her. She would activate her communicator and give Tuvok his identity, then it would all be over.

"That's not possible." Chakotay glared up a Seven. "Someone on that list has to be the saboteur." A quick look at the captain confirmed that Janeway was equally baffled.

They had reconvened in the Captain's Ready Room, albeit minus Lieutenants Paris, Torres and Ensign Kim. Chakotay had dispatched those three along with Lt. Ayala to return to the alien space station and continue searching for the main control room.

"Seven," Janeway turned toward the Borg, "is there any chance you've missed something?"

The impassive woman merely raised a brow. "No. Every person who viewed the Cardassian Logs was recorded by Voyager's computer. The list was not tampered with. I have accounted for every person on it, and none of them are responsible for the explosion in Cargo Bay Two."

"There are ways to conceal the alteration of data," Tuvok observed.

"I would have found evidence of that," Seven replied with customary Borg confidence.

"Torres to Chakotay," his communicator demanded attention.
"Go ahead."

"The station has raised shields, Commander." B'Elanna sounded frustrated enough to chew her way through ablative armor. "We can't transport to it."

He met Janeway's slate eyes. Things just kept going from bad to worse. "Understood. Abort the mission. Get started on the communicator Captain Janeway recovered."

Looks like there won't be an early return to the Delta Quadrant.

He checked the ship's chronometer. In twenty-seven hours they would be released anyway, at least according to the automated beacon. Voyager would just have to navigate the dead zone, and hope for the best.

Still...why didn't it raise shields until now?

"I don't get it - any of it," he muttered, rubbing his brow. "Why let us beam over once, and then cut us off? Why let us board in the first place?" His burning gaze sought out the detached calm of Tuvok's brown eyes. "And while I'm venting: How can a Cardassian agent be activated by a message he never saw?" *Don't stop now, Little Cat, you're on a roll.* He rose, paced to the replicator, and nabbed a cup of coffee before returning to his seat. "Then there's the question of why would your spook friend," Chakotay watched the Vulcan carefully, "decide to pick a fight with the captain?"

Janeway shifted in her seat slightly when he said the last. "I had begun to wonder about that, myself."

The security chief regarded them both in his usual stoic manner. He spoke only after a long moment of consideration. "It is seldom useful to postulate in the absence of sufficient facts. However, in the case of the alien space station, there is the possibility that we were allowed to

visit for a specific purpose. It possessed an item that belonged to us - or at least others like us. Now that it has been retrieved, there is no longer a need for us to enter."

Chakotay pondered his assertion. It implied a level of sentient awareness that was as exciting as it was scary.

"In point of fact," Janeway spoke, her voice tinged with tempered steel, "that communicator, whether it belonged to the Magellan or not, is proof that other members of Starfleet passed this way, in this space." She pointed a finger deckward in emphasis. "We are obligated to look for them and render assistance." Her gaze lowered as she picked up her own mug of coffee.

Mmm-hmmm. Chakotay traced the stony set of her jaw. *You would probably have decided to take the Delta Flyer and look for them yourself, sending Voyager back through, not that Tuvok and I would have let you do it.*

"We'll find them," he offered his captain a small half-grin of encouragement. "I guarantee you that no one on this ship would abandon a comrade."

Gratitude warmed the grey of her eyes, such beautiful eyes. How easy it was to become lost in them, and in the peaches and cream softness of her complexion.

Chakotay wrested his mind from that idle, if pleasant pursuit. "Which brings us back to our investigation on the home front..."

During the exchange, Seven of Nine had been carefully attending, glacial eyes studying each of them in turn. "I assure you, Commander, my team and I missed nothing."

But you had to. Chakotay's brain restated the obvious.

Janeway abruptly stood, arms folded. The captain turned to stare out the windows of transparent aluminum, a habit of hers when she needed to think. He drew in one breath, then two, then...

"I sent an Away Team to the Cardassian vessel to extract the logs." She turned to face them. Between delicate auburn brows was a deep frown. "Lt. Ayala led the team and chose the members." Her steel colored eyes were deeply troubled. "What if they looked at it there?"

"Ayala said it was encrypted," Chakotay reminded her, desperately hoping that the nausea burgeoning in his belly was a reaction to Neelix's latest Mess Hall concoction.

The captain's face broke into a sad, little smile. "'When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains; however improbable, must be the truth.'" She quoted Sherlock Holmes. "Someone on that mission saw the message."

She's right, as usual, Sudea.

Apparently Seven was convinced, as the ex-Borg was already heading to the exit. "I will

reassemble my coworkers and add the Away Team members to the search." She breezed out.

Tuvok tapped his communicator, "Commander Tuvok to Security Team Alpha. Are you in position?"

"Higgins, here. We're escorting Seven to the turbolift even as we speak, Commander," the crewman's voice was competent and controlled. "There are already four of us stationed in Cargo Bay Two."

"Thank you." Tuvok changed targets. "Lt. Torres, please verify that no one assigned to Seven's protection detail were members of the Away Team sent to the Utara."

"Checking," Torres sounded slightly harassed. "No match, Commander. What's going on?"

"I would prefer that you concentrate on the recovered communications device." He closed the channel.

Captain Janeway was regarding Tuvok with grateful approval. "You work fast, Commander," she congratulated. The glints in her eyes became sharper. "I've settled down enough to realize that Merris deliberately pushed my buttons. I take it she decided the best way to be used as bait was to 'bait' the captain into a contest of wills."

Tuvok nodded, his face inscrutable. "That would be a logical conclusion."

Grey eyes cut like phasers at the Vulcan. "She plays a delicate game, and so do you. I won't be so easily manipulated next time."

"Rayna gave me no warning before initiating..." he paused, one brow cocked upward, "...improvisational maneuvers."

Chakotay found himself sniggering, despite the situation. "Is that what they call 'living dangerously' in Starfleet Intelligence these days?"

Brown eyes slid to meet his with just the slightest glimmer in their umber depths. "I do not believe she knows another way to live. By the time I caught on to her intention, the damage had been done."

The captain sighed deeply and crossed the room to lay a hand on Tuvok's shoulder. "So she decided to make herself a target, trapped in one place, unable to run, the perfect temptation for a programmed assassin."

Again he nodded. "That would be an adequate definition of 'bait'. In addition, Seven of Nine saved her life. That is not an event Rayna would easily forget."

"Well I don't like it." Janeway folded her arms. "She's part of this family now, and we take care of our own." Her mouth opened to say more, then shut. A thoughtful look settled over her

features and she raised speculative eyes to meet Chakotay's. "Commander, do you recall an old merchant's technique called the 'bait and switch'?"

He felt a slow smile drift upward like the warm winds of summer. "As a matter of fact, I do."

His prey was cornered.

The notion filled him with ecstatic contentment. It had seemed too convenient at first, more like a trap, than an opportunity. Uncertainty forced him to risk exposure and hack into Merris' service record. The half-breed had an extensive history of disobedience. Not even the poor, little rich-boy, Paris, managed so much rebellion. A pity he could not have witnessed Janeway's ire when the Deltan bitch threatened to take away command. Harry Kim had painted the scene in grand terms; he could always be counted on for tidbits of salacious gossip. Of course the whelp was solidly on Janeway's side.

His host tried yet again to regain dominance. Pathetic. Like all Federation types, the human side of his personality was weak. Someone approached.

"Hey Eric," he smiled at one of the Maquis crewmen.

"We still on for drinks at Sandrine's tomorrow?" The clueless human was looking at him expectantly.

"Damn straight." He clapped his old friend's shoulder warmly. Rank between the Maquis was far less strictly enforced when none of the Starfleet types were around.

The man continued out of view. Another fool...

Showtime.

He slipped into a Jefferies Tube and climbed his way down to Deck Thirteen. Exploration vessels were not designed to contain criminals, and a brig was not designed to keep someone out. That gave him a distinct advantage. The shielded vial of cryogenic fluid in his jacket pocket gave him another. It would aspirate on contact with air, and in the small confines of a cell, would prove quite lethal to the occupant. All he need do is introduce it at the appropriate ventilation duct. Voyager's efficient life support system would do the rest.

While everyone was dashing madly about trying to rescue Merris and discover how she died, he could override safety protocols and decompress Cargo Bay Two. Even the Borg could not long survive in the frigid vacuum of space. Then he would slip back into the shadows of his host's subconscious.

He waited until his tricorder detected no passing crew; then exited the maintenance shaft. A few seconds later, he found the access panel to ventilation and crawled inside, reseating the grill to

hide his presence.

While he crawled down the narrow duct, he found himself humming The Apotheosis of Cardassia, a grand opera which he'd actually never seen. His handlers had used the music during training, and it was still the most beautiful sound he'd ever encountered. They'd told him that it would always be with him.

There it is.

He could just peer through the tiny vent into Crewman Merris' cell. It looked like someone was speaking to her at the forcefield, a young man with crinkles above his nose.

Gerron.

Hopefully the Bajoran scum wouldn't take too long. By monitoring ship's communications, he'd learned that Torres was looking into the Away Team that boarded the Utara. They would likely uncover him before long. That compressed his timetable.

Come on.

Gerron seemed upset, but he could not hear the words. The boy flapped his arms upward in frustration, forehead furrowed.

He extracted the cryo fluid from his jacket as he waited, watching as Merris shrugged over something being said.

A glimmer of metal caught his attention. He looked harder, squinting to see. A tiny metal box was hanging from Merris' left shoulder. What was that? He'd seen it before...many times...

...a portable holo-emitter...

Rage, white hot and searing, blistered its way through his bloodstream. They had tricked him! He listened for the hum of transporting security, for the running of booted guards, but there was no sound.

Hope filled his chest and he carefully backed away. They didn't know he was here. Did they believe he would storm into a secure holding facility firing off a phaser? He was no Klingon brute.

Now that he had perceived their petty substitution, he knew where to find his real prize. Rayna Merris was in Sickbay. Alas, his original kill tactic would be useless; the ventilation system in medical areas was heavily filtered and screened for contaminants. However, there were, as he recalled, Jeffries Tubes leading right to the patient area. Poison still wouldn't work. There was too much space in Sickbay. Perhaps it was time to go in with phasers blasting. He adjusted the transport inhibitor's power output, humming a little more of the opera as he slipped from the Federation's clumsy snare.

Janeway sent the two armed security guards to the outer hatch of Sickbay. She wanted a few moments to speak with Merris alone. The wiry woman was standing at attention flanking her biobed, eyes forward. She'd snapped to at Janeway's entrance.

More sarcasm?

There was no way to read Merris' features. Sweat still stained the grey undershirt; when they'd first beamed her into Sickbay, the garment had been wringing wet, a testament to the price being confined had exacted.

This is not the time for sympathy.

"I don't care for your methods." Janeway moved nose to nose with Merris, glaring at her. "They may have worked for you in Starfleet Intelligence, but they are unacceptable on my ship."

Nothing. Merris didn't even blink.

"At ease," Janeway instructed.

The other woman obeyed in a single, smooth motion, and looked Janeway in the eye. There it was again, that tickle of something zipping down her back. Merris' black gaze fascinated her, pulled her in...

You want to like her, Katie, admit it.

Her personal feelings were irrelevant. Janeway took two steps away from Merris and then wheeled 'round. "Neither I, nor my crew, are pawns for your chessboard." Her voice became dead calm. "I will take any action necessary to ensure the safety of this vessel. Am I understood?"

She didn't know what she expected to see from Merris: mockery, defiance, maybe even condescension. Instead there was only a wistful sort of understanding. "I'm very sorry, Captain." The words were kindly spoken. "I have already drafted a formal letter of apology and sent it to you, and to those staff who were present for my insubordinate behavior." Janeway's confusion must have bled through to her face because Merris continued, "There are PADDs lying about Sickbay. I wrote it while I was waiting. So," her lips curved upward a little, "how much brig time am I facing?"

Janeway digested the woman's words, adding them to what Tuvok had surmised about her underlying motivations. *Look at her, affecting a devil-may-care attitude when you know how badly she was terrified.* "I'm not putting you in the brig. The Doctor said that you suffered from severe panic attacks during your limited incarceration, and that he had to regenerate some of the muscle cells in both your primary and secondary hearts. He said you might have died there, if we hadn't pulled you out."

The oddest thing happened then. Merris' eyes dropped to the grey carpet below; a rush of golden color stained her cheeks. In humans these reactions would be clear indicators that the person was deeply ashamed. "I understand, Captain. My inability to perform as required is a significant liability. It would be best to place me in stasis until we reach Alpha Quadrant."

"I won't be putting you in cold sleep either." Janeway brought her hand to the woman's chin and raised it. She took note of the involuntary flinch that Merris so quickly controlled. "Look at me."

Black eyes hesitantly met hers, and Janeway caught a momentary flash of something raw and vulnerable beneath Merris' carefully cultivated poise. It resonated within her. "What happened to you?" she mused aloud.

Noise from behind caused Janeway to turn in time to see that the hatch on the furthest Jefferies Tube was open. Shadow shifted within. Her combat instinct took over, and Janeway pushed Merris down to the floor. She heard the hissing strike of phaser fire.

On kill...

An alarm sounded, standard procedure for unauthorized weapons' discharge. Sickbay's door whisked open and she heard the detail rushing in. Shots exchanged and one of the guards took cover behind the biobeds. Without warning, Merris rolled them over, curving her body over Janeway's. The contact stole her breath.

"Stay down," whispered words caressed her ear, and she realized that the crewman was protecting her.

I don't even think so.

Janeway made to rise, but found Merris surprisingly strong. Her senses reeled from the adrenalin of combat and the heat of bodily contact.

The sounds of fighting abruptly ceased.

"Captain," Chakotay's voice called over Janeway's communicator.

Someone's voice called out, "Did you see who it was?"

"No," the other guard responded. "Just an outline at the hatch. He must have gone back inside the tube."

Merris' weight left her without warning.

She's going to go after him.

Janeway was pulled up by one of the crewman. She slapped her badge. "I'm fine, Chakotay. Our

assassin is in the Jeffrey's tubes. Scan for him." Moving past the officers, she held out her hand, "Give me that," and pointed to one of the phasers. "You're with me," she instructed the other man. "I take it Merris is in the shaft?"

"Aye, Captain. She vaulted the biobeds and dodged past Thompson like he was carbon bonded to the deck." They scrambled inside.

Janeway could hear muffled voices and phaser fire. "Tuvok," she opened a channel as she climbed. "Get a transport lock on the energy signal of the phaser."

"Acknowledged."

Cool as Io. God how I love Vulcan equanimity.

"You are two decks down," he reported. "I will beam a Security Team directly there. I cannot lock on to the intruder."

"Then lock on to the phaser itself. Disarm him." Janeway climbed faster. The sounds of ranged combat immediately ceased, and were replaced by those of physical struggle.

Almost there...

Janeway could make out some of the words being shouted.

"I have to kill you!"

It was Ayala's voice. "I - I don't want to, but -"

Please, no. Though it had been possible, though she'd known there was a chance when she'd proposed it to Seven, Janeway had clung to the distant, vain hope that this would all be a monumental mistake.

They reached the junction of the next deck. Merris and Ayala were aft of their position. The Deltan hybrid was deftly evading the blows of her opponent. Something fell from Ayala's shirt pocket, and Merris dove for it, rolling to her feet with predatory grace.

Janeway raised her phaser, setting it to heavy stun. "Ayala, stop!" she called.

He didn't even look in her direction, too intent on lunging at Merris. This time the Intelligence officer wasn't fast enough, and Ayala caught her arm. His other hand closed on her throat. Janeway took aim.

Merris brought up the object in her hand, and Ayala hissed. "Idiot woman, that's cryo fluid. You'll kill us both."

"So long as you die." Merris grinned just as Janeway squeezed her trigger.

The tube smashed into Ayala's head, shattering into shards of gleaming crystal. He toppled sideways, and the phaser shot missed. A new security detail materialized close by, four of them, weapons drawn. It was too late.

Yellowish gas engulfed his face and transformed warm flesh into blistered pustules that burst as they froze. Blood leaked from his eyes before they were sealed shut by ice. He dropped to his knees. Pink bubbles formed at his nostrils and lips, and he began to convulse. His spine snapped like a starship caught in a black hole. It was a horrid sound, made worse by the deathly quiet left in its wake.

Janeway rushed to Merris, who was staggering toward the vertical shaft. Her hand was mangled and colorless. Frost covered it in a blanket of diamonds. She grabbed the woman's shoulder. "Transporter, two to Sickbay. Doctor, we need you." Just before they dematerialized, she saw the other crewman closing in on Ayala's body.

Hours later, Janeway was back in the Briefing Room. It was the second time today, and hopefully the last. The days events had left her numb, incapable of little more than passive listening as her staff filed supplemental reports. Tuvok had searched Ayala's quarters, and found a deleted copy of Gul Refak's message on his PADD.

She leaned into the soft cushion of her chair. Her head throbbed to the endless pounding of her pulse. *How many more, Kathryn? How many more are you going to lose before this is over?*

"I don't want this on his record," Janeway interrupted Seven's report on Ayala's extensive computer usage. The experienced officer had rerouted access throughout Voyager, using sophisticated algorithms to cover his tracks. "From what Tuvok has described, Ayala is as much a victim as he is a villain. He didn't ask for the Obsidian Order to destroy his sanity." She looked at Tuvok. "Screen the rest of the crew, and monitor computer use until further notice. Provided there are no other Cardassian surprises secreted on board, I would prefer that this be logged as a series of unfortunate accidents."

You understand Merris' silence now, don't you?

Maybe she was beginning to. Her gaze shifted to the Doctor. "I am ordering you to alter the time of death to coincide with that of Crewman David Mallory. Ayala died of exposure to cryogenic fluid. That's all." She waved away his protest with a weary gesture of her hand.

Of them all, Chakotay and Torres seemed to best comprehend the complex motivations behind her deliberate deception. Then again, they'd know Ayala longer.

You should have been faster, Kathryn. You might have saved him.

Even as the thought stabbed her conscience, she knew it would have been for naught. They lacked the technology and resources to reverse Ayala's condition. His death was a bit of mercy. She knew that in her mind. Perhaps in time her heart would stop aching.

Pull yourself together.

Janeway leaned forward, elbows on the table. There was no time for remorse or second guessing, not now, not in front of her crew. "B'Elanna, any progress on the communicator?"

"It's definitely from the Magellan," her Chief Engineer confirmed, a hint of frustration lacing her tone. "I can't say anything more beyond that. There was nothing physically wrong with the unit except drained power cell, no evidence of environmental damage, nothing."

"Another mystery," Chakotay mused. "Just what we needed."

Get them moving. Sitting at the table dwelling on things will only damage their morale.

Janeway called up her command face and forced hope back into her tone. "We're all reeling from recent events. Home has never been farther away, and now we've lost two shipmates. Unfortunately, there's precious little time to grieve. In just over twenty hours, the station will release us. Between now and then, we have to honor our fallen comrades, and begin charting a course through this sector. Our overall objective hasn't changed: we're going home. To do that we have to reach the next space station." With each word, she saw her people sit a little straighter. "You are all under orders to go off-duty for the next twelve hours. At noon, tomorrow, we'll hold services for Ayala and Mallory. Then it's back to work. Dismissed." She held each pair of eyes before they left.

Thankfully, no one lingered to offer psychological first aid. Right now Janeway didn't think she could withstand the onslaught of sympathy. Her nerves felt as though they were sitting on top of her skin. Every muscle was poised for an attack that wasn't coming. It was like someone had augmented her perception until the world was too focused, too sharp, slicing her senses with tiny razor blades, leaving her bloody.

I don't know how much more I can take.

She clenched her fists as grief forced bitter tears into her eyes and throat. Their sting spurred her into motion. Between now and tomorrow morning, she had things to accomplish. Grieving was a luxury she could not afford. Janeway exited the Briefing Room.

There was one person she wanted to see, one person who could shed light on the events that had rocked Voyager to her bulkheads.

Rayna told the computer to keep her door open before she'd even passed fully inside. She shed her uniform jacket in a heap next to her shoes and socks. Replicators could not produce respectable alcohol, but even the artificial warmth of synthehol would do.

"Orion Spice Brandy, please," she instructed. A snifter materialized, and she stared at it.

Look all you like, Ray, there are no answers in the glass.

The amber liquid was still, devoid of ripples or eddies. Focusing on it, imitating it within her mind were lessons learned from a childhood on the water. There were moments when she could still hear the sound of waves, smell the salt in the air. The old sea-longing pulled at her.

Useless reminiscences...

She turned from the beverage. When she needed it less, only then would she drink it.

Her right hand still prickled from dermal regeneration. The Doctor had been wonderfully attentive, and had complained vociferously that since she'd come on board, he'd seen far too much of her. Tuvok stopped in on the way to some meeting. She was glad he couldn't stay. Talk was as worthless as old memories.

A shifting of light let Rayna know that she had a visitor. Voyager's life support carried over the unmistakable signature of Captain Janeway, headache and all. "Good evening," she greeted, and was surprised that she did not resent the human's presence.

"It's closer to good night," her guest corrected. "I was hoping we could talk, but if you're tired, I understand." The captain was on edge.

Rayna plucked up the snifter and offered it to Janeway. "Nonsense," she fibbed. "I am no more fatigued than you."

Grey eyes registered the jibe with reasonable humor. Cooler fingers briefly touched her own as the glass transferred ownership. Rayna noticed they were trembling. With the contact came other emotional signals, isolation, regret...profound sadness. "Won't you sit down?"

On this visit, the captain selected the arm chair, propping her feet up on the coffee table and crossing them. Though obviously worn thin, the woman's formidable will was a palpable force in the room. "I need to know what happened on the *Saladin*." Her words were firm, but not demanding. "I won't bother ordering you as it will only give you incentive to remain silent, and I don't intend to make this easy."

The Saladin, again...would that I had died upon its deck...

"I fear that I will not make this easy, either." Rayna settled on the couch and curled her legs beneath her.

Janeway sipped the brandy and closed her eyes in appreciation. "I needed this," she murmured. Her features grew determined once more. "What if I make it an off-the-record conversation?"

Longing and something else...affinity perhaps...played about against the backdrop of Janeway's weariness.

She needs more than a drink, Wind Child. You recognize the signs of chronic stress better than most, having suffered from them on occasion.

"A generous offer, Captain, but no." Rayna found that it was difficult to harden her soul where this woman was concerned. Unfortunately it was unavoidable.

The grey gaze became keen. "You're protecting Captain Shin, aren't you?"

She's guessed so much already.

Rayna drew in a deep breath. "At the moment, I'm protecting you."

Her words had the strangest effect on Janeway. Suddenly the nobly commanding mien crumbled into a shy kind of pleasure. "I'm a big girl," the captain recovered somewhat. "I can take care of myself." She drained the last of the brandy.

There is your opening for deflection.

"Of course you can," Rayna rose and stretched to the heavens, "but you so seldom do."

A myriad of expressions crossed Janeway's face. They condensed into ironical humor. "I take it Tuvok has been talking."

"No indeed. He would never violate your privacy." It wasn't really a lie. Tuvok had not revealed any details, only expressed general concern. "I have my own senses." She gave Janeway a knowing look calculated to pique the captain's interest.

"Really?" her guest's demeanor was kissed by skepticism.

"You don't sleep well," Rayna began the enunciation of the obvious, staying pointedly away from the captain's emotional state. "You invariably have a headache. Unless you favor Neelix's cooking, you aren't eating regularly. The computer shows that you are on duty seventy three percent of the time, and that you haven't logged any holodeck recreation for over two months." She could see storm clouds of anger gather in Janeway's eyes.

Perfect.

"I don't appreciate being spied on." The flatly spoken words fell to the deck and confronted her.

Without answering, Rayna collected Janeway's empty glass and recycled it. She selected coffee for herself. "It doesn't take a spy to access unprotected information, only an interested party."

"You're interested in me?" Auburn brows knitted together as the captain struggled to keep up with the changing cast of the conversation.

There is a special place of torture in the afterlife for those who take advantage of exhausted paragons; you might wish to have a care.

I won't hurt her.

The last sentence surprised even Rayna. There was far more promise to it than she liked.

Janeway rallied her ire. "Have you paid a similar amount of attention to the rest of my staff?"

"Why should I? They aren't the captain." She thought the answer was perfectly obvious.

After staring her down for handful of seconds, Janeway rolled her eyes. "What the hell am I going to do with you?"

"Cold sleep remains an option."

Sensual lips curved upward in a half-smile. "You have no idea how tempting that is."

Rayna sipped her coffee before chuckling. "Oh yes I do; I live with me all the time. You're only suffering the effects of limited exposure."

That made her guest grin with genuine delight. Bleak eyes came alive with twinkles, and Rayna's world froze. Nothing else existed but the warmth of Janeway's smile.

Oh dear...you are in over your head.

Luckily, the captain was oblivious to the strength of Rayna's reaction. "By the way," she quipped. "I don't always have a headache."

"You have one now." The observation gave rise to an embarrassed kind of consternation within Janeway, as if it were inexcusable to have any sort of weakness.

You know a little of that syndrome yourself.

That she did.

The captain tried to dismiss the notion. "I'm fine."

Rayna sat her coffee down on the table of its namesake and gazed fondly at her companion. "A quaint human acronym for Fucked up, Insecure, Neurotic, and Emotional..."

A smoky laugh poured from Janeway like the gurgle of a mountain stream, natural, clean, sublime in its beauty. When she stopped, there was a new clarity to her manner as if a small measure of burden had been lifted. "It's almost gone, anyway," she assured.

"Lying to an empath is an appalling waste of life support," Rayna moved to the arm of the chair,

"as well as an exercise in futility. Would you like me to ease it?"

The legs came down, and Janeway gave every appearance of preparing to leave. "I think we're both too tired for Deltan pain relief."

Putting her hands behind her back, Rayna adopted an innocuous expression. "No Deltan funny business, though I do have to touch your neck." She shrugged innocently. "If you're scared, say you're scared."

That got a sharp glance, and Rayna congratulated herself on the timing and delivery of the challenge. From the cynical half-grin affixed to Janeway's face, she thought the captain was well aware that she was being managed. So, Rayna raised her eyebrows, upping the ante.

...and there it is, the glare of grudging acquiescence.

"I want you to do something for me, Captain," Rayna requested as she moved behind the compact woman. She slipped her fingers into Janeway's fiery hair, and past it, to the smooth softness of her neck. Remembered lessons in human anatomy guided her to pressure points along the spine, and one by one, she activated them. Nerve endings responded by instructing the muscles in Janeway's neck and shoulders to relax. "For the next thirty seconds, don't think."

Her reply was a quiet groan of relief. Rayna smiled to herself as she moved up to the base of Janeway's skull. Pain faded as rigid bands of tissue released their grip. The captain's shoulders sagged slightly. "Where did you learn to do this?" she asked.

"Whore school," Rayna replied without thinking. When Janeway's eyes opened to fix her with a disapproving glower, she belatedly recalled the captain's objection to that particular word. "None of that now," she chided gently, "you have another fifteen seconds before thought is allowed. Lean your head back." Turning her attention to Janeway's high forehead, she smoothed over careworn lines, watching gun-metal eyes become heavy.

How long has it been since you let someone take care of you?

Her inner clock continued to count down. With luck, the deep neuromuscular relaxation would lull Janeway's haggard mind. Twelve seconds remained. Rayna stroked the auburn tresses. The captain's lids shut one final time. Her breathing slowed. Ten seconds...nine...

Done.

She tiptoed to the hatch and shut it. Fear slithered its way through her abdomen turning her entrails into a nest of snakes. Rayna attempted to make peace with it and failed. So, she lowered her standards and settled for not fainting.

This is utterly ridiculous.

It wasn't as bad as the cell. That was something; no doubt a debt she owed to the captain's

presence. Rayna knelt at Janeway's feet and carefully removed the patent leather boots. She unzipped the over-tunic, then retrieved a blanket from her bedroom and tucked it about her guest. For a millisecond, she considered contacting Tuvok so he could move Janeway over to the sofa.

Good idea: that way she can awaken, embarrassed and angry.

She's likely to be riled up on the morrow as it is, considering you thwarted her interrogation, then beguiled her into slumber.

Janeway's mental and emotional fatigue had worked to her advantage. It was unlikely to be so easy to sidestep the captain's agenda in future encounters. The woman was too smart for that. Tonight's outcome was as much due to frazzled nerves as it was to her own machinations. Janeway had needed respite from reality, the type only dreamless sleep could offer.

Planning on holding vigil to keep back the demons of nightmare? Since when did you become the captain's harbor?

Rayna had no real answer for that. She could blame it on Tuvok, but that would be only a half-truth. Her motivations where Janeway was concerned were muddled, and untangling them was not something she was prepared to initiate.

The mouthwatering aromas of bacon and coffee coaxed Janeway into wakefulness. She opened her eyes slowly, blinking at the vaguely familiar surroundings.

This is neither your quarters nor your Ready Room.

"Not again." Janeway rubbed her eyes and straightened. A blanket toppled to the floor. Her neck was a little stiff; she twisted it back and forth to loosen the muscles.

"And good morning to you too," the chipper voice of Rayna Merris greeted, setting a cup of coffee and plate of food on the table.

Janeway struggled to jump start her brain. The last thing she remembered was Merris massaging her neck. *Which effectively ended your quest for information, not that you were making out so well with that.* "What time is it?" she asked as she reached for the coffee. It was delicious.

Merris settled on the sofa, just as she had before, tucking her slender legs beneath her. "0600 hours. You have plenty of time to eat," she purred.

"You can wipe that look off your face. I haven't forgotten our conversation." She frowned at Merris. "Rest assured, we'll finish it."

"Why don't you finish breakfast, instead?" Her hostess was unapologetic, and, characteristically, undaunted.

"I have to stop doing this." Janeway set her coffee down. She hesitated, not really wanting to linger. The ship was probably already rife with rumors.

You imposed on her hospitality all night. Don't be rude come morning.

Her hostess fixed her with a look of mock seriousness. "Coffee is a gift from the gods, Captain. To not drink it is a divine insult."

The comment made her chuckle. "Don't worry. I share your appreciation. It's the finest organic suspension ever made." She shot her a wry glance. "I meant I can't keep spending the night here."

"Don't tell me there's a regulation on where you sleep?" Merris unfolded herself gracefully and retrieved a glass containing some kind of juice from the replicator.

The plate in front of Janeway contained scrambled eggs and bacon. She tried the meat and found it as good as the coffee. *Figures.* Giving up, she picked up the fork and started to eat. "No regulation. It just doesn't look good."

"To whom?"

Why did I start this conversation? She tried to brush it off, "People will jump to conclusions, that's all."

Merris finished her juice and recycled the glass. "Which conclusion concerns you the most?"

"The one where we're involved in a romantic relationship," Janeway just went ahead and answered. She didn't want the hassle, and it was the last thing Merris needed. The poor woman had enough to deal with without everyone labeling her the "Captain's Lover."

"Ah," there it was again, that oddly neutral tone.

Janeway gave Merris her full attention. The elfin features were closed, and the black eyes devoid of expression. Before she could interject anything, Merris continued, "You're right. It would not do your reputation any good to be linked with me."

"That thought never entered my mind." *You keep forgetting the woman's background.* She stood, abandoning the dregs of breakfast and crossing the room. That's when she noticed that she was in her stocking feet, an important detail for when the time came to go. Janeway tentatively placed a hand on Merris' arm. The hairless flesh was sleek as Tholian silk, and nearly as soft. It caused the strangest sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Merris' eyes awoke in a mild cluster of twinkles. "Is it that I'm female?" she asked, shaking her head and tsking. "I rather thought you Federation types were more open-minded than that."

"It's that you're a member of my crew," Janeway finally spit out the blunt fact in exasperation. "As the captain, I can't become involved with subordinates, not that we're involved, but the appearance of it will put Voyager's grapevine into overdrive."

"May I tell you something without sending you into a squealing fit?" Merris asked lightly, then covered Janeway's hand with her own, patting it.

Currents of electricity raced up her arm, to her shoulder, and downward igniting a most unexpected fire. "I don't know." Janeway quickly withdrew, unsure what was taking place between them.

You're attracted to her, old girl. It hasn't been so long since you encountered the sensation.

But she's a woman.

"Your powers of perception are astonishing." Boothby had told her that when she'd noticed the first bouquet of roses he brought her.

She picked up her coffee taking a fortifying gulp. *I've never been attracted to a woman, not like this, anyway.*

It had to be Deltan pheromones. Janeway decided to consult with the Doctor about Merris' physiology.

If Merris noticed her discomfiture, she didn't show it. Nor did she speak until Janeway finally nodded her permission. "Starfleet Command and Starfleet Intelligence are two separate agencies within the Federation, Captain. They don't even share the same director. I am a guest on your vessel, but I am not, and will never be, a member of the crew."

You knew that. You were just hoping that she didn't.

No such luck. Janeway faced her hostess. "I am still your superior officer."

At that remark, Merris' face became slightly amused. "When it comes to Voyager's operation and security, yes, but not to matters presenting a danger to the Federation as a whole. I may have used it to piss you off, but Special Order 66715 is a bona fide directive, and it supersedes your authority."

Janeway felt her brows lower as her blood pressure rose.

"However," Merris continued with a smirk of ironic humor, "I am well aware that you can space me at any time and make up a story later, so I don't overestimate my position here." Pale lashes fluttered at her coyly. "Cold sleep is sounding better and better, nay?"

Mirth ambushed Janeway so suddenly she almost dropped her cup of coffee. She managed to retain it through her bout of laughter. "You know," she observed, "your sense of humor isn't

always going to save you."

Merris merely grinned all the wider. "I am not seeking salvation. I simply enjoy seeing you smile."

Is she flirting with you?

Janeway found herself thrown into a sinkhole yet again. Keeping pace with Merris' quicksilver conversation and lightning wit was challenging. *Oh and you love a challenge, don't you Kathryn?*

But she also knew when to retreat. Today would be a long one. "I have to go," Janeway said reluctantly, and that surprised her. Being here felt...better. "Thank you - again." She snagged her shoes from beside the chair. The hatch opened at her approach and she escaped back into the familiar world of command and control.

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